

## A new mould for Mauritius

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**"There is a bigger challenge for Delhi in dealing with Mauritius. It is the urgent need to discard the deep-rooted perception that Mauritius is simply an extension of India. It is not. It is a sovereign entity with a unique national culture and an international identity of its own."**

As it prepares to host the prime minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth, who returned to power in the recent general elections, Delhi needs to change the lens through which it sees the small island republic in the western Indian Ocean.

For far too long, Delhi has viewed Mauritius through the prism of diaspora. This was, perhaps, natural since communities of Indian origin constitute a significant majority in the island. But the time has come to reimagine Mauritius in much larger terms.

More recently, Delhi has certainly begun to see the strategic significance of Mauritius thanks to the renewed great power contestation in the Indian Ocean. Right at the very start of his first term in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi saw Mauritius as part of India's neighbourhood and invited its leadership to join his inauguration along with other South Asian leaders.

It was during his visit to Mauritius in 2015 that Modi unveiled an ambitious policy called the SAGAR (security and growth for all). It was India's first significant policy statement on the Indian Ocean in many decades. Delhi has some ways to go before it can translate the logic of SAGAR into effective outcomes on the ground.

But there is a bigger challenge for Delhi in dealing with Mauritius. It is the urgent need to discard the deep-rooted perception that Mauritius is simply an extension of India. It is not. Mauritius is a sovereign entity with a unique national culture and an international identity of its own. Its leaders are also conscious of the island's special place in the Indian Ocean as a thriving economic hub and an attractive strategic location. Although it is quite small with just 1.3 million people, Mauritius has been punching way above its weight.

Jugnauth's visit is a good moment for India to visibly demonstrate its respect for the sovereignty of Mauritius. Jugnauth, who took over from his father Anerood as the PM in January 2017, has now won power on his own steam. At 61, Pravind may not be too young, but he represents a new generation that is immensely proud of the republic's extraordinary evolution from a slave island to a prosperous economy.

An India that begins to see Mauritius on its own terms would want to go beyond sentimentalism and to explore the immense possibilities for elevating India's strategic partnership with an island that is looking beyond sugar plantations to financial services and technological innovation.



Mauritius is all about location and the genius of its people. As early European explorers sailed around the African continent and ventured eastwards to India, they began to call Mauritius, the “Star and Key of the Indian Ocean”. If the Portuguese and the Dutch were the first to gain a foothold in Mauritius, it was the French who gained effective control over the island in the early 18th century.

The French developed sugar plantations, introduced ship building and developed a naval base. The French certainly understood the strategic significance of Mauritius. A French soldier and colonial official, Félix Renouard de Sainte-Croix, described the island as “a central geographical point between every other place in the world”.

The British who gained control over Mauritius during the Napoleonic wars turned it into a garrison island that would

help secure the sea lines of communication between Europe and India. The enduring value of its location is reflected in the fact that Diego Garcia, once part of Mauritius, today hosts one of America's largest foreign military bases in the world.

But in emphasising the value of military access to Mauritius, it is easy to miss its geo-economic significance. The French description of the island as a "central geographic point" holds equally true for commerce and connectivity in the Indian Ocean. As a member of the African Union, Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Commission, Mauritius is a stepping stone to multiple geographies.

If Delhi appreciates the value of Mauritius as a regional hub, a number of possibilities present themselves. One, as new investments pour into Africa, Mauritius is where a lot of it gets serviced. Mauritius can be the fulcrum for India's own African economic outreach.

Two, until now India has tended to deal with the so-called Vanilla islands of the south western Indian Ocean — Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Reunion and Seychelles — on a bilateral basis. If the Indian establishment thinks of them as a collective, it could make Mauritius the pivot of Delhi's island policy.

Three, the Mauritius pivot can facilitate a number of Indian commercial activities in the south western Indian ocean — as a banking gateway, the hub for flights to and from Indian cities and tourism.

Four, India could also contribute to the evolution of Mauritius as a regional centre for technological innovation. India has not really responded so far to the demands from Mauritius for higher education facilities from India like the IIT.

Five, climate change, sustainable development and the blue economy are existential challenges for Mauritius and the neighbouring island states. Mauritius will be the right partner in promoting Indian initiatives in these areas. It could also become a valuable place for regional and international maritime scientific research.

Finally, if Delhi takes an integrated view of its security cooperation in the south western Indian Ocean, Mauritius is the natural node for it. The office of a defence adviser in Mauritius, for example, can service the demands of all the island nations as well as the East African states.

All this and more is possible if Delhi takes a fresh and more strategic look at Mauritius. One way of getting there is to have an early Indian summit with the leaders of the Vanilla islands.

**Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)**

1. Consider the following statements and choose the correct answer using the code given below.

1. Sagar Niti was launched by India in 2015 in the Indian Ocean.
2. Mauritius was named the star of the Indian Ocean by European explorers.
3. Mauritius is not a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Code:-

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Expected Questions (Mains Exams)**

Q. The geographical location of Mauritius makes it unique, but the policy adopted by India so far towards this island nation has not changed its position as India's strategic advantage, which now needs to be changed.' Analyze this statement and what steps should be taken by India in this context? Discuss. (250 words)

**Note:** Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 2 Dec., is 1 (c)

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