

# Why Mauritius matters

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in Mauritius for its National Day, which, like much else in the country, has an Indian connection. Its location in the Indian Ocean makes Mauritius strategically important



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**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi will be in Mauritius Tuesday for a two-day State visit, his second since 2015. He will be the Chief Guest at Mauritius' National Day Celebrations on March 12.

Mauritius, a strategically located island nation in the western Indian Ocean, is an important neighbour for India. A key reason for the special ties is that people of Indian-origin comprise nearly 70% of the island's population of 1.2 million.

Mauritius was once a French colony, before being taken over by the British. Under the nearly century-long French rule (in the 1700s), Indians were first brought to Mauritius from the Puducherry region to work as artisans and masons. Under British rule, about half a million Indian indentured workers came to Mauritius between 1834 and the early 1900s. About two-thirds of these workers settled in Mauritius.

Even the National Day has an interesting Indian connection. Mahatma Gandhi had briefly stopped in Mauritius on his way to India from South Africa in 1901. He gave the Indian workers three transformative messages: the importance of education, political empowerment, and staying connected with India. Thus, as tribute to Gandhi, the National Day of Mauritius is celebrated on March 12, the date of the Mahatma's Dandi march.

## History of ties

Mauritius was among the first few countries with which independent India established diplomatic relations in 1948. Since its independence from the British in 1968, Mauritius has mainly been ruled by two major political families, the Ramgoolams (Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and his son, Navin) and the Jugnauths (Anerood Jugnauth and son, Pravind). Navin Ramgoolam, who won the elections last year, has been the PM of Mauritius twice before (from 1995 to 2000, and from 2005 to 2014).

His father led the country's freedom struggle and was the first PM of independent Mauritius. He worked closely with many Indian freedom fighters, including Gandhi,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Mauritian counterpart Navinchandra Ramgoolam before their bilateral meeting in New Delhi in 2014. Reuters

Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sarojini Naidu. He had strong links with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and even proofread one of Bose's books, *The Indian Struggle* (1934).

## Ties today: Infra, China factor

In March 2015, when PM Modi visited Mauritius, India signed a Memorandum of Understanding to improve transport facilities at Agaléga island.

This agreement said that infrastructure "for improving sea and air connectivity at the Outer Island of Mauritius will go a long way in ameliorating the condition of the inhabitants of this remote Island. These facilities will enhance the capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island."

Agaléga island is located 1,100 km north of Mauritius and is closer to the Indian southern coast. It is spread over an area of 70 sq km. In February 2024, India and Mauritius jointly inaugurated the air strip and the jetty projects.

When concerns were raised that India intended to build a military base at the island, then PM Pravind Jugnauth dismissed them, saying, "there has never been any agenda for Mauritius to relinquish its sovereignty over the Agaléga islands, as some ill-minded persons in and outside Mauritius attempted to make believe. Likewise, there has never been

any agenda to transform Agaléga to a military base... here, I wish to forcefully deplore, condemn India-bashing campaign..."

For India, China's increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean region has been a cause of concern. It thus wants to work closely with island countries like Mauritius.

Notably, Mauritius faced the devastating Cyclone Chido last year, particularly affecting Agaléga. India managed to mobilise its naval assets and utilise the facilities created in Agaléga to deliver assistance and relief material.

These facilities have additionally assisted Mauritius in its maritime surveillance, patrolling of its vast Exclusive Economic Zone and safeguarding the assets of its blue economy ecosystem from challenges such as piracy, as well as drug and human trafficking.

## Areas of focus

New Delhi will seek to build on some broad thrust areas in the ties during the visit:

■ **DEFENCE:** The two sides are looking at moving on defence and maritime security, and are likely to sign a technical agreement on sharing white-shipping information between the Indian Navy and the Mauritius authorities. This will further enhance the maritime security of Mauritius and the safety of its trading corridors, and improve regional

cooperation in real-time data-sharing.

■ **INDIAN PROJECTS:** Numerous India-assisted development projects dot the Mauritian landscape. The development assistance to Mauritius just in the last decade is nearly \$1.1 billion. Of this, about \$729 million is through lines of credit, and \$427 million is through grant assistance. The bouquet of executed projects contains three phases of the Metro Express. An MoU was also signed in January 2022 to undertake 96 small, people-oriented projects across Mauritius, of which 51 have been inaugurated so far.

■ **FIRST RESPONDER:** India has traditionally been the first responder for Mauritius in times of crisis, including during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Wakashio oil-spill crisis of 2020, and the cyclone last year.

■ **TRADE:** India is amongst the largest trading partners of Mauritius. Mauritius is the second largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into India for FY 2023-24, after Singapore. Mauritius and India signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement on February 22, 2021, after nearly 15 years of negotiations. It is the first trade agreement signed by India with an African country.

At present, 11 Indian PSUs are in Mauritius, including Bank of Baroda, Life Insurance Corporation, and the National Building and Construction Company Ltd (NBCC).

■ **SPACE COOPERATION:** An Agreement between India and Mauritius for the establishment of Telemetry, Tracking and Telecommand (TTC) Station for Satellites and Launch Vehicles and cooperation in the field of space research, science and applications was signed on December 26, 1986. In November 2023, the Mauritius Research and Innovation Council (MRIC) and ISRO signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a framework for cooperation on developing a joint satellite.

■ **CAPACITY BUILDING:** Mauritius is one of the largest beneficiaries of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. Since 2002-03, India has trained around 4,940 Mauritians under civilian & defence slots of ITEC. About 2,300 Indian students are currently pursuing higher education in Mauritius in streams such as medicine, hotel management, business studies, etc.

The visit will also touch upon the contribution of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and his ancestry from Bihar, and celebrate the common cultural connections — the celebration of Maha Shivratri in Mauritius, the Ganga Talao holy pilgrimage site, and more.

