

**Speech of Hon. (Mrs.) L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun**  
**Minister of Education & Human Resources**  
**Tertiary Education and Scientific Research**

***Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery***  
***University of Mauritius***  
***January 30, 2019***

**(Protocol)**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

A very good afternoon to all of you.

Let me join the previous speakers and extend a warm welcome to all of you to today's function. A special word for Emeritus Professor Nigel Worden, from the University of Cape Town. As a senior-most historian of slavery in South Africa, I am certain that your Lecture aptly entitled "*Being a Historian of Slavery*" will be a treat as well as being eminently eloquent and, most probably, punchy, to say the least!

Allow me also to congratulate the Centre for Research on Slavery and Indenture for sustaining the tradition of commemorating the anniversary of the abolition of slavery. On the occasion of this 184<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I am glad to see on the program, in addition to the film *Slavery Museum Project*,(?) the inclusion of the launch of an *Inventory of Documents on Slavery in the Collection C4 of the French National Archives*.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Slavery has been perhaps one of the worst episodes among the tragedies to have struck humanity in the course of its history. For slightly more than 4 centuries, between the 1440s and 1880s, the figure of African slaves transported to distant places like the Americas and the Indian Ocean islands stood at some 10 to 15

million. Besides, for Mauritius and Reunion Island alone, it has been said that, between the 1720s and 1820s, over 200,000 slaves were brought in from East African and Malagasy ports. As tragically, slavery may have been abolished in 1835 but this did not signify the immediate cessation of the slave trade.

True to say, slaves contributed enormously to the development of the countries. An obvious case in point is our own capital city, Port Louis, built during the time of Governor Mahé de La Bourdonnais but through sheer dint of the hard work and sweat of slaves. But there is no denying the inhumanity, cruelty, and immorality of the slave trade.

However, for a plethora of reasons, there are elements of the past that we blind ourselves to or simply we tend to brush aside—and brush aside deliberately!

As a historian once put it, living as we do in an era of rapid change, we tend to define ourselves in terms of where we are going, not where we come from.

Allow me at this point to highlight an excerpt from the 1976 publication of Alex Haley, “Roots: the Saga of an American Family”.

For those of us who remember the novel, one of the fundamental tenets is that, *without* our past, we're fundamentally incomplete.

Kunta Kinte recalls the words of his stern father, Omoro,

*“He said that three groups of people lived in every village. First were those you could see [...] Second were the ancestors [...] The third people....are those waiting to be born.”*

This is a strong sense of the community, one that binds everybody together—those who *had been* part of it, *are* part of it and who *will be* part of it.

Now, that is an important lesson when we speak of slavery.

We cannot have a mind like a sieve: we cannot afford to be forgetful or absentminded about the past. We cannot allow ourselves to be struck by a spell of oblivescence.

On the other hand, the cause for remembrance should not merely be, something to be remembered/ celebrated in a transient and temporary manner and exclusively on that particular day.

I believe it is our duty to remember, it is what we call in French, a “devoir de memoire”. It is the permanence of this duty to remember or duty to memory, if you will, that can help guide our present and future actions.

Having said that, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, occasions like this one call for a reflection on related issues. We should face up the fact that slavery may have been abolished -- but the world hasn't really done away with slave-like practices even today.

Indeed, contemporary slavery now takes new forms: human trafficking, child labour, forced labour and the gun-point recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, sex trafficking, debt bondage, among others.

2017 figures indicate that more than 40 million people around the world were victims of modern slavery, of which almost 29 million – or 71 per cent – were women and girls.

On the other hand, an ILO study, “*Global estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends, 2012-2016*”, confirmed that about 152 million children, aged between 5 and 17, were subject to child labour.

Allowing such a situation to persevere would have dire consequences for many countries. As ILO Director-General Guy Ryder puts it,

*“The world won't be in a position to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals unless we dramatically increase our efforts to fight these scourges”.*

So, our struggle against all modern forms of slavery must continue. Indeed, increased vigilance must be exercised and all platforms—national and international—used to denounce such reprehensible acts.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

At this point, you will understand that, as Minister of Education, I cannot not emphasize the significant role that education must play to stem the tide of servitude.

That there was a racial slur in slavery as practised in the past is undeniable.

That discrimination has been one of the cultural legacies of that past is equally unquestionable.

An awareness of these and such other issues has to be inculcated in our youth right from an early age. A mindset change, an attitudinal shift thus become primordial—and it is education basically that will bring this about.

The transformation in our education system is grounded in some basic objectives .

One, it is the absolute and unquestioned right of every learner to gain access to meaningful and quality education.

Equity has to run across the entire system and right across the different levels.

And our learners must, right from the start, come to prize the virtue of living and sharing together, irrespective of their differences of color and creed.

True, we do present to the world a model of peaceful co-existence. But this needs to be sustained.

Besides, the modern reality stresses an increased mobility of the work force—both in terms of skills and location. Many of our learners will be called upon tomorrow to work on an international front, to be global citizens.

It becomes all the more important, then, that they learn to live and socialize together, to work together, to collaborate with one another.

Jacques Delors' Four Pillars of Education—learning to Know, to Do, to Live Together and to Be – thus philosophically permeate the education system.

**Distinguished Guests, Ladies and gentlemen,**

Before I conclude, it behooves me to speak of my appreciation of the work currently undertaken by the the CRSI.

This Centre is engaged in a narrative that is quite unique. It is a narrative that rests on exploring together the two labour systems that have been part of our history: Slavery and Indentured Immigration. But it has also set itself the task of moving beyond the merely anecdotal and encouraging like-minded persons—many of whom are volunteers-- to work together and undertake research so as to gather concrete evidence about the 2 systems.

In this context, I recognise the importance for the University in general and the CRSI in particular to come up with a database on Slave Trade, Slavery and Indenture in the South West Indian Ocean, the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean.

For the University, this undoubtedly becomes an activity intrinsically embedded in the quest to consolidate the research culture that you have been forcefully advocating.

But, in addition, it will certainly serve as a bulwark to position the University of Mauritius as a regional hub for the study of slavery and indenture.

I do not see that as an overambitious aspiration, given that Mauritius was a Centre of slave trading in the Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century. Besides, by virtue of being a country where international languages flourish, we are acting as a link between the Anglophone and Francophone countries in this part of the world.

So, congratulations to all of you for having organized today's function as part of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery. Congratulations as well to Mr. David Constantin for his beautifully crafted film on the proposed "Slavery Museum Project".

***Thank you all for your kind attention.***