

For the happiness of suffering mankind

The legend of Dookhee Gungah

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*“Absence is to love, what wind is to fire.
It extinguishes the small but kindles the great.”*

Roger de Bussy-Rabutin

New shores – 1850s to 1890s

Was born to Busmoteea a boy, in the bleak of night.

It had been two weeks since she gave birth, and her body was still shattered from the pain of childbirth. She was barely sixteen. It was not uncommon for girls her age to become mothers. Or even widows. An unprecedented outbreak of malaria in December 1866 caused havoc, and forty thousand lives, or 12% of the population, had perished due to this epidemic. The living conditions, in ordinary times, were already grim for Busmoteea and other indentured labourers working on the sugarcane plantations; the surge in deaths in 1867 brought even more gloom. And so, when Busmoteea and her husband, Fowdur, welcomed their first-born, they named him *Dookhee*, a Hindi word epitomising this general state of anxiety and grief¹. That the wheel of fortune would turn for them, by the end of the 1800s, was beyond their wildest of dreams...

Fowdur's dream was to seek a better life for his family. In late August 1854, he took a fateful decision to leave the barren fields of his native village, Ruwanee, in the impoverished district of Arrah, in Bihar, to travel to Kolkata, some three hundred miles away. Whilst boarding the *Prince Albert*, he, like hundreds of others on the ship, had no idea where he was heading to, except to a distant land of promised treasures. Most of them, if not all of them, had never even seen the sea until that day. They came unprepared – all they wanted was to flee the misery at any cost. To sail these waters was more than a leap of faith into the darkness. It meant letting go of all their possessions, material and otherwise. It meant leaving behind their family, their loved ones, their people. It meant, more than anything, shedding that taut cast they were born with: their caste. By embarking on this journey, they were to be reborn – unless they perished crossing the Kala Paani². On the other side of the ocean, that faraway land was no paradise; cholera had only just dwindled away, resulting in the death of 8 thousand souls, over a period of four months.

¹ Over the few years preceding Dookhee's birth, the country was struck by cholera outbreaks in 1854, 1856, and 1859, devastating lives and livelihoods. Severe flooding in 1865 was a blow to the sugarcane industry, particularly in the north of the island. This was followed by drought, further affecting sugar production. Meanwhile, floods in northern India prompted more Indians to flee to Mauritius. As a result, the sugar estates and villages were overcrowded, exacerbating the spread of diseases. An unprecedented social and economic crisis ensued as several estates and planters went broke. The sense of despair and grief was palpable and seemed unsurmountable. Amidst this desolation was born Dookhee.

² The indentured labourers expressed their fears of crossing the Kala Paani, literally the Black Water. According to Hinduism, crossing the seas would cause the loss of social respectability, and the ordinary folk were terrified of this prospect. Eventually, the British took water from the Ganges in large containers onboard the ships, to reassure the Indians and protect the sanctity of life with the possibility of reincarnation beyond the sea.



Voyage to Mauritius

Fowdur finally disembarked in Port Louis, Mauritius, along with the other young and abled men, and taken to the nearby coolie depot on the 27th of September 1854. The officials requested his surname, to which he replied: “Gungah”, formally registering as an indentured labourer. Was it his father’s name that he had taken as his family name, or was he alluding to Ganga, the river on whose once fertile banks he grew up? Thus began the new life of this immigrant, then only twenty-five years old, on this exotic little island in the Indian Ocean, thousands of miles from his famine-stricken village. But his journey was not quite over. From the depot, he was then sent to the sugar estate in Deux Bras, on the south-eastern part of the island. He never imagined that he would not

see his family ever again and was on his own despite being surrounded by his peers, his *jahaji bhaiyon*³.

Busmoteea was too young to understand why she and her family had undertaken a similar journey from their village in the district of Ballia, Bihar, to Kolkata and then, eventually, to Mauritius. And she certainly could not conceive how her parents, and thousands of other immigrants before them, had been duped by unscrupulous profiteers and purveyors of dreams when they were enrolled as indentured labourers. The nightmare began as soon as they boarded the ship. Traversing the Indian Ocean must have felt like an eternity. The conditions onboard were cramped; deplorable to say the least. The men were separated from the women and children. They were all kept in the lower decks, sharing the same unsanitary space as the rodents. The spread of diseases was inevitable and those who were sick beyond any hope were left to die with no dignity, their bodies tossed overboard, like empty husks.



³ Jahaji bhai (*plural*: jahaji bhaiyon) literally means boat brother. It refers to the term the Indians who undertook the same perilous journey called each other as they felt bound by the same hardship and suffering.

India

Those who were fortunate enough to set foot upon Mauritius were swiftly assigned to their respective sugar estates, to begin a life of toil and hardship. Busmoteea, this frail, innocent six-year-old child, disembarked from the *Devonshire*, on the 28th of July 1857⁴ and was taken to the Deux Bras sugar estate a few days later. In all probability, as a little girl, she was groomed to be a good housewife as she helped with the domestic chores rather than being sent to work in the fields. The fact that Fowdur came to ask Busmoteea in marriage nearly a decade later implies that both he and Busmoteea's family had taken the decision to not return to India at the end of their five-year servitude. Perhaps, the prospect of a better life in Mauritius seemed more of a reality than ever before. They must have heard from each incoming batch of new immigrants how rough and rotten things still were in Bihar for them to forego their free return journey. Or was it the thought of crossing the perilous ocean that had put them off? The following year, in a tattered thatched hut nestled in the Deux Bras sugar estate in the south-eastern part of the island, Busmoteea gave birth to Dookhee Gungah, on the 11th day of a cold and biting August. Fowdur, wrought with anticipation, was filled with joy to see his wife cuddle their new-born son.

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Across the British Empire, slavery was abolished in August 1834.

British administrators in Mauritius took three months to transition from slavery to indentured servitude when the first wave of Indian immigrants⁵ reached Port Louis, the capital city, on the 2nd of November 1834. However, it was not until a further three months that the abolition of slavery was officially recognised, on the 1st of February 1835. To fill the void created by the gradual retreat of slaves from the sugar plantations, Indian indentured labourers were brought over. That was known as 'The Great Experiment'. The British had to validate whether

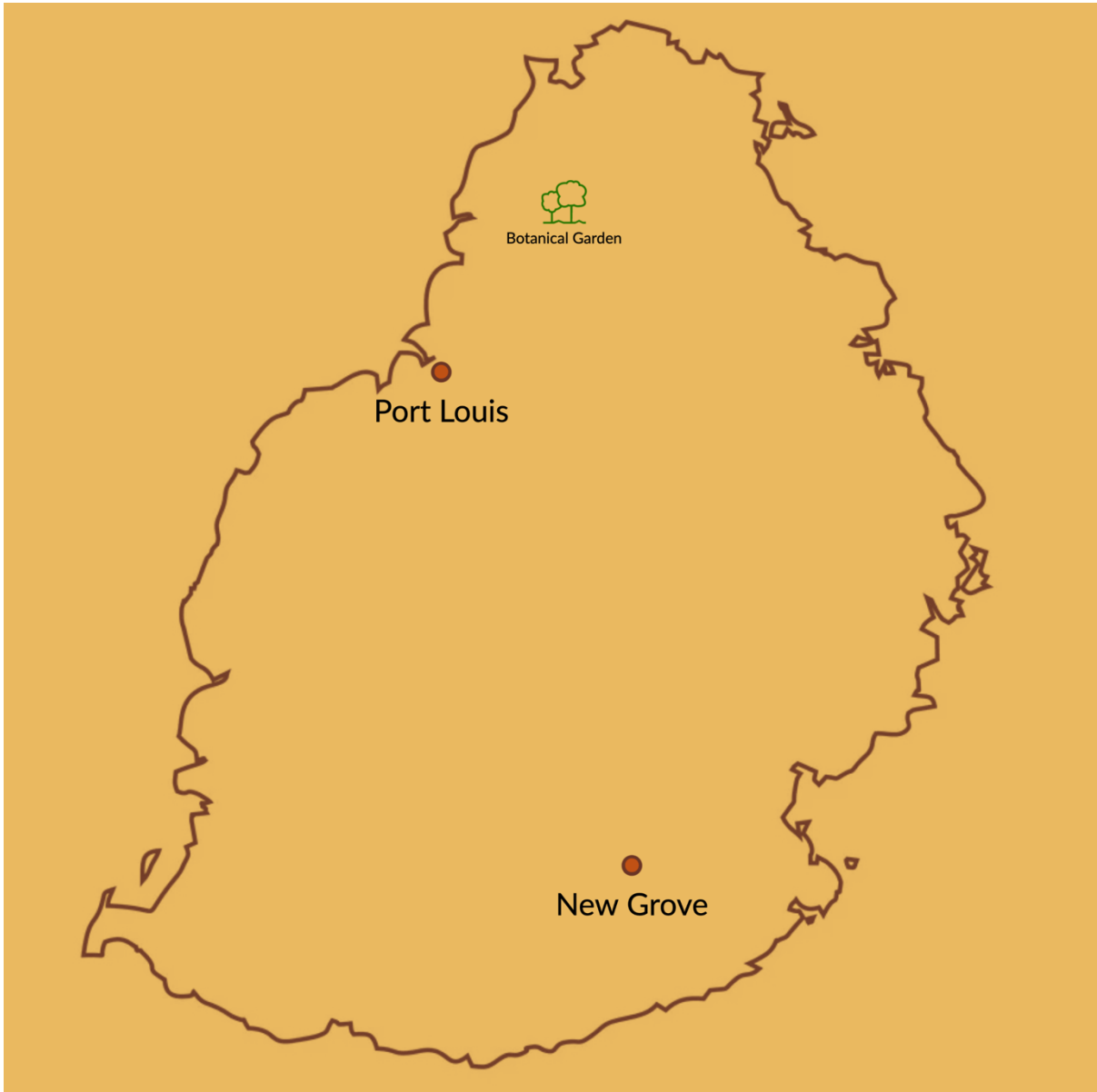
⁴ Meanwhile, the siege of Arrah was taking place in India. It lasted from the 27th of July to the 3rd of August during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The rebellion had begun in May near Delhi that year and spread to other parts of northern India, including Arrah. It is estimated that at least 800,000 Indians were killed due to the rebellion and the famines and epidemics of disease that it caused in those areas. Had Busmoteea and her family not left their village, they likely would have fallen victim to the rebellion or famine.

⁵ There were contracted workers from India who were brought to Mauritius during the French rule (1710 – 1810) and when the British took over in 1810, but they were not part of the indentureship system that was formally institutionalised in 1834.

this new form of labour would prove economically viable, and socially acceptable, before it was deployed across the rest of the Empire. The experiment seemed to have worked. A total of more than one million Indians were shipped across the globe between 1834 and 1924, of which more than four-hundred and fifty thousand were taken to Mauritius alone.

The Indians landed at what is now called the *Aapravasi Ghat*, an immigration depot located in the harbour of Port Louis. They came with barely anything: their belly filled with nothing but apprehension, their heart bursting with hope and their mind full of aspiration. What they did bring was their courage, and their most precious possessions, their holy books; the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana were what anchored them to their motherland, upon setting foot in Mauritius. Their sacred scriptures offered solace and strength, in the face of brutal reality and hardships. Most never gave up their religion despite the challenges encountered. While some Indians were coerced into converting to Christianity, the religion of the colonial landlords and estate owners, others felt starved of their cultural identity and stripped of their foreparents' heritage. Their sense of 'self' and 'community' seemed to gradually disappear. As the number of Indian immigrants grew, over the decades, prayer ceremonies became more of a social gathering. Not solely religious in function, these also served as a social device to maintain community cohesion, providing hope and comfort.

Initially, there were barely any temples or socio-cultural institutions which could benefit the community, and the few who built shrines for their deities did an invaluable service to society. Indeed, the year Dookhee was born, one of the first Hindu temple was established in a village, in the north of the island by a landowner named Gokul. Even then, holding ceremonies and rituals (called puja) proved quite a mission as the items and ingredients to be used as offerings during the prayers were not readily available. Besides conducting prayers and social gatherings, they also needed a way to disseminate religious teachings. Steadily, as the Indo-Mauritian community organised itself in their individual groups, these places of learning and enlightenment, known as a baitka, saw the light of day and, in turn, cemented the community, bolstering their sense of belonging. Although a number of indentured labourers chose to return to India at the end of their five-year contract, the vast majority of those who came to Mauritius decided to call it home, as community spirit strengthened. Even though these baitkas served a valuable purpose, by the time Dookhee was of school age, in 1873, he was part of the 98% of the forty thousand children aged between five and fourteen who did not receive any formal education. It was as if one had to choose either to wield a cutlass in a sugarcane field or to write in a copybook in a classroom. Such was their fate.

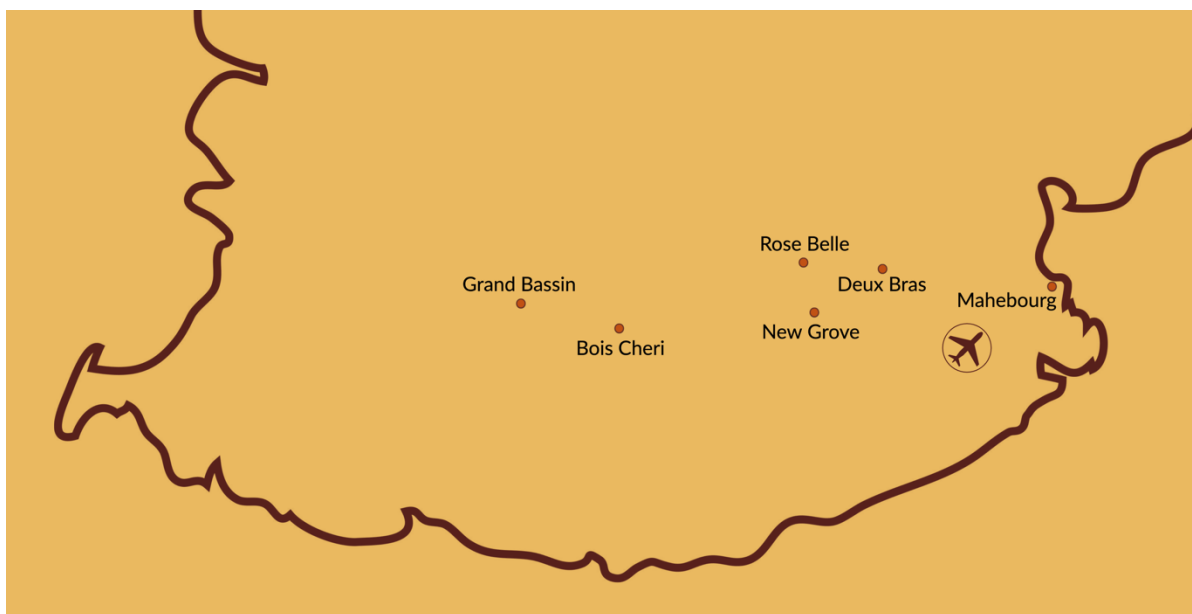


Mauritius

Four decades had elapsed since the new labour system replaced slavery; nevertheless, the working conditions were still deplorable in the 1870s. Labourers were powerless, the police corrupt and violent, magistrates, ignorant and impartial. Already poorly remunerated and heavily taxed, the labourers had to pay for any license to carry out an occupation. In addition, the then Governor of

the island, Arthur Gordon, believed that the conditions were so dire that he deemed them to be beyond improvement. The entire country was indebted, the soil in the coastal regions was poor and inconducive to the cultivation of sugarcane. Even worse, malaria had made a comeback.

This was Dookhee's childhood. By 1880, now a teenager and the eldest of five boys, he was expected to work the fields alongside his father, to help with the household income. An extra pair of hands meant extra savings, as well as expenditures, with the arrival of new siblings. Their spirit of unity as a family was vital to their emancipation. Their resolve paid off, but they had to be thrifty about their lifestyle. Mirroring Fowdur's sense of sacrifice, the boys worked additional hours, starting much before dawn. The Gungah brothers were not only renowned for their physical prowess but also their unwavering perseverance. Within a decade, the family had managed to buy a larger plot of land in the neighbouring village of New Grove, built themselves a better house, and could finally afford a more decent standard of living.



Southern Mauritius

In 1892, Fowdur, now sixty-three, became a father for the eighth time. Once again, it was a boy! Dookhee was twenty-five then and he gradually took on the role of the head of the family, ensuring that his parents and siblings lived in comfort, exempt from a meagre income, a basic staple of rice and dal, and arduous physical work – the norm of the day.

That year, the prospects seemed most favourable for sugarcane planters; they had fought against low prices of sugar and beetroot competition on the international market, and weathered the relatively mild hurricane season in February. Everything was set to welcome a new era of

prosperity for the country. Even the British administrators, eighty years after having taken over the running of the country from the French, considered the island to be the most beautiful and fertile landscape of the colony, at least in the Eastern hemisphere. In particular, in the north of the island, the Botanical Garden in Pamplémousses, which was then the third of its kind in the world, was resplendent with lush flora and luxuriant display of tropical vegetation.

Tragically, a cyclone of such devastating fury hit Mauritius on the 29th of April that, by the time the sun had set that day, *“the island had lost its beauty, the cane its promise, the planters their hopes, and the gardens their charms.”* At least, that was what the Lieutenant-Governor, Mr H Jerningham, had reported later that evening. He continued, *“1100 people were killed, 2000 wounded, 50 thousand left homeless; the spoilt canes of sugar laid flat upon the soil with their gone leaves revealing how full of sugar they were; sugar-mills were wrecked, crushing men women children who had sought refuge under their solid walls; Port Louis was levelled to the ground, every Indian hut blown away, whole villages swept away; trees that were more than a century old and 3 metres wide were felled to the ground, huge stone columns collapsed like a pack of cards...”* Nature, it seemed, had dealt Mauritius a bad hand. Fortunately, the Gungah family made it through this calamity, and plodded on, but not without coming to the help of those in need. Their sense of compassion and concern for their community were qualities they valued, for they, too, were once at the mercy of these vagaries.

Two years later, the price of sugar fell globally. For the labourers, this meant low income in order to compensate for plantation losses; the result being – longer working hours for similar wages. Some knew how to capitalise on that downturn, making both fortuitous and wise investments by purchasing plantations, large and small, that were running at a loss. Dookhee seized this opportunity, acquiring his first major plot of land of twenty arpents. This would mark the beginning of Dookhee’s golden age, an enterprise that would vastly change the lives of the Gungah family.



The Golden Years – 1900s to 1930s

By the turn of the century (1900), the migration of Indians to Mauritius had spanned over six decades. Still, only a few small temples on the island, except for a rather magnificent one in the north of the island, in the village of Triolet. It was built in 1895 by a gentleman named Sanjibandlall Ramsoondur who, like others, recognised that the lack of temples inherently led to the inability of

immigrants to maintain their religious identity, which subsequently leads to community cohesion. So, when a sadhu named Gaurdas, of Bengali origin, travelled the island requesting assistance to build a temple, he received significant and unconditional help, financially and otherwise, from Dookhee. A tiny village, called Rose Belle, not far from where Dookhee lived (New Grove), was chosen as the site; it took approximately five years for the first temple to be built on those premises. Bodhini Hoolas, a well-to-do Indian lady, funded Gaurdas' trip to India, where he purchased a Shiva lingam, with Dookhee covering its cost. Sadly, Gaurdas passed away upon his return. A pandit, named Ganapatidas, stepped forward, taking the Shiva lingam in his care, until it was finally consecrated at the temple in 1911. That it took about a decade for the temple to be built, spoke volume about the social and economic conditions in those days, yet Dookhee provided continuous assistance.

As progress was slow, perhaps due to the lack of faith from the community or the austerity of the times, those who hoped in completing the temple had no one to turn to other than Dookhee. Pandits Raghooni and Ganapatidas were among these individuals. Pandit Raghooni was an influential person in the southern part of the island and there was a mutual respect between him and Dookhee. Pandit Ganapatidas was one of the few literate persons of the Indo-Mauritian community in those days. He, too, valued Dookhee's involvement with the temple and encouraged him to read the religious scriptures. Gradually, Dookhee came to appreciate the significance of establishing these religious edifices in a community that, for decades, had been deprived of a sound cultural grounding. As the works at the temple resumed, thanks to Dookhee's generosity, a four-foot tall stonewall was erected to secure the premises. A total of five temples were built in the compound, the first of which was to house the deities Shiva and Parvati, whose statues were bought by Dookhee. Other individuals also made contributions and donations, in the form of bells, a water tank, a Nandi (a sacred cow idol) and so forth. The temples were each dedicated to a particular deity and their statues were adorned with golden jewellery offered by Dookhee even though, in those days, the economic situation did not permit the use of gold, and that ornaments worn by women were mostly of copper and silver.

Dookhee had to face a lot of setbacks and criticism while funding the construction and maintenance of the temple. At times, because of the mistake of others, the money he donated would be misplaced or misused yet, even then, he never held anybody in contempt nor saw the need to sue anyone. Dookhee was never seen in a court and was against giving grief to people. Instead, his mission was to see to it that the temple and the priest officiating there were being

properly looked after. He was always fair to those around him and stepped back from those who cheated him of his money and honesty.

While his time and effort were spent with the temple, called the Narmadeshwar Shivala, Dookhee's other activities also flourished. By 1915, he was a renowned plantation owner, having purchased larger and larger plots of land where sugarcane was cultivated. Now a landlord himself, he treated his workers justly and kindly, and they, in return, held him in high esteem. He knew the pain and struggle they had to endure for he had faced the same hardship. What also mattered to him was that the women on his plantations should also be encouraged to work alongside the men, whether it was to do with weaving baskets, helping with the cattle-rearing, or cultivating crops other than sugarcane. He had witnessed how his mother, and other women in the Deux Bras estate, had to help with the daily tasks in order to bring enough food to their homes.

From their humble home in New Grove, the Gungah family was finally able to afford building large colonial-style houses for them. Dookhee ensured that each one of his seven brothers had their own house. The houses were all identical and in proximity with one another, along the same road in New Grove, signifying the tightknit nature of the family. A quality that was essential for their prosperity. These houses were atypical for the common Indo-Mauritian community in those days who, until much later in the 20th century, still lived in small wooden huts. As the name suggests, these colonial houses were mostly the type of dwellings you would find among the white estate owners, descendants of the French who came to Mauritius in the early 18th century.

The Gungahs' houses had an air of opulence. The wooden-floored rooms were lavishly adorned with exquisite colonial-style furniture, grand French windows would let the fresh countryside air and delicate light flood the house, large wooden exterior double doors that gave on to spacious front and rear verandas that were supported by lush mahogany columns, and black teak shingles glistened on twin sloping roofs. The luxurious decoration aside, the cosiness that they provided to the family was testimony of Dookhee's concern for the comfort of his kin. That did not mean that the mansions were all for show and superficiality. Dookhee encouraged everyone, his brothers, their wives and children, to be self-sufficient and provide for their kitchen and larder from their own gardens in their spacious backyards. A larger compound, with fowls and farm animals, and a vast orchard were run for the common use of the family and for pleasure. Stables for horses were also on the compound, and stags were free to roam the premises, some of them even venturing into the verandas.

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Everything seemed to be set for the Gungahs after fortune had smiled upon them but Fowdur's journey, one that had begun so long ago from the modest village in India, finally came to an end. It is believed that he passed away in 1915 at the age of eighty-five. It was likely that, at that time, Dookhee travelled to India, to his father's native village, perhaps for his last rites and to return his ashes to Ganga. Who knows... But what we know is that, once in Ruwanee, which had not seemed to have changed much ever since Fowdur had bid farewell to it, Dookhee witnessed how deprived the villagers were and had a well dug⁶ so they could have access to clean water, at the very least. Among Hindus, the construction of a temple and digging of a well are considered acts of piety. The villagers felt redeemed thanks to Dookhee's generosity.

Four years later, on the 15th of September, Busmoteea passed away at the relatively young age of sixty-seven. She had been a pillar in Dookhee's life and in that of the family. There is no doubt that she had been a role model for her sons for, even though it was predominantly male household, their respect and support for women shone later in their adulthood. They all encouraged their wives and daughters to partake in the running of the various family duties and responsibilities.

Dookhee had been a pious individual throughout his life – a trait he must have inherited from his parents. Yet, in the early 1900s, Brahmin priests were not officiating at his house whether it was for wedding ceremonies, funerals, and other rituals. However, having witnessed the type of devout person that Dookhee was, Pandit Raghooni chose to bring an end to this discrimination and performed all those religious services in a proper manner. In so doing, Pandit Raghooni had brought in a social reform with the help of Dookhee. Gradually, as this practice got more and more accepted in society, thanks to Dookhee's piety and renown, the Brahmins and priests formally recognised this revolution in the mores by passing a resolution at the Maha Sabha, a socio-cultural organisation of high authority that was founded in 1925.

⁶ Dookhee's contribution carried on for some time with him sending funds for the maintenance of the well and for the benefit of the villagers.

The existence of these socio-cultural organisations in the early part of the 20th century was in fact a sign of the fragmentation of the Indo-Mauritian community at the time. There was no real cohesion among the Hindus as each would rally only those who shared their religious philosophy or caste. On the one hand there were the orthodox Hindus and on the other, the liberals. On one stratum, the upper caste and on the other, the lower caste. The rich and the poor. Dookhee saw past these superficial divisions and helped each and every one, whether financially or otherwise. He sought to unify Hindus regardless of their creed, wealth, or aspirations. And he did so without seeking any reward or recognition.

The Narmadeshwar Shivala was not the only temple that Dookhee had helped with even though it was the one that was perhaps most dear to him⁷, for he dedicated almost thirty years of his life selflessly to it. Even today, the temple is still run with the help of Dookhee's descendants, the Gungah family. There are too many temples and religious institutions to list but suffices to say that Dookhee gave to all of them whether they were for the Hindi or non-Hindi speaking community, whether it was close to his village in New Grove or anywhere else on the island, whether it was to the orthodox or liberal Hindus. If it weren't through financial help, he would generously donate plots of land and building materials for the construction of these institutions and welfare centres. Whatever was in his means to help the advancement of society, he gave. Unconditionally.

Not only did it matter to Dookhee that the community had a place of worship, but he also encouraged everyone to attend these temples. Each year, during the holy festival signifying the Great Night of Shiva, or Maha Shivaratri, where devotees from New Grove and the surrounding villages would go on a pilgrimage⁸ to the sacred lake at Grand Bassin in the southern part of the island to collect the holy water and offer thanks to Lord Shiva, Dookhee ensured that they were all provided with their dhotis, pagris, and kanwars⁹, which he had donated. He would also send his workers to help gather the villagers early in the morning and encourage them to go on the pilgrimage. Dookhee also made sure that the pilgrims were given refreshments and a place of rest

⁷ More than passively funding the running of the temple, Dookhee took an active role in its management. He was often criticised for his work by those who envied his position and status, but he saw past all of this for his dedication to the temple, the community, and Hinduism was of greater importance.

⁸ The first pilgrimage took place in 1898 with initially only nine devotees, mostly priests, who undertook the journey by foot from a village in the northern part of the island to the lake in Grand Bassin. Pandit Gossagne Nepal had dreamt, the previous year, that there was a sacred lake whose water was as divine and pure as that of the river Ganga. He then proceeded to walk all the way from his village in Terre Rouge in search of the lake which he discovered in Grand Bassin. The following year, him and eight other devotees went on the first pilgrimage.

⁹ A kanwar is a wooden structure, consisting essentially of a pole and containers on either side, whose function is to carry the holy water from the lake back to the temple for the rituals, prayers, and offerings to Shiva.

at the Narmadeshwar Shivala when they had brought back the holy water from the lake to the temple. A two-mile-long queue of pilgrims would gather for the celebrations and prayers. He was adamant that the villagers realised the importance of partaking in these religious ceremonies lest they lost their sense of identity and belonging.

The pilgrimage to Grand Bassin began in 1898 and has taken place ever since. However, from the region surrounding New Grove, a place called Bois Cheri, there was no access to the sacred lake that was on the west side of that village. Dookhee sent his workers to clear a path through the woods and so, in 1920, made possible the opening of the road from Bois Cheri to Grand Bassin for the benefit of the pilgrims. In recognition of Dookhee's contributions to the community, the Governor of Mauritius, Sir Hesketh Bell, visited the Narmadeshwar Shivala in 1921. For such a high dignitary to visit a Hindu temple in those days was a momentous occasion. This was the second largest temple on the island at the time and was at the service of the inhabitants of the southern part of Mauritius.

During Diwali, he would position his gramophone by an open window that gave on to the front veranda and play music so that the neighbouring villagers could rejoice in the entertainment. There was no radio in those days and so a crowd would gather on the roadside to listen to both devotional and film songs and they would stay till dusk so they could admire the decorations and illumination from hundreds of diyas (small earthen lamps) beautifully arranged all around the house, on the front steps of the veranda, the handrails, and along the driveway leading from the road to the house.

At Christmas, Dookhee would send generous gifts to the owners and senior management of the sugar factories that milled the sugarcane from his various sugarcane plantations. Children from several orphanages were treated to an annual lunch at his house and they, too, were showered with gifts. Pandits and other scholars of Hinduism were pampered by his charity. And, of course, every member of the large extended Gungah family, comprising at least a hundred individuals, and the household staff all received bountiful gifts on New Year's celebration.

Dookhee's generosity was such that he was compared to the legendary Indian king, Harischandra, in that whoever went to see him for a request never returned emptyhanded. These acts of philanthropy were innate to him and did not stop with temples or religious activities, even though these were of crucial importance to the Indo-Mauritian community.

In 1882 there were about a hundred state and aided schools (those receiving subsidies from the government) and were mostly for the minority white and coloured¹⁰ population. The majority of the population, the Indo-Mauritians, did not have access to formal education. By 1908, little had changed whereas Dookhee personally ran dozens of schools, in different parts of the island. He financed every single aspect of these schools, from all running costs to maintenance, supplying thousands of books freely to students, paying for the teachers' salaries, awarding prizes, clothes and small items of jewellery (particularly for the girls) to the deserving students, and issuing certificates.

Sending children to school was not as straightforward as it might seem. Even when the government schools were opened across the island, rumour was spreading that the educational system would convert all students to Christianity and so the Indo-Mauritians were reluctant to send their children to school. Beside a few baitkas, there was an acute lack of access to education in general, not just religious studies. Dookhee realised how detrimental this was to the children of the Indo-Mauritian community and therefore opened a number of schools and worked with an Indian scholar, named Atmaram Vishwanath, to come up with a proper curriculum. In the 1920s, Dookhee's schools were the first in the country to have a syllabus to teach various subjects, including mathematics, history, and geography, in a Hindi medium – a language the vast majority of the Indo-Mauritians were comfortable with. The syllabus was circulated in all schools as a booklet. In addition, textbooks devised by Vishwanath and financed by Dookhee were freely distributed to every single student. These were known as the *Dookhee Gungah Hindi Reading* books. Dookhee provided teachers with financial incentives to encourage them to bring more children to his schools. He even had inspectors visit the schools to ensure the proper running of these institutions.

Kunwar Maharaj Singh was an Indian government delegate sent to Mauritius to inquire into the state of the Indian immigrants. From 19th of December 1924 to 31st of January 1925, Maharaj Singh carried out his investigation. He visited sugar plantations and estates and met with several dignitaries as well as planters and labourers. On the 11th of January, he was a guest at the Narmadeshwar Shivala where one of Dookhee's school had been established. There, Maharaj Singh praised Dookhee's numerous achievements and his promotion of free education. In his report published in 1925, Maharaj Singh recommended that Indian languages should be taught at schools, a comment that was no doubt inspired by Dookhee's Hindi-medium schools.

¹⁰ Those with mixed white and non-white heritage.

Some months later, Dookhee was addressed a letter dated 7th of September 1925 from Natal, now Durban, praising his good deeds in the field of education and requesting more copies of his *Dookhee Gungab Hindi Reading* books as they were the only Hindi textbooks they could get hold of other than from India. This level of recognition for a descendant of an indentured labourer was unheard of in those days. His influence on the lives of several hundreds, if not thousands, of children was monumental and he was truly a pioneer of free education for the masses.

It was a lifelong commitment to education for Dookhee. In 1930, he set up The Savitri Girls School¹¹ to further reform women's position in society. Dookhee had always been about the emancipation and empowerment of the womenfolk by providing them access to paid work on his estates, his biscuit factories, bakeries, cattle farms, fisheries, and cottage industry. With the Savitri Girls School he wanted to make sure that girls would have an even stronger foundation in education, and access to better opportunities compared to the previous generation.

Even though there had been some progress in the living conditions and lifestyle among the Indo-Mauritian community since they first arrived en masse in 1834, in the early 1900s there was what could be described as a cultural atrophy. Dookhee, once again the visionary, was already organising satsangs, or gatherings where religious discourses were held by scholars of Hinduism, whether at the Narmadeshwar Shivala or other temples or even at his own house. His incalculable wealth did not make him pompous in any way. Instead, he made several important contributions to religious and cultural societies with the aim to incentivise the community to be more engaged in their cultural and social duties. These organisations gradually realised that there was indeed a demand for these types of social activities. As a result, the 1920s were marked by the visits of several cultural leaders from India. They had been invited by these organisations to help consolidate the work that had already begun by Dookhee and other stalwarts in the community. These leaders toured the island and popularised the use of Hindi among the Indo-Mauritians. The most outstanding of these leaders was Ramgovind Trivedi, a journalist and scholar of Indian philosophy who had translated the Rig Vedas from Sanskrit into Hindi. With Dookhee's help, he opened a dozen centres across the island for the study of the Bhagavad Gita. Upon his return to India, Trivedi published a magazine and named it "*Gungab*" in honour of Dookhee. The magazine was issued every quarter between 1927 and 1933 in Vanarasi.

¹¹ Savitribai Phule (1831 – 1897) was perhaps the first woman teacher of modern India. Savitribai and her husband founded one of the early modern Indian girls' schools in Pune in 1851. The Savitri Girls School was likely named after the pioneer of India's feminist movement.

Another publication that is of great historical importance is the first ever Hindi book to be published in Mauritius by Vishwanath. Prior to writing his book, Vishwanath was working as editor in a local newspaper called *The Hindustani*. It was the first and only one, among a dozen French and English papers, that existed then, and that was accessible to the Hindu community for it was printed mostly in Hindi and partly in English. The weekly paper was originally launched in 1909 and edited by Manilal Maganlal Doctor, an Indian barrister and linguist. He had come to Mauritius in October 1907 upon the request of Mahatma Gandhi, who had advised him to help the Indo-Mauritians labourers in their plight to improve their social and political situation. He did so fervently until his departure in 1911.

In 1912, Vishwanath came to Mauritius from India, upon the insistence of Manilal Doctor, to take over the running of *The Hindustani*, which he edited for about a year until the newspaper ceased to be published. Even then, Vishwanath chose to stay in Mauritius, having witnessed the conditions in which the Indo-Mauritians were living. He followed in Doctor's footsteps in helping to uplift the Hindu community through social work. During that time, he spent about seven years researching and compiling his seminal book, *History of Mauritius*, which he finally wrote in 1921.

The work that went into the book was indeed colossal. Beside the main historical events of Mauritius, outlining its Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British occupation, the book also addressed other subjects such as the indentured servitude system and the treatment of Indian workers in Mauritius, their religious, cultural, and educational conditions, key political figures, and the democratic system of government in the island. The challenge for the author was that he did not have readily available references, neither in English nor certainly in Hindi, as most books then were in French. When *History of Mauritius* eventually came out, it was a book like no other. It was the first of its kind and, following its subsequent publication in 1923, inspired other emerging Indo-Mauritian scholars to write their own books about various aspects of Mauritian history and culture.

It was not to be as straightforward as this, however. The publication of the book itself was delayed by about two years. One of the reasons was the lack of funding for its printing and so Vishwanath had to seek sponsorship from a handful of wealthy Indo-Mauritian dignitaries. In addition, as soon as the book was released in Mauritius, in late July 1923, it caused a stir, particularly among the high-echelon society of Indo-Mauritians. The reasons for this are twofold.

First, the elite accused Vishwanath of being a liar and a fraud for having misrepresented the Indian community in Mauritius. They threatened to burn copies of the book and have the author deported back to India. This whole scene took place on the 7th of August 1923 in Port Louis where Vishwanath was being manhandled and insulted by this group of vexed individuals. The embarrassing incident was reported on that day in the oldest and one of the most popular newspapers of the time, *Le Cernéen*, in an article entitled *Un Verte Correction (A Severe Reprimand)*. Second, they were not happy that the book had been dedicated to Dookhee. It angered them that a non-Brahmin should be the recipient of that much praise and recognition.

The criticisms and threats ensued for several weeks after the book's release. Fortunately, once the misunderstandings had been dissipated and the author having come forward to justify why he had dedicated the book to Dookhee, the dispute was laid to rest. Following a few edits to the original, more so to please certain sections of the Indo-Mauritian community, the author published the second edition of *History of Mauritius* in April 1924, once more with the financial help of a few individuals including, again, that of Dookhee. Moreover, Vishwanath insisted that despite some changes in the second edition he would keep the original acknowledgement as he recognised the unique and immense contribution that Dookhee had made to society, and he considered Dookhee's support to be of utmost importance to the *raison d'être* of the book. Dookhee went on to finance almost all of Vishwanath's books, but none of them had the same impact that *History of Mauritius* had when it was first released nearly a century ago.



Legacy – 1930s onward

As the 1930s began, Mauritius came out of the Great Depression that had started from about 1922. Most planters and sugar estate owners suffered through this crisis, but not Dookhee. His acumen and entrepreneurship would allow him to not only navigate through these hard times but to prosper while carrying on with his philanthropy. He did not have to preach about his social work and charity – his deeds carried more weight than the value of his donations. He had many admirers, both among his workers and the public. His workers were in awe of him, and he inspired them to work hard like he had. From time to time, Dookhee was called upon to mediate between disputing parties. He did so in all fairness and judiciously, and his ruling was final.

Dookhee's success relied a lot on the support of his wife, Mooneea, and his family, particularly his brothers. Each one of them was responsible for one of the various activities that Dookhee was involved in. One brother looked after all the religious aspects and even managed some of the socio-cultural organisations. Another was responsible for the schools and educational elements, yet another took care of the estates and various properties. The youngest oversaw the bakery, and the rest was each in charge of the several other cottages, orchards, fisheries, farms, etc. *La Société Dookhee Gungah et Compagnie* was founded in 1930 by Dookhee and five of his brothers

specifically for that purpose. Dookhee, as the head of the family, also oversaw the entire family enterprise.

Over the decades, to manage seven sugar estates was no mean feat. It is estimated that the total land that he owned at one point was the equivalent of about ten times the total area of Hyde Park or about forty times the size of the Botanical Garden in Pamplemousses. Much of this has either been donated unreservedly by Dookhee for the betterment of the community or passed down the generations among the ever-growing number of heirs. Part of his orchard was given to the government so that the airport could be extended, and the remaining portion is now managed by the government and used as an agricultural experimentation station. The orchard now bears the name of *Dookhee Gungah Orchard*.

Within the confines of his house in New Grove, there have been several gatherings whereby Dookhee and his guests, whom he picked judiciously, debated the current state of affairs and talked about setting up a structure for socio-cultural and even political organisations. In particular, there were lengthy conversations about the sugar boom and bust in the 1920s and 1930s respectively, the first Indo-Mauritians candidacy to the general elections in the 1920s and the subsequent election of Dunputh Lallah and Rajcoomar Gujadhur, the rise of the working class activists such as Maurice Curé and Guy Rozemont, and the rise of the political figures such as the Bissoondoyal brothers and Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who would become the country's first Prime Minister when Mauritius gained independence from the British in 1968. Dookhee's house, to some extent, had been the crucible where many of these socio-political movements took shape and burst into the political scene of a nascent nation. He might never have taken an active role in politics but his influence and impact on the destiny of the country is undeniable.

One other topic that was also addressed during those gatherings was the centenary celebration of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in 1935. In commemoration of this event, Dookhee published a book called *Sadukti Sangraha*. It was a collection of inspirational sayings derived from religious scriptures, and it was a testament that Dookhee was well versed in both Hindi and Sanskrit. He had taught himself to read and write after having spent years in the company of learned pandits and scholars while encouraging them, in return, to disseminate the teachings from the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, and Vedas to a culturally-thirsty Indo-Mauritian community. His book stands among those works that hold a historically significant place. To commemorate the centenary of the arrival of Indian immigrants with a book about their cultural

and religious identity is a metaphor about how vital this sense of a common faith was to the survival and emancipation of the labourers.

On 23rd of November 1978, the then Governor General, Dayendranath Burrenchobay, inaugurated the Dookhee Gungah Government School near New Grove in recognition of his immeasurable contribution to the field of education. The school was built on a plot of land that once belonged to Dookhee. Several dignitaries were present at the ceremony, and they all recognised the work of this unique individual who had never set foot in a classroom and who had never been formally taught to read and write. The dozens of schools that were once under his ownership and management no longer exist but the children who benefited from them are the true legacy of his contribution to educating the nation.

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Dookhee Gungah's story is one of unparalleled achievement and positive impact on society. While most stories about indentureship revolve around suffering and hardship, his is about the rise of not just one individual or family but that of an entire nation, for he was the first to inspire, support and guide the leaders who came after him.

He provided the oppressed Indo-Mauritian community with the means to better themselves, to find their new sense of identity, to be able to freely practice their religion, to have access to free education, to learn about their culture and traditions, and to unite as one people.

Dookhee has been described by many of his contemporaries as a benefactor, philanthropist, social reformer, promoter of knowledge, father of free education, author, entrepreneur, patron of arts and culture, administrator, landlord, commander, and immortal fighter of Hinduism, amongst other accolades. These take on a different, more pointed meaning when one considers the context in which these praises were bestowed. The challenges and hurdles the Indo-Mauritian community had to face, even though they were more populous than the ruling class, were truly set for them not to succeed. To be fair, few did manage to rise and serve their community, but none did it to the extent that Dookhee did. While others had to rally together to fight a cause, he independently, and out of his own pocket, championed several of them.

And while many had to rely on the government and other organisations to provide them with their basic needs, he singlehandedly operated as an institution who empowered women and championed their emancipation, who provided free access to education for those seeking a better life, who supported other socio-cultural entities so they could in turn shepherd the community through their hardship, who ran businesses and enabled hundreds of families to earn a decent livelihood, who managed vast estates that contributed to the economy of a prospering nation, and so on and so forth. And he did it all out of pure philanthropy, with no expectation of reward or recognition.

His assets and property spanned across more than just real estate, like that of most planters. He owned a bakery, fishery, biscuit factory, farm, orchard, an entire cottage industry, several colonial-style houses, bungalows by the seaside and countryside, boats, cars, lorries, horses and carriages, locomotives, weighbridges, and other possessions and items of luxury that were rare or unheard of among the Indo-Mauritian community. His real worth, however, was in the construction of several temples, the funding of religious ceremonies and festivals, schools, textbooks, financing of political activists, and helping his fellow Mauritians to rise as a nation.

He and his family might have lived affluently and in abundance, but it was never out of greed or avarice. In fact, his benevolence was legendary and revered, and unequalled. Vishwanath said of Dookhee, “His generosity is more valuable to us than his wealth.” It was hard for some to understand Dookhee’s ascent and prosperity. Legend has it that, once upon a time, while toiling in the sugarcane field, Fowdur had stumbled upon a dazzling treasure – not unlike the gold the indentured labourers were promised to find if they were to dig underneath the boulders in the plantations. This treasure was to be the source of the Gungahs’ extraordinary fortune, according to folklore. But these were mere fabrications by those who envied Dookhee’s fame. None of this was to put a dent in his dedication to social work and charity. He symbolised the true meaning of philanthropy – the absolute unconditional love of humanity.

His legacy is still alive and, even though it cannot be quantified, his contribution to society is of immense historical importance. He was recognised in his native Mauritius, his father’s native

India, as well as in South Africa. For a son of an immigrant to have that much reach during the period of indentured servitude is perhaps unique among the entire indentureship diaspora¹².

A heartfelt obituary was published in a renowned weekly newspaper, called *Arya Vir*, on the 31st of March 1944. He was 76 when he passed away a week before, on the 24th. His grave can be found on the cremation ground that was once used by the family and is in the vicinity of New Grove. Mauritius has undoubtedly gained from the life of a true visionary, pioneer, and philanthropist.

The following engraving, which encapsulates the person that he was, can be seen on Dookhee Gungah's headstone:

*How fortunate is the man
Whose life is spent in the spread of knowledge,
And whose path is that of virtue,
Whose conduct is free from selfishness and pride,
And whose sole aim is benevolence
For the happiness of suffering mankind*

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¹² The diaspora consists mainly of Indians who were dispatched to the following colonies: Mauritius, Seychelles, Réunion, South and East Africa, the Caribbean, Surinam, Guyana, Malaysia, and Singapore.



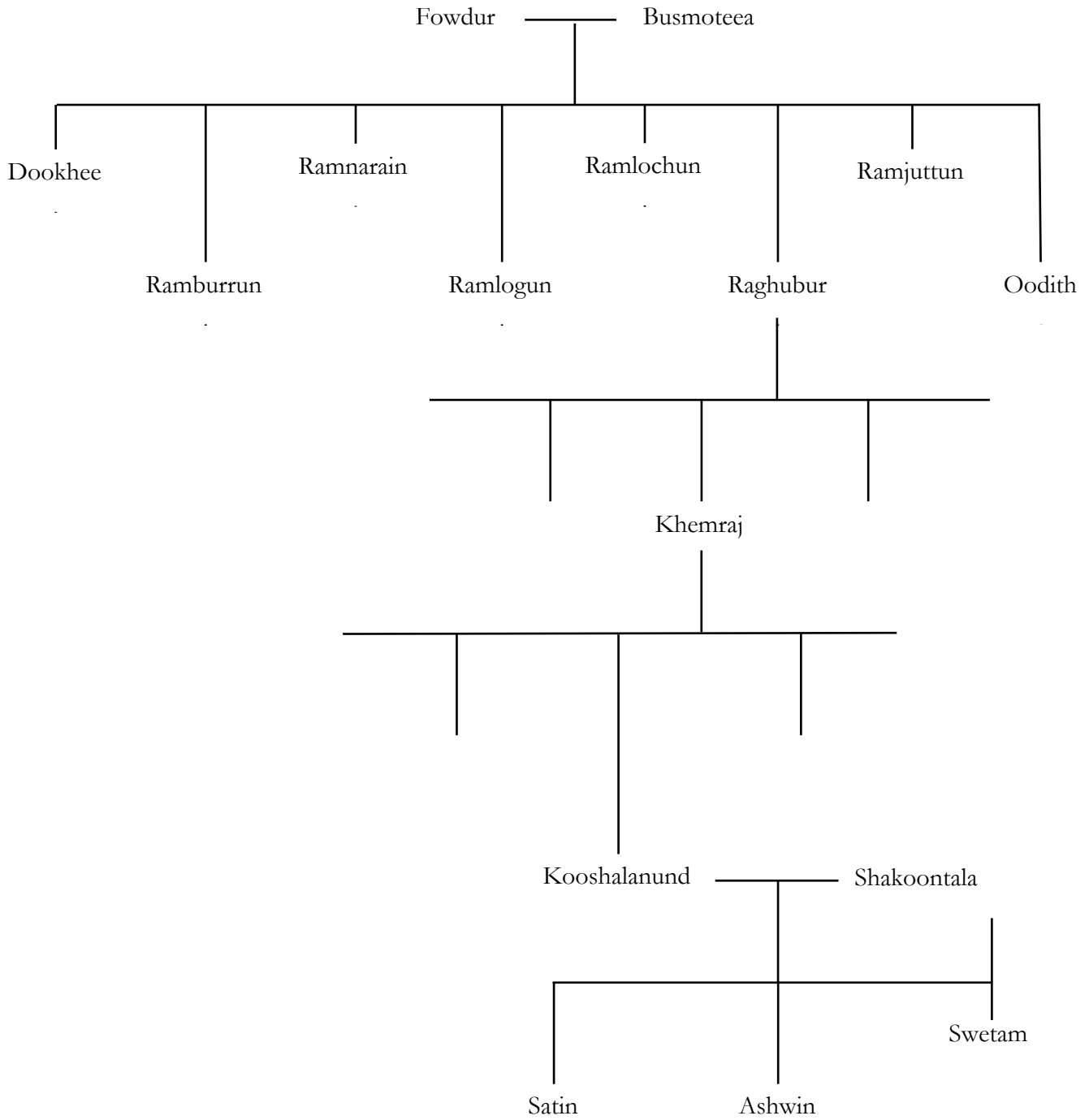
Gungah family – 1912



Dookhee Gungah – 1930s

Family Tree

(Or how I am related to Dookhee Gungah)



End Note

Dookbee Gungah's story is one whose time has come. His story touches on so many aspects that are more relevant than ever. Whether it is to do with philanthropy, in its most fundamental and purest form (and not as a means of tax avoidance or a trendy thing to do), or whether it is about empowerment or entrepreneurship or emancipation, everything that Dookbee did was in one way or another a ground-breaking and laudable achievement. He was a pioneer in Mauritius and, perhaps, even among the diaspora of indentured labourers and their descendants.

I am entirely indebted towards my father, Dr Kooshalanund Gungah, who has been monumental in reviving my ancestor's story. Without his guidance and encouragement, I would not have been able to produce this work.

Still, there is much, much more that needs to be told about the life of Dookbee Gungah. This abridged version is only to provide a glimpse of his many achievements and his many timeless qualities.

History will remember him as a great philanthropist whose legacy will shine on like an eternal sun.

Dookbee Gungah will forever be my hero and inspiration...