



wilberforce
| e c t u r e t r u s t

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I am delighted to be in your midst today to participate in the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade and to pay tribute to that celebrated son of Hull, William Wilberforce.

I wish to thank the Wilberforce Lecture Trust Committee and the Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce for having invited me to deliver the Wilberforce lecture.

William Wilberforce's passion for freedom and his belief in the dignity of Man led him to embark on a crusade to end the slave trade and eventually slavery itself.

He was so appalled with this obnoxious trade that he said he would never rest until he would have effected its abolition. He was a man with a mission.

But, in a larger sense, we pay tribute to his age, an age much maligned for its imperial ambitions.

We also pay tribute to those who joined him in this crusade and those who, convinced of the rightness of the cause, lent him their support in parliament and elsewhere.

Those men and women, without shedding a drop of blood, carried out a veritable revolution that changed the economic, social and moral order of the world and put an end to a most repugnant practice that had existed for so long.

The world at large is yet to catch up with them.

It is only recently, at the Durban Conference in 2001, that the slave trade and slavery have been recognised as a crime against humanity.

Yet it was undoubtedly a horrific crime against humanity. Just cast your mind back in time and try to imagine what it was like – if it can be imagined at all !

Try to imagine how young people were torn away from their families, bundled into ships, for journeys of thousands of miles – packed like sardines, chained and made to row as well - sometimes – and whipped if not rowing hard enough.

Very little food and water was given to them - many felt sick but the ill and the sick were kept together with the others

So infectious diseases spread - with rats roaming about.

Those who died and they were many – were unceremoniously thrown abroad.

Those who survived – on landing were chained and sold as property – they were often given derogatory names.

My Government is now facilitating the change of name of slave descendants. Once taken to their work place, they had to spend the rest of their lives – humiliated, flogged, made to toil like beasts of burden until death.

It is unbelievable that man could treat his fellow man in such a brutal and obnoxious manner.

This was a clear example of man's inhumanity to man as said by the poet Robert Burns

Today, slavery is part of our common heritage as is its abolition.

They are an integral part of the history of my country and its people.

My address will focus on a very important period of our past which has left a deep imprint on my country.

Slavery and its abolition have left their distinctive legacy in all aspects of our life.

The island I come from was uninhabited when the first Europeans landed. Very soon they sought to make of the island a profitable venture.

That turned out to be a difficult enterprise.

The Portuguese had visited the island but did not settle there.

When the Dutch decided to do so, in 1638, they could only create a colony by importing slaves to the island.

The foundation of a Dutch settlement in the island was possible only after they had secured slaves from India, Indonesia and Madagascar.

The development of the island became linked with the institution of slavery.

After the Dutch abandoned the island, in 1710, it became a real pirates' lair, until 1721, when the French took physical possession of the island.

The French did not succeed in making agriculture viable as they could not get sufficient French labour to do so. They had introduced free workers from France and from India. This workforce proved inadequate for the task.

They, in turn, had recourse to slavery to obtain a labour force.

It was only after slaves had been introduced from Mozambique that development started on the island

So Mauritius, without slaves, would not have been a viable proposition. The introduction of slavery was a seminal moment in the history of the island.

In Mauritius, slavery had distinctive features that made it, in many ways, unique.

It is a truism that all historical events and processes are unique to their places and contexts.

Yet there is something special about Mauritius.

Very few countries experienced such ethnic diversity under a slavery regime.

Slaves were drawn from various regions and cultures, from Madagascar, Indonesia, India and Africa.

Our patchy recorded history has it that a slave rebellion, in 1695, during the Dutch period, had among its leaders Anna of Bengal, Paul of Ceylon, Aron of Amboina and Antony of Malabar.

The heterogeneity of the slave population became a permanent feature of our multi-cultural set-up.

Unwittingly and inevitably, slavery in the island resulted in an encounter of people and cultures.

Slavery contributed inadvertently to the rich cultural diversity of our island.

This brutal globalisation of people and cultures occurred in the island, more than 300 years ago, and it has left its indelible mark on the memory and in the very blood of our people.

When the British took over the island, in 1810, it was merely a transfer of sovereignty which altered little the realities on the ground. For the capitulation treaty stipulated that the French settlers would retain their land and other properties, their way of life and their religion.

They were given the right to leave the colony, should they decide to do so, within two years, with all their possessions.

Napoleon declared that he had never come across such magnanimous terms of capitulation in history.

After the British conquest, the slave population which stood at 55 000, in 1807, rose to 77 000 by 1817.

This change in the population was a reflection of the deep-seated changes in the economy of the colony and the nature of slavery itself.

I am not suggesting that, during the French period, there existed a mitigated, form of slavery, or that there were happy slaves - far from it.

However, slavery during the French period, occurred in a mercantile economy. A great number of slaves were working in the ports, on small estates or engaged in domestic tasks.

Some slaves could secure a number of material benefits from their masters by doing extra work for wages generally.

Slaves with highly demanded skills no doubt enjoyed substantial control over their lives and were a part of a cash economy. However these were few in number, and life, in general, was short, nasty and brutal.

Slavery was dehumanising, depriving people of their freedom and reducing them to the status of chattel.

Physical and emotional abuse, malnutrition, injury and disease were the lot of the slaves.

The advent of British rule was a turning point in the economic development of the island.

It brought about a full-fledged plantation system with the island's economy integrated into the imperial one and the world capitalist mode of production.

The conditions of slaves deteriorated under British rule, not because the masters had become more cruel, but because it ushered in a new mode of production and focused on one crop.

The harmonisation of duties, with those imposed on West Indies' sugar, in 1825, opened the British market to Mauritian exports.

This ushered in what historians refer to as the 'Sugar revolution'.

In 1823, sugar constituted 55% of total exports. By 1835, sugar accounted for 95% of exports, of which 79% was destined for Britain.

In fact Mauritius experienced some kind of an industrial revolution. The factory system had become more widespread.

By 1838, there were 203 sugar factories operating on the island.

Dramatic consequences accompanied the conversion of the economy into a capitalist industrialised one. The rhythm of plantation life was dictated by new exigencies.

For the slaves, the living and working conditions underwent a major degradation.

For a labour force, which had been introduced from Africa with pre-colonial and pre-industrial cultures, and brutally separated from their families and communities, these conditions were extremely traumatic and resulted in high rates of mortality.

It is under such conditions that an outbreak of cholera, in the 1820s, took a toll of about 10,000 lives.

Hence, the slave population could not increase naturally. So they had to be fresh importation.

The expansion of the industry, at a time when the slave trade was legally prohibited, increased the demands on each slave.

They had to work for longer hours. Slaves, introduced illegally, were severely ill-treated. It was a traumatic experience as I said before.

The transfer of urban slaves to plantation work was also extremely difficult and depressing for many.

Between 1810 and 1835, conditions of slaves in Mauritius deteriorated even more significantly. It is paradoxical that this should have coincided with a period of liberal democratic evolution in Britain.

Locally, administrators faced the dilemma of reconciling the doctrines of liberty with the material interests of the plantocracy.

Colonial administrators feared antagonising the landowners, with whom they mixed socially. The latter resented interference with their slaves and new laws passed, remained a dead letter and interference was kept at a minimum.

The laws aimed to ameliorate their lives, were an attempt to educate the planters to improve the existing conditions. The experiment failed. Ameliorating slavery was a contradiction in terms.

So then the British Government sent an envoy, John Jeremie, to enforce these laws. Believe it or not he could not land from his ship and had to remain on board, for four days, because the planters had assembled at the port to prevent his landing and threatened his life.

This was a repeat of history. During the French Revolutionary period, an expedition to abolish slavery was sent back in 1795.

The abolitionists had expected that the end of the slave trade would lead to an improvement in the living conditions of slaves and eventually contribute to a natural death of slavery itself.

This expectation was short-lived and reinforced their determination to press for legally ending slavery.

The anti-slavery movement in Britain, with which we associate the illustrious names of Wilberforce, Clarkson and others, was indeed inspired by a moral fervour and the ideals of the Christian faith.

The 1780s were a period when a radically new ethical order was emerging in Britain. This happened in the context of the 'the democratic revolution' spread over more than a century, between 1770 to 1890.

It was an age of liberal reform and humanism in Britain. This had a lasting and deep influence on political thought throughout the world. It is arguably one of the most impressive periods of human development.

The initiators of the move, in favour of the abolition of the slave trade, were a group of Quakers and evangelical Anglicans, deeply worried that Britain should participate in this abomination.

Under the leadership of Wilberforce, the anti-slavery movement campaigned, for over 40 years, against moral orthodoxy, economic good sense and conservatism until its ideas prevailed.

According to James Walvin, Professor of History Emeritus, at the University of York and author of A Short History of Slavery, Wilberforce came to personify the abolition campaign.

Some of the most well-known figures of the movement were Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, Zacharie Macaulay, Thomas Fowell, Buxton George Stephen, Joseph Sturge, John Scoble and Elizabeth Heyrick, were all part of the movement which maintained pressure on the British parliament until final abolition in 1833.

The struggle of the abolitionists is a glorious chapter in the history of humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, While the experience of slaves was a deeply destructive one, resistance to slavery was endemic. It took many forms, both overt and covert.

All the odds were stacked against the slaves.

They had no stake in the economy. They had no rights and were defined as property. They did not prosper but worked for the prosperity of their masters.

Yet they found ways of safeguarding their dignity. It is recorded that some runaways, while being pursued, clambered up to the edge of a mountain and preferred to throw themselves down in the void, choosing death rather than servitude.

However, brutal and dehumanising the slavery system and, despite being reduced to the status of '*furniture*', in the notorious Code Noir, slaves developed their psychological autonomy and their cultural resilience.

They demonstrated again man's capacity to fight against all odds and to strive for liberty and freedom.

The Code Noir promulgated by Louis XIV in 1685 was extended to Mauritius in a slightly amended version.

This text codified brutality of the most unspeakable nature and will for ever remain a shameful monument of Man's inhumanity to Man. It was in fact while reading the Code Noir under the prompting of my teacher, Dr Karl Noël, author of "l'Esclavage à l'île de France" that lies behind my abiding curiosity in the subject of slavery. Unless you read about these inhuman treatments you cannot even come close to imagining how this could be possible.

There are indications that the preservation of religion and culture was an important aspect of resistance to slavery. We know, for example, that the idea that a Malagasy should die in his homeland and be reunited with his ancestors, led Malagasy slaves to cross the seas back to Madagascar.

We have a number of cases of them stealing boats to return to their homeland to die. Some were even caught in their native land and brought back to the island.

But they yearned for their freedom and fought back for it. To this end, they assisted the British in taking over the island, in the hope that they would be set free.

Vain hope, for the abolition of slavery was not yet on the imperial agenda decided in London.

But British administrators locally were derelict even in enforcing the law banning the slave trade. All manner of subterfuge and deception were used to allow the trade to continue, in spite of the act of 1807.

As a result of pressure from the anti-slavery movement, only then a Commission of Inquiry was sent to Mauritius to investigate the slave trade.

The campaign against the slave trade was unrelenting and infringements of the law were denounced in the Anti-Slavery Reporter.

Although slavery was abolished, in 1833, the emancipation order only took effect in 1835. This was followed by a period of apprenticeship which lasted until 1839.

During the period of amelioration, the laws regulating working conditions were not respected by planters. The apprentices showed their longing for freedom by working hard and saving to buy their freedom rather than waiting to obtain it from their owners or from the state. Thus 9000 of them bought their freedom.

When the day of final liberation dawned on the first February 1839, the vast majority of those released chose to abandon the plantations of their former masters.

All attempts by planters to retain them on the plantation failed. A contract was offered to many apprentices but the conditions attached were so ridiculous and repugnant that the majority refused to be bound.

The slaves had never known freedom throughout their lives and the offer of a few rupees could hardly restrain the urge for freedom. It is a reminder that material gains cannot stifle a free spirit.

They settled on crown lands and set up hamlets on the coast. They chose fishing and market gardening which were a precarious one. They refused to get in to the plantation system.

The former masters had wanted to incorporate the ex-slaves in the plantation system.

It had also been the intention of the colonial state and the abolitionists to create a free, market society in which the ex-slaves would sell their labour against wages.

This was more easily said than done.

A free labour market never developed and soon slaves were replaced by bonded labour, toiling in conditions akin to slavery.

Planters decided to have recourse to paid indentured labour, from India but it was a new system of slavery.

My own grandfather, Moheeth Ramgoolam, immigrant number 353639, left his village in India, in 1871, travelled to Mauritius as an indentured labourer, lived in dire poverty and grinding toil, broke his health and he died at an early age.

It is amazing that his son, should, within one generation give freedom to his country of adoption and become the first Prime Minister of free Mauritius.

Slavery was abolished but freedom came at a very high price. Many must have found their hopes of a better life dashed.

Different denominations of the church competed against each other and, in so doing, provided certain facilities to the newly enfranchised.

As we commemorate the life and the achievements of Wilberforce, we pay homage and tribute to a great social reformer who has valiantly fought for the liberation of poor suffering humanity.

His crusade was a long one and its abolition continues to inspire many in their struggle for human rights and in their fight against modern slavery in all its horrendous forms.

The fight for the abolition of slavery was a formidable undertaking. The scales were heavily, probably hopelessly weighted against success. Its realisation heartens us as we continue today to struggle to restore people to their undeniable rights.

In the twentieth century, in our struggle for emancipation and constitutional development, we were actively supported by the Labour MP for Hull, the honorable James Johnson, whom we came to consider as the representative of Mauritius in Westminster. So you see, Ladies and Gentlemen, Hull and Mauritius have come a long way together. Vested interests and inertia conspire to thwart us in our efforts to overcome the heavy legacy of slavery, a legacy of social dislocation, cultural denial and economic marginalisation.

And this legacy was perpetuated, for more than a century of benign neglect.

It was only with a political awakening and the introduction of adult suffrage that measures were taken to redress the ills, the inequities and the trauma left by slavery. I quote again from James Walvin:

“Slavery was the means by which the West emerged to a position of unrivalled economic and political dominance. Stated simply, African slave labour, transplanted into the Americas, was critical to the creation of Western wealth and the consequent relegation of other regions and peoples to the overarching power of the West.”

In my own country, it has left us with a distribution of wealth that is still skewed in favour of those who benefited from slavery.

One of the legacies of slavery, that continues to hamper development, is the concentration of ownership of assets.

This concentration is unfair in a way but also gives rise to misallocation and inefficiency in the utilisation of resources, and impedes growth.

My Government is aiming to reform the national economic structure and open doors of opportunity to the population at large. We will achieve this by enlarging participation in mainstream activities and opening access to land ownership.

As we see it, the key to economic democratisation is empowerment.

Since assuming office, my government has set up a Commission on the Democratisation of the Economy and we are now implementing the recommendations of that commission. We have also set up an Empowerment Programme whereby people are trained and get paid while they are being trained, with funds being allocated for that.

We will also soon be presenting to the National Assembly an Equal Opportunity bill to address various forms of discrimination and exclusion, both in the government and in the private sector.

To create an even playing field and open up space, a Competition bill is under preparation.

My country is an active member of the UNESCO Slave Route Project. The Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture, whose foundation stone was laid by President Mandela himself, has started a project to trace the genealogy of African slaves.

The most famous refuge, where runaways found relative safety, has been declared a national monument and we are actively engaged in getting inscribed in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites.

We have invited Reverend Desmond Tutu to help us to create a Truth and Justice Commission, as a healing exercise, so that we can move forward.

Because we want to build a nation where descendants of slaves will put behind them the humiliation and the rancour and make of equality a fact of daily life.

I will not keep you for three and a half hours like William Wilberforce did, in his famous speech of 1789. My purpose is of less import than his had been.

I hope, as we move forward, the people of Hull will continue to stand by us.

Thank you.