Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam
Memorial Lecture
24 September 2014

“His Life, Vision and Achievements”

By
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Moka
“Only through education can the proletariat raise itself from the primitive level of existence to which it has been condemned and integrate itself with such a dignity in a democratic society.”

Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam
Dr. the Hon. Ahmed Rashid Beebeejaun, Deputy Prime Minister

The Hon. Abdool Razack Peeroo, Speaker of the National Assembly

Honourable Ministers

Mr. Raouf Bundhun, Former Vice-President

Your Excellencies Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Hon. Members of the Mauritius National Assembly

Mr. Ravin Dwarka, Chairman of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute

Mr. Bijaye Madhoo, Director General of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

All Protocol Observed
1. Good afternoon. I would like to thank the Honourable Minister of Arts and Culture for having given me the opportunity to speak on the life, vision and achievements of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, whom I had the immense privilege and honour to serve as Member of Parliament from 1976 to 1979, and as a Cabinet Minister, until 1982.

2. Indeed, it was SSR who offered me the opportunity to embrace public life.

3. I can say that that was a very enriching experience, and a defining moment of my political career. The experience I gained guided me throughout my public life.

4. May I at the very outset underscore that speaking on SSR in an hour or so would be tantamount to doing injustice to the memory of a great and outstanding Mauritian who has marked and shaped the history of our country, and who personifies and embodies the Mauritian nation.

5. Some called him a superman. Others, a man of all seasons and a political yogi.

6. But above all, SSR was a man of innate convictions.

7. SSR’s life was not easy. He worked hard and lived modestly.

8. As you know, modesty, humility and respect for others are signs of greatness, and SSR possessed all of these qualities that made him stand out among contemporary Mauritians.
9. Since his return to Mauritius in 1935, he went to every nook and corner of this country to talk to the people and to assess *de visu* the conditions in which they and their family were living.

10. He could see the numerous challenges that lied ahead of him in order to break the shackles of poverty, and the inhumane and degrading life the masses were in.

11. That is how he developed the capacity to feel and listen to the pulse of the nation.

12. Instead of sensational displays, he allowed his works and actions speak for themselves.

13. His political work started from then onwards.

14. He gradually transformed into action, his knowledge and experience he had gained in politics in London.

15. As we know, he was a committed and born socialist.

16. But from time to time, he would also say:

   "I am neither a capitalist nor a socialist. I am a practical man."

17. He always said that development should not stop at figures but should have a human dimension.

18. He turned Mauritius into a welfare state, and through his policies and initiatives, he laid the foundations of a just, peaceful and egalitarian society.

19. SSR left us 29 years ago. But his memory and spirit still lives within us, within every Mauritian, from all walks of life, and even in the minds of our children.
20. SSR remains a symbol for our nation while uniting into himself the various facets of our history.

21. SSR’s life spans like a bridge across the whole of the 20th Century. And he has rightly been called the Mauritian of the last Century.

22. That is because of what he has incarnated during his living.

23. SSR has left behind a legacy which still inspires one and all in this country.

24. Therefore, to talk this afternoon, on somebody of the stature and caliber of SSR whose political life spanned over a period of 50 years is no easy feat.

25. The history of Mauritius is intrinsically linked with the life and times of SSR. As Thomas Carlyle has put it:

   “No man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great man.”

26. Indeed, the history of our country is the biography of this great soul. In no small measure, SSR was a great man in his own right.

27. We will forfeit the chief source of dignity and sweetness of life if we do not seek converse, time and again, with greater minds that have left their vestiges in the world.

28. And the great minds who have gone before us and who have revolutionized the world have taught us how to live and how to die.

29. In a way, SSR symbolized the wisdom of the ages and we are his heirs.
30. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said:

"Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our own lives sublime, and departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time."

31. And the great men of any nation across the world reach out to all mankind indiscriminately.

32. They don’t strive for greatness. They simply do great works. Their deeds remain for posterity.

33. For those of you who have known or have been closely associated with that great man, will certainly agree that SSR worked selflessly for his country.

34. He has left his footprints in the history of our nation. Generations after generations will remember him for his achievements and his legacy.

35. SSR was a man of character who could turn around things quickly when others were struggling.

36. His strength in fact was in his character, in his convictions and sincerity of purpose, and more importantly, in his innate leadership qualities, in his capacity to translate vision into reality.

37. SSR knew the way, went the way, and always showed the way.

38. He knew how to convince people and to hold them together by his speeches and actions.

39. And like all leading minds of his time, SSR had one common characteristic – it was the willingness to confront unequivocally and without fear the major anxiety of his people.
40. He loved his country and his people and felt that he had a duty towards them. He had faith in them.

41. For him, success was a journey and not a destination.

42. SSR has proved that great leaders were not defined by the absence of weakness, but rather by the presence of clear thoughts, strengths and vision.

43. His strengths were his principles and the discipline he exercised when dealing with people and national issues.

44. He was soft-spoken, yet convincing. He kept a low profile, yet was always heard of. He was kind and gentle, yet he could press an argument and get those around him to agree.

45. For many of us, SSR was a father-figure, and a fine intellectual.

46. He was well read and had a vast knowledge. He could converse on any matter, be it medicine, politics, literature or philosophy with ease.

47. SSR loved literature which aroused in him an interest for languages.

48. He compared literature to the trunk of a tree from which the other branches of knowledge draw their life sustenance.

49. Since his college days, he was very passionate about English language and English literature which played a great role in shaping his character and vision.

50. He always took firm but diplomatic, at times, moderate positions, in denouncing the capitalist exploitation, discrimination and social injustices of the time.
51. This is where his critics could not appreciate the idea of SSR working with British administrators during his fight for equality and social justice.

52. SSR, himself, conceded that sometimes, he did make some short-term concessions to them as a matter of strategy but all the time, he never lost focus on the realization of long-term, carefully planned goals, i.e.:

(a) to make Mauritius an independent country; and

(b) the development, prosperity and happiness of all Mauritians.

53. For him, the welfare of the people remained all throughout, his prime consideration, and not some false ideology or dogmas.

54. Since 1948, in the electoral manifesto published by him together with Vaghjee, Beejadhur, Balgobin and Roy, he had already decided on the economic model for Mauritius, that is, a mixed economy.

55. He believed that capital and labour should work together but with social justice, and man being at the centre of development.

56. That is why he was described by Sookdeo Bissoondoyal as a person who is a blend of many mysteries, of many contradictions and of many conflicting loyalties.

57. Because nobody could read his thoughts and his mind.

58. The tribute that most touched SSR, in fact, came from Sookdeo Bissoondoyal who stated:

"Dr. Ramgoolam is a well-read politician. He is not that class of Indo-Mauritian intellectuals who gradually develop
unforgivable arrogance when they come across an ill-dressed person. He hates affectation. Although his knowledge of English is vast, still he clings to the Mauritian accent and in this, he differs from the shallow but arrogant so-called intellectuals. Dr. Ramgoolam unmistakably is a blend of many mysteries, of many contradictions and of many conflicting loyalties. He is at home anywhere, however ruthless these may turn out. He knows how and what to speak in moment of crisis.”

59. This is the image of SSR portrayed by no less a person who had opposed him most of the time.

60. In his battle for Independence, he stood firm like a rock and was unbending.

61. He would use to say: “Leaders must be close enough to relate to others, but far enough ahead to motivate them.”

62. And in the course of his long political battle, he was imbued with these principles.

63. He succeeded in creating a new and modern Mauritius on the noble principles of equality, social justice and tolerance.

64. SSR lived a humble and simple life.

65. To better illustrate SSR’s simplicity of life, let me share with you a small anecdote that has been narrated by late Kissoonsingh Hazareesingh, who also had a very close and long association with SSR.
66. According to Mr. Hazareesingh, when SSR returned to Mauritius after completing his medical studies in London, his brother who was a member of the Etat Major of Beauchamp sugar estate wanted to welcome him with a sumptuous feast of the best French cuisine, consisting of salmon, prawns, lobster, meat and poultry, thinking that after 14 years spent in London, SSR would have changed his lifestyle.

67. But when the butler came with his silver trays to serve SSR with those delicacies, the latter burst into anger and ordered that all the trays be taken away immediately. And instead, he asked that he be provided with home-made food such as his traditional rice and dhal, vegetables (brèdes) and chutney!

68. Whatever I am going to share with you this afternoon may be known. Because a lot has already been written on the life and achievements of SSR.

69. Suffice it to say that he has already found a place of prominence in our history, and history can neither be altered nor distorted.

70. To start with, let me talk on the life of SSR so that we understand better what made him the person he was, from a humble beginning to a political giant.

The Life of SSR

71. Kewal (meaning flower), as his parents used to call him, was born on 18 September 1900, in a hut among estate houses in the small village of Bois d’Oiseaux, home of his maternal grandparents in the district of Flacq.
72. It was the tradition in those days for the mother to give birth to her child at her father's place.

73. His parents in fact hailed from the village of Belle Rive, close to Bel Air.

74. His father, Mohit Ramgoolam, was himself one among the thousands of the Indian indentured labourers who were brought into the island during the latter half of the 19th century to work in the sugar cane fields.

75. Mohit Ramgoolam married Basmati Ramchurn, a young widow, who was born in Mauritius.

76. From that union, two daughters were born who unfortunately did not survive.

77. The birth of Kewal brought a glimmer of joy and hope in the hearts of the couple.

78. Because after two years of grieving, Kewal came into being like a flower born to new life after the snows of winter.

79. Kewal spent all his childhood days in Belle Rive during which time he learned to live a very simple ritualistic village life in the pure Hindu tradition.

80. That simple life in fact became part of him.

81. As a child, Kewal saw unfolding before his eyes how thousands of indentured labourers, soaked in perspiration were toiling in the vast sugar cane fields in inhumane conditions.

82. The daily evils, hardships and ill treatment meted out to the mass of indentured labourers had a profound impact upon him in his early age.
83. I say this because in one of his interviews, he was asked the question: “Prime Minister, when did you first realize the socialism learning of your politics?”

84. He replied: “It started early. I became conscious of social realities when I was still at the primary school.”

85. The time had come for young Kewal to get his first education.

86. As there were very few government schools in the island in those days, parents had to rely essentially on baikas where children were taught their ancestral languages, culture and traditions at the hands of the local gurujis.

87. One day he was watching children going to school, clad in their school uniform and wearing shoes.

88. They were passing by the hut he lived in. He asked one of the children: “Where are you going?”

89. And the latter replied that he was on his way to school.

90. Without hesitation, he joined the group and headed with them to that school.

91. Naturally, he was barefooted. He had no uniform on him. He was wearing shabby clothes.

92. He was heartily welcomed by Mrs. Siris, the teacher.

93. Mrs. Siris was a liberal and kindhearted person. She allowed young Kewal, who was still five years old, to sit together with the other pupils and to follow the class.
94. Mrs. Siris was very passionate about education. She convinced Kewal’s parents to allow him to register at her school in spite of the fact that that school was an RCA school.

95. That’s how the primary education of Kewal all started.

96. At that age, he had decided that he would have a western type education instead of the traditional teachings in the baitka.

97. What led him to make that choice at such a tender age? That is mystery? Nobody has yet found the answer.

98. On my part, surely it must have been an inner intuition or God himself that had guided his choice of the type of education that he wanted.

99. Later on, this education led him to the pinnacle of power and made him become a great leader of his times.

100. But he never forgot his roots.

101. This is in deep contrast with the situation that prevails in our country today.

102. It is a paradox of life that these days we have to literally coerce parents, to send their children to school in spite of all the facilities that are being provided.

103. Let us therefore as parents be inspired by young “Kewal” who more than a century earlier had the imagination to understand the importance and value of education at such an early age.

104. Kewal continued his primary schooling at Bel Air Government school.
105. At the age of seven, he lost his father, who died of pneumonia and bronchitis.

106. But poverty and the death of his father did not deter him from pursuing his studies.

107. He then went on to Curepipe to attend the Boy’s Government School from where he passed “la petite bourse” to secure admission to the Royal College Curepipe.

108. During his daily travel from Bel Rive to Curepipe, his quest for social justice and an egalitarian society for the thousands of indentured labourers had continued to haunt his mind.

109. He saw how the villagers were mal-nourished, sickly, ill-fed, and living a precarious life.

110. For him rural life was one of depressing poverty, disease, illiteracy, indebtedness, high infant mortality rate, and early death.

111. All this had moved him tremendously.

112. He vowed to correct all the injustices and the exploitation of the people of his country.

113. SSR political awareness started then, when he developed a deep sense of commitment to fight for the downtrodden.

114. At the Royal College, Kewal turned out to be an excellent student. Reverend Flower, one of his teachers inculcated in him a taste for the English Language and culture.

115. Two of his teachers were persons who were imbued with the ideals of justice and equity which had a profound impact on his character and personality.
116. One day, while he was still studying at the Royal College Curepipe, he came across some Indian periodicals.

117. One of them had the picture of a British woman, Annie Besant, on which there was a small caption that read: “I hope to see India winning home rule before I die.”

118. SSR was very much impressed by that as to how so many people were prepared to give up everything to obtain freedom for their country.

119. “Freedom” notes Nelson Mandela, “is something worth fighting for even if it means giving your life.”

120. SSR was also very much attracted by the inflammatory speeches that the Indian leaders like Lallah Rajput Rai, were giving for home rule of the Indian sub-continent at that time.

121. After his secondary education, SSR joined for a short while the Civil Service as a Clerk at the Treasury Department, but he was not happy because he was not convinced that as a civil servant he would be able to serve his people.

122. What prompted him to study Medicine has been well articulated by the Prime Minister.

123. But I feel I should recount to you again for you to just close your eyes and visualize what the social conditions were then.

“One day he saw an old woman resembling his mother in tears. SSR was deeply touched. He asked the lady in Bhojpuri: ‘Mother, why are you crying?’

The woman replied “What do I do Babu? It’s our fate!’
The young boy then asked the woman what can I do for you, and, at the same time, put his hand into his pocket to get some money.

The woman said ‘You are not a doctor Babu. The Sahab doctor treated me like a dog when I went to see him.’

124. Doctors, in those days, would not accept labourers to come near them as they considered the latter to be filthy.

125. Sometime later SSR narrated the incident to his brother Ramlall who was by then a planter.

126. Thereupon, his brother Ramlall retorted – “Why are you wasting your time in Government, go and study medicine!”

127. That’s how in 1921, SSR left Mauritius for England to study medicine. In London he was fascinated by the British way of life, traditions and culture. He was far from the prejudices, social degradation and discrimination he witnessed at home.

128. He saw in them freedom, social justice, fair play and equity.

129. As his brother was financing his studies, he could save some money to dress himself like a perfect English gentleman.

130. We all also know that SSR’s days in England were not easy. His brother had lost all his properties. Some 450 acres of land were seized and sold by the banks because he had supported Mr. Rajcoomar Gujadhur in his election against Mr. Montocchio.

131. But in spite of his precarious situation, SSR did not abandon his studies.

132. At the beginning, SSR lived with the Indian Students on the premises of the Indian Student’s Association.
133. This is where he got his political apprenticeship.

134. He befriended many top Indian scholars like Vithalbhai Patel who inculcated in him the art and science of politics.

135. He met top Indian Leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlall Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, and Subash Chandra Bose.

136. In 1924, he became the President of the London Branch of the Indian National Congress which aroused in him the staunch desire to fight for the freedom of his own country.

137. Even, the proof-reading of the manuscript of the book, “Great Indian Struggle” written by Subash Chandra Bose was done by SSR before its publication.

138. In London, SSR also became familiar with the Fabian Society, a leading left of centre think tank and political society, committed to creating the political ideas and policy debates that shape the future of progressive politics.

139. His love for the Fabian Society led him to listen to the lectures of Harold Laski, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics.

140. These lectures were a combination of Marxist, socialist and democratic thoughts from which sprung the Fabian socialist and they exerted a tremendous influence on his mind.

141. SSR was deeply impressed by the values of Fabianism, which ultimately shaped, his political philosophy, thinking and action.

142. He would say of Fabianism that its cardinal principle of “the correct timing”, that is, waiting for the right moment to act, had indeed characterized his political life.
143. The whole idea of the welfare state, conditions of employment, health, housing, education, social security and the brand of socialism that he advocated upon his return to Mauritius may rightly be attributed to the principles and teachings of the Fabians.

144. The Fabians rejected revolution and propagated instead the method of peaceful and gradual constitutional reform based on patience, moderation and persuasion.

145. He learned the golden rule of never rushing to any decision, never speaking off-hand without prior grasping and analyzing the issue carefully.

146. SSR later said that Fabian socialism suited his temperament and he had been all his life a Fabian in his approach to politics, in his tactics, in his political philosophy and in his battle for the emancipation of his people as well as for the liberation of his country from the yoke of colonialism.

147. And from his association with Mahatma Gandhi, he adopted the principles of non-violence.

148. SSR returned to Mauritius in 1935, to witness that the living conditions of the Indian masses were the same when he had left the country in 1921.

149. The same inequalities and harsh working conditions continued to prevail. Poverty was rife.

150. Life was still hard and unbearable for the masses and their families.

151. Education was accessible to only a privileged few.
152. From his experience in London and having deepened his knowledge about Fabian socialism, SSR was convinced that the only route to bring down the inequalities and hardships and to break the shackles of poverty was education at all levels, the gradual establishment of a welfare state and self-rule.

153. It was Charles de Gaulle who once said and I quote:

"Nothing great will ever be achieved without great men, and men are great only if they are determined to be so."

(Unquote)

154. SSR, no doubt had great hopes for his countrymen.

155. He refused to be a captive of the environment in which he found himself in spite of the huge challenges he had to face.

156. Because of his indomitable spirit, he went forward with the vision he had for his people and the dream for his country.

157. He had the strength, the patience, and the passion to transform the destiny of Mauritius.

158. After engaging himself into public life, he became a nominated Member of the then Legislative Council in 1940.

159. His appointment by Sir Bede Clifford, the then Governor was neither a favour nor a privilege.

160. He was selected on the basis of his political philosophy and for being a moderate politician.

161. His writings and speeches in favour of the “sons of Indian immigrants”, added to his outstanding leadership qualities.
162. As soon as he entered the Legislative Council, the effective battle for the improvement of the plight of the masses, in all sectors, be it education, health, social security and for home rule gained momentum and took an altogether different dimension and turn.

163. His various speeches from 1940 onwards in the Legislative Council speak volume on SSR’s intention and his ambition for his countrymen.

164. There was not one single social issue on which SSR did not express himself.

165. He covered everything that would change the substratum of the life of the thousands who were trapped in all that could be called the evils of life.

166. The various gradual constitutional reforms in which he took part together with other political leaders were decisive for the political future of the country.

167. From limited franchise to universal suffrage was a long political struggle and required hard work and perseverance.

168. I am not going to enter into the details of the various Constitutional Conferences that led to the political freedom of the masses.

169. Let me however, stress, that it was not easy for SSR to reconcile the diverging views of the political parties and leaders, and to reach a consensus on thorny issues like the electoral and education systems and the creation of the various institutions.
170. The minutes of proceedings of the 1965 Constitutional Conference released in London after the 30-year rule - of which I have a copy - provide an insight on the difficulties faced by SSR and his team.

171. The backdoor negotiations which took place at these Conferences, although not reflected in the various reports, were crucial to bring like-minded people together.

172. During the last and final Constitutional Conference leading Mauritius to Independence held in London in September 1965, SSR pressed for the lowering of the voting age to 18.

173. He said that the youth of Mauritius was maturing earlier.

174. Consequently, it should take its responsibility in society, and a reduction in the voting age should help it to integrate society more quickly.

175. This was however, not retained by the Conference which saw it unwise in view of the danger of introducing a student politics.

176. But, SSR did not abandon the idea. For the 1976 General Election he had the voting age lowered to 18.

177. All this clearly demonstrates the patience of SSR, to bring about gradual social and political changes in Mauritius in the pure Fabian tradition.

His Vision

178. The road to Independence has been a long and sustained battle.
179. The years preceding Independence were beset by many social and political uncertainties.

180. Many political analysts, both local and foreign, had doubts on the future of Mauritius as an independent nation.

181. Mauritius was outright condemned as a failed state.

182. For example, Professor Meade had concluded that the development prospects of Mauritius were poor; the island was over-populated and heavily dependent on monocrop; there was no hope for economic diversification; in sum, Mauritius was a strong candidate for a failed state.

183. Furthermore, in 1961, at page 237 of his report on the Social Policies and Population Growth in Mauritius, Prof. Titmuss had this to say:

"Frankly, they (meaning all the social and economic challenges) amount to economic, social and political disaster. We would be failing in our duty if we used any other word."

184. And when the report was reprinted in 1968, Prof. Meade reiterated that the economic and social structure of the island had not diminished and may even grow in importance now that the island had gained Independence.

185. In another paper published in the Journal of Development Studies in London, Barbara Wake Caroll and Terence Caroll, both from McMaster University and Brooke University, Canada, had this to say on Mauritius when it attained Independence:

(Quote)

"When Mauritius became independent in 1968, its prospects for maintaining democratic institutions seemed, if anything,
even more tenuous. It experienced large scale unemployment and a stagnant economy, and its mixture of racial, ethnic, religious and caste identities seemed to constitute ‘a well-tested recipe for social and economic disaster’.” (Unquote)

186. It was against such a background that SSR set out to change the destiny of Mauritius and its people.

187. Despite all the pessimistic predictions, he persevered with the delicate task of nation building, blending his deep convictions and strong determination with pragmatism and the then realities.

188. As someone said, “He defined the broad parameters and the grand contours of a newly independent Mauritius.”

189. SSR had no intention of turning course in spite of the challenges and obstacles that were evident when Mauritius became independent.

190. He was a realistic man and he knew there would be tough times ahead before things improved.

191. But he was ready to lead the country into a new era.

192. Realising the gigantic task that lied ahead, he set out to re-unite the nation that had been fragmented during the battle for Independence.

193. For him, nation building was key for any economic and social transformation.

194. Because of his skills, actions and decisions, there was a smooth transition from one era to another.

195. And this is what Peter White, another guru of the private sector said when asked:
“Just imagine what things would have been without him. He would see the longer road. He had vision. He had foresight. He was fully in control of things. Nobody could stand up to him – which was a very good thing in the early days.”

196. He invited all people of goodwill to join him in the national effort to address the socio economic plight of the people with focus on further developing the economic base through diversification, in order to reduce the overdependence of Mauritius on sugar which at that time represented practically 98% of export earnings.

197. Many of our compatriots who were working abroad in top jobs, such as Professor Lim Fat, in England, were convinced by SSR to come back and help in the process of the construction of a modern and independent Mauritius.

His achievements

198. As we all know, there is no sector in Mauritius that does not bear the imprint of SSR.

199. And it will not be possible for me this afternoon to enumerate all his achievements in a short span of time.

200. There are however, a few for which he will always be remembered by the generations to come, i.e., free education, free health services, social security, introduction of television, just to mention a few.

201. SSR once said: “without a healthy, educated and contented nation, it will never be possible to develop the resources of this country.”
202. He was and remained absolutely right.

203. Because without proper education and health, no country can enjoy the highest level of development.

204. His passion and love for education was beyond imagination.

205. Since his childhood, he believed that it was only through education that the proletariat could raise itself from the primitive level of existence to which it has been condemned and integrate itself with such a dignity in a democratic society.

206. In 1936, on the occasion of the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the indentured labourers, SSR wrote and I quote:

“The first and last objective of life is education. Man has emancipated himself from the laws of jungle by education and experience.” (Unquote)

207. In 1951, the British Government appointed three Liaison Officers to be in charge of the Departments of Agriculture, Labour and Education, respectively. SSR chose the Department of Education.

208. However, some people in those days were critical of the choice SSR made.

209. They thought that Mauritius being basically an agricultural country, he should have opted for the Department of Agriculture.

210. They were blatantly wrong!

211. Because, from 1951 to 1956, as the Liaison Officer of Education, SSR worked ceaselessly to bring education to all Mauritian children at primary level.
212. At that time, around 45,000 children were still out of school because of lack of facilities.

213. In other places where facilities existed, they were in shabby conditions.

214. In spite of severe constraints and insurmountable odds, SSR set himself the goal of building a decent primary school in every village.

215. My own primary school which I attended as from 1952, the Shri Shamboonath Government School at Camp Fouquereaux, was housed in two buildings, one made of timber and covered with straw without flooring and the other, of corrugated iron sheets.

216. Both looked like warehouses and not a school.

217. Also, two classes were conducted in the same room.

218. Some classes were even held under a big tree.

219. In 1954, the then Head Teacher of the school, Mr. Sookdeo Mussuddee, wrote a letter to SSR, who visited the school and immediately agreed that children cannot be taught in such conditions.

220. The construction of a new school made of concrete in the village at a different nearby location was completed in only six months’ time.

221. Thanks to him, I was able to study in a decent building.

222. By the year 1960, SSR had ensured that every child of Mauritius had access to primary school.

223. His goal of universal primary education had been realised.
224. In 1968, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Barclays Bank, he reiterated his ambition for free education at all levels and this is what he said:

(Quote)

“Our salvation truly lies in education and training our men and women in such a way that they are equipped to face the great battles of life.” (Unquote)

225. SSR always believed that it was through education that we would create the opportunity for our citizens to succeed in life.

226. It was through education that we would offer our young a pathway out of the circumstances of their birth and open up to them a better life than that of their parents.

227. SSR succeeded in his vision by making secondary education accessible to every cross-section of our population.

228. The introduction of free secondary education in January 1977, against all the odds, that brought about a major societal transformation in our country was the culmination of his dream to provide free access to education, both at primary and secondary levels.

229. As far as tertiary education is concerned, the idea of a University started coming into picture in his soul of thinking towards the end of the 1950’s.

230. SSR always believed that if Mauritius was to survive and prosper as a nation, the development of its human resource was imperative for the successful implementation of its development agenda.

231. But there were no facilities for higher education then.
232. Mr. John Lockwood from Burger College in London was invited to conduct a feasibility study and the potential for a university in Mauritius.

233. But unfortunately given the lack of financial resources, he submitted a negative report.

234. In one of his official visits he undertook to Israel around 1962, SSR was passing by a new university.

235. Although that was not on his official programme, he asked to visit the university campus.

236. While visiting the University, he met the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Elat, an old friend of his.

237. SSR told him that he would like to have a university in his own country but he was told that that was too expensive.

238. Dr Elat exclaimed: “That’s what they always say – it’s too expensive. Can any country wishing to progress not have a university?”

239. On his return, SSR did not give up the idea of having a University in Mauritius.

240. What Dr. Elat had said to him obviously strengthened his conviction and belief of having a university in Mauritius.

241. Dr Colin Leys, Professor of Political Science and Public Administration from the Makerere University College, was called in to advise on the development of a University in Mauritius.

242. In the Sessional Paper No 4 of 1964 presented to the Mauritius Legislative Assembly titled, “The Development of a
University College of Mauritius”, Professor Colin Leys said and I quote:

“A University College designed to occupy the central role in national development which I have envisaged is likely to command considerable interest in the academic world.” (Unquote)

243. SSR was delighted on receiving the report of Professor Leys.

244. Thanks to his determination and his farsightedness, the University of Mauritius came into being in 1964, and since then, it has played a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of our country.

245. The University of Mauritius is a clear example of his perseverance to implement what he always had in mind.

246. “He would allow expenditure on education and perhaps health too with a song in his heart”, later wrote Sir Dayendranath Burrenchobay

247. As I told you earlier, when SSR opted for Liaison Officer in Education, many criticized him.

248. But later, eminent persons in Mauritius have praised him for his choice.

249. I also believe that there are no better references to immortalize his memory than what has been said by some prominent personalities in Mauritius.

250. Here are some of the testimonies.

Mr. Maurice Paturau wrote in 1980:
“Ce n’est que quelques années plus tard que je compris l’importance du choix qu’avait fait le Dr. Ramgoolam en se faisant nommer Officier de Liaison pour l’Education. C’était un choix capital, car c’est bien la pierre de touche grâce à laquelle allait s’édifier tout le développement politique mauricien. La nomination de trois Officiers de Liaison en 1951 couvrait les secteurs de l’Education, du Travail et de l’Agriculture.

Alors que l’on aurait pu croire que l’agriculture représentait une activité beaucoup plus importante pour le développement mauricien, le Dr Ramgoolam eut parfaitement raison de choisir l’éducation, car c’était là qu’une rapide évolution pouvant être réalisée sans trop de contraintes économiques ou d’opposition des intérêts privés. Il fallait préparer les classes pauvres à s’instruire afin de relever le niveau de responsabilité politique.

Pour rendre indépendants les secteurs les plus défavorisés de la population, il fallait d’abord leur apprendre à lire et à écrire, afin de pouvoir en faire les dirigeants de demain.”

“Et le choix du Dr Ramgoolam fut un choix crucial qui s’avéra génial et pour lequel le peuple mauricien devrait lui être extrêmement reconnaissant.”

“Avec souplesse, mais avec fermeté, le Dr Ramgoolam sut suivre cette ligne de conduite qu’il s’était tracée, sans jamais y déroger. Augmentation du nombre d’écoles et de professeurs, enseignement des langues orientales, distribution de lait aux écoliers, puis de chaussures, introduction de la télévision avec section éducative, création
251. SSR did not use education only to prepare tomorrow’s leaders, but more importantly, as a powerful weapon to combat underdevelopment and to eradicate poverty and ignorance of the thousands of people in this country.

252. The well respected Father Souchon added in 1993:

(Quote)

“L’éducation gratuite est son œuvre. Que serait Maurice aujourd’hui si nous étions restés une nation d’analphabètes?”

(Unquote)

253. Another landmark achievement of SSR was his decision to adhere to the Sugar Protocol of the EU at a time when the price offered by the EU was less than what obtained in the international market.

254. Some people criticized him for that decision.

255. He had in fact commissioned a study on the perspective of sugar for the next 30 years and he knew that the price would fall dramatically in the world market by the 1970’s.

256. That became a reality.

257. What would have been the fate and the future of Mauritius had not SSR negotiated the quota of 500,000 tons of sugar with the EU at a guaranteed price?
258. Can we imagine that countries with a much more broad economic base, such as Cuba had to lay off almost one third of its civil servants, because they had no money to pay them at the end of the month. There was havoc in Africa. For over six months, civil servants were not being paid their salary. But in Mauritius, in spite of the difficult situation, no worker was laid off.

259. On this issue, I would like to quote what Sir Gaëtan Duval said on SSR:

(Quote)

“Ramgoolam avait été dans ce cas précis un visionnaire. Voilà ce qui a permis le développement du pays. Sans cela, il n’y aurait pas eu de zone franche, pas de développement du tourisme, rien. C’est ce que l’histoire, je pense, retiendra.”

(Unquote)

260. In the same breath, much later, Mr. Vishnu Luchmeenaraidoo the former Minister of Finance had this to say about the sugar protocol:

(Quote)

“D’abord, j’estime qu’il faut tirer un grand chapeau au gouvernement post-indépendance qui a réussi à décrocher pour notre pays un protocole sucre qui nous a permis de survivre dans des moments difficiles. Le protocole sucre nous a aidé énormément et est à la base même du développement économique qui s’ensuivit.”

(Unquote)

261. Mr. Cyril Leckning, an influential member of the PMSD said:

“Aujourd’hui, on parle de boom économique, mais on oublie trop vite que la vision et le réalisme de Ramgoolam y sont pour beaucoup.”
262. That was the farsightedness of the man.

263. I may go on and on on the achievements of SSR. But that would be too time consuming.

264. Although SSR had been educated and brought up in the pure British traditions, he never shunned things that were oriental or European.

265. These comprised part and parcel of his general strategy of unity in diversity.

266. His love for languages and cultures was unfettered.

267. He recognized and valued the force of western language and culture and learning in shaping the course of progress of the Indian community.

268. But at the same time, he was of the view that our ancestral languages and ways of life should, in no case, be relegated at the expense of European languages and culture.

269. Instead, Indian students should be encouraged to take both Indian and European languages together.

270. I would not be out of place to quote what he said in his speech on the Ward Report on Education. (Quote)

"The Indians of this island must be taught their languages, and that properly and effectively, because that is the only way in which they can preserve their culture, and also because they have not the least intention of being denationalized in the process of time." (Unquote)

271. Language is the most massive and inclusive aspect of culture and identity.
272. If language is gone, culture is gone.

273. As Albert Camus put it so beautifully:

(Quote)

“Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle.” (Unquote)

274. We all recognize that throughout his political life, SSR worked relentlessly to chart out a path that would bring the unity of this diverse nation by promoting all the cultures and languages of different ethnic group in Mauritius.

275. Unity in diversity did not fall from the sky. It was constructed gradually by SSR.

276. As far as his vision and achievements are concerned, I should perhaps also tell you that the NPF project that had germinated in his mind as far back as the year 1942 was accomplished by him in 1976.

277. He called his good friend Dr. Brian Abel-Smith from LSE to write the report on NPF.

278. He never failed to execute what he had promised to the people.

279. But I cannot end this talk by not speaking on two issues that are close to my heart – the truth about the administration of SSR between 1976 and 1982, and some of my personal experiences when I was the Minister of Social Security.

280. First 1976-1982. Many people have distorted the reality of that period.
281. The period 1976 to 1982 should be placed in its proper context.

282. That was the time when the world was going through an economic recession triggered by a massive increase in the price of oil due to the Middle East crisis.

283. All non-producing oil countries were badly affected.

284. Mauritius, like all other non-oil manufacturing countries was also badly shaken.

285. Our exports fell because of lack of demand from our traditional trading partners, the EU.

286. Our tourist industry also suffered badly.

287. In addition, the adverse climatic conditions exacerbated the economic situation.


289. Our sugar production in the year 1980 fell from 650,000 tons to about 450,000 tons.

290. We could not even honour our obligation towards the EU.

291. Our foreign exchange reserves were completely depleted.

292. The Government could not allow the country to plunge into a catastrophic situation which would have worsened the situation of the working classes.
293. Mauritius, like many other countries was then compelled to solicit the assistance of the IMF by entering into a SAP and had to take bold, unpopular decisions to redress the economic situation.

294. It is therefore unfair to say that SSR led Mauritius to bankruptcy.

295. That was the stark truth.

296. The economic and climatic conditions that prevailed were beyond the control of the Government.

297. In support of what I have told you, I would like to quote again what Maurice Paturau, Coordinator of the Joint Economic Council said:

"C'était en 1979, il avait fallu dévaluer la roupie de 30% en octobre 1979 et les conditions climatiques furent spécialement défavorables en fin 1979 et début 1980 avec cyclones et inondations. Pour tout compléter, les prix des produits pétroliers prirent l’ascenseur, rendant ainsi notre problème économique encore plus grave alors que le chômage et le manque de devises étrangères pesaient lourdement sur nos chances de reprise. Il fallut une nouvelle dévaluation, en 1981, pour nous rétablir, mais nous avions vraiment frôlé alors la catastrophe."

298. Coming to my personal experience with SSR, I have chosen a few anecdotes that I would like to share with you this afternoon.

299. I remember being with him in New York in September 1981 for the UN General Assembly.

300. SSR had to deliver his speech the following day. On the eve, we were reviewing together the text of the speech.
301. At some point, we came to that part that dealt with foreign policy.

302. He stated to me that once Jomo Kenyatta had told him, “Ram the day your country becomes independent and when your foreign policy is in conflict with your country’s national interest, always pursue a policy which is in the interest of your country”.

303. This is an advice that I followed as Foreign Minister.

304. On another occasion, there was a lot of pressure in the country for government to change its language policy at the level of our schools.

305. Many Ministers, seeing election nearing, succumbed to the pressure out of sheer political gain.

306. SSR refused to enter into that game and said he did not want to create a situation where there will be a war of languages among communities.


308. The negotiations were inconclusive because the British Government had made a proposal for only one million pounds.

309. The following year, that is, in January 1982, the British delegation came to Mauritius to pursue the negotiations, but still, we could not agree.

310. At a dinner held at Westminster House at Floreal, SSR made a new proposal to the British delegation that the Government of Mauritius was prepared to chip in land worth £4 million and the
British Government should in turn, contribute a corresponding amount of £ 4 million in cash.

311. The British delegation immediately consulted London and the following morning, I was informed by the delegation that the British Government had agreed.

312. Do you realize that at a dinner and within an hour, using his shrewdness and capacity, he was able to solve a problem that had been dragging on for years?

313. During meetings between the public and the private sector, he defended the interests of the workers to the tilt.

314. In one of those meetings, in 1981, the private sector pressed for the abolition of the export tax on sugar.

315. My friend, the Hon. Abdool Razack Peeroo, Speaker of the Mauritius National Assembly, was also a member of that Committee.

316. SSR picked up “une colère de Dieu”, and told them that they were only concerned with their own selfish interest and not the fate of those who were toiling hard night and day.

317. When free education was introduced in January 1977, the Government was heavily criticized.

318. The arguments were that :-

(a) it was not properly planned;

(b) it was a waste of money;

(c) Managers of private colleges would enrich themselves.
319. Being a young MP at that time, I was carried away by such arguments and I said in a speech in the House that Government should nationalize the private colleges.

320. SSR turned round, looked at me, and said:

"That's a revolution!"

321. Later, I went to see him to apologise.

322. I told him:

"Sir, why don't we, in that case, introduce means testing so that those who have the means can pay?"

323. Thereupon, he gave me a piece of his mind and in no uncertain terms.

324. He said:

"If you do that, that would create two categories of students and those who would not be paying would be humiliated and bullied in the sense that the one paying would say: "grâce ek mo l'argent qui to pe gagne l'éducation".""

325. I was immediately convinced.

326. SSR did not live in vain.

327. He has legated a country which every Mauritian is proud to belong to.

328. He had the courage to take tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others.
329. He did not set out to be a leader, but became one by the equality and sincerity of his actions, and above everything, the integrity of his intent.

330. He led and inspired his people.

331. It was Marcus Tullius Cicero, a Roman philosopher, politician and lawyer who had said:

(Quote)

“In nothing do men more nearly approach the gods than in doing good to their fellow men.” (Unquote)

332. Indeed, doing good was the best portion of SSR’s life.

333. Throughout his life time, SSR has done nothing but good.

334. That’s why he is revered as the “Father of the Nation”.

335. In conclusion, let me say that great men are born to succeed, not to fail.

336. SSR’s life, vision and achievements are replete with successes.

337. Of course, like the common of mortals, he had his own weaknesses and frailties, but he never lost faith in his conviction.

338. As Khalil Gibran put it so convincingly:

(Quote)

“You give little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.” (Unquote)

339. SSR lived and worked to give of himself to the cause of his people, his country.

340. It is not out of place to quote Shakespeare by saying that:
“His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him, that Nature might stand up.

And say to all the world, “This was a man.” (Unquote)

341. As Mr. Vijay Joypaul also put it in December 1985, “to quote Fische on Gandhiji, we can well say of Ramgoolam, who redeemed our country from bondage and bequeathed to us a secular democracy:

“His Legacy is courage, his lesson truth, his weapon love. His life is his monument. He now belongs to mankind.” (Unquote)

342. Like the famous poet John Donne said: “He was an abridgement of all that was pleasant in man”.

God Bless you all!

I thank you for your attention.
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