



SPEECH

**His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K.,
President of the Republic of Mauritius**

**EVENT: CULTURAL FORUM – “OUR HERITAGE:
HISTORICAL MONUMENTS AND SITES” BY
ORGANISATION FOR DIASPORA INITIATIVES**

VENUE: MGI, MOKA

DATE: 29 AUGUST 2026

TIME: 09:45 HOURS

Honourable Mr. Mahendra Gondeea, OSK, Minister of Arts and Culture,

Mr. Pierre Ricardo Lalande, Chairperson of the National Heritage Fund,

Mrs. Ranjita Bunwaree, CSK, President of the Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives,

Distinguished historians, researchers, cultural practitioners and heritage custodians,

Distinguished guests,

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

Allow me first to thank and congratulate Mrs Ranjita Bunwaree and the Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives for organising this important and topical Cultural Forum on **“Our Heritage - Historical Monuments and Sites.”**

I understand that, since its establishment in 2007, ODI has sought to deepen understanding of the history and role of diaspora communities, while promoting cultural exchange and harmonious cohabitation, through various activities, including forums on Intangible Diaspora Heritage and Cultural Diversities of Diasporas.

In July last year, I had the pleasure of officially launching Mrs. Bunwaree’s novel, “Return to My Nest.”

Its themes of migration, displacement, identity and belonging brought forward pertinent questions and reflections closely connected to our understanding of heritage and its importance in our lives and in our quest for unity in diversity.

Today's Forum is therefore a natural continuation of that work: bringing our different histories into conversation and thoughtful reflections, and asking how **the monuments and sites that remain around us can help us better understand the people and the experiences that shaped Mauritius and how they can help us in building more bridges in our society**

I commend Mrs Bunwaree and ODI for continuing to create opportunities for reflection and dialogue on our common heritage.

Why Heritage Matters Today

As you may be aware, we are living in times of poly-crisis: a time of very rapid changes, while conflict, uncertainty and increasing divisions are being witnessed across the world.

A context conducive to the spread of a narrative of doom and gloom, which can be very harmful to our nation's morale and future.

Mauritius is certainly not immune to these challenges or their consequences.

But can we, as responsible citizens, allow doom and gloom to prevail over hope and happiness?

As Head of State, I can share with you what I am observing.

My observation is that there are, in parallel to our challenges, some visible signs of a positive societal transformation in progress.

There is clearly a renewed interest in questions of identity, history and heritage.

People want to know where they come from, understand the experiences that shaped their families and communities and, perhaps more importantly, understand where they belong and **how they can build a common future of hope and happiness for all.**

This is exactly where heritage, history and culture has an important catalytic role in the positive transformation of our society.

Behind every historical monument and site, there are people, stories, experiences, memories and legacies which need to be shared and understood.

Many of these stories have not yet been fully told or sufficiently understood, and must continue to be revisited.

Our monuments and historical sites are therefore not simply places to preserve; they are places through which we can question, learn and better understand the society we have inherited and how we can build a better society for our common future.

This is very much in line with UNESCO's 4 Pillars of Education: Learning to know, Do, Live together and to be.

New Ways of Looking at Heritage

Recently, I had the opportunity to read “Voices in Stone”, authored by His Excellency Paul Brummell, British High Commissioner to Mauritius.

His book re-examines statues, but also the life, history and stories behind them

Who would have thought, for example, that the meaning attached to statues could change significantly over time, and that one generation's heroes may be viewed as another's villains, or vice-versa?

This raises important questions about how we deal with monuments associated with painful or contested histories.

Do we remove them, or do we preserve them and re-contextualise their history so that future generations can understand them more accurately, more meaningfully?

A monument can become an opportunity for education, reflection and even reconciliation.

What I found particularly interesting is that a statue can tell us so much about the society that created it, its values, and how its meaning can change over time.

Last week, on the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, I launched the “Forgotten Saints” exhibition by Seychellois artist Emmanuel D’Offay at the Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture.

Through painting and digital technology, he restored individuality and dignity to enslaved Africans who were otherwise reduced in historical records to numbers and classifications and victimhood.

It was a powerful reminder of how art and technology can help bring new perspective to historical material. Beyond pains, sufferings and humiliation, slavery is also a testimony of heroic resistance, dignity and resilience and hope.

And only this week, I saw yet another interesting example at the Mauritius Institute of Education, through its Mathematics Video Competition.

The theme was “Celebrating Mathematics through History and Culture”, and students discovered mathematics in architecture, patterns, navigation, trade and other aspects of human civilisation.

These examples, although very different, point to the same conclusion: that heritage, history and culture can be made more relevant and meaningful to our contemporary context, in particular ,to young people by enabling them to find new and imaginative ways of connecting the past with the present.

This is precisely why I believe honest conversations about our history, grounded in research, evidence and inquiry, must be a continuous therapeutic liberating process.

Heritage Beyond Monuments

This brings me to another dimension of today's theme.

Our heritage includes the complex histories of the slave trade, slavery and its abolition, indentured labour, colonialism, migration and the many communities that have contributed to the development of our Republic.

These should not be viewed as separate and parallel histories. They intersected with one another and helped shape the Mauritius we have become today. And can define what Mauritius will be tomorrow.

For example, the lives and contributions of people like Anjalay Coopen, Furcy Madeleine, Anna de Bengale and Dr Idrice Goomany, among many others, remind us that our heritage is also the legacy of individuals whose courage deserves to be known and remembered **because they all echoed universal values so important for the well-being of humanity.**

Similarly, our Sino-Mauritian community reflects different experiences of migration, settlement, trade, labour and cultural exchange.

Their contribution to our economic and cultural life is today an integral part of Mauritian heritage, reflected in the vibrant streets and architecture of Chinatown, in our culinary traditions, places of worship, businesses and community institutions, and in the many cultural practices that have become part of the Mauritian DNA.

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Each of our communities has contributed to the making of Mauritius. Each has brought experiences, traditions and memories that have become part of the larger Mauritian story.

As I have previously noted in my interventions, we must continue to recover and listen to voices that have remained silent or insufficiently represented in our historical narratives.

This is not an exercise in rewriting history to suit the present. It is an effort to make our understanding of history more complete, more balanced and more inclusive, more authentic.

There must therefore be no contradiction between historical truth and national unity.

On the contrary, I believe that national unity is stronger when it is built on an honest recognition of the different experiences that have shaped our country.

From Multiculturalism to Interculturalism

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As President of the Republic, I am entrusted with the important responsibility of safeguarding and consolidating national unity.

Each one of us comes from a particular history and from different origins, places and journeys.

Some histories are linked to slavery, others to indenture, migration, trade and settlement.

But let us be clear: Mauritius was multicultural from very early in its history.

The story of Anna de Bengale, for example, offers an early window into the connections between Mauritius, Madagascar and the history of the slave trade.

We may have come by different ships, under different circumstances, but today we must realize that we are in the same boat and we have to row together.

So far we have had a rich experience of multicultural co-existence

But it is now time to go one step further and deepen it through greater intercultural understanding - sharing, learning from one another and developing a genuine curiosity about each other's histories, traditions and experiences. Build more bridges and bring down the walls

Because multiculturalism allows different cultures to coexist. Interculturalism goes further: it encourages those cultures to engage with one another, to learn from one another and to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

This is particularly important in a country such as Mauritius, where our diversity is one of our defining characteristics. Our diversity should not merely be tolerated; it should be understood, valued and transformed into a source of strength.

This is also why, since assuming office, I have sought to make State House - listed as one of our national heritage sites - a space of encounter:

Where people from different backgrounds, institutions, communities and traditions can meet, while opening it to the public so that people can discover the history of Château du Réduit and the different chapters of our national journey witnessed by this place.

Because a building such as State House also has a history. Understanding that history gives greater meaning to the institution that occupies the building today.

The names of our schools, halls, buildings and institutions can help us remember people whose contributions have shaped our country.

In this way, the preservation, interpretation and transmission of heritage, history and culture become part of the broader national endeavour.

Looking Forward

Today's Forum is therefore not simply about looking at the past. It is also about how we carry our common heritage into the future.

We must make appropriate use of art, education and technology to bring these stories to new generations.

At the same time, greater accessibility must go hand in hand with accuracy, context and respect for evidence.

I therefore encourage ODI to continue creating spaces for dialogue and reflection on our heritage, and I commend the speakers and researchers participating in today's Forum.

Closing Remarks

I note with interest that the programme brings together different perspectives on our historical monuments and sites, including colonial and African heritage, the history of slavery, Muslim culture and heritage, and Chinese culture and heritage.

This diversity of perspectives is itself reflective of the richness of Mauritius.

It reminds us that there is no single story of Mauritius. There are many stories, sometimes different and sometimes difficult, but together they form the complex and fascinating tapestry of our Republic.

It is my hope that these conversations will continue beyond today and contribute to the transmission of our shared values to future generations...for peace, progress and prosperity for all.

With these words, it is my pleasure to now officially open the Cultural Forum on **“Our Heritage - Historical Monuments and Sites”**.

I wish you fruitful and meaningful sharing of ideas and perspectives, and hope that today’s discussions will deepen our understanding of our culture and heritage, and how we transmit them to future generations.

Thank you.