

## **Operation *Lal Dora*: India's aborted military intervention in Mauritius**

Mauritius forms an anchor to India's strategic role in the Indian Ocean. India has long had a special economic, political and security relationship with Mauritius, which a US diplomatic report has characterised as Mauritius' "willing subordination" to India.<sup>1</sup> A key turning point in the relationship occurred in 1983, when, in Operation *Lal Dora*, India came to the point of a full scale military intervention in the island state to ensure that it stayed in India's strategic orbit.

This article will discuss a 1983 political crisis in Mauritius which threatened to overturn a Hindu-led government and led to plans for an Indian intervention in the island. When Indian military leaders hesitated over a military operation, Indira Gandhi instead relied on her security services to achieve India's objectives. An understanding of this previously undisclosed operation casts light on India's thinking about its role in the region, its military decision-making processes, and on what could be seen as a long-standing alignment of interests between India and the United States in the Indian Ocean. These issues are particularly relevant as the United States now looks to further develop its strategic partnership with India as part of its 'Pivot to Asia'.

### ***Strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War***

The southwest Indian Ocean of the late 1970s and early 1980s was a scene of superpower competition, rivalry and intrigue. The Indian Ocean had become a new frontier of the Cold

War as the Soviet Union and the United States expanded their naval capabilities in the region and jostled for influence over the small and politically weak Indian Ocean island states. The great distances across the Indian Ocean meant that access to local port facilities and air bases became a major focus of competition between the two superpowers. At the same time, apartheid South Africa actively destabilised states that it considered hostile. This strategic competition led to considerable instability in the region. Several of Indian Ocean island states including Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar suffered coups involving foreign powers or mercenaries. As the *Mauritius Times* commented in 1978, "Mauritius is the only important island left in the Indian Ocean that is not in the pocket of any superpower...It would be sheer folly to dismiss the likelihood of a coup in Mauritius."<sup>2</sup>

For much of the Cold War, the growing influence of the United States and the Soviet Union was the cause of considerable dismay for New Delhi. India saw itself as destined to become the leading power in the Indian Ocean, but it did not have the military capability to challenge the regional presence of either the United States or a "friendly" Soviet Union. The ideology of nonalignment to which India officially subscribed held that the 'intrusion' of great powers (particularly Western powers) into any part of the developing world was inherently illegitimate and the primary (if not only) source of insecurity among developing states. From the early 1970s, India had strongly opposed the US military presence in the Indian Ocean as a threat to regional stability. The "intrusion" of a US naval task force led by the USS *Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal in the closing days of the 1971 Bangladesh war was long remembered in India as an outrageous and impermissible exercise in gunboat diplomacy. New Delhi also strongly resented the US base on Diego Garcia which gave the

United States the capability to dominate the entire Indian Ocean and to potentially intervene in South Asia.

Although India had a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union, it was also concerned about Soviet activities in the Indian Ocean region, particularly after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1980. While New Delhi refrained from publicly condemning the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and continued in its anti-US rhetoric, there were increasingly instances where New Delhi and Washington had similar interests in the region. From the early 1980s, the Reagan administration also increasingly saw India as a *status quo* power that could act as a security provider to the region.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Political instability in Mauritius***

Mauritius, the island state located some 900 km east of Madagascar, is in many ways the “Little India” of the Indian Ocean. It was colonized by the Dutch, the French and then the British. With no indigenous population, the Europeans imported slaves from Africa and indentured labour from India to work the sugar cane plantations. Between 1834 and 1920, some 420,000 Indian workers migrated to Mauritius, many of them Bhojpuri speakers from the Indian state of Bihar. Today some 70% of Mauritius’ population is of Indian descent with the remainder is mostly French Creole speakers of African descent and a very small white French community. Although the whites no longer hold the reins political power, the key Franco-Mauritian families or “Grand Blancs” as they are called, still exert considerable economic influence.

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1968, Mauritius has managed to maintain a democratic system, but the road has sometimes been rocky. Its early years were dominated by Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, leader of the Mauritian Labour Party, who shepherded Mauritius through independence and then governed for the next 14 years. Ramgoolam was pragmatic and a moderate social democrat and, although of Indian descent, he sought to maintain a balance between the various ethnic and religious groups that make up Mauritius. He also balanced Mauritius' international relationships, although generally taking a pro-Western line. This included a mild, if largely symbolic, opposition to the US presence at Diego Garcia.

Even before the independence of Mauritius, India saw itself as having a special relationship with the island. Early Mauritian political leaders of all persuasions took inspiration from India's struggle for independence and the Indian community clung tenaciously to the idea of Mother India. After the departure of the Royal Navy from the region, India effectively assumed responsibility for Mauritius' security under a 1974 defence agreement. In effect, this agreement signified Mauritius swapping one security guarantor for another. Under the agreement India transferred patrol boats and a helicopter to Mauritius and the Indian Navy effectively took responsibility for the Mauritian Coast Guard. Indira Gandhi considered Mauritius to be one of India's most dependable international partners and a potential safe haven for her and her family.<sup>4</sup>

New Delhi had supported Seewoosagur Ramgoolam since independence. But by the early 1980s he was barely hanging on to power and it was clear that he would lose the forthcoming election to the main opposition party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM). Ramgoolam was deeply unpopular as compared with the MMM, which had a young leadership and often identified with radical third world movements. The MMM was nominally led by Anerood Jugnauth, a London-trained lawyer of Indian descent, but its “ideological leader”, was a firebrand socialist of French descent, Paul Berenger. With political change likely, the politically active Indian Mission in Port Louis facilitated several meetings in New Delhi between Indira Gandhi, Jugnauth and Berenger in 1980 and 1981. Mrs Gandhi faced the reality of the forthcoming transfer of power and swung her support behind the MMM. Gandhi also hoped to see the new government take a stronger stand against the US presence at Diego Garcia.<sup>5</sup>

But many still had misgivings about the MMM’s radical policies, and Berenger’s leftist views in particular. Berenger called for close ties with Libya and the Soviet Union and socialist leaning African states. Much attention was also focused on the MMM’s links with Libya whose leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was widely seen as representing both Arab radicalism and as a fellow traveler of the Soviet Union. Among other things Libya was financing the conversion of Mauritian Hindus to Islam.<sup>6</sup>

In June 1982, Ramgoolam decisively lost a general election to the MMM, after which Jugnauth became Prime Minister, with Berenger as Finance Minister. Days later, Indira Gandhi made a triumphant visit to the island, showcasing India’s special relationship with

Mauritius and its approval of the new government. Among other things, Mrs Gandhi approved a double tax treaty that has since allowed Mauritius to position itself as an offshore financial centre and the primary route for foreign investment into India.<sup>7</sup> However ideological and personality differences among Mauritius' new leaders surfaced within months. There was considerable personal friction between Jugnauth and Berenger, and major disagreements over Berenger's imposition of economic austerity measures mandated by the IMF. There was also disquiet over Berenger's attempts to promote French Creole as Mauritius' national language. For Berenger and other young socialists, creolisation was an important social engineering exercise to transcend what they saw as non-indigenous languages and cultures and create a single homogeneous Mauritian culture.<sup>8</sup>

The Creole language issue became a proxy for the communal tensions that surfaced under the new government. Some non-Hindu leaders feared that the delicate communal balance in Mauritius that Ramgoolam had nurtured since independence would be upset by Jugnauth and that Mauritius would come to be dominated by a majority Hindu culture. Hindu leaders were frustrated that they had less economic and political power than the Franco-Mauritians despite their majority numbers and feared that Berenger's role in the new government could signal a return of the "Grand Blancs" to power. Some believed that Berenger intended to exclude high caste Hindus from power and even establish military rule. As one analyst commented on Berenger's policy of creolisation: "The stake was high: no less than the reversal of the whole ethnic political balance which had structured the regime of independence."<sup>9</sup>

By early 1983 Jugnauth had become increasingly concerned about the possibility of Berenger leading a coup against him with the help of Libya and the Soviet Union. The Indian Mission in Port Louis kept a close watch on developments. According to one of Jugnauth's advisors, after the 1982 election both the United States and the Indians were feeding false intelligence to Jugnauth about Berenger's socialist links.<sup>10</sup> In February 1983, Jugnauth met with Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi, where he requested military assistance in the event of a coup by Berenger. According to an advisor to Jugnauth who was accompanying him, Mrs Gandhi assured him of Indian support, telling him that, "Within five hours a contingent of my air force will be in Mauritius."<sup>11</sup>

The power struggle came to a head in mid March 1983. On Mauritian Independence Day, while Jugnauth was in New Delhi attending a Non Aligned Movement summit, Berenger arranged for the Mauritian National Anthem to be broadcast over Mauritian television in Creole, referring to Creole as the new national language.<sup>12</sup> On Jugnauth's return to Mauritius, Berenger proposed constitutional changes that would strip power from the prime minister. The MMM government disintegrated and Jugnauth was left with a small number of mostly Hindu followers.

The collapse of the government heightened communal and ideological tensions throughout Mauritius. Jugnauth feared for his safety after he was jostled by Berenger supporters. Local media reported the formation of a "workers' militia" led by Berenger. Jugnauth spoke of the dangers of "growing fascism," labelling Berenger a "racist" and comparing him to

Stalin.<sup>13</sup> Hindu leaders exploited Hindu communal fears about Berenger, while Berenger supporters saw Hindu leaders such as Harish Boodhoo as being in league with New Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

### ***New Delhi's concerns***

New Delhi was extremely concerned about these developments. It was worried about the welfare of the Indian ethnic population in Mauritius under a Berenger government that may favour the Creole and Muslim minorities and potentially provoke a refugee exodus by Hindus.<sup>15</sup> Over the previous decades, there had been considerable official discrimination against the Indian minority communities throughout the Indian Ocean region – at the hands of whites in South Africa, black Africans in East Africa and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In 1972, the entire Indian community had been expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin. In mid 1983, rising communal tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka would explode into pogroms and civil war. Official discrimination against Indians also existed elsewhere in the world, even where Indian community represented a majority or near majority of the population. In Guyana, the majority Indian ethnic community had been excluded from power since independence. In Fiji, constitutional restrictions had been introduced to prevent the majority Indian ethnic community from exercising political control. While India had previously left its diasporic communities to their own fates, by the early 1980s the protection of Indian ethnic communities outside of India had become a factor in New Delhi's calculations.<sup>16</sup>

Of probably greater significance were New Delhi's concerns about the drift of Mauritius out of India's sphere of influence and the possible loss of Mauritius as the only unquestioning supporter of India's foreign policy in the Indian Ocean. In particular, New Delhi was concerned about Mauritius' links with Libya and the Soviet Union, which had been funding the MMM prior to the 1982 election.<sup>17</sup> After the election, Mikhail Orlov, the Soviet Ambassador to the Seychelles, had met secretly with Berenger to offer Soviet assistance in reorganising Mauritian internal security services and they later offered to supply patrol boats to the Mauritius Coast Guard.<sup>18</sup> Jugnauth ruffled feathers in New Delhi by making his first official overseas visit to Libya rather than India. Jugnauth also visited Moscow where he was told that Soviet assistance would be conditioned economic assistance on Mauritius moving towards a socialist system.<sup>19</sup>

There were even greater concerns about a government led by Berenger. His French ancestry and his attempts to undermine the power of Hindu communal groups would not have helped create the view that he would be a reliable supporter of India. Although New Delhi saw many benefits from its relationship with the Soviet Union, including its role as a supplier of defence equipment and its strategic role in balancing against China, India remained jealous of its relationships in the region and would have seen a drift of Mauritius into the Soviet orbit, particularly under white leadership, in negative terms. Mrs Gandhi may well have seen the crisis as an opportunity to consolidate India's political role in Mauritius. This was part of a broader strategy then being followed by New Delhi in asserting and expanding its influence throughout the Indian Ocean region, from Sri Lanka, to Maldives, the Seychelles, Southern Africa and even the Antarctic.<sup>20</sup>

The United States also supported the status-quoist Jugnauth against the socialist Berenger. The US was particularly worried that a Berenger government might allow the Soviet Navy access to Port Louis and would also aggressively prosecute Mauritius' claims over Diego Garcia. General Vernon Walters, the legendary Deputy Director of the CIA, took a close interest in Mauritius, cultivating personal links with Harish Boodhoo and other Hindu leaders.<sup>21</sup> While the US was working to undermine Berenger during this period, it is not clear whether the US and India actively coordinated their activities in Mauritius. However, Mauritius' later move towards a broadly pro-Western foreign policy under a new Jugnauth-led government (which will be discussed below) certainly suggests that there may have been considerable US involvement in the crisis.

### ***Plans for Indian military intervention: Operation Lal Dora***

As the Mauritian political crisis deepened in mid-March 1983, Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army and Navy to prepare to intervene against a possible coup against the Jugnauth government. Despite Mrs Gandhi's earlier promise to Jugnauth, Mauritius was well beyond the airlift capabilities of the Indian air force. Instead, the intervention plan, named Operation *Lal Dora*<sup>22</sup>, involved the landing in Port Louis of two battalions from the 54th Infantry Division, the Indian Army's designated rapid reaction unit based in Hyderabad.

The plan unfolded in a way that was typical of the lack of coordination between the Indian Army and Navy at that time. An advance battalion of 54th Division troops arrived

unexpectedly at the Indian Naval dockyard in Mumbai after a 30 hour journey from Hyderabad with orders to board Western fleet ships. Remarkably, the Navy's Western Command in Mumbai, which had commenced planning for the operation, had not been informed of the Army movement and many crew were on shore leave. The troops initially attempted to virtually force their way onto INS *Mysore*, which was the largest warship berthed alongside, but were stopped by the Operations team of the Western Naval Command and staff of the Western Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral K K Mukherjee.<sup>23</sup> After negotiations between the Army and Navy, the troops were sent to camp at the sprawling Colaba Army base to await orders while some of the Army's equipment was loaded on the INS *Mysore*, and fuel, victuals and medical supplies were ordered for the amphibious task force.

Indian Naval officers then set to planning the naval operation. Having studied the recent UK operation in the Falklands less than a year previously, they believed that the Navy could transport the troops from its main western naval base in Mumbai to Mauritius with two days preparation, followed by around five days sailing time. The Navy then had no specialised amphibious lift capability in the Western Fleet, but the troops were to be transported on warships. The naval task force was to include:

- one or two modern Rajput class guided missile destroyers (INS *Rajput* and/or INS *Rana*), carrying KA-28 Helix helicopters;
- three or four Leander class destroyers carrying Alouette helicopters, as well as MK-42C Sea Kings for slithering operations;
- a Deepak class naval tanker, carrying one helicopter;

- a civilian tanker requisitioned from the Indian state-owned shipping company (which had previously taken part in naval exercises with a naval party on board) for replenishment at sea; and
- a survey and training ship.<sup>24</sup>

Notably, the naval task force would have no fixed-wing air support. India's sole aircraft carrier at that time, INS *Vikrant*, was then in the process of being refitted for new Sea Harrier aircraft and was not available. Despite the crucial role that fixed wing aircraft had played in the Falklands campaign, the lack of air support was apparently of little concern to the Indian Navy given that Mauritius had no air force.

### ***Disagreements in the War Room***

While preparations were being made in Mumbai, senior military and intelligence officers met with Mrs Gandhi in the War Room in South Block to discuss the operation. Present at the meeting was Mrs Gandhi's National Security Advisor, R N Kao, a former head of RAW. The Navy was represented by Admiral O S Dawson, Chief of Naval Staff. The Army was represented by Lieutenant General S K Sinha, who was then Vice Chief of Army. (The Chief of Army, General Krishna Rao, was then on tour in Vietnam and Sinha was preparing to take over from Rao several months later). Dawson was known to be close to Mrs Gandhi and her family since his younger days when he was ADC to the Indian President and would receive Mrs Gandhi's children at the President's pool. But Sinha had a more difficult relationship with her.<sup>25</sup>

It became apparent that the Indian Army and Navy had quite different views about the operation. There were considerable disagreements between Army and Navy over command and control of the amphibious task force. The naval task force was to be commanded by Vice Admiral Nayyar. Admiral Dawson argued that the Navy should be in overall command of operation, while General Sinha argued for overall command. Mrs Gandhi suggested that Navy would be force commander at sea but the Army would assume command of the task force once the landings took place (an arrangement which Navy was not at all happy with).<sup>26</sup>

Other than the question of command, the Navy was confident of its ability to execute the operation, even at a distance of some 4,600 km from its fleet base in Mumbai. The Indian Navy believed that it had the capability to conduct operations at long distance, and had become confident in its capabilities to refuel and replenish at sea. The Navy was also familiar with Port Louis, having accumulated intelligence reports and photographs etc from numerous ship visits over the years and from the Indian naval officers stationed there. The Navy was not overly concerned about landing the troops. It was believed that troops could be properly briefed at sea for alongside landings and disembarkation. The Navy did not believe that troops would need to be landed on beaches, but expected that troops could be landed at Port Louis docks without opposition, or at worst a semi-opposed landing at the docks. The Mauritian Coast Guard (commanded by an Indian naval officer) could also provide assistance if necessary. Nayyar however requested Rules of Engagement in the event of US intervention, no doubt remembering the Navy's experience in 1971 when it had been given no Rules of Engagement in relation to the USS *Enterprise*.

However, General Sinha told Mrs Gandhi that he did not have confidence in the planned operation.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the question of command, Sinha had major concerns about the army's ability to conduct an amphibious operation of this nature and about the possibility of US intervention. Sinha believed that his troops were inadequately trained for amphibious operations. The Army's previous experience at an opposed amphibious landing had been disastrous. In the closing days of the 1971 Bangladesh War, in Operation *Beaver*, a force of Gurkhas had been landed near Cox's Bazaar in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in an attempt to cut off an escape route of retreating Pakistani troops into Burma. The amphibious force had not been able to find the correct landing beach and several Gurkhas drowned when they were ordered to disembark with full equipment into deep water. The badly planned operation was widely regarded as a fiasco. Sinha, a Gurkha himself, was no doubt deeply aware of this. Sinha was also very concerned about the possibility of US intervention in the operation. The USS *Enterprise* was still fresh in the minds of Indian military leadership, as was the presence of US forces at Diego Garcia. Some have called a preoccupation among some Indian military strategists with US intervention the "Enterprise Syndrome."

There is reason to believe that Sinha may have been sufficiently concerned about the possibility of US intervention to take the initiative of personally consulting with US representatives about Washington's views on the Mauritian political crisis. (In this regard, it is worth noting that the Indian armed forces are notoriously kept compartmentalized from both intelligence analysis and political decision-making in New Delhi.) According to B.Raman, a former head of the counter-terrorism division of RAW, the Indian intelligence

services later became aware that a “senior” Army officer leaked Jugnauth’s request for assistance and the details of the War Room meeting to the US Embassy in Delhi, which later “affected his chances of rising to the top.”<sup>28</sup> Two months later, against longstanding tradition, Mrs Gandhi controversially ordered that Sinha be passed over in his expected promotion to Army Chief and he took early retirement from the Army. (Sinha then joined the opposition BJP party and subsequently served as Ambassador to Nepal and Governor of Kashmir.) If Raman is to be believed, Sinha was passed over because of leaks over the Mauritius operation, and not because of his opposition to an assault on Sikh militants in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which was widely thought to be the reason.<sup>29</sup>

With the military commanders unable to agree on execution of the operation, Mrs Gandhi decided against the operation and Operation *Lal Dora* was put on hold. Equipment was unloaded and troops were returned to barracks. The most obvious reason was the Army’s distinct lack of enthusiasm for the operation. However, Mrs Gandhi was shrewd. It is also possible that she merely intended Indian preparations for the operation to act as a signal to relevant Mauritian leaders of India’s determination to support Jugnauth.<sup>30</sup> Word was spread in Port Louis that the Indian Navy was “surrounding” Mauritius.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Political intervention and the 1983 elections***

According to one account, in place of Operation *Lal Dora*, upon the suggestion of R N Kao, Mrs Gandhi decided to send N F Suntook, then head of RAW, to Port Louis to deal with the crisis at a political level.<sup>32</sup> Suntook was due to retire at the end of March 1983 and he was

requested to delay his retirement by a couple of weeks. Suntook's mission to Mauritius was never publicly disclosed. Indeed, his abrupt disappearance a few days prior to his scheduled retirement provoked somewhat bizarre accusations in the Indian media that he had defected to Washington.<sup>33</sup>

In Mauritius, Suntook was assisted by Prem Singh, the Indian High Commissioner, who was well known for his highly partisan support for Jugnauth.<sup>34</sup> Singh was later accused of having played a virtual pro-consul role in Mauritian politics.<sup>35</sup> Suntook and Singh worked with Harish Boodhoo and other Hindu and Muslim leaders to persuade them to swing their support behind Jugnauth, and it is likely that financial incentives were offered.<sup>36</sup> Berenger claims that he knew nothing of Suntook's role.<sup>37</sup> The efforts of Jugnauth and his Indian backers to build a new Hindu coalition around Jugnauth were successful. On the day after Suntook returned to Delhi in April, Jugnauth announced the establishment of a new party called the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM), which merged Boodhoo's Parti Socialiste Mauricien with Hindu elements from the MMM. This new party, along with other opposition groups, had the numbers to form a new government in Parliament.

New elections were called for August 1983, which Jugnauth would win convincingly. The election campaign was divided on highly communalist basis and included threats of violence. Boodhoo claimed that a Libyan hit squad was in Mauritius to conduct assassinations.<sup>38</sup> There was a purported assassination attempt on Boodhoo on the eve of the election, although some insiders have claimed that the incident had been organised by

Boodhoo himself.<sup>39</sup> It is highly likely that the MSM received significant financial support from India during the campaign.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The Aftermath***

The events of 1983 consolidated India's already extensive influence in Mauritius. Since that time all major political leaders have publicly acknowledged India's special role in Mauritius' security. After the 1983 election, Jugnauth requested the appointment of Major General J N Taimini, the Indian Army's chief liaison officer with RAW, as the Mauritian National Security Advisor. Tamini occupied that post for more than a decade, to be followed since that time by other Indian appointees with connections to RAW.

Mauritius also took a distinctly pro-Western turn in foreign policy. The new Deputy Prime Minister Gaetan Duval, who represented the old guard of pro-Western leaders, took charge of foreign policy, stating that Mauritius considered itself "a staunch ally of the West."<sup>41</sup>

Jugnauth refused to receive the Soviet Ambassador, Nicolai Pankov, who was thereupon recalled to Moscow. The Libyan diplomatic mission was expelled after refusing to cease its non-diplomatic activities in providing financial assistance to the Muslim community.

Jugnauth backpedalled on Berenger's previous strident stance on Diego Garcia, reportedly stating that "we have to accept the base is there."<sup>42</sup> Mauritius continued its formal claim to sovereignty over Diego Garcia, but dropped demands for closure of the base and any appeal to the International Court of Justice. Jugnauth also lifted the embargo on the supply of labour to the US base that had been imposed by his previous government. Relations with

South Africa also improved. Duval was known to be particularly close to South Africa and was a frequent visitor there. Jugnauth stated that Mauritius would be “realistic” in its relations with Pretoria even though it was opposed to apartheid.<sup>43</sup> Pretoria was allowed to open a diplomatic presence in the form of a trade office.

The Mauritian crisis also presaged India playing a much more active role throughout the Indian Ocean, particularly after Rajiv Gandhi assumed office in 1984. As Admiral RH Tahiliani (who in 1984 took over from Admiral Dawson as Chief of Naval Staff) commented: “We must take the responsibility that size imposes on us, without having any hegemonistic aspirations. Coming to the help of a small neighbour is a responsibility, but we have no intention of spreading our sphere of influence.”<sup>44</sup> In 1986, the Indian Navy secretly intervened used one of its frigates, the *INS Vindhyagiri*, in the Seychelles to head off one of several attempted coups (*Operation Flowers Are Blooming*).<sup>45</sup> In July 1987, Rajiv Gandhi sent peacekeeping forces in the Sri Lanka in an attempt to enforce a negotiated solution to civil war (*Operation Pawan*). In November 1988, following a request by the Maldivian President, India flew a battalion of paratroops to the Maldives, making a daring landing at Malé airport to avert an attempted coup by Tamil mercenaries (*Operation Cactus*). India’s unprecedented level of activity in the Indian Ocean only ended after the humiliating withdrawal of Indian troops from Sri Lanka in 1990. Rajiv Gandhi was subsequently assassinated by Tamil extremists in May 1991 in retribution for his role in the operation. India found that foreign interventions can sometimes carry a significant cost.

### ***Lessons from Operation Lal Dora***

In some ways the story of Operation *Lal Dora* is merely an interesting footnote to the Cold War – when jostling between the West and the Soviet bloc in the Indian Ocean threatened India’s role in the region. However, the story also has broader significance in a number of respects and particularly in light of Washington’s hopes that India will take a broader security role in the Indian Ocean.

First, the events of 1983 were a turning point in the close security relationship between India and Mauritius, which continues and has in fact strengthened since then. India has effectively become Mauritius’ security guarantor and Mauritius has “willingly subordinated” itself to India in strategic matters. Mauritius now provides an anchor for India’s growing sphere of influence in the southwest Indian Ocean.<sup>46</sup>

Second, Operation *Lal Dora* demonstrated the willingness of India during the 1980s to conduct foreign military interventions. In some respects, India was much more of a “normal” state – in terms of its willingness to project military power - than the nonaligned rhetoric of the times would suggest.

Third, these events demonstrate how Indian and US interests were often aligned, even in the depths of the Cold War - again, despite New Delhi’s rhetoric. India’s interests in maintaining its influence in Mauritius transcended its relationship with the Soviet Union. There seems to have been an interesting, if limited, commonality of interests between India and the United States over Mauritius. New Delhi appears to have considered that its

primary long-term interest in Mauritius lay in supporting the Jugnauth government with the intention of maintaining the dominant position of the Hindu community in Mauritian politics. US interests appear to have been served by supporting a relatively conservative Jugnauth government which could be persuaded to reject Soviet and Libyan influence and adopt a more Western-oriented foreign policy. It is unclear whether or not this was the outcome of a specific understanding between New Delhi and Washington. An implicit alignment of Indian and US strategic interests in the Indian Ocean would be seen in several other instances during the 1980s, predating the public development of strategic links during the 1990s.

Fourth, the story of Operation *Lal Dora* illustrates the lack of jointedness, failures in operational coordination and lack of communication between services that have long plagued the Indian armed forces. The operation involved little or no joint planning and issues of command remained unresolved. Some steps have been taken to address these problems, including the establishment of the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) in 2002, although there are questions about its effectiveness. Despite calls for many years, there is still no Chief of Defence Staff as a single point advisor to the government.

Coordination between India's armed forces is still seen by many to be woefully inadequate compared with other major powers. A lack of coordination in joint operations could have a significant impact on India's credibility as a major power. This is likely to be a major issue for India in coming years as demands for it to conduct combined force operations grows.

Finally, the story sheds light on India's military capabilities. Although the Navy was confident in its abilities to successfully conduct the operation, it had to make do without proper amphibious capabilities. Troops were to be transported aboard warships and the fleet logistics train was extremely thin. No fixed wing air cover was available. In contrast, the Army had little confidence in its abilities to conduct the operation. There have been considerable attempts to address these weaknesses. Over the last decade or so the Navy has further developed its amphibious capabilities through the acquisition of the amphibious dock ship, INS *Jalashwa* and other landing craft. The Indian Navy is in the process of procuring up to four large multi-role support vessels and is establishing an amphibious warfare school at Kakinada on India's east coast. In 2011, it was announced that the 54th Infantry Division (which was to play a role in Operation *Lal Dora*) had been designated as a Reorganised Amphibious Formation. The Navy, which demonstrated its amphibious capabilities in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives as part of the 2004 Tsunami relief efforts, is eager to learn from the experience of the United States and others in amphibious operations through bilateral exercises. As India stretches its sea legs in the Indian Ocean and beyond into the Pacific, the need for these capabilities is only likely to grow.

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<sup>1</sup> Report from US Embassy Port Louis to US Secretary of State, "Mauritius Denies Plan To Cede Agalega Islands To India, But Issue Shows Mauritian Subordination", 15 December 2006, published in *The Hindu*, 2 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *The Mauritius Times*, 23 June 1978, quoted in P.K.S.Namboodiri, JP Anand and Sreedhar, *Intervention in the Indian Ocean*, (Delhi: ABC Publishing, 1982), p.260.

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<sup>3</sup> Which included US approval for India's intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the Maldives in 1988.

<sup>4</sup> During the Indian General Elections in 1977, Indira Gandhi reportedly kept an aircraft on standby at Sarsawa Air Force Base ready to fly her to Mauritius in case her life was endangered. Dilip Bobb, 'Blunting the Edge,' *India Today*, 1 September 1980, p.85.

<sup>5</sup> Ajay Dubey, *Government and Politics in Mauritius* (Delhi: Kalinga Publications, 1997), p.147.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Interview with co-author, 12 May 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Some have claimed that Indian Congress Party leaders had a personal interest in the treaty and the ability to move Indian money offshore. The treaty has recently become a matter of controversy with claims that Mauritius is being used by wealthy Indians to avoid tax and launder money of questionable origin. Attempts by the Indian government to close down the "round tripping" of Indian money is now the subject of tensions with Mauritius.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Shillington, *Jugnauth: Prime Minister of Mauritius* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.114.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Houbert, "Mauritius: Politics and Pluralism at the Periphery" *Annuaire des Pays de l'Océan Indien*, Vol 9 (1982/83), pp.225-65.

<sup>10</sup> Satteeanund Peerthum. Co-author interview, 9 May 2012.

<sup>11</sup> S.Peerthum, "L'ingérence néocolonialiste," in *L'Express*, "Portrait d'une nation", 12 March 1998, p.56.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Eisenlohr, *Creole Island or Little India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p.59.

<sup>13</sup> Malenn D. Oodiah, *Mouvement Militant Mauricien: 20 ans d'histoire (1969-1989)* (Port Louis, s.n.: 1989), p.146; *Times of India*, 17 May 1983.

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<sup>14</sup> Oodiah, *Mouvement Militant Mauricien*, p.146.

<sup>15</sup> Selig Harrison, *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean*, p.263.

<sup>16</sup> Most obviously in India's 1987 intervention in Sri Lanka, but also in India's response to political developments in Fiji.

<sup>17</sup> Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Interview with co-author, 12 May 2012. At the same time, the CIA had been supporting the Rangaloom government. This came to light in July 1981, when a White House official mistakenly leaked to the press that the United States was seeking to counter Libyan influence in *Mauritania*. When the Mauritanian government publicly demanded an explanation, the US State Department was left to deny its involvement in Mauritania by explaining that in fact it was supporting the *Mauritian* government against Libyan influence. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p.159.

<sup>18</sup> Peerthum, "L'ingérence néocolonialiste", p.56 and Interview with co-author, 9 May 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Interview with co-author, 12 May 2012.

<sup>20</sup> India was staging Antarctic expeditions through Mauritius and in March 1983, an Indian Antarctic team was in Port Louis.

<sup>21</sup> Boodhoo met with Walters both in Mauritius and Washington D.C.

<sup>22</sup> Lal Dora means "red thread" in Hindi. It is commonly used in the Hindu *puja* ritual and other Hindu rituals and invokes the blessings of the Hindu gods.

<sup>23</sup> Confidential interviews with former senior Indian naval officers.

<sup>24</sup> *INS Mysore*, an ageing Fiji class cruiser built in 1939 and acquired from the Royal Navy in 1957, was deemed non-operational by planners.

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<sup>25</sup> Among other things, Sinha's father, M K Sinha, had been a political opponent of Mrs Gandhi.

<sup>26</sup> The British experience of commanding the Falklands operations in 1982 is often held up as a model of command of amphibious operations conducted far from home. The overall command of the Falklands operation was held by Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse who operated from task force headquarters at Northwood, England. Command of all forces within the operational zone around the Falklands Islands initially fell to Rear Admiral John Woodward. As landing operations started at San Carlos, Commodore Michael Clapp, Commander, Amphibious Warfare Forces, took command of landing forces and reported directly to Admiral Fieldhouse at Northwood. Once established on shore, all land operations fell under the command of the Commander, Land Forces who also reported directly to Admiral Fieldhouse at Northwood.

<sup>27</sup> Lt General S K Sinha. Interview with co-author, February 2012.

<sup>28</sup> B.Raman, *The Kaoboy of R&AW: Down Memory Lane* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2007), p. 120.

Although Raman does not name Sinha, there is little doubt as to who he is referring.

<sup>29</sup> Shortly after these events, Mrs Gandhi requested Sinha to begin planning an assault against Sikh militants in the Golden Temple in Amritsar - which was subsequently implemented in the highly controversial Operation *Bluestar* in 1984. However, Sinha strongly advised Mrs Gandhi against such a course of action, fearing (correctly) for its impact on Army morale.

<sup>30</sup> A tactic that Mrs Gandhi was to use the following year in ordering planning for a full scale military intervention in Sri Lanka – to be called Operation *Buster* .

<sup>31</sup> Prem Singh. Interview with co-author, May 2012.

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<sup>32</sup> Raman, *The Kaoboys of R&AW*, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> The Indian Home Minister, P.C.Sethi, was forced to deny these allegations in parliament.

V.Balachandran, "The day media turned a patriot into a traitor," *Sunday Guardian*, 19 September 2010.

<sup>34</sup> According to Kishan S. Rana, who was a later Indian High Commissioner to Mauritius.

Kishan S. Rana, "Island Diplomacy", *Indian Express*, 7 June 2003; and Kishan S. Rana, *The 21st Century Ambassador: Plenipotentiary to Chief Executive* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.74.

<sup>35</sup> Selig Harrison, "India, U.S. and Superpower rivalry" in Selig Harrison and K.

Subrahmanyam, *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean*, p.262. Singh was recalled in 1986 following allegations of interference in Mauritian politics.

<sup>36</sup> Peerthum, "L'ingérence néocolonialiste".

<sup>37</sup> Paul Berenger. Interview with co-author, May 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Colin Legum, *Africa contemporary record: annual survey and documents: Volume 13*, (New York: Africana Publishing, 1983), Page B231

<sup>39</sup> Oodiah, *Mouvement Militant Mauricien*, p.153.

<sup>40</sup> Confidential interviews with Mauritian political identities, May 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Legum, *Africa contemporary record*, p. B221.

<sup>42</sup> *Times of India*, 17 May 1983.

<sup>43</sup> "Mauritius: a change in direction?" The South African Institute of International Affairs, Brief Report No.53, December 1983.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Raju G.C.Thomas, "The Sources of Indian Naval Expansion," in Robert H.Bruce, *The Modern Indian Navy and the Indian Ocean: Developments and Implications* (Perth: Centre for Indian Ocean Regional Studies, 1989), pp.95-108.

<sup>45</sup> David Brewster and Ranjit Rai, "Flowers Are Blooming: the story of the India Navy's secret operation in the Seychelles," *The Naval Review* (2011), pp.58-62.

<sup>46</sup> See David Brewster, "An Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean?" *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring 2010), pp. 1-20.