Speech – ‘Abolition of Slavery’ – Art Exhibition

RABINDRANATH TAGORE INSTITUTE

5 FEBRUARY 2015

1st February 1835, is a date that has been written in letters of gold in Mauritian pages of history to commemorate the abolition of slavery and to pay homage to the work that slaves have been doing over centuries. Today, it gives me much pleasure to attend this function to mark the 180th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery.

Every year we have been celebrating this event on February 1st and today, this art exhibition has been organised to commemorate and pay homage to our ancestors.

Slavery has been present during the period of colonisation in Mauritius. Slaves were brought from Madagascar and from the East Indies by the Dutch settlers in order to help in the island's development.

Indeed, before the abolition of slavery, slaves were of a great help to the development of agriculture and infrastructure in Mauritius in the 17th and 18th centuries. Port Louis, which today stands, as the capital city of our country could be possible only because of the hard work and efforts of those slaves. It was under the command of Governor Mahé de La Bourdonnais that the slaves built Port Louis. Subsequently, the governor also brought skilled labourers from India to carve our small island.

The year 1787 witnessed the setting up of an abolition society in England and this is what initiated the abolition of slavery in our island.
In 1810, when Mauritius was taken over by the British, slave trade was already illegal. Despite this, labourers brought by the British were considered as slaves and it is only a few decades later, in February 1835, that slavery was abolished in Mauritius.

Indeed, today its gives us great joy and pride to be celebrating the 180\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of the abolition of slavery.

The objective of the Rabindranath Tagore Institute is to promote education and culture and, today, to mark this event and to pay tribute to our ancestors and all the slaves who had a hand in carving Mauritius into what it is today, this Art Exhibition has been organised.

The history of slavery and its abolition has been a theme of great interest to many researchers and in contemporary art production. Artists have been using their brush to visually express the suffering and humiliation that slaves underwent throughout decades. The art works may not resemble a narrative story but they make it possible for us to understand the state of mind of the slaves and their condition in the past. We all know in what conditions they lived and worked.

A two day art workshop was organised by the RTI where 25 local artists gifted with a keen sensitivity, came to express their feelings on the theme of the Abolition of Slavery in various forms such as painting, print, sculpture, installations and photography, These artists regularly participate in exhibitions locally and abroad and this, no doubt, contributes to the rich cultural heritage of the country.

Rabindranath Tagore once said,
“Man has a fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with his self-preservation. This surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of Art for man’s civilisation is built upon his surplus”.

Artists are inherently endowed with a capacity and, what is more, the urge to create. Every artist has a particular vision which he explores before creating and communicating to his audience. This is his main concern as he is gifted with extraordinary sensibility.

Art thus becomes a vehicle of communication which enables artists to express themselves. Over the years, they have expressed their feelings and emotion over a variety of issues associated with their experiences and outlook.

The Rabindranath Tagore Institute has been organising workshops in Madhubani Art aimed at training teachers, educators and established artists of Mauritius in the formal, symbolical and design aspects of Madhubani Art with the intention that a local form of this style be developed and rooted in the prevalent socio-cultural traditions of Mauritius.

All the four workshops organised from 2008 to 2014 have been very successful and have seen the participation of many enthusiastic Art Educators and Artists.

As from the year 2014 the Mahatma Gandhi Institute has decentralised its activities in Arts and a full time B.A Fine Arts Course is being run here at the Rabindranath Tagore Institute.

Today, Art is being taught at all levels, from Primary to Tertiary in Mauritius. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute has also made its presence
felt all over the country by offering courses in Fine Arts from Certificate level to M A in visual art.

This Art Exhibition on the Abolition of Slavery will no doubt help to sensitise the students and the public in general about slavery. I would wish that more exhibitions of this kind took place in our island to enable other artists to express their talent and to enable the public at large to gauge the beauty of their work. This will contribute to the enrichment of the Mauritian nation as a whole and will disseminate culture at all levels.

It gives me much pleasure now to declare this exhibition open.