

# DUNPUTH LALLAH:

## PIONEER OF INDO-MAURITIAN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

*A Legacy of Courage, Justice, and Service (1886-1947)*

### **Introduction**

On 22 January 1926, Dunputh Lallah achieved what many considered impossible: he became the first Indo-Mauritian elected to the Legislative Council of Mauritius, winning the Grand Port constituency with 424 votes. This victory, alongside Rajcoomar Gujadhur's simultaneous election in Flacq, marked a turning point in Mauritian political history - the moment when descendants of Indian immigrants began their journey from political exclusion to full participation in the governance of their country.

Yet Dunputh Lallah's significance extends far beyond this single electoral triumph. As the second Indo-Mauritian attorney-at-law, a champion of the downtrodden, a cultural patron and a mentor to future independence leaders, Lallah embodied the ideals of courage and justice that would eventually guide Mauritius to independence in 1968.

### **Early Life and Education**

Born on 2 July 1886 at Coromandel, Dunputh Lallah was the youngest son of Gorachand Lallah and Ramkalia Beeharry. The Lallah family story itself is remarkable: Gorachand arrived in Mauritius on 13 May 1854 aboard the Sir Robert Seppings from Calcutta, bearing immigrant number 134527. Through shrewd business acumen and partnership with Seewoodharry Buguth, Gorachand became a successful entrepreneur, participating actively in the "Grand Morcellement" - the subdivision of sugar estate lands in the 1880s.

This economic success enabled Gorachand to provide his sons with education at the Royal College Curepipe, then the premier educational institution in Mauritius. Their cousin, Harry Parsad Seewoodharry Buguth, was the first student of Indian origin who attended the Royal College Curepipe. The opening of Royal College to all sections of the population was one of the most significant events of 19th-century Mauritius, helping shape future political leaders. At Royal College, Dunputh likely crossed paths with Dr. Maurice Curé, who would later become his political ally in the budding Labour movement.

## **Boodhun Lallah: Breaking the Legal Barrier**

Before Dunpath could make his mark, his elder brother Boodhun Lallah blazed the trail. In 1903, Boodhun became the first Indo-Mauritian admitted to practice as an Attorney-at-Law - a momentous achievement that shattered the color barrier in the Mauritian legal profession. At a time when the Chief Prosecutor had arrogantly declared, "The day a mulatto dares enter this Bar, I'll trample my gown underfoot," Boodhun's admission represented a revolutionary breach of the professional fort that had been the exclusive preserve of whites.

### **The Atchia Case: Justice for All**

Boodhun's most significant contribution came through his collaboration with Manilal Maganlal Doctor, the barrister sent to Mauritius by Mahatma Gandhi in 1907 to advocate on behalf of discriminated Indo-Mauritians. Their partnership would challenge the very foundations of colonial discrimination.

In 1909, they took up the landmark case of C.M. Atchia, a Mauritian Muslim prosecuted for contempt of court for "having appeared as a witness before the district magistrate dressed in Oriental fashion and wearing shoes without socks or stockings." The case, though seemingly trivial, struck at the heart of systematic discrimination against Indo-Mauritians in the justice system.

Manilal Doctor served as barrister, with Boodhun Lallah assisting as attorney in the appeal to the Supreme Court. Together, they marshalled powerful arguments: that Indo-Mauritians had lobbied Governor Sir Henry Barkly as far back as the 1860s against magistrates who required "natives of Indian origin" to remove their head cloths in court; that a Colonial Secretary's circular had already enshrined the right to maintain cultural customs in court; and that to appear without traditional dress would itself constitute contempt in Indian courts.

The Supreme Court ruled in favour of Atchia - a major victory that marked the first legal triumph in a long struggle to ensure respect for the rights of every section of the Mauritian people. Though it might appear insignificant to modern readers, this case demonstrated that justice and law, when properly applied, could ignite major societal changes. It inspired the Indo-Mauritian community to rise to the challenge of greater equality in colonial Mauritius.

Boodhun's tragic death in a hunting accident on 31 December 1917 cut short a brilliant career, but he had established a legal tradition that his younger brother Dunpath would carry forward with even greater impact.

## **A Legal Pioneer: Dunputh Follows Boodhun**

After completing his secondary education, Dunputh was articled in the office of his elder brother Boodhun Lallah. In 1913, Dunputh followed in his brother's footsteps, becoming the second Indo-Mauritian attorney-at-law.

The Lallah brothers' entry into the legal profession was strategic. As successful businessmen, the family had developed networks across Mauritian society but still had to rely on Franco-Mauritian jurists when disputes arose. In a courtroom populated by judges with close ties to the planter class, non-white litigants faced systematic disadvantages. By breaching the professional fort, the Lallahs ensured their community had representation in the halls of justice.

Dunputh set up his legal practice as a solicitor advocate, and the profession became his springboard for participation in the major political and socio-economic debates of the era. His office would later serve as training ground for future stars of the Mauritian Bar, including Aunuth Beejadhur, Renganaden Seeneevassen and Sir Veerasamy Ringadoo - all of whom became involved in the struggle for Independence.

## **Khemlall Lallah and the Arya Samaj Movement**

While Boodhun conquered the legal profession and Dunputh prepared to enter politics, their brother Khemlall Tottalall Lallah was leading a different kind of revolution - one that would prove crucial to Dunputh's electoral success.

## **Founding the Arya Samaj in Mauritius**

In 1898, Indian soldiers from Bengal brought to Mauritius two books by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj movement in India: the Satyarth Prakash ("The Light of Truth") and the Sanskara Vidhi. Through a series of fortuitous exchanges, these books reached Khemlall Lallah, who became profoundly inspired by their reformist Hindu philosophy.

The Arya Samaj advocated radical ideas for its time: rejection of idol worship, elimination of the caste system, opposition to the worship of the dead, and rejection of superstitions. These views were unpalatable to orthodox Hindus - the descendants of the first generation of Indian immigrants to Mauritius.

Despite fierce opposition, Khemlall persevered. In 1903, he became the founding President of the first Arya Samaj organization in Mauritius, established at Curepipe Road in Jugmohan Gopal's shop. About 200 people attended the launch. The organization initially struggled - membership fell to just five individuals after controversial lectures on idol worship - but Khemlall refused to give up.

His persistence paid off. By 1911, with the support of Manilal Doctor, Khemlall successfully established a permanent Arya Samaj in Port Louis. He served as President, with Guruparsad Duljeetlal as Secretary and Khersingh as Treasurer. Before leaving Mauritius, Manilal Doctor entrusted his press and newspaper to the Port Louis Arya Samaj members. They launched The Mauritius Arya Patrika on 1 June 1911, appearing fortnightly in Hindi and English, with Khemlall as the first editor.

## **Bridging the Orthodox-Reform Divide**

Khemlall's reformist views initially created tension within the Lallah family. His father Gorachand was a profoundly orthodox Hindu, and Dunputh, a staunch Sanatanist, was especially at loggerheads with his brother over religious matters. However, Dunputh eventually acknowledged that it was best to respect Khemlall's philosophy - a wise choice, as the Arya Samaj would play a key role in the 1926 election campaign. Dunputh even supported a number of Arya Samaj initiatives, especially in education.

## **The Arya Samaj's Political Impact**

By the 1920s, the Arya Samaj had developed into a formidable socio-political force. The movement opened hundreds of evening schools in villages known as "baithkas," raising educational levels and political consciousness among Indo-Mauritians. Through Manilal Doctor's newspaper The Hindustani and later The Mauritius Arya Patrika, the Arya Samaj encouraged education and aroused interest in political decisions.

The organization's contribution to the 1926 electoral victory cannot be overstated. Between 1886 and 1906, the Indo-Mauritian electorate had grown from just 300 to 1,400—a significant increase attributed partly to Arya Samaj mobilization efforts. By 1926, Indo-Mauritians constituted 31% of the total electorate (approximately 3,500 of 11,000 voters).

During Dunputh's campaign, the Arya Samaj actively campaigned door-to-door for both Dunputh Lallah and Rajcoomar Gujadhur. The Mauritius Arya Patrika provided crucial editorial support. The movement's extensive network of schools and cultural centers served as organizing hubs for political mobilization. Arya Samaj leaders spoke at public meetings, registered new voters, and helped transport electors to polling stations on election day.

Khemlall's vision of an educated, politically conscious Indo-Mauritian community had been realized. Though he died before seeing his brother's electoral triumph, Khemlall Lallah had sown the seeds of what became a formidable socio-political force in 20th-century Mauritius. His courage in standing firm against the Hindu orthodoxy, combined with his organizational genius, made him an indispensable architect of Indo-Mauritian political emancipation.

# THE ROAD TO 1926: BUILDING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

**Several factors converged to make Dunputh Lallah's 1926 election possible:**

## **Family Legacy and Economic Independence**

The Lallah family's economic success provided the financial independence necessary for political engagement. Dunputh managed various family estates, including sugar plantations, tobacco plantations and the sawmill in Curepipe. This wealth freed him from dependence on the Franco-Mauritian oligarchy that controlled employment and credit.

## **Cultural Leadership**

Dunputh was deeply involved in Hindu cultural and religious life, financing the construction of several temples including Camp Caval Shivala, Camp Fouquereaux Shivala and Vacoas Shivala. He organized the Maha Shivaratree festival and was present at the founding of the Hindu Maha Sabha in 1925. He also served as the first manager of the Aryan Vedic School of Vacoas from 1922, recognizing education as key to the community's transition from labourers to instructed citizens.

His cultural work earned him respect across the Indo-Mauritian community, building a constituency that would support his political ambitions.

***In 1931, at the request of Ackbar Gujadhur (President of the Hindu Maha Sabha), Dunputh Lallah and Rajcoomar Gujadhur tabled a historic motion in the Legislative Assembly for the proclamation of Maha Shivaratree as a National Public Holiday. The acceptance of this motion remains one of the most significant victories for cultural and religious recognition in Mauritian history.***

## **Media Ownership**

Dunputh owned the Mauritius Mitra (Friends of Mauritius), founded on 25 August 1924. This daily newspaper, published in English and Hindi and sold for five cents, became a powerful tool for political mobilization. The Mauritius Arya Patrika, affiliated with the Arya Samaj movement founded by his brother Khemlall, also supported his campaign.

## **Growing Political Prominence**

By the mid-1920s, Dunputh had established himself as a leader of the Indo-Mauritian community. In 1922, he led the community's response to Bishop Golding Bird's alleged insulting comments about Indians. In 1925, he was invited to address a national conference on Mauritian currency - the first time the government had officially invited him to speak at such a forum.

In his speech, Dunputh courageously attacked the Oligarchy, explaining how currency policy favoured wealthy sugar planters at the expense of ordinary Mauritians. He stated that the weak Mauritian rupee only benefited "the Planters, the Banks and the Brokers," and advocated linking the currency to the British pound with a gold standard.

## **The Visit of Sir Kunwar Maharaj Singh (1924)**

A pivotal moment came when Sir Kunwar Maharaj Singh, son of Raja Harnam Singh of the Kapurthala royal family and the first Indian Governor of Bombay, visited Mauritius in 1924 to investigate labour conditions. He stayed at the Lallah residence in Curepipe, later expressing special gratitude:

"In particular, I am indebted to Mr. Dunputh Lallah, a Hindu Attorney at Law and one of the ablest and most prominent citizens of Mauritius. His house was often my home in the evenings and he and his family showed me great kindness from the hour of my arrival to the time of my departure."

Crucially, Maharaj Singh's report noted:

"...no Indian has hitherto secured election to the Legislative Council. Unfortunately the main reason for their failure is the lack of unity... There is no doubt however that there are many Indian voters who have not troubled to register their names. If this was done and if there was some political organisation at work and more unity, it is certain that at the election of 1926 one or more Indian candidates would be elected."

This analysis undoubtedly influenced Dunputh's decision to run for office.

# THE 1926 ELECTION CAMPAIGN:

## "KHOON PAR KHOON – KHOONÉ KHOON!"

*"Khoon par Khoon – Khooné Khoon!" (Blood for Blood!) was Dunputh Lallah's battle cry in Grand Port - a slogan that captured the determination of a community demanding political representation.*

### **The Electoral Landscape**

After the disappointment of the 1911 elections, when L'Action Libérale (including Dunputh's brother Boodhun) had been defeated through Machiavellian tactics, Indo-Mauritian leaders launched a renewed assault on the Oligarchs in 1926.

The total Indo-Mauritian electorate had increased significantly, reaching 31% (approximately 3,500 of 11,000 voters). In Flacq, Indo-Mauritians constituted over 50% of the electorate (700 of 1,100), while Grand Port also offered realistic prospects of success.

### **Four Indo-Mauritian candidates stood:**

- Rajcoomar Gujadhur (Flacq) - sugar estate owner
- Dunputh Lallah (Grand Port) - attorney-at-law
- Ibrahim Beebeejaun (Rivière du Rempart) - major landowner
- Ramrattun Hawoldar (Pamplemousses) - land surveyor

### **Campaign Support**

The campaign enjoyed broad support:

- **Cultural Organizations:** The Arya Samaj actively campaigned for both Dunputh and Gujadhur, leveraging its extensive network of evening schools (baithkas) and cultural centers across the island to mobilize voters
- **Media:** The Mauritius Mitra and Mauritius Arya Patrika provided editorial support, with the latter serving as the official voice of the Arya Samaj movement that Khemlall Lallah had founded
- **International Appeals:** Lala Lajpat Rai, leader of the Swaraj movement in India, sent a telegram published in the Mauritius Mitra urging voters to support Indo-Mauritian candidates

Local Elite: Dookhee Gungah, a philanthropist, made financial donations to the campaign; Pandit Cashinath Kistoe spoke at public meetings

- **Grassroots Mobilization:** Campaign agents like Ramlall Ramgoolam (brother of future Prime Minister Seewoosagur Ramgoolam) organized transport for voters and hosted prayer meetings

Despite early pessimism - a confidential despatch from the Governor reported that "the Indians appear to have been slow in organising their campaign" - the mobilization proved remarkably effective.