

MAURITIUS AT THE DIGITAL CROSSROADS

From Sugar Fields to Silicon Dreams

"As my grandfather would say, 'Progress waits for no one.'"

My grandfather, Mohun Persad Kisnah, came from an old Indian Diaspora family rooted in sugar cane. During childhood trips to L'Amitié cane fields, he would tell us how Mauritius transformed into a world-leading sugar producer under the leadership of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the nation's founding father.

Today, the next tidal wave approaches—artificial intelligence. This is the era of intelligent systems and progressive thinking based on data. After designing the high-performance computing systems and GPU clusters that power today's digital world, I've observed a crucial pattern: countries that thrive in transformative epochs don't merely join the race; they set the pace.

Mauritius stands at a familiar crossroads. We've witnessed this scenario before—the dot-com bubble, the BPO wave, and high-tech manufacturing ambitions. We made choices. Some succeeded; others leave us wondering what might have been. But this current wave moves faster, penetrates deeper, and shows less mercy to late adopters. This time, we must get it right.

Learning from Our Past

In the early 2000s, while other nations cultivated innovation hubs, Mauritius chose the seemingly prudent path of Business Process Outsourcing. Armed with a bilingual workforce, stable governance, and an advantageous time zone, we built Africa's back office. The strategy worked—ICT/BPO grew to represent 10% of GDP and employed over 40,000 young Mauritians [1][2][3].

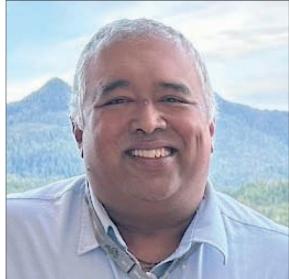
Yet the uncomfortable truth remains: while we optimized call centers, Singapore established research laboratories. While we focused on cost reduction, Ireland catalyzed an innovation economy through R&D subsidies, creating over 200,000 high-paying jobs. We excelled at executing others' ideas but failed to generate our own.

The numbers tell a sobering story. With only 0.37% of GDP invested in R&D, Mauritius invests less than a quarter of the average for upper-middle-income countries [5][6][7]. Fewer than 10% of local firms engage in research. Now, automation threatens nearly 30% of traditional BPO jobs [4].

But within this disruption lies opportunity. Those 40,000 professionals who understand service, data, and process management can pivot to building and managing digital systems. We must act swiftly.

Building Momentum

Encouraging signs are emerging. Last summer, I engaged with local technology leaders—from Mauritius Telecom to Oracle Mauritius. I toured



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Rik Kisnah has spent decades working in Cloud Computing and AI/ML. He was among the first infra engineers at Oracle to design and build AI/ML infrastructure. Rik holds multiple postgraduate degrees from the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, the University of Wales, the University of Texas, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), specializing in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. He lives with his wife Estelle Nicolas and their two children, Rekha and Roy in Seattle.

cutting-edge data centers in Rose Belle and learned about myGPT, an education initiative by Mauritius Telecom. Our policymakers increasingly champion the digital transformation.

We possess natural advantages over many African nations:

• **AI Readiness:** In the 2024 Oxford Insights AI Readiness Index, we ranked 69th globally—ahead of South Africa and tied with Rwanda as the only African nations scoring above 50% [11][12][13].

• **Responsible AI:** We ranked 13th globally for Responsible AI Use

• **Data Protection:** Our Data Protection Act 2017 aligns with GDPR, making Mauritius one of Africa's safest jurisdictions for international data operations [8][9][10].

• **Investment Climate:** Our regulatory sandbox attracted global giants like Huawei, which invested USD 20 million in a local research lab [14][15].

• **The 2025-26 Budget demonstrates ambition:** Rs 25 million for digital tools in ministries, a Start-Up Innovation Program, and generous technology investment incentives [16][17]. We're small enough to pivot quickly, stable enough to inspire trust, and strategically positioned between Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The Vision: Africa's Technology Leader

Our goal isn't to mimic others but to leverage our unique strengths:

Smart Sovereignty: We cannot match Nigeria's scale or South Africa's existing tech ecosystem, but we can out-adapt them. Mauritius can become the trusted testing ground for digital solutions—an Innovation Freeport with world-class regulation, privacy protection, and a multilingual, multicultural population.

From Service to Creation: Transform the BPO industry into a product development and innovation

ecosystem. Foster co-research partnerships with European universities and Indian Institutes of Technology. The new 2025 India-Mauritius Digital Partnership Agreement marks a promising step toward collaborative innovation.

High-Value Lighthouse Projects

Agriculture: Smart agriculture technologies can reduce water usage by 20% and increase cane yields by 15%. Data-driven decision-making could potentially double most crop yields.

Finance: AI-powered compliance services—helping banks verify customer identities (Know Your Customer) and detect money laundering activities—could be 40% faster than manual processing. This could position Mauritius as a regional service provider, offering these AI-powered financial compliance solutions across Africa.

Tourism: Advanced forecasting and personalized experiences could generate an additional Rs 25 billion minimum.

Health: Digital diagnostic services could serve the entire Indian Ocean region for tropical diseases.

Secure Modern Computing Infrastructure

In the digital economy, high-value tasks require computing power. Mauritius can develop cloud arrangements (such with Oracle Cloud that has a strong relationship in the region and leads the market for AI Hyperscalers) that leverage global resources while keeping sensitive data within our borders. We can leverage our good relationships with giant hyperscalers who have a strong foothold in sovereign countries—like Oracle Cloud—to accelerate this infrastructure development. With our commitment to 60% green energy by 2030, we should aspire to regional leadership in sustainable computing. Rodrigues could emerge as a premier location for satellite data centers.

ICT/BPO Sector Size and Economic Impact

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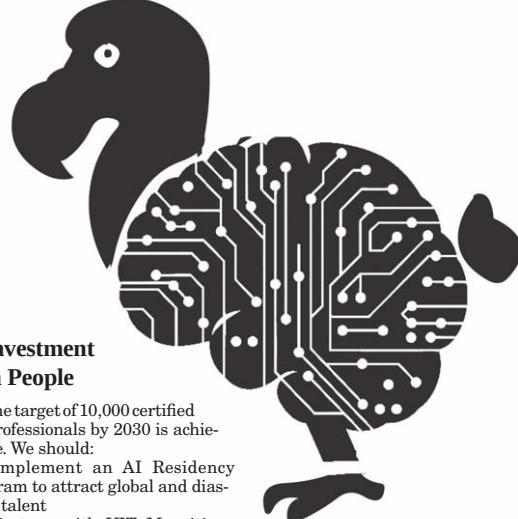
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Investment in People

The target of 10,000 certified AI professionals by 2030 is achievable. We should:

- Implement an AI Residency program to attract global and diaspora talent

- Partner with VIT Mauritius, University of Mauritius, and other institutions to ensure world-class digital programs

- Create a virtuous cycle where talent attracts investment, and investment attracts talent

The Urgency of Now

Africa's digital economy is projected to grow 27% annually, expanding from USD 4.5 billion today to USD 16.5 billion by 2030 [4]. The top four markets—Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt—already capture over 80% of funding. Mauritius must secure its position immediately.

Two-year targets:

- Three major tech companies establishing regional headquarters
- 1,000 professionals working on cutting-edge AI projects
- Five lighthouse projects delivering measurable economic benefits

A Personal Reflection

Small nations have historically demonstrated the power of swift,

decisive action. Mauritius has always been about anticipating change and resilience. From the sugar cane era through the EPZ period to financial services—every leap forward came from seizing tomorrow's opportunities today.

This moment is no different. Mauritius stands at the digital crossroads. Our choices will determine whether we lead or follow in the AI revolution. This isn't about being first; it's about creating our own path.

We missed the R&D revolution when our entrepreneurs chose outsourcing over innovation. Having all the right components means nothing if we fail to build with them. We have the infrastructure, stability, and talent—all waiting to be activated. The only thing left is to act.

In the race for progress, victory belongs to those who move first.

As we say in Creole, "Nou per retom dan karo-kann,"—we cannot return to the old fields.

The future is ours to shape.

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