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**The colonial state, the “*Surra*” epizooty  
And the colonial economy 1902-1905**

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On the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1902, 300 delegates of the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture assembled under the Chairmanship of Honourable Souchon, its President to discuss issues concerning the sugar industry. The major issue turned on the competition which the sugar industry faced from other sugar producers, particularly Germany. No one suspected that in a few months, the sugar industry would face a major crisis - a cattle epidemic which by the end of the year decimated the cattle stock of the island particularly mules and oxen. Later the disease was identified as ‘*Surra*’. It was a new disease and constituted a major catastrophe for the island, and some estate owners regarded it as worst than the worst cyclones. Once the disease began to take its toll, the colonial government, the planters, and the rest of the population had to cope with its consequences and took a number of measures as the disease wrought havoc with the economy. This paper seeks to unravel the state’s response to the epizooty and its impact on the economy.

### **Introduction**

In 1899, the colony of Mauritius had a population of 379,513 comprising of Indians and the General Population. It was an economy exporting 117,430 tons of sugar for a sum of Rs29,855,640 for the year 1895-1896. There were 126 sugar estates and 40 sugar factories<sup>962</sup>. The major means of transport were by railways and coaches and carts which were drawn by mules, asses, and donkeys. The light carioles were an efficient mode of transport for passengers while mules’ carts were used mainly for the transport of goods. Very little livestock was bred in the island and cattle played an important role in the economy not only providing transport, but also meat, milk and occupations linked with cattle from coachmen, carters to blacksmith

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<sup>962</sup> *Mauritius Almanac*, 1902.

etc... There were also oxen on the estates and they were the main form of transportation for sugar cane, sugar, manure while mules and donkeys were used to transport goods across the island. Cattle and oxen were imported mainly from Madagascar, and in the year 1900, 3,590 cattle and oxen were brought to Mauritius<sup>963</sup>. In 1895, there were 1800 carriers – these men were licensed, and each had a cart and a mule. Mules travelled long distances carrying goods to and from Port-Louis. A cattle disease could cause havoc to the economy and it was not new to Mauritius<sup>964</sup>.

In 1901, the disease made its appearance in Mauritius and it was widely believed that it was introduced from India with some cattle. Prior to 1901, the farmers of Mauritius had been in the habit of obtaining cattle from Madagascar, but apparently during the South African War, the authorities virtually closed the Madagascar markets to general export, with the result that the farmers in Mauritius were compelled to obtain their animals elsewhere. A number of deaths occurred among animals during a voyage from India. Post-mortem examination failed to reveal any cause of death, and after a little delay the surviving cattle were allowed to land. Deaths continued to occur among the imported animals, and within a short time, deaths began to spread among the horses, cattle, mules, and donkeys in some places in the island. It was not until the disease had been in existence for nearly six months, by which time a very large proportion of the animals had become affected and had died, that Dr Lesur, the Director of the Sanitary Department, was able to establish the real nature of the disease. The disease continued to take heavy toll of the livestock until, by the end of January 1903, there was scarcely a horse, or a mule left alive.

### Chronology of “Surra”

There had been in the past epizooty outbreaks. An epizooty outbreak in the years 1844-1848 had killed about 14,000 cattle. Between 1872-1876, 1,000 oxen and mules had died, and in 1879, 90 % of the cattle were wiped off. The epizooty of 1902 was more deadly and unprecedented. The origins of the disease were shrouded in controversy. At that time, the disease was little known in Europe, but it had been identified in several countries in Asia. The planters reported that the outbreak started in the district of Rivière du Rempart and thought that the disease was introduced from India as the first signs of the disease were identified in cattle imported from there. The disease then spread in several nearby localities in Rivière du Rempart namely Mapou, Schoenfield and Labourdonnais, and later spread to the district of Flacq. A report by Mr Lorans communicated to Dr Vassal provides some figures of cattle mortality for three months. From July to October of 1902, 890 solipeds and 1081 bovids died monthly. From the report of the scientists

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<sup>963</sup> *Mauritius Blue Book 1900*, V-5 p.

<sup>964</sup> J. W. P. Muir-Mackenzie, *Report on The Condition of Indian Immigrants in Mauritius 1895*. UOM CRSI Republished 2017.

the disease appeared to have affected the various types of animals differently, affecting more mules and donkeys, fewer oxen, followed by dogs and cats and lastly horses. The epizooty outbreak in 1902 continued up to April 1905. Between July 1902 to December 1904, 5,000 cattle and 4,000 equines perished. It was reckoned that mortality for bovines varied between 25 % to 30 % while equines which had been infected invariably died. Overall, it was estimated that the island had about 10,000 cattle – mules and oxen and there were between 4,000 to 7,000 belonging to estates, and small proprietors owned the rest. Duclos gave a different figure of 4,000 deaths for mules belonging to estate owners and 6,000 mules belonging to rouliers (private owners)<sup>965</sup>. There was an average of 70 to 80 cattle on each estate. During the outbreak of the disease many proprietors in Flacq lost about 3/4 of their cattle and on one estate 80 were found dead and in many estates only 14 to 15 survived.

In fact, no one could identify the disease at the beginning; doctors and veterinary surgeons in the island had no knowledge of what later was identified as “*Surra*”. Since only a few cattle had died in some places, no great importance was given to the cattle deaths. It was only when more and more cattle died that it dawned upon the cattle owners and the authorities that the disease was a very severe one. The impending catastrophe caused a great alarm in the population, and particularly for the sugar estate owners. Those planters who became aware of the cattle deaths initially attributed it to tiredness, which occurred after the animals had been heavily worked during the crop season while for the professionals, veterinary to medical men, the causes ranged from gastro enteritis, progressive anemia to anthrax. The authority that investigated the cases in the village of Palma concluded that it was caused by anthrax and had ordered vaccines to combat the disease.

Failure to diagnose the epizooty was understandable given the absence of laboratory services and lack of knowledge about the disease. The veterinary services fell under the Medical and Health department and its basic bacteriological laboratory at the Civil hospital was not of great help. Later it was identified as “*Surra*” by Dr Lesur and also by Mr Deixonne. As to the vector, Lieutenant Colonel Manders who visited the island in that period found that the disease was universally attributed to *Stomoxys*, known locally as cane fly which was abundant in manure. However, De Charmoy, a microbiologist in the island attributed the contagiousness of the disease to the cane fly that was found to carry the trypanosome.

### **State's Response**

When the epidemic broke out, the government set up a committee to diagnose the disease and its first step was to telegraph India and South Africa for information, and later telegraphed South Africa for the services of an

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<sup>965</sup> *Le Petit Journal* 25 November 1902.

expert. In Mauritius there was speculation about the disease and its origins. The scientific class was unanimous in their view that it existed in the island for some time. The disease had been raging in the island for about six months before it was identified as “*Surra*”. The epidemic attracted interest from neighboring islands of Reunion and Madagascar. Bacteriologists from Reunion and Madagascar wanted to become familiar with the etiology of the epizooty and they visited Mauritius to gather first hand information about the disease. Dr Vassal from Reunion visited Mauritius to gain firsthand knowledge of the disease. The *Journal de Madagascar* carried reports of the disease for their readers. A Bacteriologist, Dr Eddington from South Africa, was brought to investigate the disease in July 1902 and spent three weeks in the island investigating the disease and he went back with Mr Deixonne to South Africa for further investigations. Dr Lesur, the Director of the Sanitary Department, who had been working in Mauritius for about 7 years and Dr Eddington held the view there was no evidence that it had come from India. According to them the disease was endemic to the island and had existed in the district of Black River for about a year. Even for historians, half a century later, the origins of the disease were still in doubt. North Coombes wrote that there was no certainty about its source since it was believed but not proved that it had been introduced from Bombay in July 1901.

In Mauritius the outbreak of diseases had always resulted in controversies about their origins. The failure to take appropriate measures to prevent the outbreak diseases was always blamed on the administration and was held responsible for the outbreak of “*Surra*” in the island. The controversy also reflected the political division within the ranks of the oligarchy between those who were close collaborators of the British administration and their opponents. It was also part of the blame game that usually accompanied outbreaks of epidemics. Mr Antelme, a member of the Council of Government and proprietor of Stanley Sugar estate, was an opponent of the government. He blamed the sanitary inspector who visited the ship where it was reported that a few cattle had died and even insinuated that it was deliberate on the part of the veterinary surgeon to ignore cattle deaths for an outbreak of disease would enable him to make a fortune<sup>966</sup>. Antelme, who was opposed to the oligarch and to the colonial government, recommended slaughtering at the beginning of the outbreak. In fact, when the Colonial Secretary telegraphed the Government of Bombay for advice, the recommendation on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1902 was to slaughter of marked cases – another issue that divided the political class and planters.

The ordinance of 1881 already provided guidelines to cope with cattle disease and article 22 of ordinance 1881 provided for slaughtering of marked cattle in case of an epizooty. The colonial government delayed in taking immediate action because of the divisions among its own collaborators and the fact that Mr Antelme, an opponent of the government was advocating

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<sup>966</sup> Debate in the Executive Council of Government 1902 (hereafter Council of Government Debates).

slaughtering might have deterred government from taking action lest it appeared to be siding with its opponent instead of its collaborators. Moreover, the collaborators of the government represented the most powerful political and economic lobby in the island on which the colonial administration was wholly dependent.

There were other reasons to oppose slaughtering. Souchon who was a planter and president of the Chamber of Agriculture and a member of the Council of Government opposed slaughtering at first on the ground that the animals which had caught “*Surra*” were still working efficiently<sup>967</sup>. It was even advanced that Indians too would oppose slaughtering<sup>968</sup> and might revolt<sup>969</sup>. Later, Souchon changed his view and came in favour of slaughtering. Dr Edwards agreed to slaughtering as recommended in article of the ordinance of 1881 but pointed to some weakness in the law which made it difficult to implement. He highlighted that the ordinance provided for the slaughtering of cattle which had been “marked” in other words, identified with the disease. But since it was difficult to identify such cattle, he was opposed to wholesale slaughtering of all cattle. An additional reason to oppose slaughtering was that the colonial government lacked competent authorities to implement the measure.

While there were good reasons for opposing slaughtering, one should not overlook the fact it was the short-term business interests of the planter class that lay behind their resistance to slaughtering. There was a need to complete the crop season<sup>970</sup> as the cattle were the main means of transportation, and from their point of view it was better to maximize the use of these cattle infected or not, before they died. Indian proprietors pursued the same line of reasoning and both big and small proprietors pursued their narrow economic interests. It was reported that some estates sold their infected cattle to Indians and did not care whether these infected cattle would infect cattle in other parts of the island. Later, when the Government finally took the decision for slaughtering, Souchon’s amendment which was voted on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1902 was limited “to horses asses and mules without indemnity”, partly because “every authority has advised that there is a very marked distinction between the effect of the disease on cattle and its effect on equines”<sup>971</sup>.

Antelme pressed for slaughtering on the ground that delays in implementation could only spread the disease to cattle which had not been infected. He adduced evidence that some cattle which were free from the disease were also infected because the disease was allowed to spread. He also gave examples of Indians buying cattle suffering from “*Surra*” with the objective of selling it to others in other districts which could only widen the

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<sup>967</sup> *Le Petit Journal*, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1902.

<sup>968</sup> *Ibidem*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1902.

<sup>969</sup> *Ibidem*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1902.

<sup>970</sup> Council of Government Debates 52, 15 p.

<sup>971</sup> Council of Government Debates No. 83, 1199 p.

spread of the disease.

Other groups and individuals were also divided on the issue. Hugnin, Director of Credit Foncier and Leclézio, Director of Mauritius Commercial Bank, remained opposed to slaughtering. *Le Petit Journal* reflected the different viewpoints some for slaughtering and others against. The argument for, pointed out that 20 years ago during a cattle epizooty, it was argued that Indians would revolt, but nothing had happened. One anonymous writer anticipating that Dr Eddington would recommend slaughtering cast doubt on his diagnosis and recommendations<sup>972</sup>.

The colonial government defended itself against the charge that it was responsible for delays for the ordinance entrusted the responsibility for the planters to bring their diseased cattle to the authorities for slaughtering. While this was true according to the law, one suspect that the Governor was hesitant about taking a drastic measure particularly as its closest collaborators – most of the planters and businessmen were against. The colonial government consulted the secretary of state, various authorities and finally waited for the arrival of Dr Eddington for guidance. This intensive consultation, though was the normal procedure in colonial administration, allowed time for the governor to rally support for any measure which had to be taken<sup>973</sup>.

Once the number of death increases, the authorities were blamed for a number of reasons. First, the disease had not been identified at the beginning and the diagnosis was wrong. Some felt that the authorities and particularly the colonial government was to blame for having refused the request to set up a bacteriological laboratory. There was no veterinary department and veterinary services fell under the responsibility of the Medical and Health Department which did not have any veterinary. Part of the indifference can also be attributed to the fact that cattle disease had not posed a major crisis in the past.

The government's response to the disease was to use its excess balance to purchase automobiles and build railway sidings so that small planters could convey their sugar canes to the network of railways<sup>974</sup>. But these measures could not be implemented; the railway department could not build sidings because it had no rails while an order for automobiles from South Africa was not only expensive but could not be obtained before at least six months. Meanwhile the planters grew nervous about the sugar crop and were threatened with ruin if they could not find the necessary transportation. A motion for the government to buy oxen and sell it at cost price to the planters was defeated in the Council by 14 to 4. The government was opposed to the motion on several grounds mainly that it could not compete with the importers of cattle and that if it introduced cattle, the price would be much higher, that there was a risk for the government not to be able to

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<sup>972</sup> *Le Petit Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1902.

<sup>973</sup> Council of Government Debates n° 90, 14 p.

<sup>974</sup> Council of Government Debates 1902.

dispose the cattle.

The government opted for a loan to introduce tramways in the island. This measure was welcomed but it did not address the immediate needs of the planters. The government loan for tramways was also opposed by Antelme. He argued that the loan benefited the few while there was the need for a loan to tackle the major financial problems facing the whole island<sup>975</sup>. He organized a public meeting to oppose the loan for tramways also arguing that the small planters had not been consulted on this issue<sup>976</sup>. The demand for a loan to tackle major problems of the country was to be endorsed by Laclézio who acknowledged that the major financial difficulties included not only the impact of the “*Surra*” disease but also the low prices of sugar<sup>977</sup>. The government subsequently made a financial contribution of 6,000 francs to the Institut Pasteur for the investigating the disease. Research collaboration and networking were also developed. Later, when the epidemic was identified, all the cattle slaughtered, all owners suffered not only financial loss but were also were distressed at the slaughtering of their animals.

### Consequences

The disease threatened ruin to the island's economy and later it was pointed by some that it was one of the main causes of financial difficulties in the early decade of the century. For businessmen, the “*Surra*” disease provided an opportunity to increase the import of cattle. Blyth Brothers Company imported mules, horses and poneys, and asses from Buenos Aires on the ground that “*Surra*” was no longer affecting the animals and a remedy had been found and the mules were important for the crop season. In July 1902 a steamer brought 524 oxen from Vohemar<sup>978</sup>. After two shipments, the trade began to slow down, for on the 17<sup>th</sup> July it was reported that of the 524 oxen only 150 had been sold<sup>979</sup>. Yet it was reported that on the 28<sup>th</sup> July that the cattle introduced from Madagascar on sugar estates in the north of the island had also died.

The important role of cattle in the economy was not confined to the sugar economy. It also provided meat, milk and manure for the population, jobs from carters, butchers, blacksmiths, and other jobs related to the transportation and the unloading of canes in the factories. The veterinary office had even predicted that within one year all the cattle would die. This information must have thrown the island into great panic given that this was main means of transportation and the crop season was due to start in a few months time.

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<sup>975</sup> *Le Petit Journal*, 16 September 1902.

<sup>976</sup> *Ibidem*, 13 October 1902.

<sup>977</sup> *Ibidem*, 25 November 1902.

<sup>978</sup> *Ibidem*, 15 July 1902.

<sup>979</sup> *Ibidem*, 17 July 1902.



### ***Economic Consequence***

The epidemic had major consequences on the sugar economy both in the short term and in the long term. H. Robert estimated the losses due to "Surra" in animals alone to be Rs6 millions<sup>980</sup>. According to Manrakhan, the disease that carried off nearly all the draft animals which represented a direct loss of around Rs 6 million. Walter's estimation was the loss of sugar to 11,000 tons in 1903 due to late harvesting and the loss for 1904 to 23,000 tons representing in all Rs6 millions. Other consequences included manure foregone, cattle replacement and incomplete harvests<sup>981</sup>. Planters, big or small, found enormous difficulties to transport the canes to factories. While all planters suffered, the small planters suffered most. Those who had enough capital could hire extra men to help with transportation. There was a general increase in labour cost and hence a reduction in profits for all. Some had to abandon their canes in the fields for failing to transport them to factories. This led to reduction of sugar production.

### ***Production of Sugar***

The production of sugar went down from an average of 160,000 tons of cane to 170,000 in 1903 and 140,000 or 144,000 in 1904 which was 15.3 % lower than the previous crop. The shortfall was comparable to a strong cyclone<sup>982</sup>. The revenue of the island from sugar fell. Cattle deaths, problems of transportation and shortage of labour combined to delay all the activities linked with both crop season and the intercrop season. The tramways arrived late in 1903 and the harvest of 1902 ended in February 1903<sup>983</sup>. Normally the harvest ended in November and at latest in the first week of December. The late ending of the harvest meant that planting had to start late and missed the first two months of the year that were crucial for the growth of the canes. Productivity declined as the crop was extended incurring higher labour cost and the harvest was prolonged beyond December as it was considered best month to end the crop so that the planting season could start early. Delays in planting retarded the growth of cane, which resulted in low sucrose content. The revenue of the island went down as a result of the disease.

### ***Efficiency of the Sugar Estate***

The immediate impact of cattle deaths was deeply felt by the population in their daily activities. On sugar estates the supervisors could not carry out their daily rounds and had to do so on foot which was both difficult and time consuming. In Flacq and in other localities carts had to be pulled by

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<sup>980</sup> F. North Coombes, *Mes Champs et mon Moulin: réminiscences de Robert Weller, 1901 à 1944*. Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1993, 198 p.

<sup>981</sup> Manrakhan Jagadish, *History of agricultural research in Mauritius*. Editions de l'Océan Indien and the University of Mauritius, 1997, 11p.

<sup>982</sup> F. North Coombes, *Mes Champs et mon Moulin: réminiscences de Robert Weller, 1901 à 1944*, *op. cit.*

<sup>983</sup> *Ibidem*.

men instead of by draught animals<sup>984</sup>. In some cases, an extra wheel was added to the cart to make it manageable for the men to stabilize the load and provide some rest to the workers<sup>985</sup>. Planters recruited labour from villages and towns to haul sugar canes. The labour force had to be diverted from other tasks and were exhausted. Five men were needed to pull one cart, with the coming crop season there was a shortage of labour and this rendered the planters nervous and it became urgent to find a solution to the transportation problems.

For the planters, it was the harvest that was their main concern and they sought a special legislation cope with harvest. Many planters who formerly used carts turned to railways for transport. On the other hand, planters who had their lands in districts where the railways did not run were hit very hard<sup>986</sup>. Given the urgency of the cane harvest, the colonial government had to consider the construction of further branch lines and the light railways. Among their suggestions were the introduction of automobiles, tramways and light railways and new sidings on existing railway lines<sup>987</sup>. The introduction of tramways led to a lively debate in the Council of Government reflecting the opposing views of those who were favorable to the colonial government, particularly the big planters and their spokesman who were keen collaborators of the colonial government, and those who opposed to the big planters and were critical of colonial administration. The dividing line between government and opposition was clear enough with those opposing the government arguing that a hasty introduction of tramways might prove costly if the disease was brought under control and transportation by draught animals was resumed. The big planters supported the introduction of tramways as this would be financed by a loan from the colonial government which had also an interest in saving sugar crop as the revenue of the island was wholly dependent on sugar.

Finally, the government agreed to the introduction of tramways for the sugar industry and provided a loan of Rs3 millions to the planters in December 1902 without any condition<sup>988</sup>. New railway branches were opened such as the Bois Chéri light Railways and the Black River line which led to the expansion of sugar production in later years<sup>989</sup>. While the big planters benefited from a loan from government for tramways, the interests of the small planter class were ignored, and it suffered most from the epizooty. They had invested in oxen to haul canes and other goods, and the manure obtained was sold to the estates. The disease killed all their animals: not only

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<sup>984</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>985</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>986</sup> Arthur Jessop, *A history of the Mauritius Government Railways, 1864 to 1964*. J. Eliel Félix, Govt. Printer, 1964, 5 p.

<sup>987</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>988</sup> North Coombes, F, *Mes Champs et mon Moulin: réminiscences de Robert Weller, 1901 à 1944*, *op. cit.*

<sup>989</sup> Jessop Arthur, *A history of the Mauritius Government Railways, 1864 to 1964*, *op. cit.*

did they lose their animals and the manure which was a source of income but also the carting business.

Viewed in retrospect, it was considered a blessing in disguise by the estate owners as it hastened the substitution of mechanical transport for animal power. It also indirectly increased peasant ownership of land<sup>990</sup>. At the end of December 1903 Edouard Ellias introduced the first motor car in Mauritius<sup>991</sup>. In 1911, the Annual Report of the railways recorded "the ever increasing number of motor cars in the island" was reducing the first class and second class traffic in the island but third class travel was well maintained and increasing<sup>992</sup>. While the expansion of railways was a result of the outbreak of "Surra", in the long run, the epizooty also led to the introduction of cars and automobiles in the island that proved disastrous for railways

### ***Problem of Tramway***

The lack of planning in the introduction of tramways on the sugar estates illustrates further the rivalries among the different planter groups the large, middling and small planters. Once the loan had been disbursed the large and the middling ones were the ones who installed tramways on their sugar estates. They ordered their own locomotives and cane cars and tracks from various countries and the different tracks had gauges varying from 600mm to 950mm. The different locomotives had names like Bagnal, Hudson, Decauville, Koppel, Kerr-Stuart varying from 3-12 tons with different types of wagons. The lack of uniformity in laying tracks with different gauges reveals the rivalry between the large and the middling planters<sup>993</sup>. The different gauges were implemented to make centralization of factories difficult because some planters resented to see their factories and estates being absorbed in larger ones.

The "Surra" disease also affected manure production<sup>994</sup>. Further changes as a result of "Surra", such as the introduction of tramways, reduced the number of draught animals, stables or eliminated them completely, and replacement by cars further reduced the use of manure<sup>995</sup>. In the north of the island which was poorly served by railways, planters could not carry their sugar to the railways and the railways too could not cope with the increase in demand. Some of the factories and estates that could not solve the transport problem faced financial difficulties and were later closed down and their land sold.

On the other hand, the rising demand for transportation benefited the

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<sup>990</sup>North Coombes, F, *Mes Champs et mon Moulin: réminiscences de Robert Weller, 1901 à 1944, op. cit.*

<sup>991</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>992</sup>Jessop Arthur, *A history of the Mauritius Government Railways, 1864 to 1964, op. cit.*

<sup>993</sup>North Coombes, F, *Mes Champs et mon Moulin: réminiscences de Robert Weller, 1901 à 1944, op. cit.*

<sup>994</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>995</sup>*Ibidem.*

Railway department and it was able to recoup some profits during the “*Surra*” years. New lines of commerce developed with introduction of tramways and animals from other countries. As a result of the epizooty, small planters introduced a large number of animals from Buenos Ayres and Australia. For the big planters, the ‘*Surra*’ disease brought certain benefits. They were able to secure a loan from the government that helped in the modernization of the transport system which would have remained traditional in the absence of the “*Surra*”. Even the railway department seized the opportunity of the profits they made to ask for an extension of railways and this became a major demand for loan by the planters before the Royal Commission of 1909. Some small planters lost their access to the tramways while others benefited depending on the location of tramway networks.

### Treatment of Disease

Once the disease was identified as “*Surra*” and the vaccine “*Soamin*” was used to treat the disease but the disease continued for a few years. All the sugar estates had their tramlines. In town for some time rickshaws pulled by men were used to replace carriages and coaches but these proved ineffective and were discontinued. However, after the first car was introduced, coaches declined in popularity and use and gradually cars became widely used.

Another way the disease affected the agriculture was the replacement of cattle manure by other types of manure. Cattle had provided manure to the sugar estates and to small planters. After the epidemic other, the use of animal manure declined and other sources of manure had to be explored and for about a decade, sugar estates particularly in wet localities, used a kind of compost which was not very rich in potassium and ammonia until they were eventually replaced by imported fertilizer.

One important consequence of the epizooty was to give a boost to the import and consumption of frozen meat. In 1900 a Cold Storage<sup>996</sup> for meat had been established by Ireland Blyth Company but with epizooties, people turned more to frozen meat and the cold storage became a part of the food infrastructure of the island. Meat of oxen and cows was (carcasses) 796 in 1902 and sheep 7,712<sup>997</sup> while in 1903 it rose to 1,614 for oxen and cows and 50 for sheep<sup>998</sup>. It was mostly the upper classes who consumed frozen meat. As for the lower classes they could not buy frozen meat because electricity was not available and even in Port-Louis it was available only at the beginning of the century. Only the rich were able to procure meat while the other classes had to do without meat for some considerable time.

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<sup>996</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>997</sup> *Blue Book 1902*, p. V41

<sup>998</sup> *Blue Book 1903*, p. V41

## Long Term Consequence

The “*Surra*” disease revealed the political divisions in Mauritian politics along both class and colour lines. One member before the Royal commission of 1909, deplored that the general interests of the colony were subordinated to colour and class issues. Such divisions led him to demand the abolition of the elective element and a return to the method of nomination in the Council of government. On the other hand, it indirectly emboldened the reformers to ask for constitutional changes and greater political autonomy for Mauritius. By castigating the neglect of government for its failure to deal with “*Surra*” crisis, the reformers argued for example the setting up of a bacteriological laboratory would have spared the island of the epizooty had the reformers had a greater say in running the affairs of the colony. The financial crisis, in the wake of the “*Surra*” disease led the Chamber to ask government to set up anew institution to replace the Station Agronomique<sup>999</sup>. Later the Royal commission of inquiry of 1909 recommended the setting up of a Department of Scientific Agriculture which would absorb the Station Agronomique. This came about in 1912<sup>1000</sup>. There is a grain of truth in this criticism of the government and the oligarchy, for once the oligarchy had solved the transportation problem through tramways with financial support of the Government, there was no rush to set up a bacteriological laboratory which would have proved beneficial to the small proprietors. It was not until 1908 that a Bacteriological laboratory was set up initially in Saint Pierre and later at the Station Agronomique in Réduit.

What is little known is the impact of the epidemic on other classes of people in the island. While the direct impact meant loss of income, assets and jobs for many people, the indirect impact is not known. Small planters, carters and all those working in the transport sector, butchers, sale of manure, milkmen were deeply affected. Animal husbandry which was an important sector of the economy had also an impact on the transportation of goods, the rise in prices and the dearth of goods. With the loss of oxen and cows, milk and meat consumption must have considerably declined affecting the nutrition health and the standard of living of the poorer classes.

## Conclusion

The epizooty of 1902 was a major catastrophe in the island affecting all sectors of the economy as cattle were the main means of transportation in the island. A lot of people who lost their assets and livelihoods and transportation problems created affected not only the sugar economy but resulted in the dearth of many goods and higher prices. However, the main concern of the government and the sugar estate owners were the way it affected the transportation of sugar and the loss of revenue. There was

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<sup>999</sup> Manrakhan Jagadish, *History of agricultural research in Mauritius, op. cit.*

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considerable delay in identifying the disease and taking drastic measures partly out of lack of scientific knowledge about the disease but also out of conflict of interests among the oligarchy in taking solutions such as slaughtering of cattle. In the long run, the disease was a blessing for it accelerated certain changes in the colony, the introduction of tramways and motor cars as well as frozen meat. While the disease exacerbated the problems of the industry in the short term and in the long term, the successful pressure by the oligarch for financial support for building railway sidings and tramways encouraged the oligarch to ask for further financial assistance. Opposition to financial assistance by the colonial government resulted in a Royal Commission of Inquiry and which had important political consequences for the future of the island.