

From Kolkata to Highbury (1838 – 2013): A Journey to Remember

By Ashook Ramsaran

Ancestral Footprints - 175th Anniversary of Immigration Celebration: *The Emancipation and Immigration of the Indian People in the Caribbean*

Venue: York College, City University of New York

Date: May 18, 2013

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you, Dr. Mohamed Hack

All protocols observed.

I want to thank all the organizers for arranging this forum on *175th Anniversary of Indian Immigration Celebration: The emancipation and Immigration of the Indian People in the Caribbean*

And for inviting me to share my thoughts among so many notable and qualified presenters.

The theme of my presentation today is:

From Kolkata to Highbury (1838 – 2013): *A Journey to Remember*

With emphasis on:

Our journeys - the footprints left for us, the footprints we leave and the footprints we are making; our obligation in documenting the journeys as duty and responsibility; monuments, markers and inscriptions; achievements; historical perspectives and the impact on history; preservation of culture and heritage; first and second migration trends.

There are many suitably qualified speakers here today who will provide in-depth details on their areas of study and expertise. I will try not to duplicate any of that.

Indian Heritage & Perspectives

Indian heritage and culture are the cornerstone of the diaspora, transcending time and place, surviving obstacles and severe situations, remoteness and influences. Despite speaking different languages, living in different and sometimes remote places, sustaining and improving our lives, we share heartfelt feelings of Indianness and the urge and yearning to connect and belong. Meanwhile, we have inherited and taken a lot from India and transformed our lives and the new countries of our birth or adoption.

The Indian diaspora is a continuing phenomenon and can be likened to “the export of people seeking better lives for themselves and their families” which we achieve, and subsequently we flourish after assimilation and adaption with each succeeding generation, while adding to economic progress of our respective countries of domicile. Indian heritage, culture and values are the driving elements for sustenance, survival, achievement, pride and progress at all levels.

Our diaspora is molded by culture, heritage and values while it also adds to and sometimes influences those traits in both subtle and visible ways: language, clothing, lifestyle, technology and social values.

The older diaspora, which I refer to as the legacy diaspora, of the Caribbean, Africa, Mauritius and Oceania, have retained more of the Indian culture and heritage intact and in its original form for the many reasons associated with remoteness, harsh living conditions, sense of belonging and togetherness, sustenance and bonding – while some adaptation was necessary, such as with foods and clothing, some conversion to Christianity, and break down of the caste system. Later, some Indian music and songs witnessed a fusion combination such as “Caribbean Chutney”.

It seems that wherever we Indians go, we take certain staples that sustain us: Mantra; Music; Massala; Memories; Mentoring; the importance of Mataji; the value of Money; and of course, thrift and hard work.

Simultaneously, we have a knack for reconciling our two (2) identities – our inherent Indianness and birth or newly adopted citizenship. We learn very easily to adapt, co-exist and progress in other countries with multi-ethnic societies far away from India or the Caribbean. Indian heritage is such a powerful asset in the diaspora that some colonial powers marginalized persons of Indian origin curbing cultural observances and by making it difficult to maintain cultural traditions. Despite such efforts, those Indians persevered and sought more to preserve and protect Indian by culture, heritage and values, and survived and remained vibrant.

I want to stress that adherence to heritage and cultural origin should not – and must not – diminish national loyalty. In fact, assimilation and adaption are key attributes to progressive lives in other birth or newly adopted countries.

Our heritage includes “blessings as well as yokes of burdens”. These are topics for an extensive discussion.

With innovation, modern communications, advanced transportation and increased levels of mobility, as well as increased opportunities in other countries, there is re-migration or second journeys. There also some repatriation to the Caribbean countries after retirement.

Especially among older (legacy) diaspora, there is the yearning to find one’s roots with research and regular trips by PIOs from Caribbean, South Africa and Mauritius to find’s family and “roots”. The “Tracing our Roots” was first discussed at a session I organized at PBD20005 in Mumbai because of the need. The Kolkata Memorial, a diaspora initiative that I worked closely with Government of India to dedicate, is a beacon of acknowledgement of those who left India as indentured laborers from 1834-1920.

One must acknowledge and be grateful for the indisputable and invaluable role of civic, cultural, religious and advocacy organizations in preservation of inherent culture and values – such as GOPIO of which I am privileged to be the current president. These have helped promote assimilation with ease, generally peaceful co-existence among multi-ethnic societies. GOPIO is a non-political, secular global Indian diaspora advocacy organization addressing the concerns and interests of the global Indian community.

Indian heritage has undoubtedly influenced our lives and in time, we have also influenced the lives of others (non-Indians) in our midst. Visible examples include: Gadar movement spawned and encouraged others in diaspora countries in their struggle for their independence; Gandhi as model of tolerance and perseverance for those seeking peace, civil rights and equality in USA, South Africa and other countries; celebration and general acceptance of Holi and Diwali by non-Indians.

Courage, reliance, determination, thrift and hard work, competitiveness, faith reverence and respect – hallmarks of Indianness derived from culture, heritage and values that are maintained, nurtured and remain with us beyond the shores of India and the Caribbean.

Footprints

Our ancestors arrived barefoot from India to the Caribbean – just like Africans who were made slaves. It is ironic that we should talk about footprints because they physically footprints on the landscape as well. They have made a lasting impact on the lives of people and the countries where they lived: Socially, culturally, economically and politically. We came for opportunity seeking better lives. We came seeking better lives and we achieved beyond expectations.

The 1st journey 1838-1971 was charted for us by others with little or no choice of destination – a form of servitude. The 2nd journey is for opportunity by choice and circumstances. On this 2nd journey, we are designing the road map and leaving footprints along the way. Our second migration from Caribbean to North America and other countries are also part of the journey and impact on our lives and the lives of our descendants.

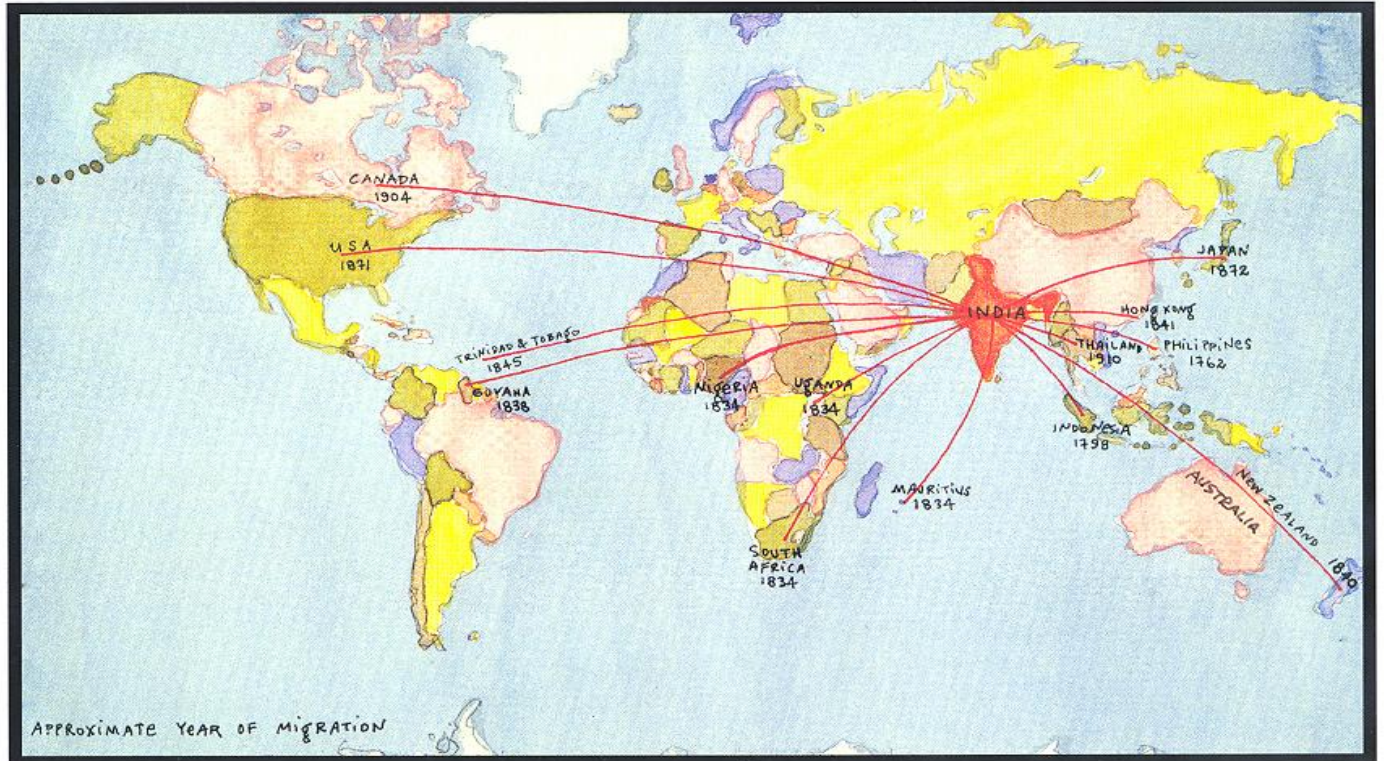
Our footprints are indelible and last forever – because of the historical significance of our journeys, because we make an earnest effort to make sure the steps, the journeys and experiences are fully documented regardless of moments of dispute or controversy or even unsavory episodes. We have progressed and will continue to make an impact wherever we go or whatever we do – with more footprints along the way. These are footprints that cannot be denied, diminished, disregarded or neglected.

Documenting the journeys

We must recognize those whose efforts contribute to tracing the footprints, follow the footprints and documenting the journeys. These include our many historians, researchers and writers, singers, including poets – among the known ones: Peter Rohuman, Dwarka Nath, Badseo Mangru, V. S. Naipaul, Balkrishna Naipual, Dhanpaul Narine, Baytoram Ramharack, Tyran Ramnarine, Clem Seecharran, Lakshmi Persaud and so many others then - now and to follow. It is important that we encourage more to do research and document this amazing phenomenon.

Efforts must be made to include Caribbean migration history in the schools where our people reside in USA and Canada – for this and the next generation to become more aware while education others about our history to crease more understanding among people of different backgrounds and ethnicity. We should also remember and recognize those who were the pioneers in the struggle for rights and freedom from colonial domination. There are many who are living as well as those who have passed on.

Name of Destination Colony	Arrival Year	Language Spoken
Guyana (British Guiana)	1838	English
Trinidad	1845	English
Jamaica	1845	English
Martinique	1853	French
Guadeloupe	1854	French
Cayenne (French Guiana)	1854	French
Belize (British Honduras)	1857	English
Grenada	1857	English
St. Lucia	1859	English
St. Vincent	1861	English
St. Kitts (St. Christopher)	1861	English
St. Croix (Danish West Indies)	1863	English
Suriname (Dutch Guiana)	1873	Dutch
Nevis	1874	English



Indian Migration Map (Courtesy of Dr Jagat Motwani)

Migration of Indians to the Caribbean Region

Many from inland regions over a thousand kilometers from seaports were promised jobs, were not told the work they were being hired for, or that they would leave their homeland and communities. They were hustled aboard the waiting ships, unprepared for the long and arduous four-month sea journey. Charles Anderson, a special magistrate investigating these sugarcane plantations, wrote to the British Colonial Secretary declaring that with few exceptions, the indentured labourers are treated with great and unjust severity; plantation owners enforced work in sugarcane farms so harshly, that the decaying remains of immigrants were frequently discovered in sugarcane fields. If labourers protested and refused to work, they were not paid or fed: they simply starved.

The sugarcane plantation-driven migrations led to ethnically significant presence of Indians in Caribbean. In some islands and countries, these Indo-Caribbean migrants now constitute a significant proportion of the population. Sugarcane plantations and citizens of Indian origin continue to thrive in countries such as [Guyana](#), formerly British Guiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent, St Kitts, St Croix, Suriname and Nevis.

By some estimates, over 2.5 million people in the Caribbean are of Indian origin. Many have ethnically blended with migrants from other parts of the world, creating a unique syncretic culture.

Not just British colonies, sugarcane production affected human history in colonies controlled by other pre-World War II powers. France, for example, negotiated with Britain leading to Act XLVI of 1860, whereby large numbers of [Indian indentured](#) labourers were brought for harsh sugarcane plantation work in French colonies in the Caribbean region. The Caribbean colonies of the Netherlands too benefitted from the indentured laborers from India.

In recent years, attempts to commemorate the Indian presence and contributions have come to fruition: In 1995, Jamaica started to celebrate the arrival of Indians in Old Harbour Bay, [St. Catherine Parish](#) on May 13. In 2003, Martinique celebrated the 150th anniversary of Indian arrival. Guadeloupe did the same in 2004. These celebrations were not the fact of just the Indian minority, but the official recognition by the French and local authorities of their integration and their wide-scale contributions in various fields from Agriculture to Education, Politics and to the diversification of the culture of the [Creole peoples](#). Thus, the noted participation of the whole multi-ethnic population of the two islands were in these events.

St. Lucia and many Caribbean countries have dedicated commemorative days to acknowledge the arrival and important contributions of their Indo-Caribbean populations. St. Lucia celebrates its Indo-Caribbean heritage on May 6. Other dates when the India Arrival Day is celebrated in the Caribbean include May 5 (Guyana), May 10 (Jamaica), May 30 (Trinidad and Tobago), June 1 (St. Vincent), and June 5 (Suriname).



Achievements

For a region with slightly over 1 million people of Indian origin, we have made tremendous strides and remarkable achievements while overcoming many hardships and obstacles. We have produced prime ministers, presidents, cabinet ministers, the best cricketers, Nobel laureate, legal minds, professions, entrepreneurs, scholars and scientists. These are stalwarts on whose shoulders we stand tall, who made it possible for us to be courageous and be recognized. They - and we – owe it all to those who made those first footprints.

Monuments & Inscriptions

I strongly believe in establishing markers as we make these journeys – markers which transcend time and place, cultures and creeds – markers for past, present and future – in recognition and remembrance of our journeys.

I am honored to have collaborated with the Government of India for the construction and dedication of the Kolkata Memorial on the banks of the Hugli River at a place called Demerara Kidderpore Depot in Kolkata on January 11, 2011. The Kolkata Memorial has meaningful significance to millions of descendants of those who left India as indentured Indian laborers from 1834 thru' 1920. I am honored to have written the inscription expressing the hopes and aspirations of those early pioneers and their descendants.

I stated in one my published articles in 2010 that, “Our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin in the Indian Diaspora. We should all be very proud of our ancestors who made the first journey that has become an integral part of our history as well. We certainly owe them a lasting tribute, recognition of their sacrifices and a truly worthy remembrance”.

Kolkata Memorial Inscription

From Here They Set Forth

This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian laborers who sailed from Kolkata Port between 1834 and 1920 to lands far away, seeking better livelihood for themselves and their families.

This is a celebration of their pioneering spirit, endurance determination and resilience.

They made significant contributions to their adopted countries, yet cherished and passed on the spirit of Indianness – culture, values and tradition – to their descendants.

We salute them.

Jai Hind

January 11, 2011

Kolkata

I again collaborated with the Government of India for support and funding for the construction and dedication of the Highbury Memorial commemorating the first arrival of Indians in Guyana on May 54, 1938 – in fact, the first indentured Indian laborer in the Western Hemisphere.

I am again honored to have written the inscription for the Guyana memorial monument expressing the hopes and aspirations of those early arrivals in Guyana and their descendants.

Guyana Indentured Indians Memorial Inscription

On these shores they arrived

This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian labourers who arrived here starting on 5th May, 1838.

In honoured tribute, gratitude and lasting remembrance of their pioneering spirit, determination, endurance, resilience and sacrifices.

Individually and collectively they have made invaluable contributions to the diverse culture and economic development of Guyana and other lands.

Dedicated on 5th May, 2013

There was another similar memorial constructed at Monument Gardens in Georgetown.

When I unveiled each of these memorials on the same day – May 5, 2013 marking the 175th Anniversary of Indian Arrival in Guyana, I said (as I did on January 11, 2011 in Kolkata):

“While we dedicate this memorial, I am certain we are not alone. The souls of our ancestors are looking at us from above, smiling and saying “THANK YOU. YOU HAVE DONE WELL”. To which we would all reply: “THANK YOU FOR MAKING IT POSSIBLE”

Markers:

A few of the markers established and in process in Guyana:

- Highbury – Memorial Monument 2013
- Berbice - Monument to Indian Indenturedship - Sep 2013
- Berbice – Indian Cultural Center – 2014
- Monument Gardens – “We came in ships” replica
- Monument Gardens – Memorial Monument 2013
- Archives – Digitizing the archival records – begun May 2013

Planned Dialogue:

- 2014 GOPIO Conference in USA on "Preservation of Indian culture in the 21 Century
- 2014 GOPIO Conference in USA on "Peaceful Co-Existence of Indians in Multi-Culture Societies"
- Embrace and Engage: Assistance to Romani People in New York to organize and collaborate with Indo-Caribbean groups.
- 2014 GOPIO Conference in USA on “The Influence of Gandhi on the Civil Rights Movement in America”.

GOPIO has made a proposal for a plaque to be installed at a New York City park commemorating the arrivals and contributions of peoples of the Caribbean region to landscape of New York City in a very positive way.

While many tend to savor the past, we must be more assimilated, progressive, participatory and forward looking in countries where we are domiciled. The Hudson and St. Lawrence should be considered as the new Ganges.

Continuing

The dialogue continues as the Indian journey continues in so any progressive ways, adaptable to circumstances, conditions, time and place – with preservation of core values, heritage and history. Our pioneering spirit, resilience and determination are hallmarks of our journeys and will continue to sustain us as the journey continues.

Our history is being written by what we do and how our journey continues – and we leave more indelible and amazing footprints to remember and follow.

As a precaution: It behooves us to take all necessary steps to promote and preserve Culture, heritage and values among the younger generation in the diaspora with the influences of technology, mobility and inter-marriage -- lest the diaspora wanes in these attributes that are serving it well.

Living outside of the Caribbean, we can teach a lot to others while we learn a lot as well. Living outside of the Caribbean, we have improved and transformed our lives and the countries where we live.

All diaspora are fortunate that nowadays there is freedom to migrate with many available countries which readily accept migration and becoming citizens, to make progress at all levels, to bring their extended families, to continue religious and cultural observances, and to live in safety.

I will conclude by saying:

This is an important conference and I thank the organizers. I am hopeful that this is a springboard to more in-depth discourse that this subject of first and second migration truly deserves – the why, where, when, who, what, influences, shape and form of the past, present and future – and the effects in a rapidly changing, dynamic and evolving diaspora. Our impact and changes to history as circumstances of history have brought us together – via migration, adaptation and assimilation. It is up to us to shape the future.

Thank you.

May 18, 2013
York College, New York

Ashook K. Ramsaran was born in Guyana, third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came to Guyana in 1853 and 1860 respectively. He emigrated to the USA in 1968 and obtained advanced degrees in engineering at Polytechnic University in New York. He is president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International). He is founder and president of Ramex, an electronics manufacturing company based in New York, USA. He resides in New York, USA with his family. Contact: Ramsaran@aol.com



Photos – Kolkata to Highbury



Kolkata Memorial, Kolkata, India



Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana



Kolkata Memorial, Kolkata, India



Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana



Kolkata Memorial, Kolkata, India - January 11, 2011



Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana – May 5, 2013



Kolkata Memorial, Kolkata, India



Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana



GLOBAL ORGANIZATION OF PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN GOPIO INTERNATIONAL

History of PIOs in the Caribbean Region

Prepared by: Ashook Ramsaran

Migration of Indians to the Caribbean Region

From 1838 to 1917, over half a million Indians from the former British Raj or British India, were taken to thirteen mainland and island nations in the Caribbean as Indentured workers to address the demand for sugar cane plantation labour following the abolition of slavery. Attempts at importing Portuguese, Chinese and others as indentured laborers had failed. Much like cotton, sugarcane plantations motivated large scale near-enslavement and forced migrations in the 19th and early 20th century.

Following the emancipation of slaves in 1833 in the United Kingdom, many liberated Africans left their former masters. This created an economic chaos for British owners of sugar-cane plantations in the Caribbean region, and elsewhere. The hard work in hot, humid farms required a regular, docile and low-waged labour force. The British looked for cheap labour. Since slavery had been abolished, the British crafted a new legal system of forced labour, which in many ways resembled enslavement.[2] Instead of calling them slaves, they were called indentured labourers. Indians, primarily began to replace Africans previously brought as slaves, under this indentured labour scheme to serve on sugarcane plantations across the British empire.

Indian Arrival in the Caribbean Region

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The first ships carrying *indentured* labourers for sugarcane plantations left India in 1838 for the Caribbean region. In fact, the first two shiploads of Indians arrived in **British Guiana** (now **Guyana**) on May 5, 1838 on board the *Whitby* and *Hesperus*. These ships had sailed from Calcutta. In the early decades of the sugarcane-driven migrations, *indentured* Indians were treated as inhumanely as the enslaved Africans had been. They were confined to their estates and paid a pitiful salary. Any breach of contract brought automatic criminal penalties and imprisonment. Many of these were brought away from their homelands deceptively.



GLOBAL ORGANIZATION OF PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN GOPIO INTERNATIONAL

History of PIOs in the Caribbean Region

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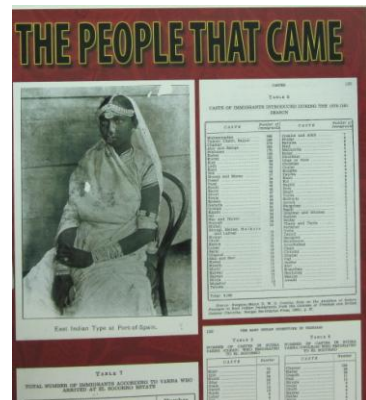
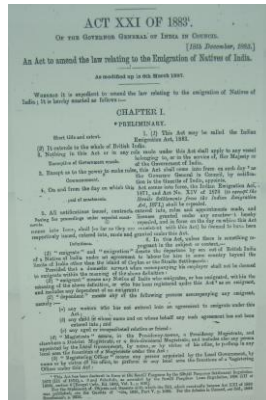
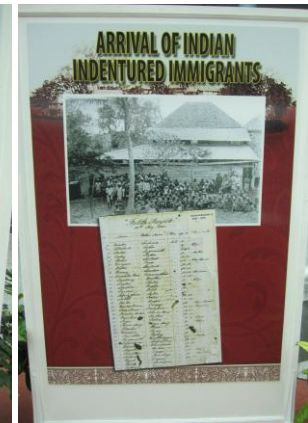
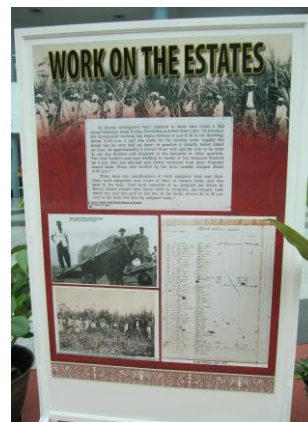
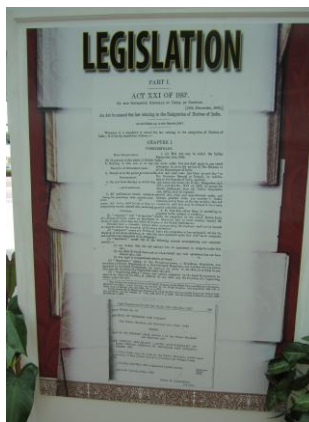
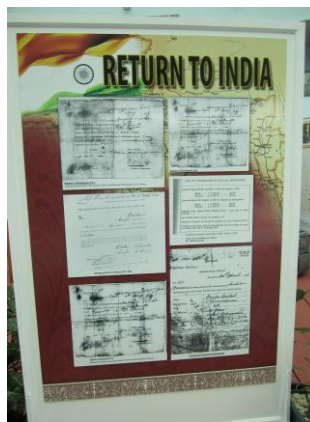
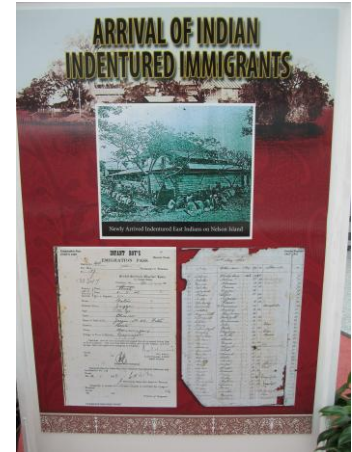
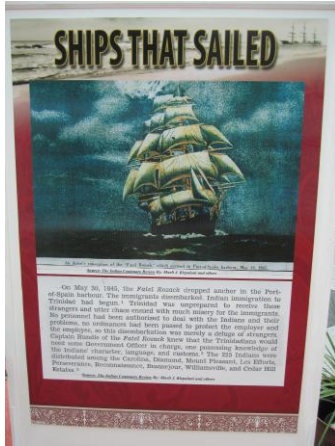
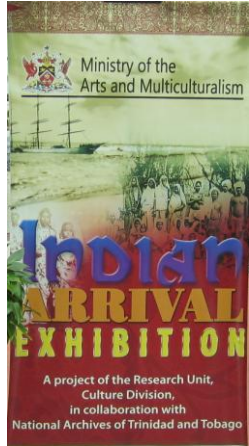
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167th ANNIVERSARY INDIAN ARRIVAL DAY COMMEMORATION EXHIBIT
PORT OF SPAIN, TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Prepared by: Ashook Ramsaran



GOPIO and Trinidad & Tobago: A Pictorial Synopsis

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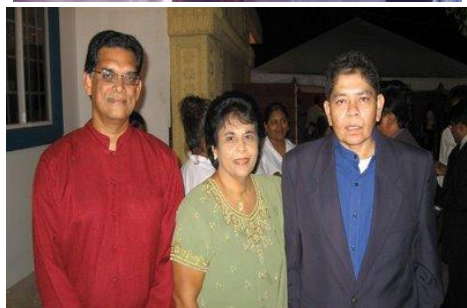
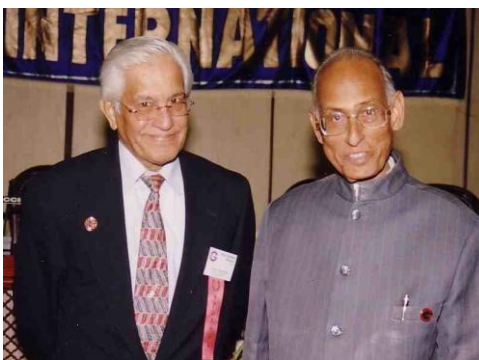
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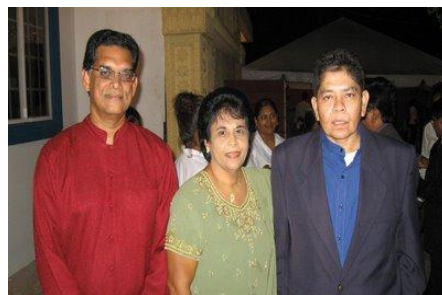
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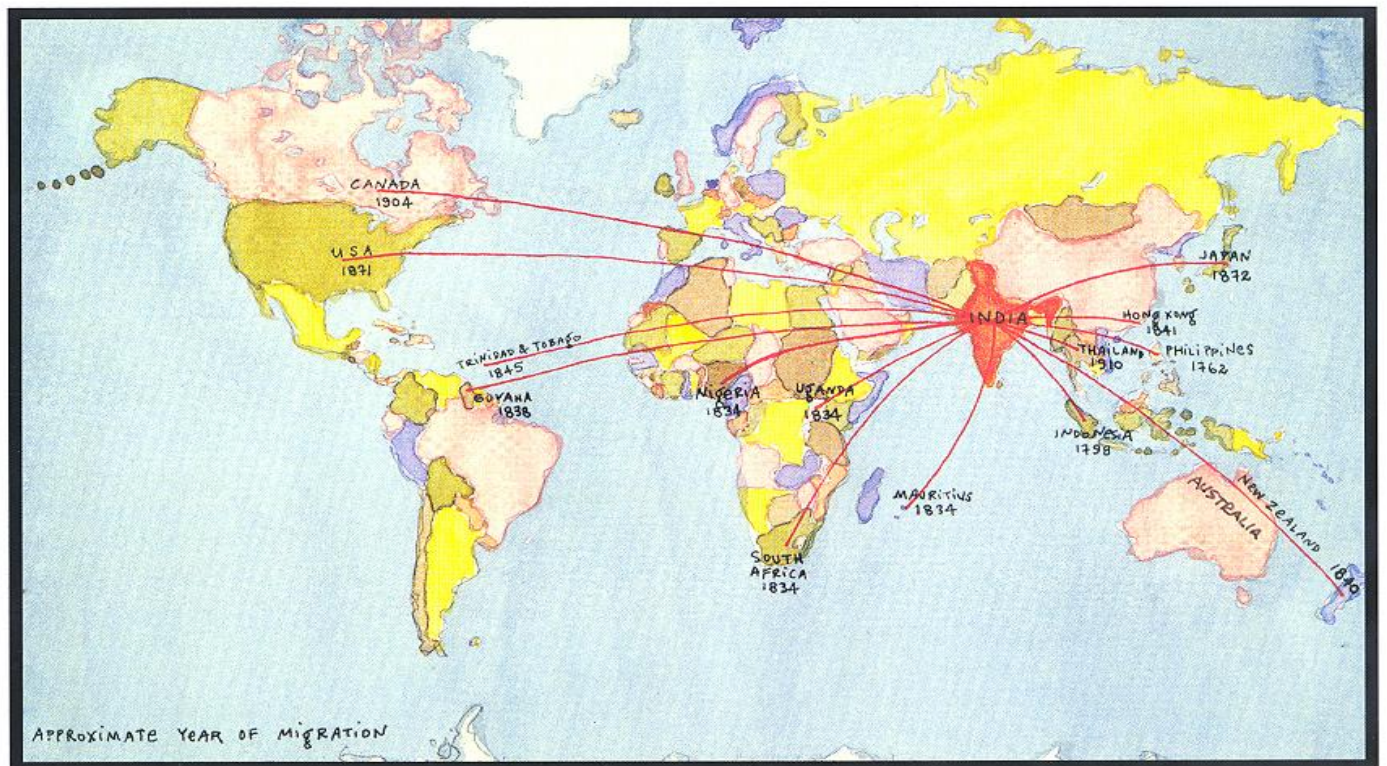
GOPIO and Trinidad & Tobago: A Pictorial Synopsis

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World Map



Indian Migration Map (Courtesy of Dr Jagat Motwani)



Caribbean Region



Trinidad & Tobago



Port of Spain

Trinidad & Tobago

Geography

Trinidad and Tobago, officially the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is an island country off the northern edge of South America, lying just off the coast of northeastern Venezuela and south of Grenada in the Lesser Antilles. Usually considered part of the Caribbean, it shares maritime boundaries with other nations including Barbados to the northeast, Grenada to the northwest, Guyana to the southeast, and Venezuela to the south and west.

The country covers an area of 5,128 square kilometres (1,980 sq mi) and consists of two main islands, Trinidad and Tobago, with numerous smaller landforms. The two main islands are divided into nine regions, and one ward. Sangre Grande is the largest region of the country's nine regions, comprising about 18% of the total area and 10% of the total population of the country. The nation lies outside the hurricane belt.

Official Name: Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Official Language: English

Population: 1,346,350 (July 2011 Est.)

Time Zone: Eastern Caribbean (same as EST-USA)

Size (Area): 5,128 sq km (1,980 sq mi)

Average Temp (May): Tropical 87°F (30°C)/73°F (23°C)

Prime Minister: Kamla Persad Bissessar

Former Prime Minister: Basdeo Panday

Capital: Port of Spain

Driving: On the left

Per Capita: \$21,287

Tel. Country Code: +1-868



Visa Requirements

A passport valid for 3 months beyond intended stay and a return ticket for entry. Depending on country of origin, an entry visa may also be required. Check with nearest consulate or high commissioner's office for visa requirements.

Currency

Currency: Trinidad & Tobago Dollar TT\$

Exchange Rates: TT\$6 = US\$1

TT\$8.74 = EUR1 TT\$10.50 = GBP1

US\$ Currency: US\$, EUR widely accepted



Telephone

Tel. Country Code: +1-868 Direct Dial

SIM Cards: Obtain at airport on arrival or at telephone centres everywhere– DigiCel; Reliance

Airline Travel

Miami (MIA) to Port of Spain (POS): 4.5 hrs non-stop Caribbean Air Avg. US \$450-\$500 RT

4.5 hrs non-stop American Air Avg. US \$450-\$500 RT

New York (JFK) to Port of Spain (POS): 5.5 hrs non-stop Caribbean Air Avg. US \$500-\$550 RT

Toronto (YYZ) to Port of Spain (POS): 6.5 hrs non-stop Caribbean Air Avg. US \$500-\$600 RT

Major Hotels

Hyatt Regency Trinidad

★★★★ No 1 Wrightson Road

Port of Spain, Trinidad

Rooms, Meetings, Conference Banquet. Average Room Night \$125. USD



Hilton Trinidad & Conference Centre

★★★★ Lady Young Rd. St. Ann's

Port of Spain, Trinidad

Rooms, Meetings, Conference Banquet

Average Room Night \$100- 125. USD



Tourism Packages

Tobago – A Holiday Resort Island

Same day tour or overnight 2-day trip Pick-up group at hotel & return after tour. **Tobago** is the sister island of Trinidad - 30 minutes by air from Port of Spain. Considered by many as the true Caribbean, Tobago offers its guests a unique travel experience. Come and explore our island's rich history, culture, and biodiversity. Find the perfect accommodations for your stay, from luxurious villas, to quaint bed and breakfast establishments, to guesthouses and full-service hotels, many of them with views to die for. Learn about the many festivals, as well as cultural and sporting events that take place throughout the year. Let us help you find that perfect restaurant, idyllic beach or historical attraction. See why dive enthusiasts, romantics, adventure seekers, bird-watchers and beach lovers all have Tobago on their to-do lists!



Aruba- Dutch Paradise in the Caribbean

2 days tour to nearby **Aruba** - Pick-up single/group at hotel & return after tour. **Aruba** is an island 33 km (20 mi) long, located about 1,600 km (990 mi) west of Lesser Antilles in the southern Caribbean Sea, located 27 km (17 mi) north of the coast of Venezuela. With Bonaire and Curaçao, it forms a group referred to as the ABC islands. Collectively, Aruba and the other Dutch islands in the Caribbean are often called the Netherlands Antilles or the Dutch Antilles. The citizens of these countries all share a single nationality: Dutch. Unlike much of the Caribbean region, Aruba has a dry climate and an arid, cactus-strewn landscape. This climate has helped tourism as visitors to the island can reliably expect warm, sunny weather. It has a land area of 179 km (69.1 sq mi) lies outside the hurricane belt.



Barbados

2 days tour to nearby **Barbados** - Pick-up single/group at hotel & return after tour. **Barbados** is a sovereign island country in the Caribbean Lesser Antilles. It is 34 km (21 mi) long and 23 kms (14 mi) wide. It is situated 100 km (62 mi) east of the Windward Islands and the Caribbean Sea; it is 400 km (250 mi) north-east of Trinidad and Tobago. Barbados is outside of the principal Atlantic hurricane belt. In 1627 the first permanent settlers arrived from England, and it became a British colony with independence in 1966. It is a leading tourist destination and is one of the most developed islands in the region.



The Kolkata Memorial: History, Perspectives and Significance to Persons of Indian Origin

By Ashook K. Ramsaran

The Kolkata Memorial

The Kolkata Memorial was unveiled at 3:30pm on 11th January, 2011 at the Kidderpore Depot, 14, Garden Reach on the bank of Hughli River, West Bengal in Kolkata, India. It was a long overdue tribute to those who took enormous risks on barely a promise and fervent hope, for their individual and shared sacrifices and for their endurance that made it possible for their descendants to flourish with the spirit of Indianness that transcends time, and for their courage which become a living testament in our lives. The Kolkata Memorial was finally a lasting tribute to those who left India as indentured Indian laborers from 1834 thru' 1920.

This appropriately designed memorial was inaugurated by Hon. Vayalar Ravi, Government of India's Minister of India's Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) with participation by other officials from India and other countries. This historic event was attended by hundreds from several countries including Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, Suriname, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Jamaica, USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, South Africa, Kenya, Fiji, Mauritius, Re-Union Islands, New Zealand, Australia and many others countries where Indians and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) migrated and now reside.

Constructed of marble and with clear and conspicuous visibility from the Hughli River, the Kolkata Memorial has an inscription on four (4) sides of the memorial (in both English and Hindi) that pays honoured tribute, recognition and remembrance of Indian indentured laborers who took journeys to far away lands seeking better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants; for their pioneering spirit, determination, resilience, endurance and perseverance amidst the extremely harsh and demeaning conditions they encountered; for their preservation of sense of origin, traditions, culture and religion, and their promotion of the Indian culture; for their achievements and successes despite insurmountable odds.

Motivated by my personal quest for information on the village, district, state roots of my ancestors and in my capacity as then Executive Vice President of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International), I began the effort and worked closely and collaboratively with MOIA to obtain approval, design the memorial and include an appropriate inscription befitting the memorial and its intended tribute. During this process, I made several visits to Kolkata and held lengthy meetings with MOIA in New Delhi and Kolkata, as well as meetings with MOIA Minister Vayalar Ravi, Secretary Dr. A. Didar Singh and others in New York at various times during this process. It was the agreement on 7th July, 2010 among Dr A. Didar Singh, Secretary of MOIA, MOIA Joint Secretary Gollerkeri Gurucharan, myself and prominent historian and author Leela Sarup, to embark on a two-phase effort to pay tribute to Indian indentured laborers of 19th and 20th centuries (in particular, from 1834 thru' 1920): Installation of a memorial plaque at Kidderpore Depot (to be unveiled on 11th January, 2011), to be followed by a memorial museum and resource center in a suitably significant site in Kolkata. In all respects, the 7th July, 2010 meeting in Kolkata was indeed profoundly historic. As publisher and editor Sayantan Chakravaty stated in the commemorative issue of Empire India, "it took a man coming from New York to make things happen".

On my return trip from Kolkata, I met on 12th July, 2010 in New Delhi with MOIA Minister Ravi and MOIA Secretary Dr A. Didar Singh, and within one (1) week, I sent a written proposal and draft inscription to MOIA. The Government of India accepted the proposal and proceeded to erect a memorial monument at Kidderpore Depot overlooking the Hughli River with the inscription plaque contained within. In fact, the inscription tribute on the plaque are the words which I wrote, capturing the shared sentiments of the descendants of those indentured laborers as only the descendant of an indentured laborer can feel and articulate.

My draft inscription stated:

By thousands they journeyed from other parts of India by boat, bull cart and by foot to this port city, bound for their long and arduous journeys on the treacherous seas of the “kala pani” by ships to places unknown to them and despite many false promises, travail they did with unwavering spirit and hope for a better tomorrow. In honored tribute, with due recognition, gratitude and lasting remembrance of all those who left these shores from 1834 - 1920 as Indian indentured laborers to far away lands seeking better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants; for their pioneering spirit, determination, resilience, endurance and perseverance amidst the extremely harsh and demeaning conditions they encountered; for their preservation of sense of origin, traditions, culture and religion, and their promotion of the Indian culture; for their achievements and successes despite insurmountable odds; for the many sacrifices made individually and collectively; for the invaluable contributions they have made to the diverse culture and economic development of the lands they adopted and where they lived; and for triumph of the spirit of Indianness that they maintained and passed on to their descendants.

The final inscription reads as follows:

From Here They Set Forth

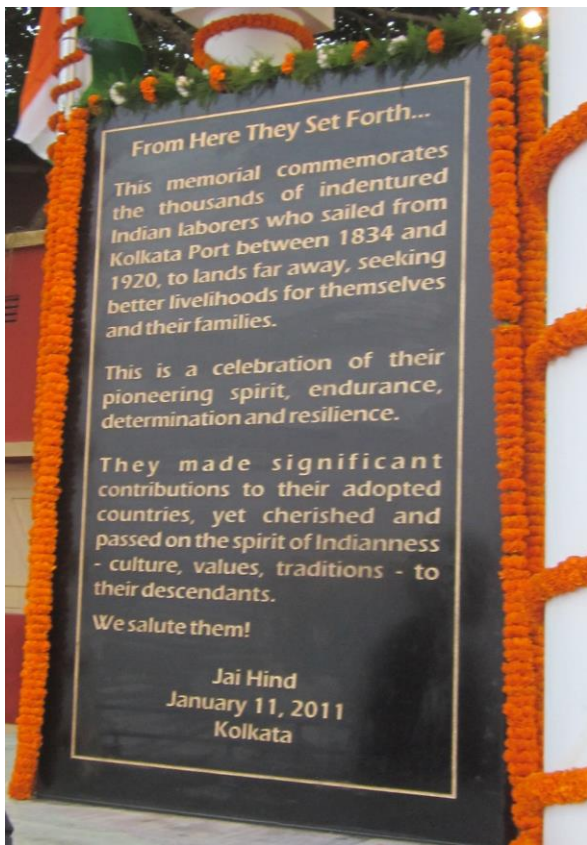
This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian laborers who sailed from Kolkata Port between 1834 and 1920 to lands far away, seeking better livelihood for themselves and their families.

This is a celebration of their pioneering spirit, endurance determination and resilience.

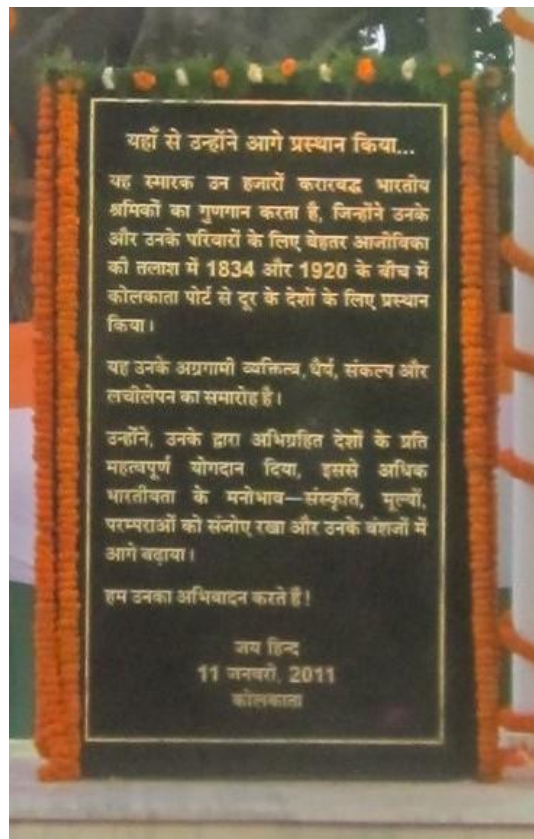
They made significant contributions to their adopted countries, yet cherished and passed on the spirit of Indianness – culture, values and tradition – to their descendants.

We salute them.

**Jai Hind
January 11, 2011
Kolkata**



The Kolkata Memorial Inscription in English



The Kolkata Memorial Inscription in Hindi

The inaugural was preceded by a commemorative luncheon at the Oberoi Grand Hotel in Kolkata hosted by GOPIO and the newly formed Global Indian Heritage Society (GIDHS). It was attended by Minister Ravi, Dr A. Didar Singh and other members of MOIA staff, as well as attendees from the various countries who proceeded thereafter to attend the inaugural ceremony at Kidderpore Depot. Speeches and remarks were made by those attending from various countries, expressing their gratitude for the Kolkata Memorial as a symbol of their connection and their roots in India. Other attendees included: West Bengal Chief Minister Smta Mamta Banerjee, India's high commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago, Amb. Malay Mishra, Hon. Raouf Bundhun, former president of Mauritius, and Hon. Ronald Gajraj, Guyana's high commissioner to India.

The inaugural and unveiling was a solemn event with the expected overwhelming expression of heartfelt emotions of so many who came from far off lands to witness this historic event. The delegations from Mauritius, Fiji and Re-Union Islands sang familiar songs, expressing their gratitude to their ancestors who are remembered by the Kolkata Memorial and for their own presence and participation at the inauguration and unveiling which have so much meaningful significance to all of them.



The Kolkata Memorial project has meaningful and lasting significance to millions of descendants of those who left India as indentured Indian laborers from 1834 thru' 1920. The plan to begin with the installation of the inauguration plaque on 11th January, 2011 followed by the memorial museum and resource center, has been received with overwhelming emotional sentiments and enthusiastic support from all corners of the global Indian diaspora, in particular from persons of Indian origin (PIOs) in destination countries where Indian indentured laborers emigrated from 1834 thru' 1920.

"We are all deeply indebted for the Kolkata Memorial which is a tremendous achievement", said prominent Indo-Caribbean Diaspora icon Dr Yesu Persaud of Guyana. "A noble effort indeed", said writer and historian Dr Anand Mullo of Mauritius; "An extra ordinary service to the Indian Diaspora", said Indian emigration roots researcher Shamshu Deen of Trinidad & Tobago; "A commemoration tribute whose time is overdue", said Prof. Mohan Gautam of the Netherlands."

I had remarked to the media at that historic moment that, "This will be a lasting legacy for present and future generations and their descendants – and I am honoured to contribute to the initiative to erect this monument in remembrance of our ancestors".

Working in close collaboration and coordination with MOIA was a focused and intense effort. The objective was to complete within 5 months in time for the 11th January, 2011 planned unveiling following the conclusion of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) 2011 so that more people could participate in the historic event. During those months as I worked with MOIA, I remarked to MOIA officials that "I feel so honored and privileged to be actively working in prominent leadership role to see the Kolkata Memorial become a reality". I had remarked previously on several occasions that our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin. We owe them due recognition and a lasting remembrance – and that is what the Kolkata Memorial would be. I feel so honored and privileged, truly so fortunate and blessed, to be doing this. The vision of a single, suitably significant place of emotional and physical connection for the descendants of indentured workers is finally becoming a reality".

The significance of the Kolkata Memorial is a physical linkage to India, transcending all boundaries and becoming an example for other groups who emigrated from India during and/or subsequent to the 1834—1920 period. Subsequent to the unveiling in 2011, pilgrimages continue on a regular basis for descendants of indentured Indian laborers who consider Kolkata Memorial's significance and how meaningful it is to them. Prominent visitors include Prime Minister of Mauritius, Hon. Navin Ramgoolam, and Prime Minister of Trinidad & Tobago, Hon. Kamla Persad Bissessar.

Personal Perspectives

My personal quest for my own family's connection to India was always a yearning long before I met with Minister Jagdish Tytler of newly formed Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in Brussels, Belgium in October 2004. After review of my proposal and subsequent discussions, Minister Tytler was convinced that my request to initiate and chair a session at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD2005) was a worthwhile initiative. I chaired the first "Tracing the Roots" session at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) 2005 in Mumbai, India. It was a welcome trend that contributed to more avid interest among descendants of Indian indentured laborers and their quest to connect to their ancestral villages and, in effect, to India itself. "Tracing the Roots" at PBD2005 was a very successful session that drew on the experiences of many in persons of Indian origin (PIO) countries, historians, academicians and custodians of records of Indian emigration, in particular Indian indentured laborers from 1834 through 1920.

That session spawned renewed intensity among PIOs and encouraged MOIA to establish "Tracing the Roots" initiatives within MOIA and referred those who were qualified to do actual searches for

families in Indian based on emigration information obtained in the countries of destination. A few Indian states, including Bihar, also initiated programs to assist PIOs to trace their respective families and their ancestral villages. As then Secretary General of GOPIO in 2005, I established GOPIO's "Tracing Our Roots" committee to assist those who seek assistance in finding and connecting with their ancestral families in India.

My continuing search and inquiries led me through many pathways but nothing definitive that would allow me to pursue a direct link to the ancestral village of my great grandfather Pooriya who arrived in Guyana (then British Guiana) as an Indian indentured laborer in 1853 aboard the ship *Adelaide*. The only information available was shown on the single line entry in the birth record of my grandfather Ramlochannd born 10th March, 1867 in Guyana. That single line entry also listed my great grandmother Radhah having arrived in Guyana in 1860 aboard ship *Colgrain*. With no ship records of 1853 or 1860 available in the archives in Guyana due to time, damage or loss of documents, my search moved beyond Guyana to other possible sources such as India and the United Kingdom where I was hopeful that secondary records were kept.

From both my vantage point as then Secretary General of GOPIO and my regular interaction with other PIOs and non-resident Indians (NRIs) on a global scale, I was able to view the entire global landscape of PIOs and the history of emigration from India during the 19th and 20th centuries. In particular, I acquired historical details, more in-depth knowledge and valuable information on Indian indentured laborers from 1834 through 1920. This appealed to me since I was interested in knowing more about my great grandparents and their journeys to Guyana, with the intent that perhaps someday I would be able to find my ancestral village in India.

My great grandfather left India in 1853 and it took him over 100 days by ship to reach Guyana (originally named Demerara, then British Guiana). By contrast, it took me less than 24 hours by airplane from New York to reach to Kolkata. During my many journeys to Kolkata preceding the inauguration of the Kolkata Memorial, I made several visits to housing sites, holding areas, processing offices and the docks that are still standing in Kolkata even more than 150 years later. All through those visits, it was on my mind that perhaps it was by some beckon call and some special guidance I was being led to that place, doing what should be done as a lasting tribute and due recognition to all those who left those shores.

The disappointing lack of success in my personal quest evolved to a search for a collective answer, quickly transforming my motivation to become a representative of the descendants of those who left India from the ports of Kolkata (Calcutta), Chennai (Madras) and Mumbai (Bombay). That gave me an enormous sense of courage and determination to succeed in installing something physical, symbolic of lasting recognition and tribute. There is an overwhelming sense of personal obligation and responsibility that I undertook to make certain that quest is fulfilled. In that process, I intended to use all available support, collaboration and good intentions of the governments of India and West Bengal, governments of countries with persons of Indian origin (such as Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Malaysia and others), indenturedship researchers and historians, authors, film and documentary producers, archivist, patrons and well wishers throughout the global Indian Diaspora".

Thereafter, I was emboldened and encouraged to seek more and to do more to fulfill that personal desire to find and connect with the land (even the village) of my ancestors. Since that time and previous as well, it has been a journey into the unknown, seeking those I have not personally known but wanting to know, to learn, to marvel, to empathize, to trace their footsteps and to imagine their experiences. Yet, somehow it felt that I may have known them all along but have been missing the connection that could fulfill a long desire that existed as a deep desire and personal yearning. In so many ways, it was fulfillment of another kind, for the larger good – and how fascinating this journey has been at every single step for me.

The goal was to establish a commemorative marker in Kolkata on January 11, 2011 followed by a museum and resource center that would emotionally and physically connect the descendants of indentured workers with the history of their ancestors who left India from 1834 -- 1920. This will be a lasting legacy to present and future generations of their descendants.

On that long airplane return journey to New York from Kolkata on July 12, 2010, with lots of emotion, vivid recollection and personal perspective in mind, (and, oh yes, with some wine and Kleenex), I drafted the following inscription to be placed on the memorial plaque, an inscription that reflects common feelings among the global Indian Diaspora. MOIA later reduced the inscription to fit the plaque, but retained those words that were placed on the Kolkata Memorial.



Ashook Ramsaran at the Kolkata Memorial



Ashook Ramsaran & Min Vayalar Ravi at Kolkata Memorial

“Our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin in the Indian Diaspora. We should all be very proud of our ancestors who made the first journey that has become an integral part of our history as well. We certainly owe them a lasting tribute, recognition of their sacrifices and a truly worthy remembrance”, I stated in one my published articles in 2010.

“While our ancestors left those shores with barely the clothes they were wearing but emboldened with lots of hope, promise and courage, we, their descendants, can proudly walk today in those very same depots and docks, reminisce and marvel – while expressing our gratitude and, yes, become quite emotional -- at their courage and determination. Today, we all stand tall on the broad shoulders of our ancestors who bore the initial burden and sacrificed so much for our wellbeing. Our strength and freedom of spirit come from them who bravely made the journey, courageously walked ahead of us and cleared treacherous pathways so that we can live better lives today”, I remarked to a journalist shortly after the inaugural of the Kolkata Memorial.

11th January, 2011 at the Kidderpore Depot in Kolkata was truly a historic moment with enormous significance to millions of descendants of those who left India as indentured Indian laborers during the 19th and 20th centuries. While the unveiling of this memorial plaque was witnessed by many in person and broadcast live electronically for the PIO world to view, I was convinced that we were not alone at that moment: Also viewing that ceremony were the souls of those who left those depots, smiling in gratitude and silently shouting “Thank You” for remembering them and

recognizing their journeys and ordeals. In collective gratitude, recognition and tribute, we also say to them, “Thank you”.

Decades later, we continue to express our gratitude to them and honor them in visible and significant ways that transcend time and place.

Significance to Guyana and other PIO Countries

Guyana

The Kolkata Memorial is of tremendous significance historically and symbolically to Guyana and persons of Indian origin in Guyana – as well as the entire Caribbean region and other countries where Indians were sent as indentured labourers. The first arrivals of Indian indentured laborers to the entire Caribbean (West Indies) region came to the shores of Guyana at Highbury on 5th May, 1838 and that migration continued until 1920. It is indeed appropriate that two (2) replica of the Kolkata Memorial were unveiled in Guyana (at Highbury and at Monument Gardens) on 5th May, 2013 which was the 175th anniversary of the first arrivals. While similar replica are envisioned for other countries in the Caribbean region where Indian indentured laborers were sent to work on the plantations, it is significant that the first such replica are installed in the Guyana, the country of the first arrivals of Indian indentured laborers in the region.

When I had spotted the clock tower on 7th July, 2010 while standing with MOIA and Government of West Bengal officials on the deck of the launch, I was informed by West Bengal government archivists that it was known as “Demerara Depot”, the location from which the ships departed to then British Guiana with their cargo of indentured laborers. Immediately, I recognized the historical significance and successfully negotiated to erect the memorial plaque at that very same spot. In fact, “Demerara” was the name given to the colony prior to being named British Guiana, hence to connection to Kolkata Memorial.

It is noteworthy that I, as a “son of Guyana”, played a significant role in convincing the Government of India on the need for the Kolkata Memorial, and worked closely and collaboratively with MOIA to design that historic memorial which included an appropriate inscription taken from my draft, capturing the shared sentiments of the descendants of Indian indentured laborers. The “Guyana connection” is evident from the inception.

I am again honored to have written the inscription for the Guyana memorial monument expressing the hopes and aspirations of those early arrivals in Guyana and their descendants. There was another similar memorial constructed at Monument Gardens in Georgetown.

The inscription on the Indian Arrival Monuments in Guyana reads as follows:

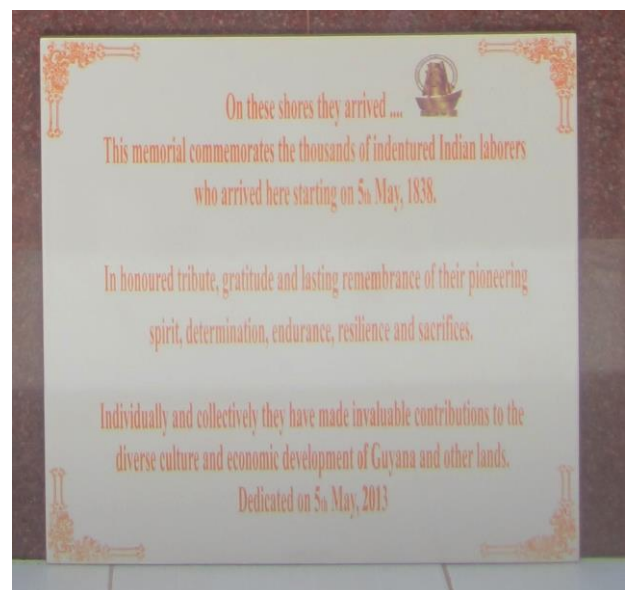
On these shores they arrived

This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian labourers who arrived here starting on 5th May, 1838.

In honoured tribute, gratitude and lasting remembrance of their pioneering spirit, determination, endurance, resilience and sacrifices.

Individually and collectively they have made invaluable contributions to the diverse culture and economic development of Guyana and other lands.

Dedicated on 5th May, 2013



Inscription written by Ashook Ramsaran; Memorial unveiled and dedication by Ashook Ramsaran and Indian High Commissioner Puran Mal Meena on 5th May, 2013; At Highbury, site of first ship Hesperus arrival on 5th May, 1838 and at Monument Gardens in Georgetown.

Dr. Yesu Persaud of Guyana said, “We are all deeply indebted for the Kolkata Memorial which is a tremendous achievement”. Born and raised in Guyana, I am honoured and feel privileged to have made such an historic contribution for which I was cited when the President of India bestowed on me the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award to me on January 9, 2011.

In the absence of Hon Vayalar Ravi, Government of India’s Minister of Indian Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), I was given the honour, along with Indian High Commissioner to Guyana, Shri Puran Mal Meena, of unveiling the Indian Arrival Monuments at Highbury and Monument Gardens.

When I unveiled each of these memorials on the same day on 5th May, 2013 marking the 175th Anniversary of Indian Arrival in Guyana, I said (as I did on January 11, 2011 in Kolkata):
“While we dedicate this memorial, I am certain we are not alone. The souls of our ancestors are looking at us from above, smiling and saying “THANK YOU. YOU HAVE DONE WELL”. To which we would all reply in unison: “THANK YOU FOR MAKING IT POSSIBLE”

Trinidad & Tobago

The Indian Arrival Monument at Waterloo-by-the-Sea was unveiled on 30th May 2014, the 169th anniversary of Indian Arrival Day in Trinidad & Tobago, another significant and historic marker of the journey of Indian migration to other lands for better livelihood. The monument is another commemorative milestone marker in honored tribute and well deserved recognition of the first arrivals of indentured Indian laborers in Trinidad & Tobago. This project was initiated by GOPIO president Ashook Ramsaran in similar manner as with the Kolkata Memorial in India (2011) and Indian Arrival Monument in Guyana (2013). It was supported by the Indian High Commission of Trinidad & Tobago and the Ministry of Local Government - Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation.

The site at Waterloo-by-the-Sea was selected as an appropriate setting for the tribute to first arrivals of Indian indentured laborers to the shores of Trinidad & Tobago. The unveiling was attended by Trinidad & Tobago’s Minister Dr. Suruj Rambachan MP (Works and Infrastructure), Minister Ramona Ramdial (Minister of State in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources), Counselors Abdool and Seepersad, Couva Regional Chairman Henry Awong, among many others officials. GOPIO International President Ashook Ramsaran and Indian High Commissioner HE Gauri Gupta unveiled the monument in the presence of hundreds of people including several “legacy generation” persons, a few over 100 years old. This was followed by an authentic Indian lunch served Caribbean style. Among the many legacy honorees were: Samoondarie Doon; Sewdass Sadhu (builder of Temple by the Sea), Samdaye Sewdass (wife of Sewdass Sandhu) and 110-year old Sughari Jattan.

In honour of Indian indentured labourers whose arrival in Trinidad and Tobago began on 30th May 1845. In recognition of their pioneering spirit, sacrifices, endurance and determination to seek better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants. In gratitude for their invaluable contribution to the social, spiritual, cultural, economic and political development of Trinidad and Tobago”.



Inscription written by Ashook Ramsaran; Memorial unveiled and dedication by Ashook Ramsaran and Indian High Commissioner HE Gauri Gupta on 30th May, 2014 at Waterloo-by-the-Sea in Trinidad & Tobago

I was again honoured to write the inscription for the Indian Arrival Monument at Waterloo-by-the-Sea which I patterned after the Kolkata Memorial in India (2011) and Indian Arrival Monuments at Highbury in Guyana (2013).

Footprints

Our ancestors arrived barefoot from India to the Caribbean and other countries of the British colonies in search of better livelihoods. It is ironic that we should refer to footprints because they have left physical footprints on the landscape as well. They have made a lasting impact on the lives of people and the countries where they lived: Socially, culturally, economically and politically. We came for opportunity seeking better lives. We came seeking better lives and we have achieved beyond expectations, contributed significantly to the development of respective countries economically, politically and culturally.

The 1st journey beginning in 1834 was charted for us by others with us having little or no choice of destination – a form of servitude which continued through 1917, finally concluding in 1920. Our footprints are indelible and last for lifetimes because of the historical significance of our journeys, and because we make an earnest effort to make sure that the steps, the journeys and experiences are fully documented regardless of moments of dispute or controversy or even unsavory episodes. We have progressed and will continue to make an impact wherever we go or whatever we do with more footprints along the way. These are footprints that cannot be denied, diminished, disregarded or neglected.

I stated in one my published articles in 2010 that, “Our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin in the Indian Diaspora. We should all be very proud of our ancestors who made the first journey that has become an integral part of our history as well. We certainly owe them a lasting tribute, recognition of their sacrifices and a truly worthy remembrance”. We continue to pay honoured tribute to those who made those treacherous journeys of yesterday which made it possible for us to share a better today and tomorrow.

By: Ashook K. Ramsaran – 25th July, 2015

Ashook K. Ramsaran was born in Guyana, third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came to Guyana in 1853 and 1860 respectively. He emigrated to the USA in 1967 and obtained advanced degrees in engineering at Polytechnic University in New York. He is president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International). He is founder and president of Ramex, an electronics manufacturing company based in New York, USA. He resides in New York, USA with his family. Contact: Ramsaran@aol.com

