



# *COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS*



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## **Introduction**

The Mauritian immigration depot, Aapravasi Ghat, was built in 1849 to provide accommodation for indentured labourers who emigrated from India, East Africa, China, South East Asia and Madagascar.

The Aapravasi Ghat is an architectural ensemble that symbolises an important example of a phase in modern human history. It represents the beginning of the 'Great Experiment' initiated by the British Government, after the abolition of slavery, to demonstrate to the world the superiority of 'free' labour over slave labour. This was the indentured system. As a result of the success of the system first established in Mauritius, other British, French, Dutch and Spanish colonies in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans also adopted it.

In all these countries, immigration depots were built in the nineteenth century. Research indicates that the depots in those countries have not been preserved. The Aapravasi Ghat is therefore, the best known surviving example of an immigration depot symbolising the world-wide migration of 2 million indentured labourers during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Aapravasi Ghat is symbolical for the indentured labour Diaspora. It represents the global phenomenon of indenture and it pays tribute to the indentured labourers who left their country of origin to work in foreign lands.

The Aapravasi Ghat has also become today a highly symbolical site for the Mauritian population, of which three-quarters are descendants of indentured labourers. The site is associated with values, memories and traditions that form part of the intangible heritage of the people.

## 1. Uniqueness of Aapravasi Ghat and Mauritius

### **Aapravasi Ghat as a 'type site' for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century form of indentured labour.**

Mauritius was the first country to receive indentured labourers in the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The indenture system was introduced after the abolition of slavery as an attempt to show to the world that 'free labour' was preferable to slave labour. The success of this 'Experiment' in Mauritius ensured that indentured labour immigration was replicated in other countries around the world. More than 2 million indentured labourers were shipped from India, Africa, China, South East Asia and Madagascar to British, French and Dutch colonies.

### **Aapravasi Ghat as a 'site of conscience'**

Within the British Empire, Mauritius was in a difficult position when it was transferred to Britain. The slow process of abolition of slavery had begun in British Colonies which had time to find other sources of labour. Mauritius was not able to do this and did not have any indigenous population to employ as an alternative. It thus suffered from a chronic labour shortage.

For the above reason, Mauritius became the 'pilot study' or the 'experiment' for what proved to be a very successful alternative to slavery. Indentured labour can in no way be considered as free labour given the penal sanctions applied in case of breaches of contract. *Aapravasi Ghat is thus a 'site of conscience'.*

Mauritius is significant because it welcomed the largest contingent of these immigrants; over 450,000 people passed through the Aapravasi Ghat, making it the 'Ellis Island' of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Several thousand of Chinese, African and Malagasy immigrants also reached the island and added another dimension to the indentured experience in Mauritius.

The largest number of immigrants landed in Mauritius followed by Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa and Réunion Island. In many of these areas, the contribution that indentured labourers made to the creation of modern societies has not been fully recognised and have resulted in the fact that most historic structures related to indentured immigration have disappeared.

Research indicates that no other country in the world has structures similar to those in Mauritius that have survived in their original form.

The Aapravasi Ghat is thus unique. It represents the beginning of this 'Experiment' and is the sole surviving example of this unique modern Diaspora and the only remaining example of 'The Great Experiment'.

### **Aapravasi Ghat as a site representing symbolic and intangible values**

If nomination is approved, for the people of Mauritius and for the people of the world, this site remains a symbol of:

1. The unique origin of the majority of the people in Mauritius

2. The first country to which indentured labourers were brought at the start of the massive movement of people, particularly of South Asian origin;
3. The only place where people transported via the indentured system make up the vast majority of the population;
4. Indentured immigrants were brought mainly to work on sugar estates in Mauritius. This system created a unique estate 'camp' culture that brought together Indians from different regions, social groups and linguistics traditions and produced a new local hybrid culture which represents a fusion of Indian and colonial Creole traditions. This unique culture has survived into the 21st century;
5. There may be other places that are better representative of physical evidence of the system: this does not detract from the individual and unique significance of this particular site and its symbolism, not just for the people of Mauritius but for all the descendants of nineteenth century migrant labourers regardless of by whom and to where they were taken. It stands alone and unique as a symbol of immigration to the country.

## 2. Definition of Indenture

For the purposes of a Comparative Analysis and to work towards the conceptualisation of an Indentured Route Project, links with countries with the Indentured Diaspora are beginning to be established by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund. An intensive research has begun since 2004 to pursue contacts with individuals and institutions with the purpose of identifying structures and sites related to indentured immigration. However, it was imperative to first define the scope of the Indentured Heritage Route and in order to do this, the meaning of Indenture had first to be defined.

The term indenture refers to a written contract entered into by a labourer. As stated by Carter, 'an indentured migrant was an individual who had not paid his or her passage' but had entered into an agreement to receive transported assistance to a colony in return for a fixed period of labour.

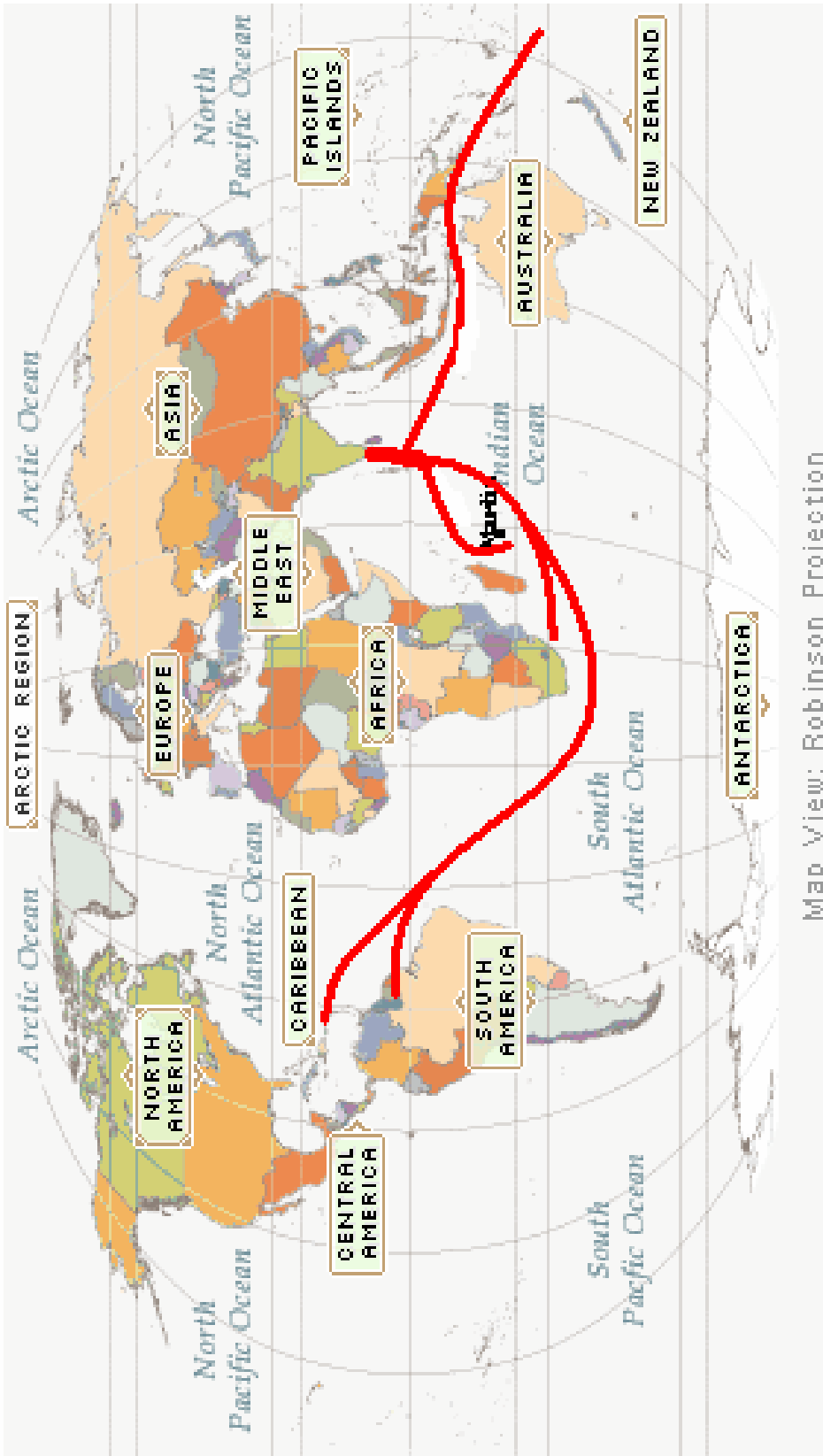
The definition adopted by historians of Mauritius attached to AGTF is as follows:

- The indenture system refers to the nineteenth century indenture and differs substantially from the seventeenth and eighteenth indenture.
- The indenture system refers to primarily persons displaced from their already country to other colonies.
- Indentured labour of the nineteenth century migrated to serve labour needs of the colonial power, especially after the abolition of slavery.

- Indentured system was a penal contract system which punished by imprisonment any breach of the contract by the labourer. It was as such a form of 'unfree' labour.
- Indentured labour system begun in the context of the emergence of modern global capitalist economy.

### **3. Sites related to Indenture**

A site or structure related to indenture is therefore considered to be an original and authentic structure or location that has survived from the period 1834, year when the first written contract was signed to roughly 1924, the year the last labour immigrants are believed to have arrived.



: Indenture Route map

Table 1: State of preservation of structures and sites related to indenture in former indentured labour-importing countries

Country	Location of site	Original use	Present state of building
Guyana	Georgetown	Immigration Depot	Non-existent Monument erected
Guyana	Highbury	Plantation estate	A portion converted into a commemorative site with a monument
Trinidad	Nelson island	Landing place and quarantine station	National monument, partially renovated
Jamaica	Old Harbour Bay	Immigration depot and landing place	Non-existent Monument erected
Jamaica	Kingston Harbour	Landing place	Non-existent Monument erected
Fiji	Nukulau island	Immigration Depot and Quarantine station	Converted into prison
South Africa	Durban	One structure	Non-existent
Guadeloupe	Fouyol	Immigration Depot	Non-existent Monument erected
Réunion Island	St Denis	Immigration Depot	Non-existent Monument erected
Réunion Island	Grande Chaloupe	Quarantine Station	Under restoration
Suriname	Paramaribo	Immigration Depot	Non-existent Monument erected along Saramacca river
French Guyana		Immigration Depot	Non-existent
Peru		Immigration Depot	Non-existent
Hawaii	Kakaako	Immigration Depot	Non-existent

## Guyana



Figure 1: Map of Guyana showing location of Georgetown and Berbice River

(Source: [www.worldatlas.com](http://www.worldatlas.com))

May 5, the Arrival Day is the commemorative anniversary of the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourer. It is a National Holiday in Guyana since 2004.<sup>1</sup> In the capital city of Georgetown, a model of the first ship bringing indentured Indians into the country, has been erected and decreed a monument to commemorate the event.

In March 1988, the East Berbice Indian Immigration Commemoration Committee

Guyana was the second largest importer of indentured labourers after Mauritius. The main immigration depot was located at Georgetown but there were other landing places along Berbice River. Site visit in 2004 and information collected from local people confirmed that the depot no longer exists.



Figure 2: The Indian Heritage Monument on Camp Street Georgetown, commemorating the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in Guyana

Source: AGTF collection

(Photograph: J. Mungur)

<sup>1</sup> President stresses equal importance of diverse groups. In. *Guyana Chronicle Online*. 7 May 2004. (online). <http://www.guyanachronicle.com/ARCHIVES/archive%20%2007-05-04.html>

was set up and it started planning East Indian Immigration Day, an annual commemorative activity celebrated at the Highbury Plantation estate.<sup>2</sup> A plot of land was donated by the owners of the estate and was converted into a commemorative site. An arch has been erected in memory of the indentured labourers, bearing the inscription:

*'Plantation Highbury, Arrival of 128 East Indians 1838 - 2004 was erected on the site.*

On the site there are remains of the wharf where the vessels landed, the sugar factory and the train lines which transported the cane from the fields to the factory. There are also indications of where the manager's house and a small hospital were located.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3: The Cluster of Wooden Buildings in the Foreground with coconut trees on its side is the Immigration Depot on Kingston Street in Georgetown, c.1890s.

(Source: Courtesy of Ricky Singh of the Guyanese Indian Heritage Society)

<sup>2</sup> Indians in Berbice to return to arrival site today . In. *Stabroek News*. May 5th 2004 . (online).  
<http://www.stabroeknews.com/index.pl/article?id=7102063>

<sup>3</sup> Indians in Berbice to return to arrival site today . In. *Stabroek News*. May 5th 2004 . (online).  
<http://www.stabroeknews.com/index.pl/article?id=7102063>

## Trinidad & Tobago

Nelson Island is one of the Five Islands which lie west of Port of Spain in the Gulf of Paria. The island is famous as the disembarkation point and quarantine station for indentured immigrants to Trinidad and Tobago in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> On the arrival of the immigrant ship at Nelson Island, the Protector of Immigrants proceeded to the inspection on



Figure 4: Map of Trinidad showing Port of Spain  
(Source: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov))

board. Their bundles and blankets were fumigated and they were quarantined and allowed to recover and regain strength. This measure was designed to prevent the spread of diseases which might have been transported from India. Special effort was made to stop the spread of smallpox and measles. At Nelson Island, the immigrants were examined by a medical doctor and then transported by small boats to Port of Spain. The healthy ones were immediately sent to estates, the sick ones went to the Colonial Hospital in Port of Spain and those who only needed rest were kept at the Depot in Port of Spain.<sup>5</sup> Here two buildings constituting part of the quarantine station have survived.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that, part

<sup>4</sup> Nelson Island, Trinidad and Tobago. ( online) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson\\_Island,\\_Trinidad\\_and\\_Tobago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Island,_Trinidad_and_Tobago)

<sup>5</sup> Nelson Island, Trinidad and Tobago. ( online) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson\\_Island,\\_Trinidad\\_and\\_Tobago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Island,_Trinidad_and_Tobago)

<sup>6</sup> Site visit, Trinidad and Tobago

of the site was destroyed and part of it was modified and put to other uses after the cessation of indentured immigration in

Trinidad<sup>7</sup>. The building was declared a National Monument. From information gathered recently, it seems that the Trinidadian Government has a plan to renovate and convert the site into an interpretation centre for the history of Trinidad.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 5: Panel indicating Nelson Island as a Heritage site

( Source: AGTF collection

(Photograph: J. Mungur)

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<sup>7</sup> Site visit and information from locals and historians of Trinidad

<sup>8</sup> Site visit and information from the representatives of the Government and Director of Museum in Trinidad



Figure 6: The site of Nelson Island

Source: AGTF collection

(Photograph: J. Mungur)

## Jamaica

In Jamaica, the main landing place was located along the coast of Old Harbour, a town in the South of the country. In 1845, the first group of 261 Indian indentured people landed at there.<sup>9</sup> However Kingston Harbour was also used as a landing place as in the 1880s, a group of 680 Chinese immigrants including 501 men, 105 women, 54 boys and 17 girls were docked in Kingston Harbour.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 7: map of Jamaica

Further to the site visit and local information, no building or ruins have been preserved. A memorial plaque has been unveiled, by the

<sup>9</sup><http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0057.htm>

Dr. Rebecca Tortello. Out of many cultures the people who came, the Arrival of Indians. In. *Pieces of the Past*. (2003). (online).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

descendants of Indian Immigrants, to commemorate the arrival of their forbears.



Figure 8: Monument to commemorate the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in Jamaica

Source: AGTF collection

(Photograph: J. Mungur)

## Fiji



Figure 9: Immigration Depot and Quarantine Station, Nukulau Island, Fiji, c.1900

(Source: [http://www.janeresture.com/fiji\\_historical/index.htm](http://www.janeresture.com/fiji_historical/index.htm))

The Immigration Depot was located on Nukulau Island,<sup>11</sup> a small islet lying in Fiji waters, about 15 kilometres from the Capital Suva. During the Indenture period, 1879 to 1916, the island was used as a quarantine station or reception base for the Indian Indentured

labourers when they first came to Fiji. In his book: *Fiji's Indian migrants - a History to the end of Indenture in 1920*, Dr Ken Gillon writes that Indians were transferred to Nukulau, which served as a reception centre and quarantine station. The migrants were inspected by Agent-General of Immigration and medically examined before being sent to the respective plantations. "Those who were unfit were set aside either to be returned or they were detained in the depot for further treatment." The Depot was subsequently used for other migrants. The island currently houses a prison.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Historical Fiji ([www.janeresture.com/fiji\\_historical/](http://www.janeresture.com/fiji_historical/))

<sup>12</sup> Nukulau's Proud History. Monday July 31, 2000. (online). <http://www.lookinglassdesign.com/fijicoupmay2000/july2000/731-nukulauhists-fl.html>

## South Africa

South Africa, especially the province of Kwazulu/Natal was also a large recipient of indentured labourers. The Immigration Depot was located in Durban. According to South African historians,<sup>13</sup> the Immigration Depot no longer exists. In light with information obtained recently, it was confirmed that one structure which was possibly used as a quarantine station for indentured labourers, still exists.



Figure 10: a structure which is possibly a Quarantine Station in Durban  
(Source: AGTF collection)

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<sup>13</sup> (personal communication) Goolam Vahed, Associate Professor, Department of History, School of Anthropology, Gender, and Historical Studies, University of Kwazulu Natal and Surendra Bhana, Associate Professor, Department of History, School of Anthropology, Gender, and Historical Studies, University of Kwazulu Natal .

## Kenya

In Kenya, Indian indentured labourers were brought in by the British to build the Uganda Railway (running from Jinja in Uganda to Mombasa in Kenya). The Immigration Depot was located at the old port of Mombasa. To date, no information has been obtained on the location of the Depot. The old port is now on the tentative list of UNESCO's World Heritage sites.

## Guadeloupe



Figure 11: Monument erected in Guadeloupe.

(Source: <http://cqoj.typepad.com>)

In Guadeloupe, immigrants disembarked at Fouyol, where there were vast sheds used as a depot.<sup>14</sup> The depot has not survived.<sup>15</sup> This fact was further confirmed by the Société d'Histoire of Guadeloupe. For the first time in 2004, a ceremony to commemorate the arrival of Indian indentured labourers was organised by the local authorities. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first Indians in Guadeloupe, the Regional Council, the General Council, the City of Pointe-à-Pitre, in association with the Bharat-à-Gua Federation, erected a monument on 23rd January 2005 at Pointe-à-Pitre, near the sea-side spot where

<sup>14</sup> *Mémoire & Hommage aux Premiers Indiens de Guadeloupe 1854-1889*. Dimanche 23 Janvier 2005 (online). <http://cqoj.typepad.com>:

<sup>15</sup> Site Visits and Information from Société d'Histoire de Guadeloupe

the indentured Indians landed between 1854 and 1889.<sup>16</sup>

The plaque reads:

*"On December 24, 1854, the sailing ship "Aurelie", after a dreadful three-month passage, disembarked on this spot 314 East Indians, requested by the Colony to cope with the loss of labour resulting from the abolition of slavery in 1848. "*

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<sup>16</sup> *Mémoire & Hommage aux Premiers Indiens de Guadeloupe 1854-1889*. Dimanche 23 Janvier 2005 (online). <http://cqoj.typepad.com>

## French Guyana

The French looked to India for the bulk of their workers, totalling almost 10,000 in number, although they also recruited 3,700 labourers from Africa. Labour from India began to enter French Guiana in the beginning of 1862.<sup>17</sup> However, no immigration depot, site or monument has been identified yet.

## Réunion Island

On their arrival at Réunion Island, all immigrants were systematically placed in quarantine before proceeding to the Immigration Depot.<sup>18</sup> There were three quarantine stations or “Lazarets”. Two of them were located at Grande Chaloupe and the third one at Ravine à Jacques. They were built in 1860. Each Station had two stone buildings covered with tiles. Later on, a hospital was built in one of the two Lazarets. When the Lazarets of Grande Chaloupe were too crowded, the immigrants were sent to the Lazaret of Ravine à Jacques.<sup>19</sup> At the end of immigration, the quarantine stations were closed in 1935.

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<sup>17</sup> The Growth of Non-European Populations in the Americas and the Caribbean. <http://www.ucalgary.ca>

<sup>18</sup> Les Cahiers du CRI 1er Semestre 1986. L’Engagisme indien à L’île de la Réunion.

<sup>19</sup> [www.pyepimanla.com](http://www.pyepimanla.com): Les Lazarets de la Grande Chaloupe



Figure 12 Immigration Depot in Réunion

(Source: Les Cahiers du CRI 1er SEMESTRE 1986 L'engagisme indien à l'île de la Réunion.)



Figure 13: Quarantine Station in Grande Chaloupe – Réunion

(Source: Les Cahiers du CRI 1er SEMESTRE 1986 L'engagisme indien à l'île de la Réunion)

Since November 2004, a French Non- governmental Organisation, L'association Chantiers Histoire et Architecture Médiévales (CHAM), along with an NGO supporting the unemployed, has organized

restoration works on the abandoned buildings, for their re-use as a cultural resource and place of remembrance.<sup>20</sup> The Immigration Depot of St Denis has not survived<sup>21</sup>



Figure 14: The Lazaret found at Grande Chaloupe.

(Source: Chantiers Histoire et Architecture, Chantiers de Bénévoles, Stages Education au Patrimoine, 2006.)

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<sup>20</sup> Chantiers Histoire et Architecture, Chantiers de Bénévoles, Stages Education au Patrimoine, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Chantiers Histoire et Architecture, Chantiers de Bénévoles, Stages Education au Patrimoine, 2006.

## Suriname

The Immigration Depot was located in Paramaribo but the building has not survived. During the 100th commemoration of the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers a monument representing a model of the sailing ship *Lala Rookh*, was unveiled along the Saramaca River in Groningen.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 15: Picture of Indian Indentured Labourers at the Immigration Depot in Paramaribo, Suriname , c.1905

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<sup>22</sup> Report on the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora Chap. 18

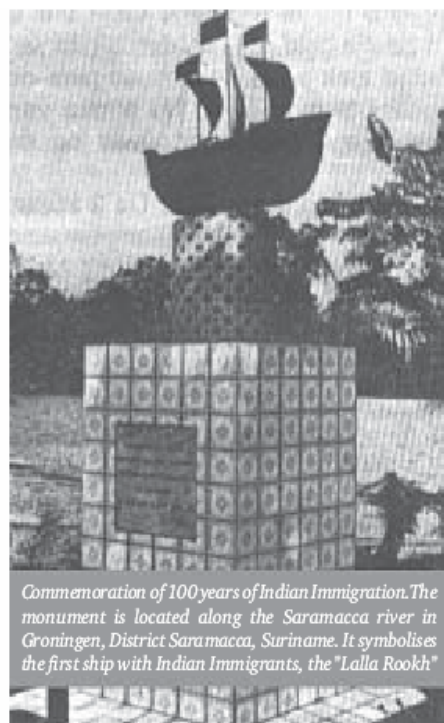


Figure 16: Monument for the Commemoration of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers. (Source: Report on the High level Committee on the Indian Diaspora Chap. 18)

## Australia

It was in Maryborough Port that indentured labourers were landed.<sup>23</sup> However, whether other groups of indentured labourers also landed at the same port needs further investigation. Maryborough Port was the main port in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries until the development of other ports in Australia. Maryborough Port still survives.

## Peru

The Immigration Depot was most probably located at Callao. However, no surviving site or structure has been identified yet.

## Hawaii

The Immigration Depot called Kakakoo Immigration depot was located in Honolulu. <sup>24</sup> The depot has not survived.

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<sup>23</sup> Port of Maryborough,

<sup>24</sup>Description of voyage of Sterlingshire. (online)

<http://www.islandroutes.com/ships/sterlingshire.shtml>

## Conclusion

Our research indicates that Mauritius is the only country where the Immigration Depot of indentured labourers has been preserved and is recognised by the Mauritian Government as an 'Indentured Site'. There is no physical evidence of a similar Immigration Depot in the indentured labour Diaspora countries.

The Aapravasi Ghat site was established in 1849 at its current location. It was gradually extended to accommodate a larger number of immigrants and remodelled completely in 1865 because of the construction of the railway line. The current site contains all the remains of the key features of the Immigration Depot. What have been lost are the additions of 1865.

The authenticity of the site has been established through the extensive historical documentation that has been preserved at the different archives in Mauritius. These include estimates and detailed plans from the Works Department dating from 1830s to 1900, secretarial records from the Immigration Department (1843-1880) and plans of the surroundings of the Aapravasi Ghat.

The creation of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund to undertake research and preserve the site is evidence of the commitment of the Mauritian Government. The Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund has conducted historical, archaeological and architectural research on the site for the last four years. Furthermore, it can be said that Aapravasi Ghat is one of the first

indentured sites where detailed archaeological studies are being carried out.

After ascertaining the authenticity of the information, the AGTF (under the supervision and consultation of experts from ICOMOS-India) finalised a plan of action for the archaeological and conservation works. The conservation works started in June 2004 after the completion of historical and archaeological investigations. The conservation works were extensively documented and the Experts assured that works undertaken on site were according to international norms of conservation.

Since the 1970s, the Aapravasi Ghat has acquired great symbolical value as the nation's Historical and Cultural Heritage. The symbolism that the site represents in the hearts and minds of the Mauritian nation comprising totally of immigrant elements without any native population cannot be underscored. In April and May 2006, the Oral History/Oral tradition Unit of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund had carried out interviews with the Mauritian population in order to get their views on the Aapravasi Ghat. It was carried out with people from different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The main objective of this work was to look at the cultural significance and values associated with the Aapravasi Ghat from multiple perspectives. The aesthetic, historic, scientific, universal, educational and social values attached to the Aapravasi Ghat site have been acknowledged by all Mauritians.

Aapravasi Ghat is symbolical not only for Mauritius but also for the whole Indentured Labour Diaspora. Like Ellis Island, it has a hugely symbolical value for all those of indentured ancestry across the world or like Goree and Mozambique Islands, for those of slave ancestry. In countries where no heritage site related to indenture has survived, a monument or commemorative plaque has been erected in memory of the history of indentured labourers. Consequently, the Mauritian immigration depot can become a memorial site for all descendants of indentured labourers in other countries. It is a site to be valued as it is a symbol of the mass migration of indentured labourers from India, China, Africa and South-East Asia to countries in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

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