

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Records of the Indian Indentured Labourers (Fiji, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago)

Ref N° 2010-35

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1. SUMMARY

This is a joint submission for the inclusion of “Indian Indentured Labourers” records to be inscribed in the International Register of Memory of the World Programme. The Indian Indentured immigration was first accounted for in the 1830s and over a period of roughly 100 years 1,194,957 Indians were relocated to 19 colonies. These records are the only documents for ancestral and lineage research for the numerous descendants of those Indian Labourers.

At the peak of colonialism in the early 19th century, slavery was finally abolished, however colonial administrators were hard-pressed to find alternative cheap labour from the Indian sub-continent to meet the burgeoning cost of maintaining their empires particularly the colony’s vast sugar plantations.

The recruitment process was often hasty and unorthodox targeting the populous of poverty stricken Indian provinces some landless and affected by food shortages and unemployment due in part to the commercialization of the Indian economy generated by British economic policies. Given the circumstance many were easily lured and deceived about the work on offer, they were hustled aboard the waiting ships, unprepared for the long and arduous four-month sea journey.

The arrival of large groups of Indian labourers in the receiving colonies had immense repercussions, many of which are still being felt today. This mass movement of labour was meticulously recorded by former colonial powers and stored in the archives of many receiving colonies around the world. As a result, the documents relating to the Indian Indentured Labourers dispersed all over the world offer a unique perspective of colonialism as a major phenomenon in the unfurling of world history.

The loss of such records would deprive humanity of the enduring knowledge of the legacy of indentured labour against the backdrop of Colonialism and the concept of “Empire” which are so vigorously debated in learning institutions the world over. The study of history is the study of humanity, and to lose such an important documentary heritage would be to lose an irreplaceable part of our humanity.

The Indian Diaspora to these island nations had an enormous impact on the local economy, the politics and the socio-cultural make up of the colonies. The Indentured descendants have gone on to create new livelihoods and expanded their horizons beyond the colonies some taking their place in the world as renowned sportsmen, politicians, dignitaries and professionals. Their stories are compelling and demand the equal attention of the international community through the preservation and accessibility of their documentary heritage.

This submission is put forward by Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad & Tobago, and Fiji, with Fiji as the primary nominator.

2. DETAILS OF NOMINATORS

2.1 Name (person or organisation)

- a) The National Archives of Fiji
- b) The National Archives of Guyana
- c) The National Archives of Surinam
- d) The National Archives of Trinidad & Tobago

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

The above institutions are the official custodians of the records of the Indian Indentured Labourers for their countries.

2.3 Contact Person (s)

Mr Setareki Tale – Government Archivist
National Archives of Fiji
Fiji Islands

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

a) Setareki Tale – Government Archivist
The National Archives of Fiji
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b) Ms June Du’Bissette
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c) Rita Tjien Foooh- Hardjomohamad
The Republic of Surinam
National Archives of Surinam
Ministry of Home Affairs
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Paramaribo
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d) Ms Cheryl Lee Kim - The Acting Government Archivist
National Archives of Trinidad & Tobago
105 St. Vincent Street
Port of Spain
Republic of Trinidad & Tobago
Phone/Fax: 1 – 868-265-2689
Email: leekimc@moi.gov.tt

3. IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

Records of the Indian Indentured Labourers

Fiji (1879 – 1962)
Guyana (1838 – 1917)
Suriname (1853 – 1946)
Trinidad & Tobago (1851 – 1917)

3.2. Description

These records are in secure storage in the nominating institutions.

In terms of bibliography references, these are a few of the many renowned scholars & historian who have extensively worked with the nominated documents

4. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1. Authenticity

These records are official records, generated in compliance with several laws and regulations concerning immigration, and their authenticity is verified by the National Archives of Fiji, of Suriname, and of Trinidad & Tobago who are the relevant custodial institutions.

These documents have been used by many renowned scholars in the reconstruction of the history of these former colonies and in the exploration of issues surrounding Indentured Labour.

4.2. World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

The records of the Indian Indentured Labourers or girmityas (contracted labourers) are of world significance in documenting a period of movement which was initiated and managed by the machinery of colonialism. They constitute a body of documentation which details personal information of a mass of people who were contracted as cheap indentured labourers. The personal information contained within the records is the only source for genealogy search for the descendants of girmityas worldwide.

The descendants of the girmityas have become an integral part of the former colonies that received them; the records pertaining to their forebears are of irreplaceable social, cultural, and historical significance.

These records capture a unique migration history of Indian communities around the world. They offer researchers a distinctive opportunity to study the effects of a different migration support on network establishment and studies of the caste system, and the effects of indenture on migrant and indigenous populations.

They support inquiry of universally relevant questions of social inequality, gender inequality, racism, crime, and social injustices, in colonial and post colonial societies.

They comprise the most detailed record extant of the strategy of the indentureship system and the colonial powers and its consequences for the human rights of the labourers

And most importantly, these records are unique and irreplaceable, as originals and the only authentic documentation available. Their deterioration or loss would leave a void in the memory of many former colonies, and erode the sense of belonging of many of descendants of the original labourers.

4.3. Criteria

(a) Time

The records in question are work products, reflecting the underpinning philosophies and priorities prevalent at the time of their creation. Their thorough nature and near completeness makes them an extremely valuable resource and a testament which will continue to be relevant; connecting and enlightening people all over the world well into the future.

(b) Place

These official records provide a tangible connection between India and the former colonies which received Indentured Labourers. Equally as important is that the records provide an indelible connection between descendants of those labourers and the former colonies they now call home. In fact, the practice of engaging indentured labour from India was a genesis of the “Diaspora,” which has taken members of the Indian race to all corners of the globe, where they have had an immediate and lasting impact on the growth and development of their new homes.

(c) People

As the most detailed record of the strategy of the indentureship system these documents contain important personal details which provide an immensely important source of information for the descendants of the Indentured Labourers and researchers concerned with humanities and development issues. These records hold considerable social and historical value, and are among the most requested and used documents in the National Archives of former colonies which received Indentured Labour.

4.4. Rarity

The documentations are originals and therefore rare. Their authenticity remains unchallenged, and is frankly un-contestable. These collections are the only existing evidence that records the

origins of the indentured labourers from the vast districts of India where they were contracted from. They are the original documentation of Indenture relating to the former colonies, and are the only extant records available, making them extremely rare.

a) Integrity

The collections as a whole are comprised of primary source materials in their original state. They therefore remain accessible for research purposes. The records are largely complete and legible in their original form and have not been altered; some minimal tears have not affected the value or access to the collection. Bindings of the majority of bound documents are original; the few that have been changed are due to professional remedial conservation carried out to protect their integrity.

b) Threat

The collection due to its age is of course under threat of deterioration. However, a preventative conservation management programme is in place to ensure its survival, an effort that is constrained by funds. At the same time a conservation assessment of the collection has been carried out to ensure its longevity and preventative conservation plans are developed to sustain the collection.

c) Management

The documents are secured and arranged in their original order. They have also been described, all of which makes them very searchable, and ensures they are readily available to the general public. Of all the records these holdings the Indian Immigration Records are highly sought after and are among the most requested archival documents in the National Archives.

5. LEGAL INFORMATION

5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

a) Republic of the Fiji Islands

National Archives of Fiji
25 Carnavon Street
Suva
P.O Box 2125
Government Buildings
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Fiji Islands
Phone: [679] 3304144
Fax: [679] 3307006
Email: stale@info.gov.fj

b) The Republic of Guyana

National Archives of Guyana
26 Main Street
Georgetown
Guyana

Tel: 00 579 (227) 7687

Email: narchivesguyana@yahoo.com

c) The Republic of Suriname

National Archives of Surinam

Ministry of Home Affairs

Doekhieweg Oost 18 A / Zorg en Hoop

Paramaribo

Suriname

Phone: (597) 498222 or (597) 464943

Fax : (597) 498222

e- mail: rtjienfooh@nationaalarchief.sr

a.ammersing@hotmail.com. minbiza@sr.net or mhassan@cq-link.sr

d) The Republic of Trinidad & Tobago

National Archives of Trinidad & Tobago

105 St. Vincent Street

Port of Spain

Trinidad & Tobago

Phone/Fax: 1 – 868-265-2689

Email: leekimc@moi.gov.tt

5.2. Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

Not Applicable

5.3. Legal status:

a) Category of ownership

b) Government Ownership

c) Accessibility

The records of the Indian Indentured Labourers are accessible to all researchers upon request and when approval is attained from the Chief Archivist. A minimal fee is levied for photocopying of these records. Where possible portions of these different holdings are on microfilm and are being prepared for digitisation.

d) Copyright status

With the permission of the Minister who has the final say on access.

e) Responsible administration

Established

f) Other factors

None

6. MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Indian Immigration Records are among the most requested records in the National Archives, and their usability and accessibility are of prime concern. In order to ensure these records remain secure and accessible, a number of steps have been taken. These records are being microfilmed for ease of research and to prolong their lifespan. They are also well arranged and boxed and are priority records as far as preservation and restoration works go. A long term preservation plan for the National Archives is to have these records digitized from microfilm copies.

7. CONSULTATION

The nominating organisation has had consistent and productive consultations with the Fiji MOW Committee, partner organisations National Archives of Guyana, Surinam, and the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as seventeen (17) other former colonies that have expressed their support and are exploring the possibility joining this nomination once they are prepared. Constructive dialogue has also taken place with UNESCO Samoa, and with scholars who have done extensive research using these records.

PART B SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8. ASSESSMENT OF RISK

The collection is exposed to a number of risks. The threat to the collection lies in the demand for its research potential that can place it at risk. Excessive handling of these original documents can result in damage to the object; as such the institution is embarking on digitization both as a preventative conservation measure as well as providing greater access to the public. There is also the risk of loss through theft if records are left with researchers unsupervised. Another risk is power outages which impacts environmental conditions i.e. Air-conditioning and de-humidifiers' go offline.

9. ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION

9.1 The records have undergone preservation assessments and appropriated action has been taken. All the records are secure, and are kept in environmentally controlled storage. Programs are in place to reformat these records, with most already copied onto microfilm with the possibility of digitization in the future.