

IN MEMORY OF INDENTURED WORKERS

By Sayantan Chakravarty in Kolkata

istory, at Kolkata, is set to repeat itself. In a stirring and strange way, things are coalescing together to bring the descendants of indentured Indians in touch with their past. Also, it does seem that the Universe has designed to bring together men and women from diverse backgrounds, but driven by a common dream, to support a Kolkata Memorial.

It is proposed that in January, 2011, a first step towards building such a memorial will be taken. A commemorative plaque will come up at the Demerara (the former name of Guyana) Clock Tower at the Kidderpore Dock. It will be dedicated to the memory of those indentured Indians who undertook perilous ship journeys to find their destiny in foreign lands in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

It all came wonderfully together on July 7 when GOPIO International's Executive Vice President Ashook Ramsaran, himself a descendant of indentured Indians who left for British Guyana (then called Demerara) in the 19th century, flew down to Kolkata to meet up with A. Didar Singh, secretary in the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in the federal Government. Singh's trip to Kolkata from New



An ancient Banyan tree that carries the wisdom of Kidderpore



The clock tower

Delhi can be described as momentous, for it has taken an eternity to finally shake up the West Bengal Government to find a piece of land that can be dedicated as a memorial to the indentured workers, many of whose descendants today occupy powerful and influential positions in lands far and wide. Ramsaran himself is a prime example, as are people like the presidents of Guyana and Mauritius (Bharrat Jagdeo and Anerood Jugnauth), prime ministers of Trinidad and Tobago, and Mauritius (Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Navinchandra Ramgoolam), and New Zealand's Governor General Anand Satyanand. Singh met up with West Bengal chief secretary Ardhendu Sen and then visited the port area. Also present was joint secretary (financial services) in the MOIA, G Gurucharan.

That things materialized on July 7 is a tribute in many ways to the untiring efforts of Leela Gujadar Sarup, a researcher and historian on indentured Indians. Aside from having written several volumes of books on colonial emigration, Sarup has also been actively persuading both the Governments at the federal level (to which Singh belongs) and the state Government of West Bengal for several years to find a heritage site in memory of the indentured Indians, shipped to far away outposts of the British empire. Sarup's ancestors themselves made the arduous and risky journey (those days ships could capsize in mid-seas easily, and deaths were common on board) from Calcutta to Mauritius, a country where she grew up, and where her son lives. The other significant push to the memorial project was given by Malay Mishra, a former joint secretary with the MOIA's diaspora division and currently India's high commissioner to Trinidad. While with the MOIA, Mishra had written relentlessly to the West Bengal Government for years, but had not received a single meaningful response to his missives on the proposed memorial. But even though the responses were hard to come by, the issue was kept alive through his efforts.

Several people among the diaspora have told the author of this article that they would like to see a memorial come up in Kolkata during their lifetime. It would provide a new meaning to

WHAT THEY SAY



ASHOOK RAMSARAN

This will be a lasting legacy to present and future generations.



LEELA SARUP

We are moving towards a wonderful beginning.



MALAY MISHRA

I think this is a laudable step taken by the MOIA

A noble effort indeed

ANAND MULLOO

An extraordinary service to the Indian diaspora

SHAMSHU DEEN



The Kidderpore Dock



The launch on the Hooghly

their visits to India, and find them a place where they can visit with family in loving memory of ancestors who provided them a new destiny in their adopted lands. The pull of memorials worldwide is immense. Afro-Americans and Afro-Europeans fly in to visit the Slave castles of Ghana every week. The emotional outbreaks that are witnessed at such moments are stirring, and at times mere words are not enough to describe their soulful experience. Author Alex Haley who famously penned *Roots*, built a memorial to Kunta Kinte, the principal character of his best-selling novel. About a million people visit the memorial at Annapolis, Maryland, every year. Says Ramsaran, "The goal is to establish a commemorative memorial followed by a museum to emotionally and physically connect the descendants of indentured workers with the story of their ancestors. This will be a lasting legacy to present and future generations." Adds Mishra, "I think this is a laudable step taken by the MOIA. The project is indeed timely. I feel countries like Trinidad and Tobago which have substantial diasporic populations will be extremely keen to see such projects materialize in the land of origin of their ancestors."

At Kolkata, on July 7, Singh, Ramsaran, Sarup and Gurucharan, accompanied by officials of the West Bengal Archaeology Department, stepped on to a motorized launch and moved along the Hooghly river. They took a look at the places where ships

were docked to receive the indentured workers slotted for different destinations. The team viewed and evaluated the various depots used, such as the Suriname Jetty, the Demerara Depot, Garden Reach Depot and others. A visit was made to the site of the Bhowanipore Depot on D.L. Khan Road---another possible heritage site that is currently under litigation. Says Sarup, "What better way to pay tribute to our ancestors than finding a place in Kolkata where their descendants can visit to relive a slice of history. I think we are moving towards a wonderful beginning."

Indeed, they are. A two-phase effort is now on to make a memorial site a reality. Firstly, the plan is to install a memorial plaque in January 2011 at the Kidderpore (Demerara) depot clock tower that is intact and in fairly good condition. In the second phase the plan is to acquire suitably significant land in Kolkata for a museum and resource centre archiving records between 1834 and 1920, including literature, works of art, documentaries, films, artifacts, photographs and emigration records relevant to that era and those who left as indentured workers. The GOPIO will drive the project and is setting up a society for the purpose in Kolkata.

"A noble effort indeed," is how Anand Mulloo, writer from Mauritius, describes the new initiative. "An extraordinary service to the Indian diaspora," says roots researcher Shamshu Deen from Trinidad and Tobago.

With all the concerted efforts on, it is abundantly clear that in times to come, Kolkata will become the favoured destination of the PIO community. A little help from the West Bengal Government would go a long way. □

—for details about the project, please write to info@indiaempire.com