SHOULD INDIANS IN THE DIASPORA DEMAND REPARATION FOR INDENTURESHIP?
Presentation by Ashook Ramsaran - May 22, 2022

Thank you for the introduction and to the organizers of this forum. I am honored to among these distinguished panelists.

Regardless of special skills, it is impossible to capture 80 years of Indian Indenturedship and associated atrocities in Guyana in just 5 minutes. Such a historic, heavy and content-laden topic. So, I will summarize the main points, highlighting the 3 areas suggested by the program organizers and focusing on JUSTIFICATION FOR REPARATION – not repeating presentation by others.

1. OVERVIEW OF INDENTURESHIP IN GUYANA

So much has been written by so many over the years by: historians, researchers and scholars. Beginning 1838 and officially ending in 1917, some extending to 1920:
# of Arrivals: 239,909
# of Returnees: 75,547
Remaining: 164,362
Terms: 5 years, with 5 years renewable contract
Classification: indentured labourers (girmitiyas or girmit)
Global Phenomenon: Starting in 1828 in Reunion Island and continuing to 1917, spanning countries in several continents, including earlier Malaysia and contract labor in East Africa.

2. ATROCITIES OF INDENTURESHIP IN GUYANA

The Indian Diaspora Council (IDC) and Canadian Guyanese Congress (CGC) agree that this term captures most, if not, all: "INDIAN INDENTURESHIP BONDAGE".

These included BRUTALITY imposed by the plantation owners, with intolerable, inhumane WORK CONDITIONS and horrible LIVING CONDITIONS. Besides the deaths during the voyages and in the plantations.

The objective was to maximize profits for the owners in UK, and plantation managers in British Guiana were given the freedom to do so without supervision or penalties on them. Hence, sustained atrocities for 8 decades on helpless Indian laborers. Certainly the same in other colonies: English, Dutch, French and Portuguese – as profits were the prime motivation.

These levels of atrocities were so severe in some plantations that laborers resorted to work stoppage, resistance and riots but these were quickly quelled, sometimes with extreme measures, including killings.

3. THE JUSTIFICATION FOR REPARATION

IDC POSITION: Yes, the Indian Diaspora Council International is in favor of REPARATION FOR INDENTURESHIP. The extent, value and content of reparations should be determined through in-depth negotiations between descendants of Indian indenturedship and British, French, Dutch, Portuguese governments and descendants of Indian indenturedship laborers. Notwithstanding the enormous progress of succeeding generations of Indian laborers.

Brutal colonial treatment of Indian indenturedship laborers were deprivation of rights, replete with arbitrary penalties, punishment and torture at the sole discretion of the plantation owners.

This is not to, in any way, diminish the inhuman, torturous and despicable treatment of slaves brought from Africa to these colonies. Despite the enormous progress by the descendants in succeeding generations, it was indeed a torturous experience and cannot be denied or forgotten.

LEGAL: Breach of Contract – a universally accepted reason for compensation in any transaction. Indian Indenturedship was organized with a legally binding contract for each laborer.

PAYMENT PER CONTRACT:
It was not negotiated. It was arbitrarily designed by the plantation owners with UK government blessings, "Take it or leave it".
Professor Lomarsh Roopnarine wrote extensively about "Violation of Indentured Contracts" and no penalty imposed on plantation owners. Freedom of plantation owners to do as they wanted to inflict pain and suppress the Indian laborers solely to increase profits.

In addition, only 1% of Indian Indenturedship laborers received land in lieu of return passage to India. It's a violation of the contracts and there is compensation due to the descendants of those who were denied.

GIAA (Guyana) noted that Indian Indentured laborers were significantly punished with harsh prison terms for "labor infractions". In 1884 for example, 13% of Indentured laborers were jailed, comprising 44% of the prison population.

In short, the Indian laborers were penalized in so many ways to reduce their work pay and increase their contracts with penalty extensions arbitrarily imposed on them by plantation owners. The laborers had no choice but to accept what the plantation owners meted out to them.

CONDITIONS:
Brutality & Abuse – physical and mental; Inhumane Work Conditions; Poor Living Conditions

REPARATIONS TO PLANTATION OWNERS:
According to Wikipedia: "Slave owners were paid approximately **£20 million** in compensation in over 40,000 awards for enslaved people freed in the colonies of the Caribbean, Mauritius and the Cape of Good Hope according to a government census that named all owners as of 1 August 1834" debts to slave-owning families in 2015. So there is precedence, even very recent payments.

OTHER RECENT EXAMPLES OF REPARATIONS:
Harvard University $100M USD "Legacy of Slavery Fund".
Cambridge University endowment for "Study of Indenturedship"
Holocaust: Reparations to survivors and descendants.
USA (slavery & Indentureship): Acknowledgement, apologies, direct payments, funds for studies, scholarships, museums, and similar forms of compensation.

Extensive research and writings on this topic have been done by many outstanding historians and researchers. There is no shortage of information on this topic.

4. IDC PROPOSAL

The Indian Diaspora Council (IDC) proposes a serious, class action among global partners impacted by INDIAN INDENTURESHIP BONDAGE and other atrocities, with due consideration to all legal aspects, responsible parties (colonial powers, plantation owners, Booker and successors), the short and long term consequences of such atrocities, precedence (if any), a pragmatic framework for restitution and compensation, and follow-up in a sustained manner to the project's conclusion.
Recommendation: Collaboration with global entities such as the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) and the CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC), and others.
The form, extent, value and content of reparations should be determined through in-depth negotiations and based on thorough analyses and pragmatism.

Thank you for your patience. I can answer questions later or you can contact me directly.

Born in Guyana, educated in USA and residing in New York since 1968. President, Indian Diaspora Council International (IDC); Executive Vice President, Queens Civic Congress; Board Member, Queens Borough President's Civic Engagement Committee; Past President, GOPIO International (2011-2016). Actively engaged in NYC community quality of life agenda with various organizations. Champion of street namings in NYC to honor outstanding community advocates and institutions. Advocate of social justice, legal and health equality. Recipient of numerous national and international awards including India's highly esteemed Pravasi Bharatiya Saman Award in recognition of outstanding community service.

TOPIC: Should Indians in the Diaspora demand reparation for indentureship?
SPEAKERS:

PROF. VERENE SHEPHERD (UWI) - Director of the Centre for Reparation Research (CRR), University of the West Indies (UWI). Vice-Chair of The CARICOM Reparation Commission.

PROF. DAVID DABYDEEN (UK) - Director of the Ameena Gafoor Institute (AGI). Former Professor, University of Warwick & Director, Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies.

DR. KUMAR MAHABIR (Trinidad) - Director of this weekly Sunday ZOOM programme. Anthropologist, university lecturer, and author of an oral history of indentureship *The Still Cry*.

ASHOOK RAMSARAN (Guyana) - President of Indian Diaspora Council (IDC). Activist in New York as well as the global Indian Diaspora community of People of Indian Origin (PIO).

DR. MAURITS S. HASSANKHAN (Suriname) - Researcher and former Head of the History Department at Anton de Kom University. Co-author of the Historical Database in Suriname.

LENROY THOMAS (St. Vincent) - Co-Founder of the SVG Indian Heritage Foundation. Researched records at the National Archives, UK. Author of *Stories from our Indian Elders*

DR. AKSHAI MANSINGH (Jamaica) - Dean, Faculty of Sport, UWI. Senior Lecturer in Sports Medicine. Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon. Justice of the Peace, Director, Cricket West Indies (CWI).

KIRU NAIDOO (South Africa) - Writer based in Durban with a keen interest in workers' histories and women's voices during indentureship. Bangladesh Market remains his centrepiece

PROF. KHAL TORABULLY (Mauritius) - Writer, poet, semiologist, and author of 25 books in French, English and Creole. Devised a theoretical framework to include slavery and indenture

PROF FARZANA GOUNDER (Fiji) - Linguist and lecturer; author of *Indentured Identities*, and co-editor of *Women, Gender, and the Legacy of Slavery and Indenture* (2021).

ARLEN HARRIS (India) - Award-winning filmmaker with over 30 years' experience working mainly for British broadcasters such as Channel 4, Channel 5, ITV and BBC TV and Radio.

Followed by Q&A

GIRMITIYA MIGRATION ARRIVAL HISTORY

Definition:

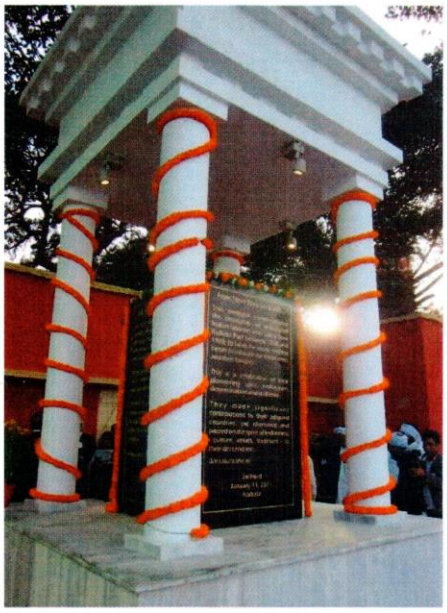
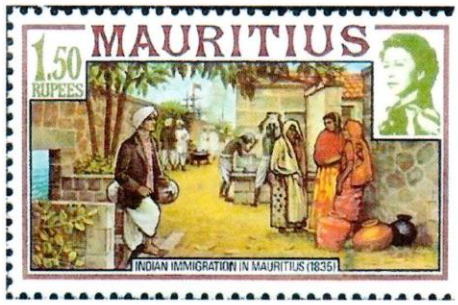
While it is generally known that a Girmitiya is a descendant of Indian Indentured labourers to Fiji, the Indian Diaspora Council International has defined a Girmitiya as a descendant of **all** Indian Indentured labourers who were taken from India to several British, Dutch and French colonies during the periods 1826-1920 under the system of indenture labour.

Arrival History by Country & Territory:

Country	Date of First Arrival & Ship Name	Number of Arrivals
Guyana (formerly British Guiana)	May 5, 1838 - *Hesperus*	238,909
Trinidad & Tobago	May 31, 1845 - *Fatal Razak*	143,939
Guadeloupe	December 24, 1854 - *Aurélie*	42,326
Jamaica	May 7, 1845 - *Maidstone*	36,412
Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana)	June 5, 1873 - *Lalla Rookh*	34,000
Martinique	May 6, 1853 - *Aurelie*	25,509
French Guiana(South America)	1854	19,276
St. Lucia	May 6, 1859 - *Palmyra*	4,354
Grenada	January 27, 1857 - *Maidstone*	3,200
St. Vincent	June 1, 1861 - *Travancore*	2,472
Belize (formerly British Honduras) located in Central America	1858 – Sepoy Indians 1882	1,000 from 1857 revolt 3,000 from Jamaica
St. Kitts	June 3, 1861 - *Dartmouth*	361
Nevis	1874	315
St. Croix	1863	321
Reunion Island	April 13, 1828 - *Yangon*	120 000
Seychelles	1898	6,315
South Africa	November 16, 1860 - *Truro*	150,000
Fiji	May 15, 1879 - *Leonidas*	60,965
Mauritius	November 2, 1834 - *Atlas*	451,796

Note: The information above is compiled from various sources and its accuracy is based on information reviewed. Credit to the many historians, researchers and authors whose information have been used to compile the listing above.

Compiled from various sources by Ashook Ramsaran – Indian Diaspora Council International (IDC)



Kolkata Memorial 2011 (Photos by Ashook Ramsaran)