

The Kolkata Memorial: A Tribute to Indian Indentured Laborers

By Ashook Ramsaran

The Kolkata Memorial was inaugurated on January 11, 2011 at Kidderpore Depot located along the Hoogley River in Kolkata by Hon. Vayalar Ravi, Minister of India's Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA). It was truly a historic moment. The unveiling ceremony was attended by hundreds from several countries including Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Guadeloupe, United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Switzerland, South Africa, Kenya, Fiji, Mauritius, Re-Union Islands, New Zealand, Australia and other many other countries where Indians and persons of Indian origin reside. Then railways Minister and current Chief Minister of West Bengal, Hon. Mamta Banerjee and MOIA Secretary Dr A. Didar Singh, along with several other dignitaries, also participated in the unveiling ceremonies. In attendance was Guyana's High Commissioner to India, Hon. Ronald Gajraj and former Vice President of Mauritius Raus Bundhun.

The Kolkata Memorial has meaningful significance to the millions of descendants of those who left India as indentured Indian laborers from 1834 through 1920. There was, and continues to be, 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 during that period in the history of Indian migration.

The Kolkata Memorial project is another significant – and monumental – achievement of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (**GOPIO**), done in the interest the global Indian diaspora with **GOPIO**'s Executive Council approval and support throughout the process. Spearheading this effort on behalf of **GOPIO** was Ashook Ramsaran whose continuous efforts, persistence, articulation and collaboration with others became his personal crusade that led to the momentous event on January 11, 2011 when the historic monument was unveiled.

Guyanese born, third generation PIO Ashook Ramsaran, former Executive Vice President and recently elected President of **GOPIO** International, made several trips to Kolkata that proved to be worthwhile and significant towards establishment of the Kolkata Memorial. Ramsaran worked closely with the Government of India to energize the Kolkata Memorial project, from its design, construction and dedication which were done in record time. With the approval and agreement Ramsaran reached with MOIA Secretary Dr A. Didar Singh while standing at a point near the Demerara clock tower in Kidderpore on July 7, 2010, a multi-prong effort began with a fast paced momentum towards an unveiling to coincide with the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD2011) held in New Delhi on January 7—9, 2011. Many of the delegates and participants of PBD2011 attended the unveiling which **GOPIO** heavily promoted in advance.

Preceding the unveiling, an elaborate pre-unveiling luncheon was held at the Oberoi Grand Hotel in Kolkata. It was attended by Minister Ravi as chief guest, Dr A. Didar Singh and Indian High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago, Hon. Malay Mishra. The luncheon was hosted by **GOPIO** and the Global Indian Diaspora Heritage Society (GIDHS). Prominent Indian diaspora historian and writer Leela Sarup, and Empire India's editor and publisher Sayantan Chakravarty, Hon. Malay Mishra and Ashook Ramsaran spoke at the event and acknowledged the important role of MOIA and **GOPIO** in making the Kolkata Memorial a reality.

Mementos of appreciation were presented to Minister Ravi, Dr A. Didar Singh Hon. Malay Mishra by Leela Sarup and Ashook Ramsaran. Also in attendance were many GOPIO officials including Chairman Inder Singh, president Lord Diljit Rana, vice president of North American region Dr Piyush Agrawal, and immediate past chairman Dr Thomas Abraham among several others.

The shared sentiments and common feelings of the descendants of indentured Indian laborers were captured in the text of the inscription Ramsaran wrote on his long airplane return journey from Kolkata to New York on July 12, 2010, with filled with lots of emotion and vivid recollection, combined with personal and historic perspective in mind. It pays long deserved tribute and honor to those who left India as indentured Indian laborers.

The inscription on the plaques (in English and Hindi) placed on the Kolkata Memorial is based on Ramsaran's text, written from the heart and meant as "recognition and remembrance of their journeys 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". It is written as only a PIO descendant of indentured Indian laborers can so succinctly express.

The inscription on the plaques states:

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 livelihoods 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, traditions – to their descendants.

We salute them.

The Kolkata Memorial, which was long overdue, was immediately viewed as highly symbolic for the descendants of those who left as Indian indentured laborers and became a lasting legacy for present and future generations. "A noble effort indeed", said writer and historian Dr. Anand Mullo of Mauritius; "A commemoration tribute whose time is overdue", said Prof Mohan Gautam of The Netherlands; "We are all deeply indebted for the Kolkata Memorial which is a tremendous achievement", said prominent Indo-Caribbean Diaspora icon and GOPIO founding life member, Dr. Yesu Persaud of Guyana. **GOPIO** has once again taken the initiative and achieved a historic milestone on an issue of interest to the Indian Diaspora. Ramsaran added that "this will be a lasting legacy to present and future generations of their descendants, and I feel so honored and privileged – truly, so fortunate and blessed -- to have been there and done my share to make this such a meaningful reality".

The underlying premise is connecting with the past in order to understand those circumstances of history that helped shape the present. Such a burning desire and yearning persist among PIOs. There is this inherent belief and yearning among most PIOs to connect with their ancestral motherland in a shared and meaningful way. Walking in the footsteps of their ancestors with the understanding of their role in shaping their future is important for them to recognize their history, to take pride and to progress onwards.

Significant moments in history are unique. The Kolkata Memorial is one such historic moment for all PIOs and for India itself. Specifically, for those whose ancestors came from India as indentured laborers, the Kolkata Memorial is a significant and meaningful milestone yet it is a reminder of the special responsibility to document, preserve and promote their unique history. The Kolkata Memorial is a courageous step and will give impetus to other significant efforts towards these goals.

The descendants of Indian indentured laborers are scattered across continents and oceans apart, speaking several languages, living among diverse populations and ethnic groups and cultures. The common feeling among those descendants is to fully understand and document the realities of their past. Else, they feel that they would have failed in their obligation to past, present and future generations. Therein lie their obligation and duty to connect to their past and, in so doing, connect to themselves, among themselves living in various countries globally -- and to the motherland of India. They share a common thread, common aspirations and common heritage, one of the many branches of a huge tree with deep roots. The Kolkata Memorial is symbolic of coming full circle by understanding and preserving the history of their forebears.

GOPIO took a bold step in making the Kolkata Memorial a reality, and Ramsaran feels extremely honored and privileged to have been in such a prominent leadership role to see it become a reality. He had remarked previously that those of our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the migration journeys of people from India. They deserve due recognition and a lasting remembrance – and that is what the Kolkata Memorial symbolizes. The vision of a single, suitably significant place of emotional and physical connection for the descendants of indentured workers finally become a reality – the Kolkata Memorial.

Reminiscing about the historical significance of the Kolkata Memorial, Ramsaran said that, “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. The Kolkata Memorial is our tribute to them”.

The significance of the Kolkata Memorial transcends all boundaries and can become an example for other groups who emigrated from India during and/or subsequent to the 1834—1920 period. The message of the Kolkata Memorial should be disseminated to as many as possible to inform others as well as generate support for future museum and resource center plans.

Ashook Ramsaran was born in Guyana, a third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came to Guyana in 1853, is President of GOPIO International and resides in New York, USA with his family.



Ashook Ramsaran at Kolkata Memorial at its inauguration on January 11, 2011.