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**Commémorer  
la construction  
de notre Histoire:  
Aperçu et présentation  
icônographique des  
archives de l'engagisme de  
la République de Maurice  
(1826-1950)**

L'objectif de cet article est de donner un aperçu de la richesse et de la diversité des archives de l'engagisme à Maurice et des expériences de vie des engagés qui ont atteint les côtes mauriciennes entre 1826 et 1910. C'est également une présentation icônographique qui offre

de nouvelles perspectives sur la valeur historique et patrimoniale de ces documents uniques au monde qui documentent l'expérience mauricienne du travail sous contrat. Dans le même temps, cette communication décrit, brièvement, le processus d'inscription de ces documents mauriciens au Registre de la Mémoire du Monde de l'UNESCO. Cet article porte principalement sur les registres d'immigration sous contrat qui se trouvent aux archives de l'immigration indienne du Mahatma Gandhi Institute. Il souligne également que les registres mauriciens de l'immigration sous contrat, qui couvrent la période allant de 1826 à 1950, sont un patrimoine vivant, qu'il est nécessaire de les préserver, les protéger, les diffuser et les valoriser pour les générations présentes et futures.

# COMMEMORATING THE MAKING OF OUR HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW & PICTORIAL PRESENTATION OF THE INDENTURED IMMIGRATION RECORDS OF REPUBLIC OF MAURITIUS (1826-1950)

PAGE PRÉCÉDENTE

1. Eric Hobsbawm, 'First Session: Memorial Lectures at Yale University' in January 1990. The famous British social and imperial historian and prolific writer.

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2. Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, Ministry of Arts and Culture, the National Heritage Fund, the National Archives of Mauritius, the National Library, and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 'Republic of Mauritius: Indentured Immigration Records of the Republic of Mauritius: Application for Inscription on the Memory of the World Register' (Submitted by the Republic of Mauritius as State-Party to UNESCO in 2012); Refer to the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site Nomination Dossier submitted to UNESCO of January 2015. The nomination dossier was also known as 'The Records of Indentured Immigration of the Republic of Mauritius'.

3. Satyendra Peerthum, 'The Indentured Immigration Records on the Memory of the World Register of UNESCO', AGTF Magazine for 2016 (No.13), 2nd November 2016, p.24.

►  
**The Commemorative Plaque marking the Inscription of the Records of Indentured Immigration of the Republic of Mauritius at the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site**  
(Col. S. Peerthum et AGTF)

The Indentured Immigration Records of the Republic of Mauritius (1826-1950) are a very important historical Heritage Value. The long and complex process of the inscription of the nomination dossier of the 'Republic of Mauritius: Indentured Immigration Records of the Republic of Mauritius: Application for Inscription on the Memory of the World Register' began on 16th July 2006. It was on that historic and memorable day in Vilnius, Lithuania, at its annual meeting, that the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the Aapravasi Ghat on the World Heritage list and it also recommended for the Mauritian indentured labour archives to be inscribed on the Memory of the World Register.

## A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE

However, several years passed and it was only in February 2011 that a technical committee of experts was established under the Ministry of Arts of Culture of Mauritius to work on the nomination dossier. They consisted of historians, scholars, and technicians from the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund (AGTF), the Ministry of Arts and Culture, the Mauritius National Archives, the National Library, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute Indian Immigration Archives, and the National Heritage fund. In March 2012, the dossier was completed by the technical committee which produced a 32-page document with several annexes. It was submitted to the Memory of the World Register Centre of UNESCO in Paris<sup>2</sup> with Ms. Joie Springer, UNESCO Programme Specialist as the contact person. Finally, in

December 2015, the nomination dossier was ratified and inscribed on the prestigious UNESCO register. On 9 June 2016, in order to commemorate this great achievement, a plaque was unveiled at the site in Port Louis by AGTF and the Ministry of Arts and Culture<sup>3</sup>.

**The Indentured Immigration Records of Mauritius** consist of archival volumes, documents, newspapers, and other primary sources that are located at the Mauritius National Archives (MNA), the Mahatma Gandhi Institute Indian Immigration Archives (MGIIA), and the National Library of Mauritius (NL) dating from 1826 to 1950. At the same time, there are other archival repositories which are related, to a certain extent, to the history of indentured labour in Mauritius, such as the old records of the Central Civil Status Office, the



## The Indian Immigration Archives *Les Archives de l'immigration Indienne*

Mauritius was the first British colony to resort to the massive importation of Indian indentured labourers. The Indian Immigration Archives of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute is a rich and unique repository for all documentation regarding this important phase in the history of the peopling of Mauritius.

As custodian, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute has been mandated to shelter, restore and preserve some 2050 original records dating from 1842 to 1910—a period that witnessed a huge population transfer of about 454 000 individuals from India to Mauritius under the contractual labour system. By means of the collection of arrival registers, emigration and marriage certificates, genealogical search is undertaken by the staff of the Archives section.

*En tant que colonie britannique, l'île Maurice fut la première à recourir à l'importation massive de travailleurs engagés indiens. Les Archives de l'immigration indienne de l'Institut Mahatma Gandhi constituent un dépôt riche et unique pour toute documentation sur cette importante phase de l'histoire du peuplement de l'île Maurice. Officiellement mandaté à agir comme conservateur de ce patrimoine national, l'Institut Mahatma Gandhi a la charge de restaurer et de préserver environ 2050 manuscrits originaux relatifs à l'engagisme datant de 1842 à 1910, période qui témoigna un exode de près de 454000 Indiens vers l'île Maurice. Par le biais de la collection des registres d'arrivées, des certificats d'emigration et de mariage, des recherches généalogiques sont assurées par le personnel du département des Archives.*

### Some of the 2055 Indentured Immigration Registers at the Mahatma Gandhi Indian Immigration Archives

A unique collection in the world covering a period between 1826 and 1925 (Col.MGIIIA)

### Returns of the number of Indian, African and Chinese Indentured workers, poor Whites and Creoles who were imprisoned at the Vagrant Depot Prison in Port Louis in 1869

National Library of Mauritius (NLM)/The Mauritius Government Gazette for 1869.

	White Races.		Creoles of blood partly white.	Indians.			Indian Creoles.	African.	Chinese.	All Others.	TOTAL.	
	Portuguese.	Elsewhere.		B.	M.	All Others.						
Adults.												
Males	13	208	21	490	418	182	208	86	20	471	2127	
Females	1	5	1	43	38	21	20	5	...	43	177	
Juveniles.												
Males	...	...	1	1	...	8	...	21	...	...	24	50
Females	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
TOTAL...	14	214	33	533	456	203	249	91	20	538	2354	

### The Ordinance No.31 of 1867

was enacted by the local British Government in November 1867. It aimed at controlling the mobility, labour, and lives of the Indian Immigrants in Mauritius. NLM/Laws, Ordinances, and Government Notices of the Colony of Mauritius for 1867.

Registrar General's Office, the local Catholic Church, the local Anglican Church, and the Carnegie Library in Curepipe<sup>4</sup>.

The MNA (Mauritius National Archives) contain more than 5,000 archival volumes related to indentured labor from 1826 to 1950. The MGIIIA houses around 2055 archival volumes dating from 1826 to 1922 and are kept in a small room measuring 18 meters squared only. The NL holds around 1,000 newspaper volumes, documents, and other items dating from 1832 to 1939. Overall, the MNA, the MGIIIA, and the NL hold an estimated total of 8,055 volumes, documents, and items related to indentured labor from 1826 to 1950. They cover the bio-data and the working and social lives of around 462,801 Indian and non-Indian indentured men, women, and children who reached Mauritian shores between 1826 and 1910.

4. Satyendra Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21st Century: An Assesment (Paper presented at the Workshop of the Mauritius National Archives at Ebene in June 2019), pp.1-10.

## ORDINANCE

No. 31 of 1867.

HENRY BARKLY.—Enacted by the Governor of Mauritius and its Dependencies, with the advice and consent of the Council of Government thereof.

AN ORDINANCE to consolidate and amend certain of the laws relating to Indian Immigrants and other Laborers within this Colony and its Dependencies, and to make better provision for the protection of claims for Wages, and for other purposes.

[29th November 1867.]

## THE MAHATMA GANDHI INSTITUTE INDIAN IMMIGRATION ARCHIVES

It should be noted that the most important records of the indentured immigration records of Mauritius are located at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute Indian Immigration Archives (MGIIIA), as they contain around one quarter of all of these precious records including the crucial immigrant ship arrival of the PE series and photo registers of the PG series Therefore, this article will focus mainly on the immigration registers located at the MGIIIA.

Among the most important archival collection in the MGI Indian Immigration Archives and in Mauritius are the 65 volumes of the PG series, or PG 1 to PG 65, the Immigrant Photo Registers. They consist of 65 volumes with more than 175,000 immigrant photos taken at the former Immigration Depot (known today as the Apravasi Ghat World Heritage Site in Port Louis) between December 1864 and July 1914.

During the same period, or over almost half a century, more than 300,000 pictures of immigrant men, women, and children were taken with only around 58% of the pictures surviving through the decades in their present state in the PG series. Truly, the PG series is a unique photographic and documentary heritage in the world which, along with the PE series or the immigrant ship arrival registers, is the one of the centrepieces of the indentured labour archives collection of the Republic of Mauritius<sup>5</sup>. Its relevance will be discussed in greater detail later on in this article.

**The PE series** consist of 171 volumes, or PE 1 to PE 161, with the ship arrival registers and detailed bio-data of 462,800 Indians and non-Indians arriving on more than 1600 ships between 1826 and 1910. They indicate their names, immigrant numbers, sex, age, caste, occupation, place of origin, work history, names of their father, mother, and if they are single or married their wives and children, other next of kin, and some remarks<sup>6</sup>.



▲ Immigrant Khodabocus (No.494 RR)

Arrived in Mauritius from Reunion Island in 1856. He served three consecutive 3-year contracts as a cane cutter. He was a Muslim from Bihar, India who had arrived in Reunion Island in 1851. Photographed in December 1864 at the age of 45 and left Mauritius for Calcutta in May 1865. He was one of the first indentured immigrants to have been photographed at the Immigration Depot. MGIIIA, PG 2, Immigrant Photo Registers for 1864 & 1865 & PE Series, Immigrant Ship Arrival Registers.



▲ Immigrant Sophy (No.437 Reunion)

Arrived in Mauritius from Reunion Island in 1856 at the age of 18 with her parents. She worked as a domestic under several indenture contracts. She was a Catholic Indo-Reunionese from the St. Paul region. Photographed in June 1874 at the age of 36 at the Immigration Depot. MGIIIA, PG 9, Immigrant Photo Registers for 1874 & PE Series, Immigrant Ship Arrival Registers.

5. Estimated from Mahatma Gandhi Indian Immigration Archives (MGIIIA), PG 1 to PG 65 or the Immigrant Photo Registers; Archival Listing of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives (MGI, 2006), pp.1-5; Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21st Century: An Assesment', pp. 1-10; See Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius (1826-1937).

6. Estimated from MGIIIA, PE 1 to PE 161 or the Immigrant Ship Arrival Registers; Archival Listing of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives (MGI, 2006), pp.1-5; Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21st Century: An Assesment', pp. 1-10; See Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius (1826-1937).

▶ **A group of women and children estate workers**

Photographed in February 1880 at the Immigration Depot. MGIIIA, PG 23, Immigrant Photo Register for 1880; PF Series, Immigrant Indenture Contracts.



**The PD series** consist of 436 volumes, or PD 1 to PD 436, with more than 40 500 legal marriage certificates involving more than 82 400 individuals who reached Mauritius between January 1850 and August 1910. It is interesting to note that around 400 marriages involved Indian immigrants bringing at least 2 wives from 1850 to 1880<sup>7</sup>.

**The PC series** consist of 979 volumes, or PC 1 to PC 979, for 1843 to 1859 which contain the emigration certificates for more than 260,000 Indian immigrant men, women, and children<sup>8</sup>. In addition, both the PD and PC series indicate that between 1843 and 1910, more than one quarter, or 25%, of all immigrants who landed at the Immigration Depot did so with their families or with their wives, children, parents, and extended families<sup>9</sup>.

**The PF series** consist of 113 volumes, or PF 1 to PF 78B for 1826 to 1920, and contain the contract of more than 240,000 indentured workers. In addition, the PO and PH series consist of 40 volumes, or PO 1 to PO Vol 10B, and PH 1 to PH 29 for 1879 to 1905 which contain information on more than 150,000 immigrants, vagrants, and deserters. These immigrants lost their passes and warrants were issued by Stipendiary Magistrate to the colonial police for them as vagrants as well as for illegal absence and desertion. Even more important is the PH series, consisting of PH 1 to PH 10, or the Vagrant Registers that contain the full bio-data and vagrant records of 2700 vagrants and 2300 vagrant pictures for the period between 1877 and 1905. Just like the PG series, it is a unique record when looking at indentured record archives in other countries<sup>10</sup>.

DATE	NAME	RESIDENCE	CASTE	AGE	STATURE	DISTRESSING CASE	RESIDENCE	TO WHOM FIRST ENGAGED	DATE OF ARRIVAL IN THE COLONY
	Boudeo	Calcutta	Hindoo	35	Med	Seaman back of hand	Calcutta	Dookhny	24/10/38
	Annasamy	Madras	Malabar	35	Tall	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Bany	13/12/38
	Roupe	Calcutta	Hindoo	35	Med	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Dookhny	14/5/38
	Soopayen	Madras	Malabar	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Suran	21/4/36
	Chaudamon	"	"	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Mamaist	1838
	John	Tanquebar	"	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Sechello	"
	Wagow	Seo at Calcutta	Corom	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Olivari	1835
	Bachos	Died at Port Louis	Hindoo	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Pillut	11/2/39
	Dursty	"	"	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Sachich	1841
	Whadiu	Madras	Musp	35	"	Seaman on the ship	Calcutta	Pilot	9/8/37

▲ List of Early Indian Indentured Labourers who reached Mauritian shores between 1835 and 1839. MGIIIA, PE 1, Immigrant Ship Arrival Register for 1826 to 1841.

7. Estimated from MGIIIA, PD 1 to PD 436 or the Immigrant Marriage Registers; Archival Listing of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives (MGI, 2006), pp. 1-5; Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Assessment', pp. 1-10; See Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius (1826-1937).

8 & 10. Estimated from MGIIIA, PC 1 to PC 979 or the Immigrant Emigration Certificates; Archival Listing of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives (MGI, 2006), pp. 1-5; Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Assessment', pp. 1-10; See Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius (1826-1937).

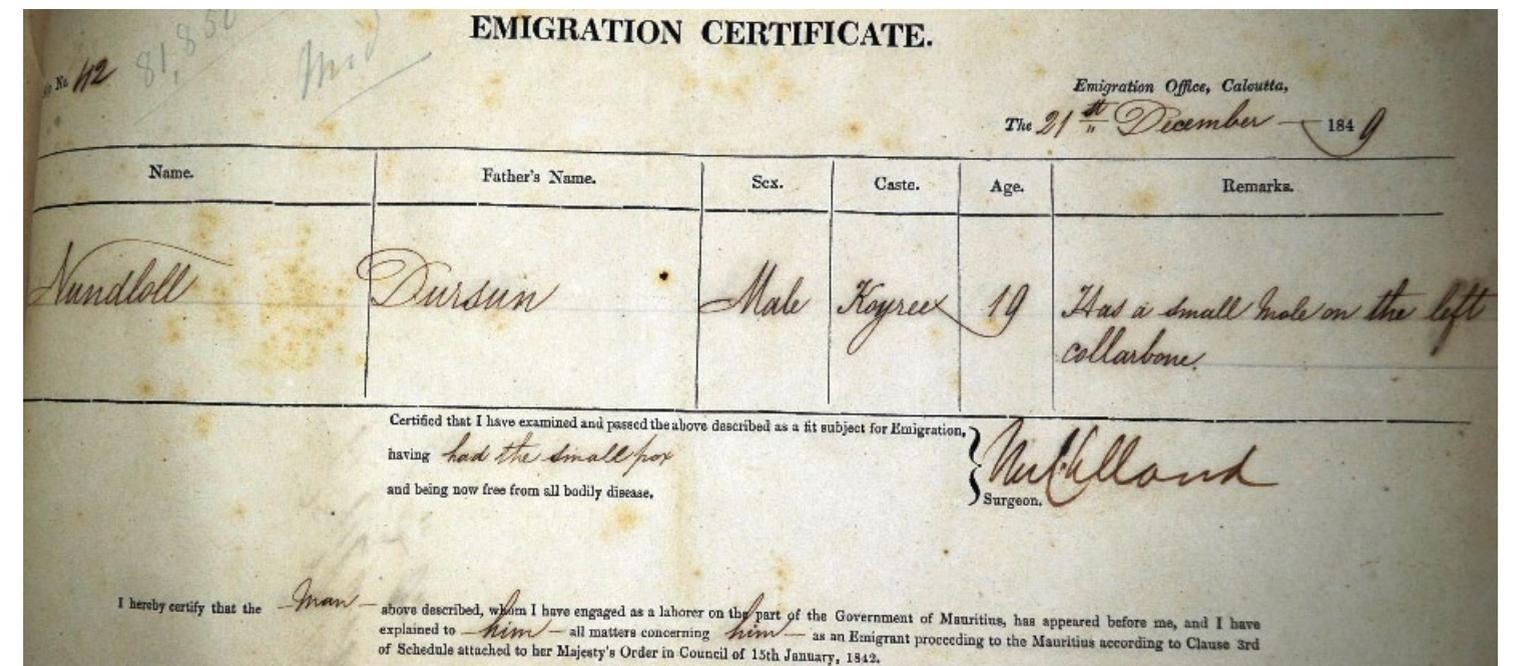
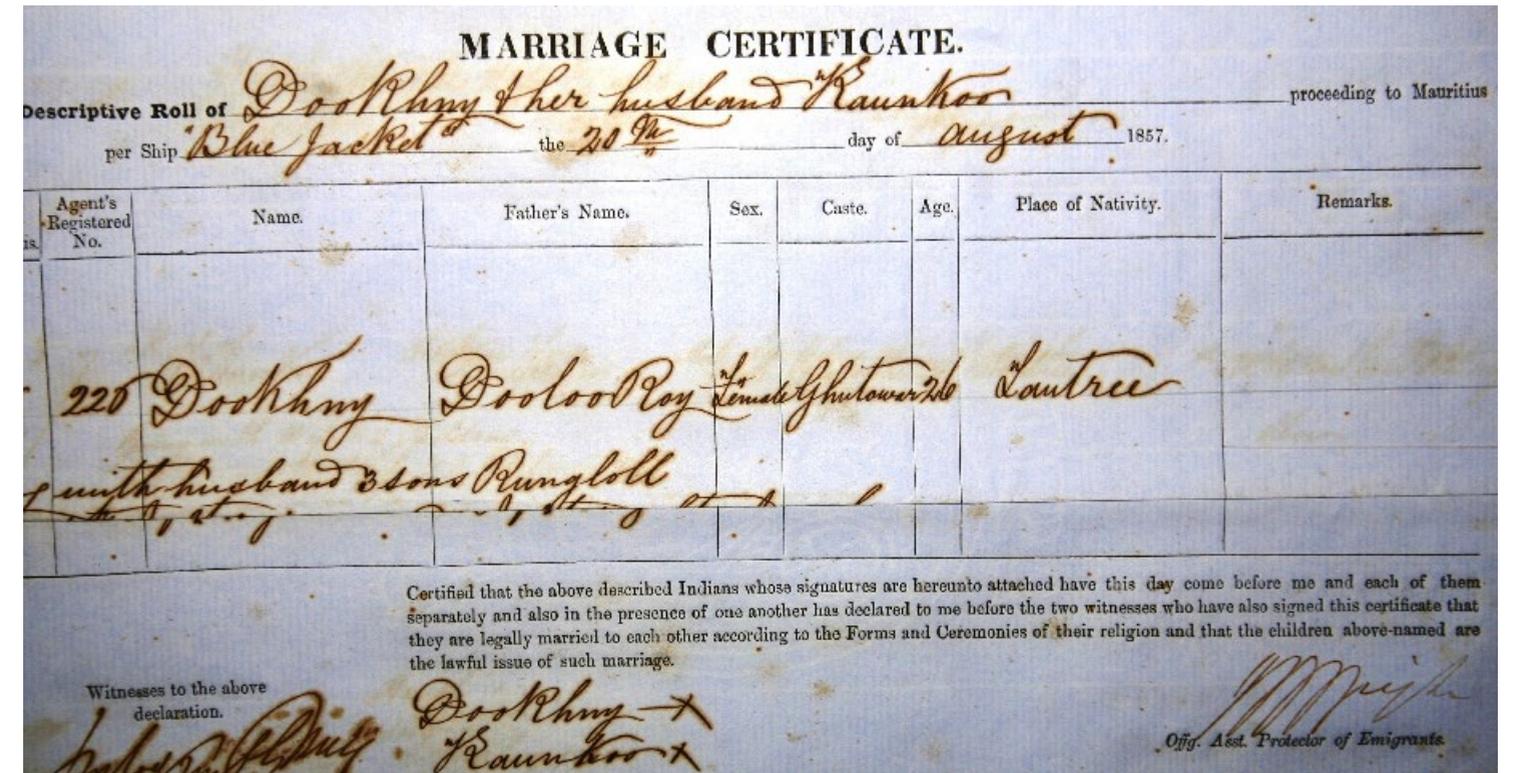
9. See MGIIIA, PD and PC Series.

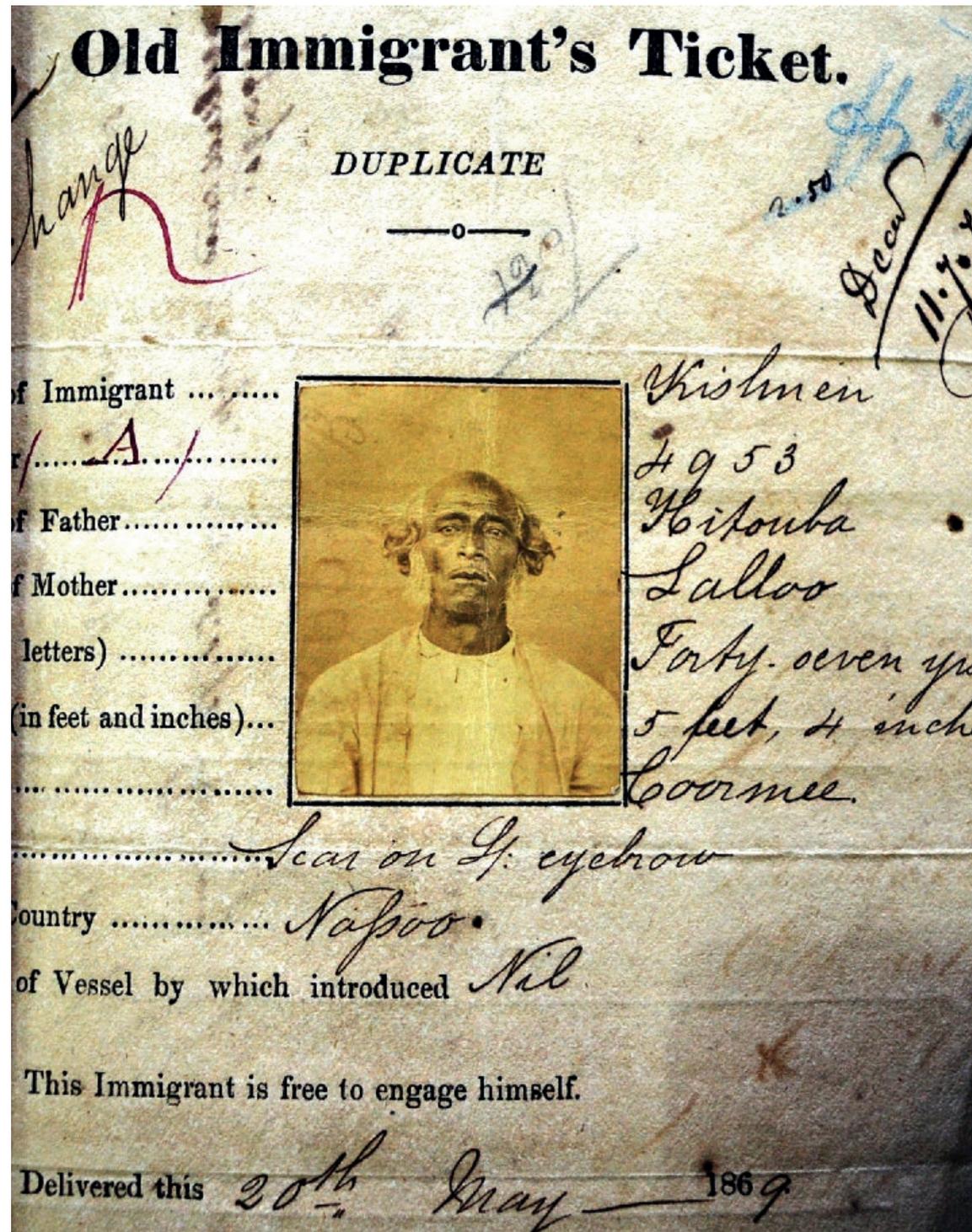
► **The Marriage Certificate of Immigrant Dookhny**

Married to Immigrant Raunkoo and with whom she had 3 sons and arrived in Mauritius on the ship The Blue Jacket August 1857. MGIIIA, PD 151, Immigrant Marriage Registers for July-September 1857.

► **Immigrant Nundall's Emigration Certificate, my great grandmother's great grandfather**

Arrived in Mauritius in December 1849 at the age of 19. He was a young Bengali indentured worker who lived and work in Riviere du Rempart district in northern Mauritius. MGIIIA, PC 373, Immigrant Emigration Certificates for November to December 1849.





**Immigrant Kishnen**

was arrested as a vagrant in May 1869 at the age of 47 after having worked and lived 33 years in Mauritius. He was 14 years old when he came to work as a child indentured labour in Mauritius in 1835. He was a Hindu from Nasso a town close to Srinagar in Kashmir district in northern India. MGIIIA, PH 1, Immigrant Vagrant Registers for 1879-1880.

Former Indentured Indian Immigrants  
Arrived in 1910 in Mauritius and returning to India with their families in December 1924 at their own expense. MGIIIA, PJ51B, Returning Immigrant Registers for 1924-1930.

11. Estimated from MGIIIA, PJ 1 to PJ 51B or the Returning Immigrant Registers; Estimated from MGIIIA, PL 1 to PL 79 or Letters and Correspondence of the Immigration Department; Archival Listing of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives (MGI, 2006), pp.1-5; Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Assessment', pp.1-10; See Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': *The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius* (1826-1937).

12 & 13. Peerthum, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory and the Archives in during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Assessment', pp.1-10; Peerthum, 'They Came to Mauritian Shores': *The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius* (1826-1937).

Wall of Ancestral Remembrance at the Peerthum Residence, MGI Archives ancestral pictures as a living visual heritage (Col. S. Peerthum)

**The PJ series** consist of 58 volumes, or PJ 1 to PJ 51B, for 1860 to 1930 and information on more than 110,000 Indian immigrants and Indo-Mauritians who returned to India. This figure includes 12,000 to 15,000 Indo-Mauritians who were the wives, children, and grand children of the returning Indian immigrants. Furthermore, between the 1860s and the 1920s, there were also more than 4000 Indian immigrants who lived and worked for between 20 and 50 years in Mauritius before returning to India and another 1000 immigrants who emigrated to other colonies and countries. The PL Series consist of 114 volumes or PL 1 to PL 79. They contain thousands of official and unofficial letters, memos, and reports from 1843 to 1912 concerning the workings of the Immigration Department and issues concerning the indentured and former indentured workers<sup>11</sup>.

**A CONCRETE EXAMPLE WITH MY FAMILY, THE PEERTHUMS**

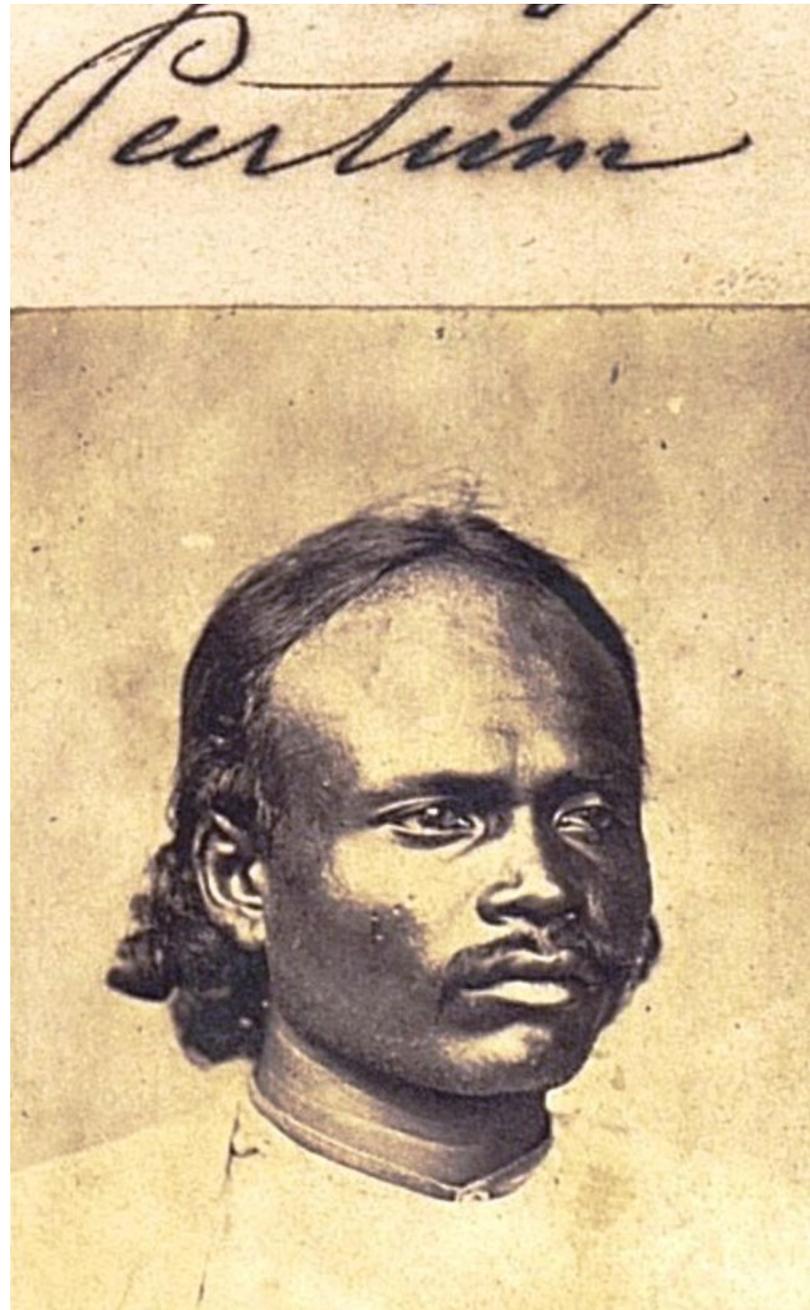
These Mauritian indentured immigration records allow for an in-depth research of the historic importance of the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site, other indenture sites such as the Vagrant Depot and Flat Island, the Great Experiment, and the global extent and impact of indentured labor as recommended by World Heritage Committee in 2006. They were also used for the preparation of the Aapravasi Ghat Nomination Dossier between 2002 and 2006. At the same time, between 1992 and 2020, or over a period of 28 years, it has allowed an estimated between 55,000 and 60,000 Mauritians to retrace their roots and obtain the Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) card instead of the People of Indian Origins (PIO) card<sup>12</sup>.

At the same time, it should be noted that between 15,000 to 20,000 individuals among them were able to obtain one or more pictures of their Indian ancestors. Between January 2017 and February 2020, more

Date of Departure	Sex	NAME	Father's Name	Age	Place of Birth
December 1869	M	Shanmugam Nigal		30	Madras
1869	F	Shanmugam		30	Madras
1869	M	Ram Narai	Sankaran	30	Madras
1869	F	Chagna	Narayan	30	Madras
1869	M	Peethay	Sankaran	30	Madras
1869	M	Sam	Peethay	30	Madras
1869	M	Shanmugam Nigal	Sankaran	30	Madras
1869	M	Shanmugam	Sankaran	30	Madras
1869	M	Shanmugam	Sankaran	30	Madras
1869	M	Shanmugam	Sankaran	30	Madras

than 15,000 Mauritians obtained the MGI immigrant certificates which was required for their OCI card application. The majority among them, frame and hang these pictures in their homes and offices which form part of their lives. Therefore, these immigrant pictures represent a living heritage as they are tangible reminders to us of our origins as descendants of Indian indentured immigrants<sup>13</sup>.





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Name of Immigrant	Peertum		
Immigrant Number	750 311	Photo No	148329 (6/23)
Father's Name	Carick	Mother's Name	Dunoo
Next of Kin	Residence:		
Age	28 Yrs	Sex	M
Married in India to	Height		
Married in Mauritius to	Number		
Place of Marriage	Date of Marriage		
Zillah	Arora	Pergonah	Village
Port of Origin	Naraipore		
Name of Ship	De Gama	Ship No	3251
Date of Arrival	12/04/1874	Reached Depot Mauritius	
Employer's Name	Messy & Co.	Field	
Distribution	15/04/1874	Usarriet	Flaco
Return to India Per	Date		
Died On	1905	Place	Flaco
Remarks	Red on right forearm Registered On: 10.02.1981		

▲ **The MGI Archives Certificate issued for Immigrant Peertum or Peertum**

issued in August 2018 which is required for obtaining the OCI Card and for retracing one's ancestry. It shows the MGI Indian Immigration Archives as a living heritage. (Col.S. Peertum)

◀ **Immigrant Peertum or Peertum, my great great grand father.**

Arrived in Mauritius in April 1874 at the age of 28. He was a cane cutter from Naraipore in Bihar. He was photographed at the age of 35 at the Immigration Depot in 1881. MG11A, PG 24, Immigrant Photo Register for 1881; PE 122, Immigrant Ship Arrival Register for 1873-1874.



▲ **The Indentured Immigrant Pictures**

from the PG Series of the MGI Archives on display at the Beekrumsing Ramallah Interpretation Centre near the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site in 2018 which is a living visual and historical heritage (Col. S. Peertum et AGTF)

***The objective of this article***

has been to provide an overview of the richness and diversity of the indentured immigration records of Mauritius and of the life-stories of the indentured labourers who reached Mauritian shores between 1826 and 1910. It is a pictorial presentation which has provided new insights into the historic and heritage value of these unique records which document the Mauritian experience with indentured labour and the lives of the Indian and non-Indian indentured workers which cover the period between 1826 and 1950. In addition, it has also briefly covered the inscription process of these Mauritian archives on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in December 2015.

31. Hobsbawm, 'First Session: Memorial Lectures at Yale University'; Refer to Footnote 1.

This article has focused mainly on the indentured immigration registers of the MGI Indian Immigration Archives, as it was demonstrated in great detail, since it houses some of the country's most important archival volumes and they have a place in the lives of some Mauritians. Lastly, it is important to reiterate that it is only through the preservation, protection, dissemination, and valorization of these unique archival and historic records for the present and future generations that we are truly, as Eric Hobsbawm once explained, "commemorating the making of our history"<sup>31</sup>.