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**Archive, Gedächtnis und Wissen**



# Networking – Shared Memory (1)

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## **Shared Memory: East Indian Immigration** *Helen Leonce*

### **Introduction**

Migration is a phenomenon common to all peoples worldwide. The world's history is shaped by the migration of peoples. Archives universally chronicle the history of nations which are generally formed by the migration of their inhabitants at some point of their history. Trinidad and Tobago, a part of the New World is no different. The Caribbean as a whole reflects patterns of migration that have taken place over six or more centuries. During the nineteenth century in particular there was an influx of peoples from the old world – India (as one example) into the Caribbean and this has influenced indelibly, the demography, culture and society of Trinidad and Tobago. Future generations of Caribbean people and the Diaspora will be able to access this portion of their history through the networking of “Shared Memory”.

### **Historical Background**

In Trinidad and Tobago Indian indentureship began in 1845 and continued for almost a century until 1917. The need for indentureds sprang from the shortage of labour which was the result of the emancipation of slaves and their large-scale emigration from the sugar estates from 1838. Sugar was the major export product or “King” as this product was referred to, during this period. It constituted the backbone of the Caribbean economy and the planters felt that they needed to import labour to keep the industry going. Many colonies like Trinidad had recently enacted and enforced freedom for all slaves. A new British Colony in 1797, Trinidad witnessed with the rest of the British Empire the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, meaning that no new slaves were introduced from then on to serve the rapidly growing estates of sugar cane.

Many schemes were tried to source alternative labour. The Port of Spain Gazette (within our holdings) is replete with these activities from 1838 to 1845. Financial incentives were offered to African Americans to come to Trinidad, but most found the island too hot. Similar sentiments were expressed by the indentured servants brought from Madeira, Germany and England. They also could not endure the rigors of plantation work. Chinese workers were brought but their costs, because of distance were prohibitive and their attitude to agriculture had them quickly changing to small businesses in the towns.

### **Arrival of the Indians**

The Trinidad planters had been aware of the successful Indian indentured immigration starting in Isle de Bourbon in 1830, Mauritius in 1834 and nearer British Guiana in 1838. Therefore 30<sup>th</sup> May 1845 saw the arrival of the first boatload of indentured Indians to Trinidad. Thus began the large-scale importation of Indian immigrants to work on the plantations, although many reported that Trinidad was unprepared to receive these newcomers. On arrival in Trinidad and Tobago, they were quarantined at one of the smaller islands of the colony called Nelson Island. (There are photographs of indentureds grouped together on this island within our holdings).

### **The Collection – East Indian Immigrants**

The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago holds various registers of East Indian Immigrants who arrived in Trinidad between the years 1845 and 1917.

The following are the main categories of these Registers:

- 18 General Registers spanning the years 1845 - 1917
- 15 Estate Registers spanning the years 1845 - 1901
- 334 Ship Registers spanning the years 1866 – 1917

The General Registers contain such information as the ship number, the registration number of the immigrants, their sex, age, height, caste, bodily marks, their fathers name, the name of the village they came from, the date of indenture, the name of the plantation to which they were assigned, whether they returned to India or not and a remarks column that relayed information on such matters as whether they died on board the ship or had children during the voyage.

Estate registers include information such as the names, registration numbers and sex of immigrants, their fathers name, annual fees paid to them, date of their indenture and the estate to which they were assigned. Ship Registers consist of an emigration pass confirming the immigrants' fitness to work and detailing information such as the name of the ship on which they arrived in Trinidad, the date of its arrival, the name of the immigrants, their caste, father's name, the immigrants' sex, age, next of kin, the district and village in India from which they came, their occupation and whether they were married and to whom they were married.

Smaller categories within the holdings of the Archives include the Reports of the Protector of Immigrants which relay the conditions under which the indentureds worked and recommendations for their improvement; Emigration passes which contain information similar to that found in the ship registers and records of monies sent back to India by the immigrants to their relatives there.

The Indian arrived with an Emigration Pass which was completed in India. In Trinidad, his/her General Register Number, estate of indenture and details of sickness if any were written. Even those who died at sea had their Emigration Passes brought to Trinidad and kept there. The Emigration Pass also contained depot numbers and ship numbers and from 1886, a sub-depot number. These three numbers were restarted with each new batch and were not unique to the Immigrant as was the General Register number. However these numbers were helpful in showing the relationship among families who emigrated together. Usually the father had the earliest number consecutively followed by the mother, the sons, and daughters, then infant sons and daughters. Obviously those born at sea were given neither depot numbers nor ship numbers.

### **Networking – Shared Memory**

There are many ways by which the information contained on these documents is of tremendous benefits for “**Shared Memory**”. Collaboration between members' countries, regions, institutions, international organizations can go a long way in promoting the development and preservation of archives worldwide. By no means exhaustive, the following list where collaboration will strengthen the East Indian Collection of Trinidad and Tobago, is now presented:

1. **Missing Documents:** Among the Trinidad Indian documents there are many gaps. Ship registers which were bound volumes of emigration passes are missing from the National Archives. Examples include the first years, 1845 – 1851, SS Castle Howard of 1861, the SS Moy of 1894, the SS Main 1896, SS forth of 1907, and SSGanges of 1915.
2. **Arrival Documents Housed Elsewhere:** Many other West Indian islands received Indian indentured workers who when the time came to be married or to marry their children sought spouses among Trinidad's larger Indian community. This resulted in movement from these islands to Trinidad with no apparent documentation of these movements. Therefore when the descendants of these immigrants try to trace their ancestors' arrivals in Trinidad, there are no records available at our National Archives. Their precious EMIGRATION PASS which recorded the India details of each ancestor would have gone to their original colony of indenture. There was also movement between British Guiana and Suriname to Trinidad.

3. **Returnees:** Many indentured Indians to Trinidad had 'Returnee of Mauritius or name of other colony even Trinidad' written next to their name in the General or Ship Register. This is an important document for researchers. If the Ship Register/Emigration Pass is missing, researchers usually check the former colony of arrival to see if the emigration pass is available there, and so get the valuable details of these immigrants to assist them in their research. This scenario also applied to Indians arriving as 'free/non-indentured' passengers, to settle in Trinidad.
4. In India apart from the Emigration Pass, the indentured Indian also filled out an '**Intention to Emigrate**' form. Some of these documents made their way to Trinidad. Perhaps these documents were kept in India as well and could be retrieved. This document was even more detailed than the Emigration Pass, because it contained information on the Indian's property in India and to whom it was to be assigned.