

Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site

Brief history

The Aapravasi Ghat historical site is an important symbol of Mauritian identity since the ancestors of more than 70% of today's Mauritian population arrived on the island through this immigration depot.

The indenture period in Mauritius (1834-1910)

The British Parliament's decision to abolish slavery in its colonies in 1833 led to the setting up of a new system of recruitment called indenture. An indentured labourer was a free man or woman who signed a contract to work away from his/her homeland for an employer for a specified period of time, generally for five years. Labourers' contracts specified their terms of employment and outlined their general standard of living, wage rate, working hours, type of work, rations, housing and medical care. In Mauritius, even before the abolition of slavery on 1st February 1835, planters called for labourers as the sugar industry expanded rapidly.

The British colonial Government wanted to evaluate the viability of this new system and also sought to demonstrate the superiority of free over slave labour. The "Great Experiment" was launched in Mauritius which as a test case, received the first indentured labourers. The Great Experiment officially started when the Atlas arrived from India with 36 indentured labourers on board on 2 November 1834.

Between 1839 and 1842, the emigration of indentured labourers from India was suspended as a result of the abuse to which the earliest contract workers in Mauritius were subjected.

Indentured immigration reached its peak years between the 1843 and 1865 to respond to the increasing needs of the sugar industry making of Mauritius, the most productive sugar colony in the British Empire around 1845.

Indentured immigration declined as from 1870s and came to a formal end in 1910.

The role of the Immigration Depot

Before the construction of the Aapravasi Ghat in Trou Fanfaron in Port Louis, several buildings were used as depots in Port Louis to receive indentured labourers.

The Aapravasi Ghat was constructed in 1849 to improve the management of indentured immigration. The depot was enlarged in the 1850s and 1860s to receive the increasing flow of immigrants. By 1860, the immigration depot was extended to a carrying capacity of 600 immigrants.

In 1864, the railway line separated the depot in two distinct parts: one side received the newly arrived immigrants and the other was devoted to the management of immigrants already under contract or about to leave the territory on termination of their engagement.

From 1849 to 1910, the Aapravasi Ghat played a central role in the day-to-day functioning of the indenture labour system and in the lives of these immigrants and their descendants in Mauritius.

The **role of Aapravasi Ghat immigration office** was to:

- Receive newly arrived labourers
- Perform sanitary control
- Register immigrants and time-expired labourers
- Deliver tickets and passes to immigrants
- Allocate labourers to sugar estates or public construction projects
- Supervise the return of migrants
- Receive vagrants
- Receive immigrants' payment of taxes
- Deliver immigrants' marriage certificates
- Record the purchase of land by immigrants
- Inspect the estates on which indentured labourers worked

Being an Immigrant at the Immigration Depot

Immigrants arrived in Mauritius after a journey from India that generally took eight to ten weeks. At the Aapravasi Ghat, they were fed and housed while being processed and received medical care if necessary.

When the immigrants arrived, they were inspected by the medical officer. He vaccinated those who had not already been vaccinated for smallpox. If a case of smallpox or contagious disease was found, the whole number of passengers were sent to quarantine stations on small islets around Mauritius. Once the healthy immigrants had disembarked, they sat in the yard of the depot where they were counted. Their complaints were recorded. Those who were sick were sent to the civil hospital.

The Immigration Depot staff registered the personal details of each immigrant. In 1865, a photographic unit was created and a photographer took two portrait photos of each immigrant. One was attached to the immigrant's ticket while the second photo was retained in the records office of the Aapravasi Ghat. These documents are now kept at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute.

Immigrants usually stayed about two days at the Aapravasi Ghat to complete all administrative procedures. Once these procedures were completed, indentured immigrants were distributed to sugar estates. Planters or sirdars came to the Aapravasi Ghat to pay the transportation costs of their new employees, and were given their certificates of engagement. A few days later, planters received the tickets of their indentured employees.

Origins of Immigrants

The majority of Indentured Labourers came from India but they also came from China, South East Asia, Madagascar and East Africa.

Malagasy, Comorian and Chinese labourers were introduced when the British government of India suspended immigration to Mauritius from 1839 to 1842, and also between 1855 and 1860, when the demand for workers was exceptionally high.

Unsuccessful attempts to introduce Indian labourers in Mauritius were made as early as 1826. Large scale indentured labour migration began in 1834. Most Indian indentured labourers were embarked at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Most of the Indian indentured immigrants came from Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Bombay.

From Immigration Depot to World Heritage Site

Nearly half a million immigrants climbed up the steps of the Aapravasi Ghat between 1849 and 1910. For this reason, the site is an important tangible evidence of the peopling of Mauritius and of the shaping process of modern Mauritian identity.

After the 1920s, the site was converted into offices for the Ministry of Social Welfare. The War Department used the building for a brief period during the Second World War. In 1950, the Public Assistance Department was established at Aapravasi Ghat as the immigration records were kept there. In 1960, cyclone “Carol” caused major damage to the site. The archives of the immigration depot had to be transferred to a safer place at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. After this transfer in 1976, the building remained empty. Only a few structures have survived since much of the site was destroyed in the 1980s when the motorway was constructed.

In 1987, the historical importance of the Immigration Depot was recognized by the Government and it was declared a National Monument. The name of the depot was changed from “Coolie Ghat” to “Aapravasi Ghat” which means the landing place of Immigrants in Hindi.

In 2001, the symbolical date of 2nd November became a public holiday in memory of the arrival of the first indentured labourers in Mauritius on board the Atlas. The same year, the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund was created to manage, preserve and promote the Aapravasi Ghat site.

Conservation Professionals from ICOMOS India (International Council of Monuments and Sites), were called upon to supervise the restoration and conservation of the site. The goal of the conservation project was to restore the Aapravasi Ghat to its original condition by using similar materials and construction methods used when the structure was built in the mid-nineteenth century.

Inscription on the World Heritage Site List

A Nomination Dossier was submitted to UNESCO on 29 January 2005 after its inclusion on the tentative list of World Heritage Sites by the Government of Mauritius in 2003.

During the 30th meeting of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Vilnius in Lithuania on 16 July 2006, the Aapravasi Ghat was inscribed on the World Heritage list.

The Outstanding Universal Value of the Aapravasi Ghat

From 1834 to 1910, Mauritius received the greatest number of indentured labourers thus preceding Guyana, South Africa, Trinidad, Cuba, Peru and Reunion Island. Ninety five percent of them came from India but indentured labourers were also recruited in Africa, Madagascar, China and South-East Asia bringing a significant dimension to the Mauritian experience.

The Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site stands for a major historic testimony of indenture in the 19th century and embodies the success of the Great Experiment that led the British Government to use indenture in its colonies around the world. As from 1840s, Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, South Africa and other colonial powers like Germany, Holland, France, Portugal and Spain began to resort to the indentured system to recruit work force in their colonies.

The Mauritian experiment demonstrated the viability of ‘free’ or contractual labour in plantation economies and led to the migration of more than 2 million indentured labourers from Africa, India, China, Southeast Asia and Melanesia from the Caribbean through eastern and southern African and Southeast Asia to Australia.

Indenture then became a universal phenomenon resulting in the creation of multicultural societies in the Indian Ocean, in the Caribbean, in the Pacific and in Latin America.

The experiment was one of the first explicit manifestations of the new global economic system that had come into existence by the early 19th century and that still exists today.

The **Outstanding Universal Value** of the Aapravasi Ghat was defined as follows at the time of its inscription:

“Aapravasi Ghat, as the first site chosen by the British Government in 1834 for the ‘great Experiment’ in the use of indentured, rather than slave labour, is strongly associated with memories of almost half a million indentured labourers moving from India to Mauritius to work on sugar canes plantations or to be transhipped to other parts of the World.”

(WHC-06/30.COM/19; Decision 30 COM 8B.33)

- 1834 Beginning of the indentured labour system under private auspices
- 1835 Abolition of slavery
- 1839 Suspension of Indian labour immigration by the British government of India
- 1842 Indian immigration under government control start again
- 1849 Aapravasi Ghat becomes operational to receive immigrants
- 1849–1865 Indenture system is fully operational; immigration to Mauritius peaks
- 1853-1859 Expansion and improvement of the Aapravasi Ghat Immigration Depot
- 1864 Construction of a railway line through the centre of the Aapravasi Ghat
- 1910 Indentured Immigration to Mauritius formally ends
- 1922 Labour ordinance formally ends the indenture system
- 1938 The post of Protector of Immigrants is abolished
- 1950 Public Assistance Department is established at the Aapravasi Ghat
- 1970 Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, visits the site
- 1976 Immigration records are transferred to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute
- 1987 Immigration Depot is declared a National Monument and renamed Aapravasi Ghat
- 2001 Creation of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund
2nd November is declared a public holiday
- 2004 Beginning of the Aapravasi Ghat Conservation Project
- 2002-2004 Archaeological excavation of the site
- 2004 Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, visits the site
- 2005 A nomination dossier to inscribe the Aapravasi Ghat on the World Heritage list is submitted to UNESCO
- 2006 The Aapravasi Ghat is inscribed on the list of World Heritage Sites