Introduction
May 5, 2013 marked the 175th Anniversary of the first arrival of Indian indentured laborers in Guyana. In fact, it was the first such arrival in the entire Caribbean region. This historic event was commemorated with a series of activities in Guyana, including unveiling of arrival monument at the site of the first landing, re-enactment of the arrivals, cultural performances, and a conference on arrivals and contributions of various ethnic groups in Guyana. GOPIO’s role, in collaboration with India’s Ministry of Overseas Affairs and the Indian High Commissioner in Guyana, was significant and supportive of GOPIO of Guyana chapter and the Indian Commemoration Trust for these historic week-long commemoration events.

Since that historic arrival of indentured Indian laborers in 1838, people of Indian origin in Guyana have observed Indian Arrival Day as a significant date in their history that connected them to India, same as those in other countries where Indian laborers were taken and later domiciled. The commemoration of 150th Anniversary of Indian Arrival Day in Guyana was a major event held on May 5, 1988 with a large contingent from India comprising officials, artists, academicians and others. Then Vice Pres of India, HE the late Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, led a delegation of over 200 VIPs, artists & performers, academicians, historians and journalists from India to participate in the 150th anniversary. Planning for 175th Anniversary of Indian Arrival Day in Guyana was done to be an equally significant and historic commemoration. The Indian Commemoration Trust, under the expert guidance of Dr. Yesu Persaud, planned the highly successful 150th anniversary and employed the same skills and determination to make the 175th anniversary another tremendous success.

History
Situated on the northern coast of South America, Guyana is the former British Guiana colony of Britain where indentured Indians were brought to work on the plantations starting in 1838. Most have remained and settled in now independent Guyana, forming a significant percentage of the present 800,000 population and contributing to its economic development and growth. Other ethnic groups comprise descendants of former African slaves, Portuguese and Chinese laborers, and native Amer-Indians. From the first arrivals in 1838 until the end of Indian indenturedship practice in 1917, a total of 238,309 Indian laborers arrived in Guyana to work on the plantations under 5-year contracts.

Approximately 85% of the arrivals originated from the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar, while approximately 7% originated from the South India (primarily Tamil Nadu). About 30% returned upon completion of the indentured contracts, with diminishing numbers after 1917
Collaboration & Support
The series of steps leading up to 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration took lots of planning, effort, support and collaboration among several key persons, officials, organizations and agencies. GOPIO International (Ashook Ramsaran), along with GOPIO of Guyana chapter (Sasenarine Sankar) and the Indian Commemoration Trust (Dr. Yesu Persaud and Pradeep Samtani), worked closely and collaboratively with the Indian High Commissioner in Guyana (HE Shri Puran Pal Meena and Shri Tirath Singh) and India’s Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (Hon Min Vayalar Ravi and Joint Secretary T K Manoj Kumar) to plan, fund, coordinate and hold the events which are truly historic.

Adequate funding was crucial to the exemplary design, construction and completion of the arrival monuments (at Highbury and Monument Gardens) and the cultural pavilion & stage at Monument Gardens. The arrival monuments and cultural pavilion & stage are indeed spectacular and befitting the 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration in Guyana. While there were many donors and supporters in Guyana and from abroad, India’s Ministry of Overseas Affairs supported the efforts with a substantial contribution. The arrival monuments at Highbury and Monument Gardens were patterned after the Kolkata Memorial which was inaugurated on January 11, 2011. The cultural pavilion & stage at Monument Gardens is a spectacular edifice with Indian motif.

Souvenir Brochure & Commemorative Coin
A comprehensive, well designed 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration souvenir brochure was produced, in addition to a suitably designed commemorative coin. The souvenir brochure included congratulatory messages and good wishes from Guyana’s President Donald Ramoutar; India’s Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, Hon Vayalar Ravi; Indian High Commissioner to Guyana, Hon Puran Pal Meena; GOPIO International president Ashook Ramsaran; Guyana’s Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Hon. Dr Frank Anthony. Articles related to Indian arrival and experiences in Guyana were contributed by:

Prof Pat Dial; Aditya Prashad; Dr. Yesu Persaud; Prof Clem Seecharan; Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG); Gauitra Bahadur; Petamber Persaud; Dr. David Dabydeen; late Rev Dr. Dale Binsauth; Pandit Harish Tewari; Parvati Persaud-Edwards; Moses Nagamootoo; Prof Bishnodat Persaud; Nowrang Persaud & Suresh Narine; Dr Seeta Shah Roath; Dr Vibert Cambridge; Dr. Vivian Rambihar; Ryhaan Shah; and Ashook Ramsaran (“The Kolkata Memorial: History, Perspectives and Significance to Persons of Indian Origin”).

175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration souvenir brochure & commemorative coins
Congratulatory Messages
The 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration souvenir brochure included congratulatory messages and good wishes from several prominent officials in Guyana, India and USA. In his message, Guyana’s President Donald Ramoutar stated, “This is a significant milestone. Today the East Indian community can be proud of the sacrifice and achievements of their ancestors who left their rich traditions and culture”. India’s Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, Hon Vayalar Ravi, remarked that “The Government and the people of India also recognize and greatly value the important role being played by the Indian community in Guyana”. Indian High Commissioner to Guyana, Hon Puran Pal Meena stated that, “The faith of Indian immigrants and descendants in religious, social and cultural traditions have nurtured and worked as a strong link to India, the land of their origin”. GOPIO International president Ashook Ramsaran stated, “While survival must have been the primary concern, they persevered to maintain their sense of origin, traditions, culture and religion despite those difficulties. Their children, grandchildren and following generations will always take pride in their resilience and accomplishments”. Guyana’s Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Hon. Dr Frank Anthony, said that, “By their sheer will power, religious solace, and tenacity to survive, they resisted and eventually triumphed over this oppressive servitude”.

Conference
On May 4, 2013 the 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary Commemoration conference organized by Indian Commemoration Trust and GOPIO of Guyana was held at the Guyana International Conference Centre, with the focus on “Living in peace, harmony, togetherness and amity to build a stronger Guyana”. The conference was chaired by Sasenarine Sankar (President of GOPIO Guyana) and included a wide array of speakers from various segments of Guyanese society: Dr Yesu Persaud (Chairman of Indian Commemoration Trust who spoke on experience and contributions of East Indians in Guyana); Ashook Ramsaran (President of GOPIO International who spoke on GOPIO, its outreach and significance to people of Indian origin in Guyana and globally); Hon Puran Pal Meena (Indian High Commissioner to Guyana); Hon. Dr Frank Anthony (Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth); Sister Mary Noel Menezes (Experience of the Portuguese under indenturedship); Stanley Ming (Experience of the Portuguese under indenturedship); Eric Phillips (Experience of the Africans under slavery); Dr. Vibert Cambridge (Indo-Guyanese Music in the 20th Century); Dr. Seeta Shah-Roath (Poem: Roots of a People). Among many others in attendance were: Ena Maraj, president of GOPIO Int’l chapter of Trinidad & Tobago; Dr Vivian Rambihar (Canada – Co-Chair of GOPIO’s Health Council); Hemraj Kissoon (founding life member of GOPIO); Pradeep Samtani (Indian Commemoration Trust); Hon. Clement Rohee (Minister of Home Affairs); MP Moses Nagamootoo and MP Khemraj Ramjattan.
Meetings with Officials
On May 4, 2013, representatives of GOPIO and Indian Commemoration Trust (ICT) held discussions on diaspora matters with several officials of the Government of Guyana. At a meeting with Guyana’s President, HE Donald Ramotar, GOPIO International President Ashook Ramsaran presented GOPIO’s “Global Indian Diaspora” book, in addition to the 175th Indian Arrival Anniversary souvenir brochure presented by Sasenarine Sankar (President of GOPIO Guyana); Dr Yesu Persaud (Chairman of ICT, founding life member of GOPIO and former president of GOPIO Guyana); and Pradeep Samtani (ICT). The group of GOPIO and ICT representatives also met with Guyana’s Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Dr Frank Anthony, and Indian High Commissioner to Guyana, Hon Puran Pal Meena. Subsequently, a separate meeting was held with MPs Moses Nagamootoo and Khemraj Ramjattan.
Cultural Presentations

There were several cultural presentations and performances by renowned Guyana and international artistes spanning the week-long 175th Indian Arrival Day Anniversary commemoration and at various venues in the country. Following in the tradition of renowned cultural icons Bhanmattee Shaw and sister Sita, Nadira Shaw performed “Vandana” at Highbury and at Monument Gardens preceding the unveiling of the arrival monuments. Nadira Shaw also gave a wonderful presentation Nrityageet at the National Cultural Centre on May 4, event opened by Dr Yesu Persaud as he has done for past 30 years and attended by Guyana’s President Donald Ramoutar, GOPIO president Ashok Ramsaran and Indian High Commissioner Meena, among many others. Other performers at Highbury included: Soriaya Kumar; Saregama Group; Savitri Persaud, Davendra Persaud, Artie Sukhia, Devendra Sookraj, Somattie Goberdhan, Nicola & Group, Amir Baksh and several others. Performers at Monument Gardens included: Pandit Ravi, Savitri Persaud, Haji Zahid Alli, Jewanram & Family, Ramkisson Singh and Kiran Mattai.
Arrival Monuments and Cultural Pavilion & Stage

The design of the arrival monuments was patterned after the Kolkata Memorial which was inaugurated on January 11, 2011. GOPIO International worked closely with GOPIO of Guyana, Indian Commemoration Trust and Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs on this project lasting several months. Pradeep Samtani and others at Indian Commemoration Trust focused their efforts to construct a masterpiece. Within the 4 high columns of the very impressive arrival monument is a marble plaque with the inscription clearly visible, a fitting tribute pays tribute, recognition and remembrance of Indian indentured laborers who took the long journey seeking better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants for their sacrifices and achievements.

One was constructed at Highbury, site of the first arrival of Indian indentured laborers in 1838, and the other at the spacious Monument Gardens in the capital Georgetown. The cultural pavilion and stage at Monument Gardens is an impressive edifice designed with India motif that stand out from afar as representative of Indian heritage and culture in Guyana and the Caribbean region. Its inaugural was on May 5, 2013 preceding the unveiling of the arrival monument located in the same Monument Gardens.
Inscription
As he had previously done for the Kolkata Memorial, GOPIO International president Ashook Ramsaran wrote the inscription for the Indian Arrival Memorial Monuments in Guyana, expressing the hopes and aspirations of those early arrivals in Guyana and their descendants.

The inscription reads as follows:

---

On these shores they arrived ....

This memorial commemorates the thousands of indentured Indian labourers who arrived here starting on 5th May, 1838.

In honoured tribute, gratitude and lasting remembrance of their pioneering spirit, determination, endurance, resilience and sacrifices.

Individually and collectively they have made invaluable contributions to the diverse culture and economic development of Guyana and other lands.

Dedicated on 5th May, 2013
---
Unveiling of Indian Arrival Monuments

In the absence of Hon Vayalar Ravi, Minister of India’s Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs who was scheduled to conduct the unveiling, GOPIO International president Ashook Ramsaran was given the distinct honor to unveil the arrival monuments at Highbury, site of the first arrival of Indian indentured laborers in 1838, followed by the other similar monument at Monument Gardens in the capital Georgetown. At both locations, large crowds gathered to witness the unveiling which was historic, nostalgic, and emotional. At Highbury, the inscription was read aloud by Chandra Sohan preceding the unveiling; at Monument Gardens, the inscription was read aloud by Pradeep Samtani preceding the unveiling.

Indian High Commissioner HE Shri Puran Pal Meena, Minister Dr. Frank Anthony, Dr Yesu Persaud, Judge Carl Singh; Ena Maraj, president of GOPIO Int’l chapter; GOPIO of Guyana chapter president Sasenarine Sankar; GOPIO Life Members Nohar Singh and Hemraj Kissoon as well as visitors the region and abroad participated at the unveiling. At the Monument Gardens ceremony, 107-year old Sukhdaia was given a special recognition and honor.

When he unveiled the arrival monuments, Ramsaran remarked that, “As I said on January 11, 2011 when the Kolkata Memorial was inaugurated, “While we dedicate this memorial, I am certain we are not alone. The souls of our ancestors are looking at us from above, smiling and saying “THANK YOU. YOU HAVE DONE WELL”. To which we would all reply: “THANK YOU FOR MAKING IT POSSIBLE”
Unveiling of Indian Arrival Monuments

Ashook Ramsaran unveiling monument at Georgetown

At Monument Gardens, Georgetown (l-r): Pandit Ravi Persaud; Nohar Singh (GOPIO Life Member); J Dr Yesu Persaud (Chairman of Indian Commemoration Trust); Sasenarine Sankar (Pres of GOPIO Guyana); Ashook Ramsaran (Pres of GOPIO International); Ena Maraj (Pres of GOPIO Trinidad & Tobago); Hemraj Kissoon (founding life member of GOPIO); Mr Beni Singh

107-year old Sukhdaia

Indian Arrival Ship Monument
Significance
The Kolkata Memorial is of tremendous significance historically and symbolically to Guyana and people of Indian origin in Guyana – as well as the entire Caribbean region. The first arrivals of Indian indentured laborers to the entire Caribbean (West Indies) region came to the shores of Guyana at Highbury on 5th May, 1838 and that migration continued until 1917. It is indeed appropriate that two (2) replica of the Kolkata Memorial are being unveiled in Guyana (at at Highbury and at Monument Gardens) on 5th May, 2013 on the 175th anniversary of the first arrivals. While similar replica are envisioned by GOPIO for other countries in the Caribbean region where Indian indentured laborers were sent to work on the plantations, it is significant that the first such replica are installed in the Guyana, the country of the first arrivals of Indian indentured laborers in the region.

It is noteworthy that Ashook Ramsaran, as “a son of Guyana”, played a significant role in collaborating with India’s on the Kolkata Memorial, and worked closely and collaboratively with India’s Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs to design that historic memorial which included an appropriate inscription taken from his draft, capturing the shared sentiments of the descendants of Indian indentured laborers. It is also of historic significance that Ashook Ramsaran again worked closely and collaboratively with India’s Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs for support of the arrival monuments (at Highbury and Monument Gardens) and the cultural pavilion & stage at Monument Gardens.

It is also significant that, in the absence of Hon Vayalar Ravi, Minister of with India’s Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs who was scheduled to conduct the unveiling, Ashook Ramsaran was given the distinct honor to unveil both monuments. At the unveiling at both Highbury and Monument Gardens on May 5, 2013, Ramsaran remarked that, “Our ancestors who left those shores truly deserve their place in the annals of Indian history and the journeys of people of Indian origin in the Indian Diaspora. We certainly owe them a lasting tribute, recognition of their sacrifices and a truly worthy remembrance. I am indeed honored to have been given the opportunity to write this inscription for the Guyana memorial monument as I had previously done for the Kolkata Memorial”.

Attendees at Highbury
Re-enactment at Highbury
Attendees at Highbury
Attendees at Highbury
Ashook K. Ramsaran was born in Guyana, third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came to Guyana in 1853 and 1860 respectively. He emigrated to the USA in 1968 and obtained advanced degrees in engineering at Polytechnic University in New York. He is president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International). He is founder and president of Ramex, an electronics manufacturing company based in New York, USA. He resides in New York, USA with his family. Contact: Ramsaran@aol.com