



INDIAN DIASPORIC NETWORK

Indian Diasporic Monuments and Cultural Heritage: A Study of Reconstruction and Preservation Study

By Soma Basak



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Abstract

The Indian diaspora is the largest and most widespread communities in world. It has immensely contributed to enrich the cultural fabric of various countries. Indian communities have migrated and created cultural monuments and heritage sites that serve as vital links to their ancestral roots. Indentured laborers build monuments in the 19th century across regions of Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and parts of Africa. It represents the symbol of Indian indenture system and that followed the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Through the establishment of temples, mosques, the diaspora sought to preserve their cultural and religious identities in their new homes. In present timeline these heritage structures hold significant historical and cultural value, representing resilience and continuity amidst adversity. However, preserving and reconstructing these sites poses unique challenges due to the passage of time, environmental factors, and limited resources. Despite these problems an ongoing efforts taking place to safeguard and restore these monuments underscore their importance in maintaining a connection to the Indian diasporic experience and cultural heritage. These structures continue to enrich the multicultural landscapes of their adopted nations while preserving the collective memory of the Indian diaspora.

Introduction

Indian Diasporas is one of the widespread and most extensive communities across worldwide. They contributed in many ways to enrich the culture in many countries. Indian diaspora have settled abroad over centuries and contributed to the establishment of numerous cultural monuments and heritage sites. Monuments are an important link with their ancestral heritage, serving thereby a very significant function in preserving their cultural identity. But in the context of preservation and reconstruction monuments and cultural sites also come up with unique challenges. In the present timeline many works are done for reconstruction and preservations of Indian diasporic monuments. After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire the scarcity of labour on plantations in the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and parts of Africa became problematic and that raised the indenture system. Over a million Indians were shipped as indentured labourers to various British colonies in 19th century. The result of this migration started to mark these regions with their culture and monuments and become poignant reminder of their indentureship period.

The Indian diaspora has been formed via various waves of migrations. During the British colonial period, Indians were taken as indentured laborers to various British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. This was followed by migrations for economic opportunities, educational pursuits, and professional advancement in the latter half of the 20th century. Each wave of immigration was followed by the establishment of cultural and religious institutions where the diaspora community continued to practice their culture and beliefs. In Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname, Indian indentured laborers constructed temples, mosques, and gurdwaras to carve out the cultural and religious landscape of the homeland. These

structures were built by destitute immigrants with scant resources and today those remain as major sites of heritage for Indian communities in migrated countries.

Historical Background of Diasporic Monuments

Indian diasporic communities have established monuments and memorials to honor their history, migration experiences, and contributions in foreign lands. These monuments serve as symbols of identity, pride, and the historical journey of the Indian diaspora, often commemorating significant events like indentured labor migration. The indenture system was basically a new form of forced labor, where Indians were signed to work on colonies under fixed- term contracts. They were frequently from impoverished backgrounds, were promised stipend and possibility of returning home after their contract ended. But in reality they lived with poor conditions, rigorous work schedules, and limited freedom. The creation of Indian indentureship sites, sculptures, and monuments plays a vital role in acknowledging, remembering, and preserving the experiences and contributions of indentured laborers. These physical reminders stand as markers of a significant chapter in world history that influenced the identity and heritage of millions people across Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Diasporic Monuments symbolizes a period of migration, hardship, and resilience, during which many individuals were misled and transported from India to distant regions as laborers. These sites and monuments serve as educational and cultural landmarks, offering a deeper appreciation of shared history. These monuments help foster a sense of connection, empathy, and respect for our ancestors. Honoring the past through monuments and historical sites is essential for preserving cultural heritage and encouraging intergenerational dialogue, which highlights the enduring spirit of the diaspora.¹



Figure1: Map showing the route of the Indian Indentured Labourers

¹ Dr. Kumar Mahabir. "Historical Indentureship Sites and Monuments in the Indian Diaspora," Think India Journal, 26, no. 3 (2023), 10.

Important Diasporic monuments and their role in Cultural Preservation

- The Older diaspora which refer as the legacy diaspora of the Caribbean, Africa, Mauritius, and Oceania still retain a lot more of their Indian culture and heritage intact. Its original form associated with remoteness, harsh living conditions, the sense of belonging, togetherness, sustenance, and bonding while some adaptation was necessary, such as with foods and clothing, some converted to Christianity, and breakdown of the caste system. Indian heritage is an asset for the diasporic people that some of the colonial powers tried minimized those Indian origins and tried to curb the cultural observances and made it difficult to maintain the same traditions. Despite such efforts, those Indians continued the preservation and protection of the Indian culture, heritage, and values and survived and remained vibrant.²



Figure 2: Indian Immigrants

- The Indo-Caribbean diaspora is the descendants of indentured laborers who came to the Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They together form part of the legacy in the region, both culturally and historically. Various monuments and memorials have been set up in remembrance and respect for them. Monuments in Guyana depict the formal arrival of the first Guyana Indian indentured workers who came in 1838. The

² Ashook Ramsaran, "From Kolkata to Highbury (1838 – 2013): A Journey to Remember," *Indian Diasporic Council*, published May 18, 2013, <https://indiandiasporacouncil.org/kolkata-memorial/>

monument is meant to emphasize the contribution of Indian descendants in the building of the Country of Guyana. Figures of men, women, and children usually symbolizing the journey of the Indian laborers and their descendants comprise the most usual visual components of the monument.³



Figure 3: East Indian Settlement Monument

- The Indian Arrival Monument is located on Merriman's Mall with its main entrance on Camp Street, Georgetown. This monument was erected to the Indian indentured immigrants who arrived in British Guiana between the years of 1838-1917. Around 1813 the liberation of slaves was expected and for that reason plantation owners got afraid of the mass exodus of slaves from the plantations and it made a vital effect on their earnings. By that time, Portuguese immigrant had arrived as indentured servants on the various plantations but they were found unsuitable for the hard work on the plantations and Indians were sought as a replacement. A first batch of immigrants from India arrived in British Guiana on May 5, 1838, on vessels named Whitby and Hesperus. These immigrants were distributed among the counties of Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara. So on their memorial bronze sculpture established which stands on a black granite pedestal, represents the Whitby ship that brought the first batch of Indian Indentured Immigrants to Guyana on May 5, 1838. It was designed in India and brought around Guyana in 1996. Mr. Yesu Persaud unveiled this monument on May 5, 1997.⁴ Indian Immigration Monument in Trinidad and Tobago was erected to commemorate the arrival of Indian indentured laborers in 1845. It stands close to the Temple in the Sea, a Hindu religious structure, and symbolizes the sustained cultural influence of Indian traditions in Trinidad and Tobago.

³"Indian Arrival Monument", *National Trust of Guyana*, published September 5, 2022. <https://ntg.gov.gy/monument/indian-arrival-monument/>.

⁴ Ibid.,

- Aapravasi Ghat is strongly associated with memories of almost half a million indentured laborers moving from India to Mauritius to work on sugar cane plantations or to be transshipped to other parts of the world in the greatest forced migration in history. It was selected as the first site by the British Government in 1834 for the 'great experiment' in the use of indentured, rather than slave labour. The Aapravasi Ghat is the remains of an immigration depot site from which the modern indentured labour Diaspora emerged and is located on the bay of Trou Fanfaron in the capital of Port-Louis. The Depot was constructed in 1849 for receiving indentured laborers from India, Eastern Africa, Madagascar, China, and Southeast Asia to work on the island's sugar estates as part of the 'Great Experiment'. The success of the 'Great Experiment' in Mauritius was taken up by other colonial powers from the 1840s, leading to a world-wide migration of over two million indentured laborers. The Aapravasi Ghat site is the main historic testimony to indenture in the 19th century and is the only remaining example of this particular modern diaspora. This place represents not only the development of the modern system of contractual labour but also the memories, traditions, and values carried into the alien lands by these men, women, and children when they migrated from their countries of origin in search of work and passed on to their millions of descendants for whom it is a site of immense symbolic significance. The site of Aapravasi Ghat belongs to the Ministry of Arts and Culture. It is covered as National Heritage under the National Heritage Fund Act 2003 and the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund Act 2001, the property. The Buffer Zones are under the control of the Municipal Council of Port-Louis under the Local Government Act. Current management on the site is assured by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund. This would include representatives of the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, the Ministry of Tourism, and the National Heritage Fund. A technical team of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, assisted by International experts, clears all conservation works at the site.⁵



Figure 4: Aapravasi Ghat (Mauritius)

One of the most important objectives of Aapravasi Ghat Site Management Plan is to putting a legislative back-up in place for the Buffer Zones, alongside having a clear

⁵ Aapravasi Ghat, UNESCO World Heritage Site, issued September 9, 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1227/>

management structure. Other complementary goals include an integral Development of the Conservation Plan; establishing linkages with the local community within Buffer Zones; an implementation of a Visitor Management Plan; and an establishment of an interpretation centre for the property. In order to protect the setting and context of the property, it will be necessary that progress is made with putting in place adequate tools to facilitate management and conservation of the property and its buffer zone allow engagement with inhabitants of the surrounding town in order that the relation between the property and its buffer zones is better understood.⁶



Figure 5: Aapravasi Ghat (Mauritius)

- From 1873 to 1916 many Indians came to Paramaribo, Suriname as indentured laborers to work on plantations, mainly on sugar. Many of them decided to stay in Suriname permanently after their contracts expired, enriching the nation with a further strain of culture. Here the monuments of Baba and Mai are a significant landmark that honors the arrival of Indian indentured laborers in the country. The monument reminds the nation of the first group of indentured Indian laborers who arrived in Suriname aboard a ship named Lalla Rookh, 1873. This monument stands in recognition of these labors and their descendants, who significantly contributed to agricultural and socio-cultural development throughout the country. The design reflects the continuity of Indian culture as maintained by their diaspora in present-day Suriname.

⁶ Aapravasi Ghat, UNESCO World Heritage Site, issued September 9, 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1227/>



Figure 6: Monuments of Baba and Mai

- The first batch of Indians arrived in St Vincent in June 1861. While the migration of Indians to Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname is well recorded but very little is known about Indians who were taken to the smaller island territories of the Caribbean. St Vincent and the Grenadines is one of several small Caribbean island countries to which Indian laborers were transported to work on sugarcane plantations during the centuries that sugar dominated the world economy. Other Caribbean islands with smaller Indian populations include Jamaica, Barbados, Martinique, St Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Belize and St Lucia. Unlike the larger territories where the Indian workers retained many of their cultural traits due in large measure to their substantial numbers, in St Vincent the churches were very active in baptizing Indian children. The distance from India and the small size of the Indian community weighed heavily towards a slow loosening of links with India and a gradual assimilation in St Vincent society. There were about 500 Indians in St Vincent when the Indians moved off the sugar estates in the early years of the 20th century and settled in Indian villages on other parts of the island. Now, a number of decades later, the Indian community has grown to about 5,000 in a population of a little over 100,000. However, lack of employment avenues has led to a high rate of emigration from St Vincent to Britain and Canada.⁷
- The Jinnah Memorial Mosque located in Eastern Main Road, St. Joseph. Muslim Indians came here to pray. The managing body for the mosque is the Trinidad Muslim League which the colonial government gave a piece of land the same year it was founded in 1947. The mosque started its construction in the year 1952 and when completed, named it as Jinnah Memorial Mosque. It was designed by British architects and engineers. The

⁷ “St Vincent and the Grenadines celebrates its Indian heritage”, *SVG Indian Heritage Foundation*, published May 12, 2019. <https://svgihf.org/hello-world>

mosque also received funding from the followers of the TML and its leader, the spiritually gifted Moulvi Ameer Ali.⁸



Figure 7: Jinnah Memorial Mosque

- The Exchange Village Shiv Mandir (Mud Temple) of Couva is considered the oldest standing temples in T&T. It was constructed mainly of mud and also happens to be the longest-inhabited temple in the country. This temple was built out of mud and cow dung at the hands of indentured labourers who lived in the barracks on the Exchange estate. The Exchange Shiv Mandir has too many religious signs and concealed inside the design and build of the mud structure. That temple is with four doors and representative of the four cardinal points. This structure is unique to the Caribbean building designs in that the walls of this building are termite resistant, and it has large sculptures on the interior walls portraying several deities. The only modification made to the outside of the original structure was the addition of an aluminium roof. This Mandir was declared a protected monument and is listed as heritage site.⁹

⁸ “Indian Contribution to Trinidad and Tobago,” National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, Published May 31, 2021, 9. <https://nationaltrust.tt/home/indian-contribution-printable-worksheets/>

⁹ Ibid., 11.



Figure 8: Exchange Village Shiv Mandir

- The Port of Spain of Hindu Mandir was also known as Paschim Kaashi. It was built in 1963 for Hindu community and situated on Ethel Street in St. James. Initially, the mandir was a shed with one main spire and a long and slender tower with two small ones on either side. This building alter has altars dedicated to Hindu deities and at the back of the mandir dance, music, craft and Hindi are taught. The first key persons involved in the building of Paschim Kaashi were businessman Jang Bahadoorsingh and Attorney at Law Simbhoonath Capildeo.¹⁰

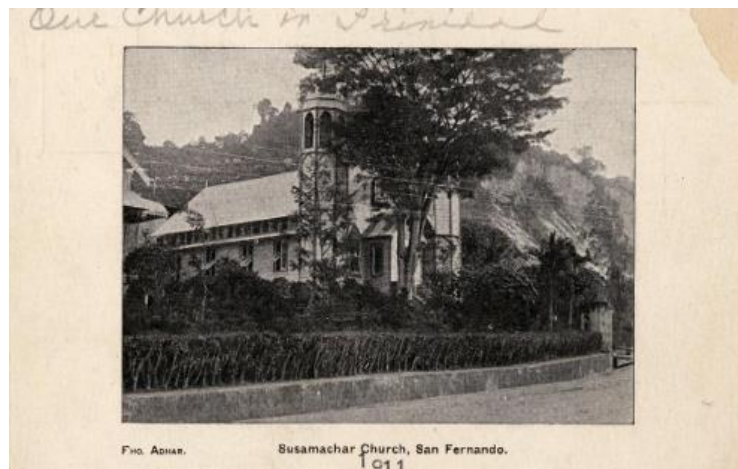


Figure 9: Susmachar Churuch

¹⁰ "Indian Contribution to Trinidad and Tobago," *National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago*, Published May 31, 2021, 15. <https://nationaltrust.tt/home/indian-contribution-printable-worksheets/>

In last three decades Indians in the European countries have followed the policy of integration. Integration is defined when a different ethnic group accepts the norms and values of the host society and behaves like them, but can retain its ethnic culture, social system, language and religious beliefs. In a way the integration policy has helped the ethnic groups to strengthen, restore and unite their communities. Indians retain their traditions and overt symbols of dress, temple building, food habits, use vernacular language in communication, observe rituals and celebrate religious festivals. Externally, they accept the general principles of the countries' laws, code of conduct, language, and public behaviour of the colonising masters. The sense is close to "Plural Accommodation", meaning living together for dignity and survival.¹¹

Adaptation and Reconstruction of Monuments

The Indian diaspora dedicated to promote the socio-cultural heritage of the Indian diaspora and showcasing the successful fusion of tradition with modern technology. They have adaptive approach and understanding. They continuously engaged with their host cultures. This ongoing interaction fosters adaptation and transformation. This view explores how Indian diaspora communities navigate their identity, blending aspects of their new environments while maintaining connections to their cultural origins.¹²

Britain relocated two million Indian indentured workers to their 19 colonies within 1834 to at end of World War I. The Indian diaspora largely formed by these sugar cane laborers and spread numerous regions like Fiji, Ceylon, Trinidad and Tobago, the West Indies, Mauritius, South Africa, Guyana, Malaysia, Uganda, and Kenya. Their cultural heritage represents traditions, practices, and ways of life developed by a community and passed down through generations. It encompasses customs, activities, places, objects, artistic expressions, and values. Additionally, natural heritage refers to culturally significant elements of the natural world, such as landscapes and biodiversity. Nearly 1.2 million Indian men, women, and children migrated under indenture contracts, forming a significant diasporic movement that reshaped the cultural and demographic landscapes of the societies they entered. Indian migrants successfully transplanted, preserved, and maintained their culture in the Caribbean, despite the pressures of westernization. The Caribbean experience, while marked by authoritarianism and repression, had a transformative

¹¹ M. K., Gautam, "Indian diaspora : ethnicity and diasporic identity," *Migration Policy Centre, CARIM-India Research Report*, 29, (2013), 2-3. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/29491>

¹² "Exploring Diverse Perspectives on Indian Diaspora Studies," *Diaspora & transnational communities*, <https://sociology.institute/diaspora-transnational-communities/indian-diaspora-studies-perspectives/>.

impact on indentured Indians. Cultural change took place in the Colony of Natal of Africa and Indian indentured laborers worked and interacted with black Africans.¹³

Significance of Preservation

Indian diasporic monument and cultural heritage preservation have a deeper significance. Preservation will help to provide a wider global cultural understanding and cultural continuity. Cultural Identity of Monuments and heritage sites serve as physical symbols of the Indian diaspora's roots. Preserving these ensures that future generations maintain a connection with their ancestral identity, culture, and traditions. Indian diasporic communities have a rich history. They spread as indentured laborers or professional migrated laborers. Many monuments and sites of cultural heritage give evidence of the journeys and contributions made by the diaspora in whichever country. Most of the Indian diasporic monuments were established during the colonial era. Preserving these monuments helps in raising broad post-colonial narratives, shedding light on global struggles for freedom, identity, and equality. Preservation of diasporic heritage can be used as a form of cultural diplomacy. It reflects the diversified culture of India, its art, and contributions on all continents and provides additional avenues for strong partnerships between India and other nations hosting the diaspora. Monument preservation will promote the exchange of culture among nations by helping the host nations appreciate the contributions of their Indian communities.

Preservation helps to create a cultural space of the Indian diaspora. It helps to develop interest towards diasporic history and individuals come together and reconnect the roots. Preservation of monuments ensure that traditions and values are passed through the next generation and make bond between the diasporic community members. Preserving monuments and artifacts seen as historical documentation and serve as tangible property. It presents as shared heritage of the Indian diaspora. Cultural spaces champion the interests and rights of the Indian diaspora, both within their local communities and globally and provide platform to address key issues in mainstream society. By engaging younger generations in the preservation process, they help ensure that future generations remain connected to their roots and take an active role in safeguarding their heritage. This involvement allows diasporic communities to foster the continued flourishing of their culture for years to come.¹⁴

¹³Kogielam K. Archary, "The Indian diaspora, cultural heritage and cultural transformation in the Colony of Natal (1895–1960) during the period of indenture," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 78(3), (2022), 2-4. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7712>.

¹⁴ "The Significance of cultural spaces in the Indian Diaspora Heritage," *iMeUSWE*, issued in September 12, 2024. <https://www.imeuswe.in/the-significance-of-cultural-spaces-in-the-indian-diaspora-heritage/>



Figure 10: Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana

Global Recognition and Awareness

The Indian diaspora's monuments and cultural heritage have gained significant international recognition and visibility over the years. It is a process propelled by the combination of cultural diplomacy, trends of migration, tourism, and the efforts put in by the Indian diaspora itself. The Indian diaspora, as one of the largest around the world, plays an important role in the promotion of Indian culture and heritage in foreign countries. Many second-generation individuals have been working to preserve and share their culture through the building of temples, cultural centers, and monuments. The monuments relating to the Indian diaspora in various countries reflect the architectural influence and historical presence of Indian people. UNESCO has recognized many of the cultural aspects and migrated places of diasporic India and mentions those as World Heritage Sites, which enhances their value at the international platform.

Cultural Centers and Museums

Museums of Indian diasporic monuments are important to the preservation, promotion, and reflection of the vast cultural heritage stemming from the Indian diaspora. These places serve as important sites for cultural exchange, education, and community building and offer a tangible link to India's rich history, values, and ideals. It has importance, and play opens up as symbol of

identity, intercultural conversations, and continuity linked with the past for successive generations. They often play an educational role by offering programs, exhibitions, and workshops intended to educate younger generations about Indian history, philosophy, and art. They promote awareness of traditional customs, languages, and religious traditions, hence assuring that the progeny of the diaspora stay connected with their cultural heritage. There are also several cultural centers and museums that remain as memorial entities to the journeys, struggles, and triumphs of overseas Indian communities. They highlight historical events like migration, indentured labor, and liberation movements, while at the same time paying due respect to the successes of the Indian diaspora in areas related to science, politics, and the arts. These cultural spaces mark that continuum from history into the present as the means of keeping alive those experiences for the present and future generations. The cultural institutions and museums of the Indian diaspora do not just act as sites of preservation; rather, they are vibrant spaces of debate, learning, and memory. These are thus critical institutions that help the diaspora maintain their cultural identity while at the same time contributing to the multicultural makeup of their host countries. They represent a vital locus that shapes global perceptions about Indian culture and heritage by celebrating both the historical legacy and the emerging global persona of India.

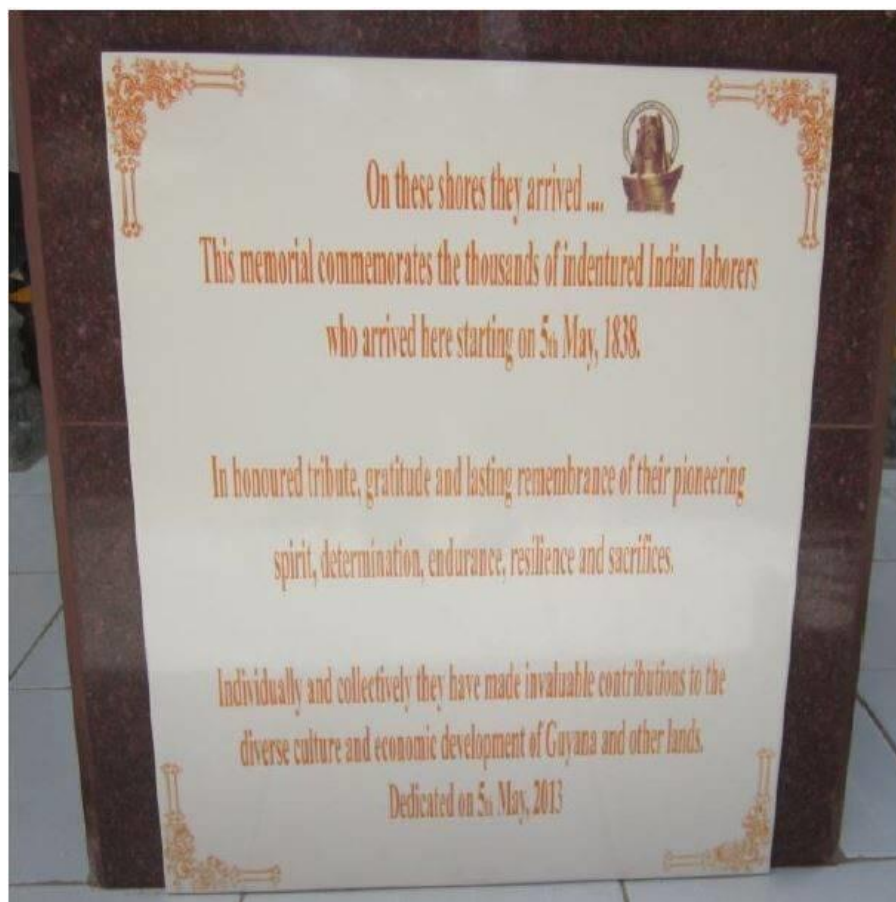


Figure 11: Indentured Memorial, Highbury, Guyana

Conclusion

Indian diaspora has significantly shaped the cultural landscapes of many countries across the globe. Migrated laborers were spread over during the British colonial period and Indian communities have left an indelible mark by establishing cultural and religious monuments. In present timeline preservation of this ancestral heritage becomes important. These structures serve powerful symbols of resilience, identity, and continuity. It shows how those are linking to diasporic roots and enriching the multicultural fabric of their adopted nations. Many challenges came in the time of preservation and reconstruction but these monuments remain crucial for understanding the history of indentureship and the broader diasporic experience. Efforts taken by next generation to protect and restore these vital heritage sites and ensuring that further generations can continue to connect with their cultural heritage and collective memory.

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