

***Beyond the Hesperus and the Whitby* - by Ashook Ramsaran**
Presented at Indian Arrival Day Commemoration – Guyana - May 5, 2015

Thank you for that introduction, Pradeep. Such a big introduction takes time from the speech.

Good evening, ladies & gentlemen !!

Firstly, I want to thank the Indian Commemoration Trust (ICT) and its founder Dr Yesu Persaud, among others, for inviting me to this annual commemoration of a historic happening which changed history and ultimately the nation of Guyana.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank Mr Hemraj Kisssoon, Dr. Yesu Persaud, Mr Pradeep Samtani and so many others who are always helpful and quite energetic in their pursuit of preservation of our history.

I also recognize familiar faces and friends such as GOPIO Guyana president Sase Sankar, Life Member Nohar Singh, Nadira Shah and her troupe, other members of ICT and GOPIO.

All protocols observed, I want to acknowledge the presence of US Chargé d’Affaires, HE Bryan Hunt, Mr Khemraj Ramjattan, Mr Jason Calder of the Carter Center, and others.

I vividly recall 2 years ago on this date and on this very stage when it was inaugurated and the special feeling it evoked among so many – a truly historic milestone of cultural preservation in the Indian Diaspora.

I am very happy to be here and to share my thoughts and perspectives on this special occasion when we pay tribute to those who came before us and paved the way for us to dwell in this land for which they labored and built for us.

Today, I want to talk about “Beyond the Hesperus and the Whitby” – from whence we have come but more so where and how we traveled together since landing here, where we are going and prospects for *that* tomorrow - as the lessons of journeys past have taught us to use wisely and effectively.

Homage

That journey in 1838 from Kolkata to Highbury followed the journeys of so many others from Africa and elsewhere but was the beginning of wholesale Indian labor as a commodity for profit and led to a new era in Guyana and the Caribbean region.

We have come to pay homage and commemorate an historic event which took place 177 years ago and recognize the journeys, hardships, travails and perseverance of a people – while looking at today and tomorrow which can take lessons from that history of not so long ago. While acknowledging that past, we can triumph by bold leaps and decisions same as those who came to this land with just a promise and with lots of hope and determination.

Our ancestors came here partially by choice, many forced but resolved and persevered under very difficult and harrowing conditions. That shared experience, that saga of shared history, fostered an unusual kindred spirit of resolve, togetherness and kinship – a triumph over obstacles and difficulties with dreams and aspirations of a destiny intertwined by history and fate.

We pay homage to those who came before us – from Kolkata, Madras, Madeira, Macao, Gambia and Congo. We have roots in India, Africa, China, Portugal and the Americas, yet we have nurtured stronger roots here, molded in this land, from whence the descendants have gone to other lands and established themselves with remarkable successes. Such is the special nature of a Guyanese – making it better with each journey, looking for opportunities and excelling in pursuits.

Roots

I trace my own roots to my great grand father Pooriya who arrived here in 1853 and settled in Tuschen De Vrinden, and my great grandmother Radhah who arrived here in 1860. They married and raised a family which went on to settle in Berbice, with now many in USA, Canada and UK. We are all product of this land of many waters and opportunities – that we shall never forget.

History

Migration to Guyana - pre-colonial and during colonial times - was based on human beings used as commodity for profit – arriving in ships but left in the same boat, not as strangers but as remnants of labor for profit.

The world has changed immensely from the days of rock writing to present day robotics, from the days of sailing ships to cyberspace and supersonics – and the Indian Diaspora has also grown more prominent in almost all countries with remarkable strides and achievements in all segments of society in many developed and developing countries: presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, entrepreneurs, best legal minds, the judiciary, novelists, writers, Nobel laureates, scientists, software & internet breakthroughs, space exploration, yoga and wellness, cricketers, distillers and adaptation of music and foods. The descendants of Indian laborers have advanced and triumphed in every part of the world – and Guyana is one of those examples.

In Guyana, we were thrown together while being used as labor for profit yet managed to establish a nation born of necessity, born of diversity yet unified in the continuing quest with determination for prosperity and progress in a national agenda of shared destiny -- a single nation with diverse ethnic origin but common national spirit and singular national agenda.

Messy at times, traumatic and heart wrenching – yet the larger goal of national loyalty takes precedence for the common good, common future and mutual benefits as a people of a nation knitted together in unison with shared dreams, aspirations and hopes for a better day each and every day. It is the totality of a people and we must take pride and courage in that fact. It is a work in progress for nation building, Guyana being a relatively young nation with a unique history.

Significance

History has thrown us together and history would look kindly on the success of the human spirit that is triumphant in a shared destiny. Our paths met – actually we were thrown together - we stayed put, remained intact and we have forged a new path for our shared destiny. By the way, some in several countries of the colonial past have taken that word in the literal sense, unfortunately.

Together, we have weathered the storms of slavery, indenturedship and colonialism to emerge with common and shared aspirations and energy to mold a new nation.

We are of the salt and sugar of Guyana.

National loyalty

Molded by common aspirations of survival and success, a shared experience and shared purpose are the ingredients for a common destiny. Each of us adds to the fabric and successes of the nation, not take away from it - to form a special mosaic and envy of so many other countries.

We are a special people thrown together by the winds and whims of history but with a unique experience which can guide us better than the winds of the Atlantic which flapped the sails of our journeys. Acknowledging the past without being mired in its intricacies is paramount for a better future as Nelson Mandela knew very well. When we look back too much, our eyes are not focused on the road ahead, we stumble and we lose momentum and direction.

Togetherness

We have successfully bridged the Berbice and the Demerara – yet some differences remain among us and it will take statesmanship and objective minds to do so – indeed, I dare say *a bridge not too far*.

We are kindred spirits with a shared destiny which can triumph obstacles, hurdles and sometimes unknown hardships lurking around the corner. Like it or not, history has dealt us a hand and our fates are inextricably intertwined for better or for worse – shared history and shared struggles but with shared destiny. Divorce is not an option. Embrace, engage & enhance the kinship and partnership among people and see it bear fruits for generations to come.

Not many of us can be like Gandhi, King, Mandela, Jagan, Carter or Braithwaite - but surely we can learn from them and from their ideals of brotherhood for a better today and tomorrow. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste”, it is said. Good, honest, determined, courageous minds are our greatest assets. Let’s use them wisely – with respect, trust and dignity, in harmony.

A special pride and honor have been bestowed on the descendants of those who arrived in Guyana from other lands – which has emerged towards to a special duty and obligation to make their dreams and aspirations bear the fruits of kindred spirits. We are resilient people and we can do it.

Indian Arrival Day

On the occasion of the 177th anniversary of Indian Arrival in then British Guiana, the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) acknowledges the continuing efforts of organizations, associations and individuals to remember and pay homage to those left India for Guyana and other colonies to seek better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants. I join with you and others to pay honored tribute and express our gratitude to those who made the first journey as indentured laborers from India to British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1838 aboard the *Hesperus* and *Whitby*.

We are always reminded of their pioneering spirit, determination, persistence and endurance under extremely harsh conditions. While survival must have been the primary concern, they persevered to maintain their sense of origin, traditions, culture and religion. Their children, grandchildren and following generations will always take pride in this unique accomplishment, recognizing and appreciating the sacrifices and achievements made on their behalf. We also recognize the invaluable contributions they have made to the diverse culture and economic development of Guyana.

GOPIO is a global diaspora organization with chapters, councils and life members in several countries, an advocacy organization, non-political, secular.

On behalf of the GOPIO, I extend congratulations to the people of Guyana, to Indian Commemoration Trust and all organizations commemorating the 177th anniversary of that historic event. We also extend our continued best wishes to all the descendents of those early pioneers for peaceful and prosperous co-existence both in Guyana and other lands where they have subsequently settled.

We continue to encourage and support active promotion of the rich and enduring Indian traditions that served their forefathers so well. We also wish to remind all the descendents of those early pioneers to recognize and reach out to others of Indian origin whose forebears also embarked on similar journeys.

Concluding

Mahatma Gandhi's teachings have been followed and practiced by Dr Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela with enormous success to "be the change you want".

History has taught us that there is always hope for people who have courage to do what is in the best interest of the nation and right for the common good. No single person has the answer – togetherness with purpose is key.

Courageous actions based on principles of fairness and equitable treatment will always stand a better chance of achieving more success and transcend time and tide.

Thank you. God bless you and God bless this nation.

Ashook K. Ramsaran was born in Guyana (formerly British Guiana) third generation of Indian indentured laborers who came in 1853 and 1860 respectively. He obtained advanced degrees in engineering at Polytechnic University in New York, USA. He is president of the Indian Diaspora Council International (IDC) and immediate past president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO International) and very active in New York and US national deliberations on migration, assimilation, partnerships and inclusivity for good citizenship. He is founder and president of Ramex, an electronics manufacturing company based in New York where he resides with his family. Ramsaran is the recipient of India's Pravasi Saman Award for his contributions to the Indian Diaspora. Contact: AshookRamsaran@gmail.com



