

LifeStyle

Current Affairs

Registers of indenture



Sateesh Maharaj

THEY came to these shores not knowing what to expect of this strange land, but 163 years later we still celebrate the legacy of the indentured. The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago recently launched an exhibition of documents and items which commemorate Indian Arrival Day. Highlighted are their holdings of East Indian Immigration records. The core and pride of this exhibit are various registers which can be used to track one's ancestors.

Marcella Thompson, Archive Assistant II explained that these are the registers which were generated by the colonial government.

"Everybody who came for a particular year is recorded in the general register," she said. "The estate register has a record of how many people went to a particular estate. The ship register, the one people really want, comprises of the immigration passes of the indentured labourers. It gives things like the village the person came from, their father's name, their next of kin, their case and a variety of other information. It's very important if you want to narrow down your ancestry. Sometimes in the general register you would see three or four names that are the same. If you go to the ship register and you have other information you can now compare it."

Thompson said this was not the first exhibition of its kind at the National Archives.

"We had one last year but it was not well publicised. We have been working on publicising ourselves a little more." She laughed: "A lot of people have said that the archives is one of the best kept secrets."

Besides various registers of the people who came, there are also records of the immigrants who returned to India.

Although Thompson revealed that many people are successful in tracing their ancestral roots, those that are not are referred to local researcher Shamshu Deen, known for his involvement in locating former

STILL BEING USED: A kitchen scene, still a practice for some even after so many decades.
—Photo: SATEESH MAHARAJ

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“We would like people to volunteer whatever they have but they hold onto these things because they are precious. That is their heritage”

INDENTURE from Page 1

Prime Minister Basdeo Pandey's family in India.

The collection was accumulated over the years and the Archives is always looking to add to it. Thompson assures that all artifacts are treated with the utmost care.

“We are into the preservation of records. We have air conditioned vaults that are kept at a certain temperature and humidity so that the books do not deteriorate. We also have a conservation laboratory where books are repaired. We have a lot of the registers on microfilm so people don't have to use the originals. We also have made copies of the ship registers. Very rarely does the occasion arise where we have to use the original.”

Of course this does not always convince people to part with cherished possessions.

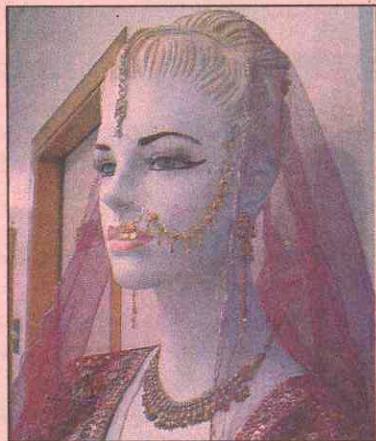
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teer whatever they have but they hold onto these things because they are precious. That is their heritage.”

Also included in the exhibit—which ends on June 27—are photographs, examples of East Indian wear, newspaper clippings and cooking utensils.



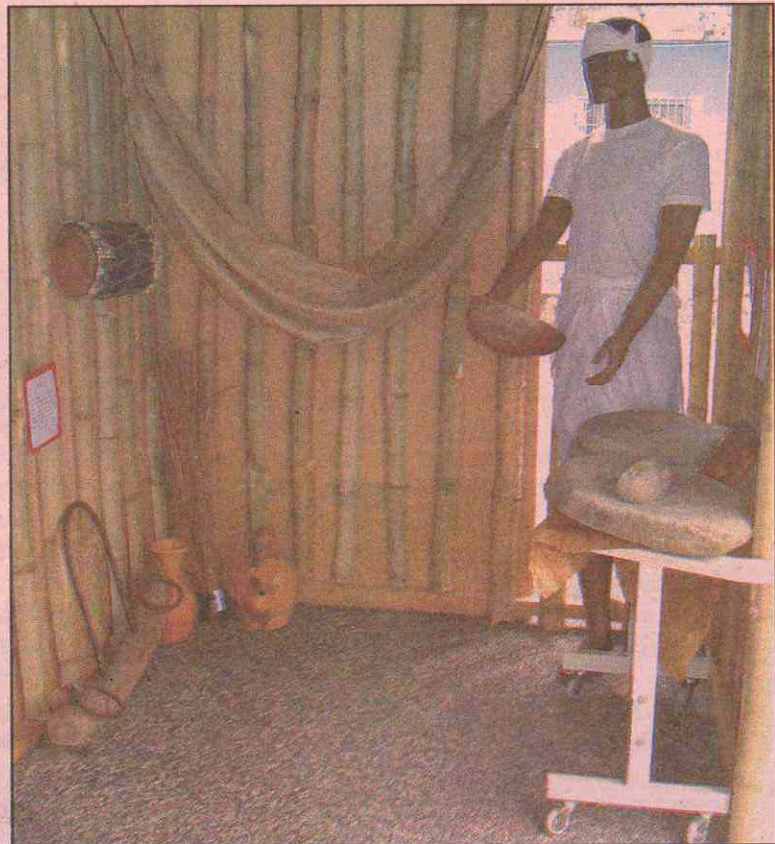
ANCIENT COOKING: A jhaarta, left, primarily used for grinding grain and a sill and lorha, which ground raw ingredients by pounding.



ALL DRESSED UP: A mannequin draped in Indian jewellery and apparel.



HISTORIC: A marriage register.



FOR THE HOME: A collection of household items.
—Photos: SATEESH MAHARAJ