A team of Archaeologists composed of Dr Diego Calaon from the Università Ca’ Foscari in Venice (Italy), Dr Saša Čaval from the Intitut za antropološke in prostorske študije, in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Dr Aleks Pluskowski from Reading University (UK) and Dr Krish Seetah from McDonald Institute & University of Central Lancashire (UK) conducted archaeological excavations at Trianon Heritage Site from 6 to 17 July 2010.

From 13 to 15 July 2010, AGTF organised a workshop on Bhojpuri heritage at the University of Mauritius. The workshop aimed at reinforcing collaboration between research institutions and discussing future research programme for Bhojpuri cultures and traditions based on research undertaken in this field together with possible means of promotion and dissemination. The discussions focused on the impact of modernity on Bhojpuri languages and traditions on the similarities and differences between Bhojpuri traditions and cultures in Mauritius and India thanks to the collaboration of Dr Archana Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University in India and Chief Guest at the workshop.

In the context of the International Day for Monuments and Sites created by ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites), the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund proposed activities in collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture and the National Heritage Fund on Sunday 18 April 2010.

*Educational activities during Heritage Week*
Researching the everyday lives of Indentured Labourers: Archaeological work at Trianon Barracks
Dr Krish Seetah - Lecturer in Archaeology Forensic and Investigative Sciences
University of Central Lancashire, Preston

In contrast to the monumental and globally recognised nature of Aapravasi Ghat, the Barracks at Trianon represent a rare and unique opportunity to investigate the daily life-ways of indentured labourers. But how best to go about such a venture, given that the labourers would not have been recording aspects of their own lives, nor would their daily existence fall within the purview of contemporaneous writers in any great detail? This is precisely where archaeological works can provide valuable insight, adding dimensions to the historical accounts that would otherwise remain underground and unreported.

Archaeological works at the Trianon Barracks which started in 2009 comprised of the archaeologists who carried out photogrammetry, magnetometry and field walking survey on the area around the standing barracks.

The results of the magnetometry survey proved promising and demonstrated areas that could potentially be excavated. The conclusion from the 2009 fieldwork “suggested that there were additional built structures in this area, related to the sugar estate, and perhaps directly to the Barrack building itself. The extent standing structures are highly unlikely to have been enough to accommodate the total number of indentured workers on the site. Other buildings (potentially identified by our survey) may have been demolished at some point, or were less substantial” (refer to: Mauritius: Archaeological Research and Agendas. The 2009 Season).

Two rapid phases of works were undertaken in 2010 to complement the 2009 research: the first of these (taking place in May) was aimed at harmonising with the results of the magnetometry. Using the very latest geophysical survey method, Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), a team of Slovenian archaeologists were able to provide clear indications of subsoil anomalies (initially it was not possible to state whether these were remains of buildings) as per figure below.

This was followed by a two-week season excavation where AGTF, in collaboration with the University of Mauritius and the University of Central Lancashire, revealed the extent and nature of the ‘anomalies’ shown by the geophysical survey. What the team uncovered was quite unexpected, even with the excellent GPR results to guide them. The foundations of a very large and potential multi-level building was excavated, along with a series of post-holes tentatively suggesting that a wooden canopy surrounded part of the structure. A second trench indicated a drainage system that appeared contemporaneous with this newly discovered building.

Less monumental, but no less significant, the discovery of a small quarter rupee coin links this ancestral community directly with their nation of origin, and pays testimony to everyday facets of life. The coin typifies the practice of paying indentured labourers with Indian currency to facilitate the process of returning money ‘home’. Though hardly rare in Mauritius, finding such an artefact associated with the barracks, and now this new structure, highlights the relevance and potential of this site.

These discoveries start the process of giving us a view of life of the indentured labourers living at Trianon. This is perhaps the most important perspective as it is one that cannot be addressed from other sources of evidence. Furthermore, archaeological research provides an important insight into the overall relationship between the organisation of the sugar estate and the relationship with the immediate and wider environment; we are thus given a unique view of the sugar industry, as the archaeology of sugar of various facets are being addressed.

The research carried out so far has been systematic and has employed the very latest technology. In this way, we have hopefully demonstrated the value and importance of archaeology and thus established a suitable precedent and protocol for future work. The archaeology of the island is far too precious to be researched in anyway but with the most advanced methods and techniques at our disposal.
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS FROM THE AAPRAVASI GHAT WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Geoffrey Summers, Settlement Archaeology Graduate Program, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

Archaeological excavations at the Immigration Depot, conducted between 2003 and 2007, confirmed the accuracy of surviving maps and plans, and, most importantly, uncovered evocative buildings and features that now form an integral part of this World Heritage Site.

The main results of these archaeological investigations have been placed within the wider setting and published in an accessible form. Until now, however, scant attention has been paid to the broken and discarded fragments of pottery and glass, metal pieces and building materials.

Study of these finds and dissemination of the information that can be revealed from them present a considerable challenge. This is because archaeology is concerned in context, that is, the physical relationship between a fragment of an artefact and the place where it was found.

The peopling of Mauritius emanates from various parts of the world and under very different circumstances. But it was not only people who were imported, everything except ebony, spices and sugar came on ships, as is still very largely the case today. Excavated fragments from China, India, Africa and Europe, to mention only the most important ones, document the extent and value of this trade while at the same time providing insights into changing cultural values through the study of such aspects as to the choice between Oriental and European designs on ceramics.

When excavation began at Aaprapasi Ghat, it was hoped that objects would be uncovered which might illustrate day-to-day conditions and practices. However, the entire design of the Depot laid much emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene as to anything else. Broken pots and pans, food remains, empty ink bottles, discarded clothing and all the other detritus of everyday activity appears to have been taken off site for disposal. Only one class of excavated materials appears to relate to the Immigration Depot itself, the building materials.

While basalt stones and lime mortar were products of Mauritius, terracotta roofing tiles which came from Marseille slate for lining water tanks was mined in Wales, most of the bricks and all of the sandstone paving flags originated from Scotland and the North of England.

Architectural iron elements and fittings, stone ware drain pipes and in the very late 19th century window glass would have come mostly if not entirely from England. In washing and toilet areas, surfaces were coated with bitumen to prevent foul water from soaking into foundations. Thus the excavated fragments of building materials, together with the standing remains of structures that form the core of the present site, indicate the emphasis that was placed by the colonial authorities on preventing the entry of epidemic diseases into the colony. Study of pottery fragments provides a microcosmic overview of the range and proportions of wares imported into Mauritius from about 1820 to circa 1900. Fragments excavated at Aaprapasi Ghat will teach us much about Port Louis. In the future it will be of interest to compare what is found in the urban capital with the findings on the plantations and, indeed, to make comparisons with other excavated coastal sites in the Indian Ocean.

Dish or platter Pearl Ware, transfer print in underglaze blue. Very possibly a scene from the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace, London, at which the finest products of the British Empire were displayed
(Source: Photo Collection of Geoffrey Summers)

A British fire-brick in Sector T Kitchen chimney stamped with the brand name COWEN. Cowen bricks are common in Mauritius found in huge numbers throughout the Empire.
(Source: Photo Collection of Geoffrey Summers)

Top of a Giladoni diamond pattern pantile, the underside is stamped Marseille. It was presumable tiles of this type that were used for the room of the Aaprapasi Ghat kitchen
(Source: Photo Collection of Geoffrey Summers)

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Trianon Sugar Estate. The overwhelming majority among them lived in small huts and only a small number of the indentured labourers and their families lived in the stone barracks. In general, the archival records clearly show that by the late nineteenth century, the Old Labourers’ Quarters had been in use for several decades and it was already in a dilapidated state.

In 1909, a document was submitted to the Royal Commissioners, who were in Mauritius to investigate the island’s sugar industry, which briefly mentions a labourers’ quarters made of stone at Trianon where Indian workers were housed. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the stone barracks or the Old Labourers’ Quarters at Trianon were still used to house Indian labourers. In 1960, after the passage of the cyclone Carol, the 15 large rooms of this structure were renovated, with eight of the fifteen chambers being provided with a small kitchen which was built of concrete. The Old Labourers’ Quarters was used to house some of the estate workers who had lost their homes during the cyclone. Therefore, until the early 1960s, this structure was still occupied by Indian labourers.

Its Heritage Value

In September 1974, the Old Labourers’ Quarters was decreed national monument through Government Notice No.666. In fact, this structure is one of the rare monuments in Mauritius which offers us an insight into what the living conditions of Indian labourers might have been like. In a few years, a fully renovated Old Labourers’ Quarters may even form part of a local Mauritian Indenture Route Project which would include the Aaprapasi Ghat and the Vagrant Depot. After all, these three national monuments are closely associated with the history of more than seventy percent of the Mauritian population.

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, this structure has played a central role in the daily lives of some of the Indian workers and their families who lived on the Trianon Sugar Estate. Therefore, the Old Labourers’ Quarters is directly and tangibly linked with the way of life of the Indian labourers who lived in the sugar camps during and after the indenture period in Mauritius.

Typical example of a Wooden Straw hut in the Estate Camp of Trianon Sugar Estate during the 1940s
(Source: Photo Collection of the Mauritian Chamber of Agriculture)