

Prime Minister Kamla on **Annual Indian Arrival Day Celebration 2015**

*Kamla: The arrival of ancestors marked the beginning of a diasporic shift that established a new community in Trinidad like no other; Indians not only introduced a distinct culture – language, religions, cuisine, dress and much more, they demonstrated a strong will to survive and move forward. Together, we helped build a nation-state rich in culture and proud of its diversity. This is a tribute to our ancestors, their cultural persistence and their will to survive... That is what we celebrate!*

Good evening and thank you. I am humbled and honoured to be here with you tonight.

First, I would like to thank the organizers of this Indian Arrival Day event for the honour that has been accorded to me.

I congratulate the Trinidad Chapter of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) for arranging this annual event, which not only recognizes the achievements of people of Indian origin in Trinidad and Tobago, but also aids in promoting understanding and appreciation in our multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious society.

Events such as these give us an opportunity to reflect on the contributions of our forefathers, and the ways in which they have shaped our modern society.

To my fellow honourees, I join in offering my best wishes to you.

I am very happy to be with you today celebrating Indian Arrival, which has become a major national event not only for those of us of Indian ancestry but for everyone.

### **Why celebrate Indian arrival?**

And as always we face the perennial question: why celebrate Indian arrival? Why celebrate an event that was the start of an era of extreme hardship for our ancestors who were brought to this land in conditions similar to slavery that the British had just abolished.

It is a valid question and I hope to answer it this evening.

However, to understand the circumstances we need to step back and view the whole canvas of our history - our arrival, our servitude, our struggles for survival in a hostile western environment and our triumph in the face of adversity.

One hundred and seventy three years ago a ship docked in Port of Spain and off-loaded a cargo of more than 200 Indian women, men and children. In the years following 1845 tens of thousands more arrived, all of them to face the harsh and inhumane working conditions on the plantations of Trinidad.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British India was facing all manner of pestilence, some of it created by the colonisers themselves to subjugate the population. Famines and manmade disasters led to crop failures and destitution among the poor who flocked to city centres in search of a better life. It was there that traders preyed on the poor, luring them to distant lands with false promises.

It was all a part of a British plan to get the former slaves off the land and replace them with cheap labour from India. Just a few years before, the British had abolished slavery in Trinidad after just 32 years. By contrast indentureship lasted 72 years ... more than twice as long.

So from the very beginning this sinister British plan created animosity between the two main ethnic groups that make up our country.

The freed blacks wanted a fair wage of two shillings a day to work on the plantations as free men and women; the planters refused because they knew that there was a plentiful supply of cheaper labour on the other side of the planet.

So traders and bureaucrats colluded to export Indians as scab labour to work for a shilling a day on fixed contracts that prevented any attempt to negotiate a better deal.

The scheme effectively put the former slaves at a great disadvantage and deprived them of opportunities to earn a fair wage.

That is the background to the arrival of our ancestors.

Once in Trinidad Indians were trapped inside a system of bondage from which there was no easy escape.

Each person was bound to a particular estate and was prevented from leaving the estate without prior permission, which more often than not was never granted. If they left without authorisation, they were hunted down, flogged, fined and even jailed. Some were murdered.

The Indians laboured under the worst conditions from dawn to evening for a shilling a day - barely enough to survive. They had to live in barracks that had no privacy of sanitary facilities ... and even the sick and feeble were dragged off to work at dawn.

Many died in these conditions; some escaped to what is today St James - at the time known as Coolie Town - where they found whatever means they could to survive.

Those who survived the indenture contract were guaranteed a return passage home but many were cheated of that because they could neither read nor understand the language in which their contracts were written.

The one redeeming factor of their miserable existence was the freedom to keep their culture - their dress, their languages, their religions. And that freedom they cherished and held on to in order to survive and move beyond survival.

Their most precious institution was the family and they made education the cornerstone of family life so their children could escape the drudgery that characterised their lives.

But opportunities for education didn't come until the 1860s when a Canadian missionary saw an opportunity to convert the mass of Indians to Christianity while offering education as the carrot, in exclusive Canadian Mission Indian schools. Muslim and Hindu schools came later.

Indians had also established themselves as docile and industrious and the planters wanted to keep them in Trinidad after their indentureship contract ended.

So the colonial government came up with a scheme to offer land and money to lure the Indians and keep them as free workers in the island.

Ladies and gentlemen let me take this opportunity to correct a popular misconception about that arrangement.

Many people are of the view that those who benefitted from this arrangement received GIFTS. Nothing is further from the truth.

A return passage to India was £11 at the time; the value of the land and money was £10. So in forfeiting their passage for land and cash, the Indians came to be legitimate landowners - something that would have been impossible if they had returned home instead of remaining in Trinidad and adopting the island as their new home. It is instructive to peruse the national archives and look at the records of Indians departing Trinidad at the end of their bondage. The majority are listed as PAUPER with just a few carrying one or two pounds as their life savings.

Indians stayed in Trinidad because they saw opportunity in their misery.

They could own land, grow crops, practice their religion, educate their children and in many ways recreate the homes they left behind.

As they became free from their contracts, relationships that began on the voyages across the oceans were consolidated and bonds created that were strong and lasting.

They created a community characterised by sharing and togetherness, based on respect for one another. It was a place where they nurtured generations of responsible women and men.

And in the comfort of their closed communities they ignored the derision of the bureaucrats and missionaries and worshipped as they did in the motherland, in the languages that was native to them. And they preserved for themselves and future generations, a little bit of India - its culture and religions, its glory and its history.

And that brings me back to why celebrate our arrival.

The arrival of ancestors marked the beginning of a diasporic shift that established a new community in Trinidad like no other. Indians not only introduced a distinct culture - language, religions, cuisine, dress and much more -they demonstrated a strong will to survive and move forward.

They embraced the best of the new land and blended it with the customs and traditions of the ancestral home and created a community that has blossomed into the greatness we have today.

That is something worthy of celebration.

Sure we can look at the negatives but think of where we were 173 years ago and where we are today. And it is all because WE ARRIVED...

We arrived; we fulfilled our obligations and recreated the life we left behind.

Together, we helped build a nation-state rich in culture and proud of its diversity.

That is a tribute to our ancestors, their cultural persistence and their will to survive.

***That is what we celebrate!***

## **Everyone under threat**

But having said that, I want to sound a word of caution; a warning that the legacy left by our ancestors is under threat.

And I call on every family to pay attention and ensure that the sacrifices of our ancestors have not been in vain.

We are fast losing our sense of community.

Children no longer have the benefit of the extended family and the influence of grandparents in their nurturing and upbringing.

The schools alone cannot and must not be the only place to educate future generations.

That responsibility lies with the family and the community.

In the old days, every child respected elders and one another; today that is disappearing.

In today's fast-paced world parents no longer seem to have the time or the commitment, and we are fast losing a generation through neglect.

Is it because of our affluence or is it that we have become a very selfish people? Or is it the economic reality that is forcing this change of priorities? Whatever it is, we need to pay attention!

Our elders are relegated to geriatric homes while our children are shipped off to day care centres instead of spending time with grandparents, who have always been the ones who provided spiritual and social continuity that preserved our communities for generations.

We settled our disputes amicably through respect for our elders in our village courts - our panchayats.

We knew how to work together as one family. Our village was one big family and we shared the joys and sorrows as only family can.

## **Crime**

Today, all our hard work, the work of each and every citizen of our beloved nation - is under threat.

Our very peace has been disturbed, violated and we are left feeling vulnerable and fearful.

The upsurge in violent crime - when a young man trying to earn a living with his vehicle is brutally killed; when women are falling prey to vicious bandits who use pepper spray as a weapon - something that should be in their hands as a defence or deterrent - when more people are being killed in their own houses as criminals invade their homes and take lives; all of this is unacceptable, yet we have an uncaring Government who seems willing to sit idly by and do nothing to stem the tide of bloodshed.

The life, limb and property of every citizen which is now imperiled as criminals are merciless in their rampage even when it comes to snuffing out the lives of innocent people.

We have said, and we maintain that that is not good enough.

The Government must take decisive action to reduce crime and ensure the safety and security of each and every citizen of this country.

That is the duty and responsibility of any Government - to protect its people.

Under the Government which I led, we took proactive steps which saw a reduction in crime, and one of these measures, the so-called "Soldier Bill" was intended to ensure a heavy increase in visible law enforcement presence throughout the country. This led to Inter-Agency Joint Patrols between the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force to have a greater presence on the ground to act as a deterrent.

The time has come for action, and I call on the Government to act swiftly and authoritatively in dealing with the threat that faces each of you.

## **Importance of Religion**

My brothers and sisters, at a time like this, where darkness seems to overwhelm us, we need to pray for our nation.

In taking the example of our forebears, who brought with them their religious beliefs, their music and their food; traditions which not only survived but are part of our religious and cultural landscape.

Religion, in particular was a source of solace in the harsh and oppressive environment that they were subjected to.

As we begin the holy month of Ramadhan, we recognize those who came to our land, bringing with them the Holy Qu'ran, and who held strong to their faith in spite of the abuse and brutality they faced.

Similarly, our Hindu forefathers held true to their faith and passed their teachings down for generations, and this community is vibrant and growing today, as a result.

It is a tribute to all of them that Islam and Hinduism survived in their most authentic forms so today we can continue to live according to the great traditions of those religions in our society today.

## **How Indian Indentured Labourers helped shape T&T**

With their religious beliefs and strong commitment to family values, our forefathers shaped the country in indelible ways, and paved the way for cultural diversity and economic progress.

Their philosophy was a simple one - that hard work, courage, determination and love for one's country will result in a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Our forefathers had a vision for a future that they wanted to create, and took the decisions, made the sacrifices and performed the actions which brought success.

They were filled with an entrepreneurial spirit and a determination not to be at the same place where they began on arrival.

They did not accept their fate but created a future by defining the destiny they wanted for themselves and their families.

Today, their descendants are leaders, professionals - doctors, lawyers, authors, chefs, business men and women...the list goes on. We have had two Prime Ministers of Indian descent, and one who served as our President.

They laid the foundation, and over generations we have worked to ensure that their dream of a better life was realized. We must always, through our lives pay tribute to their sacrifices and love.

For my own part, I have worked tirelessly to ensure that all citizens are given opportunities to excel.

It remains my belief that education is a passport out of poverty, and I have worked to ensure that the people of this country have access to all levels of education.

This is something that is close to my heart, for I have seen what lack of opportunity can lead to, and I will continue to work to ensure a better quality of life for our citizens.

I have spoken in other fora about the vision of the political party which I lead, the United National Congress, in this regard. We have, and we will continue to focus on people-centred development.

I am well aware of the significant advancements we have made in more than 173 years; however, it is my hope to see even further advancement of our citizens.

My vision for the future of our country is one in which citizens have opportunities to participate in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Our plan, which was started under the Government I led, saw that increasing the use of technology in our schools would not only lead to a better quality of education for our children, but would develop creativity and other skills needed for the workforce of the future.

We have been looking at ways we will develop on initiatives we started, and one critical area would be the redevelopment of the curriculum to include new subject areas such as coding, 3D modelling, and the use of apps and application development. This is where we need to go.

The way forward is clear - digital transformation of our economy will bring efficiency, high productivity and prosperity as well as job and revenue creation.

The Digital Age is not only about data, or software. It involves creating a whole new economy that impacts on how we live and how we work, in all sectors and industries, in manufacturing, services in research and development or hardware manufacturing.

But this requires buy-in and investment by the Government. Sadly, we have at the helm an administration whose vision is myopic, and does not share this concept of a technologically advanced, knowledge-driven Trinidad and Tobago.

I will have more to say on these matters in the coming months.

## **Preserving Our Heritage**

As I close, I leave you to ponder upon these things.

Our ancestors struggled against the worst odds and preserved something very special for us. We have a responsibility to them to save that legacy from disappearing. Nothing is more precious than family.

Trinidad and Tobago is a blessed land - blessed by our people, our climate, our natural resources and our stability in spite of the political shortcomings of our country's leadership.

We must take pride in what we as a community have achieved and our special contribution to nation-building.

We have come a long way from the barracks and the plantations. And through the efforts of our elders we have produced from among our community one president and two prime ministers.

We have churches, mandirs and masjids dotting the national landscape.

We can pray as we wish, dress according to our preferences, celebrate our festivals and religious events.

It is because of those pioneers who sailed into the unknown in a perilous journey holding on to hope for a better life, with a deep commitment to their culture and a love for their motherland.

I wish to commend the organizers of this event - groups and organisations like GOPIO ensure the preservation of our nation's heritage.

You have ensured that today, so many years later, we in Trinidad and Tobago have never forgotten where we came from, and truly, our children and grandchildren will similarly never forget our rich history and legacy of our forefathers.

It is interesting that your organisation represents people of Indian origin because that is who we are. We are not Indians. There is a part of India in us, but we know, love and respect only mother Trinidad and Tobago. At the same time we must never abandon grandmother India.

We will always be people of Indian origin knowing that the richness of the motherland remains an integral part of our upbringing, our socialisation and our lifestyle. To shed that is to lose our identity.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am a proud citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. I am also a daughter of India, the ancestral home of my grandparents who came here to help build a society that we boast of being forged from liberty and dedicated to the idea that each of us will always find an equal place.

To the organizers of these celebrations, I urge you to continue your work on behalf of all our people of Indian origin and to do it selflessly, recognising that while we take pride in our ancestry and do all we can to keep our culture alive, we remain patriotic to Trinidad and Tobago, our home and native land, our only home.

Today is a celebration of achievement, but it is also an occasion for gratitude to our forefathers for their contribution to national development, and recognition of their drive, their passion to ensure a bright future for generations to come.

By upholding the philosophy of hard work, love, determination and community, we can each of us, honour those who paved the way for us.

Let us vow to use this occasion to remind ourselves that we must continue to fight against all forms of human exploitation especially in work related environments and as well against racism and discrimination.

Let nothing divide us except our vision, our goal, our aim, to take Trinidad and Tobago forward into the future.

Our forefathers believed, and I also believe that by working together, we can build a stronger, more prosperous Trinidad and Tobago, and overcome the challenges that currently face our country.

Like our ancestors, let us never forget that there is always hope for a better future.

Keep the faith and let us join hands in developing the full potential of our great nation.

Once again, I thank you all for the great honour bestowed on me today.