Preserving Memory

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10. Opening Doors to Our Cultural Heritage: The Indian Caribbean Museum of Trinidad and Tobago
Kumaree Ramtahal

Introduction
Resources housed in museums provide significant historical, cultural, and research value to society, because they express the diversity of a particular culture or country, shared beliefs, customs, and practices. The Indian Caribbean Museum of Trinidad and Tobago (ICMtt) is no exception as it contains resources that are dedicated to the preservation and memory of the rich cultural heritage of East Indians who came from India and settled in various parts of the Caribbean including Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Guyana, Suriname, Guadeloupe, and Martinique (the French Caribbean) to work as indentured laborers between 1838 and 1917, after the abolition of slavery. They came from numerous areas of India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Oudh, and Bengal through the port of Calcutta. These indentured immigrants were recruited by unscrupulous subagents who were working on a commission basis on behalf of the British appointed Immigration Agency in Calcutta, India. While the majority of these immigrants were Hindus, there were also smaller numbers of Muslims. This paper will provide an overview of the ICMtt as a cultural repository of East Indian heritage in Trinidad and Tobago. The scope of the collection, areas of management, access, and collaboration will be discussed. Different aspects of the social history and cultural heritage of East Indians reflected in the resources at the ICMtt will be highlighted. Preservation and digitization issues, which present some challenges to the museum, together with some suggestions for future enhancements will be considered.

Background
When slavery was abolished in the British colonies in 1838, many plantation economies like Trinidad and Tobago were left looking for other sources of cheap labor. Attempts were made to draw Europeans, but the hot climate was not suitable for them. Workers were then sought from the Indian subcontinent. On May 30, 1845, the first set of 225 indentured immigrants from India arrived on the ship Fatel Rozack. Between 1845 and 1917, approximately 144,000 Indian laborers arrived in Trinidad as part of a widespread migration of labor
within the British Empire. Only 29,448 of these indentured laborers returned to India. By 1871, Indians formed a quarter of Trinidad’s population and in 1990, by a small majority, their descendants formed the single largest ethnic group in Trinidad and Tobago.\(^2\) Table 1 provides data on the indentureship period in the Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago, and the number of persons that were imported.

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island republic of the Caribbean region with approximately 1.3 million inhabitants. It is situated at the southernmost part of the chain of West Indian islands and is separated from Venezuela on the mainland of South America by the Gulf of Paria and the Dragon’s and Serpent’s Mouths. It is bounded to the north by the Caribbean Sea and to the east by the Atlantic Ocean. Tobago is situated some twenty-two miles northeast of Trinidad and was twinned with Trinidad as one colony and later with political independence as one state in 1962.\(^3\) Both islands enjoy a unique ethnic mix where the majority of the population is either of African or East Indian origin. The descendants of African slaves were brought to Trinidad and Tobago during the island’s slave history, and the indentured East Indian laborers came to work the plantations in the nineteenth century. These two groups are the most dominant but other groups such as the French, Spanish, Chinese, and Lebanese have also left their marks on this nation’s history. The 2000 Trinidad and Tobago Census lists the ethnic groups as Indian 40 percent, African 37.5 percent, Mixed 20.5 percent, Other 1.2 percent, and Unspecified 0.8 percent.\(^4\) The twin-island is famous for celebrations and art performances that can range from African drumming, calypso singing, steelband music, Emancipation Day

Table 1. Number of Indians Imported to the Caribbean (1838–1917)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>No. of Indians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Guiana</td>
<td>1838–1917</td>
<td>238,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1845–1917</td>
<td>143,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surinam</td>
<td>1873–1918</td>
<td>34,024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guadeloupe</td>
<td>1854–1887</td>
<td>42,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>1845–1916</td>
<td>38,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martinique</td>
<td>1848–1884</td>
<td>25,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>1858–1895</td>
<td>4,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>1856–1885</td>
<td>3,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>1860–1880</td>
<td>2,472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts</td>
<td>1860–1861</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Guiana</td>
<td>1853–1885</td>
<td>19,296</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

celebrations to classical Indian music, dance, songs, tassa drumming, and Indian Arrival Day celebrations. For the purpose of this paper, when mention is made of East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago, the emphasis will be placed on the island of Trinidad, because the majority of them settled and worked on the plantations in Trinidad.

**Overview of the ICMtt**

The ICMtt is a unique and specialized, nongovernmental museum dedicated to the preservation of historical and cultural materials of East Indian indentured immigrants who came to Trinidad and Tobago from 1845 to 1917, many of whom subsequently settled in this country. The museum is located in Waterloo, Carapichaima, the west-central part of Trinidad between the towns of Chaguanas and Couva. It opened on May 7, 2006, and recently celebrated its fifth anniversary in May 2011. It is the only permanent exhibition of artifacts, objects, and documents reflecting the East Indian diaspora of Trinidad and Tobago. Apart from a vast array of historical information reflected in the print resources, there are also cultural artifacts and objects that were once used by indentured immigrants and passed on to future generations. The museum’s large collection was obtained through field trips by the administrators of the institution. Resources were acquired through gifts, bequests, and loans by interested families, priests, historians, scholars, and collectors from Trinidad and Tobago.\(^6\)

The vision of the ICMtt is “to serve the public better by providing a more informative and enjoyable visiting experience; to organize related events such as lectures, seminars, workshops, and camps with the expanded facilities; to develop national and international cooperation and collaboration with organizations interested in East Indian history, heritage, and cultural research in the Caribbean; and to forge stronger links with stakeholders in the areas of culture, education, and tourism.”\(^7\)

The mission of the ICMtt is “to collect, restore, preserve, arrange, and display artifacts, cultural objects, and documents relating to the history of East Indians in the Caribbean and in particular Trinidad and Tobago for the purpose of research, education, and enjoyment; to inspire an appreciation of the past and its relevance to the present and the future; to provide primary resources for individuals, students, schools, colleges, and universities; and to increase the knowledge, and enrich, support, and broaden the perspective of all visitors.”\(^8\)

The ICMtt works closely with the Tourism Development Authority of Trinidad and Tobago since the village of Carapichaima is endorsed by the Ministry of Tourism of Trinidad and Tobago as a tourist attraction site. Carapichaima is the home of several cultural sites in the country, namely, the ICMtt; the world famous offshore Temple in the Sea; the Waterloo Cremation site near the sea; and the Dattatreya Yoga Centre which houses an 85-foot-tall murti of Lord Hanuman, a Hindu Deity, which was built by artisans from
South India. This murti is considered to be the tallest image of a Hindu deity in the Caribbean and outside of India.

From 2006 to 2010, the ICMtt has attracted over thirty thousand visitors, which include members of the public, tourists, researchers, and students. In 2006 there were 3,277 visitors; 2007 had 6,604; 2008 had 7,000; 2009 attracted 7,716; and 7,515 in the year 2010. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Indian Heritage Month is celebrated annually during the month of May, and the official Indian Arrival Day public holiday is held on May 30. In fact, the ICMtt contains the official proclamation document dated May 12, 1995, and signed by a former president of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Noor Hassanali, declaring this holiday in 1995. It is therefore not surprising that during May of each year visits to the museum increase. For example, during the months of May from 2007 to 2010, visitors numbered 856, 1,359, 1,431, and 842 respectively, as compared to approximately 600 visitors per month during the other months of this four-year period. The National Geographic 2008 publication entitled *Sacred Places of a Lifetime: 500 of the World’s Most Peaceful and Powerful Destinations* has listed the ICMtt as one of the “must see” places to visit in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Scope**

The ICMtt contains artifacts that include jewelry, cooking utensils, agricultural objects, musical instruments, photographs reflecting the history of East Indians, and samples of East Indian clothing worn by men, women, and children. There are also print resources such as rare historical and religious books from the three dominant faiths in Trinidad and Tobago—Hindus, Muslims, and Christians—as well as monographs, newsletters, brochures, conference papers, unpublished works, immigration documents, a coin collection, and several poster collections on East Indian culture and East Indian personalities who have made significant contribution to Trinidad and Tobago in areas such as arts, music, sports, politics, religion, and education. The museum has received a notable amount of donations, mainly print resources, from the Metropolitan Book Store and Chakra Publishing Company of Trinidad and Tobago. The resources from these two donors are displayed as separate collections in exhibition showcases. The ICMtt also houses an art gallery featuring the work of Isiah Ken Boodoo, a renowned East Indian artist of Trinidad and Tobago, and a reference library where researchers can access resources for research and reference purposes only. There is a large permanent screen in a recessed wall of the museum for the screening of historical films and documentaries. The exterior grounds of the museum have a huge copper (cuppa) basin that was used for boiling sugarcane syrup in factories up to the 1930s and which was then adapted for use as water troughs for animals and water tanks for household use. There is also a *dhikhi* or wooden contraption, which was used for pounding cocoa and coffee beans as well as corn and rice grains.
A replica of an East Indian house referred to as a “Tapia house,” made of clay and cow manure, is also situated outside on the grounds of the museum.

**Management**

The property that houses the museum is owned by the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS)—an organization which advocates for and represents the majority of the Hindu population of Trinidad and Tobago. The SDMS was instrumental in donating the building and setting up the museum and continues to play an integral part in its operations. A board consisting of a chairman, vice chairman, curator, and thirteen contributing members manages the ICMtt, and members meet monthly to plan activities for promoting and enhancing the museum. The curator and one committee member are usually on-site, and they are responsible for acquiring, organizing, preserving, and exhibiting the resources as well as supervising and conducting tours.

**Access**

The museum is open on Wednesdays through Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for public viewing and research. No entry fee is charged, but visitors are free to make a monetary donation. Funds received are used for the minor upkeep of the building such as lighting and plumbing repairs. There is a small research area where researchers can sit while they consult the resources. Photography and video recordings are not allowed and only in exceptional cases is permission granted by the board. Visitors and researchers of the ICMtt are required to sign a register, which is used for collecting statistical data. In April 2011, the ICMtt conducted a survey where five hundred questionnaires were administered to visitors of the museum. The survey attempted to gather data on the type of visitors to the museum, nature of the visits, as well as to elicit suggestions for further improvements. It is hoped that the findings of this research would not only help the management to further enhance the museum’s resources and facilities, but also provide opportunities for more collaboration with key stakeholders.

**Collaboration**

The ICMtt continues to partner with educational institutions and foreign missions to spread its outreach services. Since its opening in 2006, the ICMtt has received support from various local organizations such as the TSTT Foundation, National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Courts Trinidad, Radio Jagriti, the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, and the National Art Gallery of Trinidad and Tobago. The ICMtt also maintains a good relationship with the Presbyterian Board of Trinidad and Tobago who provides advice to the museum and assistance with minor binding services. The Tourism Development Corporation assists with marketing the ICMtt by advertising the museum in its tourism brochure. Radio Jagriti, which is an East Indian radio
station that is owned and operated by the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, also markets the museum on the airwaves. The ICMtt also enjoys a close relationship with and seeks professional advice and guidance from the staff at the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago and the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port of Spain.

During the period May to June 2011, the ICMtt hosted participants of two diasporic conferences that were held in Trinidad and Tobago. The first conference, entitled “Building a New Partnership between India and Caribbean: The Role of Diaspora” was held from May 31 to June 1, 2011, and sponsored by the High Commission of India located in Trinidad and Tobago and the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. The second conference, with the theme “The Global South Asian Diaspora in the 21st Century: Antecedents and Prospects,” was held from June 1 to 4, 2011, and was sponsored by the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago; the National Council of Indian Culture (NCIC), Trinidad and Tobago; and the University of Trinidad and Tobago. In conjunction with these sponsoring organizations, the ICMtt hosted the conference delegates and held cultural events that included a taste of East Indian songs, dance, music, and cuisine.

It is envisaged that further collaboration would be developed at the national level with the recent launch of the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum at the Brechin Castle sugar factory in Trinidad and Tobago on Wednesday, May 18, 2011. With the closure of the sugar factory in 2003, this project seeks to restore the rich history of sugar in Trinidad and Tobago. It will include a Sugar Museum and a Sugar Heritage Village that comprises artifacts from the defunct industry, rail engine, railway lines, animal-driven carts, tractors, harvesters, and other obsolete machinery. Additionally, it will include an archive documentation center that will preserve the records of the sugar industry and audiovisual materials related to the country’s sugar heritage. There will also be a small, functioning sugar mill, which will actually grind cane and produce fresh cane juice. It would be in the interest of these two organizations to partner together as they both represent so much of the history of the East Indian immigrants and their descendants who worked in the sugar plantations and the now-defunct sugar factory.

**Social History and Cultural Practices**

The early immigrants brought many of their cultural practices to Trinidad and Tobago as they expected to return to India at the end of the indenture-ship period. However, after this period, many of them settled in Trinidad, and despite many challenges, they transformed their status to settlers and continued to shape the country’s landscape socially, politically, culturally, and economically. They retained their cultural and religious practices from India and used unique tools for cooking, agriculture, music, religious ceremonies, and other purposes. Today, these artifacts are considered historical and ancestral
treasures of generations that immigrated to Trinidad and Tobago beginning in 1845. Many of these artifacts, which are now part of the museum’s collections, were passed on from the indentured generations to their descendants and are rare and difficult to acquire. Together with the artifacts, there are other resources that are rich in East Indian social history and cultural heritage. Some aspects of human rights, education, religion, East Indian cuisine, and music are reflected in the resources.

**Human Rights**

Both published and unpublished materials in the museum’s collection contain significant research on the East Indians and the immigration experience in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. Publications by historians and researchers such as Brinsley Samaroo, Kusha Haracksingh, Ron Ramdin, David Dabydeen, and Morton Klass have documented the rigid conditions of the indentureship experience and the way of life of the immigrants. The indentured immigrants sailed the seas under challenging conditions and endured enormous poverty and inhumane conditions in order to seek a better way of life for themselves and family members. The eleven thousand mile voyage from India to the Caribbean was perilous and lasted between two and a half to three months. During this time, the immigrants passed through dangerous weather conditions such as hurricanes and cyclones and changing climatic conditions ranging from steamy, hot weather in the Bay of Bengal to the cold and foggy climate off the coasts of South Africa. On board the ship, they lived in a constant state of semidarkness below the decks. They were not allowed to light lamps. They could not cook their own food and had to eat what was given to them, sometimes being offered meals that were against their religious beliefs. They were restricted from moving to open areas as many frustrated immigrants chose to jump overboard in a hopeless effort to swim back to their homeland.

During the colonial period, the indentured immigrants experienced many challenges economically, socially, and culturally. The indenture system was harsh towards the immigrants as they were not free and were under constant control of the plantation masters. They had to work in their assigned plantations and perform the designated tasks on the employer’s schedule. They could not change employers, refuse to work, or leave the plantation without written permission during working hours. Any breach of these rules resulted in punishment by criminal prosecution and jail sentences. Many immigrants found themselves in jail for breach of the laws. Those who completed their indentureship and lived in Trinidad for ten years were still subject to an annual tax to become eligible for the free return passage to India.

The indentured immigrants’ dress and language were criticized; their religions were condemned; and their marriages, which were held under bamboo tents, were not recognized as lawful. The recognition of imams as Muslim
marriage officers was legalized in 1936 when the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Ordinance was passed while the Hindu marriage officers or pundits were legalized in 1946 with the enactment of the Hindu Marriage Ordinance. Prior to this, these marriages were considered illegal, and children born to parents who were married under bamboo were considered illegitimate and had no legal rights to properties belonging to their parents. In this way, the crown colony benefitted from many of the East Indians’ properties. Legal provision to cremate the deceased was only made possible in 1953 through the passing of the Cremation Ordinance. From 1870, the state provided assistance to Christian denominational primary schools. However this help was only extended to the Muslims in 1948 and the Hindu community in 1951. The Hindu organization Maha Sabha was not recognized until 1952. Although the East Indians were able to read and write in their own Indian language, they were considered illiterate because they were not fluent in English. The dominant language spoken by these immigrants was Bhojpuri, a variant form of Hindi. Because of this perceived high level of illiteracy, very few East Indians were able to obtain jobs in the government services and professional fields. In 1946 a proposal was introduced for universal adult suffrage, which attempted to exclude sections of the Indian community from voting through the application of a literacy test.

**Education**

The museum contains two distinct collections with resources that cover the work of the Canadian Mission and the SDMS of Trinidad and Tobago. These two institutions were instrumental in educating East Indians so that they could better integrate into Trinidad and Tobago society. The Canadian missionaries, who were Presbyterians, arrived in Trinidad in 1868, and from here they continued their work in other Caribbean countries such as Grenada, St. Lucia, Jamaica, and British Guiana. The missionaries learned Hindi to reach out to the East Indians. They composed hymns in Hindi, held prayer meetings, and sang Bhajans in Hindi for praise, but with a Christian message meant to convert East Indian Hindus to Presbyterianism. The missionaries then established schools at the primary and secondary levels, teacher training, and theological and vocational schools.

There is also documentation on the work of the SDMS, which is the organization that represents the tenets of Hinduism in its traditional forms. The SDMS has the greatest following among the Hindus, and it has played a significant role in education in Trinidad and Tobago since 1870 when the state gave it permission to establish Hindu schools in the country. Today there are over forty-two primary schools and five secondary schools that are managed by the SDMS and assisted by the state.

The Canadian missionaries and the SDMS have made a lasting contribution to the education of the East Indians, encouraging them to become professionals and enjoy upward social mobility in Trinidad and Tobago.
Religion

Religion was central to the lives of the East Indian immigrants, and it was important for them to hold on to the values and principles that had sustained them for centuries. They therefore participated in a wide range of religious observances and festivals away from the hard work in the plantations. The ICMt contains several resources that reflect the religious and cultural events of East Indians. The religious festivals include Divali (also referred to as the “Festival of Lights”), Eid-ul-Fitr, Ramleela (ten-day celebration that depicts scenes from the Ramayan epic), and Phagwa (harvest festival, which marks the end of spring and the start of summer).

The museum contains religious books used by the Hindus and Muslims, which include the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayan, Vedas (ten volumes), and the Holy Koran. There is also a handwritten Hindi text on the Kabbir Panths, another Hindu religion practiced by East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago, and a Hindi text of the Holy Bible that was produced by the Canadian Mission. Moreover, there is a collection of resources on Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, who was an outspoken advocate for the propagation of the Hindu religion in Trinidad and Tobago and a leader of the SDMS. He was also instrumental in ensuring that a public holiday was granted for the observance of the Hindu festival Divali in Trinidad and Tobago. Apart from the printed material, there are several Hindu religious ornaments used for prayer services, which include the lotah (brass-shaped vase that is more rounded and wide), tarya (brass plate), havankind (rectangular receptacle for burning fire), and sankh (conch shell that is blown).

Cuisine

East Indian cuisine was an integral part of life for the indentured laborers and is well represented in the museum’s collection. A popular primary dish among the East Indians is called roti, which is a flatbread that could be replicated in different forms such as sada (without grease), paratha (with grease), or dhalpuri (greased with split peas and other spices placed inside the dough). The museum has on display a wide variety of cooking utensils that were used to create many sumptuous East Indian dishes, including roti. In particular, the utensils used to prepare a roti include chowki, belana, chulha, tawa, and chimta. In order to prepare the roti, the dough is placed on a chowki and then rolled with a belana or rolling pin. The chulha, which is a U-shaped fireside made of clay and cow dung and fueled with firewood, is used to cook. The tawa or tavah is a flat or slightly concave disk-shaped griddle mostly made of cast iron and is an essential cooking utensil to heat the roti. The chimta, which resembles a tong, is used to hold the hot roti and move it around the tawa to ensure that it is properly cooked. The Chakra Publishing Collection also has a book by Kumar Mahabir entitled Caribbean East Indian Recipes (1992), which contains many popular East Indian recipes.
Music

Musical skills and talents were well expressed by the immigrants and were found abundantly amongst the East Indian population. The museum contains a wide array of ancient musical instruments (drums and percussion) that were brought from India and that remain a part of the East Indian cultural heritage today. Some of the instruments include tassa drums (used at weddings and other celebrations), dhholak (provide rhythm for folk songs), dhantal (long iron rod), tabla (pair of drums), bansoori (bamboo flute), harmonium (rectangular-shaped keyboard), jhal (brass ornament that makes a clanging bell-like sound), majeera (small brass instrument that produces a finer sound than the jhal), and the sitar (stringed instrument). East Indians used these instruments to perform and entertain all over the country by singing, dancing, and performing jokes and satirical anecdotes. Today these instruments continue to be used for religious and cultural purposes.

Challenges

Although in-house preservation has begun at the ICMtt, professional expertise is still required to restore some artifacts, fumigate, and preserve brittle, rare book collections such as the nineteenth-century religious texts and other printed resources. Digitization also needs to be pursued as part of the preservation process.

The ICMtt is also challenged with issues such as lack of funding, space, security, appropriate furniture, and computer equipment. It would be worthwhile if the government of Trinidad and Tobago through the Ministry of Multiculturalism could partner with the ICMtt to provide some financial assistance and technical expertise in order to overcome some of these challenges. The ICMtt may also need to consider sourcing special grants and funding from other organizations that support the work of museums and cultural repositories.

Future Considerations

Several plans have been earmarked for the future development of the ICMtt and its outreach programs. There are plans to establish a botanical garden in the outdoor space of the ICMtt to showcase rare endangered plants of Indian origin. Plans are also being considered for the completion of the annex to facilitate a multimedia room where visitors can view a fifteen-minute documentary on indentureship before commencing the tour inside the museum. Since the museum attracts both national and international visitors and researchers, it would be useful to develop a standard tour to create a more structured and educational experience. It is also envisaged that the ICMtt would embark on community outreach programs like public lectures, film screenings, and art and drama classes in the future.
Cultural heritage collections have rich traditions of providing descriptive access to their resources in a variety of ways. Catalogs, finding aids, databases, and other tools are aimed at pointing users to appropriate resources through names, subjects, genres, and other access points. Although an inventory exists at the ICMtt, there is need to create a finding aid for easier access to the resources. With professional expertise provided, the materials could be better organized and cataloged electronically to facilitate online access. The museum’s website needs to be reactivated to facilitate remote access and visibility. Focus should also be placed on acquiring more audiovisual materials that document the rich oral history in folk songs, folk dances, and enactment of religious festivals such as Ramleela, Divali, and Hosay. Some oral history resources that document the language and the immigration experience of the indentured immigrants already exist in the museum. Two such examples are the first book compiled by Kumar Mahabir and Sita Mahabir in 1990 entitled *A Dictionary of Common Trinidad Hindi* and *The Still Cry: Personal Accounts of East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago during Indentureship 1845–1917*, also compiled by Kumar Mahabir. The former contains over twelve hundred words that are used by East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago, while the latter documents the immigration experiences of five surviving former indentured immigrant laborers.

Voluntary assistance from persons with expertise in archives, preservation, cataloging, and information technology is greatly needed. They can utilize their specific skills to provide professional advice and assistance as well as improve the services and enrich the visitor’s experience. Despite its limited resources and expertise, the ICMtt has done an excellent job to preserve and exhibit the resources by opening its doors to this rich cultural heritage of Trinidad and Tobago. The work was started 166 years ago by our East Indian ancestors, but there is still more to be done to keep this legacy alive.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
131 The Indian Caribbean Museum of Trinidad and Tobago


8. Ibid.


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