Nelson Island is one of the Five Islands off Trinidad which lies west of Port of Spain in the Gulf of Paria.

The island has historical importance for the many ethnic groups that now populate the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago. From 1866 to 1917, Nelson Island was used as a landing, immigration and quarantine station for Indian indentured immigrants to Trinidad.

This exhibition highlights the role of Nelson Island during the period of Indian Indentureship, with photos and records from the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago.
On May 30th 1845, the Futtle Rozack commonly known as the Fatel Rozak docked in the Port of Spain harbour in Trinidad with 225 adult passengers on board. The passengers were the first immigrants from India who had come to the British colony to work on the sugarcane plantations after the abolition of African slavery. They had spent 103 days at sea during the long and dangerous journey that spanned 14,000 miles (36,000 km). The immigrants were contracted for five to ten years to work on estates (sugar, cocoa and coconut) in a system that ended in 1917. A total of 147,596 Indians came to Trinidad over this 70-year period. Although they were promised a free return passage back home, at least 75 percent of them stayed and settled in the New World colony. In many ways, they brought India to the Caribbean. They continued with their traditions of Hinduism and Islam, and continue to add colour to Trinidad and Tobago’s cosmopolitan society.

Descendants of these Indian immigrants, who now comprise about half of the multi-ethnic society of the twin-island state (1.3 million), commemorate the arrival of their ancestors to these shores annually. This historic day was proclaimed a national holiday – Indian Arrival Day, in 1994.

Source: Dr. Kumar Mahabir
Nelson Island became the Immigration Depot for newly arrived Indian immigrants after the system for receiving immigrants was reorganized in 1866. This involved the disembarkation of immigrants from the ship onto barges and then onto Nelson Island.

The first ship to anchor at Nelson Island in 1866 was the Humber which brought 473 immigrants: 329 men, 84 women, 32 boys and 14 girls.
The Establishment of Nelson Island as an Immigration Depot

The Governor's message in the Trinidad Chronicle announcing the use of Nelson Island as an immigration depot.

Source: Trinidad Chronicle
February 15th 1867

Ailsa was among the 228 ships that brought Indian immigrants to Nelson Island from 1866 to 1917.

Nelson Island
On arrival, Indian immigrants were medically examined and either sent to the Marion Hospital for medical treatment or to the Convalescent Depot to regain their strength after a long journey at sea.

In the early years, the Nelson Island Immigration Depot provided accommodation for approximately 450 people. By 1881 it was improved and enlarged to hold 600 persons and by 1912, there was accommodation for 1000 persons.

Following arrival on the island, immigrants were requested to sit in the assembly area to be addressed by the Protector of Immigrants and his interpreters, where they were read their contract in Hindi and Urdu. Most immigrants spent about ten days on the island before being transferred to work on the estates.
Work on the Estates

In theory, immigrants were required to work nine hours a day except Sundays, Good Friday, Christmas and New Year’s day. In practice, the immigrants’ working day began between 6 and 6:30 in the morning. About 10:30 a.m. a halt was made for the midday meal. Legally the break was for only half an hour; in practice it usually lasted about an hour. At approximately 2 o’clock those with specific jobs to be done in one day finished and returned to the barracks or other quarters. The slow workers and men working in excess of the standard finished by 4 p.m. The less efficient and slower workmen took more frequent casual halts. Those who worked by the hour usually stopped about 4:30 p.m.

There were two classifications of work assigned; task and time. Time work comprised nine hours of labor at various tasks, and was paid by the hour. Task work consisted of an assigned job which in theory should require nine hours work to complete, but usually took much less, and was paid by the job. In the fields, almost 80 to 90 per cent of the work was done by assigned tasks.

Source: Stark’s Guide Book and History of Trinidad, Boston, 1897.
Return to India

Nelson Island served as a port of departure for ex-indentureds returning to India until 1939. The returning immigrants stayed on the island until 300 to 400 of them were gathered to fill a shipload. Some of the returnees even came from neighbouring Suriname and Guyana.

The ship Arima was among the first ships listed to leave Nelson island with returnees.

Register of Returned Immigrants 1936

Letters between the Emigration Agent at Calcutta and the Protector of Immigrants, Trinidad, reveal valuable information on immigrants, including issues of repatriation.

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The end of the Indian Indentureship Scheme had its genesis in the politics of the Indian middle classes. In the late 1800s, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi initiated massive protests against the discrimination of free, professional Indians in Natal, South Africa. This protest later expanded to include Indian indentured labourers. This was taken up by the Indian nationalists in India and later spread to Fiji and Mauritius.

The recruitment of Indian labourers to work in overseas colonies was suspended on 12 March 1917 due to the military requirements of the First World War (under India's Defence of India Act 1917), but never resumed after the war. The anti-indentureship protests continued throughout India until the British Imperial Government and the Government of India had to give in to the pressure to end the system and on 1 January 1920 it was abolished completely.

The last ship to arrive with indentured labourers in Trinidad was the S.S. Ganges on 22 April 1917.

Certificate of Industrial Residence acquired by the indentured labourer at the end of the period of contract.

General Register 1916-1917 showing Indian immigrants arriving on the Ganges ship on 22 April 1917.

An Indenture Contract, the reverse side of which stipulated the terms and conditions of the contract in three languages: English, Hindi and Urdu.

Sources:

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