

Destination Durban: 10th GOPIO International Convention

Marking 150 years of Indian arrival

March 2010 will see celebrations of 150 years of Indian workers in South Africa and GOPIO International is leaving no stones unturned to celebrate this historic moment as Dasarath Chetty, Convenor of the Convention, writes from Durban.

South African President Jacob Zuma will join his Mauritian counterpart Aneerood Jugnauth and Indian Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs Vayalar Ravi as well as senior ministers from several other countries on March 28 to inaugurate the largest jamboree of the Indian community in South Africa to mark the 150 years of arrival of the first Indians in the country. The event, to be held in the historic city of Durban, will also coincide with the hosting of the 10 International Convention of the Global

Organisation of Persons of Indian Origin or GOPIO International, an organization that unites Persons of Indian Origin or PIOs and Non Resident Indians from over 25 countries. Based in Mauritius, GOPIO International has the Mauritian Prime Minister as its Patron.

Mahen Utchana, Chairman of GOPIO International, appealed for unity amongst all organizations of PIOs and NRIs on this historic occasion to come together and unite for the betterment of the Indian diaspora worldwide. "I humbly make a request to the

PIO's from 110 countries to be present in Durban. I am inviting Gopio International (America) under the leadership of Lord Rana, Mr Inder Singh and Ashook Ramsaran to join hand with the Professor Dasarath Chetty for this event. This is the country of the Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who became the Mahatma in India. This leader gave Independence to India in peace. Let all of us join hands together to make this event a big success," says Utchana.

According to Professor Dasarath Chetty, Convenor of the 2010 GOPIO International Convention, the meeting to be held from March 28-31, 2010, will receive over 1,000 delegates from 20 countries around the globe, who will be received by at least 1,000 delegates from South Africa itself.

Chetty says Gopio is committed to the promotion of human rights and the cultural heritage of Indians. Chetty is also the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of University of KwaZulu-Natal and the President of GOPIO South Africa. The bid to host the convention in Durban was presented by Chetty to the GOPIO International Executive Committee in Mauritius where the proposal was unanimously accepted by delegates from Mauritius, France, the United Kingdom, Reunion, Sri Lanka and South Africa.

"It was significant that the GOPIO Convention be held in Durban in 2010



Temple in Durban



South African President Jacob Zuma



GoPIO Members

because it represents 150 years since the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Durban,” said Professor Chetty. “With a view to promoting intercultural tolerance and understanding, the conference provides people from all communities with the opportunity to reflect on the contribution made by Indian South Africans in ushering in a democratic society based on the values of equity and social justice.”

Among other key members of the organising committee of the convention are Professor Anand Singh; Department of Anthropology and Professor Hoosen Vawda; Discipline of Clinical Anatomy, business people and community leaders.

“I want to congratulate the South African delegation for the very able and convincing manner in which they won all the participants to their cause for holding the 10th GOPIO Convention in South Africa in 2010,” said Secretary General of GOPIO Roy Dookhony. “I wish to place on record our special appreciation for the tremendous work done by the team under the outstanding and inspiring leadership of Professor Dasarath Chetty. I wish, on behalf of GOPIO Mauritius, to reiterate our full support to Professor Chetty and his team.”

The Convention comes barely 18 months after the South African chapter of GOPIO was revived and relaunched on November 29, 2008. GOPIO was first launched in SA in 1994, but was found to be inactive in recent years. It is hoped that the new GOPIO SA will breathe

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new life into the body and help bring new insight and with new knowledge incite interest in Indo-SA culture for all Indians across the globe.

The GOPIO SA committee says South Africa is proud to be associated with GOPIO, the international body that serves as a network for people of Indian Origin. It was founded at the first Global Convention of People of Indian Origin in New York in 1989. The initial thrust of GOPIO was fighting

human rights violations of people of Indian origin. Indians in South Africa have in the days of apartheid suffered grave human rights violations and had the great Mahatma Gandhi and many other activists fighting for their liberation. The launch of this new chapter signifies international interest in honouring that struggle and marking South Africa’s role in the fight for Human Rights.

The objectives of GOPIO international include the promotion of the interests and aspirations of Indian communities around the world, to promote cultural heritage to mobilise financial, intellectual and professional resources of Indians abroad for their mutual development and advancement and to constitute think tanks and task forces of Indians abroad on particular issues of interest to people of Indian origin. The South African chapter has adopted these objectives and has adapted to ensure that the local identity of GOPIO SA will be seen.

South Africa has since made great progress with the advent of democracy now in its 17th year. As a united country, Indo-SANs now face new modern day challenges; GOPIO SA have identified the need for Indian culture to be embraced by all, as one of those challenges, “GOPIO SA should function to bring people together from different ethnic groups, allow others to understand and enjoy various aspects of Indian culture, promote inter-cultural tolerance and understanding and be part of a nation building project,” said Professor



Chetty. He added that the Congress in 2010 should not be restricted to the Indian community but be accessible to all communities. He suggested publishing a series of articles that would be translated into isiZulu and be published in leading local isiZulu publications.

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The Constitution however is nothing but a piece of paper unless all South Africans endeavor to make it a lived experience, something that is easier said than done. This is so because after years of segregation, separation, stereotyping and demonising to justify oppression and exploitation, changing the nation's social conscience, addressing age old prejudices internalised over generations and building true non racialism becomes a daunting task. Yet there are many opportunities to do so and not all of them are taken.

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similarities and differences, to undermine the stereotypes still so rife in our society and to build a nation free of hatred for the "other," free of xenophobic tendencies manifesting in appalling acts of barbarism and free of ignorance. This is why it is critical that the Convention does not become a talk shop for Indian South Africans but a forum for leaders in all communities to look at ways of addressing nation building challenges.

Nation building however is not a peculiarly South African challenge as People of Indian Origin (PIO'S) around the world would attest to. The Global Indian diasporas has borne the brunt of discrimination and marginalisation in many parts of the world with a colonial history and yet PIOs stand out in their struggles for human rights and social justice. Their business acumen, commitment to educational excellence and cultural sophistication are both admired and hated and their struggle for true integration continues in many countries. So the theme of the 10th Convention "Turning Historical Adversity into Advantage" is appropriate and relevant not just for Indian South Africans commemorating 150 years of blood, sweat, failure and success but also for PIO's the world over who can readily identify with these themes. ■

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