

## Aapravasi Ghat (Mauritius)

No 1227

### 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* Republic of Mauritius

*Name of property:* Aapravasi Ghat

*Location:* Port Louis District

*Date received by the World Heritage Centre:* 31 January 2005

*Included in the Tentative List:* 28 July 2003

*International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the nomination:* No

*Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

*Brief description:*

Aapravasi Ghat, Port Louis, is the site where the modern indentured labour Diaspora began. In 1834, the British Government selected the island of Mauritius to be the first site for "the great experiment" in the use of "free" rather than slave labour. Between 1834 and 1920, almost half a million indentured labourers arrived from India at Aapravasi Ghat to work in the sugar plantations of Mauritius, or to be transhipped to Reunion Island, Australia, southern and eastern Africa or the Caribbean.

The buildings of Aapravasi Ghat are one of the earliest explicit manifestations of what was to become a global economic system.

### 2. ACTIONS

*Background:* This is a new nomination. Supplementary information sent by the State Party has been received on 14 February 2006.

*Date of the Technical Evaluation Mission:* 2-5 September 2005

*Dates of request for additional information and of receipt from State Party:* None

*Consultations:* ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committees on Archaeological Heritage Management and on Shared Built Heritage.

*Literature:* Anderson, Clare, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean, Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius 1815-53*, London, 2000; Carter, Marina, *Servants, Sirdars & Settlers, Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874*, Delhi/New York, 1995; Carter, Marina, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*, Leicester, 1996; Kale, Mahdavi, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean*, Philadelphia, 1998; Chowdhury,

Amitava, *The Aapravasi Ghat, Past & Present: Archaeological Investigations*, Port Louis, 2003.

*Date of ICOMOS approval of this report:* 10 April 2006

### 3. THE PROPERTY

#### *Description*

Aapravasi Ghat is the site through which 450,000 indentured labourers from India first set foot in Mauritius between 1830s and the 1920s, marking one of the great waves of migration in recorded history.

Set on the bay of Trou Fanfaron, in the capital Saint Louis, Aapravasi Ghat is the remains of a cluster of three stone buildings dating from the 1860s, built on the site of an earlier immigration depot. The remaining buildings represent less than half of what existed in the 1860s.

The nominated site is tightly drawn around the buildings and covers 1640 sq metres. It is surrounded by a buffer zone which is part of the heart of the rapidly expanding city and a busy harbour.

The buffer zone 28.9 hectares is divided into two zones: a smaller zone 1 of 2.9 ha enclosing the nominated area, and a larger zone 2 of 26.0ha that surrounds zone 1.

The abolition of slavery in European colonies during the nineteenth century prompted tropical plantation owners worldwide to seek new sources of affordable and efficient human labour. In 1834 the British Government inaugurated what was called a "Great Experiment", a system of indentured contract labour, developed to attract workers to British colonies. They initially considered attracting workers from China but then turned to India where at the time the economic situation in some Indian states was very depressed. Indians, under an "indentured" or contract labour scheme, were transported to plantations across the British Empire to replace enslaved Africans.

Indentured labour was in existence at an earlier date, for instance in attracting mainly British settlers to emigrate to the Massachusetts colony in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and then later to the first settlement in Cape Colony in the 1820s. However it was not on the scale that developed post-abolition in 1834.

The island of Mauritius was chosen as the site for the first recipient of this new indenture system in 1834, as it was perceived to be an expanding plantation economy unlike the "exhausted" West Indian sugar producers, and also because of its proximity to India.

Plantation owners procured cheap labour from the Indian subcontinent through arrangements with colonial authorities. Men and women recruited as labourers from the countryside became indentured workers, so-called because they were obliged to sign contracts of indenture to work for a certain number of years in return for basic pay, room, and board.

The system soon spread to other countries and indentured labourers from India, Africa, South-east Asia, China and Melanesia emigrated to cocoa and sugar plantations in British, French and Dutch colonies in, for instance, Trinidad and Guyana in the 1840s, South Africa in the 1860s, Surinam in the 1870s, and Fiji in the 1880s. By the

time that the system was formally abolished in 1918, around 2 million people had been transported across the world and there were nearly half a million Indian immigrants in Mauritius, a quarter million in Guyana, over a hundred thousand in Natal and Trinidad, and significant numbers in Fiji, Guadeloupe, Reunion, Jamaica, and East Africa.

In Mauritius, most indentured workers were recruited from North India, especially Bihar and the Northwest Provinces such as Uttar Pradesh, although smaller numbers came from the Tamil and Telugu districts of South India. In the almost 90 years that the system was in operation, the British authorities in India handled around 1.2 million indentured labourers through emigration depots.

Today about 68 percent of Mauritius' population of 1.22 million are of Indian origin.

Because the “free” indenture system was designed to prove a viable alternative to slave labour, it was closely scrutinised and detailed records kept of the entire proceedings: recruitment, shipping, allocation to estates and employment history as well as data on individuals. The resulting registers are collected at the Indian Immigration Archives of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius (outside the nominated property). The size, comprehensiveness and quality of the database, which deals with all the almost half a million migrants, is impressive.

The property was given the name Aapravasi Ghat in 1987, meaning immigration shore or depot in Hindi. Literally the word ghat means interface – in this case between sea and shore or between the old life and the new; it signifies the symbolic nature of the site as the arrival point for the ancestors of over half the current population of Mauritius.

The nominated property consists of what remains of a construction sequence on the site of the immigration office between 1849 and 1865.

The property consists of the following:

1. Remains of three adjoining buildings:

- Entrance Gateway and Hospital Block
- Immigration Sheds
- Service quarters

2. Wharf wall and steps

3. Symbolic meaning of the site

*Buildings:*

- Entrance gateway and Hospital Block

The remaining stone-arched gateway was constructed in 1865 to serve as a secondary entrance to the complex. The single storey hospital building, adjoining the gateway, has dressed stone quoins and window dressings and rendered rubble-stone walls. In 2000 the building was re-roofed.

The hospital block consists of seven adjoining rooms. The 1865 plan indicates their use as guard's room, stable, cart

house, officials' kitchen, surgery and ward room, and staff privies. Few interior details survive, apart from in the kitchen.

- Immigration Sheds

All that remains of the sheds are one stone wall. Originally the building had three random rubble stone walls while the fourth was of timber planks.

In the courtyard in front of the building excavation has revealed the remains of an immigrants' kitchen and the Sirdar's (Gang leader's) Quarters.

- Service quarters

Remains of a bathing area and immigrants' privies still survive.

*Wharf Wall and steps:*

Half way along the Service quarters block are steps leading to the wharf. The wharf wall is of dressed stone of varying patterns, reflecting different periods of building construction. The flight of 14 straight stone steps, up which all new immigrants had to pass, are considered to be the symbolic gateway to the island. The wharf steps no longer give access directly to the water, as the land in front of them has been reclaimed.

The immigration depot in its latest manifestation originally extended much further to the east under what is now the bus station and a dual carriageway. (See history below)

*Symbolic meaning of the site:*

The immigration depot and particularly the wharf steps, the first thing that many immigrants coming from India saw of Mauritius, have great symbolic significance as an entry to a new way of life – full of hope and promise for some, hardship for others - and can be said to commemorate all the new immigrants that passed along them.

**History**

In 1721 the French took formal possession of Mauritius. Because of its sheltered position, Trou Fanfaron, became the landing point for the first French settlers who begun the construction of Port Louis in 1732, using labour from India, Africa and the Malagasy. Large defensive walls and a hospital with foursquare walls around a court were some of the earliest constructions. The hospital still exists in the buffer zone.

The hinterland of Trou Fanfaron became the cosmopolitan commercial centre of Port Louis: in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Malagasy, African and India freemen settled there and they were joined by merchants from India and China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A “Mauritian” style of architecture soon begun to emerge, based on walls of stone with lime mortar or *latanier* wood, and roofs of *argamasse* mortar over shingles (a technique imported from India) or *latanier* leaves. The lime mortar included yoghurt, egg whites, butter and “*gingely*” oil – a recipe that is still in use today, and being used for restoration work on Aapravasi Ghat.

From the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century sugar plantations were developed on the island, worked by slaves.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British were expanding their influence in the Indian Ocean. At the end of 1810, the British marched into Port Louis and the French surrendered. Under the British, sugar production increased, Port Louis was transformed into a free port, roads were built and trade flourished. With the abolition of slavery in 1834, the system of indentured labour was introduced by the British government to maintain a supply of labour, particularly for the sugar plantations. Thousands of people began to arrive each year from India and were housed initially in a depot in Port Louis until they could be dispersed to the plantations.

The nominated site is the remains of this depot. Aapravasi Ghat is located on the east side of the bay of Trou Fanfaron. There were three main phases for the history of reception arrangements for immigrant labourers.

In the first phase from 1834 to 1849, when immigration began and the system of indentured labour was first established, it appears that there was initially no fixed immigration depot and several buildings in different locations around the bay were used for disembarkation by arriving labourers. Around 1840 a building later converted into a smallpox hospital served as the immigration depot. Its location is not known. In 1843 there is a written reference to 'old stone buildings' being used and these have been identified with part of the Military hospital complex built in the 1740s. At least three other buildings are also known to have been used.

The site of Aapravasi Ghat was chosen in 1849. An old French building built before 1775 then existed on the site and this seems to have formed the core for other structures subsequently added. A plan of the site drawn up in 1849 shows the additions made. As with most plans it is not clear if all of what is shown was constructed. The plan shows six buildings around a yard the whole complex adjacent to stone steps leading down to the harbour. Almost immediately it became clear that the new structures were inadequate to cope with the numbers of immigrants arriving: there were at time as many as 1,000 men, women and children in the depot at any one time. The space was enlarged in the 1850s and a new landing space created. Further enlargements were approved in 1856.

By 1857 all available land had been built upon. Further land was then acquired and the site improved by installing privies, roofing the buildings in French tiles rather than tin to give better insulation and ventilation and constructing a wharf wall along the waterfront. All this was completed by 1859. The Protector of Immigrants describes the complex in detail in his report for 1859. He mentions large buildings some with bitumen floors, tile roofs, and planked walls, and says that 600 people can be accommodated "without the slightest inconvenience". The newly improved depot was photographed in 1859.

In the 1860s further changes were made to separate new and old immigrants and to provide separate toilets and bathing places. All the changes between 1864-5 are documented.

In 1864 the construction of a railway cut the immigration depot into two and walls were constructed along the edges of the tracks. Further minor modifications were made up to 1923.

Indentured immigration declined during the 1870s and finally ceased in 1923. The buildings were put to other uses. Many survived until a bus station was constructed in the 1970s and a motorway (the M2 national road) was put through the site in the 1980s. Others were demolished to 'tidy up' the area. In the 1990s part of the site was landscaped as a commemorative space.

In 1865 the depot consisted of: Gatekeeper's office, Surgery, Kitchens, Immigration office, Sirdars' sheds, offices of the depot Keeper and Store Keeper, Immigrants' Sheds, privies and steps leading to the wharf. Of these only the gatekeeper's office, surgery and wharf steps survive. There are archaeological remains of the kitchens, sirdars' quarters, part of the immigration sheds and privies.

During the 1980s awareness was fostered by determined local residents of the importance of the site. A practice was inaugurated of holding a religious ceremony at the site every November to honour the *jehaji bhai* spirit. The remains were proclaimed a national monument in 1987 and in 1988 the site was vested in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture.

In 1999 a project was started to renovate the remaining buildings on the site together with a study of the extensive archival evidence that is extant. In 2001 archaeological excavations were begun by the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. This project led to some controversy and it was agreed that a legal framework for the development should be put in place. In 2001 the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund was established. This has led to more intensive archaeological work being carried out and a project to reverse inappropriate work carried out in the 1990s. In 2001 the name of the site was changed from Immigration Depot to Aapravasi Ghat. To some sections of the population in Mauritius this change has signalled the association of the site with Hindu indentured labourers rather than all indentured labourers, as some were not Hindu but Muslims.

### ***Protection and Management***

#### *Legal provision:*

The Aapravasi ghat site is owned by the Ministry of Arts and Culture.

The core area is protected as a national monument in terms of the National Heritage Fund Act of 2003 and earlier legislation. This provides for the consent of the National Heritage Fund to be sought for any work done on the site.

The Buffer zones are regulated by the Municipal Council of Port Louis as part of their overall regulation of their area under the Local Government Act.

#### *Management structure:*

The day-to-day management of the site is the responsibility of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund. The Board of the Trust consists of representatives of key member institutions such as national Heritage fund, and

the Ministries of Arts and Culture, Tourism and Finance. A technical team drawn from the Board reviews all site work.

A preliminary Management Plan submitted with the nomination dossier, set out a management organisation chart, and the establishment of various management and consultative committees, and a proposed staffing plan.

A more detailed Draft Management Plan was submitted by the State Party on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2006.

This sets out existing municipal plans such as the Mauritius Port authority Master Plan, 2002 -2025 which includes the Aapravasi Ghat Development project. It also details resources directed to Aapravasi Ghat Trust by the Mauritian Government. Between 2002 and 2005, Rs 8 million, that is approximately \$260,000, was allocated.

The Plan details what needs to be addressed in terms of management structure, and legal protection. Currently there is no national policy on World Heritage sites which impact on decisions by local authorities. The plan outlines objectives to put legislative back-up in place and to set up a clear management structure which will involve a Steering Committee and Management Plan Committees. Further objectives cover the development of a comprehensive Conservation Plan, the need to foster links with the local community in the buffer zone, and an infrastructure for visitors.

The draft plan has been put out for a three to four month consultation. The funding to implement the plan has not yet been fully identified.

#### *Resources:*

The prime source of funding is the Ministry of Arts and Culture which disbursed funds for recurring work and projects to the Aapravasi Ghat Fund.

#### ***Justification of the Outstanding Universal Value by the State Party (summary)***

The Aapravasi Ghat is where the modern indentured labour Diaspora began.

The property is unique because it is the only surviving example of an Immigration Depot from this global labour Diaspora which reflects the system put in place by the British Government for its colonies.

Mauritius welcomed the largest single contingent of indentured labourers through its migration depot.

## **4. EVALUATION**

### ***Conservation***

As outlined above the site has been subject to a restoration programme and two phases of archaeological investigation since 1999. The aim has been to unpick landscaping carried out in the early 1990s and to restore the site to how it looked in the 1860s.

For instance in 2000 the Hospital Block was re-roofed inappropriately with modern materials and a large arched opening in the cart house blocked. This programme has not been without some debate and controversy. One of the difficulties is that there is no conservation plan or

archaeological strategy, and no formal consent for the work has been obtained nor has the process been documented in detail.

There is a need now to regularise the situation through the development of the necessary plans and strategies and, where appropriate, to seek retrospective approval for the work so far undertaken.

#### *State of conservation:*

The site is fragile. Much of the evidence for the original structures comes from exposed archaeology, some of which, such as early asphalt flooring and patches of original lime plaster, are very friable. There is a need to conserve what has been exposed or back fill. Where work is undertaken to restore buildings to how they looked at an earlier date, and this process seems to have been given considerable thought, it is desirable that this process be justified and recorded. The importance of the steps should be underscored from the beginning: it is important for the evaluation of outstanding universal value, authenticity, integrity and the delineation of boundaries.

#### *Protection and Management:*

As a national monument, the consent of the National Heritage Fund should be sought for any work done on the site. It would appear that this provision has not always been followed with regard to recent archaeological excavations and restoration of structures.

The State Party needs to take steps to ensure that in the future the provisions of national heritage legislation, in particular provisions for independent review by and consent from the National Heritage Fund for work to be undertaken on this site are honoured by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund and that the Heritage fund is made aware and has records of the work for which its consent was not requested.

The preliminary Management Plan submitted with the nomination dossier is in effect a list of desired management strategies that presently have no legal standing and cannot be given such in their current form. The plan allows for various management and consultative committees, and a proposed staffing plan but it is not clear when and how these will be put into place.

There are a number of issues that need addressing by a management plan. These include the need for:

- the Aapravasi Ghat Trust to work in collaboration with the national heritage Fund
- an archaeological strategy to be developed
- a conservation and development plan for the buffer zone to be agreed with the Port Louis town authorities
- a tourist plan to be developed to optimise the resources of the site

There is a need to address these issues and provide a firm framework for the management of the site.

#### *Boundaries:*

The buffer zone currently has no legal status. Its boundaries are protected only by means of apparently

unwritten undertakings by the Lord Mayor of Port Louis and the Mauritian Ports Authority.

Given the development pressures this is a cause for concern. During the ICOMOS mission it was suggested that the buffer zone could be regulated via provisions contained in Section 14 of the Planning and Development Act. This would require amendment of Port Louis' town planning scheme. This would involve the drafting of an appropriate strategy for the conservation and development of the Buffer Zone. The State Party agreed to consider this and measures to protect as national monuments around 90 structures of conservation value that the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund has identified in the buffer zone.

#### *Risk Analysis:*

##### *- Development*

The main threat to the buffer zone and thus to the setting of the site is from rapid urban development. All of the buildings immediately to the west of the core area, whilst for the most part protected as national monuments, are vacant and in some case approaching a state of dereliction. Beyond this area is the new Caudan Waterfront development. Recently plans were submitted for the extension of this development into the area immediately west of the core of the site. The scale and height of the proposed buildings will dwarf the site and could impact on the setting of the wharf steps. The plan includes the demolition or radical modification of several national monuments. Within the historic core of the city, across the M2, similar conservation issues are also prevalent. Without a detailed agreed plan for the buffer zone, there does not seem to be any mechanism to counter these imminent development threats.

##### *- Restoration*

As outlined above there remains a threat to the authenticity of the site if work is undertaken without agreed plans and necessary approvals.

##### *- Visitor pressure*

Currently visitor numbers are low, approximately 3,000 in the year 2004, but coach parties can be difficult to manage in respect of exposed archaeology.

#### *Authenticity and integrity*

##### *Authenticity:*

Without detailed documentation of the work that has been undertaken over the past six years, it is difficult to comment on the impact on authenticity. It is to be hoped that regularising the work so far undertaken will be a means of establishing the authenticity of what survives. Removing the undesirable additions of the 1990s should help to reinforce the authenticity of the site.

##### *Integrity:*

A detailed plan of the site dated 1865, discovered comparatively recently, has allowed the purpose of the remains to be understood. Less than half of what is documented in the 1865 plan still exists and possibly only around 15% of the original site.

Clearly the site is not intact. What does survive can therefore only represent the place where immigrants first arrived in Mauritius.

#### *Comparative Evaluation*

The comparative analysis provided in the dossier makes the case for Mauritius having more physical evidence of indentured labourers than any of the many other countries that were similarly recipients of the British Government's programme. There are some remains of buildings in Reunion Island, Trinidad, South Africa (Durban). There appears to be no surviving evidence in Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Guyana. Together these countries received the largest number of indentured immigrants. A global inventory of monuments and sites relating to indentured immigration is currently being compiled by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust.

A key issue to be addressed is how far the indentured labour system introduced by the British Government was a unique phenomenon. Indentured labour existed as a system much earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was for instance employed for those emigrating from Europe to the colonies in North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Whereas indentured labour was officially organised and documented by the British government under what was called the 'great experiment' from India to its then colonies, the system also existed in an informal non-governmental way for labourers from India moving to Sri Lanka and Malaysia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise many emigrants from various countries to Australia were also indentured. And the French and Dutch used the system to provide labour from China, Java and Melanesia for their colonies after the abolition of slavery.

This nomination focuses only on indentured labour from India moving to Mauritius under the official British Government scheme. If this narrower focus is adopted, then it seems necessary to look at the extent and scope of the whole scheme. It appears that there are some remains of immigration depots in at least three countries. Although Mauritius was the first country to receive indentured labour, it held that position for only about a year before other countries joined the process.

It would be more desirable to consider the wider indentured labour system which followed from the abolition of slavery in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would mean not just considering the schemes sponsored by the British Government but also those involving the French and Dutch governments and other migrations such as the Chinese to the Caribbean to work in sugar plantations. Some migrations changed history and it would be valuable to assess the impact of the various waves of indentured labour around the world.

If an inscription is to be put forward to recognise the impact of indentured labour on the World Heritage list it would be desirable if nominations could be considered to display the massive global effect of indentured labour in many countries following on from the abolition of slavery, and to show how many of these "changed history".

In 2004, ICOMOS supported an international assistance request by the State Party for a seminar to explore the global scope of indentured labour and to investigate the

possibility of a serial nomination to reflect this phenomenon.

### ***Outstanding Universal Value***

#### ***Evaluation of criteria:***

The property is nominated on the basis of criteria iv and vi:

*Criterion iv:* The site is put forward as a site that has unique remains to represent the “great experiment” in indentured labour put in train by the British Government and the impact that had around the world in social and economic terms.

Indentured labour was also promoted by other governments and it seems desirable to consider the movement of peoples in the wider context. ICOMOS considers that, with the available information, this criterion cannot be properly assessed at this stage.

*Criterion vi:* It is suggested that the indentured labour system inaugurated the beginning of a new world economic order that still resonates today. It is the global Diaspora of indentured labour that has had such a profound effect; Mauritius is one part of that process. ICOMOS considers that, with the available information, this criterion cannot be properly assessed at this stage.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Recommendations***

The nomination has brought into focus the whole subject of 19<sup>th</sup> century indentured labour which transported millions of peoples around the world and has had a profound effect on the development of many countries.

Mauritius was part of that process, in being the first country to be used as part of the great experiment by Britain. Many other countries joined in not just under the British scheme but also under similar schemes worked out by France and Holland, and through informal migrations.

It is suggested that research is initiated in collaboration with the Aapravasi Ghat Trust to consider the wider indentured labour Diaspora and its impact.

Meanwhile it is also recommended that the State Party complete the management plan for Aapravasi Ghat, to include the development and conservation of the Buffer Zone and archaeological and tourism strategies, and to regularise the restoration work so far undertaken at the nominated site.

It is also suggested that consideration should be given to changing the name of Aapravasi Ghat to Immigration Depot in order to signal that the place has significance for all immigrants of all creeds.

It is also suggested that the impressive and detailed archives connected to Aapravasi Ghat be considered for the UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

### ***Recommendation with respect to inscription***

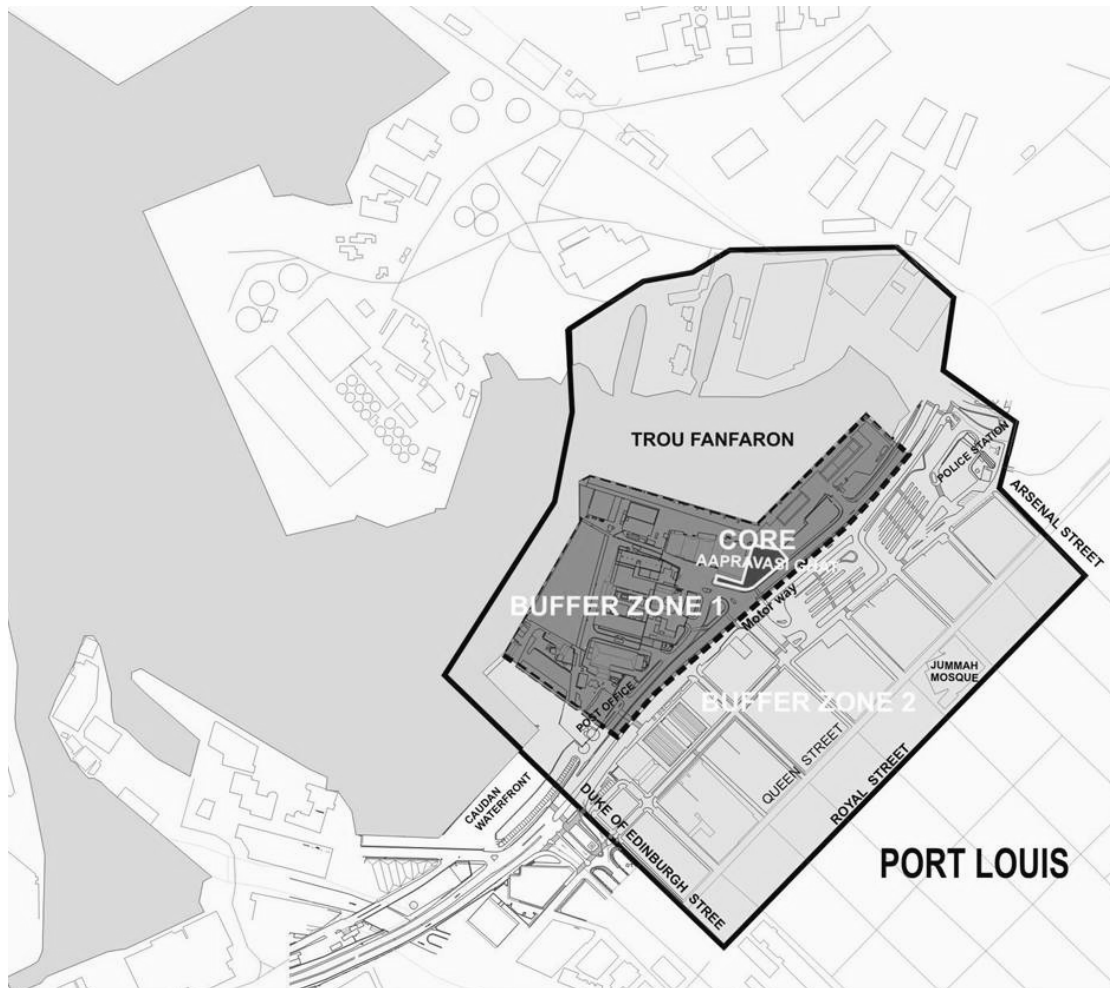
ICOMOS recommends that the examination of Aapravasi Ghat, Republic of Mauritius, be *deferred* to the World Heritage List to allow the State Party to:

-Undertake research on indentured labour to consider the extent, scope and impact of the indentured labour Diaspora around the world.

ICOMOS also suggests that consideration should be given to changing the name of Aapravasi Ghat to Immigration Depot in order to signal that the place has significance for all immigrants of all creeds.

ICOMOS also suggests that consideration should be given to putting forward the Aapravasi Ghat archives for the UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

ICOMOS, April 2006



Map showing the boundaries of the property



**Hospital Block**



**Immigrant's sheds**