Address by H.E. Mr. Rajkeswur Purryag, GCSK, GOSK on the occasion of the launching of “Journey into the Past” by Mrs. Ranjita Bunwaree, on Wednesday 16 April 2014, at 17:00 hours at the Municipal Council of Quatre Bornes.

Hon Mookeshwar Choonee, Minister of Arts and Culture
His Excellency, Mr Anup Kumar Mudgal, Indian High Commissioner
His Excellency, Dr Nomvuyo Nontsikelelo Nokwe, South African High Commissioner
Mr. Jean Claude de L’Estrac, Secretary General of IOC
Mrs. Shakutala Hawaldar, Chairperson, Mauritian Writer’s Association
Mrs. Ranjita Bunwaree and Members of the Bunwaree family
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening!

It’s always an immense pleasure for me to be in the midst of a host of people who have a passion for writing, especially, about literature and the history of our country.

Since the beginning of my mandate, this is almost the seventh time that I am being solicited to participate in the launching of books authored by our local writers. And I have invariably made it a point to respond favourably to all the invitations.

That is because I hold our local authors in great esteem, especially for their creative works and the contribution they make through their writings to immortalise history.

As in Europe or elsewhere for that matter, had not the authors and historians written about the history of their country, humanity would have been deprived of one of the most important aspects of human civilisation.

Historical books, writings and literature are indeed valuable things that we willlegate to our near generations.

Without them, the history of our own country will no longer be there to be referred to in future.

It is in this spirit that I wish to thank the Mauritian Writers Association for associating me with the launching of Mrs. Ranjita Bunwaree’s book, “Journey into the Past”.

I would like to express my sincere congratulations to Mrs Bunwaree for the publication of her third novel after the much acclaimed “Green Mountains to Blue Ocean” and “Loving to Hate”.
I wish to place on record my deep appreciation to her for authoring a book that encapsulates one of the shameful and bitterest part of the history of Mauritius, that is, slavery and slave trade.

Of course, no one would wish to go back into that part of history that has left indelible marks on humankind as a whole and the scars of which are still influencing the lives of many of our citizens.

But as Thomas Carlyle once said:

“In books lie the soul of whole past time : the articulate audible voice of the past, when the body and material substance of it has altogether vanished like a dream.” (Unquote).

In Mrs Bunwaree’s book indeed lies the soul of part of the past history of our country.

Slavery, as you know is considered to be the most abominable atrocities and crimes that has been committed against humanity as well as against millions of people around the globe, particularly, in Africa and in some other parts of the world.

So many books have been written by well-known international authors on slavery revealing the horrors of human bondage right from the moment of kidnapping of men and women in the prime of their lives until their sale at the auction block into back breaking uncompensated and often fatal labour.

Some books describe every step of the slave trade in vivid and gruesome details, including the brutality and inhuman treatment that was meted out to the captives during their long voyage to their unknown destinations.

“Journey into the Past” certainly brings an added dimension to the already existing publications on the dark side of slavery in Mauritius.

I am given to understand that the book was launched earlier this year in Assam, the home-State of Mrs Bunwaree, and in Delhi, on 15 and 22 January respectively.

I have noted that “Journey into the Past” has taken Mrs Bunwaree almost four years of extensive research and findings.

That is sufficient evidence that the greatest part of a writer’s time is spent reading in order to be able to write.

Writing can be an extreme privilege as well as a gift.

It is a gift first to the writer and a gift of giving a story to others.

By writing “Journey into the Past”, Mrs Bunwaree has not only given us a gift but also a story that I am sure many of us will treasure in the catalogue of our recollections.

I have no doubt that Mrs Bunwaree is on the right track and that she will continue to write and enrich the world of Mauritian Literature and history.
Literature and history, as you all know, form an integral part of the cultural landscape of a nation.

That is why we must encourage all our writers, novelists or columnists to write on the history of our country.

Because our younger generations should know about the historical past of Mauritius and slavery and slave trade and indentured labour are part of the dark era that we have known.

I have read some of the chapters of “Journey into the Past”.

I must admit that it is a fascinating historical novel couched in a simple language that makes interesting reading.

The story is set against the backdrop of slavery during the 18th and early 19th century Mauritius.

The scenes she describes with minute details touch our innermost feelings.

The narrative combines the enduring elements of drama, romance and history.

Though it focuses on the fictional character of Mahono, a young Mozambican boy of twelve robbed from his family and uprooted from his native village to be sold as a slave to Richard, a planter and slave-owner in the North of Mauritius, the historical details bring reminiscences of our past.

Yewaneka, a woman slave of the same origin as Mahono, develops an intimate relationship with the hero against all the odds and in spite of the inhuman miseries meted out to them by their masters during their capture.

This novel is a good tool to teach the present generations the horrible and unscrupulous miseries endured by the slaves.

The writer vividly depicts the social reality of that dark period of our history, or rather the history of humanity.

In spite of the fact that the story takes place in Mauritius, it has a universal significance as the treatment administered to the slaves here was no different from what slaves endured in other parts of the world.

Launching the book in Mauritius is highly significant for various reasons:

- Firstly the setting of the plot is Mauritius itself;

- Secondly it will give the book the necessary impetus to reach the shores of Africa from where the slaves were captured;

- Thirdly, we are the bridge between Africa and India from where the indentured labourers came with the abolition of slavery;

- Fourthly, Le Morne World Heritage Site honours the memory of those slaves who dared to seek freedom even at the expense of their lives sometimes;
Finally, the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site is a tribute to those Indian indentured labourers who came here in a disguised form of slavery to ensure the prosperity of the white plantocracy.

From the historical perspective, the story unveils the social reality of the time, namely:

- How people lived – the white masters’ opulent lifestyle and the miserable and inhuman life of the slaves;
- The living conditions of the slaves who mostly slept in the open;
- The food they ate – luxurious food for the white settlers and only boiled cassava for the slaves;
- The chains and the wooden collars tied to the slaves to prevent them from running away or attacking their masters but which in no way diminished their attempts to run away to freedom;
- The frequent references to the free and joyful life in the villages in Mozambique, the alien culture arouse our emotions while reading about the hardships, sexual abuse, corporal and capital punishments suffered by the slaves here.

I hope that this book reaches out to a maximum number of readers, both here and abroad, because it will definitely refresh our memories about life in the 18th and early 19th centuries, a time when slavery was the norm.

It will also remind us of the sacrifices made by all those people who were forced to toil day and night on the plantations to enrich the white settlers.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

With these words, I wish Mrs Bunwaree success in her future endeavour.

And I now have the pleasure to launch “*Journey into the Past*” for the benefit of our readers.

I thank you for your attention.