Mapping Migration, Gender, Culture and Politics in the Indian Diaspora: Commemorating Indian Arrival in Trinidad

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Commemorating Indian Arrival in Trinidad

Kalpana Kannabiran

Literature suggests that Indian women came to Trinidad as already independent women who made a conscious decision to move out of the difficult social situations which confronted them in India. These included deserted women, practising prostitutes and brahmin widows. But soon enough they were constrained to accept the androcentric ideal of Indianness which was coterminous with subordination. The image of the Trinidadian Hindu woman is therefore far from empowering. The renewal of Hindu energy in specific forms and in specific contexts has not only meant grappling with the erosion of political space in a racially polarised polity and reclaiming it but also confronting the derogatory images of the community that are based on the institutionalised derogation of women's rights within the community.

The experience of the English speaking Caribbean has been shaped by histories of slavery and indentureship. They came in ships. From across the seas, they came. Britain, colonising India, transporting her chains from Chhotanagpur and the Ganges Plain. Some came with dreams of milk-and-honey riches, fleeing famine and death; dancing girls; Rajput soldiers, determined, tall,
escaping penalty of pride.

Stolen wives, afraid and despondent, Crossing black waters, Brahmin, Chammar, alike, hearts brimful of hope [Espinet 1990].

Having come to Trinidad, however, a significant proportion of the Indian population chose to remain in Trinidad after indentureship rather than be repatriated to India. Between 1870 and 1900, the Indian community in Trinidad was transformed from a group of immigrants into a community. This process involved the shift of Indians from immigrant wage labour into peasant proprietorship, from estates into villages and a reconceiving of social relationships in ways that were congenial with this shift. Mohammed (1975) argues that ethnicity and gender identity were interlocked in the affirmation of this emerging Indian community. The fear of fragmenting identities and the concern over the need for ethnic purity inevitably took the form of prescriptive norms for marriage, which again depended on a policing of women’s sexuality. Mohammed suggests that while patriarchal systems governed each of the three racial groupings — the white, creole and Indian, these systems were constantly contending with one another for economic, political and social dominance. “The contest was for a definition of masculinity between men of different races” [Mohammed 1990:35-36]. Indian men who had been demeaned during indentureship and dispossessed of the power that classic patriarchy invested in them, sought to retrieve their masculine pride through a consolidation of the traditional Indian patriarchal system that formed the basis of their cultural capital. However, given the shortage of Indian women in Trinidad and the fact of women being wage earners, Indian women were in a position of relative strength, and resisted emerging interpretations of patriarchy, or the restrictions that sprang from this newly reconstituted ideology.²

The East Indian community in Trinidad is not an internally homogeneous one. Presbyterians, Muslims and Hindus constitute the dominant religious groups, each with very different perceptions of their own locations in Trinidadiian society and in the larger south Asian diaspora. It has been suggested that after Partition some Muslims traced their origins to the newly formed Pakistan. Hindus in Trinidad also contend that Muslims today distance themselves from their Indian past and link themselves increasingly to Pan Islamic trends in central Asia, the illustration being cited of the absence of any commemoration of Indian Arrival during the Eid celebrations in 1995. Clearly this is a contentious issue as several Muslims still identify with India both in terms of self description and collaboration. Presbyterians define themselves as representing a resistance to Hindu orthodoxy, the primary tension between them and Hindus being on the issue of conversion. Hindus have a nostalgic affinity to India, both their ancestral homeland and the religious centre of Hinduism. While there is a distancing both culturally and politically and a recognition of a radically different location, yet India shapes Trinidadiian East Indian [more specifically Trinidadiian Hindu] consciousness in significant ways.³

Within Trinidad, there appears to be a gradual shift in Hindu self perception from a religious group within a larger ethnic community, to religio-ethnic community, race and religion being key determinants in this shift. One of the ways in which this shifting is being consolidated is through the training of popular culture into specific modes. This paper will examine the reconstruction of the history of the East Indian Hindu community at a particular moment, and present the texture of the reconstruction as also its context: 1995, the year that marked the 150th anniversary of Indian Arrival in Trinidad, and the Pichakaree [a musical event] organised on Phagwa by the Hindu Prachar Kendra to commemorate Indian Arrival in 1995.

INDIAN ARRIVAL: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS HISTORY

De tilhas dey say, started in Bharat, Coolie jahai bandal on de Fatel Razack, Ramayan Koran jhandee for new teerath [Maharaj 1995].

History begins with the migration of labour—the working classes—unknown destinations in search of survival. History begins with a pilgrimage. History belongs to the working classes. Memory at this particular moment is history. Undoubtedly, economic hardship as well as personal troubles caused thousands of Indians in the villages to leave. The key players in the indentureship system were the recruiters or ‘arketias’ who convinced, duped and kidnapped people who eventually found themselves on the ship to Trinidad [Gosine 1995]. ‘Jahaiji’, by Mubes Babooram recaptures the experience of the jahaiji: In India where I was born, life was hard. An arkatia came and told me, come to Trinidad.

All the people here were told, that the streets were paved with gold and once we reached over there our problems will disappear. Now that we are all on this ship, and we sailing out to sea. The arkatia come and tell me: we are all bong coolies.

Ch: so we are sailing, we are sailing. Aboard the Fatel Razack [Raviji 1995]. Having left India unable to cope with oppressive conditions of colonialism, Indian migrants set out in search of a better life, only to be confronted with a similar oppressive reality in the new land, where they were situated at the bottom of the hierarchy. “They had consolation, however, in the story of Lord Rama as he journeyed into the wilderness and survived those tremendous hardships. They were making the same journey with the bhajans and other songs as their only line of communication to Him...Life was very difficult when they arrived...the Ramayan and Koran provided a source of spiritual sustenance as they chanted the various verses under the flamebeaus of tin lights within their rooms” [Boodoosingh 1993].

Workers were divided into groups on arrival depending on strength and ability. “In most territories in the West Indies, work started at about 4.30 am...Very often planters used men and women for ploughing and hauling loads, work that could have been performed by draught animals. It is argued that the Indians remained the all-purpose animal.” While, as Breton argues, “The indenture system itself contributed to the unfavourable image of the coolie”, it has also been argued that the religion, the alien dress, language, unfamiliar food habits, and the ill understood ceremonies of the Hindu religion were largely responsible for the marginalisation of the Indian in Trinidad and Tobago [Narayansingh 1995].

The Fatel Razack, the ship that carried the first contingent of labourers from India has over the years become a symbol of Trinidadiian Indian cultural identity. The jahaiji or the one who journeyed has come to epitomise the Indian. Both Fatel Razack and the jahaiji, however, are not just symbols of a past or reminders/remainst of history. “[I]n those early days, more than a century ago, the first beginnings of the sense of family and kinship emerged on the three-month long voyages aboard the ships themselves. The word jahaiji refers to the relationship among those who shared the experience aboard a particular ship. In many cases, this relationship was further sealed by marriages of the children of jahaijis, and in many cases, the bond of the jahaiji was handed down several generations” [Raviji 1995].

The early jahaijis came to Trinidad not as illiterates but representatives of a cross section of the Indian community and of a culture that was centuries old [Boodoosingh 1993]. They are far more importantly signifiers of a conduit to the mainland that has never snapped, but has re-
mained one that enabled a live contact with India and provided substance to the claim of cultural distinctiveness. Rice, beans, medicinal plants, vegetables and pigeon peas were grown in India in Vedic times. Many of these plants came to Trinidad with the indentured workers, who had seeds and even cuttings in their few belongings...Our vegetation, our agriculture, our life bears the indelible stamp of India. Trinidad and Tobago must hold in reverence our ancient links, which every child sees every day, not only in the faces of their parents but also in the trees and shrubs and cultivated plants which soften the harshness of the landscape, while giving food, medicine and shade [Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha 1995].

The sugarcane plant, which binds the Trinidadian Indian to India, is believed by them to originate in Vedic times, with the fortunes of peoples and civilisations: After the emancipation of slaves in the British Caribbean in 1834, Indians were imported to save the sugar industry from collapse...The Hindus came not only to save the sugar industry, which they were the first to invent, but also to bring to the west the fathomless depths of Indian and Hindu culture. It is all wrapped up in the history of one plant – cane. The saga of cane is the saga of Indian Pioneers from Vedic times...We should see the hand of fate in all these migrations of plant and man, which have added to the richness of our world and our culture, even as we remember the anguish and trials which have united us. Indians, Africans, Amerindians and Europeans on this island, our home, our Janma Bhoomi.4

It could be argued, after Romila Thapar, that the tendency to essentialise Vedic culture and exaggerate its virtues is part of a search for a distant Edenic World, a claim of cultural distinctiveness. The vision they leave behind, go beyond their gains...So take the torch of freedom and climb to higher planes...5

The claim to India is spiritual, a religio-cultural citizenship, that coexists with a political citizenship in Trinidad and Tobago. In the words of Surendranath Capildeo, "...Thousands of miles away [from India] across the 'kala pani' in a tiny Caribbean Island another seed of India [has been] planted, germinated and taken root and [has borne] the marvellous fruit of Tulsi Das and the Ramcharitramanas. And you and I in the like manner as our forefathers shall with our children and their children's children together eat of that fruit and enrich the life of this nation" [Capildeo 1995]. It is in this sense this dual citizenship and its implications both for Indo-Trinidadians and Indians that I will return to from time to time. This religio-cultural citizenship has several strands, that link, labour, land, the motherland and spirituality, specifically a Hindu spirituality based on a syncrretism that weaves together vedic traditions, epics, Saivism, popular cultural traditions, and liberal Hindu revivalism represented by Swami Vivekananda.

A century and fifty years ago Siva said to Parvati, to 'T'dad let's go. 'That's my wish also you should know In the hearts of Indians to 'T'dad we'll 'row' In the hearts of Indians, to 'T'dad you came Jai Siva Sambhara Hara Hara Mahadeo To bless our land and dharma to proclaim Jai Siva Sambhara Hara Hara Mahadeo Nani and Nana liked dhal and rice and bhaji satvic food that kept mind and body healthy. In purity and simplicity they were happy Like Parvati and Siva they blessed their family. Glory be to you Hara Hara Mahadeo. They lived with morality and plenty dignity. They never faltered in workship and duty Like Kailash in Himalaya was their 'Kuti' Jai Siva Sambhara Hara Hara Mahadeo.6

Alongside the tracing of genealogies to Vedic India, there is recognition of the fact that the practice of Hinduism in Trinidad is very different from that in India, and a consciousness of the fact that migration and an insular ethnicity have pushed issues of caste to the background, while religious groups that are not necessarily divisive (Muslim, Presbyterian and Hindu Trinidadians, and among the Hindus, Sanatanists, Kabir Panthis and Arya Samajists) still exist in existence [Narayansingh 1995]. Also the question of cultural identity and the experience of the loss of language as a cultural loss/impoverishment was debated extensively in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The East Indian Weekly in 1931 declared "This is the land that we have made our home; let us therefore put Hindi and Urdu aside just a little" [Narayansingh 1995].
of claims of cultural authenticity in Trinidad and Tobago:

How come calypso is national culture?
Degradin' de Indian
You know who is de champion
Degradin' we women
And soca is de champion
One hundred and fifty years
On this anniversary
Not one calypso to celebrate we history
So how come calypso is national culture?


The writing also reflected a newly emerging definition of nation and nationhood in the East Indian community that tied together images of post colonial India — ‘Jai Girmityya Jai He. Jai He, Jai He’ — with the history of indentureship and a syncretic Hindu culture. So, while there is an acknowledgment of the contribution of other religious groups to the growth of the East Indian community, the dominant public discourse has a heavy Hindu slant. The celebration of Phagwa in 1995 provided an opportunity for a reassertion of Indian pride, a collective nostalgia about the journey from India to distant lands and an uncertain future, and the concern for the preservation and rejuvenation of the Indian heritage, spiritual, cultural and religious.

In the move towards cultural and religious consolidation, socio-cultural practices were reassessed from the standpoint of their propriety, and their potential to undermine the practice of pure Hinduism from within. Chutney and Soca, forms of Indo Trinidadian folk dances had their origins in the ritual women’s dance during the matriarchal and laawa ceremonies of the Hindu wedding. These dances were sexually explicit and possibly one of the few spaces available to Hindu women that are free of male authority and control. Chutney took these dances out of the private space that was exclusively female into the hetero-social public space [Baksh-Soodeen 1996].

Ramsingh’s chowtal raises various questions related not just to a claim to ‘national’ culture, but also questions related to claims of the ‘authentic’ Indian voice. The reassertion of Indian identity and the shaping of Indian cultural practice has tended to hinge on the creation of a monolithic Hindu tradition, and the consolidation of that tradition through organisations like the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha and more recently the Hindu Prachar Kendra, that attempt to offer a new empowering alternative to a spiritually devalued people by reclaiming/resurrecting rituals, religious practices and heroes. This is a process constantly revitalised by visits to India, notably to Benaras, to study religion. Part of the effort to revitalise Hinduism has consisted of guarding the religion from attack/degradation. As early as 1965, Simbhoonath Capildeo then a Member of Parliament and a Sanatanist opposed the proposal to portray Hindu Gods in Carnival. The following year, Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, the first President General of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha influenced the inclusion of a section of the Carnival Act making the portrayal of a deity of any religion a criminal act. The efforts of these different people to keep Hinduism alive in different ways, according to their specific locations in the Trinidadian polity, has been given official recognition by the Hindu community by conferring on them the status of Caribbean heroes:

You graced sons of Nana and Nani with excellence
Bhadase Maharaj started with Hindu Renaissance
The Capildeo’s laboured for Hindu prominence
Siew Dass Sadhu reflected the Hindu conscience
Glory be to you Hara Hara Mahadeo

Ramlakhan 1995.

Thirty years later, in 1995. Hindus in Trinidad were protesting the use of images of Natraj Shiva in the Carnival, linking the protest to the cultural assertion of Hindu culture and the larger contestation of ‘national’ culture.

CONCLUSION

Reddock suggests that many of the East Indian women “came to the region, not as dependent wives, but as already independent women who had made a conscious decision to leave their difficult social and economic situations in India. These included women deserted by their husbands, already practising prostitutes, and Brahmin widows, who could not remarry in India. Very soon thereafter they were constrained by an acceptance of docility, passivity and dependence — the glorification of motherhood and an acceptance of the androcentric ideal of Indianness being coterminous with subordination [Reddock]. This has meant a tacit acceptance of Indian men’s violence towards Indian women, largely characterised by the use of the cutlass. This threat/actual use of violence was a direct response to attempts by women to retain a degree of autonomy over their lives. The image of the Trinidadian Hindu woman therefore is far from empowering. The steady rise in wife murder and violence in the 1990s has led to widespread resistance by Indian women to institutionalised domestic violence and a resistance to cultures of subordination.

The renewal of Hindu energy in specific forms in specific contexts, therefore has meant not merely working through the erosion of political space in a racially polarised polity and reclaiming it, but working through derogatory images of the community that are based on the institutionalised derogation of women’s rights within the community. The guarding of religion has inevitably meant more strictly defined norms of sexual behaviour, especially for women, along with a resistance to institutionalised cultures of subordination and violence.

Further, the construction of a homogeneous, monolithic Hinduism based on Vedic/Sanskritic traditions necessitates an elimination of ‘lesser’ traditions. In a multi caste society like India, both the elimination of non-Sanskritic traditions as well as the imposition of Sanskritic traditions have been consistently contested by lower caste people, often at great risk. This has had to do with the strength of anti caste mobilisation under dalit leadership. In Trinidad, on the other hand, while historical evidence points to the predominance of people from lower castes among the first generation migrants, caste identity is increasingly being replaced by a larger ethnic/religious identity, although it still continues to determine social intercourse. This superimposition of a religious identity is again a conscious political decision by the new liberal Hindu leadership which sees the consolidation of Hindutva as being possible only by opening up the faith, against the orthodox position of the Sanatanists. It also represents the rise of a non-brahmin leadership, that will not be accepted within the framework of the brahmin dominated Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha.

The result of this is that while caste diminishes in significance, social practice that is originally circumscribed by caste, now acquires a broader base. Socio-religious practices of the lower castes in this context have the potential of becoming the norm and the defining characteristic of Trinidadian Hinduism. The possibility that exists therefore is that of a re-centred Hinduesm. However, the newly emergent monolithic global Hinduism, known by the more popular name Hindutva, will not allow this re-centering. Hinduism must assert its claim to purity through genealogy of Vedic Hinduism at the cost of cultural
creativity and renewal which are the hallmark of the ‘lesser traditions’. The pichakahre that effectively charts out new creative terrains for the telling of history invested in the consolidation of a monolithic tradition. The 150-year-old brotherhood of jahaa, with its historical diversity and multiculturalism is now being bombarded with the images and rhetoric of the ‘Global Brotherhood of Saffron’. This now is the strongest link to the mainland. And gender is critical to the construction of the fraternity, as well as to the mapping of its genealogy.

Finally, this move to iron out internal differences and present a unified faith where Siva, Rama, Krishna, Jahaaji and Vedas coexist in peaceful harmony, is a cultural assertion that is political by definition. The overt and underlying claim being staked is one for control over and power in the political space which is only achievable through internal ‘stability’. And this stability has to do with virility and culture; it hinges on the re-gendering of the public/political space, as this poem by Indrani Rampersad, dedicated to ‘the Hindus of the Caribbean whose ancestry is linked to the sugarcane fields of the Caribbean’, illustrates:

Well you grew tall and stately as the sugarcane
To flower in majesty
In the wind of change?
Or will each harvest
Successively breed
Decreasingly stunted ratoons
Of a virility lost
Of a culture lost
Of a Will lost
In a horizon painted Hopeless?

[Rampersad 1995]

Notes
1. A majority of those who migrated to Trinidad under the indentureship system for instance, belonged to impoverished agricultural castes, the lower castes in general and untouchables. The figures of emigrants from Calcutta in 1877-78 are illustrative.

Total number of emigrants: 18,488
Women: 6,044
Men: 12,444
Brahmins and other high castes: 2,723
Agriculturists: 4,438
Artisans: 263
Low castes: 8,807
Muslims: 2,250
Christians: 7


2. See Rhoda E Reddock, Women. Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History, and Patricia Mohammed, Writing Gender into History. This contestation of terrains, of power and the consolidation of cultural capital – both patriarchal and religious – is inextricably tied to a history of migration.

3. This observation is based on conversations with a cross section of the Hindu population in Trinidad in March 1994.

4. ‘They are watching on the Call of Sugar’, Express, March 11, 1995. This optimism is reiterated in several voices that call for the celebration of Arrival Day. The blurring in the use of Hindu and Indian in this narrative is something that is becoming increasingly ‘normal’ in the contemporary Hindu writing in Trinidad.

5. ‘Jai Girmityaa’. Phagwau, March 19, 1995. Girmityaa, like Jahaaji is a term for the indentured labourer who has origin in the agreement or ‘girmi’ that the labourers had to sign.


With gazas, deeyaa and lotaa they puje the land
Ramayan they chanted and showed ah hero’s stand
Like Hanuman fought bravely for justice in this land...

There is of course an acknowledgement of the presence and contribution of Indian Muslims, for instance Haji Rukmuneen an indentured labourer who went on to play a critical role in the early development of Islam in Trinidad and Tobago. Interestingly, of two people who went abroad to attain an Islamic education, one went to India and the other to India and Egypt. And yet, the dominant discourse on Indian Arrival is within frameworks of Hinduism. It could of course be argued that this has to do essentially with numerical minority. Muslims not constituting a significant proportion of the population, an argument that will be picked up at a later point in the paper.


8. There are also a large number of people who come to India from Trinidad and Tobago to enhance their formal educational qualifications, as well as training in the performing arts. A young woman, active in the Hindu Women’s Organisation, in a sense settled this issue when she said in an interview, on condition of anonymity, that most young Indians have two positions on the Carnival. One, a public/political stance and the other a private/emotional stance, both diametrically opposed.

9. Witness the similar uproar over Hussain’s execution in Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, Barbara Espinet, Ramabai Espinet (ed), Creation Fire, p 225.

References


