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# Mapping Migration, Gender, Culture and Politics in the Indian Diaspora

## 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.*

THIS paper began as a reflection on what the terms communalism and religious fundamentalism mean; what are the contextually specific ways in which 'communalism' gets played out; would a radical difference in context pale into insignificance against the weight of manifestations of a cultural ethos that are similar, comparable or continuous on the surface? Or, is it on the other hand necessary to go beyond surface similarities and attempt to understand realities and correspondences without losing sight of historical specificities? These questions arose in the course of a six-week visit to Trinidad to dialogue with East Indian groups on the issue of domestic violence.

It is necessary to clarify at the outset however, that my own location in the work that I did in Trinidad was complex. As also my interaction with Hindu/Indian communities there. The complexity had largely to do with the ways in which Hindu religious belief and practice intersected with everyday life, and the forms which the discourse on the mainland [India] took. The difficult moment of that complexity that I found myself trying to negotiate constantly was the way in which I, a Hindu Indian woman from India was 'placed' in relation to the larger historical relationship of the people with the mainland/motherland. Yet another twist to this complexity was the fact that I was in Trinidad at the invitation of a women's group that consisted primarily of women of African origin, with the stated purpose of furthering an inter ethnic dialogue on women's rights, especially on the problem of domestic violence in the Indian community. To problematise the issue of hindutva in the course of this work was far from easy and most times not accepted. The other contentious issue that is foregrounded in this entire discourse on the identity of the diaspora is that of cultural citizenship.

There has been in the past decade a spate of writing on religious fundamentalism, more specifically on Hindu nationalism both in India and the diaspora. There are groups in the United Kingdom, the US and elsewhere particularly fighting the polarisation of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in the wake of Operation Blue Star, Babri Masjid and the increasing violence against minorities and dalits in India. There are also groups of immigrants in these countries who support and host events featuring the BJP-RSS, or pro-Khalistan groups. Clearly therefore, there is a live link between the mainland and the diaspora, both in the arenas of fundamentalist politics and democratic resistance to this politics. And resistance has been integrally multi-cultural and anti-racist, not stopping at being anti fundamentalist/anti communal [Grover 1996].

However, the UK and the US have very different diasporic histories than for instance, Fiji, Surinam, Trinidad, Guyana or South Africa. The latter have a history of giving birth in a sense, to the Indian diaspora. Unlike the UK and the US, whose history begins post Partition, these countries have a history that dates back 150 years to the period of British colonialism. This stark difference in historical location, it appears, accounts for the very different terms in which racism is experienced by different groups. One living in/fighting racism in the 1970s, another inheriting a history of indentureship to white plantation owners, having replaced peoples of African origin on the plantations at the end of slavery, thus inheriting a racial polarisation on both sides. Again unlike Britain where the Indian family is barely 20 years old [Grover 1996] the Indian family in Trinidad is 150 years old. There are written histories of indentureship, and of the East Indian community in Trinidad.

A cursory look at the contemporary experience of these two communities is very similar despite these critical differences in historical experience. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has a flourishing network that embraces both realities. The cry of Hindu nationalism is getting increasingly strident across these regions and somewhere along the way the difference fades away. As one takes a closer look, however, the difference takes shape yet again. From the standpoint of popular consciousness in India, immigrant communities in the UK, the US and Canada are tied to images of affluence, of achievement and have a high recall in the minds of the middle and upper classes across communities in India. Trinidad and countries with similar histories especially of indentureship on the other hand do not evoke this recall. The reasons for this are to be sought not just in the fact that migration took place more than a century ago, but also, and more importantly, because the migrants belonged primarily to the lower castes/classes and marginalised sections.<sup>1</sup> In Trinidad on the other hand, imagining India seems to constitute the core of Indo [Hindu] Trinidadian consciousness. The relationship between diasporas and 'the mainland' therefore are uneven and unequal to begin with.

### CONTEXTUALISING INDIAN ARRIVAL

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 reordering of social relationships in ways that were congruent 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Trinidadian 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 conten-

tious 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 Trinidadian East Indian [more specifically Trinidadian Hindu] consciousness in significant ways.<sup>3</sup>

Within Trinidad, there appears to be a gradual shift in Hindu self perception from a religious group within a larger ethnic community, to a religio-ethnic community, race and religion being key determinants in this shift. One of the ways in which this shift 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 itihaas dey say, started in Bharat,  
Coolie jaaji bandal on de Fatel Razack,  
Ramayan Koran jhandee for new teerath*  
[Maharaj 1995].

History begins with the migration of labour – the working classes – to 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 'arkatias' who convinced, duped and kidnapped people who eventually found themselves on the ship to Trinidad [Gosine 1995]. 'Jahaaji'. by Mukesh Babooram recaptures the experience of the jahaaji:  
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 born coolies.

Ch: so we are sailing, we are sailing,

Aboard the Fatel Rozack [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 flambeaux 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 Brereton 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 Rozack, the ship that carried the first contingent of labourers from India has over the years become a symbol of Trinidadian Indian cultural identity. The jahaaji or the one who journeyed has come to epitomise the Indian. Both Fatel Razack and the jahaaji, however, are not just symbols of a past or reminders/remnants 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 jahaaji 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 jahaajis, and in many cases, the bond of the jahaaji was handed down several generations" [Raviji 1995].

The early jahaajis 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 hid seeds and even cuttings in their few belongings...[O]ur 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 Utopia, in an attempt to cope with disturbing and cataclysmic changes in socio-political environments [Thapar 1979].

Arrival Day was an occasion to remember the pitris – ancestors – and reassert their values of hard work, thrift, the thirst to progress and a god-fearing life.

If by magic it can happen, or pitris come again

Aja and ajee will be happy, for their Dharma we maintain.

They will see schools and mandirs  
Better than days of yore

Nana and Nanee happy, seeing jhandees as before

They will see our many pandits officiating all around

They will see Nagar compound, 103 – and rise of Indian song [Raviji 1995].

Ortoput it in the words of Pavitra Jaimungal, Oh children of the jahaaj, arise the time has come

Honour the ancestors for the work they have done

The vision they leave behind, go beyond their gains

So take the torch of freedom and climb to higher planes...<sup>5</sup>

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 a 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 syncretism 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 Sambhu Hara Hara Mahadeo  
To bless our land and dharma to proclaim  
Jai Siva Sambhu Hara Hara Mahadeo  
Nani and Nana liked dhal and rice and bhaji  
sattvic 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 worship and duty  
Like Kailash in Himalaya was their 'Kutti'  
Jai Siva Sambhu Hara Hara Mahadeo.<sup>6</sup>

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 in existence [Narayansingh 1995]. Also the question of cultural identity and the experience of the loss of language as a cultural loss/impooverishment 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].

The point at which this precipitated into a contestation of citizenship, of nationality is an interesting one. The debates that were generated in the popular press about whether or not Indian Arrival Day should be declared a national holiday or not, raised several questions which had to do with comparative histories of oppression, of authenticity, of centrality in the politico-cultural space of Trinidad and Tobago.

The main arguments in favour of declaring May 30, Arrival Day, a public holiday, centred on the need to celebrate the arrival of Indians. According to this argument, "The Indian Arrival Day is fundamentally different to the African Emancipation day, which marks the official end of slavery. The indentured Indian pioneers came from India under indentureship contracts, to work and live for a period of time in these parts. They came as wage earners and builders of a society. There is nothing shameful about it" [Rampersad 1993]. Further, "[a]nother aspect of the Indian psyche that conditions Indians to approaching Indian Arrival Day on a positive note includes the concept of karma which was strongly espoused by the early Indians who were predominantly Hindus...It is karma that determines where one takes birth and so the Indians would have viewed their birth here as one that they had themselves determined." The argument for the official commemoration of Indian Arrival Day was often pitted against the existing commemoration of Emancipation Day to mark the end of slavery. Black scholars and activists contended that Emancipation was not merely an issue "in a little pond, dividing Indians and Africans", but one that signified the fundamental transformation of the entire society, and "at the broad human level, it was a celebration of the triumph of a universal spirit of humanity" [Taitt 1995].

The struggle to get official recognition for Arrival Day, for many Indians epitomised the disparity in representations of African and Indian experience in Trinidad and Tobago: "I can tell the stories of African slavery – learned from the history lessons of high school and university. I know nothing but the dates and numbers of Indian indentureship...[Indian Arrival Day] is the symbol which allows me to be Indian in a society that tells me that Carnival is my national culture... Or that Carnival coincides with the annual Shivratri festival, a time of austerity and penance for Hindus" [Bridgemohan 1995].

Phagwa, apart from providing an opportunity for cultural assertion, also provided an occasion for Indians to stake their claim to 'national' culture. Geeta Ramsingh's rendition of chowtal song 'Letter to Chalkdust' echoed the Indian contestation

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?  
[Phagwa, March 19, 1995].

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 Girmityaa Jai He. Jai He, Jai He' – with the history of indentureship and a syncretic Hindu culture. So, while there is an acknowledgement of the contribution of other religious groups to the growth of the East Indian community, the dominant public discourse has a heavy Hindu slant that rejects at overt and covert levels any assertion of a secular India. India, is re-imagined as the land of the Hindus, a claim to nationhood made by a socially, culturally and politically oppressed people. This disjuncture between the basis of the right wing Indian claim to Hindu nationhood and the claim of the ex-indentured diaspora is critical. Yet there are collaborations and alliances that bridge this disjuncture. 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,<sup>7</sup> forms of Indo Trinidadian folk dances had their origins in the ritual women's dance during the maticore 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.<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> linking the protest to the cultural assertion of Hindu culture and the larger contestation of 'national' culture.<sup>10</sup>

#### 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."<sup>11</sup> 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 Hinduism. 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 pichakaree 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 Jahaajis, with its history 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 achieved 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:

Will you grow 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

[I was introduced to Trinidad in 1992-93 by Rhoda Reddock, and the ideas presented in this paper took shape through numerous discussions with her both during that year as well as in 1995, when I was a guest of Women Working for Social Progress in Trinidad. Needless to say, this paper would not have been possible without working women. Drafts of this paper were presented at the International Interdisciplinary Seminar on Identity, Locality and Globalisation, Sariska, February 1998, and the VIII National Conference of Women's Studies, Pune, May-June, 1998.]

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:	2,223
Agriculturists:	4,438
Artisans:	763
Low castes:	8,807
Muslims:	2,250
Christians:	7

Further, most women who migrated were either from the lower classes/castes, or

marginalised sections like brahmin widows and prostitutes. Rhoda E Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1994, p 31.

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 1995.

4 'They Came 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', *Phagwa*, March 19, 1995. Girmityaa, like Jahaaji is a term for the indentured labourer, and has its origin in the agreement or 'gimit' that the labourers had to sign.

6 Sookraj Ramlakhan, 'Blessed Pioneers' *Phagwa*, March 19, 1995. In Jai Girmityaa, Pavitra Jaimundee sings a similar pichakaree drawing from a different popular mythic tradition:

Every morning and evening they blessed  
this motherland  
With mantras, 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 Rukmudeen 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 numbers, Muslims not constituting a significant proportion of the population, an argument that will be picked up at a later point in the paper.

7 Referred to by Geeta Ramsingh in 'Letter to Chalkdust' reproduced above.

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 depiction of Goddess Saraswati in India last year.

10 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.

11 Rhoda E Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*. In 1995, there was a living testimony to this suggestion. Naganmah, who came to Trinidad

as a child is the daughter of a deserted woman from Madras Presidency. A fairy tale account of her life published in a local newspaper as part of Indian Arrival spoke of her mother's accidental reunion with her father in Trinidad.

12 "India is to the Hindus what Mecca is to the Muslims", said a Trinidadian woman, who is a religious leader, in an interview. Similarly, in an interview for a newspaper, after questions about why Indian women were so wary about pressing for the Uniform Civil Code, the interviewer, a Hindu woman said, "Boy! It must be difficult for you Indians with all those Muslims sitting on top of you [a reference to Pakistan and Bangladesh]."

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