

*Dr. Kumar Mahabir*

## **EAST INDIANS/SOUTH ASIANS IN THE CARIBBEAN**

The abolition of slavery in the early 1830s in the British, French and Dutch colonies of the West Indies/Caribbean led to a severe shortage of labor in the sugarcane plantations. The ex-slaves had exercised their right of freedom of choice to discontinue working on the sugarcane estates even for a wage. The subsequent shortage of labor served as a catalyst for the introduction of a system of imported contract labor. The British first introduced laborers from India to the Caribbean through a system of semi-slave contract labor known as Indentureship. In 1838, Britain brought the first Indian laborers from the port of Calcutta to British Guiana (now Guyana) based on the success of the system in Mauritius.

Initially, the Caribbean initiative met resistance since accusations were leveled at the harsh treatment of the newly-arrived workers. Nevertheless, with lobbying by John Gladstone and other British planters, the system continued and expanded. It was later extended to Trinidad and Jamaica [1845] and then to other Caribbean islands like St. Lucia [1856], St. Vincent [1856], Grenada [1857] and St. Kitts [1861]. The system was also adopted by the French and Dutch who took Indians to Martinique [1853], Guadeloupe [1854], French Guyana [1855], St. Croix [1862] and Suriname [1873]. By the time Indentureship system ended in 1917, about 400,000 Indians came to the Caribbean colonies, most of whom chose to settle in the islands.

Most of the indentured immigrants to the Caribbean came from North India, primarily Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, while lesser numbers came from South India. The majority of immigrants to the French territories originated from South India and spoke Telugu and Tamil. Northern Indian immigrants spoke the Hindi dialects of Bhojpuri, Urdu and Bengali. The vast majority of these immigrants were Hindus with about ten percent Muslims. Many factors in India encouraged migrants to leave and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Severe famines in India were a major factor.

In the early days of indenture, when the passage from India to the Caribbean took at least three to four months, conditions on the ships were deplorable, resulting in high mortality rates. Caste endogamy broke down on the plantations as well as on board the ships which traversed the Middle Passage. Due to the harsh conditions that Indians faced, they became united in their struggle for survival. Despite these cruel living conditions, Indians eventually produced a middle class of small farmers and shop owners.

By the time Indentureship ended in 1917, many Indians did not exercise their option to return to India. They chose, instead, to remain as permanent settlers in the Caribbean where they got, bought and rented land to do agriculture and rear cows. By the end of World War II, those who chose to settle in the colonies easily constituted about half the population of Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad (and Tobago). They also formed the largest minority in Jamaica, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia and St. Kitts. Today, they constitute over 1.5 million in the region, settling in the territories of the Caribbean from Cuba and Jamaica in the North West to Guyana and Suriname in the South East. They form a visible ethnic group that has changed the face and form of culture, religion, music, food, architecture, politics and the economy in the Caribbean.

The social circumstances of the early years were exceedingly difficult. Not only were Indians thousands of miles from the land of their birth, they also faced an apprehensive and sometimes hostile host community of non-Indians and non-Hindus. Despite the loss of many valuable traditions through the death of the elders and the inability to resist the dominant Afro-European culture, several aspects of Indian cultural heritage have survived. The growing presence of Indians saw the rise of racial, cultural and religious trends that has contributed to the creation of a uniquely cosmopolitan Caribbean society at the beginning of the 21st century. Notwithstanding their impoverished means and limited opportunities, the Indian presence has demonstrated

steady social advancement in every field of endeavor, including literature, law, medicine, science, business and politics.

The record of achievement of Indians in Trinidad and Guyana is as far as it is wide. In 1953, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, an Indian of Guyanese birth, a dentist by profession and leader of the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP), was elected the first Premier of the Republic of Guyana. However, he was not to last, and given the social and racial instability of Guyana, was deposed. He wandered in the political wilderness until he was elected President of the Republic in 1995. Upon his death, Dr. Jagan was succeeded by his wife Janet Jagan. Currently, Bharat Jagdeo, a PPP member since the age of twelve, is President of Guyana.

Like Guyana, the glass ceiling to political power was shattered in 1995, when Basdeo Panday, a trade unionist and Opposition leader with more than 30 years in public life, became the first Indian to be elected as Prime Minister. His party, the United National Congress (UNC), with its support mainly from the Indian community, accomplished the seemingly impossible through an alliance with the Tobago-based National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) to form the government during 1995 to 2001. Additionally, during the term of office of the UNC, Kamla Persad Bissessar served with distinction as the first (Indian) woman to be appointed as Attorney General.

Perhaps the only person who has brought international recognition of the Indian presence in the Caribbean is the novelist, V.S. Naipaul. He won almost every major literary award in English in the world including the prestigious Booker Prize. In 1990, Naipaul was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, and in 2001, he won the distinguished Nobel Prize for Literature. He has written more than 20 books in the last 45 years, but perhaps his most popular novel is *A House for Mister Biswas*, which is based on the author's early life in Hindu Trinidad. Sir Vidia is the son, older brother, uncle, and cousin of published authors Seepersad Naipaul, Shiva Naipaul, Neil Bissoondath and Vahni Capildeo, respectively.

Samuel Selvon is the second most recognized imaginative Indian writer from the Caribbean after Naipaul. He is known for novels such as *A Brighter Sun*, *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*. Selvon received numerous awards, including two

Guggenheim Fellowships (1955, 1968), Trinidad's Humming Bird medal for Literature (1969) and an honorary doctorate from the University of Warwick (1989).

Distinguished Indian women writers include Ramabai Espinet, Shani Mootoo, Ryhaan Shah and Lakshmi Persaud. Persaud has published four novels: *Butterfly in the Wind*, *Sastra*, *For the Love of my Name*, and *Raise the Lanterns High*. The Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies at Warwick University in the UK has established a Research Fellowship in her name.

David Dabydeen is an eminent critic, writer and novelist from Guyana. His first book, *Slave Song*, a collection of poetry, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Quiller-Couch Prize. Dabydeen has been awarded the title of fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He is the second West Indian writer after Naipaul, and the only Guyanese writer to receive the title. His Guyanese counterpart Sasenarine Persaud is another distinguished poet in the Caribbean. He has published six anthologies of poems including *Demerary Telepathy* and *Between the Dash and the Comma*. His poetry was nominated for the 1998 Canadian National Magazine Award, and twice (1989 and 1998) short-listed for The Guyana Prize for Literature. A Caribbean star that is rising in Canada is Rabindranath Maharaj whose novel *The Interloper* was recently short-listed in the Commonwealth Prize for Literature.

Indian actors and actresses have excelled on stage and in film in the Caribbean, Canada, England and Hollywood. The actor who has earned the honor of starring in the most Hollywood films is Errol Sitahal. He portrayed a business executive in the comedy *Tommy Boy* (1995) starring Chris Farley. Sitahal was also the mysterious Indian servant with a pet monkey in the movie *A Little Princess* (1995). The engaging family drama is ranked as one of the finest children's films in the 1990s. He appeared as a stern father who is an Indian medical doctor in another Hollywood blockbuster, *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004). Also making her extraordinary appearance as an actress on stage and in cinema is Grace Maharaj. She starred in scores of stage performances, numerous television commercials, four television serials, and four full length movies: *Bim* (1974), *Man from Africa/Girl from India* (1982), *Men of Gray II: Flight of the Ibis* (1996) and *The Mystic Masseur* (2001).

In Trinidad, the Indian heritage had become an integral part of the country's lifestyle, and has added significant content and color to the nation's social and cultural mosaic. For example, the Hindu festival of Light, Divali (or Deepawali) is a national public holiday, and despite the difference in theological origin, the celebration finds favour with the majority of the island's ethnic groups. Hindus form the second largest religious group after the Roman Catholics in Trinidad, and Divali is the second largest national festival in the country after Carnival. It is not surprising therefore that majestic mandirs adorn the landscape of Trinidad and Guyana. The off-shore temple in the sea at Waterloo, for example, built by one man with a bicycle, has become a world-famous tourist attraction. Temples in Guyana have the most varied architectural designs. They range from ancient single-chamber models made of timber to octagonal shapes made of concrete with pagoda patterns fashioned after the classical era in India.

Eid-ul-Fitr, the Muslim celebration of Prophet Muhammed (uwbp) is also a public holiday, enjoying similar national acclaim. Every year, Shi'ite Muslims commemorate the death of the grandsons of the Holy Prophet Muhammed by observing Hosay/Murrahm. Participants wheel colorful, glitzy and ornate papier-mâché floats through the streets as part of a solemn procession. Tassa drums are played in a military style and moon dances are performed during the night procession. Large numbers of Hindus and Africans participate in this commemoration. In Jamaica, Hosay is one of the largest national cultural events.

Trinidad is the only Caribbean island with the distinction of celebrating Indian Arrival Day as a public holiday. The heritage day is observed in commemoration of the arrival of the first batch of immigrants who arrived on May 30th 1845. The day is marked with speeches, songs, music and dances and the re-enactment of the historic landing of the first batch of weary band of pioneers, who had sailed for six months over half of the world.

The region's diet is a culinary menu that draws heavily on Indian dishes and spices. Curry is a popular preparation of almost every kind of dish, and *roti* [pizza-like bread] has become a standard staple even in Jamaica. "Doubles," which is a *bara* sandwich made of chick pea and chutney, is indigenous to Trinidad. It is eaten hot and

fresh by everyone who buys it from wayside vendors selling from shops, stalls and bicycles.

At present, six of the country's eighteen radio stations broadcast Hindi-film and Indian music. "Radio Shakti" is the last to be launched by the Hindu Credit Union (HCU). The HCU also publishes a cultural newspaper and plans to produce the region's first Indian television station at the end of 2006. The Indian cultural identity has also been preserved by the importation of movies from Bombay which is the largest film-producing country in the world. Indians in the Caribbean still flock with their families to see these movies at their local cinemas that are largely owned by Indians. Many forms of Indian music have been maintained over the last four generations in the Caribbean. Some have been lost and others have taken new directions. Chutney is a musical cross-cultural genre which has been produced and popularized in Trinidad and exported to the Caribbean Diaspora the world over. More than calypso and soca, chutney represents a fusion of various cultural influences and musical rhythms. Chutney and chutney-soca shows are held in the heart of the Carnival season in south Trinidad. Cultural connoisseurs see chutney as a Carnival fete with a curry flavor, and as an attempt by Indians to affirm their identity by staging their own style of Carnival as a complement to the Afro-dominated parties in Port of Spain.

The most strident voice in the national community is that of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS). Founded in 1952, by Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, the SDMS is a pioneer in the field of education and organized religion of the Hindu masses. From 1952 to 1956, the SDMS was able to establish over 40 primary schools with its own building resources. The SDMS now has a temple in every community on the island. Indeed, the visionary Bhadase, who was equally revered as he was reviled, was tireless in his quest to lift the status of the Hindu community. Today, the SDMS is on par with its other denominational counterparts in the field of secondary education. The Lakshmi Girls Hindu Colleges is its flagship, standing shoulder to shoulder with other prestige schools. With the revision of the Education Concordat, the SDMS has been successful in establishing three other high schools in the country.

The vociferous Muslim voices include the Anjuman Sunaat ul Association and the Trinidad Muslim League. Both Islamic bodies have successfully married education and religion for decades, and their mosques and schools are considered among society's

highly respected institutions. Muslim, Hindu and Presbyterian children excel at all levels, and they dominate the professions of law, medicine, engineering and computer science. Hinduism was the dominant religion of the immigrants, and Islam accounted for a lesser percentage. But over time, Christianity has made significant inroads into the Hindu heartland. In 1868, Canadian missionary Rev. John Morton founded the Canadian Presbyterian Mission for the purpose of converting immigrants to the Christian fold. During the 1980s, the baton for conversion was taken over by the Pentecostal/Evangelical movement. Today, both the Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches count Indians in significant numbers among their believers.

In the whole Diaspora, individual efforts of the Hindu community have confirmed Trinidad's place on the world pilgrimage map. In central Trinidad, devotees of the Dattatreya Yoga Centre consecrated an 85-foot/25 metre *murti* [statue] of Lord Hanuman. This astonishing achievement is unmatched in the Western hemisphere and is a first for Trinidad and Tobago. The soaring marble *murti* of the Hindu Monkey God is intended to symbolize the tower of strength that is the Hindu faith. By its height, the world was signaled a message that the Hindu spirit is indomitable and would grow to meet any obstacle. The unveiling was attended by the country's Prime Minister and President and many other national figures who, over time, have come to recognize and respect the place and space occupied by the Indian community.

Hindu women in the Diaspora have also mounted a serious challenge to their male counterparts in almost every field. In July 2003, after generations of male domination in the sphere of *Ramayan* recitation, a full panel of women narrated the scriptural epic in verse and song. The panel consisted of Gita Ramsingh, Mayanti Maharaj and Shakuntala Jangbahadoor, who are well-known for their cultural and devotional activities. Such a formidable feminist gesture is a clear indication of the strength of Indian women who refuse to be suppressed by the barriers of gender.

Indians have contributed a fair share to the region's flora and fauna. Hindus in particular, cultivate consecrated trees in sacred groves to protect the species from destruction and extinction. Plants like the tulsi/basil (*Ocimum sanctum*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and papal/peepar/banyan (*Ficus religiosa*) are cultivated near the *jhandi* (yard shrine) as in situ germplasm preservation/collection centers to sustain individual and communal

needs. Domesticated cattle and the water buffaloes were brought by the British to work as traction animals during Indian indentureship in the Caribbean. The over 30 breeds of Zebu cattle in the region have, as their distinguishing feature, huge curved horns and a massive hump just behind their neck. The small mongoose was also imported from India to Jamaica, at first, and then to other Caribbean islands to control rats that infested the sugarcane plantations.

Many fourth and fifth generation Indo-Caribbeans are tracing their ancestral roots and are visiting their fore-parents homes/villages in India. Those who are running away from their identity seem to have forgotten that others define them as Indians, and though matter what they call themselves in the cosmopolitan Caribbean, Indians cannot escape the fact that they are seen as distinct people.



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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

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