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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that West Indian temples are a material articulation of an Indo-Caribbean Hindu identity that no longer claims India as home. The hyphenated identity of Indo-Caribbeans does not allow them to be fully represented by either South Asian or Caribbean cultures. Hence Caribbean temples, like the Indo-Caribbean identity, attempts to combine two different worlds. By tracing the political and social events that led to the development of a separate Hindu identity from that of East Indians, I demonstrate the ways in which Hinduism in Caribbean combines Hindu nationalism with features from Christianity into a unique form of Hinduism. I argue that West Indian Hinduism is not simply “borrowing” from Christianity or merely articulating Hinduism in opposition to Christianity, but rather it unites the two which in turn alienates it from mainstream Christianity as well as from Hinduism as practiced in India. As a result, West Indian Hinduism exists in the tension created between Christianity and Hindu reform movements. I propose that this tension is especially evident in West Indian temples in the United States as demonstrated by temples in Orlando, Florida and Queens, New York.

HYPHENATED HINDUS:

A Study of the Relationship between the
Formation of a Indo-Caribbean Hindu Identity and the
Development of the West Indian Temple in
Trinidad and in the United States

by

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B.A., Rollins College, 2010
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Thesis
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
	a. Structure	3
	b. Terminology	5
	c. Defining Diaspora	7
	i. A Hindu Diaspora?	11
	d. Postdisapora and the Dialogical Diasporic Self	14
II.	Part One: Hinduism in the Caribbean	21
	a. Phase 1: Fragmented	23
	i. Early Hinduism in the Caribbean	25
	ii. Early Temple Forms	27
	b. Phase 2: The “Other”	30
	i. Hinduism becomes “Sanathan Dharma”	35
	ii. Brahminization vs. Sanskritization	37
	iii. Canadian Missionaries and the East Indian Church	42
	iv. Formation of the Trinidadian temple	45
	c. Phase 3: Politically Strong	50
	i. Independence and the Rule of Eric Williams	50
	ii. From Callaloo to Tossed Salad	54
	iii. The Ramacharitmanas as the Text of Caribbean Hinduism.	57
III.	Part Two: West Indian Hinduism in the United States	62
	a. Migration to the United States	65
	b. Indo-Caribbean identity in the U.S.	67
	i. Relationship with Afro-Caribbeans	70
	ii. Relationship with East Indians and India	73
	c. West Indian Temples in the United States	78
	i. Punditization vs. Brahminization	84
IV.	Conclusion	86
V.	Appendix I	89
VI.	Bibliography	95

INTRODUCTION

When asked if I am Indian, I usually respond with a clarification – I am *West* Indian. If pushed, I explain further than my ancestors are from India, but my parents and grandparents are from Trinidad. People are usually able to understand this distinction quite readily until they find out that I am also Hindu. Hinduism is so intrinsically linked with India that it becomes impossible for others to break that bond just as it is imperative for me to insist that one not does necessarily equal the other. This is because the first time that I visited an Indian temple built and maintained by Indians from India, I felt like a foreigner. Here in this Indian temple were people who looked like me, but to whom I could not connect. I did not recognize several of the murtis that stood before me, I did not understand the procedures, and I was bothered by the fact that I could not touch the murtis as I was accustomed to doing. I realized suddenly that I was incredibly uncomfortable in this temple, but what really surprised me was that it was not a feeling I had felt before despite attending my aunt's Christian church only a week prior. Although I was not Christian, being in the church was not unlike being in a West Indian temple. For me and many other Indo-Caribbean Hindus, then, the changes in our identities have also produced changes in the ways in which we practice our religion. Hinduism and temples in the Caribbean differ from that of India, because they are a reflection of a separate West Indian Hindu identity which no longer claims India as home.

Roughly half a million East Indians were brought to the Caribbean through the indentured labor trade between the years 1838 and 1917. Although initially a scattered

group, East Indians soon united their community, forming their identity by emphasizing their Hindu religion. Throughout their history in the West Indies, Indo-Caribbeans have gone from clinging to their Indian roots to accepting India as part of their heritage although not their homeland. As they began to accept the Caribbean as their permanent home and not simply as a temporary settlement, Indo-Caribbeans developed an identity distinct from that of East Indians. To say that I am *West Indian*, then, is to emphasize this distinct identity. It says that I recognize the West Indies, not India, as home and identify the culture in the Caribbean to be an intricate part of my own identity. Clarifying that I am Trinidadian or Guyanese also emphasizes that my practice of Hinduism is different from that of East Indians although, as I have pointed out, this is not always obvious to outsiders. Hinduism and Hindu temples in Trinidad and Guyana have developed in accordance with this changing Indian identity in the Caribbean. Hence, the final temple form as well as the religious practices within those temples reflect the hyphenated, hybrid Indian identity in the Caribbean.

It may not be surprising that Hinduism in the Caribbean contains elements reminiscent of Christianity since Christianity has a strong presence in the West Indies. It is striking, however, that West Indian Hinduism uses Christian forms of architecture and practice to promote the beliefs propagated by Hindu nationalists. Hindus in Trinidad and Guyana use the rhetoric of Hindu reform movements (e.g. Hinduism has only one God who has many different forms, the true name of Hinduism is 'Sanatan Dharma,' Hinduism is the world's oldest religion, etc.) in combination with the form of Christianity (e.g. focus on a priest, giving a sermon, the use of a type of 'Sunday school' in order to

form a community, etc.). I argue that it is not that Hinduism in the Caribbean is simply “borrowing” from Christianity or that it is merely articulating Hinduism in opposition to Christianity as often is the case with Hinduism reform movements, but rather that West Indian Hinduism unites the two which in turn alienates it from mainstream Christianity as well as from Hinduism as practiced by Indians from India. I propose that this tension is especially evident in West Indian temples in the United States, as evidenced by temples in Orlando, Florida and Queens, New York.

Structure

I begin with arguments concerning diasporas and identity in order to frame my thesis. In this section, I argue that one can use the term diaspora to describe the movement of Hindus from India to the rest of the globe, although Indo-Caribbeans pose interesting challenges to the conception of diaspora. From there I move to discuss a dialogical model of the diasporic self and Anjali Prabhu’s use of the term “postdiaspora” to describe the Caribbean case. I argue that the notion of hyphenation which is linked to discussions of the diasporic self is evident in the physical, that is, in West Indian Hindu temples. I then construct my argument in two parts: (1) Hinduism in the West Indies and (2) West Indian Hinduism in the United States. In the first part I divide the development of a West Indian Hindu identity into three phases which correspond to changes made to Hindu temples in Trinidad during each time period. In each “phase,” I describe the social context and its effects on the Hindu religious practices within the Caribbean. By placing the social, religious, and material in conversation with each other,

I hope to demonstrate how the temple that results during each phase is a reflection of the changes made in both the social and religious environments and the Indo-Caribbean identity. I maintain that discussing the racial tension between Blacks and Indians within Trinidad in addition to the influence of Hindu nationalists is necessary to understand the motivations behind the creation of the particular temple form found the Caribbean. The influence of Christianity in this first part can be seen in the ways in which Hindus adapted the temple form to mimic the way churches were used as schools by missionaries. Although the first part is mainly historical, I often begin sections with a quote from one of my interviews. I use the quotes as a glimpse of the beliefs of the present day West Indian Hindu, saving explanations for the second part. My hope is that the quotes will offer a preview while the details of the section will provide the reasoning.

In the second part I discuss the challenge the West Indian Hindu community faces in the United States. The focus of this part, then, is on the relationships Indo-Caribbeans have with the larger West Indian community as well as East Indians, and how these relationships have affected their identity as well as religious practices. The actual temple form is less of a concern in this section since it has not changed significantly from its form in the Caribbean. The influence of Christianity in the second part, then, can be seen in the increased role pundits begin to take in the West Indian temple.

My conclusion returns to the notion of the diasporic self and the ways temples stand as a symbol of the West Indian Hindu. I briefly compare the changes American

Hinduism is undergoing with the changes that have already taken place in Caribbean Hinduism as a way to talk about the formation of and the characteristics of global Hinduism.

Terminology

I use the term “East Indian” to describe those who were born in India and claim India as their home, including East Indians immigrants and their children. As a result, I refer to indentured laborers as East Indians because they still identified primarily with India even though they were living in the Caribbean. The term West Indian is a generic term that is usually applied to anyone from the West Indies, regardless of their ethnicity. I use it interchangeably with the term Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Trinidadian, and Indo-Guyanese when I want to emphasize the connection with the larger West Indian community that Indo-Caribbeans articulate. Indo-Caribbeans will often refer to something as being “Indian,” in which they mean coming from India. An “Indian temple,” then, is a temple built and maintain by people from India. I employ this term, however, for simplicity’s sake when it is clear that I am referring to Indo-Caribbeans not East Indians or when distinguishing between the two is inconsequential.

Although there is a significant population of Hindus in Guyana and Suriname, I retrace the development of Hinduism in the Caribbean using Trinidad as the country of focus. I concentrate on Trinidad not only because Indians have become the majority race there, but also because more scholarship has been written on Trinidadian Hindus than on Hinduism in Guyana or Suriname. I write very little about Suriname, because

Suriname was not under British rule and therefore Hinduism's growth there is complicated by a different set of factors. Even though Guyana is in the South America, Guyana and Trinidad share a similar history and Indo-Guyanese refer to themselves as West Indians. While there are some minor differences between the religious beliefs between Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Trinidadians¹, none are significant enough to resist combining them into one group. It should be noted, though, that there is some animosity between Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese – each often claiming to be superior to the other. This animosity occasionally plays out in temples in U.S. where some people will refer to a particular temple as a Guyanese or Trinidadian temple depending on the nationality of the majority of its members. Nevertheless Indians in both Guyana and Trinidad have formed a united community in America, building temples and organizing community events together. For this reason, then, it is not necessary for my thesis to distinguish between the two.

¹ Examples include Indo-Guyanese tend to emphasize the need for a pundit to be a Brahmin and Kali worship is more prominent amongst Indo-Guyanese.

Defining Diaspora

The original use of the term “diaspora” almost exclusively referred to the dispersal of Jews from their homeland to various locations. As a result, the term became associated with negative feelings of displacement, victimization, and loss. People of the diaspora were said to have the “dream of return,” that is, the belief that one day members of the displaced population would return to their homeland. In recent scholarship, however, the term has been used to describe other populations, such as Armenians or Africans. In these examples, “diaspora” is defined as the deterritorialization of any population, that is, the removal of a culture from its original location. Social anthropologist Stanley Tambiah describes the condition of deterritorialization as such: “The rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people combined with the refusal of cultural products and practices to ‘stay put’ [engenders] a profound sense of a loss of territorial roots, [and] erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places.”² Tambiah’s definition, often used in discussions surrounding globalization, retains the negative connotation of the original use of the term especially with its reference to “loss.” More recent applications of “diaspora” use it to describe anything from language to immigrants to ethnic and racial minorities. In these examples, the negative aspects originally associated with “diasporas” has been muted, but the feeling of “loss” remains prominent. The danger of this wide application of the term by scholars is that it begins to lose meaning and risks being associated with simply a large movement of people. In order to implement the term in a meaningful way and identify

² Stanley Tambiah. “Transnational Movements, Diaspora, and Multiple Modernities.” *Daedalus* 129. (Winter 2000): 178.

the ways in which one can talk about a “Hindu Diaspora,” then, I implement Steven Vertovec’s, one of the first scholars to write on Hinduism in the Caribbean, breakdown of the term into three categories: “diaspora” as (1) a social reform, (2) type of consciousness, and (3) mode of cultural production.³ Vertovec’s three different approaches to “diaspora” should not be viewed as three distinct meanings, but rather as different facets of the term which help to define “diaspora” and specify its application.

As a social reform, a diaspora connotes some of the same associations as the Jewish model in that it refers to “specific kinds of social relationships cemented by special ties to history and geography.” Diasporas, in this sense, imply the forced migration of a population from one homeland to at least two other countries while holding on to a collective identity. Diasporic communities create new communal organizations in places of settlement, maintain a variety of ties with their homelands, and develop a sense of solidarity with members of one’s own ethnicity within other countries of settlement. Additionally, members of this community often feel unable to or desire not to be fully accepted by their host country because of their continued allegiance to their homelands.⁴ These relationships create a unique way of life that allows for one to “live” with others in several societies simultaneously. Political scientist Benedict Anderson has described this extensively as an “imagined community” in which people who have never met and will never meet still understand each other to belong to the same community. Hence as a social reform, “diaspora” is represented by a triadic relationship that connects “globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic

³ Steven Vertovec. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 142.

⁴ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 142-3.

groups” with locations in which those groups reside in and with their homelands.⁵

Indians, specifically Hindus, can be described in all of these ways except for three notable exceptions. First, Indians were never part of a forced migration, but instead emigrated voluntarily to other countries. Even the indentured laborers that were sent to the Caribbean elected to do so and had the option of returning to India. The second and third exceptions are specifically applicable to the Caribbean context. Indo-Caribbeans largely do not desire to return to India and relations between Indo-Caribbeans and Indians are usually tense. Both groups will admit that they shared a history, but any “sense of solidarity” is questionable. Surely both groups will defend Hinduism, but rarely work together in the community. Hindu events, such as Diwali and Holi, are celebrated separately, demonstrating that although each group recognizes the other’s presence, they are content with maintaining separate communities in their new homes.

The second approach to “diaspora” emphasizes features which connect it to a state of mind and a sense of identity. “Diaspora” in this sense refers to the awareness or consciousness among transnational communities. This particular meaning of the term also emphasizes its paradoxical nature. The negative feelings of exclusion and discrimination communities of migrants may feel in their new locations contrast with the positive identification with their historical heritage. This approach is particularly relevant to the case of Hinduism in the Caribbean, because while early Indian settlers faced discrimination and exclusion, they still insisted on maintaining their identity as

⁵ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 144.

outsiders and clung to their Indian heritage. Anthropologist James Clifford, as quoted by Vertovec, suggests

“experience of loss, marginality, and exile (differentially cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked achievement. This constitutive suffering coexists with the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn vision of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension.”⁶

While strong connections to other members of their group help migrants cope with their new environment, it also prevents them from seeking out connections to other groups and thereby further excludes them in their new locations. The exclusion they feel, then, breeds the desire to return to their homeland. Clifford goes on to propose that “the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. But there is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation...[It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here)’.”⁷ Hence recognizing oneself to be part of a larger diaspora allows individuals to join local and global communities that create a united front against outsiders. Although West Indians largely reject identifying their homeland as India and maintain a separate community from that of East Indians in the United States, they will eagerly accept and promote reformist notions of Hinduism. In this way Hinduism acts as a unifying force between the East and West Indian communities.

⁶ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 147.

⁷ Ibid.

Vertovec notes that a further kind of diaspora consciousness is specific to religious groups.⁸ This consciousness occurs through the self-questioning that arises as a result of the conditions of the diaspora in combination with religious pluralism. Vertovec writes: “Under such conditions, believers are often compelled to realize that the routine habitual practice, role learning and ‘blind faith’ underpinning previous contexts (where their faith may have been homogeneous or hegemonic) are no longer operational.”⁹ This change is represented by the shift in the questions that the individual must ask him or herself. As Clifford Geertz observes, the individual is not compelled by the question of “What I shall believe?” but rather asks “How shall I believe it?” As a minority in an increasingly pluralistic world, the believer of a particular religion may be forced to rationalize or justify his or her beliefs to other faiths because he or she no longer resides in a place where such beliefs are readily understood and followed. This shift in consciousness may forever change the individual so that he or she no longer feels as closely connected to his or her homeland as before. Whereas in the other approaches, the migrant’s pride in their homeland is evident, here the migrant faces doubts and questions brought on by the strangeness of a foreign land. Thus, this meaning of diaspora emphasizes the fluidity and complexity of identity among diasporic people, and the ways in which diasporic communities recreate their identities while both embracing and denying their homelands.

A Hindu Diaspora?

⁸ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 149.

⁹ Ibid.

The resistance in applying the term diaspora to religious movements is largely centered on the assertion that religions cannot, in fact, be considered diasporas in and of themselves because religions cross more than one ethnic group and widespread religions rarely seek to return to or recreate a homeland.¹⁰ Judaism and Sikhism are exceptions in that they are recognized as distinct ethnic groups marked by their religion and members maintain strong ties to their homelands. As such, describing them in diasporic terms is not usually contested. Vertovec suggests that Hindus may also be seen as an exception similar to that of Judaism and Sikhism because of its ties to India and its lack of converting members (although there are some forms of Hinduism, such as the Hare Krishnas, who do proselytize). For many Hindus, however, their connection to India goes far beyond ethnic origins. For these Hindus, India is not just the home of “their people,” it is also a sacred place, home to several holy sites and the background of all of Hinduism’s religious texts. Furthermore, Mother India, or Bharat Mata, is considered to be a goddess herself. Vertovec states “it is the centrality of India’s sacred geography that is emphasized and played upon by Hindus nationalists both in the subcontinent and abroad.”¹¹ So strong is this tie to India that some understand a “Hindu” to be that person who considers India to be his or her holy land and the center of his or her religion.

This is problematic for this thesis in a couple ways. First, as previously mentioned, the connection to India is weakened in the Indo-Caribbean community. Secondly, and most importantly, one of the objects of this thesis is to disassociate

¹⁰ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 2.

¹¹ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 3.

Hinduism from India because the automatic connection of the two does not resonate with the average West Indian Hindu. If Hinduism is continually spoken of as connected to India and inscribed only in the geography of India, we cannot truly understand the development of global Hinduism and the altered ways in which Hindus apart from India practice their religion. That is not to say that India is no longer important or relevant to West Indians. Despite the sometimes indifferent attitude of Indo-Caribbeans toward India, respect for India and its heritage remains strong among the majority of the nearly nine million Hindus living outside of India. Hence if diaspora is defined as a large settlement of people from the same homeland, who are tied to each other because of their similar history, and whose community is often set apart from the larger society, it seems appropriate to speak of the movement of Hinduism overseas as a “Hindu diaspora.” With this in mind, I attempt to explain how Indo-Caribbean Hinduism developed as a removed minor group from this larger diasporic community.

The objective of this thesis, however, is not just to demonstrate how Indo-Caribbeans have formed a separate Hindu identity from other Hindus in the diaspora, but also to illustrate the ways in which the temple form becomes symbolic of this particular identity. Religious institutions for any diasporic group, become a central resource in uniting their community and continuing their culture in new lands. For diasporic communities, temples or churches do not act simply as worshipping centers, but as a safe place where one can experience a sense of home in a foreign land. Despite the feeling of familiarity, however, these structures must adjust to the new environment and, as a result, often reflect the changing identity of those who attend. The changes

made to West Indian temples from the initial entry of indentured laborers to the declaration of Trinidad's independence tells the story of the Indo-Caribbean battle with their own identities, and of their struggle to create their own space within the larger West Indian society. The question of interest is whether the changes made during the formation of the West Indian temple is a product of the specific Caribbean context or a result of the challenges that face diasporic communities in general. I will tackle this specific question in the second part of this thesis.

Postdiaspora and the Dialogical Diasporic Self

It is tempting to state that the development of a separate Hindu identity in the Caribbean is simply the result of acculturation. Such a statement implies that there is nothing particularly unique about the West Indian case. I would like to question that impulse by emphasizing the complexity and sometimes contradictory ways in which Hinduism develops in the West Indies. Acculturation as articulated by A. L. Kroeber, one of the early forefathers of this theory, describes the changes in a culture brought about by the introduction of another culture, which results in an increased similarity between the two cultures. The result of this interaction is often the partial absorption of one culture into the other. As psychologist Sunil Bhatia notes in "Acculturation, Dialogical Voices and the Construction of the Diasporic Self," the implementation of specific strategies by individuals in response to new cultural environments is referred to as the *process* of acculturation. Psychologists often cite J. W. Berry's model of acculturation

strategies which classifies acculturation into four categories: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Bhatia summarizes Berry's model as such:

"the *assimilation* strategy occurs when the individual decides not to maintain his or her cultural identity by seeking contact in his/her daily interaction with the dominant group. When the individuals from the non-dominant group 'place a value on holding on to their original culture' (Berry, Sam, 1997, p. 297) and seek no contact with the dominant group, then they are pursuing a *separation* strategy. When individuals express an interest in maintain dominant group, the *integration* strategy is defined. The fourth strategy is *marginalization*, in which individuals 'lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society' (Berry, 1998, p. 119)."¹² (emphasis in the original)

The problem with the application of these terms to describe the interaction that occurs between two or more cultures is that they imply that only one of these strategies can occur at the time, thereby simplifying the acculturation process rather than highlighting its complexity. Although the ideal strategy is often cited as integration, Bhatia argues that central to this strategy is the assumption of universality which ignores the power structures involved in the formation of identity. Questions left unanswered include: who decides what strategy a culture is pursuing and when can one determine if and when a culture has become fully integrated? Discussions of integration often assume that the majority and minority cultures have equal status which blend beautifully rather than result in a messy and sometimes contradictory mix. Bhatia states that "the formation of immigrant identities in diasporic communities involves a constant process of negotiation, intervention and mediation that is shaped by issues of race, gender,

¹² Ibid.

sexuality and power.”¹³ The identity that diasporic communities form, then, is shaped by the history of the unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. To understand the formation of the Indo-Caribbean identity as well as the practices of West Indian Hinduism today then, it is necessary to understand the ways in which the political, the social, and the religious are intertwined.

Although Indo-Trinidadians are clearly part of the larger Trinidadian society now, this is not the result of a simple implementation of the integration strategy, but rather the result of applying *all* of the acculturation strategies (sometimes simultaneously). Bhatia claims that “For the diasporic self, there is an ongoing, simultaneous dialogical movement between the I positions of feeling at once assimilated, separated and marginalized.”¹⁴ Instead of the one-way acculturation model proposed by Berry, then, Bhatia argues for a dialogical model that emphasizes how “negotiating one’s migrant self involves multiple mediations with political and historical practices that are linked to and shaped by voices of race, culture, colonial and postcolonial history and power.”¹⁵ The dialogical model stresses the constant movement back and forth between voices and allows for individual differences. By tracing the different voices of the diasporic self, I attempt to show how Hinduism and temple form that emerges from the Caribbean is a reflection of the hyphenated diasporic self.

¹³ Sunil Bhatia, “Acculturation, Dialogical Voices, and the Construction of the Diasporic Self.” *Theory Psychology* 12.1 (2002): 59

¹⁴ Bhatia, “Acculturation,” 69.

¹⁵ Bhatia, “Acculturation,” 63.

Bhatia's dialogical model seems to echo discussions of the hybridity and creolization¹⁶ in that they both emphasize multiplicity and movement between factors rather than a one way transition. An automatic response to West Indian Hinduism is that, through acculturation, it has become a hybrid. Homi Bhabha, who coined the specific use of the term hybrid in post-colonial studies, argues that the formation of a hybrid destabilizes binaries thereby creating an upset of power and allowing the colonized to gain control. If Bhabha's theory is applied to the West Indian case, it could be argued that Indo-Trinidadians were able to gain power in Trinidad by creating a hybrid that mimicked the colonial structure. There have, however, been several critiques of Bhabha's theory since its publication in 1994. Scholars such as Antony Easthope, Nervdeen Pieterse, and R. Radhakrishnan have challenged the ability of a hybrid to dismantle dichotomies, arguing instead that hybrids tend to strengthen boundaries by assuming and repeating differences. Indeed the creation of a West Indian identity, as I will show, results from the intensification of difference between Indians and Afro-Caribbeans rather than a harmonious merging. It should be noted that Indo-Trinidadians did reproduce the colonial structure as Bhabha argues in this theory, but the result is not the destabilization of binaries that Bhabha suggests. Critics of Bhabha's theory go on to claim that hybridity requires dependency since it only makes sense in combination with the notion of purity. In other words, one can only identify something as a hybrid if one understands its parents to be the originals. Radhakrishnan

¹⁶ Creolization and hybridization are often used synonymously, although scholars tend to use the term "creolization" when referring to the Caribbean. For a more thorough discussion of creolization as well as the differences between it and the term "Creole," see Cohen "Creolization and Cultural Globalization: The Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power"

and Simone Driscel have elaborated on this later point by arguing that hybridity has become symbolic of a stable identity rather than a fluid one. For the purposes of this thesis, deciding whether West Indian Hinduism represents a hybrid form is less important than understanding how discussions of hybridity and diaspora are related and what kind of environment is created when the two collide.

In Anjali Prabhu's *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*, she discusses the research and theories that have been produced since Bhabha's theory was published. Prabhu argues that globalization has added a new phase of hybridity making it difficult to distinguish between hybridity (which she uses interchangeably with the term creolization) and diaspora in postcolonial studies. She argues that in postcolonial and diasporic studies, a discourse of "postdiaspora" has occurred which describes the dialectic relationship between diaspora and creolization. She states:

"Diaspora becomes creolization through postdiaspora. Creolization is closely concerned with a certain synchronic consideration of a people, is forward-looking, and concerned with interaction, while diaspora is premised on a past (and shared) trauma that constitutes and links the members of a group. I have suggested that these contrary impulses should be analytically separable but that, in reality, most postcolonial discourses, through historical and political necessity, engage in both stances within the same narrative."¹⁷

According to Prabhu, when one talks about the changes a culture undergoes when it is confronted by another culture purely in terms of creolization, the tendency of the scholar is to disregard history and describe the merging of cultures in utopian terms.¹⁸ When one refers only to diasporic discourses, however, there is a tendency to

¹⁷ Anjali Prabhu. *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*. (State University of New York Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁸ Prabhu, *Hybridity*, 14.

exclusively focus on the notions of loss and victimhood which are generally associated with diasporas. Prabhu claims:

“If there is the possibility for diasporic discourses to inscribe a return-even mythical-it is perhaps not so much to the mother country as to trauma itself. The ground or space from which diaspora discourse transmits itself, the space also that its listening communities occupy or create in this act of listening, is trauma. Discourses of creolization when theoretically positioned postdiaspora renounce trauma as a space from which to speak.”¹⁹

Combining and balancing the two, that is paying attention to historical factors as well as issues of ethnicity, allows for a productive postcolonial discourse. Furthermore, it allows for one to reimagine the idea of return that was present in the initial definition of diaspora. “Postdiaspora” then is understood to be the transition between the “speaking places” of diasporic communities. The break no longer becomes the definitive beginning of their community which they desire to heal. This is especially relevant for the Caribbean case where Indo-Caribbeans break from the larger Hindu diaspora in that they do not generally view returning to India as necessary. Hence a postdiaspora discourse embraces fluidity and avoids essentialism by manifesting “in the oscillation between the past and the present, the collective and the personal, victimhood and heroism, or the national and the ethnic.”²⁰ Thus in keeping with Prabhu’s description of postdiaspora discourses, I have arranged this thesis in such a way that there is shifting between the present and past, and the local and national. Although this constant shifting might be unsettling, it is meant to be indicative of the development of the West Indian Hindu identity.

¹⁹ Prabhu. *Hybridity*, 10.

²⁰ Prabhu, *Hybridity*, 147

PART ONE: HINDUISM IN THE WEST INDIES

“When a person asks me if I’m Indian, I tell them that I’m Guyanese. When an Indian person tries to tell me I’m not Indian, I tell them yes I am Indian – my forefathers are from there!” – S.

The history of East Indians in the Caribbean can be divided into three phases.

The first phase deals with the initial arrival of indentured laborers in the West Indies and the conditions they faced. Coming from different backgrounds, castes, occupations, and speaking different languages, the indentured laborers were a fragmented group whose only unifying thread was that they all came from India. The fragmentary nature of this group could have resulted in Indians slowly being enveloped into the larger society. Instead the opposite happened – East Indians formed a tight community that began to redefine the larger society in order to make a pronounced space for themselves. The catalyst for this change began in what I refer to as the second phase. This phase consists of conflicts with the Afro-Caribbean community which cast East Indians not only as “other,” but led East Indians to believe that Afro-Caribbeans were the enemy and not comrades in the fight for equality and recognition. As a result, this phase marks the beginning of a more unified Hinduism in Trinidad where being Indian became equated with being Hindu. The defining of this Hinduism was largely encouraged by reformist groups from India who opposed the conversion missions of Christians. At this point, Indians could have simply become a significant minority in the West Indies that held fast to their religious beliefs. Indo-Caribbeans, however, began to break ties with India (although not with Indian culture) and embrace their new identity as West Indians.

India became the “other” and Trinidad and Guyana became home. The third phase, then, marks the politicizing of the Hindu Indian identity in reaction to Trinidad’s independence and the rule of Eric Williams. In each phase I track the changes that occur in the West Indian practice of Hinduism as well as the changes in the West Indian temple form. Temples become the material articulation of the changing identity of Indians in the Caribbean. The temple form that has become the standard in West Indian communities is directly related to the hyphenated identity of Indo-Caribbeans. Thus the story of Indians in the West Indies begins before their actual arrival, because the divided environment they encountered upon entering Trinidad and Guyana greatly influenced the development of the Indian community there.

Phase 1: Fragmented

In 1797, Britain forcefully overtook Trinidad from the French though they gradually phased in English law and institutions over a period of time. As the anti-slavery movement in Britain increased, pressure was put on the crown to end slavery leading to the gradual release of 20,000 slaves of African descent on the island.²¹

Although the abolition of slavery was declared in the 1834, slaves were required to work an “apprenticeship” period until the system was abolished in 1840. Plantation owners capitalized on the newly freed Africans who settled or squatted on land near the plantations by providing them high wages and offering benefits such as huts to rent.

In addition to the separation between the Blacks and Whites, the British and other elites from enforced a strict separation between the classes. The British, in particular, sought to further strengthen their dominance of the society by building schools and Presbyterian churches in hopes of combating the presence of a significant population of Roman Catholic French speakers. By 1838, “the social and economic elites were united by race, but differentiated by language and religion.”²² Thus while religion has been a key factor in classifying cultural groups within Trinidad, the society has always been divided by race with Whites occupying the highest tier of the classes, coloreds a middle class that was also divided by religion, and at the bottom were the freed slaves. The freed Africans, united by their aversion to working on plantations, sought to establish their own identity apart from the plantations and hold out for better

²¹ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 43.

²² Robert J Tata and Arthur S. Evans. “Racial Separation Versus Social Cohesion: The Case of Trinidad-Tobago.” *Revista Geográfica*, No. 104 (1986): 26.

wages and more benefits from the plantation owners. Realizing that they were no longer restricted by their lack of rights in the society, Africans were unwilling to accept the repetition of previous injustices and did not hesitate to refuse labor contracts if they felt the terms were unfair. For the plantation owners the liberated African labor soon became seen as both unreliable and uncontrollable.

After 1838, sugar production decreased and the industry was in crisis. The labor shortage was cited by plantation workers as the main cause. As a result, a number of immigration plans were set into action in order to provide a steady and dependable supply of laborers. The most prominent and successful of these plans was one in which indentured laborers signed a contract to work for five years on the plantations with a partly paid return passage when their contracts expired.²³ Although Chinese immigrants were initially brought to replace the lost of laborers, plantation owners found them unsuited to the hot Caribbean weather. It was not until the British began to bring indentured laborers from India that they found a solution to their labor shortage. The first Indians to arrive in the Caribbean were brought to Guyana in 1838, but it was not until 1845 that Indian indentured laborers were introduced to Trinidad.²⁴ Although the costs associated with bringing Indian laborers were high, they were regarded as a cheaper and more controllable source of labor in the longer term than the freed Africans. Thus by 1917, over half a million Indians had been brought to the Caribbean

²³ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 43.

²⁴ Ibid.

with about 144,000 going to Trinidad between 1845 and 1920 when the indenture system was abolished.²⁵

Early Hinduism in the Caribbean

While each community within the various countries of the Hindu Diaspora has responded uniquely to their environment, there have been general trends. Perhaps the most important and widespread trend is the collapse of caste identities amongst diasporic communities.²⁶ South Asian societies within the Caribbean were no longer able to maintain the complexity of the caste system and soon distinctions made between the classes became largely insignificant.²⁷ Although Hindus in the Caribbean may have initially tried to continue following traditions associated with their individual castes, they were unable to do so because they were a small, highly diverse group of Indians in which everyone was forced to complete the same tasks even if traditionally those tasks may have been reserved for a particular caste. The dwindling support of the caste system combined with an increasing population of Trinidad-born Hindus who had never experienced life in India led younger generations of Hindus to lose nearly all notion of caste, including the castes of their ancestors.

In the early years of indentured labor, there were more South Indian laborers than North Indian. South Indians tended to display religious characteristics of Shaivism, that is practices directed towards Shiva, and Shaktism, which involves the worship of the

²⁵ Younger, Paul. *New Homelands: Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji, and East Africa*. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 95.

²⁶ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 24.

²⁷ The exception to this is with the Brahmin class who maintained a prominent role as I will discuss later.

cosmic power contained in various goddesses. Although there was a wide variety of beliefs and practices among South Indians, there was even more diversity among North Indian migrants. Hence early patterns of Hindu worship in the Caribbean seemed to have been diffused and scattered with each family performing rituals they remembered their parents doing.²⁸ The lack of unified practices and beliefs were not just a product of the different regions that migrants came from but also the variety of languages they spoke. Very few of the migrants spoke more than one language and the managers of the sugar estates purposely choose to put workers who spoke different languages together so that they would not unite and rebel against the owners of the plantations.²⁹ Collective religious activities could not be established without a common language to guide them. Gradually though, a common creolized Indian tongue was developed in each Caribbean context. Later complete knowledge of the original languages of the migrants were completely lost with the promotion of English in schools.

In general, religious activities among indentured Indians were tolerated and sometimes even facilitated by plantation managers, because they believed that it would pacify the Indians and prevent them from rebelling. Vertovec notes, however, that some of the earliest Hindu activities became notorious amongst the colonists leading to their suppression.³⁰ These acts included extreme forms of self-mutilation, animal sacrifices, and even such practices as “fire-walking.” These practices, deemed barbaric

²⁸ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 47.

²⁹ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 48.

³⁰ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 51.

and crude, were banned by colonists. Despite this, some of these acts remained underground and were still performed by some immigrant “Madrassis.”

Early Temple Forms

In “Transplanting Pilgrim Traditions in America,” geographer Carolyn Prorok argues that in the diaspora, temples and other places of worship become symbolic of a community’s identity.

“Churches and temples are not automatically pilgrimage destinations by virtue of their ritualized character; nor are they necessarily historically important, although all of them have a history. Instead, epitomized sites and structures are ritually invested with the emotional, political, and social moments that capture a people’s recognition of their own history, their own identity. They answer the question, ‘Who are we?’ with [...] ‘Trinidadian Hindus...’.”³¹

The development of the West Indian Hindu temple, then, should not be viewed simply as a natural, unintentional occurrence, but rather as a reflection of the changes made in the Indian community in the Caribbean. Each form of the temple created is in response to the social environment of the time.

Prorok claims that it is unlikely that many temples were built during the first two decades of the indentured period not only because the movement of East Indians was greatly restricted on the plantations, but also because the fact that many East Indians returned to India during that initial period emphasized the temporary nature of their time in Trinidad. The absence of a central worshiping area, however, was devastating for Hindus who were used to having shrines to which they could go worship.

³¹ Carolyn Prorok. “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions in the Americas.” American Geographical Society. 93.3 (2003): 295.

Consequently, many Hindus recreated from memory smaller versions of the shrines they attended in India within their new homes in the Caribbean. By the 1860s, as the Indian population increased, more elaborate structures were built although many family continued to have small shrines within their homes. At times these rudimentary temples were built with the aid of the plantation managers who may have seen this as a way to keep the Indian workers “socio-culturally isolated and therefore more easily manipulated.”³² Prorok includes a description of one early temple written by C. Kinglsey in 1871:

“The Coolie temples are curious places...Their mark is generally a long bamboo with a pennon atop, outside a low dark hut, with a broad flat veranda, or rather shed, outside the door. Under the latter, opposite each door, if I recollect rightly, is a stone or small stump, on which offerings are made of red dust and flowers. From it worshippers can see the images within. ... Sometimes these have been carved in the island: sometimes the poor folk have taken the trouble to bring them all the way from India on board ship. Hung beside them on the walls are little pictures, often very well executed in the miniature-like Hindoo style by native artists in the island. Large brass pots, which have some scared meaning, stand about, and with them a curious trident-shaped stand, about four feet high, on the horns of which garlands of flowers are hung as offerings. The visitor is told that the male figures are Mahadev, and the female Kali: we could hear of no other deities.”³³

Kinglsey’s description, typical of temples built during the earliest years of East Indians in Trinidad, indicates the initial influx of South Indians on the island with observation of the deities Shiva and Kali.

Prorok divides the temples built from the 1820s until about 1917 (the end of indentureship) into two categories: simple traditional and traditional. Simple traditional

³² Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 49.

³³ Carolyn Prorok, "Evolution of the Hindu Temple in Trinidad," *Caribbean Geography* 3.2 (1991): 76.

temples, the most common type until the 1920s, consisted of a “a bamboo/carat or a wood/tapia structure.”³⁴ The traditional style temples, first appearing in the 1880s, are characterized by stone or clay-brick structures. The traditional style temples appear to have resulted from the increase in wages that the East Indians received and reflect the “increasing permanence Indians felt about their settlement in Trinidad.”³⁵ East Indians continued to arrive on the island until 1917 influencing the temple form even though the type of materials available were restricted. By the 1920s, however, the majority of the Indian population in Trinidad had been born there and did not have personal memories of India, leading to significant changes in the form and structure of Hindu temples.

³⁴ Prorok. “Evolution of Hindu Temple.” 77.

³⁵ Prorok, “Evolution of Hindu Temple,” 78.

Phase 2: The “Other”

The second phase of Hinduism’s development in the West Indies is marked by “otherness” and, in particular, a change in the assignment of that “other.” Initially, East Indians were recognized as “outsiders” by the larger community who expected that the East Indian stay in Trinidad would be temporarily. East Indians, themselves, were comfortable being outsiders and remained loyal to India. Likewise, India politically acknowledged the indentured laborers as their own and attempted to safeguard their welfare. After independence, however, India was politically unstable and concerns about indentured laborers were largely forgotten. Slowly, the indentured laborers, many of them free now, began to distance themselves from India and accepted Trinidad as their home. As their community began to grow and Indians adopted a hyphenated existence, i.e. Indo-Trinidadian rather than East Indian, India quickly became a memory that was thought of fondly but no longer clear. Indeed by the time Indians gained political power, India became marked as more foreign than familiar.

Once in Trinidad, East Indians found themselves in conditions that were only marginally better than slavery: “wages were low, people were housed in barracks, sanitary conditions and health care were primitive, and there were few female migrants and no provision was made for East Indian cultural needs.”³⁶ Although East Indians worked initially side by side with freed Africans, they were aware that their presence was not entirely welcomed by the Afro-Caribbeans. Indentured laborers were seen by the larger community as simply a new form of slavery and as such East Indians replaced

³⁶ Tata, “Racial Separation,” 26.

the ex-slaves' position as the lowest of the classes. The freed African population resented, not the plantation owners who created the system, but the East Indians who came to represent the unjust structure.³⁷ Afro-Caribbeans blamed East Indians for their willingness to work for lower wages thereby stripping Afro-Caribbeans of their bargaining power with plantation owners. The tension between the Afro-Trinidadians and East Indians was soon extended to life outside the plantations. Viranjini Munasinghe writes in *Callaloo or Tossed Salad* that although "the initial causes of this friction [between Blacks and Indians] were economic, they soon took on a cultural meaning" as plantation owners exploited the hostility already evident between the two groups as a way to both drive labor competition and keep the masses divided.³⁸ When East Indians arrived in Trinidad there was already "a discourse deriding the moral, mental, and physical attributes of the Negro [...] in place for Indians to learn, and later to use, for their own ends."³⁹ Africans came to be viewed as lazy, indulgent, and wanting handouts instead of working as hard as the East Indians who were praised by plantation workers for having a strong work ethic. Meanwhile, Indians were viewed by Africans as "an inferior human being who would accept conditions of life that other races would reject."⁴⁰ Brinsley Samaroo, a Trinidadian historian, highlights entries in two different newspapers which reflect the attitude of the Afro-Caribbean community toward the East Indians. Written in the 1871 newspaper *New Era* was the statement: "There are

³⁷ Viranjini Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad? East Indians and the Cultural Politics of Identity in Trinidad*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2001): 65.

³⁸ Munasinghe, *Callaloo*, 43.

³⁹ Munasinghe, *Callaloo*, 64.

⁴⁰ Munasinghe, *Callaloo*, 65.

many thousands of these semi-barbarians among us, and for many years past there has been a growing tendency among them to be riotous and unruly,” while in an article in the 1911 *Trinidad Review* a writer declares that “the sooner those people of false religions are made to stay in their native country and sully their own history, the better for everybody.”⁴¹ Thus both groups turned on each other instead of the plantation system which benefited the most from their disunion.

East Indians were seen as an alien group within Trinidadian society because their indentured contracts assumed that their lives on the island were temporary. East Indians, also seeing their situation as short-term, did not attempt to integrate into the larger society.

Munasinghe quotes Kelvin Singh as saying:

“The Indians did not first view themselves, nor were they viewed by those who imported them or by other groups in the society, as permanent members of the society, but only as temporary migrants, related to the society in a segmental way, that is, as a part of the plantation economy. Relations with the rest of the society outside the plantation were not a part of the original conception behind Indian immigration.”⁴²

Plantation owners, in their desire to hold on to the laborers however, sought ways to keep the Indians in the country. Few East Indians could be convinced to accept another contract of indentureship so plots of land were made available to East Indians in hopes that it would persuade them to stay. These plots of lands combined with the knowledge that there was a better chance of social mobility in Trinidad than in India led many East

⁴¹ Brinsley Samaroo, “The Presbyterian Canadian Mission as an Agent of Integration in Trinidad during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” *Caribbean Studies*. 14.4 (1975): 42-3

⁴² Munasinghe, *Callaloo*, 73.

Indians to make the island their home permanently. Of the 144,000 East Indians that resided in Trinidad only about 22 percent ended up returning to India.⁴³ Despite choosing to stay even after the practice of indentureship was abolished, East Indians still distanced themselves from the larger community, choosing instead to replicate their lives in India as close as possible in their new home. The problem with this recreation, however, was that East Indians were recruited as individuals not as groups so there was a great deal of difference amongst themselves as far as caste, language, and religious practices.⁴⁴ Religion became a way for East Indians to unify their community, but the shift away from the East Indian self-inflicted alienation to the desire to proclaim their identities as part of Trinidad's national identity occurred only when the immigrants' country of origin was no longer claimed to be their "homeland."

The relationship between India and the Indian immigrants in the Caribbean was a complicated one. On the one hand, it was clear that many of those who migrated were not in the most advantageous position in their society, but on the other hand the Indian government took an active role in safeguarding the welfare of its citizens. Over the years, the Indian attitude towards overseas Indians shifted from general ignorance to concern to passive interest, and eventually to ambivalence. In "People In-Between: Reflections from the Indian Indentured Diaspora," historian Brij Lal states: "In the nineteenth century, there was little public awareness of, or agitation about, the emigration of Indian indentured laborers, beyond the occasional comment about abuses

⁴³ N. Jayaram. *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004): 123

⁴⁴ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 50.

in the recruitment system.”⁴⁵ This changed partly because Mahatma Gandhi’s struggles in South Africa enlightened the Indian public about the perception and treatment of Indians abroad as well as because of India’s concern about its international image. It was this interest and the surge in Indian nationalism that would eventually lead Indians to fight for the end of the indentured system. As a result, Indians in Trinidad found themselves still identifying with India despite the number of years lived in Trinidad. This attitude further separated East Indians from other members of Trinidadian society. They were outsiders – an designation they would continue to battle even after Trinidad’s independence.

Active interest in the plight of indentured Indians shifted drastically when India gained its independence as India’s main concern became developing a stable and successful government. Instead of being recognized as “Indians overseas,” Indians that were part of the indentured labor trade became referred to as “overseas Indians.”⁴⁶ The switch in the order of these two words signified a change in how the Indian public was claiming the Indians abroad and the allegiance they felt indentured laborers should have – first to the country to which they inhabited and then to India. There was increasing resistance to claiming indentured laborers as their own especially as the time the laborers spent in the colonies increased. Politically this view was made explicit when Jawaharlal Nehru asked “overseas Indians to identify closely with the interests and aspirations of the countries of their residence, and cease looking at India as their

⁴⁵ Lal, Brij. “People In-Between: Reflections from the Indian Indentured Diaspora.” *In The Construction of an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*. Samaroo, Brinsely and Ann Marie Bissessar, ed. (St. Augustine, Trinidad, The University of the West Indies: 2004): 18.

⁴⁶ Lal, “People In-Between,” 19.

'motherland'."⁴⁷ It was this shift that forced East Indians in Trinidad to see themselves as distant from their homeland and they became increasingly interested in their identity in the larger community in which they resided. As a result, overseas Indians began to identify as Indo-Trinidadians and sought to create a political presence on the island.

Hinduism becomes "Santhan Dharma"

"Santhan Dharma is our religion. 'Hinduism' is a name given to us by foreigners." - Pundit J.

Before a strong political presence could be established, Indians had to gain visibility as a unified community. The easiest way to accomplish this was through religion since many of the laborers already claimed to be practicing Hinduism. Temples, therefore, could provide Indians with a visible identifier. The unification of Hinduism in the Caribbean began with the changes Hindu nationalists and reformers made in 20th century India. Scholars, such as Vertovec, David Lorezen, and Richard King, have spoken in length about the "creation" of the modern form of Hinduism and its ties to Orientalist scholarship. Although I will not review their arguments in their totality, it is important to emphasize the changes reform groups initiated, because it is directly connected to the Hinduism which developed in the West Indies. Hindu reformers begin with assumption that Hinduism, in its current form, is a corrupt version of its original, ideal version. In "The Modern Myth of Hinduism" King summarizes the reformist account of the history of Hinduism as the following: (1) Hinduism is a single religion with its origins

⁴⁷ Ibid.

in the Vedas, (2) from the 'medieval' period onwards Hinduism stagnated and lost its potential for renewal, and (3) with the arrival of the West, Hindus became inspired to reform their now decadent religion to something approaching its former glory.⁴⁸ The "West" in this account acts as a reminder of the greatness of their own tradition, not as a model to which Hindus should reconstruct their religion, although King goes on to describe the role Orientalists have had on the changes made by reformists. The new Hinduism, which reformists argue is in fact the authentic lost Hinduism, seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing overall, and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversions.⁴⁹ These changes allow it to transcend caste identities, thereby reaching out to a larger number of Hindus and creating a more unified Hinduism.

Vertovec names the three Hindu nationalist movements which have had the greatest impact on Hindu ideology in the Hindu diaspora as the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). These three groups, although they differ in their approaches, all attempt to unite and to universalize "Hinduism." Hindu Mahasabha, founded in 1909, claims to promote the "'integrity of Hinduism,'" while the RSS, formed in 1925 in reaction to the Hindu-Muslim riots, seeks to bridge the "differences between different Hindu denominations in the interest of a united, politically strong Hinduism."⁵⁰ Finally the VHP, created in 1964 as an offshoot of

⁴⁸ King, Richard. "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism'." *Numen* 46 (1999): 106.

⁴⁹ King, "Orientalism," 176.

⁵⁰ Vertovec, *Hindu Diaspora*, 11.

the RSS, endorses “a very broad definition of Hinduism that overrides differences of a doctrinal, organizational, or religion/local nature.”⁵¹ In their attempts to universalize Hinduism, these nationalist groups have placed Hinduism not only in equal standing with Christianity, but often in opposition. In other words, to be Hindu is to be not Christian. This is particularly evident in the adoption of the term “Sanatan Dharma” (eternal religion) rather than using the term Hinduism. Altering the religion’s name does two important things. Firstly it avoids reusing what reformists recognize as the Orientalist name for the religion, thereby veiling any associations modern Hinduism may have with Orientalist projects. Secondly, by disconnecting the religion from Orientalist study, it depicts Hinduism as world religion rather than just a religion of India. Thus when Hindu reform groups arrived in the Caribbean in an attempt to combat the increasing number of Christian conversions taking place amongst the Indian community, they came equipped with knowledge of how an ideal and authentic Hinduism should look like. The Caribbean, with its small, diverse population of Indians, made it the ideal location for shaping a reformed Hinduism that would be prominent in the larger society.

Brahminization vs. Sanskritization

It is important that pundits are Brahmins, because then you can evaluate their reputations. In a world where everyone thinks they know the right way of doing things, a pundit who comes from a long line of pundits offers authenticity. (paraphrased) – Pundit J.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Vertovec categorizes the formation of a Hindu ideology in Trinidad into three stages.⁵² He posits the first stage as occurring in the 1920s because, as previously noted, religious practices until then were largely diffused. This first stage marks the creation of various Hindu associations which helped to sponsor a range of collective celebrations, thereby providing Indians with more visibility and encouraging Hindus to come together. In the 1930s, the Arya Samaj debates helped to established Hindu orthodoxy which would alter the formation of Hindu temples and determine the path Hinduism in the Caribbean would take. The Arya Samaji's presence on the island also helped with the building of Hindu schools and the publication of Hindu books. Finally in the 1950s, a Hindu political party began to rise in power ushering in an organized and politically powerful Indian minority in Trinidad.

Despite the strengthening of the Hindu community, Hinduism was still considered to be a minority religion that was uncivilized and demonic by the upper-class. Historian Brinsley Samaroo quotes Lord Harris as stating:

“They [East Indians] are not, neither Coolies nor Africans, fit to be placed in a position which the labourers of civilized countries must at once occupy. They must be treated like children, and wayward ones too; the former from their habits and religious; the latter from the utterly savage state in which they arrive.”⁵³

Several Christian missionary groups targeted Hindus in particular, concentrating their missions in the South where the largest of the Indian communities were located. Since many indentured laborers were illiterate and did not understand the theological

⁵² Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 35.

⁵³ Samaroo, “The Presbyterian Canadian Mission,” 43

underpinnings of their practices, they were often easily converted. Overall these missions, however, did not have great success and only managed to convert approximately 10% of the Indians in Trinidad and Guyana. The threat of conversion was enough, however, that Hindu groups found it necessary to educate their followers on Hindu philosophy in order to engage in verbal combat with Christians.⁵⁴ Congregational worship became a way for the priests to educate Hindus, in addition to aiding in their political ambitions. Pundits, viewed as already equipped with the necessary skills to defend the religion, increasingly began to take on the role as leaders and speakers for the Hindu community. In some way, then, pundits began to fulfill what was viewed as a natural role as designated by their caste and yet that role was being redefined and losing its exclusivity. Thus the unification of Hinduism in the West Indies began through a combination of what scholars have termed “Sankritization” and “Brahminization.”

Although I have previously described the ways in which specific caste identities were lost during the development of the Indian community in the Caribbean, it should be noted that Brahmins were able to maintain some of the power associated with their caste. While traditionally Brahmins are seen as the safe guarders of sacred knowledge that does not mean that they are automatically pundits who perform puja for others. In the West Indies, however, the tie between Brahmins and pundits was tightened. In other words, the designation of the term Brahmin increasingly became important only when talking about the qualifications of a pundit. Brahmins, then, were able to maintain their high standing in the stratification of the community by emphasizing their

⁵⁴ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 52.

religious roles. The “Brahminization of Hinduism,” as described by Vertovec, refers to the continual justification for the presence of a pundit in all religious rituals.⁵⁵ By opening up their ritual services to everyone and emphasizing the necessity of various rituals in their new roles as spokespeople for the community, pundits ensured their power. Vertovec writes that the

“Brahman-dominated practices, which became the routine features of Hinduism in all three Caribbean territories, included: the performance of formal puja; [...] rites of passage marking key life-stages; kathas involving routinized recitals of sacred lore [...]; weddings [...]; funerals [...], yagnas [...] centered on the reading of a sacred text [...]; [and] massive communal meals [...].”⁵⁶

While in present day West Indian Hindu practices the association between pundits and Brahmins has weakened, as I will demonstrate later, the necessity for a pundit’s presence in all of the scenarios previously mentioned remains vital.

It was the arrival of the Arya Samaj, a reformist movement focused on Vedic purification of Hindu belief and practice and critical of the power and position of Brahmins,⁵⁷ that provided the catalyst for creation of “the national organization of a unitary, standardized Brahmanic Hinduism.”⁵⁸ The Arya Samaj missionaries arrived in Guyana and Trinidad in 1910 in order to promote the reformation of Hinduism and combat Christian conversions in the Caribbean. Their arrival, though, was also a threat to the Brahmin pundits who did not want to cede their status within the community.

Vertovec states that the arrival of the Arya Samajis in the Caribbean:

⁵⁵ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 53-4.

⁵⁶ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 53.

⁵⁷ As Simboonath Singh notes, although the RSS preached the abolishment of the caste system, its elite class was dominated by Brahmin born members. So even though the castes system was dismantling, Brahmins remained powerful and influential.

⁵⁸ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 54.

“caused much consternation within Hindu communities through their staunch and knowledgeable advocacy of fundamental reforms in doctrine (especially by promoting their exclusive, Vedic-centered monotheism and rejection of idols) and in social structure (including efforts to upgrade the status of women and to criticize the Brahmans’ self-ascribed authority).”⁵⁹

In order to contest the teachings of the Arya Samaj, Brahmin pundits quickly organized into a united group – the “Santhanists”. The Arya Samaji responded by creating their own formal bodies. Both sides sought legitimacy by forging links with like-minded associations in India and argued that they each were presenting the “authentic” Hinduism. The Sanatanists were able to gain much of their support from rural Hindus who preferred the more conservative ways of worshipping whereas the followers of the Arya Samaji consisted mostly of a much smaller population of well-educated, middle class Hindus. The Arya Samaji were instrumental in the building of schools and temples, but the Santanists were able to gain additional supporters when they obtained the colonial government’s recognition of Hindu marriages and permission to perform cremations. Although the Santanists had a larger number of supporters, the Arya Samaj inspired a version of “Sanskritization” among the Indian population in the Caribbean that would have long lasting effects. “Sanskritization,” a term made popular by M. N. Srinivas who spoke specifically about the context of India,⁶⁰ refers to the process by which the lower castes mimic the practices of the upper class in order to achieve social mobility. While social mobility through the repetition of Brahmin practices was no longer relevant, Hindus sought the respect Brahmins received in the community by

⁵⁹ Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*, 54-5.

⁶⁰ M.N. Srinivas. “A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization.” *The Far Eastern Quarterly*. 15.4. (1956): 481-496.

following a Brahmin lifestyle. A consequence of caste no longer having the same significance in the West Indies as in India was that Brahmins could no longer justify their exclusive claims to religious texts and practices. Even though, a pundit's presence may be expected at a puja taking place at someone's home, the reading of sacred texts, vegetarianism, and conducting puja were no longer seen as solely practices of a pundit – anyone could perform them. Whereas in India it may be acceptable for a non-Brahmin to eat meat and still claim to be a devout Hindu, in the Caribbean almost all Hindus fast during special events and those deeply involved in the temples are usually vegetarian. Thus previously characterized “Brahmin practices” came to be seen simply as Hindu practices. The Hinduism that resulted from the Arya Samaji debates, then, was a combination of traditional Hindu practices and reformed ideologies. In addition to the changes they made in the standardization of Hinduism, the debates between Arya Samaj and the Santantists led to the creation of major Hindu political parties. Thus not only had Hinduism in the Caribbean become standardized, it had also become politicized.

Canadian Missionaries and the East Indian Church

“They always want to try to save somebody. Why they doh go and try and save themselves? I is tell them plain, I’m Hindu.” – M. (in reference to Christians)

Presbyterian churches in Trinidad are often referred to as East Indian churches, because of the close relationship between the Presbyterian missionaries, who migrated

from Canada to the Caribbean, and the indentured laborers.⁶¹ Prorok notes that while not all Christian Indians were Presbyterian, “95% of the Presbyterian population is Indian in Trinidad.”⁶² Canadian missionaries concentrated their efforts in the south where the majority of the Indian population resided. The decision to focus missionary efforts on the East Indian community was made by Reverend John Morton who, because of his close location to the plantation barracks, saw an opportunity to convert the Indian laborers. Samaroo quotes Morton as stating the spiritual interests of the East Indians were:

“almost uncared for...Many of these people will return to their own country after their term of service is over, and how important it is that, instead of returning with the vices of Europeans grafted on their own, they should be taught a holier faith, to teach it in turn of their countrymen in the East.”⁶³

Indians were initially resistant Morton’s efforts, because they were hesitant to mix with the African population, and because of the language barriers between Morton and themselves.⁶⁴ To encourage conversions, Morton established a school on the church’s doorstep that offered specially designed lessons for Indians in broken Hindi. Morton continued to gain the trust of the laborers by visiting them in their homes, offering medical and legal advice, and continuing to develop his Hindi. New converts were trained as “native evangelists and teachers” and Morton “took advantage of the East Indians’ great pride in their ethnic cohesiveness by providing them with their own ‘East

⁶¹ Carolyn Prorok, “The Significance of Material Culture in Historical Geography: A Case Study of the Church as School in the Diffusion of the Presbyterian Mission to Trinidad.” *Historical Reflections*. 23.3. (1997): 377.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Samaroo, “The Presbyterian Canadian Mission,” 45

⁶⁴ Prorok, “The Significance of Material Culture,” 378.

Indian Church.⁶⁵ Education, however, proved to be key in gaining East Indian trust and support. Prorok argues that the function of the Presbyterian Church as school as well as a church is as much a part of the contemporary identity of the 'East Indian Church' in Trinidad as is its ethnic association and sectarian philosophy."⁶⁶ By 1870 Morton had established five schools in the surrounding estates, all of which were also used for Sunday schools and services. By the time Morton died in 1912, 90 East Indian congregations had been established (although Prorok notes that not all had a "standing structure for worship) 63 of which Morton had established himself.⁶⁷

Although only a small portion of Indians converted to Christianity despite Morton's concentrated efforts, the devices used by the him and other Presbyterian missionaries were influential on Hinduism on the island in two important ways. First, Hindus began to construct temples similar way to East Indian churches, that is in such a way that temples could function both as a temple and as a school. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the construction of a East Indian church which provided education specifically for Indians provided a way for East Indians to remain culturally isolated. Prorok states:

"the need to have free and open access to school tailored specifically to the East Indian community, in order to attract them in the first place, actually provided a means for the community to acquire formal education without giving up its traditional ethnic and religious identity. In this sense, East Indians could resist integration while simultaneously engaging in a relationship with a religious and social institution whose very nature was designed to promote assimilation in colonial Trinidad."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Prorok, "The Significance of Material Culture," 379.

⁶⁶ Prorok, "The Significance of Material Culture," 384

⁶⁷ Prorok, "The Significance of Material Culture," 381.

⁶⁸ Prorok, "The Significance of Material Culture," 387.

Thus not only did the missionaries indirectly promote the continued exclusion of East Indians, but they also provided Indians with a way to reform their own religious structures so that they could unite their community.

The Formation of the Trinidadian Temple Form

The rise in collective religious activity and the influence of the Christian missionaries and Ayra Samaj debates can be clearly seen in the changes made to the temples during this time period. Prorok marks the second period of temple building as between the years 1921 and 1944. Although both simple traditional and traditional temples were built during this period, traditional temples outnumbered that of the simple traditional. During this time period a new temple form emerged which Prorok names “the Koutia.” She states, “A Koutia in India usually has no sacred significance attached to it. It is a place where the person who performs the daily puja and takes care of the temple (pujari) sleeps, but in Trinidad it took on the function of assembly hall.”⁶⁹ As such the koutia reflects a more organized East Indian population in Trinidad as well as the changing attitudes towards the permanence of their settlement. Koutias were originally constructed alongside traditional temples as temporary structures that were used for visiting holy men and festivals. By the 1920s, however, koutias became permanent additions.

⁶⁹ Prorok, “Evolution of Hindu Temple,” 80.

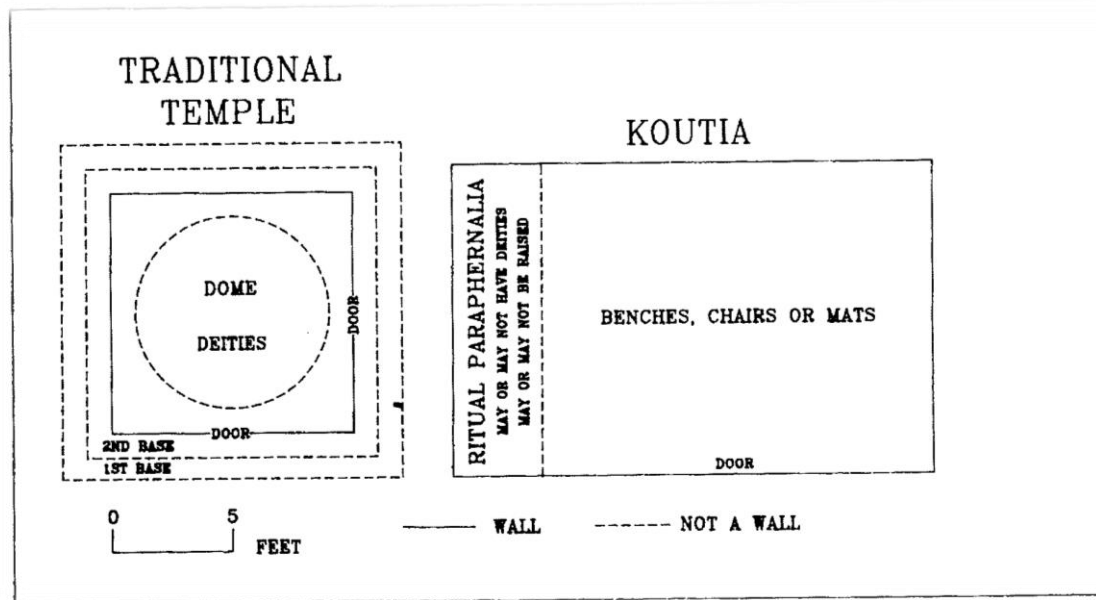


Figure 1: This line drawing represents the floor plan of the Traditional temple and the koutia temple as well as the situation when both appear together in the landscape of Trinidad.

Interestingly no new temples were recorded as being built between 1919 and 1924. Prorok posits that this was the result of the changing political scene which lead to conflicts within the community on how the temples should be designed.⁷⁰ In 1925, however, four new temples were constructed which coincides with the arrival of the Ayra Samaj and other Indian missionary groups. As more and more Hindu missionaries came to the island, the koutia quickly became a meeting place and a center for the community. The missionaries originally used the space to give lectures, but as Hindus struggle to obtain a political presence, the koutia also became a political battleground between the Arya Samji and the Santhanists. One missionary's arrival led to such discontentment amongst resident Brahmins that six new temples can be traced back to his initial visit.⁷¹ In 1934, there were significant labor disputes among the East Indian

⁷⁰ Prorok, "Evolution of Hindu Temple," 81.

⁷¹ Mehta Jaimini, an Arya Samaji, visited Trinidad in 1928.

workers and the sugar estates. Hindus participated heavily in the disputes and Prorok states that the “erection of seven new temples in the two years following the disturbances is symbolic of East Indians’ heightened awareness of their new found political effectiveness.”⁷²

Between 1945 and 1960, more new temples were constructed than in the previous 70 years and twice as many as between the years 1921 and 1944. Most of the new temples were constructed in the traditional style although the number koutias steadily increased both as add-ons to traditional temples and as stand-alone structures. Prorok argues that traditional temples reflected Hindu conservatism whereas the koutias symbolized reformist ideologies because the form emphasized a more equalizing experience.⁷³ Although the koutia’s popularity may be linked to its cheaper building cost, the increasing number of koutias also reveals the success of the reformists. Still, the presence of domes and more elaborate facades marks a compromise between the two styles. It was the koutia, complete with a dome and/or facade, that became the new standard temple form in the late 1950s. Their popularity was so prominent that Prorok terms it the “Trinidadian temple.”⁷⁴

The “Trinidadian temple,” like the standardized Hinduism that developed in the West Indies, can be seen as partly as a response to Christian missionary efforts. The increase in the construction of temples was a declaration of the strength of the Hindu community. It signaled a visible shift in the Indian community’s perception of their

⁷² Prorok, “Evolution of Hindu Temple,” 82.

⁷³ Prorok, “Evolution of Hindu Temple,” 82.

⁷⁴ Prorok, “Evolution of Hindu Temple,” 83.

place in the society. By dotting Trinidad's landscape with various temples, they were affirming not only their intention to be permanent fixtures, but also renouncing their previous "other" status. Trinidadian temples with its "benches facing an altar area for the congregation to observe ritual activity, and the housing of all deities under one dome"⁷⁵ was a recognizable form than challenged perceptions of Hinduism as uncivilized. The way the temples began to function in the community were reminiscent of the ways Christian churches function thereby dispelling the notions of being completely foreign.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

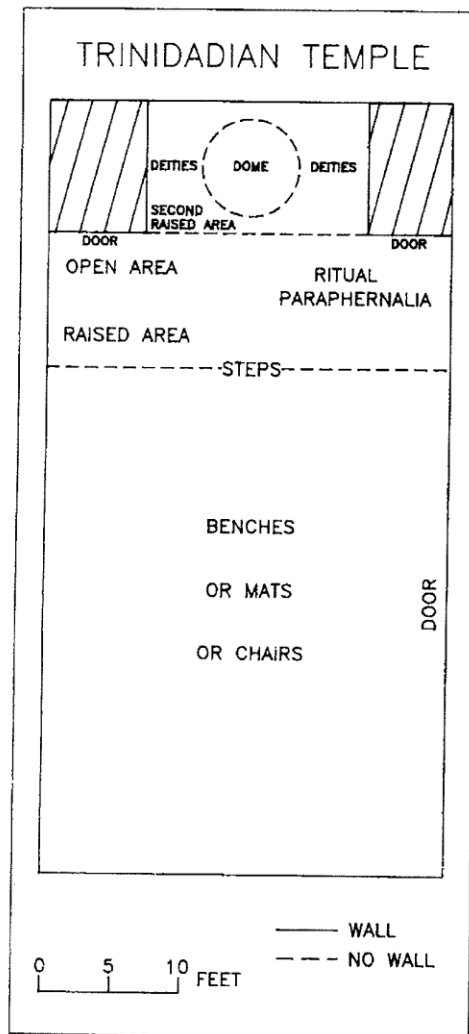


Figure 2: This line drawing represents the floor plan of a typical Trinidadian temple. The spaces on either side of the deities are used for storage or other mundane purposes. Some Trinidadian temple communities use the entire stage for the installation of deities.

Phase 3: Politically Strong

Independence and the Rule of Eric Williams

The British attempted to phase out their rule over Trinidad by creating a new constitution that introduced a modified ministerial system. In these early steps towards self-governance, Indians feared being overpowered by the Black majority who spoke with one voice whereas Indians still struggled for representation. While Indians focused on combating the island's majority race, Dr. Eric Williams, a historian of colonialism and slavery, saw the need for a charismatic leader in Trinidad and quickly took the opportunity. In January of 1956, he established the country's first political party – the People's National Movement (PNM) – in preparation for Trinidad's first general elections to be held later that same year. Although the majority of the party's members were Afro-Trinidadians, there were also a few Indo-Trinidadians who were generally Muslim or Christian.⁷⁶ With Williams as its leader, PNM took a firm anticolonial stance, supported the creation of the Federation of the West Indians, and sought to strengthen the economy by focusing on agriculture and industrialization. Williams wrote in the newspaper "The Nation" that the party was committed to"

"recognizing and, indeed, welcoming cultural diversity, the PNM calls for unity among racial groups on one common platform – agreement on common economic, social and political objectives: utilization of all resources, human and physical, for the common good....PNM proudly exhibits its banner on which are emblazoned the words revolutionary for Trinidad and Tobago – Political Liberty, Social Equality, Racial Fraternity" (264).

⁷⁶ Colin Palmer. *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean*. (Charlotte, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2006): 10.

Creating a nation that was not divided by race was Williams' primary goal for Trinidad. In his book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams argued that racism was a consequence of slavery, the result of imperialism.⁷⁷ The creation of a Federation of the West Indians, he believed, could combat colonialist ideologies while still allowing for the autonomy of individual countries. Although Williams predicted the hesitation of the Indian population to join a Federation, he saw Indians as having been steadily assimilated into the society. As such he refused to support the teaching of Hindi in schools, believing that to do so would only lead to discussions about teaching African languages as well as further divide the society he was trying to unite. Instead, he supported teaching only West Indian history and the English language and literature as a way to form a nonracial national identity. What Williams did not realize was that by ignoring race and culture in his determination to create a nation not based on race, he was in fact increasing the racial tension and alienating the Indian population. Williams' refusal to see East Indians as a separate group in Trinidad in need of recognition at the national level alienated East Indians leading them to believe that he and his administration was actually uninterested in the needs of their community.

Anthropologist Viranjini Munasinghe writes that, ""The insensitivity of the PNM regime to the needs other ethnic groups was in part an outcome of a deliberate strategy that gave priority to the anticolonial struggle at the expense of interethnic consensus. It was also partly due to a misreading of the social situation.""⁷⁸ Williams, because he was not a member of the Indian community, believed that East Indians saw themselves as having

⁷⁷ Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 260-1.

⁷⁸ Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad?*, 219-20.

equal status to other members of the society. His belief demonstrates the success of Indians to banish their designation of “other,” but East Indians were not only working to vanquish their foreignness, they were also working to build a powerful minority that could not be overpowered by the Black majority. Thus PNM’s support ultimately came from Afro-Trinidadians although Williams did have some support from Muslim Indo-Trinidadians, but their backing had less to do with their belief in PNM’s ideals and more to do with their tension with Hindu Indo-Trinidadian groups.

Shortly after the creation of PNM, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) was established by a group of politicians who were united by their opposition to PNM and Williams. Although the DLP consisted of a variety of politicians, a significant portion of its support came from the Indian population. In 1958, the DLP defeated PNM in the Federal elections. This defeat was a shock to Williams who believed that the creation of the Federation would be clearly seen as a positive for Trinidad. The campaigning of both sides was ugly and each party flung racially charged insults at each other. In a speech to his supporters, Williams cuttingly reviewed the voting patterns of the elections and argue that the DLP was attempting to turn Trinidad into an Indian and Hindu nation.⁷⁹ With this accusation, Williams inadvertently gave voice to Indo-Trinidadians’ greatest fear that their culture would be squashed by the Black majority. For Williams, Trinidadians were oppressed by the colonial powers’ insistence of their racial superiority, so in its independence Trinidad should seek to be a raceless nation.

⁷⁹ Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 270.

This was not, however, how East Indians viewed their “mode of oppression.”⁸⁰ Indians saw the Black majority as their oppressors not the White colonists. Anh Hua states, in her essay on diaspora and memory, that:

"As part of the ongoing argument between history and memory, marginalized groups often attempt to maintain at the center of national memory what the dominant group would often like to forget. The process results in a collective memory always in flux: not one memory, but multiple memories constantly battling for attention in cultural space."⁸¹

For Indo-Trinidadians, this meant bringing to the surface the injustices they endured by Blacks during indentureship even as Williams tried to convince the nation that the White imperialists were the oppressors. So whereas Williams tried to reconstruct the past as one in which Indians and Blacks stood together in opposition to colonists, Indians envisioned it as one in which colonialists presented order and Blacks chaos. Although Williams meant to condemn specifically DLP's campaign, his harsh words convinced Indo-Trinidadians that he was attacking their entire race and seemed to support DLP accusations that Williams had no respect for Indian culture. The East Indian community would later retaliate by creating an even stronger Indian presence within the government and push forward several initiatives which emphasized and celebrated Indian culture. The elections allowed people to see that the winning party who held political power could promote its own interests and that of the ethnic group that supported it thereby providing encouragement for political parties to be divided

⁸⁰ Tariq Modood. "Reflections on the Rushdie Affair: Muslims, Race and Equality in Britain" in *Multicultural Politics*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press: 2005): 104.

⁸¹ Anh Hua. "Diaspora and Cultural Memory" in Agnew, Vijay, ed. *Diaspora, Memory And Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2005): 201.

ethnically. As a result the Indian community got politically more powerful until Basdeo Pandey, Trinidad's first Indian prime minister, finally took office in 1995.

From Callaloo to Tossed Salad

After establishing a more homogenous form of Hinduism within Trinidad, Indo-Trinidadians could now compete with the other religious institutions within the country and promote their culture. Simboonath Singh notes that the 1980s resurgence of Hinduism in Trinidad coincides with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a powerful political party in India. Singh argues that this timing is not coincidental but rather indicates the proactive nature of the Hindutva ideology which drives both trends. According to Singh, the increasing visibility of Hindu celebrations such as Diwali, Phagwah, and Raksha Bandhan was a strategic move by Hindu leaders in Trinidad to assert the power of their community and to move beyond the bhakti tradition to one more in line with the assertiveness of the Hindutva.⁸² He states:

“To assert himself/herself the ‘new Hindu’ must go beyond the bhakti tradition of Hindu worship that has characterized Trinidadian Hinduism – one that entails largely ritualized Hindu practices such as bhajan (devotional songs) singing and the chanting of shlokas (Sanskritic stanzas), and the like. These basic and customary ritualized religious practices, from a Hindutva perspective, do not project a ‘strong and politically astute’ Hindu. Put simply, there is a clear focus that encourages resistance to oppression with a view to fighting social injustices. What seems to be occurring in the global Hindu Diaspora is the adoption and utilization of resistive-liberative strategies that non-Hindu minority communities in India have been using to resist the ideology of the majority.”⁸³

⁸² Simboonath Singh. “Hindu Transnationalism in Action: the Racializing Effects of Hindutva’s ideology on Contemporary Caribbean Ethnic Politics.” *IDEAZ*. 1 (2006): 38

⁸³ Singh, “Hindu Transnationalism,” 41.

By the time Indians were able to gain political control, then, Hindu leaders could flex their political muscle by engaging in several cultural contestations which challenged the Afro-Trinidadian hegemony.

One of the first of these contestations was the declaration of the public holiday of “Arrival Day.” May 30th every year since 1945 has been celebrated by Indo-Trinidadians as Indian Arrival Day, commemorating the arrival of Indian immigrants to the island. In 1994, Indo-Trinidadians proposed a national holiday to celebrate the day, reasoning that it was only fair since Afro-Trinidadians had their own day (Emancipation Day) in August to celebrate their release from slavery. Supporters claimed that such a day was needed to acknowledge the presence of Indians within the country. Indian politicians though, in particular Trevo Sudama, an Indo-Trinidadian member of Parliament at the time, were careful with their rhetoric, arguing that such a holiday celebrated Trinidad’s diversity and not just Indo-Trinidadians alone. Sudama’s appeal is summarized as the following:

“In the evolution of an ‘immigrant society’ like Trinidad, the arrival of indentured workers from India was a historical event of immense significance. Even if it is identified with Indo-Trinidadians, as a public holiday 30 May would ‘serve to sensitize other ethnic groups to the diverse inputs and contributions....in the historical evolution of this society’, and thus ‘contribute to fostering greater interethnic respect, tolerance and understanding’. As such, ‘the day has a wider historical significant for the whole national community’.”⁸⁴

Opponents to the creation of the holiday insisted that such a holiday would only celebrate indentureship, decrease productivity in businesses, and lead other ethnic groups to demand the celebration of their own arrival day. Ultimately, the House

⁸⁴ Jayaram, “The Indian Diaspora,” 131.

decided to designate May 30 as “Arrival Day.” Williams declared that May 30 1995 “was a holiday in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Trinidad.”⁸⁵ Indo-Trinidadians were not satisfied with the title “Arrival Day” instead of “Indian Arrival Day,” however, and Basdeo Pandey claimed that to leave out the term “Indian” demonstrated that the opposition was “ashamed” and “repulsed” by the term. Hindu organizations expressed displeasure at the declaration and some flatly refused it. Indo-Trinidadian leaders argued that whereas the term “Emancipation” directly referred Africans, the term “Arrival” was ambiguous and denied the very recognition of an Indian presence within the country that it was supposed to celebrate. To Indians, the refusal to include the term “Indian” demonstrated that Indians were not in fact a recognized and respected part of Trinidad. When the United National Congress (UNC), a largely Indo-Trinidadian supported party, came into power in November of 1995, it immediately changed the name to “Indian Arrival Day.” Establishing Indian Arrival Day as a holiday was a big success for Hindus, because it marked them as officially part of Trinidadian society and not simply a powerful minority. Indo-Trinidadians were no longer trying to justify their existence on the island and, as a result, the temple form also stabilized – only elaborating elements rather than adding new features.

It is not surprising, then, that during this phase of development, no new temple forms were created. Rather, like the Indo-Trinidadian identity, temple forms remained stable although designs were more ostentatious. Between 1961 and 1972, one third of the temples built were traditional, one third were koutias, and one third was

⁸⁵ Jayaram, “The Indian Diaspora,” 132.

Trinidadian. Temples continued to act as a community center and groups began to sponsor programs that taught Hindi, Indian dance and music. The last simple traditional style temple was built in the 1970s, and the majority of temples that were remodeled were done so in the Trinidadian style. The oil boom increased the wealth of the Indian population and led to more ornate temples. Prorok reports that in an 1985 survey, 186 temples were reported in Trinidad. Although the temple form did not change during this phase, temple services began to take on a more uniform appearance. In "Hinduism and the State in Trinidad," Sherry-Ann Singh writes that in addition to the homogenization of Hinduism, there are also several other defining features of Hinduism in the Caribbean that begin to emerge in the 1920s – the prominence of Bhakti, "the increase in collective religious activity and observances," and the use of Ramcharitmanas as a key text.⁸⁶ All of these features would come to define Hinduism in the Caribbean.

The Ramacharitmanas as the Text of Caribbean Hinduism

"They [pundits] always read from the Ramayana. I don't know why. It must be the easiest to read." – S.

Hinduism in Trinidad and Guyana is dominated by the recitation of three texts: the Ramcharitmanas, The Bhagvatpurana, and the Bhagvadgita. Although outside of India, the Bhagvadgita is perhaps the most well-known Hindu text, the Ramcharitmanas, a version of the Ramayana composed by the Tulsidas in 1574, is often regarded as the

⁸⁶ Singh, Sherry-Ann. "Hinduism and the State in Trinidad." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 6.3 (2005): 203.

central text of Hinduism in the West Indies. Singh writes that this particular version is so popular that Tulsidas is often referred to as “the Father of Caribbean Hinduism.”⁸⁷ The story of Ramayana has become such a prevalent influence in the Indo-Caribbean Hindu life that it is common for Hindus to greet each other by saying “Sita Ram” instead of “Namaste” or any other greeting. Singh also notes that in the West Indies the popularity of the Ramcharitmanas outweighs even that of the Bhagavad Gita: “The well-known and familiar story of the Ramcharitmanas, with its human interest and its largely ethical nature, attracts a larger audience than the Bhagavadgita’s pure philosophy and revelation.”⁸⁸ The Ramcharitmanas’ popularity can be linked to several factors. First, the majority of indentured laborers came from Uttar Pradesh and the Bihar regions of India where there were, and still are, an abundance of followers of the Bhakti tradition pervasive in Tulsidas’ version of the Ramayana. Second, the theme of exile in the text was relatable to the indentured laborers who saw their time in Trinidad as a type of exile. Rama’s insistence that his exile was necessary and the dignity with which he spent his time in the forest presented an ideal to which Indians could model themselves after. The hope of returning to India was also prevalent in the early waves of East Indians in the Caribbean. Thirdly, Singh argues that the “uncomplicated nature of the story, along with a clearly established dichotomy between good and evil, rendered it an appropriate authority in the attempts of the Trinidad Hindu community at reconstruction and reconsolidation.”⁸⁹ If East Indians felt Rama’s story was representative of their own

⁸⁷ Singh, “Hinduism,” 202.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Singh, “Hinduism,” 203.

lives, the White colonial oppressors as well as Blacks were cast in the role of Ravan, the powerful villain of the story.

As the temple form became standardized, temples increasingly became used as a place to have discussions on the sacred texts instead of simply a place to perform puja. Textual discourses were seen as a different type of worship. Textual discourses in a West Indian temple can be divided into two types: a more formal discourse, yagna, and a more weekly event, a satsang. The Bhagatpurana was the text of focus during yagnas until about the 1970s when the Ramcharitmanas became primarily text, often referred to as the fifth Veda.⁹⁰ The Bhagavadgita, revered for being a highly philosophically complex and devotional text, became the text pundits turn to explicate and reinforce arguments made in the Ramayana. For example Rama's decision to go into exile despite the trickery of his stepmother is linked to the Krishna's discussion on dharma. A feature of West Indian Hinduism then is the habit of pundits to continually cross reference the scriptures during their discourses. The Society Working for the Advancement of Hindu Aspirations (SWAHA) in particular proposed that the Ramayana should be used as "a doctrine on behavior, the Bhagavadgita as a source of philosophy and the Bhagvadpurana as a support for both."⁹¹ As I will demonstrate later textual discourses remain central in temple services in the U.S.

The rise in the use of the Ramachritmanas as Hinduism in the Caribbean's central text is important because it is directly connected to the rise in the bhakti tradition in the West Indies. Leonard Wolcott claims that "the most prominent characteristic of the

⁹⁰ Singh, "Hinduism," 204.

⁹¹ Singh, "Hinduism," 205.

Tulsidas Ramayana is its exposition and praise of bhakti, “adoring devotion.”⁹² One of the key differences between Valmiki’s Ramayana and Tulsidas’ version is Tulsidas’ emphasis on Hanuman,⁹³ particularly Hanuman’s role as a devoted servant of Rama. While most of the text pays homage to Hanuman’s devotion to Rama, not to Hanuman himself, Tulsidas begins the poem by offering reverence to Hanuman because it is in Hanuman’s heart that Rama resides.⁹⁴ There is a shift, then, in the West Indian emphasis on the characters of the Ramayana. Rama is still understood to be embodying the ideals of the perfect human, but Hanuman, the perfect devotee, becomes the character after which West Indians Hindus model themselves after. In recent years the amount of temples dedicated to Hanuman has steadily increased, and in 2003 a 85 foot Hanuman murti, the largest outside of India, was erected in Trinidad demonstrating the prevalence of the worship of Hanuman. The prominence of bhakti tradition in the West Indies is also evident in the emphasis on singing devotional songs during weekly temple services. Temples routinely hold satsangs within which devotees will spend two or more hours simply singing devotional songs. This pattern not only remains in the U.S., but interestingly the ability to sing has become a sought after qualification when one is looking for a pundit to conduct a yagna. The most popular pundits are not those who can just explain the scriptures well, but those who can also sing beautifully.

⁹² Leonard Walcott, “Hanuman: The Power-Dispensing Monkey in North Indian Folk Religion.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 37.4. (1978): 654.

⁹³ Hanuman, the “monkey god,” acts a servant and devotee of Prince Rama. He is also worshipped as the 11th incarnation of Lord Shiva.

⁹⁴ Wolcott, “Hanuman,” 654.



Figure 3: This 85ft Hanuman Murti (the largest outside of India) was constructed in 2003 and stands outside the Dattatreya Mandir in Carapichaima. Photo Credit: Somdath Rampersaud

PART TWO: WEST INDIAN HINDUISM IN THE UNITED STATES

*"When people ask you where you are from, what do you say?"
"Born in America...parents from Trinidad...great grandparents from India."
"So you say you are American?"
"No, I usually say I am Trinidadian." - V.*

Amitava Chowdhury writes in her dissertation on cultural memory and the identity of South Asian indentured labors that:

"To be Indian in the diaspora is to be hyphenated, where the hyphen on the one hand connects, elicits similarities, commonalities, bonding - a shared origin, a common memory; but on the other hand, the hyphen is also that unbridgeable gulf, between the diaspora and the homeland. The hyphen is what allows the diasporic to claim an 'Indian identity,' it is also what keeps the diasporic eternally distant."⁹⁵

In the Caribbean, Indians developed a hyphenated identity that allowed them to be fully part of the West Indian society while still maintaining a type of "otherness." As I have shown, the creation of a unique Caribbean identity relied on the Indian community creating an opposition between themselves and the larger society. Their identity exists not in the joining of "Indo" and "Caribbean," but rather in the hyphen itself – they reject and claim each affiliation thereby standing in the tension created by opposing the two. Bhatia quotes K. Vishwewaran as stating: "The hyphen enacts a violent shuttling between two or more worlds."⁹⁶ Bhatia reuses Vishweswaran's phrase to claim that hyphenated labels represent "a 'violent shuttling' of migrant identity between two

⁹⁵ Amitava Chowdhury. "Horizons of Memory: A Global Processual Study of Cultural Memory and Identity of the South Asian Indentured Labor Diaspora in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean." Diss. Washington State University, 2008. Pullman, WA: Washington State University: 15.

⁹⁶ Sunil Bhatia, "Acculturation, Dialogical Voices, and the Construction of the Diasporic Self." *Theory Psychology* 12.1 (2002): 55.

incompatible worlds” (emphasis added).⁹⁷ The existence of a separate West Indian Hindu identity, however, proves that while these two worlds seem to be incompatible, they can both be represented in a singular identity. At the same time, the existence of the hyphen demonstrates the inability of these two worlds to merge completely. A hyphenated identity, as Chowdhury states above, will always result in the individual being pulled in separate directions hence the accuracy of Vishwewaran’s use of the word “violent.” Hyphenation then does not offer a peaceful unity but rather an unsettled identity that must choose which association to bring the forefront based on the individual situation they encountered.

The dilemma that hyphenation brings forth is not unique to the West Indian case. Rather, as Radhakrishnan points out:

“Diasporic subjectivity is thus necessarily double: acknowledging the imperatives of an earlier “elsewhere” in an active and critical relationship with the cultural politics of one’s present home, all within the figurality of a reciprocal displacement. “Home” then becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness, as a form of accountability to more than one location.”⁹⁸

A hyphenated identity is a characteristic of the diaspora which forces migrants to choose their loyalties. It is not a state, but a process in which the migrant continually tries to bring together his or her history with his or her present. For this reason, Radhakrishnan suggests that the diasporic self be renamed the ethnic self. He writes:

“Renaming the diasporic self as the ethnic self: “Whereas the term ‘diaspora’ indicates a desire to historicize the moment of departure as a moment of pure rupture both from ‘the natural home’ and ‘the place of residence,’ the

⁹⁷ Bhatia, “Acculturation,” 55.

⁹⁸ R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): xiii-xiv.

ethnic mandate is to live 'within the hyphen' and yet be able to speak. Whereas the pure diasporic objective is to 'blow the hyphen out of the continuum of history,' the ethnic program is to bear historical witness to the agonizing tension between two histories (Benjamin)."⁹⁹

Bhatia's model of the dialogical diasporic self, then, should be amended to reflect the detachment migrants may feel in regards to their country of origin. Here Radhnakrishnan recognizes that it is not just that the diasporic self is multilayered with a multitude of voices interacting but that in choosing one voice over the other one or more voices are rejected. Furthermore Radhakrishnan's rearticulation of the diasporic self to the ethnic self redefines the way a sense of loss exists in diasporic communities. For the ethnic self, the sense of loss they experience is no longer "a moment of rupture from 'the natural home'" but instead the inability to choose a singular identity from which to speak. The tension between two histories is agonizing, because they cannot coexist and yet they must.

It is important, then, to recognize that Indo-Caribbeans arrive in United States with an already hyphenated identity. In America, they are confronted with a larger community of East Indians which they partly accept and partly reject. Physically and religiously, however, East Indians and Indo-Caribbeans are assumed to be part of the same group by outsiders. Hence West Indians find themselves in a position where they must not only defend their hyphenated identity, but also prove their authenticity to each group (East Indians and the larger West Indian community). As Radhakrishnan points out "in the diasporan context in the United States, ethnicity is often forced to

⁹⁹ Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 175-6

take on the discourse of authenticity just to protect and maintain its space and history.”¹⁰⁰ Thus Indo-Caribbeans find themselves engaging in two types of argument. The first is addressed to East Indians who doubt their “Indianess” and the second is proving to outsiders that they are not simply East Indian.

Although the actual temple form has not changed from the Trinidadian form in the U.S., the hyphenated identity of Indo-Caribbeans that is strengthened in America is also reflected in the West Indian temples. West Indian temples continue to function as community centers with the role of the pundit often paralleling that of a priest, and the influence of the Hindutva ideology can clearly be seen in the discourses the pundits give in the temples. In the U.S., however, the Hindutva ideology has merged with that of well-known Hindu figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Sai Baba. The result is less anti-Christian and more of a religious philosophy which exclaims the greatness of Hinduism as a religion that recognizes the validity of all the world’s religions. “Truth is one, but the wise speak of it in many ways,” a sign in one temple claims. I argue that this approach is successful precisely because of hyphenated identity of Indo-Caribbeans. The merging and simultaneously splitting of these worlds within a West Indian temple is only possible because Indo-Caribbeans exist in their tension.

Migration to the United States

Migration to the U.S. from the West Indies began in the early twentieth century as a result of the development of the banana industry by the United Fruit Company.

¹⁰⁰ Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 210.

Ransford Palmer notes that “while banana growing gave new life to the small farmer because the crop could be grown on terrain unsuitable for sugar cane, it also brought the banana boat, which signaled the development of a tourist industry.”¹⁰¹ West Indian immigrants were initially able to enter the United States under the British quota. Most of Indo-Caribbeans that migrated to the United States, however, came after Trinidad’s and Guyana’s independence from Britain and migrated mostly for economic reasons. Economically motivated immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, and Guyana accounted for 67 percent of all Caribbean immigrants in the 1980s.¹⁰² Indo-Guyanese immigrants, in particular, fled Guyana not only for economic reasons, but also to escape the dictatorship of Forbes Burnham who ruled at the same time as Williams in Trinidad.¹⁰³ Jerome Teelucksingh also notes that rise of “Black Power” in the Caribbean drove many Indo-Caribbeans to flee out of fear.¹⁰⁴ One third of all Caribbean immigrants are attributed to four countries: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Guyana – a number more significant when it is calculated as a percentage of each countries’ current populations: 14% for Guyana and 10% of Trinidad. Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Trinidadians largely settled in New York and later in Florida.

In 2002 PNM regained power from UNC in Trinidad due partly to efforts made by the Afro-Caribbean community who accused UNC of supporting racist policies. From 2002 to 2007, however, there was a surge in murders, kidnapping, and robbery on the

¹⁰¹ Ransford Palmer. *Pilgrims From the Sun: West Indian Migration to America*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995): 6.

¹⁰² Palmer, *Pilgrims From the Sun*, 12.

¹⁰³ The treatment of Indians under Burnham’s rule at the same time that Williams ruled Trinidad cemented Indians’ view that no black leader would protect the rights of Indians.

¹⁰⁴ Jerome Teelucksingh, “A Global Diaspora: The Indo-Trinidadian Diaspora in Canada, the United States, and England – 1967 -2007.” 4.2 (2011): 139.

island with the majority of victims being Indo-Trinidadians.¹⁰⁵ As a result, many Indo-Trinidadians left to join family members or establish a new life in the States. According to the 2000 census, there are about 240,000 Guyanese and Trinidadian immigrants living in New York alone.¹⁰⁶ Although it is difficult to estimate how many of those immigrants are Indo-Caribbeans, Natasha Warikoo estimates the number is around 63,000. The Guyanese community is so large in Richmond Hill, Queens that it is often referred to as “Little Guyana” by West Indians. Although I do not have exact numbers for the West Indian population in Florida, most of the West Indians there relocated from New York so the population, while not nearly as large as Queens, is continually growing.

Indo-Caribbean Identity in the United States

Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S. occupy a similar space to that of their early forefathers in Trinidad and Guyana in that reside in a place that they do not quite yet belong and they are battling preconceived notions about their identity. They identify the Caribbean as their “home” and yet they are viewed by many Americans as East Indians, an identity they no longer fully claim. To further complicate matters, they must choose between identifying with the Afro-Caribbeans that they have separate themselves from in the creation of their own identity in the Caribbean or the East Indians whose culture is in many ways foreign to them. Teelucksingh observes the “chameleon syndrome” that Indo-Caribbeans suffer, that is the way in which to

¹⁰⁵ Teelucksingh, “A Global Diaspora,” 141.

¹⁰⁶ Natasha Warikoo, “Gender and Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Indo-Caribbeans.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 28.5 (2005): 808.

outsiders they blend in with Indians from India, is also true for other ethnic minorities such as Afro-Trinidadians who are not easily distinguished from African Americans.¹⁰⁷ While this is true, the larger problem for Indo-Caribbeans is not just that they look like members of the Indian community, but the way they practice their religion is assumed to be the same as well. Hindu Indo-Caribbeans may say all religions are the same and that everyone prays to the same God, but at the same time they express a disinterest in attending East Indian temples and there is little interaction between the two communities. Indo-Caribbeans are in a position in which they are being pulled in opposite directions and, instead of choosing, they exist in that tension choosing both and neither identification. The result is an ever shifting identity that alternates between proving their “Indianess” and shouting their pride for their identity as a West Indian. This has led some scholars such as Lommarsh Roopnarine in her article, “Indian Social Identity in Guyana, Trinidad, and the North American Diaspora” to conclude that Indians in the diaspora:

“are the marginally integrated individuals in and outside of their homeland. There is among them an uncanny sort of cultural confusion. Many could not return to normal life without realizing that they have been shaped by foreign ideas, realizing that their feelings are neither here nor there, or realizing that they are so much the same but yet so different. Their identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at regaining the lost center of gravity. These Indians when asked who they are usually reply that they are simply Indians. Realistically, some of these Indians can be perceived as **‘lost souls’ with no sound identity**” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Teelucksingh, “A Global Diaspora,” 145

¹⁰⁸ Lommarsh Roopnarine. “Indian Social Identity in Guyana, Trinidad, and the North American Diaspora.” Wadabagei. 12.3 (2009): 117.

Such a description attempts to measure the Indo-Caribbean identity by a scale defined by the author and ignores the fact that Indo-Caribbeans identify primarily as being an Indian *from* the West Indies. Roopnarine herself states that Indo-Caribbeans are often “defensive if they are labeled as Black West Indians or South Asians in diasporic communities” and often “make concerted efforts “to educate” Whites as to who they are,” even if they have to “manufacture facts or fables of their homeland to lay claim to identity.” For example, during one of my interviews I asked a participant if she knew what part of India her grandparents were from. Knowing that I was working on a school project but not knowing the answer to the question, she replied “No, but let’s just say they are from Delhi.” I smiled and assured her that there was no need to make up answers, it was okay if she did not know. She, however, insisted that “it was for a school project” and that we had to “make it sound good.” Her answer demonstrates, that although to outsiders the identity Indo-Caribbeans claim seems unfixed, they themselves are sure of what they want to represent. In her article “How Do You Identify (Experiences of an Indo-Caribbean Woman),” Fawzia Ahmad writes:

“When I am asked how I identify, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is that I am of Caribbean heritage. No, I do not forget that I am Indian. I am proud of my Indian ancestry. Women in the South Asian community tell me that I have lost my heritage because I do not speak Indian languages, because my curries are different, because I do not dress the way other Indian women dress and so on. I have not lost my heritage. Yet, I am always made to feel that I am a lost soul. White society believes that Caribbean heritage is a Black heritage. People always look at me with shock and amazement when I state that I am a Caribbean woman. The common response is “you are not Black!” I am left to justify my identity by relaying the oppressive history that Indian people in the Caribbean have faced and how it is that I am really of Caribbean heritage.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Fawzia, Ahmad. “How Do You Identify (Experiences of an Indo-Caribbean Woman).” 29.3. (1994): 39.

Similar to Ahmad, the West Indian Hindus I interviewed emphasized their Caribbean heritage. All of the participants I spoke to responded with “West Indians” when asked about their nationality. A few also specified whether they were Trinidadian or Guyanese. No one I spoke to immediately answered with “Indian” or “South Asian.” If given the choice between saying “Indian” and “American,” the older generation generally chose to say they were Indian while the younger generation would say that they were “American.” Participants alternated between the names – Indian, West Indian, Trinidadian / Guyanese – depending on the context and the audience. Each name, each different facet of their identity, emphasizes a particular relationship. To say that one is Indian, is to distinguish oneself from Afro-Caribbeans. To say that one is West Indian or Trinidadian / Guyanese is to emphasize one’s identification with the Caribbean not with India. Instead of being in a state in “cultural confusion,” then, Indo-Caribbeans embrace their hyphenated, hybrid identity which can result in complex and sometimes contradictory views. In the following section, I will examine the relationship between Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans, and Indo-Caribbeans and East Indians in the specific environment of the U.S.

Relationship with Afro-Caribbeans

Although their history in the Caribbean is marked by the racial tension between the themselves and the Afro-Caribbeans, Indo-Caribbeans have found themselves more likely to join with the larger West Indian community rather than the East Indian

community in the U.S. The younger generation, many of those who were either born in the U.S. or grew up here, express a stronger affinity with other West Indians even if they differ in race rather than with East Indians. One young participant stated that “East Indians are different. Their culture is kinda different,” whereas other West Indians could relate as far as music, food, lifestyles, etc. These younger Indo-Caribbeans do not have memories of the rule of Williams/Burham effecting their relationships with the larger West Indian community. For them, people from the Caribbean regardless of their race are like them in that these other West Indians talk the same, eat similar food, listen to reggae, calypso, and chutney, and go to Carnival. Indo-Caribbeans’ wide participation in Carnival, a celebration before Lent, demonstrates their willingness to come together with other West Indians rather than maintain a completely separate community. Palmer notes that “although the West Indian carnival is largely Trinidadian in origin, in America it has become truly West Indian as it embraces those from other islands.”¹¹⁰ The older generation may not participate in as large of a degree as the younger generation, but they display their Trinidadian and Guyanese flags proudly, and every year there is a Guyana reunion for Guyanese immigrants to connect in Florida and New York.

The tensions between Blacks and Indians in the Caribbean, however, has transitioned in some forms to America. Although Trinidad is now comprised of 40% Indians and 37% Blacks,¹¹¹ many Indo-Trinidadians still argue that Trinidad’s Indian culture is being unfairly represented on a national scale which causes those outside the country to still view it as a predominantly Black country. Indo-Caribbeans, particularly

¹¹⁰ Palmer, *Pilgrims from the Sun*, 21.

¹¹¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/td.html>

Indo-Guyanese who were greatly affected by Burnham's rule in Guyana, will openly make anti-Black comments and mixed race marriages are still very taboo within the Indo-Caribbean community. Regardless of the term that they use to identify themselves, then, Indo-Caribbeans are united by the old colonial stereotypes still inform their views. As in Trinidad, they remain hesitant to have Blacks represent them and insist on maintaining barriers. Thus, as Paul Bramdat concludes in his study of Indo-Caribbeans in Canada, "the problem of 'there' and 'then' continues to inform the way participants [...] think of their 'here' and 'now'."¹¹²

The Indo-Caribbean identity which partly embodies this tension between the Indian and Afro communities plays out in interesting ways in the second and third generation Indo-Caribbeans living in the U.S. These generations of West Indians are keenly aware of the pull between identities but, as Natasta Warikoo notes in her study on Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S., for males associating with Black culture instead of Indian culture has become important to their image as "cool." Especially after 9/11, West Indians found themselves distancing more and more away from associations with East Indians and emphasizing Hinduism and the West Indies as part of their identity. Even though, second and third generation Indo-Caribbeans may embrace Blacks culture as far as music and fashion, they are still careful to claim themselves as separate or different from Afro-Caribbeans. One youth in Warikoo's study demonstrates this in her statement:

¹¹² Paul Bramdat, "Religion, Race, and Remembering: Indo-Caribbean Christians in Canada." *Journal of American Academy of Religion*. 79.2. (2010): 330

"I have a lot of black Guyanese in my school and, they think that like, you know, we both eat the same food and stuff like that, and we're from the same place, and you know. I try to...I kind of make it clear thought that I'm Indian and...I don't say it in a rude way, though. I'm just like, "Yeah, you're kind of different."¹¹³

So the very things that Indo-Caribbeans point to in order to demonstrate the commonalities between themselves and the larger West Indian community are the things that are easily dismissed when they are emphasizing the ways in which they remain different from Afro-Caribbeans.

Relationship with East Indians and India

They [East Indians] look down on us, but it is THEY who don't have any culture. – M.

The relationship between the Indo-Caribbeans and the South Asian communities in the U.S. is similar to that of the relationship between Indo-Caribbeans and the larger West Indian community in that it is doubled. On the one hand there have been efforts made on both sides to reach out to one another, at least on a more global level but, on the other hand neither community is willing to be represented with a united voice. Hence it is necessary to utilize the distinctions Radhakrishnan makes when describing diasporic Hindu communities. Radhakrishnan emphasizes the difference between (1) "cultivating "Indianess" rather than "'being Indian' in some natural, self-evident way,"¹¹⁴ (2) wanting "information about and knowledge of India and [having] an emotional

¹¹³ Warikoo, "Gender and Ethnic Identity," 812.

¹¹⁴ Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 207

investment in India.”¹¹⁵ It is important to note that while Radhakrishnan uses these distinctions to characterize groups, in the West Indian case there are no clear divisions. West Indians “cultivate Indianess” by watching Bollywood movies, encouraging youths to learn dances from the films as well as classical Indian dance forms, and teaching Hindi and/or how to play classical Indian instruments. Indo-Caribbeans, though, will also quickly point out that they are Indian by birth if an East Indian tries to deny them that right. One respondent remarked that: “When a person asks me if I’m Indian, I tell them that I’m Guyanese. When an Indian person tries to tell me I’m not Indian, I tell them yes I am Indian – my forefathers are from there!” For this participant, it was important to correct East Indians who tried to deny his roots. His response, though, was in reaction to an East Indian who was not just saying that he was not Indian, but implying that he was inferior because he was from the Caribbean not India. It is when confronted by East Indians who question the authenticity of their culture, then, that Indo-Caribbeans feel particularly strong about asserting their “Indianess.”

As a result of their desire to defend and authenticate their identity and religion, Indo-Caribbeans often cite their own practices as superior to those of East Indians. One youth describe to me the an experience she had at an Indian temple with a man who claimed that people from the Caribbean have no culture, because “they have lost their language and don’t understand much about Hinduism.” She retells the experience:

“He pointed to an illustration carved into wall next to the Shiva murti and asked me what story it was from. The scene looked familiar but I couldn’t remember the details. So I didn’t answer and he nodded, accepting it as proof that West Indians had ‘no culture’ as he stated. I remember being

¹¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 209.

really embarrassed. We returned to the temple for a special service they were having later, I was wearing a shalwar and even covered my head. But when we went inside people were wearing jeans and t-shirt, girls were in sweats – I even saw her underwear when she bent over! People just went in and out, everyone was talking, children were running around and screaming. *We have no culture? They're the ones with no culture!*

Dressing in the shalwars and saris for the specific purpose of going to temple (Indo-Caribbeans normally do not wear those types of clothing during everyday activities), and the more organized service structure were evidence in her mind of the superior practices of West Indians Hindus. Another participant claimed that Indians were more “naïve,” because they “have temples with rats and worship snakes.” Having never been to India, his knowledge of the country came solely from TV and pop culture, but it was enough to reaffirm his belief that the religious practices of West Indian Hindus were more enlightened than that of East Indians.

Evidence of the break between the Indo-Caribbeans and East Indians can also be clearly seen in the music that begins to emerge from Indian artists in the Caribbean. Indians musicians have had particular success in the West Indies by blending Bollywood songs with African beats, reggae sounds, and Indian musical instruments – a genre referred to as “chutney.” The blending of all these elements not only demonstrates the integration of Indo-Caribbeans into the larger West Indian society, but it also illustrates the ways in which Indo-Caribbeans are both embracing and rejecting the Indian side of their hyphenated identity. In Rikki Jai’s song “Sumintra,” Rikki Jai, a popular Chutney artist, talks about trying to attract the attention of a girl by playing her music from Bollywood films. The girl, however, is not impressed, preferring soca music and charging Rikki Jai for being racist because he did not present her with the music of

Scrunter or Bally, two Afro-Caribbean soca artists. She identifies as being “Trinbagonian” and dismisses Rikki Jai’s preference for only Indian music as a political tool.

*“Sumintra judge me for being racist
And tell meh doh take dem chance with she
Doh let meh catch you in dat foolishness
Trying to reach the Indian in me*

*Like you into politics
Boy you comin pon that tricks
Boy I'm Trinbagonian
I like soca action
Take your Mohammed Rafi
Bring me Scrunter or Bally
Hold the then you be talkin to me,
Yes, Rikki, she say”¹¹⁶*

Rikki Jai and other Indo-Caribbean artists, then, view the emphasis on Indian culture to be a political tool which ignores the ways in which Indian culture on the island has blended with Afro-Caribbean culture. The modern Indo-Caribbean, according to Rikki Jai, sees one’s “Indianess” as remaining in the background while one’s West Indian pride comes to the forefront.

The participants I interviewed, however, were not always negative in regards to India and Indians. Some expressed a desire to go to India not because they felt any special connection to the country, but because they wished to see the religious sites. This desire reflects Radhakrishnan’s distinction between wanting knowledge of India versus having an emotional connection with the country. This wish to see the

¹¹⁶ Rikki Jai, “Sumintra,” 1989.

pilgrimage sites of India has motivated a few West Indians temples to organize religious trips to India in which members can visit the Ganges, Krishna's birthplace, and other sacred places. Other Indo-Caribbeans claimed that while they have no desire to travel to India even to experience the pilgrimage sites, they still viewed India to as a "spiritual place" that deserves their admiration.

In recent years, the Indian government has expressed an interest in creating a global Indian community and identity, extending dual citizenship to those Indians whose forefathers were indentured laborers. Roopnarine claims that:

"The idea of granting dual citizenship to overseas Indians is intended to renew the emotional bonds that were lost and to reestablish cultural and spirit links with India. The Indian government believes that all Indians constitute the global Indian family and efforts are skewed in that direction to promote universal blood brotherhood, especially in former indentured communities where there appears to be widespread nostalgia for India."¹¹⁷

By offering dual citizenship, the Indian government is once again reclaiming those migrants of the diaspora as "Indian overseas." Only a few of the participants I spoke to had knowledge of the offer of dual citizenship and only one was interested in pursuing that citizenship. The one participant who desired Indian citizenship was an older gentleman who remembered fondly his father's love for India. Becoming an Indian citizen then had more to do with honoring his father's memory than a true desire to officially proclaim his heritage. In addition to providing dual citizenship, the Indian government has once again taken an active interest in the welfare of anyone of Indian origin. The Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) has been advocating

¹¹⁷ Roopnarine, "Indian Social Identity," 115.

for the creation of a global Indian identity since it was founded in 1989 at the First Global Convention of People of Indian Origin in New York.¹¹⁸ Each country in the diaspora has a list of demands and expectations that the country requires from India.

Trinidad's list includes the following¹¹⁹:

- 1) More trade opportunities for Indo-Trinidadians to do business with India
- 2) Award scholarships to study in India. This should cover music, dance, and also professional courses.
- 3) Training of local pundits in the performance of Vedic rites, religious ceremonies, marriage functions, etc.
- 4) Establishment of a permanent Cultural Center in Trinidad
- 5) A separate ministry in the Government of India to deal with the diaspora
- 6) Exchange of students between Indian universities and the University of the West Indies

The motivation behind this organization as well as conferences such as the Indian Diaspora Conferences organized by the University of the West Indies is to build a relationship between diasporic communities and India so that together they can battle issues that have affected Indians such as ethnic discrimination.¹²⁰ While this may be taking place at a national level in Trinidad and in the United States, none of the participants I spoke to were informed of the organization. Hence the division between the Indo-Caribbean and East Indian communities has often meant that Indo-Caribbeans are completely unaware of these kinds of initiatives.

West Indian Temples in the United States

¹¹⁸ <http://www.gopio.net/>

¹¹⁹ For a complete list, including a separate list for Guyana visit: <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>

¹²⁰ Roopnarine, "Indian Social Identity," 115.

“When the priest read and interprets the holy books, it creates one of 3 responses in my mind. If the interpretation is inspiring, then I sit and enjoy the bliss of it. If the interpretation is controversial, then it motivates me to research the information myself in the scriptures or create a group discussion about it. If the interpretation is mediocre, then I draw on my knowledge of the scriptures to supplement it. In all three instances, I benefit because it allows me to grow spiritually.”

– D. (answering why is going to temple important)

There are approximately eight West Indian temples in the greater Orlando area and twice as many in Queens, NY. Each one began as simple house until enough money was collected to build a more elaborate structure. New York temples are generally more elaborate since it has a larger and more established the West Indian community. All of the temples continue to follow the pattern of the Trinidadian temple form, no matter the size or stage of construction. There are three main areas – a sitting area, a puja area, and an altar where the murtis are located. Additionally there may be a place for the pundit to sit to deliver his discourse and a separate eating area. The seating area may contain chairs in the back for the elderly, but the majority of the space is covered with sheets on which devotees sit and face the altar. The altar is often slightly raised, making it visible to those in the back, and the puja area is either just before this altar or on the altar itself. The murtis include at the very least: Ganesh, Saraswati, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, Durga, Kali, Surya Narayan, Ram, Sita, Hanuman, and the Shiva Lingham – all white marble (except for Kali) and dressed in brightly colored dhotis and saris. Indo-Caribbeans do not distinguish between Shivaites and Vaishnavites and all of the murtis are worshipped equally. Interestingly, the murtis usually come from India and even stores that sell murtis in New York and Florida advertise that the marble from

which the murtis are made comes from India. Devotees state that having the murtis made of marble brought from India makes the murtis more sacred.



Figure 4: Typical altar and puja area

The pundit and those performing puja sit in a small area where there are often smaller murtis from them to worship. Puja consists of the pundit saying a mantra in Sanskrit to one deity and then instructing those seated in the audience to sing an accompanying song to that deity. Anyone is welcomed to sing, although most temples have a group of people who are accustomed to performing the majority of the songs. In many of the temples, it is the youths who are encouraged to sing and play the musical instruments. The songs are sung in Hindi even though almost no one in the temple speaks or understands Hindi. This does not stop everyone from singing along with familiar songs that they have heard over and over again. People often hold bhajan (devotional songs) books, many of which are written by West Indians pundits, that offer translations. When the song is finished, the pundit moves to recite a mantra to the next

deity. A song to this deity is then sung. This process continues until all of the previously mentioned deities are worshiped. Devotees are also encouraged to offer any fruits and sweets they have brought with them to the murtis.



Figure 5: Devotees surround the puja area to pay homage to the deities

After about 30 minutes of performing puja the pundit will give his discourse. As noted previously, these discourses are often taken from the Ramayana although pundits do personalize their discourses depending on the events taking place. During Shivaratri, for example, pundits may retell the story of the creation of the Shiva Lingham.

Discourses, much like the Sunday morning services one may find at a Christian church, consist of either reading a few lines or telling a story from the text, explaining the verses, and relating them to the everyday life of the devotee. Afterwards “havan,” or the offering of food and water to the fire, is performed and everyone stands for aarti.

Devotees are encouraged to perform aarti and, in smaller congregations, songs are sung until everyone is finished. During aarti worshippers touch the feet of the murtis, offer flowers and bow their head in reverence. They also go into the audience and aarti the

pundit, their parents, the elderly, and any other person they deem important. Puja officially ends when the pundit recites the final prayers with everyone joining in. When puja is over, announcements are made about upcoming events and people begin to socialize. Aarti is passed around so people can take their blessings and offer the temple a donation. Prasad is handed out and devotees go into the eating area where food has been prepared by members of the temple. The pundit usually accompanies everyone into the eating area and joins in the socializing. While people are eating, members of the temple will clean the altar of the money and offerings made, fold sheets, and tidy up the temple. Additionally, some temples may have classes after services. These classes are often musical in nature – tabla and singing – though some temples offer Hindi and yoga classes as well.

As this description demonstrates, West Indians temples encourage collective rather than individual worship. The purpose in attending temple, members state, is to learn together and from each other. Nothing is off limits to the lay follower – they may touch the murtis, perform puja, or read the sacred texts. Almost all of the temples I attended had youth groups that participated heavily in the services and were often responsible for putting out monthly newsletters. These newsletters usually contained the following: a message from the resident pundit, articles from the youths which tackled such issues as explaining the symbolism of the various deities and the origins of festivals such as Diwali and Phagwah, financial / building updates, and articles which offer some facts about Hinduism. It is in these latter articles that one can see the influence of Hindu reform movements as well as the emphasis on spirituality

encouraged by guru movements. The merging of these two movements is most evident in articles which go to great lengths to liken Hinduism to “American” values. Quoting Philip Goldberg, the author of *American Veda*:

“The fundamental features of Hinduism are remarkably compatible with American values as such freedom of choice and evidence-based pragmatism. Hinduism is more experience-based than belief-based, emphasizing spiritual practice over dogma; it is more inner-directed than outer-directed, encouraging individual to choose their own paths; and it is pluralistic and non-competitive by nature, acknowledging the validity of all roads to the Sacred. Those qualities make what appears on the surface to be foreign and strange rather easy to integrate into the fabric of American life.”

By including this quote in the newsletter the temple organization presents Hinduism as a world religion and praises its tolerance. It simultaneously glorifies Hinduism even as it claims that all religions are equal. By highlighting these features as essential characteristics of Hinduism, West Indian Hindus are following in the path of Hindu reform movements. This emphasis on “spiritual practice” and pluralism, however, are more in line with the guru movements like Sathya Sai Baba. Another newsletter, printed on Valentine’s Day, echoes the same sentiment of equality and pluralism by quoting Vivekananda:

“It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the soul of the universe,” he wrote, explaining that witnessing pure consciousness, or truth, in every being, is the essence of the Vedas, the most voluminous and significant of the Hindu scriptures. Look beyond differences in gender, caste, and religion, he would demand, to behold the same divinity shining forth in every being. As one of his American disciples said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself, because your neighbor is your self.”

Notice the last sentence which draws directly from Christianity. Newsletters and discourses given in temples often compare religions, borrowing stories without context.

In both of these cases, Hinduism is illustrated as a global religion, not just a religion of India, as well as a tolerant religion. The Vedas are cited to be its central text and Hinduism is presented as religion that is completely unified rather than containing a multitude of different practices.

Punditization vs. Brahminization

All pundits are bandits. – K.

In the last century, the role of the pundit has steadily increased beyond the performance of pujas. It is the pundit's ever expanding role that one can see the second important influence of Christianity on West Indian Hinduism. In her article on the roles of pundit, Indira Bolan writes that pundit must perform as an astrologer, advisor, performer of rituals, military guide as well as a spiritual guide.¹²¹ Specifically, she argues that the pundit must act as the voice for the Hindu community at the national level:

“The pundit, a cultural specialist, has a pivotal role to play for the Hindu community. However, this role cannot be limited to the marginal role now perceived for the pundit by himself, by the Hindu community or by the wider population. At the very minimum, pundits, as the custodians of Hindu philosophy must begin to articulate clearly a Hindu perspective on social, economic and political issues, enlightening the national community on interests of Hindus. Being the custodian, the caretaker of Hinduism, the pundit's role must include the clarifying of the misconceptions that exist in the wider society about Hinduism.”¹²²

¹²¹ Indira Bolan, "Cross Cultural Bridges in Multi-Ethnic Societies: The Role of the Pundit." *Caribbean Quarterly*. 40.3/4 (1994): 54-5

¹²² Bolan, "Cross Cultural Bridges," 57-8.

Although Brahminism is still considered to be a necessary qualification of a pundit by most Indo-Caribbeans, because many people are unaware of the caste of their forefathers, the status of a particular person cannot always be validated thereby leading to the increase in non-Brahmin pundits. The work of pundits is still family dominated in that the knowledge is passed down from father to son, but pundits will take on a student if he expresses the desire to learn the sacred texts and perform all the necessary tasks. A large number pundits maintain separate jobs and do not depend on the payments received for doing pujas as their only income. There are several popular pundits, however, who are able to rely solely on their position as a pundit to make money. These pundits are popular usually because they sing beautifully or because they explain the texts in an entertaining and stimulating way. West Indians pundits record musical cds and sell bhajan books, and some even have a part time radio segment where they offer religious discourses. Many pundits have a following the way that a particular reverend at a church might have and several of the temples I attended were constructed because of the resident pundit's desire to have his own temple.



Figure 6: Before the pundit gives his discourse, devotees place a garland of flowers (mala) around his neck and perform aarti, bowing to his feet as well as any sacred texts that is placed before him.

It is customary for devotees to honor the pundit not as the holder of sacred knowledge, but the translator who is able to reveal the hidden meaning within the texts. Thus in many ways, pundits remain at the core of the West Indian Hindu community.

The increased power of the pundit has led many Indo-Caribbeans, however, to become suspicious and dismiss them as “bandits” who are just interested in making money. Devotees are expected to pay pundits for performing pujas at their homes and for the flight and stay of the pundit if he is brought from another state or from the Caribbean. Many complain that some pundits expect more money than they should for these services and do very little to deserve the amount they charge. So on the one hand, pundits are viewed as an essential part of the Hindu community and temples but, on the other hand, West Indian Hindus are wary of their power. Since devotees are encouraged to read the scriptures and perform pujas for themselves, it seems that the only reason pundits are able to maintain their status is because of tradition and through their musical and storytelling abilities.

CONCLUSION

In their article, “The Temple as a Symbol of Hindu Identity in America?,” Surinder Bhardwaj and Madhusudana Rao identify several characteristics of Hinduism in America:

“the family altar, interfamily religious meetings, prayer house and community centers, gurus, and preachers invited from India, increased linkages with sacred centers in India, forging new links with pre-1965 non-iconic Hindu philosophical centers, linking with predominantly ‘white’

Hindus, encouraging youth and adult religious camps and retreats, and consecrating new authentic Hindu iconic (theistic) temples.”¹²³

Bhardwaj and Rao argue that these features develop in Hinduism in America, because East Indian immigrants are forced to reinterpret their religion in a new environment in which Christianity is prevalent. They state further:

“In the very process of serving as a symbol of Hindu regrouping, the temple’s role has transformed from just a place of worship to a broader cultural institution. [...] Teaching Indian languages, dance, and culture to children has become virtually a universal practice. The temples sponsor artists from India, organize major commemorative events, celebrate Indian festivals, organize youth camps, and sponsor educational activities. More recently the temples have started to participate in a broader spectrum of community activities such as humanitarian services [...]. In this respect the Hindu temple has become more like a Christian church rather than remaining only a center of worship. This is Hindu temples of both northern and southern Indian cultural traditions. Implications of this model are unlikely to be limited to America; inevitably there will be some transference of this idea back to the Indian cultural hearth.”¹²⁴

Although Bhardwaj and Rao studied East Indian communities and not West Indian Hindus, the features they cite are similar to those mentioned in this thesis as characteristics of West Indian Hinduism. There are several differences, of course, which includes the mixing of the North and South Indian styles of the temple design and construction¹²⁵ and more established contact with India. Nevertheless, the electing of officials and the emphasis on scheduling and orderly services are features both communities share. Hence East Indian Hindus are responding to the American context in similar ways to that of the East Indian laborers in the Caribbean. Once again, it is

¹²³ Surinder Bhardwaj and Madhusudana Rao, “The Temple as a Symbol of Hindu Identity in America?” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 17:2 (1998): 126.

¹²⁴ Bhardwaj and Rao, “The Temple as a Symbol,” 142.

¹²⁵ Bhardwaj and Rao, “The Temple as a Symbol,” 127.

Christianity that seems to be having an impact on the changes made in temples. Only time will tell if the transformations in East Indian Hinduism will continue to follow the same path as that of Hinduism in the Caribbean. I would argue, though, that the West Indian case demonstrates that the development of a religion in any new context is always complicated by a variety of factors – political, social, and religious. With this in mind, it is unlikely that the changes made by East Indians will continue to parallel those made by West Indians.

Even if the religious practices of East Indian Hindus in America become identical to West Indian practices, however, it is doubtful that the two communities will unite and be represented by a single voice. After all, it is not just the performance of Hinduism in temples which separate these two communities, but their identities differ as well. West Indians, even in the younger generations, determinedly cling to their Caribbean heritage as an essential part of their identity. To give up that element of their identity would be to ignore a large part of their history. For this reason, it is necessary to acknowledge West Indian Hindus as distinct group with their own religious practices and concerns. Although this seems to be against the desire of Hindu nationalist groups, as is obvious from their attempts to create a global Hindu identity, the West Indian Hinduism case demonstrates the resistance of diasporic Hindus to deny differences between themselves and East Indians. Thus in the same way that scholars speak of Christianities and Islams, we must make a concentrated effort to also refer to Hinduisms.

APPENDIX I

Figure 7-9: Typical Altars





Figure 10: This murti captures the moment in which Hanuman rips his heart open to show the place in which Rama and Sita resides.



Figure 11: Devotees are encouraged to come up and participate in worship even if they are not the ones performing puja that day.



Figure 12: Devotees sit in the raised stage that also contains the puja area, the altar, and a seat for the pundit.



Figure 13: Pundits that can sing have become so popular, it is common to see pundits sitting with a harmonium while officiating puja. This allows them to sing during interludes as well as during their discourse.



Figure 14: Youths often play musical instruments. In this photo, youths play tablas and while a devotee sings.

Figure 15: In all of the temples I visited, devotees were encourage to come up to the murtis and pray. There were no restrictions, but it was understood that devotees should be touching the murtis if they ate meat that day, did not shower, or females were menstruating.



Figure 16: Devotees line up to make offerings of fruit and perform aarti.



Figure 17-18: While pundits might be there to direct worship, they usually allow devotees to make their own offerings.





Figure 19: Example of puja area with smaller murtis



Figure 20: Before the discourse begins, devotees aarti the pundit as well as the scriptures

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