# Religion in its Diaspora:
The Adaptations of Hinduism in the Indo-Caribbean

Kahlia Brown
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

Through the forced migration of various peoples by colonial powers, the Caribbean has become a melting pot of a wide array of races, cultures, and religions. However, the existence of Hinduism in the Caribbean is often unknown to those outside of the Caribbean and its diaspora, and is sometimes overlooked within the region. Much like other social, cultural and religious artefacts in the region, Hinduism in the Caribbean has became distinct from its origins, through a unique process of 'creolization'. This essay seeks to contextualize Hinduism in the Caribbean from the 19th century onward, considering factors that have led to the evolution of Caribbean Hinduism in Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago, while acknowledging the dangers of using this evolution to define the religion as a whole.
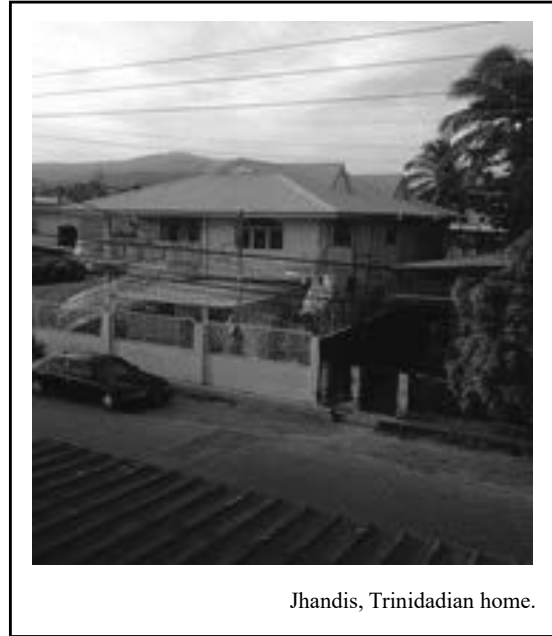
Jhandis, Trinidadian home.

Hinduism is not a religion that originated from the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, nor is it a religion that emerged through the spirituality of those formerly enslaved. When slavery was abolished by the British in 1807[1], the southernmost colonies of Britain soon required a new source of labour. The solution to the labour shortage was indentureship and the British looked to their then colony of India to fill this role. By the 20th century hundreds of thousands of Indians occupied what is how Guyana, and Trinidad,[2] with some also ending up in neighbouring colonies such as Suriname. Through this process, Hinduism was brought to the Caribbean by practicing Hindus indentured laborers who formed around eighty-five percent of those who migrated to the region.[3] Indian indentureship, though essentially serving the same purpose as slavery, differed in many ways. Labourers were typically given ten-year contracts at the end of which, some would receive passage back to India, land, or other currency. The largest difference in regard to slavery was the ability to retain culture. This meant that they were able to keep their names (although often misspelled by the British who documented them, and many chose to change their names to pretend that they were of a higher caste), their culture, and their religion. Regardless of efforts to 're-caste' themselves, it is estimated that nearly seventy percent of Caribbean indentured labourers were, artisans, agriculturalists, or of low caste.[4]

Early Years

In Guyana and Trinidad, Indian indentured labourers first arrived in 1838 and 1845 respectively. Upon arrival, planters dictated the lives of indentured Indians and limited their mobility, preventing opportunities to congregate with Hindus from different plantations or villages. While planters tolerated much of the Indian culture, for example, allowing some religious rites and small shrines, "one practice in which a devotee would pierce various point of his flesh with hooks and swing by them from a pole [...]proved too 'barbaric' for the white colonists, and hook-swinging rites were banned in British Guiana by 1853." This practice, along with other colonially defined barbaric practices such as fire walking and animal sacrifice, were suppressed by planters. Although a few would re-emerge once the Hindu's gained more autonomy. As a result, there is very little documentation or evidence of large-scale religious demonstrations until the 1870's[5] Due to their stringent contractual obligations, it took some time before Hindus were either given land or able to accumulate enough wealth to purchase a plot. Once they had the means, Hindus began practicing the rituals they brought with them. Most prominently, evidence of large-scale Hindu practices can be

---

[1] Brown, K. (2020). A Brief History of Race, Politics and Division in Trinidad and Guyana. Caribbean Quilt, 5, 45.
    Khitanya Petgrave. "Equality in Education? A Study of Jamaican Schools under Michael Manley, 1972—80."
[2] Brown, K, 45.
[3] Van der Veer, P., & Vertovec, S. (1991). Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion. Ethnology, 30(2), 149-166. doi:10.2307/3773407. 151.
[4] Van der Veer, P., & Vertovec, S., 151.
[5] Van der Veer, P., & Vertovec, S., 151.

observed through their jhandis and puja (prayer). Jhandis are colourful consecrated flags on long bamboo sticks, placed on the north side of one's property or home (See figure 1). The jhandis and puja that accompanied them were meant to signify the purification of a new home, similar in principle to the act of sage cleansing. The Hindus, of course, did not own homes or property upon their immediate arrival and this practice did not become widespread until they had homes of their own to purify. This practice symbolized the intent of Hindus to make countries such as Trinidad and Guyana their permanent homes, solidifying their contribution to the culture.

Caste, Class and Geography

Caste and class were synonymous in India and people of a shared caste generally lived amongst one another and married one another. Marrying outside of one's caste was frowned upon. However, it is important to note that caste was not recognized by the planters. As a result, indentured Indians had no choice but to work alongside people from different regions and castes. That being said, many people who migrated to the Caribbean from regions where the British would recruit them, often shared the same caste, and in turn, the same practices. Due to the caste/class and shared geographic origin of many of these Hindus. The rituals and other religious practices in the Caribbean differ greatly from those in India as they represent the interests and sentiments of a people forged by a different way of life, and caste demographics were unequally represented. People from different castes/areas worshipped different gods. They brought the practices and rituals they already knew. The Brahmin caste evidently looked down on the rituals and practices indentured Indian's took to the Caribbean. Since the high priest Brahmin caste generally did not need to seek opportunities in a foreign land due to their high status, the lower caste migrants in the Caribbean were tasked with establishing religious practices. Thus, leading to some aspects of the religion being overrepresented, altered, or unseen in the Caribbean. This fact is again represented by jhandis, a practice that is occasionally observed near places of worship in Northern India. Many of the migrant Hindus were of Northern Indian origin where the jhandis were, and are still are, placed beside or near to shrines at which to pray. In a foreign land with no Hindu temples, they created their own places of worship within their homes.

The indentured Indians, while being from Northern India, were also predominantly male. Hanuman, a Hindu god associated with overcoming adversity, found popularity amongst the single Hindu men, and so, the jhandis were often dedicated to him[6] There were other castes and religious practices in the early years, but over the years colonial powers influenced the Indians as a whole in Caribbean to form close knit communities, isolating themselves from the African-creole population that predated their arrival. This led to a more hegemonic form of Hinduism (influenced by the predominantly Northern-Indians) founded in the shared experiences of this diasporic community.

---

[6] Rampersad, I. (2013). Hinduism in the Caribbean. Contemporary Hinduism, 59.

In order to be united, the caste system that plays such a huge role in India, was set aside in favour of a united front. The cultural isolation of indentured Indians had many adverse effects that are still seen in the racially divided countries of Trinidad and Guyana, however it also led to the preservation of Indian culture and the Hindu religion which can be observed through the structures erected.

As noted above, indentured Indians did not necessarily have the luxury of discriminating against one another based on caste, and this resulted in a more hegemonic form of Hinduism, distinct from that of India. Hinduism for them represented a shared culture, today most Indians in the Caribbean do not define themselves based on what region their ancestors migrated from, or what caste their family originally was. This sense of community and the wealth they were able to accumulate in a foreign land allowed Indians to pool resources, giving them the ability to manifest their religion through increasingly physical ways, while unifying in solidarity with one another. Proof of this can be seen in the history of the Sewdass Sadhu's Temple in the Sea, a now famous monument on the island of Trinidad. The temple was originally erected by Sadhu, an indentured labourer, after his expenses associated with returning to India to pray at temples became too much.

In the 1940's, Sadhu constructed a temple on the sugar plantation to which he was indentured. Upon the temple's completion, the plantation wanted it taken down; however, the demolition of a sacred temples would be sacrilegious to any Hindu. Sadhu refused to demolish the temple, as did every other Indian. The temple was demolished by Englishmen instead, Sadhu was fined and jailed. However, some believe divine intervention was at play and within months, the two Englishmen responsible for the demolition died in unforeseen circumstances.[7] This incident was an act of solidarity on the part of the Hindu's. Despite what differences they may have had in India, Trinidad was no place to be divided. The temple represented the beliefs of every Hindu, not a select a few from the same region or caste. This demonstrates the extent to which Caribbean Hinduism had solidified itself as a distinct diasporic form.

Despite the fact that Hindu's in the Caribbean seemed to have things under control for the most part, the aforementioned Brahmins felt the need to intervene in the mid 20th century as they felt that their caste was not well represented. This was a problem as it was traditionally their role to pass on and educate others on religious matters. They felt that this diasporic group, now growing increasingly larger, lacked organization and guidance provided by the Brahmins in India. Hinduism in the Caribbean had also been influenced by its surroundings. It is likely that the Brahmins of India feared the creolization of a traditionally hierarchical and religion. This intervention by the Brahmin missionaries of India led to a shift in the religious composition. The Caribbean Hindu's who formerly did not have the option to be divided, now found themselves divided by a previously small group of people.

---

[7] Unknown Author . "History," April 4, 2016. https://templeinthesea.wordpress.com/about/. .

The Brahmins, staying true to their traditions, believed that only the Indians who had accumulated wealth, could assume their role in the Caribbean. This resulted in groups of Hindus with wealth gaining greater religious standing and power. This power led to the establishments of political parties in Trinidad and Guyana that were based on their now interchangeable religious/ethnic identity.

Social and Cultural Impact

By the mid 20th century Hinduism was firmly grounded in the Caribbean. It is during this time that the social and cultural impacts of Hinduism are formed. The newly appointed Caribbean Brahmins worked hard to have Hinduism formally recognized in Trinidad and Guyana. Their efforts are seen today through the recognition of Hindu holidays along with Christian ones as public holidays.[8] Trinidad, for example, now ranks fifth on the list of countries with the most public holidays due to this dual recognition. Hindus were also able to establish schools and temples that still exist today.[9] These actions led to the further unification of the religion's followers, on a much larger scale than it had existed before. The impacts were not all positive, however with race-based Hindus political parties gaining increased influence.

As previously mentioned, planters kept their indentured-Indians isolated together in villages, estates or plantations, which led to cultural preservation and community, but this created tensions with the led to cultural preservation and community, but this created tensions with the Afro-Caribbean population. This was more than likely done purposefully to easily control and manipulate Indians and to prevent solidarity between the formerly enslaved and the indentured. The colonial divide continued with the Hindu based parties directly opposing Afro-Caribbean ones. The Hindu based parties represented the interests of the Hindu diaspora who were able to amass much more wealth because they were compensated for their labour. This was leveraged by the Brahmin intervention which supported wealthy Hindus in acquiring enough power and sway within their community to participate on a larger political scale, in turn contributing to the already existing racial tensions that persist today.

As noted above, the social-political impacts of Hinduism in the Caribbean are multifaceted and are the source of numerous debates particularly due to its correlation with ethnicity, but the cultural impacts may be more inspiring. One example is the impact of Hindus music including the songs sung while honouring or showing devotion to their gods, or songs that would be sung to celebrate marriage or the birth of a child.[10] Traditionally, these songs were passed down orally by women and were in their native tongue. These religious songs were accompanied by various traditional dances. For years, these songs remained exclusive to Hindus as they were specific to their religion because they were sung in Hindi.

[8] Sheth, Khushboo. "Countries With The Most Public Holidays." WorldAtlas. WorldAtlas, October 1, 2018. https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-most-public-holidays.html.
[9] Van der Veer, P., & Vertovec, S. (1991). Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion. Ethnology, 30(2), 149-166. doi:10.2307/3773407. 138.
[10] Ramnarine, T. K. (1996). "Indian" music in the diaspora: Case studies of "chutney" in Trinidad and in London. British Journal of Ethnomusicology, 5(1), 134-135.

The singer Dropati from Suriname, who is well known for her song Manikdhar Jhabeeya (Lawa), is one voice that can be heard at almost any Hindu wedding in the Caribbean. While singing entirely in Hindi, Dropati can be credited with paving the way for future chutney artists after her initial album release in 1958.[11]

Chutney forms a critical example of the creolization of Indo-Caribbean culture. During the 1980's – decades since indentureship ended in 1917 and several years since Hinduism had been formally recognized – Hindus made a large-scale trans-cultural contribution: Chutney. Chutney is a traditional Indian condiment but in the context of Caribbean culture chutney, is the product of the creolization of Hindu religious song. Well-known Chutney music is a melange of these Hindu traditions, and creole calypso. Similar to calypso, chutney, began as a form of social and political commentary. Chutney music is sung in English (although many sometimes incorporate words or phrases in Hindi), making it accessible to those outside of the Hindu community to take part in and enjoy and reflects the fact that most Indo-Caribbean people today do not speak any Indian language.[12]A great example of this cultural and musical syncretism is Drupatee Ramgoonai, the first female Chutney artist in Trinidad to experience nationwide success with the single "Chatnee Soca." In it, Ramgoonai describes her experience of leaving her Indian village and dancing to soca, a musical genre derived from the creole calypso, then creating her own

version of this Chatnee (chutney) Soca.

Today popular chutney music has little to no religious ties. Songs are usually stories about Indo-Caribbean people but are identified by their distinctly Indian tone that originated from the Hindu songs. The dances associated with the music also changed. For example, in the video for the 1996 hit, Chutney Bacchanal by Chris Garcia can be seen dancing shirtless with women in traditional Hindu garb. Where this differs from traditional Hindu culture is not only in Garcia's attire, but the dance moves that can be described as whining and involves much more physical contact than would ever be appropriate in mainstream Indian Hinduism. By this point, Caribbean Hindu traditions and culture had drifted far from its ancestral plane despite Brahmin intervention.

Conclusion

Caribbean Hinduism is a religion that resembles Indian Hinduism only in very core spiritual beliefs, i.e., Gods and major rituals. In time, the Hindus that migrated to the Caribbean, and the religion they brought with them, became distinct and beautiful in its own way, shedding some of the negative social aspects that remain in Indian Hinduism. Further research is warranted on the specific ways the religion differs from modern Hinduism in India and globally. . Though Hinduism was not entirely suppressed in the Caribbean, it was not immune to outside influences as evident in the practices that remain, hierarchy within the religion, the language and the culture that emerged from the

---

[11] Niranjana, T. (2006). 3. "Take a Little Chutney, Add a Touch of Kaiso": The Body in the Voice. In Mobilizing India (pp. 85-124). Duke University Press.

[12] Ramnarine, T. K. (1996). "Indian" music in the diaspora: Case studies of "chutney" in Trinidad and in London. British Journal of Ethnomusicology, 5(1),142.

unique combination of Indo and Afro-Ca-
ribbean people. Though this cultural and
religious syncretism is not as well docu-
mented as say Christianity in the Caribbe-
an, the impacts that the Caribbean region
and Hinduism have had on one other are
undeniable and infinitely explorable.
However, considering the creolization[11]
processes in the region to date, Hinduism
in the Caribbean is still in the relatively
early stages and there is much that has yet
to come.

Works Cited

Brown, K. (2020). A Brief History of Race, Politics and Division in Trinidad and Guyana. Caribbean Quilt, 5, 44-54.

Niranjana, T. (2006). 3.“Take a Little Chutney, Add a Touch of Kaiso”: The Body in the Voice. In Mobilizing India (pp. 85-124). Duke University Press.

Ramnarine, T. K. (1996). “Indian” music in the diaspora: Case studies of “chutney” in Trinidad and in London. British Journal of Ethnomusicology, 5(1), 133-153.

Rampersad, I. (2013). Hinduism in the Caribbean. Contemporary Hinduism, 57-66.

Sheth, Khushboo. “Countries With The Most Public Holidays.” WorldAtlas. WorldAtlas, October 1, 2018. https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-most-public-holidays.html.

Taylor, P. (Ed.). (2001). Nation dance: religion, identity, and cultural difference in the Caribbean. Indiana University Press.

Unknown Author . “History,” April 4, 2016. https://templeinthesea.wordpress.com/about/.

Van der Veer, P., & Vertovec, S. (1991). Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion. Ethnology, 30(2), 149-166. doi:10.2307/3773407. 138.