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ETHNIC HISTORIES: THE INDOCENTRIC NARRATIVE OF TRINIDAD'S HISTORY

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In the process of forging national identities in former colonies, a hegemonic narrative of the nation is typically created around the time of political independence. Subsequently, especially in multi-ethnic societies, this narrative is often challenged by emerging ethnic and/or sub-regional versions of the new nation's past. In Trinidad, this development has been salient over the last thirty years of so. The paper will examine the emergence of 'Indocentric' and 'Hindu centric' narratives of Trinidad's history during the post-independence period and interrogate their meanings, purposes and repercussions.

Introduction

It is a virtual truism that all postcolonial states undergo a process of national self-creation, a process of identity formation involving (among other things) a rewriting of history to produce a usable past. Postcolonial states typically struggle to create a 'universalist' historical narrative, a single linear story which captures the 'whole' past of the new nation and counters the older colonialist narrative. Historical narratives produced by ethnic or regional groupings may be seen as a challenge to this single story. Generally, the kind of narrative created before and after independence by former colonies centres on heroic anti-colonial struggles, culminating in the attainment of formal nationhood, and usually ignoring or obfuscating internal divisions whether of ethnicity, region, class, or gender. The emergence of ethnic or regionalist narratives, especially in pluralist societies like Trinidad & Tobago, would inevitably destabilise the linear nationalist histories created around the time of independence to counter the colonialist versions (Brereton, 2007, p. 1-28).

In the case of Trinidad[1], the colonialist narratives—both that of the British, the colonial power from 1797 to 1962, and the 'French Creole' version, reflecting the story of the French immigrants and their descendants who became the main landowning elite in the nineteenth century—were challenged around the time of independence as part of the search for a past which could help create a sense of nationalism. The leader in this process was Eric Williams, both statesman and historian, who provided in his *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1962) the iconic text of what can fairly be described as the anti-colonial, Afro-Creole narrative. It saw the enslaved Africans and their descendants, known as Creoles in local terminology, as the core group in the national story, and their cultural forms

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as the origins of the new national culture. Its message—addressed to a pluralist society in which Africans were only one ethnic group, albeit the largest in 1962—was that all the *other* ethnic groups must suppress their unique cultures in the interest of nation-building. It seems fair to state that the Afro-Creole nationalist narrative, given classic expression in Williams' iconic text, became the hegemonic narrative of the country's past in the decades after 1962, the framework for academic and non-academic works on the country's history (Brereton, 2007, p. 3-9).

Almost from the moment that the Williams text appeared, but especially from the late 1960s, there were efforts to interrogate and destabilise the Afro-Creole version of the nation's history. It was a narrative which tended to marginalise significant groups: the indigenous people (the 'Caribs'), Tobagonians, Indo-Trinidadians, and even the African (as opposed to the Creole) element in the national culture. In the processes of 'culture wars' common to poly-ethnic states, the past was contested in order to make claims for the present and the future. The alternative or oppositional narratives which emerged generally developed in the domain of 'public history' rather than in formal historiography, and academic historians were not necessarily much involved in their generation. The major alternative narratives which were developed were the 'Carib', Tobagonian, Afrocentric and Indocentric ones; this paper will focus on the last (Brereton, 2007, p. 9-19; Brereton, 2010, p. 227-236).

The Indocentric Narrative Emerges

Trinidadians of South Asian descent (Indians) now constitute some 40 percent of the national population and are marginally more numerous than Afro-Trinidadians. Their ancestors arrived between 1845 and 1917 as indentured labourers to 'replace' the former enslaved, most of who had rejected field labour on the sugar estates as a viable option for free people. Gradually a small but growing group of educated, middle-class, locally-born Indo-Trinidadians emerged and began to articulate an Indian view of the colony's development. By the late 1950s a few such men were explicitly challenging the Afro-Creole narrative; H. P. Singh, in his several pamphlets published around the time of national independence, was the most trenchant of this group. But the development of a full-fledged Indocentric narrative of the nation's past—and, later, a Hinducentric one too—had to wait until the 1980s. In Trinidad, as in many other places, ethnic identity formation for the Indian Diaspora was closely linked to Hinduism, the faith of the great majority of the immigrants and their descendants. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Trinidadian Hindus were 'generally dejected as a group': fundamentalist Christian churches were making inroads; Hindu religiosity seemed to be waning and Hindu priests were viewed by the wider society as ignorant and unlettered; Hindus had little political clout in the new nation; Indo-Trinidadians were as a group comparatively poor and underrepresented in the urban, modern economy; and the Black Power movement of the period caused considerable anxiety (Vertovec, 2000, p. 68-73).

In the next two decades, however, much changed. The economic base was the first oil boom (1973-1981) and the contemporary rise in sugar prices, both of which provided thousands of Indo-Trinidadians with a higher standard of living. The spread of education had produced a far larger group of highly qualified Indo-Trinidadians, many of them well established in the prestigious professions; their economic success, as landowners, businessmen and entrepreneurs, gave them considerable financial clout. Political leaders and parties associated mainly with Indians became increasingly viable in the 1980s-1990s. These developments formed the background for a process of ethnic revitalisation from the late 1970s, which in turn fed a parallel 'Hindu renaissance' in the same period. As Indo-Trinidadians in fact became more and more 'creolised' in their cultural practices, anxiety about a loss of ancestral traditions, and possible dilution of 'racial purity', tended to increase. Moreover, the Black Power movement further galvanised ethnic identity formation; the rediscovery of African roots associated with the movement stimulated a similar process among the Indians (Vertovec, 2000, p.73-84; Brereton, 2007, p. 19).

Gradually, a fairly clear Indocentric narrative of the nation's past emerged. In the dominant, mainstream version, the story was that of all Indo-Trinidadians, regardless of religion; for it should be noted that although most are Hindus, significant numbers adhere to Christianity or Islam.[2] (A second version, which might more properly be called a Hinducentric narrative, that stridently associates 'Indianity' with Hinduism, will be discussed later in this paper).

Indentured Immigration

The narrative begins with the period of indentured immigration (1845-1917). It insists that the vast majority of the immigrants were deceived, tricked, or forced to offer themselves to the *arkatis* (recruiters) in India, not volunteers (for, unlike the slave trade, indentured immigration was in principle a voluntary process with fairly elaborate provisions for ensuring that this was so). Some were gullible and were tricked, some were persuaded through false promises, some were the victims of outright kidnapping, or so the narrative goes. It seems it is easier, psychologically, to take this line than to acknowledge the hard reality that—though fraud and force must have played a part in many individual cases—the great majority left to escape extreme poverty, landlessness, debts, caste and gender oppression, collapse of indigenous industries, and personal or family troubles. They left Mother India, this is to say, to escape harsh conditions and in hopes of improving their own and their family's situation through wage work abroad, a long-established pattern of life in the regions from which they came. Once the immigrants had boarded the ships, whatever the paths that took them to the 'Coolie Depot' in Calcutta/Kolkata, the narrative paints a picture of horrific suffering on the long voyage across the *kala pani* (dark water) to Trinidad. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, conditions on the voyage are described in terms reminiscent of the Middle Passage—a comparison

which, except on a very few voyages when shipboard epidemics devastated the passengers, can hardly be supported by empirical evidence.[3]

Once arrived on the plantations to serve out their indentures, the narrative continues, the immigrants faced appalling conditions of working and living, oppression from estate managers, moral degradation and all-round despair. They worked long hours for minimal wages, bullied and harassed by managers and supervisors who were white men or local Creoles (blacks). They were the victims of elaborate rules and regulations which saw many of them jailed for trivial offences like brief absences from work. As Simbhoonath Capildeo put it in a 1957 speech to the local legislature: 'The poor East Indian labourers on the estates are the victims of over 100 years of suppression, oppression, and aggression…people whose blood is in Trinidad's soil, who have been transported from their homeland to work under subhuman conditions.' The son of an indentured immigrant himself (albeit a Brahmin and a pundit), Capildeo said in 1962, 'I think that no finer men were forced to do more heinous labour than the people who had to go and do indentured labour on the sugar estates.' Figueira 2003: 42-44, 167) This narrative of recruitment by fraud or force, a horrific voyage, and unrelieved oppression on the Trinidad estates, is captured in a recent video documentary by a well-known local journalist.[4]

Again an implicit comparison with the hardships of the enslaved can easily be detected here, and an element in the Afrocentric and Indocentric narratives is the issue of 'who suffered most,' or a kind of competitive victimhood. As with the attempts to compare the slave trade and slavery with the Holocaust, in the Trinidad case, competitive claims of ancestral agonies might be put forward. In the late 1990s, Hindu spokesmen rejected claims for 'reparations' for African slavery, arguing that indenture was just as damaging and brutal as slavery, and that, if anything, its victims suffered more—but Indo-Trinidadians did not use this past ordeal as an 'excuse' for present failures, as (it was implied) Afro-Trinidadians did. As Selwyn Ryan correctly observes, this claim of equal or even greater 'suffering' was 'a polemical statement which had no basis in historical fact, but was part of a deliberate plan on the part of the Maha Sabha [the nation's leading Hindu organisation] to rewrite Trinidad's history' to serve its wider agenda. (Ryan 1999: 223-229) Interestingly, the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), a long-established moderately Afrocentric organisation, recently claimed that there was little difference between slavery and indenture: 'There was [sic] the same inhumane conditions on the ships, leading to the deaths of thousands at sea. The East Indian labourers experienced the same kind of physical brutality as the slaves. Penalties for shunning work [for both] were floggings…and even the loss of parts of the body'. This kind of claim, which one might expect as part of the Indocentric narrative, and which has very little basis in empirical evidence, may be understood as a well-intentioned, though unhistorical, polemical device to stress the commonalities and 'equality' of the nation's two largest ethnic groups.[5]

Despite the sufferings of the indentureds, the narrative continues, they endured and overcame all the hardships, and through their discipline and hard work, they 'saved' the local sugar industry which might have collapsed had it continued to depend on scarce and unreliable labour from the Creoles (the descendants of the ex-slaves). In a wider sense, they also 'saved' the whole agrarian economy of Trinidad, by their labour on the sugar, cocoa and coconut estates, and (even more importantly) by their establishment of a thriving peasant sector. Their 'innate' love of the land, their culturally determined propensity for landownership and agriculture, created a sturdy independent small farming class, growing canes, rice and a whole range of food crops, as well as raising livestock for milk and meat. Indians made a tremendous contribution to the colony's economic development in these ways. 'They have contributed more than any other group to the economic development of the country', stated H. P. Singh in 1962, 'yet they are treated as pariahs'. (Singh 1993: 18) Moreover, Indians achieved these successes in agriculture (and business) on their own: the idea that all Indians received free grants of land after their indentures were up was firmly, and correctly, rejected. As the Maha Sabha stated in 1998: 'It is not government grants or State patronage which sustained the Maha Sabha and the Hindu community. That Indian immigrants were given land in lieu of a passage back to India has wrongly influenced the thinking of many opinion leaders in Trinidad.' (Ryan, 1999, p. 74).

After Indenture

In 1917, indentured immigration to Trinidad ended, and at the start of 1920, the few remaining indentured workers had their contracts cancelled. The Indocentric narrative continues with a story of more persecution and discrimination, and further triumphs. Indians were oppressed by the colonial authorities, by Christian missionaries who attacked Hinduism and Islam and used unfair means to secure conversions, and, increasingly after World War II, by the Creoles who were beginning to dominate the civil service and the government. There was overt state discrimination against them: no state funds were given to Hindu schools until the late 1940s. Hindu religious marriages were illegal until 1945; because pundits were not up to then recognised as civil marriage officers, couples marrying under religious rites needed to carry out a separate registration exercise to make the union legal. Few did, and as a result the great majority of Hindu children born before 1945 were technically illegitimate, often to their disadvantage when propertied parents died intestate, as most did. In 1999 the Maha Sabha called for reparations of up to two billion (local) dollars for the property losses suffered by generations of Hindu (and Muslim) Indians in this way. (Interestingly, the Indo-Trinidadian and Hindu Prime Minister then in power, Basdeo Panday, dismissed this call as 'foolishness', though a few Indocentric commentators took it seriously.) (Ryan, 1999, p. 202, 227-228).

Despite the discrimination and oppression, the narrative continues, despite the contempt of others who saw them as heathen coolies, Indo-Trinidadians endured, persevered, and rose on the socio-economic scale. Through hard work, discipline, frugality (at times to excess), strong family support, faith in their ancestral religions, and a commitment to deferred gratification in the interest of the next generation, Indians achieved success in farming, business, education and the professions. And all this on their own, without the benefit of handouts, government patronage, or any favours. 'No power on earth can stop the onward march of a frugal, hard-working and industrious people', wrote H.P.Singh in 1965, and certainly not the resentment of the 'Negroes' when they saw Indians 'forgetting their place', leaving the cane fields and 'climbing ever higher.' (Singh, 1993, p. 89-91).

In 1956, the People's National Movement (PNM), a newly formed party led by Eric Williams and based on Afro-Trinidadian support, narrowly won elections for the legislature. This party remained in power for thirty years (1956-86), taking Trinidad & Tobago through the decolonisation process to independence (1962) and republic status (1976), and retaining power even after its leader's death in 1981. The Indocentric narrative claims, in effect, that Indo-Trinidadians found that oppression by the African-dominated PNM governments had replaced that by the British colonialists—only more so. While there is no doubt that the PNM was led almost entirely by Afro-Trinidadians, and that its general orientation was to favour its own voter base over Indo-Trinidadians who mostly voted for opposition parties, the narrative shows a clear tendency to overstate the degree of discrimination, or even 'persecution', that the latter faced from the state during this period.

The narrative makes much of the fact that not a single Hindu Trinidadian held Cabinet office in the PNM governments of 1956-86, a 'marginalisation' that 'borders on apartheid as witnessed in southern states of the USA and South Africa'; 'the PNM was very intolerant of Indians and Hindus in particular', in the words of one commentator.[6] Indians were denied appointments and promotions in the public and protective services, Christian churches were favoured with state grants over Hindu and Muslim groups, scholarships were given mainly to PNM supporters (by implication not Indians), festivals, art forms and cultural events connected to the Indian community were given far less state support than those close to the Afro-Trinidadians. In general the PNM regime supported and aided urban Trinidad over rural Trinidad (and Tobago), Port of Spain over the agricultural districts—and at least up to the 1980s, Indo-Trinidadians were still mainly rural-based. Williams, who dominated politics and government between 1956 and 1981, is seen in this narrative as the leader of a race-based party who looked after his own people rather than the national community as a whole. 'Williams' action was guided by the thought that "We were oppressed as slaves for too long, and now we, the oppressed race, must in turn oppress (those coolies) the other race"', in the words of one recent blogger.[7]

Faced with government and Christian denominational schools where Hindu children might be discriminated against, even pressured to convert, where their accents, their poverty, their humble 'Indian' lunches were often derided by their Afro-Trinidadian fellows, the Maha Sabha under B. S. Maraj (a major hero of the Indocentric narrative) built scores of Hindu primary schools in the 1950s, forcing the state to provide some financial assistance. These new schools, many of them humble structures in rural villages, were famously derided by Williams on the campaign trail as 'cow sheds', and this has become a powerful metaphor for the success of Indians, especially Hindus, in education and the professions, through their own efforts and hard work. Largely shut out from the public services and government, the narrative continues, Indian families stressed schooling and professional training for their sons and increasingly their daughters too, as well as entering commerce and industry, becoming by the 1980s well represented in the latter, and probably overrepresented in law and medicine.[8]

Political power, however, continued to elude Indo-Trinidadians; when the PNM was finally defeated at the end of 1986, the new government, though it included prominent Indians, was led and dominated by others, and the PNM was returned to power in 1991. Then in 1995 an epochal event occurred: a party based on Indian voters, and led by a Hindu Trinidadian, Basdeo Panday, was able to form the government through the support of the two Tobago MPs. Not surprisingly, this event triggered off a triumphalist discourse among most (certainly not all) Indo-Trinidadians. It seemed to mark a fitting climax to the Indocentric narrative. But, unlike the situation in Guyana where a party based on Indian voters has formed the government without a break since 1991, the PNM was returned to power at the end of 2001, and retained it until May 2010, under Prime Minister Patrick Manning. The Indocentric narrative resumed the discourse of discrimination and marginalisation, seeing Manning as in some ways more hostile to Indo-Trinidadian interests than Williams had been. His regime closed down Caroni (1975) Ltd, the state-owned sugar company where thousands of Indians had worked, and reneged on promises to dole out farming lands to the former employees; it ignored the needs of farmers (mostly Indians) and the rural areas in general; it spent billions on spectacular new buildings in the 'Creole space' of Port of Spain. Indo-Trinidadian festivals like Indian Arrival Day, Hindu celebrations like Divali, received scant financial aid from the state in comparison with Emancipation Day and Carnival-related activities. The steel pan was named the sole national musical instrument, excluding the tassa and the dholak. Indo-Trinidadians were unfairly blocked from promotions in the public services, in a few cases on orders from Manning himself, and coveted radio licenses were given to PNM supporters rather than to Hindu or Indian groups.[9]

The balance of power shifted dramatically in May 2010, when a snap election called by Manning half-way through his term of office resulted in a spectacular

victory for a coalition of parties dominated by the United National Congress (UNC) which was based on Indo-Trinidadian voters. A second Hindu Trinidadian, this time a woman (Kamla Persad-Bissessar), became Prime Minister with an unassailable majority in the Parliament. Sat Maharaj, whose speeches and newspaper articles over many years had done much to shape the Indocentric narrative of the nation's past, greeted this event with a column headed 'An Equal Place At Last'. He reiterated that the Hindu community had been 'targeted' by the Manning administration, its fundamental rights had been 'abrogated', its schools denied adequate funding, its cultural activities 'totally ignored'. At a Maha Sabha function on Indian Arrival Day (May 30, 2010, just days after the election victory), Maharaj recalled the scene at President's House in December 1986 when Panday was to be sworn in as a Cabinet minister: no 'Bhagwat Geeta' could be found at the President's residence, the ceremony had to be halted until one was located in Port of Spain so that he could take the oath. 'Oh, how far we have travelled', Maharaj commented; 'we saw so many Bhagwat Geetas recently rising at the ministers' swearing-in ceremony. Shouldn't I be happy? From being totally discriminated against we find an equal place at last'. Insisting that he and his community only wanted equality with all others, not any special privileges, he ended by stressing that, in the face of sustained discrimination from the Manning regime, 'that we have survived is only because of the strength of our religion, our culture and the dedication of our people.'[10]

Indian Arrival Day

To a considerable extent, the Afrocentric narrative of Trinidad's history has been constructed around the celebration of Emancipation Day (August 1) as the principal moment for recalling the horrors of enslavement and its harsh aftermath. (Brereton 2010: 228-232) In much the same way, Indian Arrival Day (May 30), marking the first arrival of Indian immigrants in Trinidad in 1845, has helped to develop the Indocentric narrative and fix it in the public imaginary. As part of the general 'Hindu renaissance' of the 1970s and 1980s, individuals associated with it began to campaign for an annual public holiday to commemorate Indian arrival. The Indian Revival and Reform Association initiated this campaign in the mid-1970s and, in general, put forward 'an emotive view' of the Indian community's past. In the early 1980s, the campaign was carried on by the Hindu Seva Sangh, founded in 1983, and it made much of the 140th anniversary in 1985. The PNM government declared May 30, 1995, marking the 150th anniversary of Indian arrival, as a special, one-off public holiday, and the Basdeo Panday-led government which took power later that year institutionalised it as a permanent holiday. Each Indian Arrival Day produces a spate of articles in the national newspapers, and some television programmes, through which the Indocentric narrative is developed and disseminated. (Vertovec, 2000, p. 77-80; Mahabir, 2007).

In 2010, Indian Arrival Day followed by just a few days the landslide electoral victory of the coalition of parties led by a Hindu woman and based mainly on Indo-Trinidadian voters. The function organised by the National Council for Indian Culture featured speeches which rehearsed the mainstream Indocentric narrative of the nation's past. Its President, for instance, 'spoke about the hardships experienced by indentured workers but also noted that about 80 per cent opted to stay and contributed significantly to the economic, social and cultural landscape' of the colony. The High Commissioner of India, a special guest, congratulated the new Prime Minister, also present, on becoming the 'first woman PIO [Person of Indian Origin] Head of Government in the world.' For her part, the Prime Minister was diplomatic: she said that while the election of a woman of Indian descent to her high office was a legitimate source of pride, 'she would rather like the nation to be proud that one of the descendants of the collective experience of hardship and sacrifice today represented their hopes for a better life and freedom.' She was careful to name Afro-Trinidadian heroes (Butler, Daaga) as well as Indo-Trinidadians (Capildeo, Panday) in the 'struggle for recognition and equality'. Her conclusion was that Indian Arrival Day was 'more a day of gratitude and remembrance of our ancestors, whose contribution to nation building came through empowering the lives of the future generations through their vision and sacrifice'. Less diplomatic was Sat Maharaj of the Maha Sabha: as we noted above, at his organisation's Indian Arrival Day function, he frankly rejoiced that the recent electoral victory meant 'an equal place at last' for the Indian and Hindu community.[11]

For Indian Arrival Day 2010, the *Sunday Guardian* published a special supplement (as has become the norm for all the national newspapers over the last few years; many corporations, public and private, also regularly take out advertisements to mark the event). Articles by Paras Ramoutar, described as a 'cultural and community activist', rehearsed the Indocentric narrative. 'The Indian Diaspora came here and survived under very inhumane, uncivilized and deplorable conditions that historians today are now coming to their senses and researching their Arrival meticulously', he wrote, going on to detail the hardships and the triumphs of the community, so that today 'a very large percentage are involved in manufacturing, business, the professions, corporate and government jobs'. Other articles in the supplement celebrated two surviving immigrants: Sonnylal, who arrived as a baby in January 1917 with his mother (and therefore was not himself indentured, though the headline describes him as 'one of the last male indentured immigrants'); and Willimah or Moyie, who arrived from Madras in 1916 at the age of about 16, 'one of the last Madrassi indentured women', and who died in 1989. Both profiles present the archetypical stories of hardship, struggle, determination and faith. (*Sunday Guardian,* 2010, p. 6, 14, 15, 16).

Places of Memory

Indian Arrival Day since 1995 (and earlier, as with the commemorations in 1945 and 1985, for instance) has provided an annual day of memory through which the Indocentric narrative of the nation's past is partly constructed. Places of memory, sites of commemoration, are less forthcoming, though Nelson Island, where most of the arriving indentured Indians were 'processed', and some were quarantined (and, indeed, some died and were cremated) before being assigned to their plantations, certainly has the potential for becoming such a site. A small but impressive museum of Indo-Trinidadian history and culture has been set up in central Trinidad, mainly by volunteers and mostly financed without government subventions, and is now an established destination for local visitors, school groups, and tourists. For the last few years, moreover, a group of activists led by Ravi-Ji has tried to organise events to commemorate the 'Hosay Massacre' of 1884, when police and troops fired on mainly Indian participants in the annual Mohurran (Hosay) festival in and around San Fernando, killing about twenty and injuring perhaps hundreds. In 2010, the seventh 'Jahaji Massacre Walk' took place, visiting the sites where the victims were fired on, and featuring a 're-enactment' of the events, a cultural programme and an inter-faith service. Organised by the Balidan Tola-Jahaji Massacre Committee, the event attracted the Mayor of San Fernando, who promised to consider a memorial site near the Mon Repos roundabout where many were killed in 1884: 'I think it is a sign of history that needs to be captured', she told members of the Committee. Ravi-Ji, the originator of the commemorative event, said 'The name Mon Repos, a place of repose, is such a poetic name that it makes us forget the bloodshed, the tears, the cries that are buried in this place. I think all the tree trunks should be painted red in tribute to the place', adding that the massacre should be included in the school curricula 'to educate children on the trials their ancestors endured'. In its press release, the Committee stated that 'our forefathers made the ultimate sacrifice for the survival of our culture and heritage. They understood the importance of living and dying for future generations. Their superhuman determination is what led to the development of our wonderful country thus far.'[12]

If there are few places of memory in Trinidad for the Indo-Trinidadian community, there was some local interest in the inauguration of the Kolkata (Calcutta) Memorial to recall those who left India as indentured immigrants between 1834 and 1920. Established at Kidderpore Depot along the Hoogly River, Kolkata, in the area from which thousands embarked for their long voyages to Mauritius, Africa, Fiji, and the Caribbean, it was inaugurated in a high-profile ceremony in January 2011. The Memorial plaque (in English and Hindi) pays tribute to the indentured immigrants who went 'to far away lands seeking better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants; for their pioneering spirit, determination, resilience, endurance and perseverance amidst the extremely harsh and demeaning

conditions they encountered; for their preservation of sense of origin, traditions, culture and religion, and their promotion of the Indian culture; and for their achievements and successes despite insurmountable odds'. This is the Indocentric narrative in capsule form; but it is interesting to note that the plaque makes no suggestion that the immigrants were tricked or forced to leave: instead, it forthrightly acknowledges that they left India to seek 'better livelihoods for themselves and their descendants'. By contrast, a documentary film made by the BBC on indentured Indian immigration to the Caribbean, entitled 'How Britain Reinvented Slavery', chooses to stress that the immigrants had no idea where they were going or what they would be doing in their new location, that they were effectively enslaved on a 'life sentence', and that the whole scheme was simply a story of abuse of power and exploitation of a gullible peasant people. Perhaps a case of classic post-Empire liberal guilt?[13]

The Hinducentric Narrative

The mainstream Indocentric narrative seeks to tell the story of the whole Indo-Trinidadian community, which, we noted, includes significant numbers of Christians and Muslims (as well as, no doubt, some of no faith). But a narrower, much more sectarian 'Hinducentric' narrative, which correlates Hinduism with Indo-Trinidadian identity, has also emerged since the 1970s and 1980s. This development is clearly linked to the 'Hindu renaissance' of that period. In particular, the Hindu Seva Sangh, founded in 1983, embarked on an aggressive campaign to inculcate pride in the Hindu faith and (by extension) ethnic identity, especially among young Indo-Trinidadians. Its journal, *Jagriti* ('revival'), developed the Hinducentric narrative in the 1980s: We Hindus are under constant and deliberate cultural attack, under siege; we must cherish our faith and culture, which others envy because they have to imitate the white man's culture; we must use our faith and its rituals to contribute to 'our socio-political salvation on earth'. Moreover, Hindus are 'pure', of 'Caucasian stock from India', while Muslims are 'mixed', some 'of negroid stock'. Hindus uphold virtuous ways, as opposed to Afro-Trinidadians' culture of immorality (carnival, calypso and so on). And Indian culture is Hindu culture; Hindus are a special community, linked by blood to the ancestors and the Gods. Dharma is the way of the Hindu community and of the Hindu individual, and it includes activism, resistance, in the face of oppression. The Seva Sangh inculcated this kind of Hinducentric narrative in its publications, lectures, youth camps, discussion groups, songs, games and drama, especially in the 1980s. (Vertovec, 2000, p. 79-83).

Of course, this development has also been influenced by the rise of right-wing Hindu organisations in India which promote and seek to spread the 'Hindutva' ideology among Diaspora Indians. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, founded in 1964 as an offshoot of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, is the most important of

these. Following the lead of these groups in India, the Hinducentric or Hindutva narrative in Trinidad, which equates Indian culture with Hinduism, is generally hostile to Indo-Trinidadians who are not Hindus. The Christians are seen as having 'betrayed' the ancestral faith by succumbing to the missionaries; the Muslims are considered to be 'impure', and are criticised for allegedly privileging a 'universal' Islamic identity over an ethnic Indian one. In its more extreme version, this narrative sees the triumph of Hindu civilization in Trinidad as inevitable because of its inherent superiority to all others: Hindu hegemony is karmic (Vertovec, 2000, p. 11-12; Ryan, 1999, p. 257-258; Allahar, 2005, p. 244-257).

In addition to the line taken by *Jagriti* and similar publications like *Sandesh*, perhaps the classic expression of the Hinducentric narrative was a public lecture delivered in 1989 by Surendranath Capildeo, an attorney, occasional politician, and scion of Trinidad's most prominent Brahmin Hindu clan. He told his audience:

> We [Indians, Hindus?] are like no other race. We are different. Indians are a world unto themselves. We regard ourselves as the eternal people. Our religion is the eternal religion. We have been, and are witness to, a continuous unbroken thread of Indian civilization, which began before the memory of man…So when you look at an Indian, in Trinidad or wherever, you just remember that. An Indian is no ordinary being. He belongs to a special race…The Indian mind does not submit to slavery. You cannot enslave an Indian mind. Not even the Vedic gods of yore could do that. That is our legacy. That is our heritage.

After this remarkable opening, with its coded reference to others who did 'submit to slavery', Capildeo went on to present a full-fledged, albeit extreme version of the Indocentric narrative: the horrors of the voyage, oppression on the sugar estates, Indian success in agriculture and education, the triumphs of the Capildeo dynasty (which includes Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul), the Indian/Hindu revitalisation of the past decades after all the persecution from the 'system of political negritude' which began with the PNM victory in 1956. All in all, Indians 'had not only rescued Trinidad in no uncertain manner, but had laid the foundation for its transition into a modern, model nation state'. And what would happen to that nation if Indians suddenly disappeared or stopped doing what they did? 'Law and order will collapse. Bankruptcy will be the norm. Starvation will be your daily wage. Life here will cease'. But given the chance, 'the Indian community will take this country to heights unimagined…The Indians have the capacity to feed, clothe, educate and maintain the people of this country, and to do it in style, comfort and ease' (Siewah, 1994, p. 237-261; Capildeo, 2007).

This kind of triumphalist narrative—partly no doubt a type of rhetorical excess which is locally called 'robber talk' after a traditional carnival character—is not part of the mainstream, public Indo-Trinidadian worldview. But its expression from time to time naturally feeds into Afro-Trinidadian anxieties, especially if a political party or coalition based mainly on Indian voters has come to power, as in 1995, and again in 2010. I will end this discussion by considering the recent response to

the Indocentric narrative put forward by Selwyn Cudjoe, an Afrocentric Trinidadian spokesman based in the United States who has been called an 'ethnic entrepreneur' by the Trinidadian political scientist Anton Allahar. (Allahar, 2005, p. 240-244).

Indian Time Ah Come?

Towards the end of 2010, after the decisive electoral defeat of the PNM (of which Cudjoe is a prominent member) earlier that year, he published a slim volume with the provocative title *Indian Time Ah Come in Trinidad and Tobago*. It is (cynically?) dedicated to 'Kamla, Sat and the East Indian struggle'. Containing several separate essays or speeches, the main item is the lecture titled 'Indian Time Ah Come' and first delivered in June 2010. It purports to provide a complete historical narrative of 'East Indians' (Cudjoe consistently uses this outdated phrase) in Trinidad. Through no fault of their own, Indians 'undercut the economic gains' made by the ex-slaves since emancipation. They always looked to India for 'protection' rather than to the local arena, a 'luxury' Africans never enjoyed. They were well represented in the colonial legislature after 1925, when elected members were first added to the Legislative Council. At the celebrations in 1945 of the centenary of Indian arrival, none of the speeches about Indian trials and triumphs mentioned that, by 'replacing' Africans on the sugar estates, they had 'denied Africans the fruits of their just struggles' for better wages. Cudjoe goes on to defend PNM policies with respect to the Indian 'minority', justifying Williams' famous or infamous slur about Indians being 'a hostile and recalcitrant minority': the Indian leadership in the 1950s was, in fact, unprogressive and had 'a narrow ethnic orientation'. These leaders generally opposed independence and tried to delay it. Indians 'voted en masse to support their own' in 1995, resulting in the election of the Panday government; in the 2010 election campaign, the 'East Indian leaders' cynically used the labour and African presence in the successful coalition, 'paraded to the electorate to demonstrate the nonracist dimension' of the major party which was based on Indo-Trinidadian support. The victory in May 2010 did indeed represent, Cudjoe concluded, 'a triumph of the East Indian presence' after 165 years in the country (Cudjoe, 2010, p. 7-24).

This jaundiced version of the Indocentric narrative generated considerable discussion in the media, which space does not permit me to analyse here.[14] But Cudjoe returned to the fray with an interesting newspaper column in April 2011, headed 'The Indian Narrative'. He argued that this narrative had five essential elements: the belief that Africans had 'done Indians wrong' ever since the latter's first arrival in Trinidad; that Africans had always 'tried to keep them down'; that Indians 'are bright academically' while 'Africans are stupid'; that Indians 'are more physically attractive than blacks'; finally, that 'Africans are racist, Indians are not'. Of course Cudjoe rejected all five so-called Indo-Trinidadian 'beliefs'. This astonishing collection of slurs, reflecting it would seem deep-seated anxieties and

grievances on the author's part, generated one brief response from a blogger, who simply posted this terse statement: "The Indian Narrative is 1. Religion 2. Family. 3. Industry and Thrift. 4. Education. 5. Entrepreneurship."[15]

The creation of an Indocentric narrative, along with other narratives of the nation's past which sought to counter the hegemonic 'Afro-Creole' version created around the time of national independence, is an inevitable and generally healthy development in a postcolonial, pluralist state. In their more extreme forms, however, neither the Indocentric nor the Afrocentric narrative, as developed by the 'ethnic entrepreneurs' (to use Allahar's phrase), seems to advance the search for a more unifying approach to the country's past and present. But in their more benign, less nakedly ethnic and competitive manifestations, this is not the case. The ethnic and other narratives can all contribute to a 'usable past' for the nation as it approaches its fiftieth birthday.[16]

Notes

1. The nation state which became independent in 1962 is Trinidad & Tobago; however, the Indocentric narrative which is the focus of this paper relates specifically to Trinidad, with little reference to Tobago, which has only a small, and recently arrived, population of Indian descent. Hence this paper will generally refer to '*Trinidad*', not '*Trinidad & Tobago*'. A slightly different version of this paper has been published in *The Arts Journal*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1 & 2, September 2011, pp. 55-70.
2. The generic 'Indocentric narrative' which follows is based on: Eriksen 1992: 129-139; Singh 1993: 18, 89-90, 98; Siewah 1994: 224-268, 298-307; Ryan 1999: 7, 202, 211-213, 227-229, 257-258; Persad 2000: passim; Figueira 2003: 42-44, 159-60, 167, 188-199; Vertovec 2000: 63-86.
3. For a fictional account of the *arkatis* and the horrors of the voyage, see the novel by Indo-Trinidadian Ron Ramdin (2004).
4. The video *Legacy of Our Ancestors: The Indian Presence in Trinidad and Tobago*, by Gideon Hanoomansingh, was made in 2003 and has been shown several times on national television.
5. See untitled article by NJAC (no author) in the *Guardian*, 21 May 2006: 24. Note that all the newspapers cited in this paper are published in Trinidad & Tobago.
6. Blog by D.Singh, posted on JahajeeDesi website, 14 June 2010.
7. Blog by D.Maharaj, posted on JahajeeDesi website, 29 March 2011; Sat Maharaj, 'Political Survival', *Guardian* 12 August 2010: A31; S.Kangal, Address to GOPIO's Conference on Multiculturalism, 28 January 2011, posted on JahajeeDesi website, 31 January 2011. Sat Maharaj is the long-serving Secretary of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha and the main spokesman for orthodox (Sanatanist) Hindus. The commemoration of the centenary of Eric Williams' birth in 2011 has already generated interesting public debate on his contribution to national development and, in particular, on his views and actions with respect to race relations; this is sure to continue (his actual birthday was September 24, 1911).
8. S. Maharaj, 'Cow Shed Schools', *Guardian*, 30 September 2010: A33; S.Maharaj, 'Multiculturalism for T&T', *Guardian*, 3 February 2011: A29.
9. See notes 6, 7 and 8 for examples of these arguments.

10. S. Maharaj, 'An Equal Place At Last', *Guardian*, 10 June 2010: A33.
11. *Yatra* May-June 2010: 21-22. *Yatra* is the magazine of the High Commission of India in Trinidad & Tobago. See also note 10.
12. There have been plans for many years, not yet realised, to make Nelson Island (one of a group of five small islands off the north-west peninsula of Trinidad) a heritage site. For the Jahaji Massacre Walk, see '7th Jahaji Massacre "Walk of Determination"', *Express* 27 October 2010: Section 2, 11; 'Mayor considers massacre memorial', *Express* 2 October 2010: 22; Programme for 7th Annual Jahajee Massacre 2010, posted on JahajeeDesi website, 30 October 2010.
13. For the Kolkata Memorial, see article posted by Ashook Ramsaran on JahajeeDesi website, 27 July 2010; 'Kolkata Memorial to Restore Historic Legacy of the Past', *Yatra*, January-February 2011: 23-26. The BBC film was made in 2010 and features David Dabydeen, the Guyanese-born British academic, whose search for his ancestors in Guyana provides the framework for the documentary.
14. See in particular: blog by R. Singh, 'Professor Cudjoe's INDIAN TIME AH COME', posted on JahajeeDesi website, 10 October 2010; S.Cudjoe, 'Indian Time Ah Come', *Guardian* 25 November 2010: A34; L.Grant, 'Hate message; embrace messenger', *Express* 27 November 2010: 13; S.Maharaj, 3-part series on *Indian Time Ah Come*, *Guardian* 2, 9, 16 December 2010: A33, A29, A29; S. Ryan, 'Indian time ah come or dougla republic?' *Express* 12 December 2010: 13.
15. S. Cudjoe, 'The Indian Narrative', *Guardian* 7 April 2011: A34; blog posted by Francis Bacon, Jahaji Bhai/Bahen website, 7 April 2011.
16. For a fuller discussion, see Brereton 2010: 218-236.

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