HYPHENATED HINDUS: A STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDO-CARIBBEAN IDENTITY

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In this article, I argue that Indo-Caribbeans developed a hyphenated identity which allowed them to acknowledge their Indian heritage while fully participating in West Indian society. I begin by retracing the history of Indians in the Caribbean using the specific country of Trinidad to illustrate the social underpinnings behind the formation of their hyphenated existence. Many indentured laborers who sought a better life in the Caribbean stayed after the abolishment of the indenture system. Feeling rejected by both Afro-Caribbeans and East Indians, however, these Indians sought to create a new space for themselves in which they could partially join the larger society while still maintaining distance. The hyphenated identity Indo-Caribbeans developed in the West Indies, however, faces a dilemma in the United States when Indo-Caribbeans come in contact with large East Indians communities. To outsiders, there are no differences between the two communities, but Indo-Caribbeans actively resist being categorized as simply"East Indian" or "coming from India."They wish to recognize their history, but emphasize that the Caribbean, not India, is their homeland. Hence their hyphenated identity, as demonstrated by my study of the Indo-Caribbean communities in Queens, New York and Orlando Florida, has allowed them to maintain separate communities from that of East Indians in the U.S. I assert therefore that, despite initiatives from the Indian government to create a global Indian identity and reach out to Indians in the diaspora, it is unlikely that Indo-Caribbeans will ever completely merge with East Indian communities, because to do so would require them to ignore a large part of their history as well as their identity.

Keywords: Hinduism, Caribbean, West Indian, Trinidad, identity, diaspora

Terminology

Throughout this article, I use three different but connected terms to describe the population of Indians in the Caribbean and that particular group's transition to the U. S: "East Indian," "Indo-Caribbean," and "West Indian." I use the term "East Indian" to describe those who were born in India and claim India as their home, including East Indians immigrants in the U.S. 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. When these initial East Indians, no longer claimed India as their home and began to insist on their own distinct identity, I refer to them as either "West Indian" or "Indo-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 themselves

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articulate. When I want to distinguish the group from the larger West Indian community, however, I use the term "Indo-Caribbean." Additionally, 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 alternating between such similar terms may cause confusion at first, the use of all of these terms is necessary because it is not only the way that Indo-Caribbeans talk about themselves and those from India, but it is also representative of their complicated identity which stands both inside and outside of these individual groups.

Introduction

Roughly half a million East Indians were brought to the Caribbean through the indentured labor system between the years 1838 and 1917. Although initially a scattered group, East Indians soon united their community, forming their identity by emphasizing their religion, in particular Hinduism. 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 a temporary settlement, however, Indo-Caribbeans developed an identity separate from that of East Indians. To say that one is West Indian, then, is to emphasize this particular identity. It says that one recognizes the Caribbean, not India, as home and identify the culture in the West Indies to be an intricate part of one's own identity. At the same time, Indo-Caribbeans have been careful to maintain a certain distance from other West Indians, particularly Afro-Caribbeans, asserting their "Indian-ness" whenever others try to deny it and resisting the merging of their identity with that of Afro-Caribbeans. I argue that the identity of Indo-Caribbeans is predicated on the often contradictory relationships between themselves and other West Indians and themselves and East Indians, or those Indians from or those Indians from India who are not associated with the Caribbean. By hyphenating their identity and existing in the tension created by these two worlds, Indo-Caribbeans have been able to carve out a unique space for themselves which has allowed them to remain a separate and distinct group in the United States.

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 [see Steven Vertovec (2001), Carolyn Prorok (1991), Viranjini Munasinghe (2001)]. The defining of this Hinduism was largely encouraged by reformist groups from India who opposed the conversion missions of Christians. At this juncture, Indians could have 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, the first prime minister of Trinidad. The conflicts that emerged between the Indian and African communities during Williams' rule forever guaranteed the Indo-Caribbeans would develop a hyphenated existence rather than completely merge with the larger Trinidadian society. Even as the Indian population began to grow into the majority in Trinidad, Indo-Caribbeans would continue to distance themselves and maintain a distinct community within the country.

Phase 1: Fragmented

In 1797, Britain forcefully overtook Trinidad from the French and 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 (Vertovec, 2001: 43). Although the abolition of slavery was declared in 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.

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 put 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 (Vertovec, 2001: 43). 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 (Vertovec, 2001, 43-4). 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 with about 144,000 going to Trinidad between 1845 and 1920, the year the indenture system was abolished (Younger, 2010: 95).

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" (Tata and Evans, 1989: 26). 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 the ex-slaves' position as the lowest of the classes. As anthropologist Viranjini Munasinghe notes in *Callaloo or Tossed Salad*, the freed African population resented, not the plantation owners who created the system, but the East Indians who came to represent the unjust structure (Munasinghe, 2001: 65). 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 Afro-Trinidadians and East Indians was soon extended to life outside the plantations. Munasinghe states 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 (Munasinghe, 2001: 43). 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" (Munasinghe, 2001: 64). 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" (Munasinghe, 2001: 65). These stereotypes would continue to influence East Indians as they began to transition into recognizing themselves as Indo-Caribbeans.

Phase 2: The "Other"

The second phase in development of the Indo-Caribbean identity 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 temporary. 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 accept Trinidad as their home. As their community began to grow and Indians adopted a hyphenated existence, i.e. Indo-Trinidadian or Indo-Caribbean 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 in Trinidad, India became marked as more foreign than familiar. It was India, therefore, not the larger West Indian community, that became viewed as "other" by Indo-Caribbeans.

East Indians were seen as an alien group within Trinidadian society because their indentured contracts assumed that their lives on the island were temporary. 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. Plots of land, as a result, were made available to East Indians in the hope that it would persuade them to stay. These plots of land combined with the knowledge that there was a better chance of social mobility in Trinidad than in India led many East 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 (Jayaram, 2004: 123). Despite choosing to stay 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 (Vertovec, 2001: 50). Religion became a way for East Indians to unify their community and significant time was spent building temples for worship, 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 their 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 in the recruitment system" (Lal, 2004: 18). 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 East Indians to fight for the end of the indentured system. Active interest in the plight of indentured Indians, however, 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" (Lal, 2004: 19). 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 'motherland'." 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.

Phase 3: Politically Strong

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.

Creating a nation that was not divided by race was Williams' primary goal for Trinidad. In his book, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) Williams argued that racism was a consequence of slavery, the result of imperialism (Palmer, 2006: 260). 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. Williams, because he was not a member of the Indian community, believed that East Indians saw themselves as having 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 argued that the DLP was attempting to turn Trinidad into an Indian and Hindu nation (Palmer, 2006: 270). With this accusation, Williams inadvertently gave voice to Indo-Trinidadians' greatest fear that their culture would be squashed by the Black majority.

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 Indo-Trinidadian 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. Most importantly, 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 ethnically. As a result, the political influence of the Indian community grew until eventually Basdeo Pandey, Trinidad's first Indian prime minister, was elected in 1995. The rule of Eric Williams and the Indo-Caribbean fear of being overpowered by the Black community, however, would continue to affect not only the politics of Trinidad but the very identity of Indians from the Caribbean.

Indo-Caribbeans in the United States

The solution Indo-Trinidadians fulfilled their desire to further integrate into the larger West Indian society when they adopted a hyphenated identity that allowed them to be fully West Indian while still maintaining a type of "otherness." Amitiva Chowdhury writes in her dissertation on memory and the Indian diaspora 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.(Chowdhury, 2008: 15).

The Indo-Caribbean identity exists not in the joining of "Indo" and "Caribbean," but rather in the hyphen itself – Indo-Caribbeans reject and claim each affiliation thereby standing in the tension created by opposing the two. Sunil Bhatia, in his article "Acculturation, Dialogical Voices, and the Construction of the Diasporic Self," quotes K. Vishwewaran as stating: "The hyphen enacts a violent shuttling between two or more worlds"(Bhatia, 2002: 55). Bhatia reuses Vishweswaran's phrase to claim that hyphenated labels represent "a 'violent shuttling' of migrant identity between two *incompatible* worlds" (emphasis added) (Bhatia, 2002: 55). The existence of a separate Indo-Caribbean identity, however, proves that while these two worlds may seem to be incompatible, they both can 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 in which the individual must choose which association to bring to the forefront based on the particular situation encountered.

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, R. 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 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 (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 175-6).

Here Radhakrishnan recognizes that it is not just that the diasporic self is multilayered with a variety 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 as the ethnic self redefines the sence of loss that diasporic communities experience. For the ethnic self, the sense of loss 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 created between these two identities, these two histories of the individual, is agonizing because they cannot coexist and yet they must.

It is important, then, to recognize that Indo-Caribbeans arrive in the U.S. with an already hyphenated identity that holds their history and present reality in tension. 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. Indo-Caribbeans, therefore, find themselves in a position where they must not only defend their hyphenated identity to outsiders who belong neither to the West Indian nor East Indian communities, but they must also prove their authenticity to each community. 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 the same as Indians who migrated from India to America.

Most of the Indo-Caribbeans that migrated to the United States came after Trinidad's and Guyana's independence from Britain and emigrated for mostly economic reasons. According to the 2000 census, there are about 240,000 Guyanese and Trinidadian immigrants living in New York alone (Warikoo, 2005, 808). Although it is difficult to estimate how many of those immigrants are Indo-Caribbeans, Natasha Warikoo, in her study on Indo-Caribbeans in the U.S., estimates the number to be around 63,000. The Guyanese community is so large in Richmond Hill, Queens, NY 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-Caribbeans in the U.S. occupy a similar space to that of their early forefathers in Trinidad and Guyana in that they 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 separated 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. One of the larger problems for Indo-Caribbeans is not just that they look like members of the Indian community, but the way they practice their religion, in particular Hinduism, is assumed to be the same as well. Hindu religious services

are conducted by Indo-Caribbeans in a way similar to that of Christian church services (see Prorok, 1991). Religious services are conducted on Sunday, a "sermon" is given in which religious texts are read and interpreted by a priest, and devotees are encouraged to make their own offerings with minimal assistance from the priest. Hindu Indo-Caribbeans, therefore, are often uncomfortable with the ways worship is conducted in East Indian temples in America, mainly because they feel that their role as a participant in the worship is minimized. As a result, they express 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 Lomarsh Roopnarine, 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) (Roopnarine, 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" (Roopnarine, 2009: 118). For example during one of my interviews, conducted in the West Indian communities of Queens, New York and Orlando, Florida, I asked a participant if she knew what part of India her grandparents were from. Knowing that I was working on a school assignment 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.

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 of "cultural confusion," Indo-Caribbeans embrace their hyphenated, hybrid identity which can result in complex and sometimes contradictory views. In the following section, I will examine the ways in which the current relationship between Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans, and Indo-Caribbeans and East Indians plays out 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 themselves and 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. 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. 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. Ransford 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" (Palmer, 1995: 21). The older generation may not participate in Carnival to 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 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 Warikoo noted, for males associating with Black culture instead of Indian culture has become important to

their image as "cool" (Warikoo, 2005: 812). 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 Black culture as far as music and fashion, they are still careful to assert themselves as separate or different from Afro-Caribbeans. One youth in Warikoo's study demonstrates this in her statement:

> "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 though 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" (Warikoo, 2005: 812).

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

The relationship between the Indo-Caribbeans and the East Indian 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," (Radhakrishan, 1996: 207), and (2) wanting *"information about and knowledge of India and [having] an emotional investment in India"* (Radhakrishan, 1996: 209). It is important to note that while Radhakrishnan uses these distinctions to characterize groups, in the West Indian case there are no clear divisions. Indo-Caribbeans "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 a reaction against not just the fact that an East Indian was telling him that he was not Indian, but the perceived implication 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 described to me 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 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 Indo-Caribbean 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 Indo-Caribbean 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 mehdoh take dem chance with she / Doh let meh catch you in datfoolishnesss / Trying to reach the Indian in me / Like you into politics / Boy you cominpon 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" (Jai, 1989).

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 pilgrimage sites of India has motivated a few West Indian 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 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 labourers. 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 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. Each country in the diaspora has a list of demands and expectations that the country requires from India. Trinidad's list includes the following:

(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 (Roopnarine, 2009: 115). While this may be taking place at a national level in Trinidad and in the U.S., 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.

Conclusion

Despite the desire of the Indian government to create a global Indian identity thereby uniting Indians in the diaspora, it is unlikely that Indo-Caribbeans will merge with the East Indian community in the U.S. This is largely because the Indo-Caribbean identity has developed with the understanding that there is a gap between it and the identity of East Indians. Indo-Caribbeans have negotiated their own identities based on their constantly shifting relationships with people from the Caribbean and those from India. To join any world exclusively results in the denial of a vital part of their history. Hence the Indo-Caribbean case demonstrates the need for scholars to study Indians in the diaspora on their own grounds and not simply as part of a larger diasporic consciousness. Without examining the intricacies in which the Indo-Caribbean identity operates, we risk simplifying the development of a significant portion of the Indian diaspora. As the number of third and fourth generation Indo-Caribbeans continue to increase U.S., it will be interesting to see if any particular part of their identity begins to take preference or if Indo-Caribbeans will continue to exist in the tension created by joining their Indian heritage and their Caribbean lives.

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