Since originally migrating as indentured labourers from throughout India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hindu Indians have dominated the agricultural sector and emerged as the prominent force of political opposition in Trinidad and Tobago. Their unique cultural and religious practices - the focus of strong ethnic sentiments - have developed in relation to historical conditions in Trinidad, marked by socio-economic constraints, intra-communal controversies, and inter-ethnic tensions.

Beginning with a comparative examination of socio-cultural change affecting Indians in a number of post-indenture settings (such as Fiji, Mauritius and elsewhere in the Caribbean), Dr Vertovec challenges fundamental categories such as the Indian family caste, and Hinduism itself. He suggests that especially with regard to developments among overseas Indians, these categories have often been seriously misunderstood. The Indian presence in Trinidad is explored by detailing ways in which these and other Hindu social, cultural, political and religious phenomena have been transformed in discourse with shifting historical contexts. The book also provides an analysis of how Trinidad's oil boom in the 1970s and subsequent recession in the 1980s affected heightening of Hindu ethnic sentiments, and it concludes with a detailed look at contemporary Hindu practices and their place within everyday rural life on the island.

This historical and anthropological study integrates a wealth of material and covers important issues particularly concerning the Indian diaspora, Caribbean Studies, and more generally the social scientific study of religion, cultural change, migration and ethnicity.

Hindu Trinidad includes a Foreword by Hugh Tinker (Professor Emeritus of the University of Lancaster, formerly Director of the Institute of Race Relations, and author of numerous seminal works on South Asia and the South Asian diaspora).

Steven Vertovec received a BA Magna cum laude in Religious Studies and Anthropology from the University of Colorado and, under a Regents' Fellowship, an MA in Religious Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara before gaining a doctorate in Social Anthropology from Oxford University. In addition to writing a number of articles on religion and ethnicity, he is co-editor of South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and editor of Aspects of the South Asian Diaspora (Oxford University Press, in press). Currently Dr Vertovec is a Research Fellow at Oxford University's School of Geography.
Warwick University Caribbean Studies

Hindu Trinidad
Religion, Ethnicity
and Socio-Economic Change

Steven Vertovec
To my mother and family

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Series Preface

The Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick was founded in 1984 in order to stimulate interest and research in a region which is only now beginning to receive academic recognition in its own right. In addition to the publication of the papers from annual symposiums which reflect the Centre’s comparative and inter-disciplinary approach, other volumes in the series will be published in disciplines within the arts and social sciences.

The present book is one of a number which the Centre is publishing on the Asian community in the Caribbean, and which started with Kelvin Singh’s study and collection of documents, Bloodstained Tombs: the Muharram Massacre 1884 (1988). The impact of Asians in the Caribbean, especially Trinidad and Guyana, has begun to attract scholarly attention and to be accorded the importance which it deserves. In Trinidad, economic change in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the prise de conscience among Indians. Among academics there has been an awareness that determinist economic theories alone are a blunt instrument for understanding the dynamics of Caribbean society. This study focuses on the complexities of ethnicity and on the importance of cultural and religious factors which have tended to be ignored in much of the social science literature on the region.

By focusing on Hindus, this book shows how, over time, patterns of Hindu cultural practices have been continuously transformed, in a complex interaction with particular social, economic and political factors. Although placing the Trinidad phenomenon within the wider framework of the Indian diaspora, and describing the preconditions in India which contributed to the initial migration, this study is mainly concerned with Hindu social organization and religious practice in agricultural villages where the majority of Trinidad Hindus live.

Dr Vertovec, who shows a remarkable empathy with those he is studying here, takes his place among those anthropologists who have enhanced our understanding of Caribbean societies.

Alistair Hennessy
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This book is based on a doctoral thesis (Vertovec 1987), parts of which have been published previously (Vertovec 1988, 1991a). Throughout the stages of research, and ultimately, of publication, I have been fortunate to have gained the assistance of a great many to whom I am thankful.

First, I must express my thanks to Dr Peter Riviere and Dr Colin Clarke who supervised work for the thesis at Oxford. Fieldwork in Trinidad and subsequent support would not have been possible without the grants received from the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Spalding Trusts, the Philip Bagby Bequest at Oxford’s Institute of Social Anthropology, the Sigma Xi Foundation, the Graduate Studies Committee of Oxford University, and Nuffield College, Oxford.

In Trinidad, I would have accomplished very little were it not for the warm hospitality, encouragement and assistance offered by a number of people. Foremost, I am ever grateful to Bridgelal Bachue and Balliram Moonasar for their friendship and help – without them, and the entire membership of the Panduranga Vitthala Mandir, simply none of this would have been possible. I am also very appreciative of Garib Sieuraj’s broad knowledge and unfailing willingness to talk with me. I must also thank, among many others: Hector Mohan and family, George Ramdial, Pandit Dhanraj Maharaj, Pandit Brahmedo Maharaj, Sundardaye and Dhanrajee Moonasar, Asing Nelson, Sr Colomba Byrne and Fr Hildebrand Green, Linda Hewitt and Ray Saney.

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Note on transcription
Throughout this book many terms are found in italics, which are my own transcriptions of Hindi or the creolized Bhojpuri found in Trinidad. These have been written as they were heard, without diacriticals or direct reference to standard transliterations of Hindi. A Glossary of the most frequently used non-English terms is found following the Appendix.

Foreword

Formerly, the interests of social anthropologists and sociologists were quite separate. Anthropologists wrote about villages and tribes. Sociologists described the cultures of nations and states. Now, the two coalesce. This study by Dr Vertovec cannot be called an account of the ‘little tradition’ nor of the great tradition: the terms are not relevant to his treatment of Trinidad. He moves from an account of the individual, and the home, to passages on the overall situation in Trinidad in the period of the oil boom and after. His theme is the persistence of Hinduism in spite of the pressures of a Christian culture, distilled through Western missions and Afro-Caribbean forms of religion, which occupy a superior place in society: and latterly the impact of a new materialism, stimulated by the oil boom. Although Hinduism in Trinidad incorporates much from traditional India, it is accepted as Hinduism, not as the ritual of a caste or cult. The community still recognizes certain caste distinctions, in particular the special place of the Brahman, but in general there is a common sense of belonging to the Hindu section as opposed to the ‘African’ or ‘Black’ group which historically has been dominant. In colonial times, the Creole Black was accepted as having a place, even if an inferior place, in the dominant Western culture. The Indian (or East Indian in Caribbean terms) was an outsider, though a few might gain acceptance by adopting the values of Christianity and frequently by disguising their Indian names: thus, Krishna Deonarine became Adrian Cola Rienzi, and a national leader in the earlier phase of politics. This particular ambivalence was ended when, with the extension of the franchise, an Indian constituency emerged. However, although the Indian population is probably the largest in Trinidad, it does not form a majority: the Indian politicians therefore operated the politics of accommodation, not of confrontation as in neighbouring Guyana. They have not responded to Black Power movements by invoking Indian separatism. This has saved Trinidad from the extremism found in Guyana (initiated not by the Indians but by Black political leadership).

The Indian community has emphasized its separateness in religious rather than political terms, as Dr Vertovec so effectively illustrates in his book. There have been separatist Indian political parties, but the preferred course is that of alliance with Black politicians. This strategy has brought dividends to Indian political leaders, though not noticeably to the rank and file.
One reason, perhaps, why the East Indians of Trinidad have not spoken more effectively is that their leading intellectuals have made a second migration to the West: one thinks of V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon who have made their homes in Britain (with Selvon latterly domiciled in Canada). Theirs is a metropolitan audience; a Trinidad readership is incidental. Hence, the evidence of a sympathetic outsider like Steven Vertovec is still important in completing the picture, both for the young intellectuals of Trinidad and for the wider audience.

Hindus in Trinidad and Tobago – most of whom are now in the third, fourth, or fifth generation since their forebears came to the region as indentured labourers – currently engage in a wide range of individual, domestic and communal religious activities. Many of these activities, in their form, content and organization, are identical to ones practised in India; others exhibit modifications which have evolved over several decades, and some are unique to the Caribbean. So it is with several facets of Indian culture found in Trinidad and Tobago: an observer may note close resemblances between certain gestures, expressions, dispositions, values, aesthetics, implements and social relationships found among Indians in the Caribbean and in parts of India. Many other such facets of culture among Trinidad Indians, to be sure, are quite unlike traditional facets in India – instead, these are wholly Trinidadian, usually shared with all members of society. While their ‘non-Indian’ traits are rather taken-for-granted by many Hindus of Trinidad, the traits which they have come to regard as being of pristine Indian origin – particularly religious phenomena – are increasingly being singled out, accentuated and prized by Hindus themselves as indicators of communal exclusivity and worth in a culturally diverse society. In other words, such traits are gaining increasing value as markers of a distinct ethnicity.

This book broadly charts the development of Hindu society and culture in Trinidad, from pre-migration conditions through settlement and growth in the island, to recent economic shifts and organizational trends. It traces the evolution of many Hindu socio-cultural forms, which are now key markers of Trinidad Hindu ethnicity, by way of their origins and course of historical alteration, enhancement, routinization and institutionalization. Further, it describes current modes of Hindu religious activity, underscoring their importance in everyday life for individuals, families, and local communities.

The study by no means presumes that, in Trinidad, Hindus represent some kind of homogeneous mass. Virtually since Indians were introduced to the island, there were – or have emerged – among Hindus marked differences in class interests, devotional orientations, caste or regionally-derived predilections, rural/urban lifestyles, and local inter-ethnic relations. The initial chapters undertake a general and comparative treatment of Indian migration, resettlement, and socio-cultural change in Trinidad, while
the latter chapters focus on contemporary Hindu social organization and religious practice as found in rural, agriculturally-centred villages (in which the majority of Trinidadians live).

All too much in the pertinent literature, in the understanding of the public, and in the approaches of many academics, the issues of Indian cultural persistence and attenuation are treated as if culture involved some tangible stuff that one either continued to, or no longer continued to, ‘have’. The pre-migration traditions – including supposedly concise categories such as caste, family form, and religion – are often treated as kinds of ‘baggage’ which the original migrants ‘brought with them’, either to be discarded piecemeal or altogether, or ‘kept’ until post-indenture conditions allowed their re-emergence. In this way it has come to be assumed that, with regard to certain neat cultural categories, Indians in Trinidad for the most part ‘picked up where they left off’ in India. It is here suggested that such a view misunderstands much of the nature of culture and culture-change, and hence misconstrues both the history of Indian culture and society in Trinidad and the present-day development of Hindu ethnicity.

Instead, the approach used in this book is one which sees cultural phenomena as being continuously reproduced in discourse with social/economic/political surroundings. These surroundings themselves are usually in flux, so that the process of cultural reproduction within such conditions often yields some form of modification. Further, the cultural phenomena in question are not viewed as kinds of tangible stuff possessed and carried about by persons, but as internalized types of relationship, behavioural and emotional dispositions, sets of symbols, techniques, and conceptual orders – all capable of being articulated in a number of ways – which individuals and groups of people reproduce by ‘doing’ them. In brief, this study essentially employs certain perspectives on culture and culture change drawn from what has been called a ‘practice’ approach (Bourdieu 1977, Ortner 1984).

Here, there are three guiding premises. First, no single ‘Indian cultural tradition’ ever existed among migrants to Trinidad – and therefore, such a tradition could not be re-established abroad. Second, Indian immigrants and their descendants did not simply continue to ‘have’ or ‘not have’ pre-migration cultural forms, but, since landing in Trinidad, have continuously drawn upon pre-migration cultural phenomena and, subsequently, upon their permutations, thus creating a series of hybrid and other modified cultural forms – nonetheless ones which represent an unbroken link with traditions found in nineteenth-century India. Third, due to the place Indians (particularly Hindus) have been generally relegated to within Trinidad’s social/economic/political structure – and given the changing nature of that structure over the past century and more – new types of relationship among Indians and between Indians and others (particularly Africans) have peri-

odically wrought changes in the ‘doing’ of Indian culture. That is, through an evolving discourse between Trinidadians and each overall historical context in which they have found themselves, the natural process of reproducing culture – of drawing upon the internalized symbols, dispositions, relationships, conceptual orders, etc. and enacting these in behaviour or manifesting these in material form – has wrought transformations of many kinds. Often such cultural transformation occurred inadvertently, sometimes through conscious, rational choice and collective mobilization. Moreover, such an approach recognizes that Indians in Trinidad have not merely reacted to contextual change in a secondary, passive manner, but have at all times been active agents in their own social and cultural development.

The following study points to a variety of key cultural transformations, suggesting a host of factors, in each case, which can be seen to have conditioned such change. Chapter 1 is divided into two parts: the first outlines various historical circumstances in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries surrounding the system of indentured migration from India and the settlement of Indians in foreign colonies – circumstances, it is demonstrated comparatively, which in each case played a large part in channelling cultural change in certain directions. The second part examines in detail three key spheres of Indian culture – kinship and household, caste, and Hinduism – and how these were transformed through the process of indentured migration to foreign colonies.

Turning specifically to the history of Indians in Trinidad, Chapter 2 is comprised of three parts. Part I describes social trends among Indian immigrants and their descendants: from developments on estates, through the establishment of independent Indian villages, to the rise of Indian associations and party politics. Part II offers an account of the process of cultural amalgamation among the immigrants, who were drawn from a wide, culturally diverse region of (primarily, North) India. In Part III, features of religious change affecting Hinduism are assessed, including the changing role of Brahmans, trends toward congregationalism and a unitary form of Hinduism, and controversies surrounding the reformist sect known as the Arya Samaj.

Chapter 3 begins with an account of social and economic development in Trinidad, which points out the longstanding deprivation to which rural Indians have been subjected within Trinidad’s racially-conditioned hierarchy. The chapter subsequently describes the unprecedented impact of the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, when the social and economic structures of the nation were rapidly transformed, when the government continued to bolster racial hegemony through selective spending programmes, and yet when even the Indians of remote rural areas nonetheless received sudden injections of wealth. Rather than dissipating ethnic and racial senti-
At present over eight-and-a-half million persons of South Asian descent live outside South Asia. Although within the last few decades, emigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have swollen in number, the bulk of overseas South Asians are Indians (see Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990). Backgrounds, migration histories and subsequent trajectories of settlement and community development are significantly varied, however, such that contemporary social patterns and cultural practices among overseas Indians differ widely.

In ancient times, Indian experience overseas took the form of the expansion of empire into Southeast Asia and Indonesia, and of the incursion of traders into East Africa. Yet these longstanding links abroad never produced sustained Indian communities overseas. The modern Indian diaspora has generally arisen through: (a) migration of labourers under various terms of contract (indenture, kanganı, maistry) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to places such as Mauritius, the West Indies, Fiji, and East Africa and Natal; (b) ‘free’ or ‘passage’ migration of merchants, especially in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries to East and Southern Africa; (c) the transport of educated Indians as colonial administrators and clerks, prior to the Second World War, to places like Burma and Kenya; (d) travel by students, especially since the end of the war, to Western industrial countries; (e) migration of semi-skilled workers, particularly to Britain, in the 1950s and 1960s, and (f) to countries of the Middle East since the 1970s; (g) the resettlement of Indian professionals, particularly in the United States, Canada, and Australia since the 1960s; (h) secondary migration within the diaspora since the 1970s (especially as political or economic refugees), including the movement of Indo-Surinamese to the Netherlands, Indo-Fijians to New Zealand, and Indo-Guyanese to the United States and Canada.

Comparative study of overseas Indian communities can prove important not only for providing insights regarding specific communities, but also for increasing our understanding of fundamental features of Indian society and culture. Whereas general comparisons of variables affecting migration and community development throughout the Indian diaspora have been conducted elsewhere (see Jayawardena 1968a, Vertovec 1987, Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990), this chapter examines certain basic issues concerning...
Indian indentured migration, resettlement abroad, and subsequent changes in fundamental spheres of Indian society and culture. An understanding of these issues will serve to inform the book’s more detailed study of the Hindu community in Trinidad.

Part I: Indian indentured migration and settlement overseas

Colonialism and indenture

The large-scale emigration of people from the subcontinent to tropical colonies throughout the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was wholly conditioned by matters of imperialist economy, and within that, substantially by a single commodity. By the nineteenth century, a large share of the world economy was bound up in sugar. The place of sugar in the expansion of colonialism and capitalism has been a major subject in historical studies of the period. Throughout the century, imperialist governments vied for control over sugar-producing territories in order to reap the substantial benefits of meeting Europe’s burgeoning demand for the product. Sugar considerations played prominent roles in determining strategies regarding wars, treaties and mandates, modes of administration, patterns of colonial development, and the mass-movement of labourers around the world – including slavery and indenture.

Following the abolition of slavery in colonial territories (British in 1834, French in 1848, Dutch in 1863) and the expiration of mandatory periods of apprenticeship for the freed slaves, planters desperately sought for cheap labour to maintain the expansion of the sugar industry. A contemporary view (long accepted in a number of historical studies) maintained that the planters’ search for new sources of labour after abolition was due to labour shortages following an exodus, or an unwillingness to work, among the freed African slaves. Yet Hall (1978), among others, shows that the ex-slaves did not flee to hinterlands, and that they wished to work as free men and women. Instead, recent studies indicate planters’ motives were more manipulative: after abolition, by increasing calls for cheap, controllable labour from outside their respective colonies (even in times of actual low labour need), planters could ensure depressed agricultural wages within the colony and could mitigate against the possibility of the African ex-slaves becoming a proletariat class which might threaten production and profits by making demands and withholding labour (Carter 1987, Mangru 1987).

Various immigration schemes were tried by the colonial authorities from place to place, including the importation of workers from Madeira, continental Europe, West Africa and China. Yet none of the groups fulfilled the needs and desires of planters, either due to costs of recruitment and transport, unreliability of work, or simple inability to thrive in a tropical climate. From 1834, planters in Mauritius were relatively successful in importing contract labourers from India; their model soon spread to sugar colonies around the world. The pervasive framework of British colonial administration provided the substantial organization that was needed, both in India and overseas, to create what was deemed in its own time ‘a new system of slavery’. Even given the costs of recruitment and transport (often undertaken by local governments of the colonies which were dominated by sugar planters), indentured Indian migration was quickly accepted by local plantocracies as the most beneficial (that is, profitable) solution to the post-abolition condition. Importation of Indian ‘coolies’ came to be regarded as the economic salvation of a number of sugar-producing colonies, whether British or other. ‘Give me my heart’s desire in coolies,’ wrote one planter in British Guiana, ‘and I will make you a million hogsheads of sugar without stirring the Colony’ (Bronkhurst 1883: 98). And indeed, following the introduction of a formal system of transporting Indian labourers overseas, ‘The success of the traffic from an economic point of view may be measured in the almost meteoric rise in export figures for plantation products’ (Cumpston 1956: 160).

During the period from 1834 (when Mauritius was the first to receive Indian immigrants) to 1917 (when the last shipment of Indians left Calcutta after the Indian Government put an end to what they came to regard as an inhumane system), well over one million Indians ventured abroad to a variety of destinations (see Table 1.1). In the case of each foreign colony, the migration of Indian labourers was governed by similar modes of contract and recruitment.

Though particular features varied between colonies and through the years, the most common features of indenture included: contracts to labour for at least five years in a foreign colony (usually on a plantation); transport to a sub-depot, a port of embarkation and abroad, as well as maintenance throughout the process; while labouring under contract, receipt of a basic pay, often on a task basis, supply of basic housing, rations, and medical attention; and partly or fully paid return passage to India following expiration of the contract (sometimes on the conditions that the labourer work an additional five years in the colony, and that the right to return-passage be claimed immediately upon eligibility).

The system for recruitment of indentured emigrants evolved over the years, coming under increased regulation so as, ideally, to avoid deception and exploitation (though by the nature of the system itself, these were unavoidable). A bureaucratic structure governed the vast operation, managed by Emigrant Agents, through Sub-Agents, to licensed recruiters and their unlicensed assistants (see Lal 1983: 20–42).
Table 1.1 Indentured Indian immigration by colony in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Indian population by country, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colony (Country)</th>
<th>period</th>
<th>Indian immigrants</th>
<th>Indian pop. (est.) 1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>1834–1912</td>
<td>453 063</td>
<td>623 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Guiana</td>
<td>1838–1917</td>
<td>238 909</td>
<td>424 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Guyana)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natal</td>
<td>1860–1911</td>
<td>152 184</td>
<td>750 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(South Africa)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad</td>
<td>1845–1917</td>
<td>143 939</td>
<td>421 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reunion</td>
<td>1829–1924</td>
<td>118 000</td>
<td>125 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>1879–1916</td>
<td>60 969</td>
<td>300 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guadeloupe</td>
<td>1854–1885</td>
<td>42 326</td>
<td>23 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Africa</td>
<td>1895–1901</td>
<td>39 771</td>
<td>79 000/430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kenya/Uganda)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>1854–1885</td>
<td>36 420</td>
<td>50 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch Guiana</td>
<td>1873–1916</td>
<td>34 000</td>
<td>124 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Surinam)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martinique</td>
<td>1854–1889</td>
<td>25 509</td>
<td>16 450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Guiana</td>
<td>1804–1876</td>
<td>19 296</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seychelles</td>
<td>1899–1916</td>
<td>6 319</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Lucia</td>
<td>1858–1895</td>
<td>4 350</td>
<td>3 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>1856–1885</td>
<td>3 200</td>
<td>3 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Vincent</td>
<td>1861–1880</td>
<td>2 472</td>
<td>5 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Sources for these figures are Deerr 1938: 98; Davis 1951: 101; Roberts & Byrne 1966: 129; Gregory 1971: 53; Tinker 1974: 104; Lal 1979: 18. For various reasons (cited by the source authors), these figures are not entirely accurate. However, they do provide a relative indication of proportions. Further, it should be noted that these figures do not represent net immigration.

2 The sources for these figures are Tandon & Raphael 1984; The Economist 1984; Singaravelou 1975. Data not available are designated "n.a."

3 This total is for the year 1967.

4 These figures are much lower, of course, than those prior to the expulsions of 1972 (see Twaddle 1975a; Tandon & Raphael 1984). In 1970, the Indian population of Kenya was 182 000 while that of Uganda was 76 000.

There were three Emigration Agents in the main port of embarkation, Calcutta: one for acquiring workforces for British Guiana and Natal, one for Trinidad, Jamaica, Mauritius, and Fiji, and a final one for Dutch Guiana (Surinam). Each Agent office had its own depot for interviewing and housing emigrants prior to embarkation, and each went about its own business under the jurisdiction of the Protector of Emigrants for the Government of Bengal. Numerous sub-depots were found throughout North India in cities like Patna, Muzaffarpur, Gorakhpur, Fyzabad, Cawnpore, and Allahabad (by 1915 there were 58 such sub-depots, employing a total of some 600 recruiters; Hill 1919).

Under direct licence from the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta or Madras, but employed by the regional Sub-Agents, indigenous labour recruiters roamed the countryside seeking potential recruits for indentured emigration. The number of active recruiters varied each year depending on demand, and were paid by commission, salary, or both. Heavy fines were levied if they were found to have unduly coerced individuals, and licences were revoked when other misconduct – such as making false promises to persons or kidnapping women to fill quotas – was discovered (Jenkins 1871: 360–2; Weller 1968: 5–7). The recruiters, and particularly their unlicensed assistants (arkatis), were generally looked down upon locally as being of a wholly unscrupulous nature. In 1896, the Emigrant Agent for Fiji noted, 'In many villages the recruiter dare not show himself for fear of personal violence, and everywhere he is the prey of the police and court official of the lower grades' (in Gillion 1956: 141). Yet after pointing out that the recruiters came from a variety of backgrounds (including some 40 per cent Muslims), Lal (1983: 22–5) suggests that their disrepute likely amounts to an historical overstatement.

While the flow was channelled by colonial bureaucracy, 'The volume of the emigration was primarily determined by the demand for labour [in the colonies], which was in turn influenced by world sugar prices' (Gillion 1956: 140). This point is underscored by Carter (1987: 116), who writes:

Recruitment was to a large extent controlled and determined by economic interests within and outside India: its volume and characteristics corresponded to planter demands and preferences more strongly than it reflected aspirations of individual migrants.

In the colonies, also, changes in legislative mandates and in the availability of government funding further influenced the numbers and source locations of migrants drawn throughout the years. Nonetheless, indigenous conditions in contemporary India must also be stressed as contributing fundamentally to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century indentured Indian emigration.
Conditions in India

The first Indians to be recruited systematically for indentured labour overseas were the Dhangars of Chota Nagpur (people belonging to the Santal, Munda, and Oraon tribes in a hilly area at the conjunction of West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa). Because their traditional modes of slash-and-burn cultivation increasingly came under pressure (from their growing population and through discouragement of the practice by the British), Dhangars came to hire themselves as labourers in various parts of North India and quickly gained a favourable reputation as reliable, hard workers. These ‘hill coolies’ were eventually attracted to employment opportunities in Calcutta, where they were actively sought by recruiters on behalf of foreign planters (see Tinker 1974: 45–6; Deerr 1938: 94). By the 1850s, Dhangars comprised at least half the total population of indentured emigrants (it has been suggested that most of the other migrants in the early years of indenture were the ‘marginals’ of urban areas: vagrants, prostitutes, beggars; cf. Tinker 1974: 51–2). But for reasons historians have yet to explain, these tribal migrants suffered much higher death rates abroad than any others. Luckily for them, the expansion of the tea industry in eastern India (in the Duars, Assam, Sylhet) enabled the Dhangars to sell their much-sought labour to places other than plantations overseas. With the loss of the much-desired Dhangars, and planter dissatisfaction with urban marginals, there followed a move to gain labour recruits from further afield. Tinker (ibid.: 52) writes,

It was necessary to cast the net more widely, and the recruiters turned their eyes towards those areas from which manpower was drawn for the army and other services such as the police: the Gangetic plains. The search was concentrated upon the districts lying around Banaras, and forming the eastern part of what was then the North-West Provinces (later United Provinces) and the extreme west of the vast Bengal Presidency (the area which in the twentieth century became the province of Bihar).

In these areas, potential recruits were not few, for by the mid- to late-1800s, the condition of these parts was dire.

During the nineteenth century, a combination of factors created a situation in which more Indians than ever before were close to destitution (particularly in the areas of the North mentioned above by Tinker).

(1) Certainly the major famines of 1804, 1837, 1861 and 1908 contributed to the worsening plight of North Indians (Kondapi 1951: 4; cf. Mangru 1987: 68–71). Also, between 1860–1908, twenty localized famines and shortages drastically affected the wellbeing of numerous rural populations.

(2) There was increasing population growth throughout the region, compounding high population densities in various provinces: in the eastern United Provinces just after the middle of the nineteenth century, population densities are suggested to have ranged from 750/mi² in many places up to 1000/mi² in the district of Basti (Lal 1979: 21).

(3) The soil became overworked (largely because of economic shifts noted below); consequently productivity was insufficient to provide for such large populations (Saha 1970: 70).

(4) Local handicraft industries were rapidly declining and causing widespread unemployment – mainly due, many historians suggest, to the capitalist endeavours of the ruling British (see Lal 1983: 75–7). For instance, Kondapi (1951: 2–3) explains,

The industrial and commercial needs of England necessitated the transformation of India from a manufacturing power to that of a market for the supply of raw materials and the consumption of British manufactures. [Indian economic patterns were based on] cotton and silk, calico printing and chinta, tanning and dyeing, building and brick-laying, carpentry and stone-cutting, furniture and boat-building, working in iron and copper metals, gold and silver filigree work, wood-carving and bronze work, pottery and embroidery. Almost all these industries were domestic occupations and simple crafts of hamlets. Spinning and weaving which constituted a great national industry gave employment to millions irrespective of all caste considerations.

[Through a series of policies meant to stifle Indian export and turn India into a consumer of British goods,] the British manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could not have competed on equal terms’ [R. Dutt].

(5) Consequently patterns of trade and commerce were greatly transformed and relocated. Facilitated by the construction of railways, the economy of western Uttar Pradesh comparatively gained at the expense of other areas. ‘By the turn of the century the eastern region, which had more than half of the province’s population, came only to have a quarter of the share of total trade, while the western region controlled the rest’ (Lal 1979: 58).

(6) Agricultural labour became the only alternative for many economically displaced persons. But for those who managed to find employment in agriculture, wages were low; the harvesting of their own crops (for those with land) was often in jeopardy if wage labour was undertaken; fields of employers were often miles distant; and, above all, the work was only seasonal (Rothermund 1978).

(7) Economic decline in other sectors left little room for an expansion in
agriculture which might have absorbed the growing (and increasingly unemployed) population (cf. Saha 1970: 70).

(8) Perhaps the most central factor which stunted the growth of rural economies was the transformation of traditional landlord-tenant relations (particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century). This was directly brought about by the imposition of British policies for the collection of revenue. Traditionally, peasants’ payments for the use of land were made in the form of shares in the yearly harvest, given to local landlords who were regarded as representatives of regional nobility. The British legal machinery turned the zamindars and taluqdaras (landlords) into persons responsible for extracting, as rent from their tenants, set amounts of cash regardless of the land’s production in any year.

(9) The requirement to pay rents in cash put enormous pressure on peasants. Many had to change their patterns of cultivation to grow cash crops (Neale 1962: 65). Often they were also forced to sell their crops at low prices simply to obtain rent money. The grain dealer (who often doubled as a moneylender) would sell the produce back to the peasants, later in the year, at higher prices and usually on credit, causing the peasants to go deeper and deeper into debt (Lal 1983: 83–4). Moreover, due to economic pressures on the dealer-lender himself, he would often have to become tightfisted and withhold loans or spontaneously demand repayment (Rothermund 1978: 8–9).

(10) In order to keep the growing cash-and-rent economy alive, lands belonging to families for generations had to be subdivided and subletted; this decreased the economic viability of many plots (Rothermund 1969: 354–5).

(11) The rate of rents spiralled upwards over the years, making the predicament of tenant farmers worse and worse (Lal 1979: 29).

(12) In increasing numbers, those who could not pay their rents were evicted. Already by 1873, ‘notices of eviction were being issued at a rate of 60,000 annually, with the object not of clearing the land but of forcing the tenant to submit to an enhanced rent’ (Metcalf 1964: 134).

It is clear that these severe economic conditions favoured emigration, from the viewpoints both of the peasant and the colonial administrator. In 1888, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal reported, with reference to the economic difficulties of the times:

> The population of the districts specified by the Government of Bengal as those in which the pressure is most felt exceeds fifteen millions and behind these there are the inhabitants of Dudh and a part of the N.W. Provinces who seem to be, so far as the landless labourers are concerned, in much the same position as those who reside in the worst part of Bihar. The case requires the transfer of millions, while the most sanguine can only hope to move hundreds of thousands. . . .

> Emigration, whether to Burma, Assam, or the colonies, on any scale which can be reasonably contemplated, is not . . . a panacea for the evils of the working classes, but it is at least a palliative; and as such it should not be despised. (in Saha 1970: 66)

Although economic causes were likely foremost, non-economic reasons for emigration doubtless came into play for many Indians. These may have included (a) a frustration with oppressive policies following the Mutiny of 1857 (see Metcalf 1964), (b) a flight from domestic problems or (c) criminal proceedings, and (d) simply ‘the desire for adventure’ (Kuper 1960: 10). Non-economic reasons were perhaps the cause of migration for many of the large number of single women who became indentured (Lal [1983] shows that 64 per cent of women emigrants to Fiji were listed as single). For them, Emmer (1986: 248) suggests, emigration was a ‘vehicle of female emancipation’ (cf. ibid.: 97–114).

Despite the many forces acting to promote emigration from India, Crooke (1897: 326) nevertheless wrote:

> The fact is that the Hindu has little of the migratory instinct, and all his prejudices tend to keep him at home. As a resident member of a tribe, caste or village, he occupies a definite social position, of which emigration is likely to deprive him. When he leaves his home, he loses the sympathy and support of his clansmen and neighbours; he misses the village council, which regulates his domestic affairs; the services of the family priest, which he considers essential to his salvation. Every village has its own local shrine, where the deities . . . have been propitiated and controlled by the constant service of the votaries. Once the wanderer leaves the hamlet where he was born, he enters the domains of new and unknown deities, who, being strangers, are of necessity hostile to him, and may resent his intrusion by sending famine, disease, or death upon the luckless stranger. The emigrant, again, to a distant land, finds extreme difficulty in selecting suitable husbands for his daughters.

> . . . Should he die in exile, he may fail to win the heaven of the gods, because no successor will make the due funeral oblations, and no trusted family priest be there to arrange the last journey of his spirit. So he may wander through the ages a starving, suffering, malignant ghost, because his obsequies have not been duly performed.

Crooke’s points are exaggerated, for internal migrations (and, of course, pilgrimages) have been common throughout India’s past. As Lal (1983:
67–8) demonstrates, a large share of the indentured emigrant workforce was recruited outside individuals’ places of origin, particularly in urban areas where they had already migrated to find work. Other peasants had left their homes and bonded themselves in kamiuti, a kind of semi-slavery undertaken by some of the poorest people (Tinker 1974: 53).

The concept of kala pani (‘black waters’, or the sea generally) has often been regarded as presenting a significant ideological deterrent against travel abroad. If Hindus travel across the sea, it is supposed, they become almost unremediably polluted. Many writers on Indian migration have seen this as a formidable conceptual barrier; but this, too, has probably been exaggerated. Basham (1964: 162–6) outlines a long history of Indian seafaring and travel abroad, and points out that religious interdictions in the Dharmashastras were meant primarily for Brahmans, and to a lesser extent for other high castes, not for those of lower orders (nor, of course, for Muslims; cf. Kuper 1960: 2). But even for those orthodox high-caste persons who, for whatever reason, were determined to go abroad, there were indeed doctrinal and practical solutions (see Sastri 1910). Regarding the concept of kala pani, Basham (1964: 163) concludes

Despite all these bans it is evident . . . that Indians of all castes, including Brahmans, frequently travelled by sea. . . . The texts which forbade or discouraged ocean voyages cannot have been followed by more than a small section of the population.

Still, there were doubtless other ideas militating against indentured migration which were common among Indians. Gillion (1956: 142) suggests these included (1) a general dread of the unknown, (2) the belief that caste duties and rights would be interfered with, (3) the fear of a forced conversion to Christianity, (4) a general dislike of an alien system, on the part of the Indian upper classes with effect on the lower, and (5) a suspicion that the whole business was some kind of fraud. Even after they embarked on migration overseas, some Indians came to find the prospect wholly unacceptable; suicides were not uncommon onboard ship or on colonial estates (See Gillion 1962; Lal 1983).

Given the variety of reasons for emigrating, and notwithstanding the ideas against it, indentured migrants came to be drawn from a vast area of the subcontinent. It has been mentioned how the first indentured migrants were largely tribal Dhangars originally from Chota Nagpur, and how a recruitment strategy extended to wider areas followed the loss of Dhangars to other sources of employment. Recruiters’ methods were instrumental in leading to the migration of labourers from a wide variety of locations and social backgrounds. A contemporary account makes this point:

[R]ecruiters hang about the bazaars and the high roads, where they pick up loiterers and induce them to accompany them to the depots and agree to emigrate, by relieving their immediate wants and by representations, no doubt often much overdrawn, of the prospects before them. The male emigrant more often than not is unaccompanied by any member of his family, and indeed, the family is frequently not even aware that he has left the country until (possibly some years afterwards) he reopens communications. Since, except in times of scarcity or of famine, the supply of casual recruits of this kind is not likely to be large at any one place, the net of the recruiters has to be spread far afield. . . .

(BPP 1910: 17)

In this way labourers from largely the same broad regions were shipped to plantations around the world. North India sent far more recruits than South India, mainly because of planters’ preferences for workers drawn from the former (see Mangru 1983; Vertovec n.d. 2, and Chapter 2, below). Within North India, Bihar always figured largely in the supply of indentured emigrants, while the eastern districts of the North-West Provinces and Oudh (both later subsumed as Uttar Pradesh) became the greatest source by the later part of the nineteenth century. Colonial plantations regularly received Indian labourers from a wide variety of places in India; for example, Jayawardena (1979) records the presence of migrants from 94 districts of India on a single plantation in Fiji.

In any given year, the number of recruits from each district varied considerably (See Appendix). The reasons for the fluctuations were manifold. These included the differential effects of: recruitment strategies by local agencies and sub-depots (often following the directives of foreign planters), the number of licences granted in certain areas, and local kidnapping scares or other rumours regarding indenture which put off potential recruits (cf. BPP 1910: 18). It was the variation of local ecological and economic conditions, however, which had the greatest impact on the scale of emigration from certain parts of India. This phenomenon is best described in a Report for the year 1885 by the Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta:

The manifestly greater activity of emigration from the Lower Provinces [Bengal and Bihar], as compared with that from the North-West and Oudh, is attributable to the comparatively high price of food grains, the result of a persistent drought that prevailed during the year throughout the area from which the largest number of labourers was drawn. For while the crops in Bengal and Behar [sic] were suffering more or less from want of rain that led to scarcity, the local markets of the North-West Provinces and Oudh appear to have been comparatively well stocked. . . . [T]he poorest labouring classes, who ordinarily emigrate, were feeling.
the full effects of the high prices of food grains in Patna, Gya, Shahabad, Monghyr and neighboring localities. (Protector of Emigrants 1885: 8).

The vicissitude in the flow of migrants from different places in India each year meant that persons with diverse linguistic, social (especially caste) and cultural backgrounds arrived at foreign destinations in continuously fluctuating numbers (cf. Saha 1970: 33). This would confound the process of gradual social and cultural consolidation among indentured labourers on colonial estates (see Chapter 2). Other demographic factors that were in many ways more significant also obtained.

Since colonial planters sought the most able-bodied workers, recruitment policy was developed towards acquiring persons ideally in their early twenties. Throughout the period of indentured migration, two-thirds of the Indians shipped to foreign plantations were between the ages of 20 and 30. Jayawardena (1979: 61) describes one of the important ramifications of this:

The relative youth of the bulk of the population meant that there was no generation of seniors with a sufficient experience of village life to guide the younger people toward a sense of community and common tradition, even were they able to do so under plantation conditions.

Although planters were most concerned with gaining men for labouring purposes, they agreed with colonial officials that a substantial proportion of migrants should be women (less, they reckoned, to provide labour than to create stable domestic relationships among workers on the plantations). The average proportion of sexes among indentured emigrants was 68.2 per cent males, 31.8 per cent females (Lal 1979: 19). In actuality, the allotment of each sex varied year by year and ship by ship. A series of regulations were authorized, over the years, setting the ratio of sexes which were to obtain for each shipful of emigrants from India. In order to attract the indenture of women, by the early 1900s recruiters received commissions of Rs 45/- (£3) for each man contracted and Rs 75/- (£5) to Rs 100/- (£6.13.4) for each woman.

Despite rates frequently twice as much as for a male, with bonuses added where more than 3 women are provided with 5 men, and deduction where this proportion is not maintained over a season’s recruiting, the greatest difficulty is experienced by Immigration Agents in obtaining the requisite number of women. . . . Registering Officers could, and frequently did refuse to register single women until enquiries by the Police confirmed that they were in fact Widows, had been deserted by their husbands, or, at any rate, were not wanted by them. These enquiries often taking weeks, the women in the interval became unwilling and were lost to the Agency.

And woe betide the recruiter who relying on the word of a woman – who may have wandered from a distant district – that she was a widow, investigation subsequently brought to light she had run away from an aged husband or a tyrannical mother-in-law. Unless he can clear himself, a heavy fine or even imprisonment and the cancellation of his licence are likely to be his lot.

For this and like reasons Sub-Agents and recruiters found the recruitment of women a risky and often an unprofitable task, with the result that seldom more than the minimum proportion were embarked over a season’s recruiting. (Hill 1919: 48)

Overall, then, an ebb and flow in the numbers of migrants of different sexes, castes, linguistic groups, regionally-varying cultural backgrounds, religious sects, and tribes created a heterogeneous aggregation of labourers on colonial plantations. The specific history of migration and makeup of each indentured population had basic consequences for determining the subsequent rate and direction of socio-cultural change among respective overseas Indian communities.

Heterogeneity among the indentured Indians (a situation preferred by planters) acted to stultify trends toward the solidarity of the Indian community until some more homogeneous socio-cultural pattern emerged: usually this would have to be built on the foundations of some kind of Indian lingua franca, and patterned on a set of institutions originally practised by a numerically dominant group of migrants from a particular area of India. The plantations themselves became the contexts within which the course of change was specifically channelled; after the period of indentureship, the particular socio-cultural forms which emerged were modified further in relation to wider conditions prevailing in each colony.

Conditions in the colonies

The regimented and dreary life of indentured labourers on colonial estates – subject to cramped living in lines of barracks amidst poor sanitation and disease, with toilsome labour in tropical conditions under stern supervision – provided little chance for Indian migrants to conduct themselves according to ways which they had known in their home villages. Speckmann (1965: 36–7) lists a number of important features characterizing the plantation context in Surinam (which in many ways suffices to summarize conditions in most other colonies), seen as a set of
factors which forced the immigrant group to adapt itself, but also factors which led to isolation and conservation. The first category of these factors is reckoned to include:

- the fact that recruitment took place from various parts of India;
- the new ecological conditions, which compelled adjustment;
- the circumstance that the immigrant community was to a large extent a society of males, as a result of which normal family relations were absent;
- the organizational structure of the plantation;
- contact with the European and Creole supervisory staff;
- the fact that the immigrants were forced to live together with other groups of workers, of a different ethnic origin.

The second group of factors includes:

- the nature of the decision-taking when the emigrant was induced to emigrate. Emigration was of a temporary character, as a result of which ‘migrability’ was small;
- the immigrant legislation of [each colony], which created a special position for the group;
- the great amount of freedom allowed the Indians to maintain their own habits and customs;
- the only slight degree of labour specialization, as a result of which the group’s feelings of solidarity were strengthened;
- the low social status of plantation labourers, and their low standard of living, as a result of which the immigrant group was placed in a position on the periphery of the social structure;
- the immigrants’ location on the plantations, which aggravated their geographical isolation;
- the differing culture of the immigrant group vis-a-vis the rest of the country, which makes it possible to speak of an Indian subculture;
- the presence among the immigrants of priests, who could function as new leaders;
- the generally negative attitude towards the Creole population;
- the negative attitude of the Creole, who saw in the immigrant an uncivilized being and a competitor whose presence kept wages low;
- the social proximity of the old country, owing to the regular supply of new indentured labourers. [As suggested above, however, their initially heterogeneous cultural and linguistic makeup would not necessarily contribute to practicing any specific socio-cultural pattern.]

‘These factors were especially active in the “plantation period”’ Speckmann (ibid.; 38) concludes, “but their continued effect is distinctly traceable throughout the further history of the group.”

Because indentured labourers were prohibited from leaving the estate grounds, there was an ‘involution’ of relationships; plantations embodied a ‘set of isolated units of production and consumption, social entities in themselves’ (Emmer 1984: 94). In Fiji, estates were much smaller in size than those in most other colonies, with the consequence of an even more intense propinquity of interaction among resident workers than in other colonies (Jayawardena 1979: 92). In such contexts, close bonds among migrants were gradually formed across the significant cultural and linguistic divides characteristic of their home districts in India. Early signs of communal solidarity among indentured Indians were eventually evident in protests and strikes against oppressive estate conditions (Jayawardena 1968b: 418–32; cf. Tinker 1974: 228–9, Hoeft 1989).

At the heart of the modified system of relationships which developed on plantations were changed domestic structures and patterns of authority. Jayawardena (1963: 20–1) explains how shifts in these were connected:

[N]ew residential arrangements, the changed economic basis of the domestic group, and the substitution of the manager’s control for that of the village elders contributed to the establishment of norms more consonant with the plantation.

For instance, in regulating the lives of their labourers, managers acted in terms of their own cultural norms. They housed one nuclear family in each dwelling and provided new accommodation for the children when they got married, usually in another part of the plantation. This was deliberate policy, for they wished to eliminate tensions arising from the difficult position of the resident daughter-in-law. As a rule, no married couple was allowed to reside in the parental home for longer than a few years.

The power of the father in the family was circumscribed to the extent that he was no longer the sole trustee of the economic resources of the domestic group. Adult sons and wives could evade his control in that they had access to economic resources and accommodation that were beyond his control.

Lastly, the manager was the arbitrator in all inter-personal disputes, and his solutions tended to be in terms of the norms of his own culture. He paid attention to the complaints of wives, sons, and daughters-in-law against the husband/father and, if he felt the man was behaving ‘unreasonably’, reprimanded him and so limited his authority. Thus the manager’s intervention tended to rearrange the domestic relations of the Indians in accordance with [European] patterns.
Further, the roles of women were significantly transformed on foreign estates from what they had been in village India. Positive aspects included some greater personal freedoms (including choice in partners and independent wage-earning ability). But these were greatly overshadowed by negative aspects. Sexual and economic exploitation, prostitution, suicide, and murder were recurrent phenomena surrounding the life of women on colonial plantations. Frequently, too, the majority of the ills of estate life were unfairly blamed on the presence of the indentured women.

Once their indenture contracts had expired, Indian migrants were faced with a set of choices: to re-indenture, to return to India, or to attempt to create some means of independent livelihood within the colony. Planters made every effort to channel the outcome of this decision towards their own benefit. Planters recurrently took action to influence the government to change its regulations concerning the repatriation or settlement of the Indians. They also attempted to coerce the migrants. Among planters in most colonies, there was a tendency by manipulation of the ordinances to induce the labourer to lengthen his term of service, and delay the day of his return to India, or of his establishment on the land as an independent small landholder. Every advantage was taken of the labourer’s ignorance and comparative helplessness to introduce abuse into the system. (Cumpston 1956: 159–60)

Despite the manoeuvres by planters, a great number of Indians succeeded in establishing themselves independently as settlers after the expiration of their indenture; in fact, in some colonies even before the turn of the century, the number of free Indians living off estates often exceeded the number (free and indentured) remaining on the estates. Although the opportunities for newly-settled Indians in the colonies were certainly different and potentially more advantageous than in villages of India, the post-indenture environment nevertheless proved to be harsh and demanding. Poverty, disease, child mortality, debt, the tribulations of subsistence agriculture and cash crop farming, plus seasonal wage labour on nearby estates combined to make early Indian settlement in foreign colonies rife with difficulty.

In most colonies, some land was available for purchase, lease, or sometimes as a direct commutation of the original contract providing for repatriation. Each colony had its own policies and programmes regarding the settlement of migrants (see Kondapi 1951: 121–31). These had great significance for the subsequent development of each respective Indian community’s social structure and general lifestyle, and are therefore worth detailing (especially so as to compare with the Trinidadian context in Chapter 2).

In South Africa, legislation specifically restricted the movement of Indians between provinces (Kuper 1960: xii); therefore 80 per cent came to be restricted to Natal, where they were permitted subsequently to purchase only 0.01 per cent of the land (Kuper 1969: 250). There, Indians have been ‘geographically, as well as politically, encapsulated’ (ibid.). They have been treated as a corporate group, and have subsequently been fit to conduct themselves as such.

The British colonial policy towards the indigenous Fijian population – a policy unique throughout the Empire – bore direct consequences for Indian settlement. The Deed of Cession signed by Fijian chiefs in 1874 called upon the British to safeguard the welfare of the indigenous people. The first resident Governor of Fiji established a restriction on the alienation of land to non-Fijians, whereby nearly 90 per cent of the colony was to remain indefinitely under Fijian ownership. After their periods of indentureship, Indians could only lease scattered plots of land on either of the two main islands, and those leases were obtained under conditions which were ‘cumbersome, expensive, and insecure’ (Jayawardena 1971: 97). Further, leases provided by the dominant sugar company could not be subdivided for inheritance. These two factors of limited land and tightly-negotiated tenancy created a favourable market in leases. Indians, therefore, had no communal strategies for creating settlements based upon their own social and cultural attributes. Instead, in Fiji ‘evidence suggests that early settlement was based on the quality of the lease obtainable, rather than on the Indian background of prospective neighbours’ (Mayer 1954: 161). Additionally,

If Indian had been recruited in large groups or at least from the same districts, it is possible that nuclear settlements would have been set up, mirroring the type of village left behind. Since, however, there appears to have been little feeling of communality or communal responsibility – beyond the varying affection of shipmates – a scattered settlement grew up. (Mayer 1953: 183)

As leases expired, Indians and their families often moved elsewhere in the colony, producing rapid social turnover and continuous transformation in the rural communities (Jayawardena 1983: 145). Limited social cohesion characterized early Indian settlements in Fiji (cf. Mayer 1961: 14–37), where, Jayawardena (1971: 98) concludes, ‘The weakness of community bonds, a high rate of migration, a shortage of land, a ready market for leases and the impossibility of partible inheritance are definite features of Indian rural society.’

After some political debate, Indians in Mauritius were allowed much freer reign to purchase or rent land after indentureship, contrary to their counterparts in Fiji. Moreover, the ex-labourers in Mauritius seem to have settled in a much more systematic way, with consequences of greater social solidarity.
Villages were formed by one or more Indians acquiring a plot of land by 'morcellement'. Having settled on it themselves, they brought in relations or friends from an estate campo. They rented or sold small plots, the income being used to pay off the debts to the planter from whom they had obtained the land. The lessees in turn brought in other camp dwellers, who in turn rented or purchased house plots. In this way villages grew up. (Benedict 1961: 27)

These Indian villages in Mauritius were ill-defined, linear developments on roads along which inhabitants interacted in limited local spheres, rather than with others in adjacent vicinities. However, subsequent government provisions acted to fuse people of disparate locales into collective units.

With the introduction of Village Councils, village boundaries were set by Ordinance. Numbers of sections and even outlying hamlets were included within a single Village Council area. Sections of a village were brought into new and formal relations with each other. (Benedict 1957: 330)

Indian villages in Mauritius, therefore it seems, came to promote a sense of community more than those in Fiji (and in conditions different to those which functioned to promote communality amongst Indians in South Africa).

Speckmann (1963: 8–9) suggests that Indian indentured immigrants in Surinam were much despised by the Creole population and were held culturally contemptible by the European colonists. These prejudices combined with Indians’ strong desire to return to India, creating amongst them a negative attitude towards the prospect of remaining in the colony after indenture.

This disinclination to settle permanently finally led the Surinam government to take far-reaching measures to make colonization attractive. In doing so the government considered that the sparse population of the inland areas called for settlement by agricultural colonists. To this end rented plots were made available on old plantations to Indians who had fulfilled their contracts. The immigrants were also permitted to own crown land if they were prepared to clear and drain the land set aside for this purpose. This often was found to be especially attractive for the Indians.

These immigrants did not stay on account of a growing solidarity with their new country or because of an increased identification with the Surinamese community, but rather because the official provisions for settlement appealed to their highly opportunist mentality. (ibid.: 10–11)

Numerous schemes for the acquisition of land in Surinam were taken advantage of by ex-indentured Indians (Speckmann 1965: 38–44). Speckmann emphasizes the broadening of social and cultural horizons for the Indians which this move from the plantations afforded (again, these points are quite applicable to Indian communities in other colonial contexts):

a. There was question of a more direct confrontation with the physical environment. As independent farmer, the colonist was forced to take into account the specific difficulties facing agriculture in Surinam.

b. In the plantation community, leadership was given by the manager and his supervisory staff; but now the Indian had to deal direct with Governmental Institutions.

c. In disposing of his agricultural products, the new colonist came into contact with the market and with the customs of that market.

d. At the Government settlements, but more especially outside them, the former indentured labourer stood in a direct relationships to the other ethnic groups.

e. On the plantation the immigrant had been a mere field labourer; but now a certain differentiation by profession took place in the group, although it was still limited at this phase.

Yet within the extremely pluralistic society of colonial Surinam (including communities of Creoles [African ex-slaves], Maroons [escaped African slaves who developed a separate culture], Chinese, Javanese, Amerinds, Dutch, and other Europeans), Indians remained socially isolated and geographically concentrated. Regardless of their agricultural settlement and increasing incorporation into Surinamese economic structures, they remained to a major extent a community unto themselves.

Ehrlich (1971) provides a useful comparison of Indian settlement patterns in Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana (Guyana). His central argument is that

communities organized around modified Indian cultural patterns failed to develop in Jamaica as they did in some other areas because of historical and ecological factors during the post-emancipation period in the British Caribbean. (Ibid.: 166–7)

Due to various financial problems surrounding a declining sugar industry there, Jamaica received far fewer indentured Indian immigrants than either Trinidad or British Guiana (see Table 1.1). However, it was not the paucity of numbers that disfavoured the creation of a sense of community among Indians in Jamaica; rather, lack of geographical concentration after
Part II: Three fundamental spheres of change among Indians overseas

Kinship and household

In order to examine possible changes affecting kinship and household phenomena outside India, their multifaceted nature in India must first be appreciated. Regarding Indian families in general, Mandelbaum (1970: 45) has stressed that:

Any cogent analysis of Indian family life must include the consideration of kinship and household phenomena outside India, their multifaceted nature in India must first be appreciated. Regarding Indian families in general, Mandelbaum (1970: 45) has stressed that:

...
virilocal residence, of proper relations between father and son, between brother and brother. The family members are expected to form one solidarity, living in one household as long as possible, supporting each other in the round of their days and in the cycle of their lives. Within these general characteristics of Indian families, there are three broad types of variation—within a family over time, within a village and region, and among regions. . . . Within a family the constellation of relations changes in the course of the family cycle. Within a village and region there are differences in family relations according to wealth, occupation, and jati rank. Finally, there are differences among the linguistic-cultural regions.

Along the same lines, Karve (1965) has described how family structures in India are interwoven with the customs of caste groups found throughout various linguistic regions. Kolenda (1968), too, observes such variety, providing evidence of how family types vary throughout India in relation to domestic cycles and socio-economic patterns. And Gould (1960) points out another aspect of geographical variation among Indian families, what he calls the ‘territorial stabilization of kin groups’ through ties to land over generations, through the maintenance of shrines, and through sustained economic interdependence or transaction with other members of a lineage within a village or in adjacent villages.

Families in North India are patrilineal (tracing descent through the male line) and virilocal (living in the male’s household) — including a norm of village exogamy or out-marriage — with households tending to be oriented toward a ‘joint’ nature. Lineage, as well as household, members demonstrate their links, among other ways, by recollecting lines of descent, honoring ancestry and worshipping a lineage deity (kuldevata). Yet any lineage or household must be recognized to share a variety of links or overlaps with other social groupings such as clan or gotra, sets of affines located in different nearby villages, fictive or ritual kin, ‘kindred of co-operation’ (certain agnates, or blood-relatives, who are invited to social functions) and ‘kindred of recognition’ (more distant individuals known to share an agnatic link, but with whom no interaction occurs; Mayer 1960), along with intra-caste status groups and hypergamous (marrying up in status group) or reciprocal marriage networks, and other local categories usually linked with sub-caste (cf. Khare 1960). An Indian villager maintains a number of familial identities within layered, encompassing fields of social relationships, each identity being called upon in a particular context. The emigration process among indentured Indians acted dramatically, so that migrants’ familial identities were abruptly left unsupported.

The fact that indentured migrants came to the colonies mostly as individuals meant that it would take decades to create any semblance of the kinship structures which were present in India. Lineage would arise again over successive generations; clan and ‘kindred of recognition’ would be much more difficult to identify successfully abroad, because the diverse geographical backgrounds of migrants meant that no common genealogical criteria for inclusion in such social clusters could be readily discovered or agreed upon (Kuper 1960: 32). Status groups (based on accumulated wealth) effecting marriage networks, ‘kindred of co-operation’ and fictive kin relationships could, to some degree, be instituted over time.

Therefore, the basic nature, and the subsequent ‘spread’, of kinship among the indentured overseas Indians was radically different from those in their home contexts.

This is understandable when it is recalled that there were, at first, very few kin-groups, since immigrants were for the most part unrelated. The first ties to appear were affinal, and it was not until the second generation that agnatic links evolved. Even now, the rapid growth of the population has given the group of biologically related people, living and dead, a wide spread with little depth. (Mayer 1954: 167)

Especially bearing in mind the youth of most of the indentured migrants — and therefore their greater unfamiliarity with the conceptual aspects of lineage, soon the tracing of lines of descent virtually started anew, ancestors were venerated generally instead of by name, and the worship of kuldevata was easily displaced by more generalized forms of worship. Nevertheless, very basic ideals of kin groups — essentially, of exogamy and patrilineal descent — remained rooted. So too did a broad ideal of the ‘joint family’.

The notion of the so-called ‘joint family’ has been rather problematic in studies of the households in India, therefore obfuscating the study of Indian households overseas. The term usually refers to a unit of kin composed of at least two married couples, who are related lineally or collaterally, plus their respective unmarried children. However, there is some debate, or more often, failure to define, whether a ‘joint family’ is to be marked by the trait of being commensal, co-residential, or a combination of these.

The joint family is supposed to be distinguishable from the nuclear family (one married couple and their unmarried children); but, as Kolenda (1968) has clearly shown, a whole series of categories composed of commensal and co-residential kin exists in India. Furthermore, Indian villagers themselves generally do not terminologically differentiate between joint, nuclear, or any other form of family (Mandelbaum 1970: 36). Within and between generations, families in India assume many forms as children marry, parents die, households fission, and other domestic processes occur. Morris (1961: 782) states that, at any one time,
The size and state of such a joint family will depend on a variety of factors such as the type of housing, the size and nature of the joint estate, the nature and organization of the labour needed to work it, and the structural relations that exist among the members of the households. As in all lineage systems, when the family or other structured unit passes a certain size it divides and produces two or more similar entities. . . . At the same time it is assumed by the people themselves and also by official Hindu law that every family, even if it happens to be in the individual family phase of the cycle, is in fact, joint.

Morris (ibid.) emphasizes, too, that joint families in India must be seen as but one, shifting segment of a larger lineage; therefore overseas, where lineages are not well-developed, the joint family takes on a somewhat abstract quality.

Practically everywhere, anthropologists have reckoned that the ‘joint family’ remains an ideal among overseas Indians, but one which is seldom maintained within individual households. Mayer (1953, 1961: 31–7), for instance, points to the considerable variety of household types and family structures which are found within different Indian settlements in Fiji (parallel in many ways to those found by Speckmann [1965: 187ff.] in Surinam). Mayer stresses the range of possibilities open to families as they evolve through different stages of variable domestic cycles (cf. Nevadomsky 1985).

Jayawardena (1983) also indicates a variety of domestic types in Fiji, and emphasizes economic variables involved in determining the composition of households. It is these, he suggests, which subsequently affect the nature of family roles and relationships. Regardless of an Indian family’s ‘ideal’, whether or not a given form of family can “survive” or not depends on the kind of household. . . . The most favourable type of household, in turn, depends on the flexibilities and alternatives of a given mode of production’ (ibid.: 141–2). On a wider level of enquiry, Mayer (1954) describes the importance of extended kin groups as sources of reciprocal labour and economic security among overseas Indians. These types of relationship needn’t depend on household or family structure, but they do similarly vary with modes of production and other economic contingencies.

Thus we can say that, broadly throughout the post-indenture diaspora, kinship structures have been significantly refined (in that they lack a complex multi-reference makeup) from traditional patterns in India, whereas domestic structures abroad are not essentially different (in being variable around an ideal) from those observed in India.

### Caste

Nearly every anthropologist who has conducted ethnography among post-indenture populations of Indians overseas concludes that the caste system no longer plays any considerable part in organizing social structure or determining social relationships among Indian communities outside India.

Since the nineteenth century, the majority of Western scholars have approached castes in India as readily identifiable social groups which are ascribed by birth, endogamous, occupationally specialized, and hierarchically ranked. Among anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s, it was generally reasoned that, regarding Indians overseas, the same groups, attributes and predominant hierarchy could be sought out and assessed – or remarked upon as to their absence – in direct relation to their ‘traditional’ nature and structure in the motherland. More recently, however, it has come to be recognized that caste in India involves much more varied and complex phenomena than are addressed in this longstanding approach. The following section aims to augment previous studies of caste among post-indenture Indian communities by calling into play or underscoring certain other significant features and models of caste in India.

The longstanding view of caste described above was particularly fostered by means of the frameworks used for collecting information and administrating Indian society under British colonial rule (Cohn 1987). Census-takers, gazetteers, district officers, bureaucrats and other colonial observers in India undertook their duties with ‘an atomistic interest in the attributes of the various castes, rather than the patterns of their interrelationships within a village or region’ (Raheja 1988a: 500). Much subsequent study among social scientists came to concretize such an ‘atomistic’ view; eventually it was taken for granted that castes were ‘discrete, single-status bearing, ranked and named units . . . characterized by endogamy and occupational specialization’ and that they were ‘culturally and structurally homogeneous’ (Michaelson 1983: 117).

Some consequences of this traditional view of caste are that it ignores, as Raheja (1988a, b) suggests, the variety of interactions or transactions which occur between various groups in different contexts, and, following Michaelson (1983), that it overlooks processes and meanings involving rank within certain groups. Further, both of these issues are related to problems of scope, in that the traditional view reified caste as a discrete social grouping, whereas it seems that throughout daily life in Indian villages and towns, the criteria and boundaries of caste-related ‘group-ness’ are not always clearcut. As more became known through the years about individual and group identities and interactions in India, there followed an increasingly confused conundrum of needing to define what constitutes the ‘real’ social unit of caste (Mayer 1960: 6–9; Mandelbaum 1970: 13ff.).
Depending on particular contexts with Indian towns and villages, individuals’ habitual and formal behaviour, claims to rights, privileges, and responsibilities, exchanges of goods, payments, gifts, services, and other social manifestations of power in social relationships will vary. In each context, one or another facet of caste serves as a mode of classifying persons so as to ascertain and gain, in a most orderly fashion, the appropriate behaviour, claims, exchanges and general relationship deemed (in ideal terms, mutually) appropriate. This system of contextually relevant classification thus involves ‘a series of successively wider zones of reference for the units in any local system, the several zones being characterized by distinctive values’ (Marriott 1968: 103).

One way of depicting these successive ‘zones’ of caste is as follows: (a) on the most intimate or local level, individuals belong to a household, lineage, and other kinship-based subdivisions of caste (bans or gotra), usually all of which come into play especially in determining marriage. Individuals also belong to units which can be designated as (b) caste and (c) subcaste. Mayer (1960: 8) discusses important differences between these:

The individual’s role in his village . . . is largely as a representative of his caste group, acting toward other caste groups as if they were internally undifferentiated. But in his relations with people of other villages his main role is rather as a member of the endogamous subcaste within the caste, that is, as a member of a caste which is internally differentiated . . . .

There may be different behaviour towards different subcastes in various villages or even towards the same subcaste in different villages. At the level of the regional study, then, the subcaste may be the unit of inter- as well as intra-caste relations, though within the village inter-caste relations can be seen in terms of castes rather than subcastes.

(d) On a broader level, though not existing as a corporate group (nor even really as a category of identification), Mayer (ibid.: 47) observes that often within villages there are sets of ‘allied castes’ which are commensally equal and which on occasion act together, providing within the village ‘an island of relatively “casteless” behaviour’.

The following levels of categories of ‘multi-endogamous group organization’, obtaining (at least) for Uttar Pradesh, are suggested by Fox (1969a, b). Bearing in mind that there are multiple layers of identity associated with caste, he (1969b: 38) points out:

In a system as complex as this one, certain mental abbreviations or short cuts are made by the population itself to portray the system for easy manipulation. Thus, a man who says his caste is ‘Kisan’ is stating not what his endogamous group is, but what the general position of that group is in the total caste scene . . . . Whatever the term used to describe them, these simplifications or categories are not groups, only mental orderings of the caste universe.

Here ‘Kisan’, Fox (ibid.: 40) points out, is actually a ‘potpourri of many castes’, including seemingly disparate jatis such as Kumbhars (potters), Lohars (blacksmiths), Naus (barbers) and Ahirs (cowherds, this itself being a status category subsuming divergent endogamous groups). Thus he (1969a) describes these ‘mental orderings’ in terms of (e) supra-local caste clusters, found within a single linguistic region, often composed of commensally equal endogamous groups sometimes sharing the same traditional occupation; (f) sub-regional varna categories, composed of a more diverse number of castes or caste clusters, all claiming common status; (g) regional varna categories, involving a large territorial extension of the sub-regional categories, and similar to the all-India varna categories in type (and often, name) but not in content; and (h) the classical all-India varna scheme (of the categories Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisha and Shudra) based on ancient scriptures, which actually bears no real application to daily social interactions (Marriott 1968: 110–12).

One important contribution of such a ‘layered’ model of caste is the recognition that in the past, social scientists and other observers with an ‘atomistic’ view of caste have mistaken caste attributions obtaining on one level for ones actually occurring on another. This especially applies to phenomena associated with subcaste, caste and caste cluster. For instance, attributes which came to be associated with a specific caste were actually those pertaining to a larger cluster (like ‘Baniya’, subsuming various trading castes); ‘In many village studies, the term “Baniya” is reported as if it were the name of an actual caste characterized by trade as a traditional occupation’ (Fox 1969b: 42n.; cf. Michaelson 1983). Problems of this sort were endemic to the censuses and Tribes and Castes series of British colonial India (Cohn 1987), and perpetuated in studies of caste overseas.

The above model represents, as Fox says, ‘mental orderings’, the extent and content of which are quite often disputed by members of the constituent groups or categories. One reason for such continuous dispute is that corporate status (in terms of a structure of expected behaviour, rights and obligations) is not necessarily a fixed quality. Thus, for instance, subcaste members may experience different status relations in different villages, or may be able to rise in status, along with their group, within their local or regional setting. Furthermore, status in ritual, economic, and political domains is not necessarily uniform.
A brief word regarding hierarchy is warranted here (before the topic is taken up again, below). Recently in the anthropology of India, the idea of hierarchy has come under fundamental criticism. It has long been part of the Western understanding that castes are hierarchically placed in relation to one another by reference to ideological notions of purity and impurity, a view most seminally described by Dumont (1970). Other types of caste relationship, such as economic or political, came to be regarded as somewhat epiphenomenal. Appadurai (1986), for one, has attacked 'the hegemony of hierarchy as a dominant image' in studies of Indian society and culture. Within the religious or ritual domain, concepts concerning purity, impurity and hierarchy are certainly powerful and pervasive; but this domain should not be regarded as the 'be-all and end-all' of caste.

Types of relationship in other domains – and the relationship, between domains, of types of relationship – need to be taken more fully into account in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of caste. In this way, the study of prestation patterns, ritual and economic transactions in one Uttar Pradesh village led Raheja (1988b: 29) to conclude that

intercaste relationships may be ordered in terms other than rank and the opposition of purity and impurity. The order of castes grounded in rank or hierarchy and that grounded in ... the centrality of the dominant caste of jajmans are analytically and culturally distinguished, and they are acted upon in distinct contexts of village social life.

Further, she advocates that 'centrality' and 'hierarchy' are 'contextually differentiated ways of construing intercaste relationships and configurations of castes in the village' (ibid.: 32). When status relations (especially, we might say, gauged according to Marriott's 'zones of reference' and Fox's 'mental orderings' of multi-endogamous groups and categories) are seen in the added light of polity, dominance and kingship – rather than wholly in terms of religious ideology and ritual – there appear to be 'multiple configurations of castes, multiple hierarchies, and ... multiple perspectives on social life' (Raheja 1988a: 519).

A kind of 'multiple' model of caste, then, has implications for studies concerning indentured migrants and their descendants. Instead of looking at the attenuation of caste overseas in terms of conditions militating against the maintenance of traditional occupations, endogamy and commensality rules among discrete, hierarchically-ranked groups, attention should be turned to how the everyday practice of caste in India – involving multi-layered, contextually meaningful identifications together with shifting inter- and intra-group relations – was affected by the sudden move to an alien setting.

While a detailed study of this proposed sort is beyond the scope of the present work, a look at certain intrinsic features of caste – and how they were affected by transplantation among the indentured migrants – will serve as a first step towards a fuller appreciation of caste phenomena abroad (in contexts such as Trinidad). These features, arranged under four headings, are briefly and generally described below as pertaining to the Indian context at large, and are recapitulated subsequently with reference to indentured and post-indenture Indian communities overseas.

I Social organization

(1) Caste generally concerns structures of social interaction which simultaneously involve certain types of relationship in other analytical domains: thus a caste 'does not exist by itself' as a social group, Leach (1960: 5) emphasizes, but only amongst other groups in a 'network of economic, political, and ritual relationships'. This is most evident in the jajmani organization of a village (see below).

(2) Membership in any given category is ascribed by birth. Subsequently, and by way of the specific 'zone of reference' called into play in any interaction, status is ranked corporately (that is, individuals are ranked according to the status of their perceived group or category; Marriott 1968).

(3) Marriott (1959) has isolated two basic principles according to which corporate status is determined: by way of attribution (with reference to the broadly conceived, characteristic 'nature' of certain groups or categories); and by way of interaction (according to direction and content of exchanges, between groups, of food, touch, goods and services, gifts, greetings, and so on). In the former, rank is determined in an ideologically taken-for-granted way which assumes persons of a particular group or category all share the same ontological status, dispositions, habits, and 'way of life'. Therefore knowledge of an individual's group or category (that is, on a particular level of identification) carries with it a number of status attributions. The latter method of assessing rank involves looking at the ways in which people actually behave towards one another – especially their means, matters and modes of transaction. These may actually be at variance with the attributional rankings (noted in the often anomalous position of Kshatriyas in general and dominant castes in particular). More importantly, an interactional approach demonstrates how caste ranking is continuously generated or actively practised in villages and regions.

(4) Especially for purposes of identification in categories such as sub-regional and regional varnas, groups on all levels (caste, subcaste, cluster) wish to be classified together with groups of relatively high status; conversely, they wish to have excluded from their own conceived category any groups which they deem lower than themselves (Pocock 1957a). By way of
the process which Srinivas (1952) deemed ‘Sanskritization’, entire corporate groups may collectively adopt certain ideals and behaviour associated with higher caste categories in order to upgrade their local or regional classification. Subsequently, they often divorce themselves from others once considered to be of the same rank or category (Pocock 1972; Michaelson 1983).

(5) As already mentioned, the classic ideal of hierarchy, with pure Brahmans at the apex, is no longer seen by anthropologists as a model holding the key to understanding Indian society. Instead, there has been greater acknowledgement of the important roles played by kings, Rajputs and other dominant castes in structuring interrelationships among a range of caste-based groups in villages and regions. The fact to bear in mind regarding caste interrelationships is that ‘The order lies not in one fixed or internally consistent ranking, but in a pragmatically constituted set of shifting meanings and shifting configurations of castes’ (Raheja 1988a: 517). Thus in some domains like ritual, hierarchy may remain the most appropriate descriptive model; in others like jajmani, Raheja suggests, a ‘centre-periphery’ model, with the landholding dominant caste at its core, may better convey the pattern of caste relationships.

(6) Status hierarchies or centre-periphery relations which affect individual and group actions are, most importantly, frameworks with highly localized import. ‘Castes gauge their status in relation to other castes of the same area’, Pocock (1957a: 19) stresses. ‘The localized caste is concerned to define its position in relation to other localized castes with which it lives in close proximity.’

(7) Particularly in order to maintain status rank, caste groupings emphasize marital exclusiveness, essentially by way of endogamy. This is mainly operational on the most small-scale, local level of subcaste and clan (on the latter level, particularly, hypergamy may be an accepted means of heightening status within a subcaste).

(8) The form and frequency of social interaction, both within the caste and between members of different castes, is regulated by reference to locally, mutually recognized prescriptions and proscriptions for behaviour (epitomized by restrictions on types of food giving and receiving). These common codes of conduct may vary not just regionally, but from village to village.

(9) Behaviour codes among individuals are often monitored by caste or subcaste councils, with powers to punish or ostracize transgressors.

(10) The socially corporate nature of local castes or subcastes is manifested geographically, in that co-members often tend to be concentrated residentially in certain areas or neighbourhoods of villages and towns.

Caste identification of strangers (Sebring 1969, Berreman 1972) — again, in terms of ‘mental orderings’ or categories affecting behaviour, claims and exchanges — may be posited (correctly or incorrectly) among individuals by reference to strangers’ (11) surnames or deferential titles, (12) usages of speech or dialects, (13) gestures and forms of non-verbal communication, especially ones denoting subservience or superiority, (14) clothes, tattoos and other styles of appearance, and (15) physical traits (especially skin colour and breadth of nose).

II Economic and political regulation

(16) Caste members are traditionally associated with specific occupations, or with sets of duties to perform on behalf of persons of other castes, which are considered hereditary.

(17) Within villages or local regions, certain caste-groups (often locally associated with a Kshatriya classification) maintain a ‘dominant’ status over most other groups by owning a great deal of the land and subsequently through wielding considerable control over local production, payment and gift-giving. In this way, political power is ultimately exercised. One model for the relations between ‘dominant’ and other castes, as Raheja has suggested, is that of centre-periphery.

(18) Members of different castes are generally described as being engaged in a system of labour, goods and service exchange based on their hereditary occupation, a system usually referred to as jajmani. Here, especially, use of a rigid model of hierarchy may be obfuscating. ‘For sociological analysis’, writes Morris (1968: 48), ‘the inter-dependence of jati is more fundamental than the cultural details of their separateness and arrangement in order of rank.’ In the North Indian village of Pahansu, which is dominated by landholding Gujars, Raheja (1988b: 13) describes jajmani as inherently involving

the system of allotting customary shares of the harvest to members of various castes (Brahmans, Barbers, Washermen, Sweepers, Potters, Carpenters, and so on) tied to particular cultivators in hereditary service arrangements. . . . Not only do many of the service castes derive most of their livelihood from these distributions at the harvests and at other times of the year, but Gujars, as well as people of the other castes, understand and construe their relatively central or peripheral positions in the local configuration of castes as being constituted in and through these arrangements and prestations. These prestations . . . are not reducible to matters of hierarchy. . . .

(19) Hereditary specialization is equated with highly limited occupational and economic mobility. [However, it has been recognized, even by early colonial observers, that a substantial degree of occupational change
among caste members has been a longstanding phenomenon in India, and that the occupation or livelihood of individuals can by no means be determined by traditional caste occupation.]

III Differential states of being

Whereas in social, economic and political domains caste involves more interactional criteria by which a largely unfixed framework of rank is achieved, in the religious or ritual domain caste probably best remains seen as involving attributional criteria based on an overarching conceptual hierarchy.

(20) The hierarchy in question is believed by Hindus to reflect a kind of continuum of ontological states described in terms of degrees of purity and pollution. Brahmans are considered by their very nature to be the most pure in being, with groups subsumed as ‘untouchables’ considered the most impure or polluting. The myriad groups or categories which fall in between the poles often occupy ambiguous or even contradictory places on the continuum (witness the high place of many persons within the Kshatriya varna – those, nonetheless, with generally lusty, meat-eating reputations seemingly at odds with greater purity).

(21) Various forms of transaction between members of different castes are regulated by notions of purity and pollution. In an exemplary form these often concern exchanges of types of food (especially *pakka*, or ‘ripe’ food prepared with clarified butter, which can be given and received between many caste groups, and *kaccha*, or most other foods, which are highly restricted by way of giving and receiving).

(22) The members higher on the most general continuum (those in the ‘twice-born’ varnas) undergo generally exclusive ceremonies of initiation. These tend to indicate a two (or more)-tiered religion in which access to different forms of sacred knowledge, to special rituals and other modes of worship, or indeed to certain manifestations of God are determined with reference to basic degrees of corporate purity.

(23) For the higher caste groups as well, there are various purification rites meant to reinstate appropriately pure states of being after contact with substances or persons deemed polluting.

(24) Access to certain temples and rites is restricted according to ritual status, often being off-limits to persons from the lowest castes.

(25) Conversely, numerous local cults, shrines and religious practitioners cater to groups conceived to be lower along the purity–pollution continuum. Those dealing with blood-demanding supernaturals, disease and exorcism are usually managed by low caste members.

IV Doctrinal Legitimation

(26) The caste system in its broadest sense, primarily in terms of *caturvarna* or the fourfold ideal form of social order, can be legitimated by reference to certain sacred texts (primarily the Rig Veda, Dharmaśastras and Manusmriti). Other levels or divisions of caste tend to be legitimized by local lore positing historical or legendary origins of groups.

(27) Basic Hindu concepts of dharma (duty or order), karma (accumulated ramifications of action), and samsara (the cycle of rebirths) can be considered essential components of the ideology of the caste system, for they legitimize reasons for being born at certain levels, ideal courses of life for persons in different caste groups, etc. However, it has been observed that average rural villagers rarely make reference to such concepts (Lewis 1958: 249–53).

Most researchers agree that the massive Indian population which emigrated overseas under contracts of indenture represented a kind of cross-section of castes. ‘It is evident that the castes of the emigrants were representative of those found in North Indian villages’, states Lal (1979: 22), ‘and that they came from all strata of society.’ In one contemporary study, Grierson (1883) found that over 70 per cent of indentured emigrants came from caste groups considered ‘medium and high’ in status. According to the classification of emigrants’ castes used throughout most of the period of indentured migration, the averages from the total number who emigrated to foreign colonies are: ‘Brahmans and other high castes’ 12.03 per cent, ‘agricultural castes’ 36.82 per cent, ‘artisan castes’ 6.39 per cent, ‘low castes’ 33.16 per cent, Muslims 11.56 per cent, and Christians 0.04 per cent. Although these are certainly artificial categories, they serve in some ways to provide a rough indication of the fact that migrants’ caste backgrounds were broadly variegated. So, given large communities steeped in a complex heritage of caste-based relations and identifications, what have been the effects of emigration and resettlement on caste-related phenomena amongst indentured Indians and their descendants?

Contemporary reports attest to caste’s attenuation even while migrants were still indentured on colonial estates. Visiting plantations in the southern Caribbean before the turn of the century, for instance, Comins noted that in Surinam, ‘The influence and restrictions of caste are much modified and in some cases disappear altogether, though certain traditions and superstitions always remain’ (1892: 17). In Trinidad, be found that ‘caste is not a subject which troubles coolies long after their landing, and in most cases many of the prejudices disappear or become much modified’ (1893b: 37). And in British Guiana, Comins observed that young boys have little notion of what caste entails (1893a, Diary: 23), that ‘Caste is not only modified, but its laws and restrictions are practically ignored after immigrants leave Calcutta’,
yet that high-caste individuals still didn’t wish to work under low-caste drivers (1893a: 79).

By recapitulating the features of caste outlined above and drawing on some of the observations made by a variety of social scientists regarding overseas Indian communities, we can come to appreciate better the conditions and processes effecting the attenuation of caste among indentured migrants, as well as understand more clearly the nature and uses of caste’s remaining vestiges among their descendants.

(i) Social organization

(1a) Coexisting social–economic–political–ritual structures The unique complex of meanings and relationships which caste involved in India, spanning social, economic, political, and ritual domains, was altogether removed from the lives of indentured migrants upon leaving the motherland. In one way, as Jayawardena (1971: 93) indicates, this was due to the basic institutional framework of management and indentured labour on colonial estates:

In the formal organization of the plantation, economic and political decisions were made by the managers and overseers who allocated and supervised work, computed the wages and punished infractions of labour discipline. Managers appointed sardar whose authority in the formal structure enabled them to become leaders in activities outside work.

In a rather more profound way within the alien contexts overseas, he (ibid.: 116) adds, a combination of factors and conditions disallowed certain types of relationship necessary for the exercise of caste.

It appears that the dissolution of the particular pattern of elements characteristic of a caste system was mainly caused by the system’s disconnection from the sources of power in the host society. . . . In the plantation, caste members could not form viable social groups because no one had the power to organize them, nor, had they been formed somehow, could they have administered any significant interests or rights. Such groups continued to be unrealizable during free settlement because, again, no person or group could exercise any control over others.

This conclusion is based on the premise that the continuous manipulation of power relations, not simply a purity-based ideology of hierarchy, is essential to the workings of caste in India. When this is undercut or removed, so is the living stuff of caste. Thus Raheja (1988a: 519) calculates that in the South Asian social landscape, ‘Caste divorced from indigenous conceptions of polity, sovereignty, dominance, and kingship would surely occupy . . . a

(2a) Membership ascribed by birth, rank by corporate status In many significant ways, among indentured migrants transplantation overseas had impact even on the most basic criteria of caste, namely ascribed membership, group identity and corporate status. By way of effecting membership, individuals could virtually change their caste by simply identifying themselves differently at the recruitment depots. It is assumed by various writers that some migrants, hoping to gain status abroad, claimed higher caste membership during the course of migration (leading to the common joke among Indians, recorded by Mayer [1961: 163], that there are few true Brahmans in Fiji). This ever-present possibility, some say, undermined the status claims of many if not most persons of higher caste (Gillion 1962: 124). Some high-caste persons, for reasons of their own, actually pretended to be of lower caste (Comins, in Tinker 1974: 210). Yet as Mayer (1961: 162–3) points out, in the new context where caste ranking was of peripheral concern to migrants, there was ultimately little to gain by this, save for those desiring to be priests and therefore claiming to be Brahmans (cf. Klass 1961: 58).

The corporate nature of caste itself, in which individuals (at various levels of identification and interaction) are ranked and acted towards as members of known groups and categories, largely disintegrated among indentured labourers and their descendants. ‘Membership in a caste is still chiefly a matter of birth’ in Mauritius, Benedict (1967: 40) comments, ‘but all that is really acquired is a caste name, not membership in a corporate caste group.’ What vestiges of caste-based ideology remained were not manifested in group behaviour. ‘Caste values and rules did not give rise to groups; they were reduced to matters of conscientious objection, of unenforceable personal moral scruple’ (Jayawardena 1971: 116). This lack of corporateness not only involved social relations, but extended to all manner of collective representation. In Trinidad, writes Clarke (1967: 169), ‘The castes have no myths, heroes, or heritage of their own. In fact there has been a “generalization” of Indian culture which has affected the cultural variations which were associated with caste in India.’ Instead, social networks and affiliated group identities grew from other sources. Thus Jayawardena (1971: 93) suggests that ‘The main bases of social life in the plantations were, then, not caste but residential propinquity and association at work.’

(3a) Attributional/interactional ranking It is reported in most post-indenture contexts that the only caste categories or identities which have continued to bear important status value are the hierarchically high and low
extremes of Brahman and Chamar. The former retain the highest respect in overseas Indian communities, while the latter are often regarded with some disdain. All other caste identities in between are accorded somewhat ambiguous and ultimately unimportant status distinctions, including to a large degree those of varna. The retention of significant meanings to the identities Brahman and Chamar — and the status-related uncertainty of identities in-between — is understandable by reference to attributional and interactional theories of caste ranking.

Marriott (1959) notes that in India, the statuses of Brahmans and untouchables (Chamars) are reckoned essentially by attributional considerations (absolute pure v. absolute impure). In contrast, he proposes that

Between these poles of pure and impure, the other castes — those oriented toward Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra values — would take their places by reference to the interactive ritual idiom whose use is contingent upon differences of power, wealth, and skill.

(Ibid.: 102)

Attributional ranking, which rests largely on ideological considerations, not surprisingly functions most successfully in positing characteristics of groups on the far ends of the social spectrum. The attributional ranking of groups or categories between these, can only be accomplished in a very broad manner, and even then so only ‘in establishing at least the initial expectation as to rank among separate peoples, such as tribes, or among castes belonging originally to different regional societies . . . ’ (ibid.: 103).

The interactional mode of ranking intermediate caste groups, on the other hand, is perhaps more exacting, yet it can only occur in relatively small, closed contexts such as a village, where tightly-knit relations between social units may effectively reproduce structural distinctions. But again, such distinctions or ranks may be specific to given situations or domains of analysis.

Following Marriott, it is suggested here that in contexts such as colonial plantations, where a diverse range of caste groups were assembled, attributional ranking of Brahmans and Chamars would be readily achieved and grasped by all migrants (as in cities in India; Berreman 1972). Something akin to this was observed in British Guiana by one writer in 1886: ‘The new Coolie believes in caste and pretentiously sticks to its tenets for his first years in the Colony . . . But after residing for a time, he sees here that caste only means, — “That man is a Chumar [sic], and therefore I am a better man because I am a Brahmin’ (in Moore 1977: 98). Since immigration into foreign environments, overseas Indians have been less able to underline the attributes or relative ranks associated with most caste groups or categories; yet the pure and arrogant Brahman and the lax and ‘dirty’ Chamar are two stereotypes which remain pervasive. The latter, in many places, has become a general derogatory term within Indian communities (sometimes even utilized as such by non-Indians). Although in practically all forms of behaviour, persons of Chamar descent have become identical to their Indian brethren, they are still in certain ways or at certain times socially distanced or scorned. As one woman of Ahir descent in Trinidad said of her Chamar neighbours, ‘Dey lives just as we — but dey always [inevitably] does somet’ in’ dat shows dey’s low.’ 31 In Surinam, Speckmann (1967: 209–10) found that,

In such cases, when one asks in what way these ‘Chamar characteristics’ cleave to the person concerned, the most frequent answer given is: ‘A thing like that is in the blood’.

Ranking the array of intermediate caste groups found among indentured migrants overseas could not be accomplished interactionally, especially since plantation and post-plantation contexts brought deep-rooted shifts in the behavioural, transactional and power relationships upon which such ranking depends. Thus Smith (1962: 120) writes:

The process of caste attenuation seems to have proceeded logically. The two opposite extremes of the caste hierarchy, the priestly caste of Brahmans at the top and the leather-working Chamar caste representing the lowest untouchable groups, have been most clearly remembered. Everything else in between has tended to become quite vague. . . .

(4a) Inclusion/exclusion, upgrading Because corporately functioning caste groups did not form, and since encompassing caste categories became quite vague, issues of group identity by way of classificatory inclusion and exclusion were minimalized within indentured migrant communities. 32 There have not been observed among post-indenture Indians overseas many attempts at upgrading through ‘Sanskritization’ or other means by which entire groups in India have come to claim higher status (instead, high-status ideals and behaviour abroad were generally adopted abroad by individuals regardless of caste considerations; cf. Jayawardena 1966). Klass (1961: 62) comments that in Trinidad,

any sense of caste solidarity or group interests is almost entirely lacking among the castes of Amity. Individual families may better themselves, but this has nothing to do with the rest of their caste. A caste as a whole can be ‘raised’ in the general esteem if most of the representatives become prosperous, pious, and give up the raising of pigs. Unlike what has been reported for India, there is no concerted effort on the part of the caste members to do this as a group.
By way of example, Klass (ibid.: 63) found that among those few seeking some form of caste upgrading.

Claims are made on the most tenuous of grounds: members of the wealthy Dusad family claim to be Ahir because one of the sisters of the head of the family married an Ahir. The true members of the caste into which the family has up-casted itself often bitterly resent the step.

Similarly in Fiji, 'people raised their status as individuals or, at the most, with the concurrence of the near kin, rather than as members of a local caste group' (Mayer 1961: 162). Thus some forms of inclusion/exclusion and upgrading can be said to remain as part of the vestige of caste among post-indenture communities – but such issues no longer obtain for corporate groups.

(5a) **Multiple configurations** As mentioned above, political, economic and other aspects of local caste interaction in India could not obtain overseas; consequently, 'centre-periphery' or other types of caste configuration were wholly absent. Therefore, though much diluted and usually of limited use, general ideological notions of hierarchy represented the only real kinds of caste 'structure' which could persist among the indentured migrants.

Contrary to the longstanding view of caste, a recognized hierarchy does not effect all significant forms of status or social interaction – abroad even more so than in India. Niehoff (1967: 153) provides a list, in general order of prestige, of castes found in one area of Trinidad; yet he emphasizes that

The list is no absolute hierarchy, but rather a vague general consensus of ranking. Caste ideas are not so explicit that unanimity about position can occur. The classification reflects the situation in north India quite well.

Elsewhere Niehoff (1967: 162) writes, 'In Trinidad, the matter of caste status is of so little importance in comparison with other status markers, that some Hindus have forgotten what caste they belong to.'

(6a) **Local ranking** The inability to recreate a fixed local hierarchy is proposed by numerous anthropologists as the most central cause of the caste system's demise overseas.33 This, they agree, was primarily because 'the immigrants came from many different localities in India and were unable to reform the small-scale organization on which caste-group and subcaste-group behaviour had been based' (Mayer 1967b: 3). Only on the level of a roughly composed varna scheme could hierarchy be constructed, and this, often with some difficulty. Klass (1961: 58–60) describes such a problematic, localized ranking system in the community of 'Amity' in Trinidad:

Two criteria are used for determining Varna membership for these castes. First of all, it may be that there is no argument about original Varna membership in India. No one in Amity, for example, disputes the fact that the Ahir caste is Ves [Vaishya] and the Camar [Chamar] caste Sudra. Where there is any dispute, the second, and most important, criterion is used: all castes made up predominantly – in Amity – of families that raise and eat swine are Sudra; castes that eschew this practice are considered Ves. Thus, many Bhars in Amity claim to be 'Raj-Bhars,' and therefore Ves, but most Amity Bhars raise swine, and so the claim is disallowed. On the other hand, most of the older people are aware that the Dhobi caste is 'low' in India, but the only Dhobi family in Amity is a highly respectable one that does not raise swine and has a teacher in the family. In Amity, this caste is considered Ves. Within these varnas, Klass goes on to say that for Vaishyas, order of caste precedence is acknowledged only in terms of a general 'high' and 'low' rank, whereas for members of Shudra castes, 'precedence has no significance.

(7a) **Marital exclusivity** On a somewhat practical level, 'a severe shortage of women among indentured immigrants destroyed the demographic basis of the caste system' (Jayawardena 1968: 442). With few suitable partners within the local community, members drawn from a variety of caste groups and categories had to settle for caste-exogamous marriages. Still, especially among those from originally high-status groups, caste endogamy continued to be an ideal – albeit, as among Fijian Indians, a rather vague one:

People gave no clear reasons for wanting to marry their children within the caste. Some said that different castes had different ways of life, and that a girl going into a strange house would not be able to adapt herself. But few such differences appeared to exist... [D]ifferences were as much between individuals as between castes; a traditionally low-caste group in Vunioki contained both meat-eaters and vegetarians, both drinkers and teetotallers. The preference for caste endogamy appeared to be founded on feelings of difference, therefore, rather than actual difference, feelings which might well have stemmed from the initial desire of Indian-born parents to order marriages as they had done in India, though the customs which had supported the former marriage patterns might have changed or disappeared. Continuance of caste endogamy by the Fiji-born could thus be seen as the wish to follow established practice and to avoid beingclassed as an unorthodox person. (Mayer 1961: 160, emphasis in original)
Given general inconsequences of caste-group identities (aside from Chamars and but a few others) and the ambiguities concerning rank orderings of intermediate caste-groups, broader definitions of endogamy have developed. Thus ‘there are indications that the varna has to some extent “replaced” the caste as the endogamous unit’ (Mayer 1967b: 5; cf. Clarke 1967). But on either level, the lack of corporate identity and the ultimately individual or family-based nature of marriage decision raises doubts over whether such patterns constitute marital exclusivity comparable to its pre-migration nature. Jayawardena (1971: 108) explains:

Strictly speaking, the use of the term ‘endogamy’ is misleading. If the term refers to a rule enforced by sanctions, then the preference for marrying individuals of the same caste status is not endogamy. [Overseas] caste is not a social group that collectively regulates the marriages of its members.

(8a) Codes of behaviour Since they had been drawn from such a range of localities in India, and especially since among them caste-related identities and statuses were fairly uncertain, indentured immigrants found it difficult to agree on caste-specific standards of behaviour and interaction once resettled overseas (Mayer 1967b: 3). ‘Powerful individuals may have maintained caste rules within their homesteads and perhaps their circle of near neighbors or kin, but caste control stretched no wider than this’ (Mayer 1961: 160).

(9a) Caste councils Further, behavioral and interactional standards for caste-groups were not regulated due to the lack of caste panchayats or councils in estates and settlements overseas. Mayer (1961: 159–60) suggests:

There are several probable reasons for this lack. One is that there were often too few men of the same caste in an area at any one time to provide a council. Another is that any men of the same caste would in any case almost always have come from different villages and districts of India. They would not have known each other before immigration, and no single man would have been in a position of acknowledged leadership. Again, since most of the immigrants were young men, there were few elders on whose shoulders the operation of caste councils had traditionally fallen, and who would have been qualified to re-start them.

(10a) Segregated residence Whereas in villages of India most caste groups were residentially segregated, immigrant co-residence on foreign estates initially upset such segregation. After the expiration of indenture contracts, factors conditioning village settlement in some context – such as sheer access to land and the nature of tenures – further disfavoured the geographical manifestation of caste segregation (Jayawardena 1971: 98).

Mayer (1961: 28) points out that in Fijian Indian villages, the Hindi word jagah (place) came to replace the word toli (a section of a village in India associated with a particular caste), simply because the latter was no longer relevant. ‘Sometimes, however,’ he (ibid.: 161) adds, ‘members of a single caste group also constituted the entire cultural group of a settlement; on those occasions the cultural group’s stereotype was added to the comments about caste.’ Klass (1961: 61, 64), in turn, notes that caste segregation indeed had taken place during the settlement of ‘Amity’ in Trinidad; such a pattern was still roughly discernible in the late 1950s, especially with regard to an area known as the ‘Jangli Tola’ (which, though Klass doesn’t point out the fact, actually refers to an area of immigrants from tribal groups). Also in Trinidad, Clark (1967) discerned an overrepresentation of members of high caste-groups in the town of San Fernando. Yet rather than indicating some overt form of segregation, Clarke suggests that

It is probable that the higher castes were particularly self-confident and ambitious, and therefore more likely to look for the opportunities for material advancement which were available only in schools and occupations in the town. It is also possible that many low-caste members of the Hindu community, who were born or came to live in San Fernando, were converted to Christianity. (Ibid.: 176–7)

(11a) Surnames/titles Since social interaction is generally not affected by caste considerations, the place and meaning of caste-associated surnames and titles have become rather peripheral. Referring to Brahman priests, ‘baba’ remains one of the few deferential titles, and many if not most people often do not know the caste affiliation of Indian surnames anymore. Only among certain members of some high-caste categories are certain surnames flaunted. Clarke (ibid.: 179) found that alongside those who retain surnames such as Dube and Misir, ‘a considerable number of Brahmins have adopted the title Maharaj during the last twenty years’, and that ‘Kshatriyas carry the surname of suffix “Singh”, and this is their panache.’ Similarly in Fiji, Mayer (1961: 162) writes of

a father who started to call his son ‘Singh’ and to say that they were Rajputs, although he had previously made no pretension to be of that caste. . . . [T]here had been some comment by others in the settlement, but nobody had moved to penalize the people, by boycotting their functions, for example.
(12a) **Forms of speech/dialect** With the creolizing of Indian tongues into 'plantation Hindi', forms of speech associated with local caste-groups in India were lost and linguistic components were altered, including those conveying relative caste ranks (see Chapter 2).

(13a) **Non-verbal communication** Similarly, this carried mainly local meanings with regard to caste attributes and interactions in India, and came to have little significance in overseas contexts. With an immigrant population drawn from such a broad socio-cultural field, these usually subtle indicators or cues conveying caste background may well have informed identities of some strangers at first, as they do in urban settings in India. In time, however, within the Indian community doubtless new mannerisms, gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication developed which conveyed little with regard to structured caste relations, and more with regard to differential status in terms of wealth, education, and power.

(14a) **Clothes, tattoos, etc.** Overt symbols or markers of caste – including some hairstyles, tattoos, ornaments, and garments – also carried mostly localized meanings in India, meanings which were less obvious among the amalgam of indentured immigrants abroad. The use of many such items for caste identification quickly waned (Kuper 1960: 34), being replaced instead by ones mainly aesthetic in purpose.

(15a) **Physical features** Clarke (1967: 175) suggests that association of varna with colour of skin still persists in Trinidad. Moore (1977: 105–6) suggests a transference occurred in colonial British Guiana, where the ruling whites conferred an Aryan ideal of being 'long-headed' and 'fine-nosed', whereas 'The broad-nosed, black-skinned Negroes were regarded as Kale or Karroon jat – persons of the most degraded caste, not fit to be associated with.'

(ii) **Economic and political regulation**

(16a) **Occupational specialization** The industrial organization of foreign plantations, as Smith and Jayawardena (1967: 51) bluntly describe, held little relevance for caste-related occupations:

[T]he division of labor in the plantation was based on economic and technological practices which belonged to a culture quite foreign to that in which caste was embedded. It was administered by managers who were not concerned with the preservation of traditional Indian ways. The assignment of immigrants to jobs in the factory and the field bore no relation to their caste statuses, taboos, and specializations. The type of occupational specializa-

Following indentureship and settlement off plantation estates, a variety of types of jobs or economic activities were undertaken by persons of all caste origins. In most places, Indian livelihoods centred on peasant farming and seasonal labouring, though businesses and trades were increasingly engaged especially in proximity to towns. Eventually, as Jayawardena (1971: 107) notes in Fiji, ‘Occupational specialists, such as carpenters and tailors, belong to all castes. They are employees of urban contractors and store-keepers.’ Still, it is reported (e.g., Niehoff 1967: 160) that a very few occupations continue – through individual family tradition, rather than caste ideal – to be performed by members of specialized castes: these include some carpenters (Barhai), goldsmiths (Sohar), potters (Kahar), and midwives (Chamar).

The multiple functions of pundits or priests (including those of family priest, temple priest, astrologer, funeral priest, and more) – once undertaken by specific divisions of Brahmans in India – are all undertaken by members of what has become a generalized Brahman category in most overseas contexts. Through their own efforts by way of preaching, textual legitimation and national pundit councils, Brahmans have made sure to harbour their specialized knowledge and thereby to maintain a monopoly over performance of ritual functions (see van der Veer and Vertovec n.d.).

(17a) **Dominant castes** Since basically no corporate caste-groups formed or functioned within indentured communities abroad, powerful caste-groups never came to dominate emergent Indian villages in the post-indenture years. Further, upon leaving colonial plantations, the local availability and sale or lease of land – regulated, of course, without reference to immigrants' caste backgrounds – mitigated against the emergence of pre-migration forms of centralized, caste-specific economic power.

(18a) **Economic interdependence** In response to the removal of caste-specific economic activities and the absence of dominant caste-groups, resettled Indians overseas came to rely on modes of economic interdependence (involving the production of goods and the provision of services) based on relationships markedly different from those which had characterized jajmani systems in village India. Involving individuals and families, rather than caste-groups, these included new patronage networks (Mayer 1967a), types of debt relationship (Klass 1961), forms of cooperative labour organization (Schwartz 1967b: 131–4) and rotating credit associations (Vertovec 1987). Jajmani, as found in villages of the subcontinent, was completely erased in most places – so much so in Trinidad that Clarke (1967: 168) discovered ‘The term jajman (patron) is known to very few
Hindus in San Fernando, and almost all of those who recognized it thought that it referred to the relationship between guru and chela.'

(19a) Limited mobility  Following indentureship, open access to land, practical disregard of caste specializations, and capitalist competition with cash economies were among the important factors spelling the demise of the caste system and the introduction of potential socio-economic mobility among Indian migrants overseas. It was likely that such conditions contributed significantly to individuals' choice not to return to India after the expiration of their contracts.

(iii) Differential states of being
(20a) Purity-pollution continuum  The traditional conceptual continuum based on notions of relative purity and pollution was confounded by the conditions of migration and plantation life. Indians of all castes were housed together in depots in India and shipped together overseas. Rules regulating their contact and commensality were thereby confused or disregarded, despite any attempts to uphold them. In the midst of the period of immigration, Grierson (1883: 19) curiously makes mention of a 'new caste rule which is gaining ground, to the effect that a man can eat anything an [sic] board ship, a vessel being like the Temple of Jagannath, without caste restrictions.' Mayer (1961: 157–8) documents a related tale:

One old woman told how she had set sail from Calcutta, and all on board had started to cook dinner, each caste with its own hearth. Suddenly a wave rocked the ship, and all the cauldrons of food overturned on the deck together. It was a choice of eating food which had been mixed and so polluted, or of going hungry. From that time on restrictions on food had ended, she said. No Fiji Indian informant could recall any attempt to re-introduce restrictions of food or drink after the immigrants had arrived in Fiji.

Long after the end of indentured immigration, Singer (1967: 111) observes that in Guyana, 'Hindu purity no longer depends upon a taxonomy of mutual exclusion, and ritual precision, diet, and occupational ranking.' And in Fiji, Jayawardena (1971: 101) concludes that

The Brahmin is no longer a measure of things; he is respected only if he is a priest (pandit). . . . On the other hand, there are no impurity-removing specialists. Each family cleans its own lavatory and washes its own clothes. . . . Corpses are washed and prepared for the funeral by relatives and friends. Dead cattle are buried by the owner. . . .

Likewise Schwartz (1964b: 13) found that in Trinidad, 'Commensal, sexual, and physical concepts of pollution are insignificant. . . . Where they do exist, it is an individual matter, based upon local concepts of health and not on principles of ritual pollution.' Schwartz, however, overstates the case regarding individual notions of pollution: these are importantly maintained not so much in reference to health but to ideals concerning personal states of being, especially à propos the three gunas (basic substances) and one's 'fitness' to conduct certain rituals (see Chapters 4 and 5).

(21a) Regulated transactions  Not surprisingly, with the attenuation of caste-groups, occupational specialization, patterns of interdependence and notions of purity-pollution, the pre-migration forms of ritual transaction between members of different caste-groups are rarely if at all found within overseas Indian communities. Those remaining tend to involve types of 'payment' (dakshina) to pundits for their ritual services, or much less frequently, to Naos (barbers) for their assistance in special rites. Further, it is generally only among some orthodox Brahmans that restrictions on the acceptance of food are practised – and these, regardless of whether the food is considered pakka or kaccha.

(22a) Initiation rites  Overseas, practice of high varna initiation rites seems to be a largely a matter of individual and family preference. In some places, as Niehoff (1967: 155) writes of Trinidad, 'The upper castes have retained a vestige of the "twice-born" ritual. They observe the ceremony of the investiture of the sacred thread, janeo, but unlike their ancestors in India they do not continue to wear it through the rest of their life.' In Fiji, reports Mayer (1961: 162), one man

had insisted on an investiture with the sacred thread before his marriage, although it was popularly held that he was far from being a member of a 'twice-born' upper caste, whose members alone had the right to wear it, and the officiating priest was later reprimanded by his fellows.

As pointed out in Chapter 5, however, currently in Trinidad persons from virtually all caste backgrounds undertake a similar 'christening' ceremony, indicative of other generalizing trends in Hinduism outside India.

(23a) Purification rites  Following the general lack of pollution restrictions, there arises little need for caste-associated purification rites. Thus, for instance, Schwartz (1964b: 14) states that in Trinidad, 'there are no significant attempts to enter into purificatory rites subsequent to accepting food, sexual relations, or physical contact with specific persons dissimilar from oneself'. Instead purification remains mostly an individual undertaking, usually involving a fast, prior to the performance of certain ceremonies.
Limited access to temples, rites

Generally among post-indenture Hindu communities, as Jayawardena (1971: 101) found in Fiji, ‘There are few ceremonies, such as temple rituals, where caste differences could be publicized; in any case there are no rules against low castes entering temples.’ As described below and in the next section, trends in religious practice cut across pre-migration divides of caste.

Caste-specific cults, shrines, practitioners

Regarding religious practice long ago on the estates in Fiji, some of Jayawardena’s informants recalled ‘that each caste conducted its own rituals, others that they combined’ (1971: 91–2); occasionally,

puja to caste gods were offered, especially by the Ahir and the Chamar. Such rites were not expressions of caste solidarity. Rather, the diverse ritual experiences of individuals inclined them to pin their faith on rituals idiosyncratically. Those who believed in the effectiveness of a particular rite co-operated to celebrate; sometimes members of one caste combined, sometimes members of different castes. (Ibid.: 93)

Moreover, Speckmann (1965: 233–4) indicates that in the early years of settlement in Surinam, Brahmans sometimes refused to perform services for Chamar; the latter, therefore, appointed their own priests. Yet Jayawardena (1971: 94) amply describes an ensuing process by which cult exclusivity was eroded.

According to one Brahmin, they set aside the scruples they heeded at home because the immigrant Hindus were in a foreign land. However, some non-Brahmins recalled that Brahmin priests readily officiated only at the homes of Brahmins, Kshatriya and clean Sudra. If they accepted calls from low castes they insisted on conducting the ceremony in the open, sat well away from their clients and brought their own prasad.

However, most Brahmin priests gradually relaxed their attitude to low castes as the few who were more tolerant came to be in great demand, becoming famous pandits whose reputations eclipsed those of the more orthodox.

Philosophical concepts

Many of the arguments just mentioned call upon philosophical concepts concerning dharma, karma and reincarnation, and continue inconclusively in most overseas Hindu communities to the present day.

Thus we see that among communities of indentured migrants and the descendants overseas, a host of factors combined to mitigate against the practice of caste as it had existed in villages of India. Moreover, in the early years of resettlement abroad, it seems that in attempting to foster ideas or relationships associated with the caste system, some individuals met with indifference or derision from their fellow migrants. In this way in Fiji, ‘People who insisted on the public affirmation of caste distinctions were usually shrugged off as tiresome and even marked for their empty pretensions’ (Jayawardena 1971: 93).

Nevertheless, some form of caste identity, however vague, was bound to remain (since for one reason or another, it might be occasionally referred to by others in the community if not by individuals themselves). Yet the pre-migration matrix of caste identities held no meaning in the new context because of the great heterogeneity and geographical spread of migrants’ caste-group origins. ‘Since the people came from different districts, not every caste name possessed significance for the whole group’ (Speckmann 1965: 32). Instead, caste identity needed to be reconstructed or reclassified.

The variety of contexts and interactions in India, each of which once necessitated reference to a particular caste identity out of a number of identity ‘levels’, did not exist in foreign plantations or settlements abroad. No longer was it of any purpose, as had been the case in India, to call upon one or another grouping or classification (lineage, clan, sub-caste, caste, allied castes, ‘supra-local cluster’, and sub-regional, regional, or all-Indian varna) in order to effect claims, exchanges, or behaviours deemed appropriate for the context at hand. Therefore overseas, caste identities were rapidly subjected to considerable ‘condensation’. Persons within the Hindu community each came to be known by one broad caste-group name and accordingly, by membership in one of the four classical varnas. But as we have seen, caste ‘group-ness’ failed to emerge, and the ranking or classification of caste identities was often vague.

It was mostly on the level of what Fox (1969a) calls the ‘supra-local cluster’ that the naming of such castes was achieved. With this kind of naming or classificatory process in mind, Moore (1977: 103) suggests that in Guyana,
The practice of mixing people from different regions and of different caste backgrounds undoubtedly rendered caste regroupings somewhat difficult. Since, however, conditions in the colony led to a breakdown in pollution proscription governing commensality and intermarriage among people of different castes, it is most likely that caste regroupings were facilitated to some extent by the fact that *jatis* of comparable status in different regions of India often share a common generic name and title. Consequently, although in the home environment there is no intermarriage or dining together among these *jatis* or their subdivisions (sub-castes), a modified version of caste categories could be established in the colony based on the coming together of people from *jatis* of similar status and title.

It can be assumed that persons originally from a broad range of local castes and sub-castes were subsumed under generalized caste names or categories simply to provide some sense of behavioural order and ranking among initial sets of immigrants. Thus for example in Fiji, 'The term “Chamar” itself has such wide currency as the ideal typical low caste that it is possible that even some northern low castes are now known as “Chamar”' (Jayawardena 1971: 100). Along the same lines, Speckmann (1965: 33) suggests that in Surinam, ‘The caste hierarchy, which gradually reformed, based itself on a few important caste groups... But it was no longer possible to speak of the existence of castes in the native sense.’ Like lineage and especially clan identities in the sphere of kinship, sub-caste identities within post-indenture communities fell into complete desuetude. It is therefore not surprising that 98 per cent of Clarke’s (1967: 183) informants in Trinidad failed to identify themselves with a sub-caste.

Outside of India, then, ‘What persists of the caste system is a thing of shreds and patches and not the seamless web it was in the ancestral society’ (Jayawardena 1971: 115). The context-specific, interactional, and multi-configurational features of caste in India – those which make it a living practice rather than just an ideological framework – do not exist within post-indenture Indian communities overseas. However, Mayer (1967b: 8–9) points to the fact that

| **two of the main features of the ‘ideal’ caste system can still be found in overseas Indian communities. There is still some separation of castes and varna through endogamy and ascribed membership; and there is a notion of hierarchy, whether or not based on purity.** |

But these essentially ideological features which remain overseas do not effect claims, exchanges and behaviours in any pervasive way. Notions of hierarchy and status attribution are sporadically called into play in issues of marriage (hence caste-group or more usually, *varna* endogamy) or, by way of rather ignorant prejudices (how else, since pre-migration roles and relationships were removed?). Such prejudices were evident to Mayer (1961: 161) in Fiji, where conflicts produced the view that if the caste of an opponent was lower in rank than a man’s own, then he was craven, probably immoral and so unreliable and in the wrong; if he was of a higher caste, then he was hot-tempered, arrogant, and so unreliable and in the wrong.

While prestige among overseas Indians is not derived from caste heritage – instead being reckoned with reference to social, economic, educational, or other achievement – still, membership in a particular caste or *varna* may at times enhance or diminish the status of individuals (cf. Jayawardena 1963; Benedict 1967). Only in regard to such ‘extra’ status, high or low, might caste affiliation come (in no systematic manner) to effect interpersonal relationships. Thus Mayer (1967b: 9) concludes that among post-indenture Indian communities,

> Caste status is therefore generally only a reflection of a person’s social status rather than a governing influence on it, status being derived instead from elements such as education, occupation and wealth, and political power.

Within Indian communities overseas, the displacement of caste by other, non-group related criteria affecting status and interpersonal relationships has prefigured and now parallels caste developments in India. Berreman (1967) suggests that wherever caste organization occurs it is acutely jeopardized by processes of ‘modernization’ – which, among other things, involves the spread of once group-specific values and practices together with a trend toward a kind of social egalitarianism (cf. Singer 1971). Caste systems in India, says Berreman (1967: 365),

> are threatened and they inevitably change when power relations change and also when consensus becomes the primary basis of social integration, for then pluralism – an essential ingredient of caste systems – is threatened or disappears.

Among the original indentured migrants there was certainly pressure towards homogeneity and (within their own community) egalitarianism, originally through restrictions imposed by the plantation. In the years since indentured labour on plantations, Indians in all overseas contexts have been subject to a variety of forms of ‘modernization’. In post-indenture contexts overseas – where corporate ranking of individuals held far less salience than
in India, and where numerous new, widely-accepted criteria and opportunities for status mobility were found – caste-based power relations came to hold little sway over individuals. Relatedly, broad values and modes of behaviour were eventually held by persons from all caste backgrounds. For instance, in Guyana, Smith (1962: 121) believes that

the ideals of high caste behaviour have become very widely diffused among all Hindus; these are the purifying effect of a vegetarian diet, the desirability of abstaining from alcohol, the worship of Sanskritic deities, and the performance of Brahmanic rituals.

As post-indenture Indians grew more socially and economically incorporated into their adopted societies, these fairly generalized ideals derived from India were held alongside locally important ones shared with the non-Indian communities (cf. Schwartz 1967b; Nevadomsky 1980, 1983a).

Significantly, regarding Hindu religious beliefs and practices overseas, trends toward homogenization and egalitarianism both reflected and contributed to the demise of caste. In this way and others, too, Hindu religious change has had direct bearing on the continuous social and ideological reconfiguration of Indian communities abroad.

Hinduism

Various seminal studies of Indian society have underscored the intrinsic interrelation of Hinduism and the caste system. Calling caste ‘the fundamental institution of Hinduism’, Weber stated that ‘Before everything else, without caste there is no Hindu’ (in Gerth and Mills 1946: 396). Srinivas has argued that ‘it is impossible to detach Hinduism from the caste system’ (1962: 150), and that ‘Hinduism lacks all organization, excluding the caste system. If and when caste disappears, Hinduism will also disappear’ (1956: 495). We have seen that following indentured migration, caste no longer functions as a viable system within overseas Indian communities; so, what impact has the demise of such a presumably basic cultural concomitant had on Hindu belief and practice?

For a start, Hindus and Hinduism have by no means disappeared overseas along with significant feature of caste. Yet a variety of changes – some intentional, some inadvertent – have been wrought by overseas Hindus while living outside India within shifting social, political and economic contexts. The balance of this chapter explores common patterns of change affecting Hindu belief and practice in post-indenture Indian communities; the rest of this book looks in more detail at these patterns as they have influenced the historical and contemporary development of the Indian community in Trinidad.

Jayawardena (1968a: 444) has broadly addressed the issue of socio-religious change among Hindus overseas, concluding that ‘In general, trends have led from village and caste beliefs and practices to wider, more universalistic, definitions of Hinduism that cut across local and caste differences.’ Such wide trends are discussed under a series of headings below. Yet the reader should bear in mind that each trend or pattern suggested has quite specific, situationally-derived form and meaning in each locale and historical period, and that these forms and meanings are by no means fixed. As van der Veer and Vertovec (n.d.) have stressed with regard to Indian communities overseas,

...to be a Hindu is neither an unchanging, primordial identity nor an infinitely flexible one which one can adopt or shed at will, depending on circumstances. It is an identity acquired through social practice and, as such, constantly negotiated in changing contexts.

Basic beliefs

Hindus have been renowned for their capacity to recognize commonality in religious forms found throughout India. One way of doing this has been by referring localized phenomena to classical categories. For instance,

While many resemblances were shared among the unlettered little traditions, their participants generally communicated from one region to another not directly, but only through triangular translations up to the higher levels and down again. In Andhra a peasant would worship Vyankateshvar; in Bengal, Krishna; in Orissa, Jagannatha; in Maharashtra, Vithoba; and so on. Only if these names of deities were translated into the name of the embracing Sanskrit god Vishnu would the civilization-wide community of worship become apparent. . . . (Marriott 1963: 30–1)

Such a capacity, some observers suggest, has in recent years turned into a tendency as increased social mobility and other modes of change in modern Indian society have stimulated moves whereby ‘all-Indian values are asserted and the homogeneity of the entire Hindu society increases’ (Srinivas 1956: 493). Parochial Hindu phenomena in modern India, say Srinivas and Shah (1968: 365), are giving way to the classical forms or categories of Hindu belief:

Everywhere village deities traditionally associated with epidemics of diseases such as plague, smallpox, and cholera seem to be losing ground, while the prestigious Sanskritic deities are becoming more popular. Blood sacrifices and offerings of liquor
to deities are also becoming less popular. The horizon of the peasant is widening, and the richer peasants now visit pilgrimage centers several hundred miles away from their villages. Films, radio, text-books, newspapers, journals, and paperback books are strengthening ‘regional’ and ‘all-India’ Hinduism, at the expense of strictly ‘local’ forms. . . . Moreover, there has been a growth in secularization, egalitarianism, and rationalism.

Singer (1966, 1971), too, sees Hinduism undergoing a variety of socio-religious processes effected by ‘modernization’. ‘(T)he net result of these processes of interaction and adaptation’, he (1966: 66) writes, is ‘an ecumenical sort of Hinduism that is blurring sect and caste lines.’

Most ethnographic studies of overseas Hindus show that among migrant labourers who were drawn from various regions and castes in India – each typified by what anthropologists long called ‘little traditions’ of localized socio-religious phenomena – there has emerged a predominant, stylized form or set of beliefs and activities likened to what has been deemed the Sanskritic ‘Great tradition’. Along these lines, Bharati (1970: 39) notes that ‘the Hindu settlers in East Africa have achieved a complete fusion of “big” and “little” tradition elements.’ Jain (1987: 23) writes of widespread ‘religious upgrading – a move toward the “great tradition” of Hinduism’ amongst low-caste plantation workers in Malaysia. And in South Africa, Kuper (1957: 227) outlines a similar pattern in which the body of Hindu belief and practice resembles a ‘regional Hinduism’ akin to those characterizing vast areas of India. Kuper (1960: 216) goes on to explain how, in a way similar to that found in other post-indenture communities, such a generalized Hinduism has been achieved:

Hinduism has reacted to the South African situation by breaking through its caste restrictions and extending its ethical implications. The paradox of classical Hinduism – a tolerant, eclectic dogma coupled with an exclusive and divisive social system – is being resolved in South Africa by becoming socially as well as dogmatically inclusive.

In virtually all places where indentured Indian labour was introduced, patterns of ideological and ritual inclusivity, generalization, or homogenization within Hinduism co-evolved with the attenuation of caste and the restructuring of kinship. Caste and kin-based deities, ceremonies and ritual duties largely disappeared from the overall religious corpus (some exceptions are discussed in Chapter 5). So, too, did ‘the division between a brahmanical religion of the higher castes and a folk religion of the lower castes’ (van der Burg and van der Veer 1986: 517). Religious beliefs, practices and orientations arose which were common to all Hindu immigrants in their new and alien settings.

One fundamental implication of this shift towards commonality was that Hindus came to stand in a generally different and special kind of relationship with the divine. No longer did they need the medium of a Brahman priest to approach the highest gods (that is, the Sanskrit deities, conceived to be the purest manifestations of the Absolute); the relaxation of caste proscriptions surrounding purity and pollution allowed individual Hindus of all social backgrounds to enter devotionally into more involved, personal relationships with the godhead. Such a transition had important implications for matters of morality and social behaviour, as Jain (1968: abstract) explains:

It may, for example, be hypothesised that in those societies where the rules of purity–impurity are not elaborated and where the caste hierarchy is unsupported by the traditional priestly and kingly authorities, man’s direct relations with the supernatural (devotion) becomes a more powerful element in the conduct of moral life than in the ‘typical’ Hindu societies where ideas of merit and sin refer primarily to conformity or deviance with the rules of the caste order. . . . [In such societies] the individual’s direct relations with the supernatural take on a moral character conducive to the development of individual religious devotion and a secular morality. Society as a whole has ceased to be sacred; the gods are outside and sometimes juxtaposed to it. The individual human being is confronted with the individual deity.

Thus among overseas Hindu communities, the demise of caste, a shift in devotional orientation, and ultimately the development of new forms of socio-religious practice in foreign, secular societies are to be seen as changes occurring in conjunction (cf. Kelly 1988).

The ideal of a direct relationship, unaffected by caste or social context, between an individual and a chosen deity is drawn from Hinduism’s age-old bhakti marga (path of loving devotion). It has been generalized features of the bhakti tradition which came into predominance most within the religious orientations developed among communities of Hindus overseas. Therefore a few words on the spiritual message and social meanings of bhakti are in order, as these comprise significant features of contemporary Hinduism in diaspora.

Strands of the bhakti tradition of loving devotion to a personalized deity or supreme God can be traced back several centuries in both North and South India. Philosophically, it is an alternative spiritual path to those of Brahmanic ritual, intellectual contemplation, or ascetic practice. Socially, it represents a widespread, popular form of Hinduism, with tenets and practices open to all.
(The doctrine of bhakti taught that religious merit and even salvation could be acquired by those deficient in sastric learning, ritual observance, and ascetic penances if they would but love the Lord and sing his name and praises in the presence of other devotees (called bhagavatas). This doctrine gave the movement a mildly anticaste and anti-intellectual tone. (Singer 1971: 157)

Moreover, the bhakti tradition has always taught that an immediate and direct relationship with God is readily attainable by any person. Dumont (1960: 57–8) writes of bhakti,

Here the divine is no longer a multiplicity of gods as in ordinary religion, it is a unique and personal God, the Lord, Ishvara, with whom the devotee may identify himself, in whom he may participate. . . . This is a revolutionary doctrine since it transcends both caste and renunciation, and opens for all without distinction an easy road to salvation. . . . (B)y loving submission, by identifying themselves unreservedly with the Lord, everyone can become free individuals.

In North India especially, the popular attractions of relatively easy salvation, individualism, and ‘anti-caste-ism’ combined with Sanskritic or text-based legitimation by focusing devotion on Vishnu and his incarnations (avataras). Over centuries, Vaishnavite bhakti came to have a widespread influence over Hinduism, spawning numerous movements and sects whose teachings and rites were incorporated into many local traditions (Pocock 1973).37

For centuries, Vaishnavite (Vishnu-oriented) bhakti sects, such as the Ramanandis, and devotional scriptures, especially Tulsidas’ Ramayana, have had profound influence over Hinduism in the dominant source areas of indentured emigration – Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Also in this region, another widely popular text is the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana, a bulky collection of stories regarding some forty avataras of Vishnu (Krishna foremost). ‘The single most important feature of the Bhagavata’, Hopkins (1966: 6) states, ‘is its emphasis on bhakti.’ Moreover, like the teachings of many bhakti movements, the Bhagavata Purana promotes ‘ethics that one might call almost democratic’ (Ingalls 1966: ix).

Fundamental ideals of Vaishnavite bhakti, therefore, include egalitarianism, ‘the sentiment of inter-caste fraternization, which focused attention less on particularistic caste ethics than on the universal ethico-social ideal of harmonious equilibrium’ (Lamoy 1971: 207), as well as the ‘somewhat protestant flavour of individualism on which the personal relationship of love between the devotee and his Lord is based’ (ibid.). Ishwaran (1980: 74) proposes that these ideals are exceptionally suited to Hindus experiencing processes of ‘modernization,’ among whom ‘the values of individual freedom, equality, rationality, and community’ come to be paramount. Similarly, it is for these reasons that Singer (1971) suggests bhakti Hinduism has become predominant in rapidly-changing (especially urban) India. The teaching of bhakti is ecumenical, he (ibid.: 158) says, and represents an expression of democratic aspirations within Hinduism. It links village and town, traditional and modern, the folk and the classical, and sacred and secular spheres of culture. It brings together, at least within the religious and cultural sphere, different castes and sects, linguistic and religious communities. Historically, devotional movements have had similar tendencies but have usually resulted in the formation of exclusive sects. The contemporary movement inspires not so much sectarian and denominational formations as a diffuse emotion of brotherhood, which softens the rough edges of group differences.

Quite distinct from the family and caste-based forms of worship which characterize village Hinduism in India, in bhakti-centred Hinduism the importance of communal feeling often finds expression in congregational activity. Recitation of the Ramayana by laymen, expositions of the Bhagavata Purana by pundits, and the group-singing of bhajans (hymns of praise) are foremost examples of bhakti congregationalism.

Bhakti-centred Hinduism, then, is a religious orientation ideally suited for overseas Indians. (1) The anti-caste and democratic/egalitarian ethics of bhakti well befit the diaspora, where the configurations and sentiments of caste have eroded; critics of any remaining vestiges of caste in overseas Hindu communities often make reference to social doctrines associated with bhakti. (2) Bhakti’s goal of a direct, personal affinity with God (usually in the form of Rama or Krishna) conforms with the kind of spiritual relationship which the demise of caste ideology (especially the purity/pollution complex and the mediating role of Brahmans) makes possible. (3) The trend toward a universal or ecumenical Hinduism, able to span geographical and caste differences among migrants, is facilitated by Vaishnavite bhakti. (4) Bhakti ideals and trends are legitimated through reference to well-known literature and doctrines such as Tulsidas’ Ramayana and the Bhagavata Purana (not to mention the Bhagavad Gita, a scripture with profound importance which can be interpreted so as to convey a bhakti message). (5) Finally, among Indians overseas the collectivist tendency of bhakti-centred Hinduism, expressed in congregational worship, has the potential for manifesting and supporting a broad, communal Hindu identity in multi-ethnic contexts.
Ritual activity

In the earliest years of Hindu presence in foreign colonies, exclusive rites were maintained by persons of different castes and regions of India; yet these were eventually discarded or combined as caste-based socio-religious organization was found to be unworkable, especially because caste and kin groups no longer functioned corporately (cf. Jayawardena 1979). Hindu priests themselves did much to break down caste-exclusivity in ritual practice, since they sought to maximise their clientele by providing services for individuals from virtually all caste backgrounds (Jayawardena 1971; van der Veer and Vertovec n.d.).

As Hindu communities became ever more settled in a variety of environments, there arose a range of new – or, at least, newly and collectively structured – socio-religious phenomena. For instance, a host of Hindu festivals were widely celebrated among migrants on colonial estates – up to 32 each year in Surinam (Emmer 1986: 259), and sites for mass Hindu pilgrimage were established – such as Grand Bassin lake in Mauritius (Carter 1987: 326). Other local, collective practices especially associated with Vaishnavite bhakti became routine features of life on plantations and in early Indian villages – including, throughout the southern Caribbean, small gatherings for singing bhajans, reciting the Ramayana, and for listening to sermons on the Bhagavata Purana (Vertovec n.d.2).

The proliferation of temples, in most places since before the turn of the century, provides an important indicator for the growth of collective worship among overseas Hindus. But the forms of management and patterns of use surrounding temples found in various contexts also show significant differences in socio-religious development (differences which are largely attributable to the combined workings of variables surrounding migration and settlement described earlier in this chapter). Among some Hindu communities – such as in the Caribbean – temples represent a widespread, homogenized Hinduism; in others – such as in South Africa and Fiji – rather fragmented congregations and more variegated traditions have evolved. By way of such contrast, Jayawardena (1968a: 444–5) describes temple organization and practice in two such settings. In Guyana, he explains,

local Hindu communities are organized around a temple (known as a ‘church’) that is not associated with a local or sectarian god but dispenses the same rituals and doctrines found in other local temples in the country. The temple is run by a Brahman priest responsible to local associates.

In Fiji, on the other hand,

Temples are frequently managed by a pujari who is often not a Brahman. . . . Members of a community may have no special attachment to the local temple and may regard themselves as clients of a temple in another district. In Fiji all temples do not dispense the same kind of blessings; several are specialized centers that confer unique benefits and conduct annual cycles of ceremonies attended by devotees from all parts of Fiji.

Guyana does, in fact, also host similarly specialized centres in the form of Kali Mai temples, evolved from ecstatic South Indian Hindu traditions and managed by ‘Madrassi’ pujaris, which are quite distinct from those of the country’s mainstream or ‘Sanatani’ Hinduism (after Sanatan Dharm; see below). Nonetheless, the Kali Mai centres draw both regular devotees and Sanatanis seeking divine healing or assistance for personal crises. These temples and their rites, once having dwindled to a point of near-extinction in the Caribbean, have in recent years grown dramatically in participation and elaboration (a trend found now in Trinidad as well; see Chapter 5). The changing role and trajectory of the minority Kali Mai centres point significantly toward other basic trends or developments affecting Hinduism abroad; these include indications that the popularity of certain religious practices may ebb or flow over the years, and that key Hindu ritual practices may be refined or truncated (Hutheesing 1983), embellished (below, Chapter 4), or even ‘invented’ over the years or at certain historical junctures (Vertovec 1991b). The fact that individuals may engage in ritual activities at a number of fundamentally differing centres or events also suggests important dynamics involving socio-religious organization.

Socio-religious organization

Organized religious associations have played significant roles in consolidating or stimulating overseas Hindu communities. The unitary forms of Hinduism which emerged overseas originally provided the basis for these kinds of associations (Kuper 1960); subsequently, it has been these broad forms which such bodies have continued to promulgate. The continued predominance of Brahman priests, the standardization of doctrine and ritual activity, and the management of national political campaigns have all been largely accomplished through or by major Hindu religious bodies in each post-indenture context. Ironically, in most places the stimulus to these and other phenomena surrounding such ‘orthodox’ organizations has historically arisen – as we shall see in Trinidad – by way of response to the missionary activities of an Indian-based Hindu reformist movement, the Arya Samaj.

Founded in the Punjab in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), the Arya Samaj stresses, among other things, solidarity and equality among all Hindus by repudiating the caste system and advocating
a strictly monotheistic faith based solely on the Vedas. Soon after its founding, the Arya Samaj gained popularity throughout North India, particularly among the lower castes who were attracted to its anti-caste doctrine.\textsuperscript{38} Higher castes, too, were drawn to the sect’s teachings, sometimes consequently abandoning certain practices of untouchability and idolatry (Mahar 1960: 283). The Arya Samaj had a kind of ripple effect across North India: even those who did not join, after being exposed to its teachings, came to re-evaluate their own beliefs. Subsequently, various associations were founded to safeguard non-Arya Samaji Hinduism (deemed Sanatan Dharm, ‘eternal way’ or ‘eternal duty’) and to combat the teachings of the sect. This then led further toward conscious attempts to create common forms of Hindu belief and practice. ‘(I)ntroduction of the Arya Samaj into many [Uttar Pradesh] towns’, Freitag (1980: 603) writes, ‘polarized Hindus, forcing them to define and identify just what it was that they regarded as their community’ (cf. Planalp 1956: 138–40). Prior to the nineteenth century, Freitag (1980: 597–8) points out, ‘Participants in Hinduism, active only in localized religious practices and not subject to, or coordinated by, any central organizational structure, certainly could not be treated as a coherent community.’\textsuperscript{39}

The Arya Samaj in particular were responsible for sending very learned and well-spoken pundits to virtually all overseas Indian communities in the early decades of this century (see Vedalankar and Somera 1975). Wherever they went, their impact was considerable. Their lectures and rites were well-attended, while their message emphasized the importance of ethical action over the status dictated by birth (that is, caste). The impact of the Arya Samaj missionaries in Surinam, described by Speckmann (1965: 47–8), suffices to summarize their impact among overseas Indian communities elsewhere:

Their success must be largely attributed to the more universalistic system of values of the sect – a system that fitted in very well with the new social situation of the immigrants. For we have seen that the old caste structure had undergone substantial modifications. The ascribed status on the basis of birth, which was typical of the caste system, was dysfunctional in a society in which equal chances were offered to every immigrant, irrespective of his caste. . . . The modern, more rationalistic teachings of the Arya Samaj presented an ideology on the basis of which the prestige aspirations of many younger people in the Hindu community could be justified. It was no longer necessary to subscribe to the principles of caste status and the authority of the old priestly elite: personal achievement, and a more personal experience of religion, were of central importance.

As in India itself, those Hindus who did not themselves join the ranks of the Arya Samaj came to re-evaluate essential aspects of their religion and religiously-based social system. Among Hindus in British Guiana, Smith and Jayawardena (1959: 331) recorded such a reaction to the Arya Samaj’s ‘emphasis on the universal nature of this version of the Hindu faith’:

Under the influence of the new stress upon achievement criteria emanating both from the Arya Samaj and from Guianese society itself, even the ‘orthodox’ Hindu organization, the Santan [sic] Dharm Maha Sabha, was engaged in a reinterpretation of orthodoxy. Whereas the original ‘coolie culture’ had included the idea that low caste groups such as Chamar had their own priests and their own rituals, even they were eventually drawn into the body of ‘orthodox Hindus’ served by the priestly caste of Brahmins.

Furthermore, although only a few of the doctrines and practices of the Arya Samaj were actually incorporated into ‘orthodox’ or Sanatani Hinduism overseas, much of their basic manner was adopted. Bharati (1976: 329), for instance, notes that

\textit{all Hindus in east Africa, sanatani, Arya Samaji, and non-aligned, share a style of moralization that is Arya Samajist; sermons and less formal religious dialogue, regardless of the sectarian provenance of the participants, utilize all of the homiletic input created close to a century ago by Swami Dayananda in his Satyarth Prakas . . . It may, therefore, not be an oversimplification to say that the east African Hindu \textit{ritual} follows a \textit{sanatani}, the sermon an Arya Samaji model, regardless of the audience’s sectarian identification. [emphases in original]}

In time, certain ‘mainstream’ Hindu associations, developed \textit{in situ}, came to dominate the religious organization of the Hindu community and of an entire country. In Guyana the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha is one such body which represents an emergent, unitary Hinduism in its most institutionalized form.

This form of Hinduism has gradually replaced all the lower-caste cults and special practices which used to exist among the immigrants, and it claims the affiliation of practically all the temples in the country. . . . With its sister organization, the British Guiana Pundits’ Council, it may be said to control orthodox Hinduism (or the nearest Guianese equivalent to it), in British Guiana, and has come to constitute a ‘church’ in the technical sense. (Smith 1962: 122–3)
Religion and ethnicity

Since its earliest days of diaspora, Hinduism has been in constant discourse with each of its alien surroundings. Various elements of the overseas context have impacted on Hinduism, bringing about all sorts of modification in doctrine and practice. Yet equally important, Hinduism has been a key locus of individual and communal distinctiveness and worth. As Jayawardena has emphasized in a number of his works, the development of an all-inclusive form of Hinduism overseas arose in conjunction with Indians’ confrontation with ethnically and racially complex surroundings:

Development of the Sanatan Dharm and the decline of all smaller sects may be associated with the growth among the immigrants of a consciousness of being all Indians in a multiethnic society, where only this dimension of their social personality was significant and all finer distinctions of caste, ritual, and belief were unappreciated and ignored. (Jayawardena 1968a: 444)

While several items of traditional culture, such as dress, language, cremation, and other festivals and ceremonies have fallen into desuetude, those that have been retained, and in some cases even elaborated, serve as media for maintaining and expressing the solidarity of the Indian community vis-a-vis other ethnic groups. (Jayawardena 1963: 25).

Yet Jayawardena also points out that the ways in which common religious culture is expressed within overseas Indian communities can vary substantially — largely, he suggests, as a function of settlement history. For example, he has underscored the fact that in Guyana, Indians settled in proximity to and came to interact often with Africans; in Fiji, Indians were largely segregated geographically and socially from indigenous Fijians. Hence ‘the Hindu in Guyana, bound by close interaction with Indian and Negro Christians, feels a greater need to proclaim his separate identity as a Hindu than does the Fiji Indian, whose life is largely confined to the Hindu community anyway’ (Jayawardena 1968a: 445; cf. 1980).

Yet the centrality of Hinduism among overseas Indian communities has not continued solely due to the need for social identification within multiethnic environments. Devout Hindus — like persons adhering to any faith — structure their behaviour, attitudes and values not just in accord with their social-economic-political context, but in accord with their basic and all-embracing beliefs about who they are and how they must act. In this way, ascendent reality, ordained code of conduct, and sacred symbols. This-worldly and other-worldly points of reference, as it were, are interposed. (Vertovec 1990b: 247)

While many kinds of ideological, social, economic and organizational or political change have impacted upon Hindu communities overseas — change by way of which Hindus were singled out and disadvantaged by others or by which they have made collective strides within their encompassing societies — through it all, the ideals and beliefs associated with dharma, bhakti, sin and merit, prescribed performance of ritual, astrological auspiciousness, manifestation of the godhead, and much more, have remained at the centre of Hindu life as the ultimate criteria of ethnicity and identity.

Shifting solely to examining the development of the religion and its place among Indians in Trinidad, the following chapters describe the ways in which certain ideological and social forms equated with Hinduism have gradually emerged as the Indian community — and Trinidadian society itself — has changed through long years and in recent times.

Notes

1 General overviews of (providing useful bibliographies for) the study of overseas Indians include: Gangulee 1947; Kondapi 1951; Cumpton 1953; Tinker 1974, 1976, 1977; Shigematsu 1975; Thomas 1985; Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990.

2 Comparative studies overseas Indians communities include: Firth et al. 1957 (examining factionalism in East Africa, Fiji, Mauritius and Gujrat); Mahajani 1960 (on Burma and Malaysia); Mayer 1976b (focusing on patronage and brokerage among Indians in Trinidad, Fiji, colonial British Guiana, and Mauritius); Kuper 1969, and van den Berghe 1970 (comparing South Africa and East Africa); Jayawardena 1980 (Fiji and Guyana); Lemon 1980 (East Africa and the West Indies); van der Berg and van der Veer 1986 (Surinam and the Netherlands); and Jain 1988 (Malaysia and Trinidad). Edited volumes containing collected studies of different overseas Indian communities include Bahadur Singh 1979; Kurian and Srivastava 1983; Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990; Vertovec n.d. 2.

3 This echoes Jayawardena’s (1971: 113) point that, ‘The persistence and disintegration of traditional institutions in overseas Indian societies can elucidate the nature and operant conditions of these institutions.’ Both Pocock (1957b) and Mayer (1967b: 13–18) make a similar observation with specific reference to caste overseas vis-a-vis caste in India, while Nevadomsky (1983b) compares family patterns in rural India and Trinidad, and Jain (1968) examines aspects of Hindu morality as found in South India and Malaysia.

4 For details of debates, legislation and general history surrounding the early transport of Indians abroad under schemes of indenture, see Geoghegan 1873; BPP 1874, 1910; Erickson 1930, 1934; Shiel 1967; Tinker 1974; Lal 1983; Saunders 1984.

5 Special Conventions with Great Britain made by various colonial powers (both France and Denmark in 1860, Holland in 1870) provided indentured migration from British India to their own respective foreign territories. See Erickson 1934.
At both the sub-depots and port depots, recruits went through a series of interviews, medical examinations, and a period of waiting, designed to allow them a chance to think over their decision. Some 20 per cent of recruits were rejected at the regional sub-depots (for reasons of health, misunderstanding, or after being reclaimed by families), as at the port of embarkation, where over 14 per cent often deserted as well (Lal 1983: 27–33). See Protector of Emigrants 1873; Hill 1919: 45–6; Erickson 1930: 141–53.

Regarding this last point, Grierson (a colonial official and Indologist) remarked on how Bhojpuri in particular seemed to have a more adventurous spirit than any other Biharis, ‘each man ready to carve his fortune out of any opportunity which may present itself to him. . . . Thousands of them have emigrated to British colonies and have returned home rich men’ (in Saha 1970: 74). Cf. Tinker 1974: 53.

Mangru (1983: 101) suggests that much of the alleged dread which the kala pani caused in the minds of Indians was due to it being synonymous with transport to the notorious penal settlement in the Andamans.

The locations of origin throughout India for migrants to various colonies are discussed in the following sources: to South Africa, Kuper 1960: 5–6; Fiji, Gillion 1956, Lal 1979, 1983; to Mauritius, Benedict 161: 17–22; to the French island colonies, Singaravelou 1975: 19–30; to Surinam, Emmer 1984: 95–6; to British Guiana, Smith 1959. [The home areas of Indian migrants to Trinidad are detailed in Chapter 2 of this book.] Lal’s research is particularly noteworthy, for he bases his findings regarding the social and geographical backgrounds of Indian migrants to Fiji on a computer analysis of 45 439 original emigration passes.

Between 1844 and 1860, government regulations required ratios of 50 women/100 men; in 1860, no ship was to be dispatched from India without a 50/50 ratio; from 1860 to 1863 the proportion was 25/100, rising to 33 1/3 per 100 in 1863–65; this increased to 50/100 once again in 1866; after 1870, the ratio of sexes was set at 40/100 (Erickson 1930: 156–7; Lal 1983: 99–102). Other discussions of the attempts to provide acceptable proportions of sexes among indentured Indians can be found in Nath 1950: 143ff.; Kuper 1960: 5; Lal 1985; Emmer 1986.

Some of the general conditions which existed on colonial estates are described in Bronkhurst 1883, 1888; Comins 1893a, b; MacNeill and Lal 1914; Tinker 1974: 179–235; Jain 1984; Hoeft 1989.

Even on the voyage from India, tight quarters and a common predicament of anxiety created deep friendships among migrants; these were known as jihai bhai (ship brother) relationships, which continued to be strong on plantations – and indeed, well after Indians had finished their indenture contracts and settled in nascent villages within the colony. See Mayer 1961: 6; Speckmann 1965: 25; Jayawardena 1968: 435n., 1971: 92–3.

Important aspects concerning the plight of indentured women are described more fully in Lal 1983, 1985; Reddock 1985; Jain 1986 (a critique of Reddock); Emmer 1986; Carter 1987; Beall 1990.

Not only did planters exploit the labour of migrants at all stages, but their constant monitoring of individuals’ levels of productivity also led to some Indians’ rejection after indenture. This is noted by Sandhu (1965: 77), who writes, ‘Naturally many an employer undertook to maintain his workers at as small a cost as possible, to work them as hard as possible, and to keep them on the job as regularly as possible. At the end of the indenture, he tried to renew the agreement for another stretch if the worker was still productive, or to get rid of him if he was not.’

Soon after the Deed of Cession, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon (later Lord Stanmore) took up this post. It was Gordon who introduced indentured Indian immigration to Fiji, having come to know the system well while serving as Governor of Trinidad (1866–70) and later, as Governor of Mauritius (1870–74).

Although the Guianan coastal strip, which is only 15 or 20 miles wide, also serves to concentrate the other ethnic groups in the same limited space, Despres (1967: 58) points out that immigration policies and labour laws – along with differential strategies of resource exploitation – acted to confine different groups to virtual ghettos. Indians came to be located primarily in rural districts of East and West Coast Demerara and Berbice, while Africans are more numerous in the urban vicinity of Georgetown.


The difference between clan and gotra is not always clear in the anthropological literature. The former generally refers to a genealogically traceable, exogamous section of a sub-caste (Mayer 1960: 161–6). The latter, Madan (1962) insists, is not a form of kinship relation but merely a category for grouping individuals, through mythic descent (often from some sage), for determining marriageability. In local environments, the terminology becomes interchangeably or highly contextualized. Cf. Fox (1969b: 87): ‘The Hindi word usually employed to denote locally endogamous branches within a caste category is “bans” or “gotra”. In the literature the latter word is generally taken to mean “exogamous clan,” but at least in Tezibazar, and particularly among Baniyas, it indicates an endogamous, localized entity. In contradiction to this usage, however, local Brahmins use the term “gotra” to mean exogamous clan, and “bans” as employed by the Thakur means the same.’

In the later years of indentured migration to Mauritius, however, recruitment and transport of groups of labourers bore many resemblances to the kangani system (involving recruitment through various middlemen, a system which obtained for much South Indian migration to Ceylon and Southeast Asia; see for instance, Kondapi 1951: 29–46). That is, ex-indentured Indians were sent as recruiters to India, where they often utilized their own personal networks to gain labourers for plantations abroad; the people subsequently recruited were in many cases close kin, fellow members of sub-caste, or co-villagers (Marina Carter, personal communication). On indentured migration of families to Fiji, see Lal 1983.

Among South Indian populations abroad, matrilineal succession, cross-cousin marriage, and other kinship features differed markedly from certain North Indian norms. See Mayer 1954, 1961: 164–76; Kuper 1960: 95ff; Rambiritch and van den Bergh 1961.

With regard to India, commensal generally includes sharing a kitchen, property, pocketbook, debts, labour, and one authority figure (cf. Cohn 1961: 1052). Co-residential can include living in the same dwelling, household, house site, or compound (cf. Lewis 1958: 171).

Kolaendra (1968: 346–7) demonstrates the geographical distribution of the following family types in India: (1) nuclear, (2) supplemented nuclear (including unmarried collaterals, widowed kin, etc.), (3) subnuclear (i.e. a fragmented unit, such as a widow with children), (4) single person household, (5) supplemented subnuclear, (6) collateral joint, (7) supplemented collateral joint, (8) lineal joint, (9) supplemented lineal joint, (10) lineal-collateral joint, (11) supplemented lineal–collateral joint, and (12) other (consisting of various combinations).

Others examining the interrelation of economic factors and domestic structure among overseas Indians include Smith & Jayawardena 1959; MacDonald & MacDonald 1973; Smith 1978.

Most of the contributing authors in the volume on caste among Indians overseas, edited by Schwartz (1967a), reach much the same conclusion regarding a lack of any pervasive social function of caste among Indians in Fiji, Mauritius, Surinam, Trinidad, British Guiana, and South Africa. Similar conclusions are drawn by Tinker 1974 and Moore 1977. Only in East Africa, South Central Africa, and among certain (mainly Gujarati) communities in South Africa does caste continue to have any real salience (for reasons described in this chapter); see, for example Pocock 1955, 1957b; Rambiritch and van den Bergh 1961; Morris 1968; Dotson and Dotson 1968; Nelson 1973; Michaelson 1983.

The terms jati and biraderi are both reportedly used for either subcaste or caste; their precise usage will depend on local contexts.


The severe social and economic conditions prevailing in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India affected a wide range of people, thus, it is said, producing motivations to emigrate among individuals of all caste levels. Gillion (1956: 152–3) suggests further factors pertaining to the presence of numerous high-caste members among the numbers of indentured migrants: many persons from highly-ranked caste groups would have been, like lower-caste members, from agricultural backgrounds themselves – thus likewise acutely feeling the effects of economic change which swept rural India in the nineteenth century; also, many Rajputs, Bhuinhrs, and Muslims were deeply in debt towards the end of the nineteenth century, and like other Indians of all castes, saw that emigration was a viable escape; and it is reckoned that higher-caste members were generally in better physical condition, a trait important in the eyes of recruiters.

These are derived from the Annual Reports of the Protector of Emigrants, Calcutta 1874–1917. The categories – like those for individual castes – are rather crude and artificial, of course, reflecting more the conceptions of colonial administrators than of indigenous social categories. These are discussed further in Chapter 2 with reference to Cohn 1987. Cf. Smith 1959.

A very different situation arose, for significantly different reasons, among Indian (mostly merchant) immigrants in East Africa. There, caste corporateness was actually heightened and institutionalized by way of formal communal organizations. See note 35 below.

None of my non-Chamar informants in Trinidad could ever put their finger on just what such ‘low’ behaviour among Chamar might be, indicating vague prejudice rather than specific objection. The role of midwife, long undertaken by females of Chamar descent, could, one guesses, be pointed to as something involving impure substances (this role has greatly lapsed over the past generation or two, however). The only remaining religious practice that is specifically Chamar – the sacrifice of a hog to the goddess Parvati (described in Chapter 5) – is sometimes suggested as indicative of some kind of ‘lowness’, since the most orthodox and Brahman-emulating Hindus consider such a sacrifice to be impure (blood-demanding) and somehow malevolent (involving a manifestation of Kali).

Further, originally some caste or subcaste groups may have only been represented, in an estate or village overseas, by a single person; such a person would likely encounter difficulties claiming status equivalence and maintaining group-specific behaviour patterns (Gillion 1962: 123–4).

These include virtually all the contributors to Schwartz 1967a, as well as Pocock 1955, 1957b; Dotson 1968; and Barot 1975.

Douglas (1966: 41) writes, ‘Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. . . . [T]he only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation.’ Migration and plantation life served to disorganize the ideological system of caste purity–pollution in conjunction with removing its interactional markers or ‘rituals of separation’.

The salience of certain caste phenomena in parts of Africa, largely populated by Gujarati merchants along with some Punjabi artisans, represents a situation altogether different from that present in colonies hosting indentured immigrants. In East Africa, as Pocock (1955, 1957b) observes, castes are not recognized systematically as parts of a hierarchy, but are recognized as attributionally ‘different’ from each other and therefore separate. Further, Morris (1967, 1968), Nelson (1973) and Michaelson (1983) each describe how in East Africa the maintenance of caste-groups – their difference and their corporateness – is fundamentally related to the establishment of formal caste associations. Furthermore, remarking on caste persistence among Gujarati merchants in South Africa, Kuper (1960: 31) importantly suggests that ‘a caste structure can survive among urbanised immigrant groups under the following conditions; namely, if caste members (1) can maintain a ritual exclusiveness from the time they leave India; (2) hold a privileged position in the economic organization and avoid proletarianisation; (3) retain ties with a protected caste nucleus in India; and (4) isolate their women from intimate cross-caste contact.’ Such conditions could only obtain for the free migrating Indian merchants and artisans, while conditions obtaining for indentured migrants disallowed the fulfilment of virtually all of these criteria.

The only reference to the Sanskritic ‘Great tradition’ been able to draw together a variety of Hindu immigrants abroad, but it can subsequently come to represent a key component of ethnic identity and communal cohesion. For example, Lee and Rajoo (1987: 396) write, ‘The ideal of the “Great Tradition” in Indian culture, however vague, forms an object of pride for many Malaysian Indians, thereby providing a model of cultural and religious behaviour that reinforces social bonds.

Most independent bhakti movements, however, never succeeded in gaining complete intercaste followings. Instead, most were gradually incorporated into the existing social system, in the course of which they often became yet another sect or caste unto themselves (Dumont 1970: 186–8; Lannoy 1971: 205).

Sharma (1976) suggests that many low-caste individuals joined the sect seeking higher caste status through adopting high-caste symbols such as the sacred thread, the Vedas, and the homa sacrifice. This would then make joining the Arya Samaj a type of Sanskritization rather than an abandonment of the principles of the caste system. Also see Mandelbaum 1970: 450, 463.

Freitag (1980) demonstrates how local religious and political movements in North India under British colonial administration led to the amalgamation of ideologies and the collective organization of Hindus, especially in the Cow Protection movement of the late nineteenth century.
CHAPTER 2  Indians in Trinidad

The first part of this chapter chronologically outlines the immigration process followed by the gradual consolidation and incorporation of Indian immigrants and their descendants within Trinidadian society. In the second part, historical conditions and processes which had impact on Indian social and cultural phenomena are described, while in the third part, the discussion points to important developments affecting Hindu belief and practice in Trinidad.

Part I  Social consolidation

Migration and indenture

One of the greatest turning-points in the history of the British West Indies took place with the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of the slave population. The British government passed the Act of Emancipation in 1833 and declared it law in the following year. Slave-owners throughout the empire were duly compensated, while the slaves themselves were originally obliged to labour as ‘apprentices’ for an additional six years. The requirement of apprenticeship was halted, however, in 1838. Over 20 000 slaves of African descent were freed in Trinidad (see Williams 1962, Brereton 1981).

However, rather than fleeing to the hinterlands, as many planters had feared, a large proportion of the newly-freed Africans settled or squatted on lands ‘just over the line’ from plantations (Joseph 1838:91). For a time, planters attempted to keep the ex-slaves labouring on estates through many means, including offers of huts, provision grounds, and the highest wages in the Caribbean. But high rents, a restricted economy, and various other inequalities ensured that ‘the resident worker was in a position of virtual serfdom, and the system gave every incentive for him to leave the estates and seek independence as a smallholder and a part-time wage labourer’ (Brereton 1981: 79; cf. Hall 1978). In the planters’ eyes, then, the liberated African labour of Trinidad was unreliable and unproductive.

After 1838, sugar production decreased and the market value of Trinidad estates declined. The industry was in crisis, and it was perceived that the labour shortage was at the heart of the problem. Beginning in the early 1840s, various immigration schemes were initiated, including introducing liberated African peoples from slave ships, from the African continent, or from other Caribbean islands. Portuguese, Madeirans and Chinese were also encouraged to immigrate. For various reasons, however, none of these groups were found suitable for the demands of the sugar plantations at that time. The influx of such peoples nonetheless added considerable heterogeneity to an already multicultural colonial society.1

Immigration of Indians, organized to ameliorate labour problems in Trinidad, was suggested as early as 1814 by the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Williams 1962: 78). But it was not until 1844 that the British Government, after assessing similar schemes in Mauritius and British Guiana, agreed to the indentured migration of Indians to Trinidad.2 From 1845 to 1917, the gradual growth of an Indian population in Trinidad radically changed the social and economic structure of the colony.3

The considerable expense of recruiting and shipping labourers from India to the West Indies was originally met in its entirety by the colonial government of Trinidad; by the 1870s, the planters were required to pay half these costs, two-thirds by the turn of the century, and the entire amount by 1912 (Erickson 1934: 136–7; Johnson 1971: 29; Laurence 1971: 45–6).

The indenture contracts agreed upon by migrants to Trinidad stated the following general conditions (which changed only slightly throughout the entire period of indentured migration; cf. Protector of Emigrants [Annual Reports] 1875 to 1893):

- **classification of emigrants:** males from 10 years old, females and children from 5–10 years old
- **period of indenture:** 5 years
- **nature of work:** cultivation of the soil and manufacture of the produce
- **duration of work:** six days per week, holidays excepted, nine hours each day (changed eventually to task-based labour)
- **wages, minimum rate claimable:** 1s. 0 1/2d. payable fortnightly (eventually standardized @ 25 cents per task)
- **ration — prescribed scale:** for adults over 10 years of age: rice – 1 lb.; dhal – 4 oz.; ghee or coconut oil – 1 oz.; sugar – 2 oz. (half of this scale was to be provided for children)
- **ration — period of supply:** for two years at a cost of 2 annas and 8 pie per ration
- **dwelling house:** free of charge
- **medical care and maintenance during sickness:** free of charge
- **free return passage when claimable:** after ten years continuous residence in the colony, five of them being under indenture4
Although the Protector of Emigrants and his staff sought to ensure that individuals understood all the implications of indentureship and migration, the Sanderson Committee of 1910 reported to the British Parliament that many migrants actually did not fully understand the relevant considerations (BPP 1910: 17). Many Indians in Trinidad today still believe their forebears were tricked into leaving India.

The voyage from Calcutta to Trinidad took between 60 to 100 days on ships carrying between 270 and 510 'coolies'. For the crew at least, the trip was routine since a single ship would do four trips within 14-18 months (see Swinton and Swinton 1859, Lubbock 1935). The shipment of indentured Indians to the West Indies and Fiji was in the hands of only two companies, Sandbach, Tinne, & Co. and James Nourse Co.; for each of their ships and crews, the transport of Indian migrants was routine. Each ship's surgeon—superintendent was the person entirely responsible for the health and wellbeing of the human cargo, and he was paid per head landed. Cholera was the ‘terror of the Indian coolie trade’, and epidemics occasionally broke out on ships at sea. The surgeon—superintendent kept a close watch on such health hazards and looked after sanitation, cooking, ventilation and exercise. Other crewmen in charge of the coolies were the third mate (in charge of stores and rations) and certain Indian employees: compounders (translators and intermediaries), sardars (to maintain discipline and distribute rations), and topazes (sweepers). Although an average ship mortality rate of 3 per cent was regarded as good at the time (Laurence 1971: 38), the overall experience – especially the dangerous passing of the Cape of Good Hope – must have proved harrowing for the unaccustomed migrants. The move on to sugar plantations would be no easier.

Table 2.1 indicates the number of Indians introduced into Trinidad as indentured labourers during the immigration period. Each year, thousands of Indians arrived in the island and were dispatched to estates where they were interspersed with other indentured Indians, gradually to learn the ways of a foreign land. The locations of major sugar estates in Trinidad in the second half of the nineteenth century are shown in Map 2.1. They were concentrated in the flatlands or rolling hills of the western side of the island, situated in what later became known as the ‘sugar belt’. Thus, the early Indian population in Trinidad was itself highly concentrated geographically.

Conditions on the estates were austere, and the lifestyle was regimented. Labourers were housed in lines of wooden barracks where space was strictly allotted by Ordinance: in separate rooms 10 ft high, adults were provided with 50 sq.ft while 120 sq.ft was given to three single men or a family of a husband, wife and three children. One door and one window were found in each room, and a *chula* (or *chulha*, an earthen cooking frame) was allowed on the verandah. The Mayor of San Fernando provided an excellent description of the barrack environment in 1888 – a setting which dominated many Indians’ lives until recent times:

> The barrack is a long wooden building eleven or twelve feet wide, containing perhaps eight to ten small rooms divided from each other by wooden partitions not reaching the roof. The roof is of galvanized iron, without any ceiling; and the heat of the sun by day and the cold by night take full effect upon the occupants. By standing on a box the occupant of one room can look over the partition of the adjoining one, and can easily climb over. A family has a single room in which to bring up their boys and girls if they have children. All noises and smells pass through the open space from one end of the barrack to another... comfort, privacy and decency are impossible under such conditions. A number of barracks are grouped together close to the dwelling house of the overseers, in order that they may, with the least trouble, put them out to work before daylight in croptime, which they do by entering their room and, if necessary, pulling them off their beds where they are lying with their wives... (in Poynting 1985: 317)

Sometimes labourers were allowed to cultivate a small patch of ground or to keep a cow or pig (Gamble 1866: 36); but despite this and the rationing of food, vitamin deficiency plagued the estates. The absence of latrines was perhaps the worst defect of estate conditions, along with leaky roofs, bad ventilation, and poor drainage. Colonial authorities, however, often justified the poor environment of estate Indians by claiming that ‘the general condition of the dwellings and their surroundings was much more sanitary than that of the houses in an ordinary Indian village [in India]’ (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 4). Some means to monitor the situation existed: inspectors under the Protector of Immigrants were expected to visit each estate at least
once in every six weeks, and owners were required to have regular times when labourers could voice their grievances. Estates with excessive mortality (over 7 per cent) or those found to be mistreating workers could be penalized or have further shipments of indentured Indians denied (ibid.: 39–40; cf. Geoghegan 1873: 121–2).

Administrative safeguards notwithstanding, the Indian population on sugar plantations was a relatively unhealthy one. In 1908, the Surgeon-General of Trinidad reported:

The incidence of sickness amongst indentured immigrants on sugar estates as compared with cocoa estates appears to be twice as great . . . , with corresponding variation of mortality rates: this very marked contrast may be due to the more arduous and exhausting labour conditions on sugar estates, but I think it is also referable in no small degree to much greater prevalence of malarial diseases on sugar estates.

... malarial fevers are responsible for more than a third (35.8 per cent) of the gross toll of sickness amongst indentured immigrants. . . . (in Boyce 1910: 220; emphasis in original)

He also wrote that ‘Ankylostomiasis [hookworm] continues to prevail extensively, chiefly among the Indian population, and is a serious cause of disability amongst labourers on the estates’ (ibid.: 222).

The work performed by Indians on sugar plantations varied according to sex, age, ability, and degree of experience (see Jenkins 1871: 73–8; Comins 1893b: 6–14). The primary tasks of forking and cutting cane dominated the labour of men, who were organized into gangs under a driver or overseer (usually an Indian himself). The exact work duties would depend on time of year and weather conditions. Some 80–90 per cent of men’s work was done according to task, or the amount an able-bodied labourer could be expected to perform in nine hours. Most days actually lasted between six-and-a-half to seven hours, as the task basis of work gave incentive for quick performance (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 16–19; Weller 1968: 39–41). Women and weaker men concentrated on weeding, while young boys were expected to tend livestock. Skilled estate workers laboured long hours in the sugar mill. Heavy labour, such as trenching and hill banking, was given to African workers, many of whom still lived on estates in quarters separate from the Indians (see BPP 1910; Campbell 1976). Indians, indentured and unindentured, also served estates as carpenters, stockkeepers, grooms, and watchmen.

The basic pay rate of 25 cents per task obtained throughout most of the indenture years, though some variation occurred in relation to the state of the sugar market and according to the specific nature of the work performed. Labourers were paid fortnightly or monthly, sometimes in the form of a slip representing credit at the estate store. Although some workers managed to save considerable sums, debt was a frequent condition of many estate labourers.

Haraksingh (1981: 3–4) has emphasized the repression of the entire indenture/plantation system, describing the situation as a ‘context of control’ over immigrant Indians: the legal framework (Indians had to work according to their contract or face penal sanctions), the ‘spatial ambit’ (indentured individuals were confined to the estate vicinity, and passes were required for all Indians off the estate under threat of gaol), the promotion of indebtedness through payment penalties and plantation store credit, and the poor housing and health conditions all combined to keep indentured Indians in place within a rigid socio-economic structure.

However poorly the Indian migrants fared, their labour stimulated a
major upswing in the British West Indies sugar trade. The period 1865–84 was an unprecedented period of prosperity for West Indian sugar. Yet the 1880s saw a rapid demise of West Indian cane sugar, due primarily to a boom in European beet sugar production. The decline of West Indian sugar continued through the end of the nineteenth century: British imports of sugar from the West Indies fell from 168 thousand tons in 1884 to 37 thousand tons in 1900. The price of West Indian cane sugar consequently plummeted. In Trinidad, this meant the failing of many plantations, or the amalgamation of estates and their concentration in the hands of a few individuals or firms. The number of sugar estates in Trinidad was reduced from 110 in 1865 to 56 by the end of the century (Beachey 1957: 123; cf. Maharaj 1969: 30–48).

Given the drastic reductions in the sugar industry, and despite planters’ claims, by the 1890s the colony had no labour shortage. In addition to the local African part-time labourers and the estate Indian labour force, steamship service within the Caribbean brought large numbers of immigrants from smaller islands. (At that time in Trinidad, wages were three times higher than in Grenada or St. Vincent [Johnson 1971: 28–38].) Nonetheless, planters continued to press the colonial authorities for more and more indentured Indian immigrants. The primary motivation behind the planters’ call for more Indians was to suppress agricultural wages; as long as there was an indentured labour force, free labour could make no demands on the plantocracy (Comins 1893b: 10). The Sanderson Committee of 1910 concluded:

It is probably the fact that during a period of severe crisis, the supply of imported labour at a fixed rate of wages enabled the estates to carry on their operations, when if exposed to the serious fluctuations in the supply and price of labour, they would have collapsed. (BPP 1910: 274)

In addition to the economic leverage planters hoped to gain by continued Indian immigration, they saw other social advantages:

[Pl]anlers more than once remarked on the reliance placed on the coolie not merely in the sense of his being a more reliable labourer, but from a feeling that in any time of need he would be on the side of the planter rather than with the negro. (Beachey 1957: 101)

The government heeded the demands of the planters, yet called on them to shoulder more of the costs of recruitment and transport of migrants (while simultaneously requiring the Indians themselves to pay a greater share of the return passage to India). The costs and quality of estate labour became increasingly acute issues towards the end of the nineteenth century. In India, recruiters were advised to select migrants with better physique and greater agricultural experience (ibid.: 104n.). In Trinidad, experienced workers were valued and given substantial incentives, when their indenture contracts expired, to re-indenture or otherwise commit themselves to the estate.

### Post-indenture settlement

On average, only about one of every five Indian immigrants to Trinidad returned to India (see Table 2.2). Some took with them substantial savings (Ramesar 1974: 72–3). The vast majority chose to remain in Trinidad for a number of combined reasons: work was virtually guaranteed and opportunities for gaining land were opening up in the new country, while conditions back in India were known to be dire and unpredictable; young Indians raised in Trinidad were not anxious to go to India; many migrants disliked the idea of returning to an ascribed low position in a traditional caste hierarchy, whereas in Trinidad social position could be more readily achieved; and many who did return to India for a time found that they had lost their family, were rejected by their villages, or were regarded as exceptionally polluted due to having crossed the ocean, having lived with inferior castes, or having disregarded behavioural restrictions associated with caste and religion while abroad.

As the years of the immigration period passed, the proportion of indenture-expired Indians in Trinidad swelled, out-numbering the indentured population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Migrants</th>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Migrants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1845–1850</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1881–1885</td>
<td>2,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851–1855</td>
<td>1,395</td>
<td>1886–1890</td>
<td>2,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856–1860</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>1891–1895</td>
<td>3,775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861–1865</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>1896–1900</td>
<td>3,638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866–1870</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>1901–1905</td>
<td>3,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871–1875</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>1906–1910</td>
<td>3,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876–1880</td>
<td>1,875</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>29,448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Roberts and Byrne 1966: 133
by far. Geoghegan (1873: 122–4) reported that on the estates in 1871, 10 616 Indians out of 18 556 were indentured; outside the estates, he estimated ‘about 9 000 absorbed in the general population’. By 1890, only 9 360 of 68 703 Indians in Trinidad were indentured, and by 1908, only 10 774 of 102 439 Indians were bound by indenture contracts (BPP 1910: 127). In addition to those whose five-year contracts had expired, many Indians were able to buy their way out of indenture. The West Indies sugar industry remained depressed and planters continuously received new indentured immigrants, while a growing population of free Indians began to make its mark on Trinidad’s social and economic landscape.

In order to keep seasoned labourers on their estates, owners had long offered land or cash to Indians whose indenture contracts had finished. Many free Indians soon realized they could sell their labour at higher prices elsewhere, such as on cocoa plantations. Others gradually took up occupations as grass-sellers, peddlers, and shopkeepers (see Comins 1893b: 17; Wood 1968: 156–9). Yet the greatest number continued to work, part-time at least, on the sugar estates known to them. In 1875, the Trinidad Chronicle described the situation regarding ex-indentured Indians:

Some of the planters express a fear that these coolies will be lost as estate labourers; but this does not happen. They have on the contrary often said they don’t wish to go far back, but to settle near estates they have become accustomed to. And they in fact do give a great amount of labour to some of the sugar estates. They will walk several miles to their favourite estate. Of course when their own crops need attending to, they do not willingly neglect them.

As early as the 1860s, the free Indian population had spilled over to areas outside established plantations. Together with Africans and Venezuelans, they squatted on Crown lands in adjacent areas. Under Governor Gordon, the Legislative Council made way for the sale and legal settlement of Crown lands to accelerate the colony’s development (Wood 1968: 270–5). In May 1869, 25 indenture-expired Indians petitioned for grants of Crown lands in lieu of their return passage to India. Seeing the opportunity to save the government transport costs, relieve the squatter situation, settle undeveloped land, and provide the burgeoning Indian community with some stability, Gordon granted the land and enacted regulations for an ongoing programme of land-for-passage commutation. During 1869–89, some 5852 Indians received land under various related schemes (Comins 1893b: 31; Ahsan 1963: 93–4).

The planters, however, were dubious about such allowances. They were constantly fearful of losing their labour force through scattering the Indian population too widely (Campbell 1976: 436). In response,
a locality is selected, surveyed ... and a settlement is thus formed of Indian immigrants only; and an Indian name is given to the settlement. ... The immigrants are thus encouraged to form small communities, speaking the same language, and having the same habits and ways.

As more free Indians took advantage of the opened Crown lands, more Indian communities were formed. By 1894, the Port-of-Spain Gazette noted that ‘villages or “settlements” exclusively of coolies have been formed all over the island, and, as their indentures expire, numbers of coolies from the estates flock to them to join their countrymen.’ Most would not obtain land too far afield from other Indians. ‘They congregate by themselves, avoiding as much as possible the society of all mankind but their own countrymen’ wrote Stark (1897: 77). In 1871, 32 per cent of Indians in Trinidad resided in villages and settlements; by 1901, 78 per cent of Indians were thus settled in their own rural communities (Tikasingh 1980: 123). The establishment of homogeneous villages in Trinidad represented a significant step towards forging Indian social and cultural solidarity.

At the same time, the isolated pattern of Indian settlement did little to integrate them with the African population of Trinidad. Comins (1893b: 35) observed, ‘The habits of Indians and negroes are entirely distinct, and there is little sympathy between them’ (cf. Brereton 1979). Similarly, regarding his impressions of the two communities in the island, Charles Kingsley wrote:

No wonder that the two races do not, and it is to be feared never will, amalgamate; that the Coolie, shocked by the unfortunate awkwardness of gesture and vulgarity of manners of the average Negro, and still more of the Negress, looks on them as savages, while the Negro, in his turn, hates the Coolie as a hardworking interloper, and despises him as a heathen. (in Bronkhurst 1888: 390)

Further, although some colonial elites disapproved of the Indians’ independent settlement for the reason that it ‘fostered heathenism’, most others involved saw the move as beneficial. The Indians themselves enjoyed a greater degree of freedom and were able to elaborate more traditional lifestyles and family patterns than on estates. Planters regarded the Indian villages as ready reservoirs of labour, without the costs of maintenance necessary for labourers housed on estates. And administrators advocated the development of cultivated lands by the Indians, whose year-round crops became important substitutes for food imports by the turn of the century (Richardson 1975a: 244–8). In 1914, a colonial report on the condition of immigrants described the situation of free Indians in Trinidad as follows:

The majority are holders of from 5 to 20 acres cultivated partly by household labour and partly by paid labourers, most of the latter being Indian. They enjoy a good deal of comfort and bring up large families of children whose physique and appearance resemble not the average but the best Indian types. Their daughters inter-married either with Indians of colonial birth or with young men under indenture. The father-in-law in some cases pays for the commutation of indenture. The field for settlement in Trinidad is very good indeed. (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 42)

One of the most significant aspects of Indian settlement after indenture was their growing role as independent farmers. With the decline of the West Indies sugar industry in the late nineteenth century, fewer estates existed and market forces dictated a shift in the structure of agricultural production. Even with a continual source of indentured and part-time labour, planters could not maintain their costs. When planters attempted to reduce wages, strikes ensued and there was a large migration of free Indians from the estates (Johnson 1971: 45). More Crown lands were available for sale at that time (the land-for-passage scheme ended around the same period) and, though many went into debt to do so, the newly-independent Indians took advantage of the opportunity by becoming peasant proprietors.

From 1888, Indians were allowed to grow canes on their own land under contract to estate mills. Labouring for themselves, they could supply cane at lower costs than could plantations. The west India Royal Commission of 1895 encouraged Indian cane farming, and other citizens saw such economic activity as a sure means of assimilating Indians into Creole society. So enthusiastically was cane farming promoted and engaged in, that by 1902 these independent farmers were producing over half the cane in Trinidad (Beachey 1957: 116; cf. Walker 1901: 34–5, 174).

In addition to growing sugar cane, rice, and vegetables for home consumption and sale, Indians were also, in a very large way, actively involved in cultivating cocoa. Richardson (1975a) has underscored the diversity of ecological zones and economic activities exploited by the Indians in Trinidad at the turn of the century. At different times of the year and even daily, Indians would be maintaining a livelihood through many means in ‘symbiosis’. Swampland was used for fishing, crabs catching and rice cultivation; near village settlements, a variety of vegetables and provisions were grown according to season; hilly lands nearby would sustain cane or cocoa. And during croptime (January–May), wage labour was available on estates. The developing importance of economic exchange between these zones – particularly the sale of cane to estate factories – led to improved roads and communication between communities. A further feature of the socio-economic system, however, was seasonal indebtedness. From July to
December, when little cash was to be made, Indian villagers had to rely on credit extended by local shopkeepers. Practically since their inception, Indian villages in Trinidad were socially and economically open and interdependent (Maharaj 1969; Nevadomsky 1982b).

Though Indian settlements and nearby estates were connected to each other in various ways, as a whole rural Indians were relatively isolated from the rest of the colony. This characteristic led to a higher degree of poverty, poor health, and illiteracy than among any other community or sector of the society.10 Trinidad Indians rapidly realized they needed to organize themselves and to promote actively their collective welfare.

Organization and politics

For most of the period of indentured immigration and plantation residence, Indians in Trinidad enjoyed little formal leadership or political organization. Imams and pundits were the leading figures within the community, and their aims were rarely secular. Yet the Indian population was not passive; they made their complaints known and they actively took measures of protest.

The recognized channels of voicing grievances to the estate-owner or for complaining of mistreatment to the Protector of Immigrants usually yielded few results by way of changes. Feigned illness, absence, or desertion were usual recourses taken by individuals intolerant of the plantation system.11 Excessive punishments were given to indentured labourers for such breaches of contract, and British observers noted that Indians were frequently treated unfairly in court (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 23). Secret societies existed among Indians to help indentured deserters run away to Venezuela or to gain false documents (Weller 1968: 52). These may be seen as some of the earliest forms of inter-estate, self-generated institutions acting for the collective welfare of Indians.

A more important and more powerful means of protest was the strike. Though Haraksingh (1981: 13) claims that withholding labour during the period of indentured migration did not pose much of a threat to plantations, striking did occur frequently on sugar estates, often with violent consequences. Between 1880 and 1914 there were at least eighteen major strikes on Trinidad estates (Poynting 1985: 287); Weller (1968: 49) gives evidence of an average of seven estate strikes per year by 1900, and as many as 21 strikes in 1889. Sometimes these involved escalations of violent disputes between workers and overseers, or arose from protest over excessive tasks; others resulted from attempts by planters to lower wages. In the early years of this century, officials attributed such labour disturbances to the large numbers of returning Indians who had re-emigrated from India wanting a more satisfactory lifestyle (BPP 1910: 297). Regardless of who the instigators were, such strikes demonstrate how isolated or spontaneous gestures could spawn collective action, signifying the developing organization and communal motivation of the labouring Indian community. However, as Tinker (1974: 226) points out, at that time such moves were stifled by a variety of contextual factors:

Any effective protest depended upon the presence of Indians with some experience in the use of force, or alternatively upon the chance of a homogeneous group of people with the same background being together upon one estate. If the workers on one estate protested, others might hear and follow the example. But the effectiveness of the isolation which the system enforced was apparent in the absence of combined activities.

Certain types of more-or-less informal social institutions existed on the estates and in the nascent villages. These would include groups which met for coordinating religious ceremonies and celebrations, and networks for arranging marriages through an aguwah or matchmaker. Pundits performed the role of guru (spiritual teacher) to individual chelas (disciples), as well as purohit (ritual specialist) for various families. Extended kin groups were not to be found due to the nature of migration (moving as individuals or, rarely, as nuclear families). Instead, sets of jihaji bhai or ship-brothers maintained contact and often settled together. There is no record of caste panchayats having functioned, but inter-caste panchayats of elders were formed in villages to settle local disputes in ad hoc fashion. Formal associations eventually took the form of Friendly Societies, founded before the turn of the century to provide villagers with death benefits, sick relief, and medical costs (see Wells 1953).

Organization on the national level occurred before the end of the nineteenth century. In the late 1890s, the colonial administration took steps toward abolishing immigrants’ right toward free return passage to India. In 1897 a national panchayat was called to protest the measures (Poynting 1985: 351). Little came of this, perhaps because many Indians by then had no intention of returning to India. But in that same year, an Immigration Ordinance called for all non-indentured Indians to carry a certificate of exemption from labour. This outraged the middle-class Indian businessmen, who subsequently founded the East Indian National Association. The EINA organized mass meetings, circulated petitions, and sent deputations to the Governor. In addition to combating this Ordinance, they eventually pressured the administration for Indian employment in government service, for legal recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages and for participation...
of these religions in the colony's ecclesiastical grant. Overall, however, it was not very successful in its endeavours.

In 1909 a rival organization of middle-class Indians, the East Indian National Congress, was established. Both groups were dominated by urban, westernized, well-educated, and Christian-convert Indians. Neither the EINA or the EINC were greatly concerned with the plight of the rural Hindu majority, but they were nonetheless national bodies generated to foster Indian interests (see Jha 1982, Laurence 1985).

The Indian segment quickly grew to be the substantial portion of the total population it is today (see Table 2.3). Increasingly, both Indians and non-Indians alike realized the need for the community's incorporation or equitable participation in the colony's affairs. For the most part the Indians were hindered, however, by their geographic isolation, social and cultural distinctiveness, and relatively low economic status. With the support of planters, schools established for Indians by the Canadian Presbyterian Mission socially advanced a number of Indians (Mount 1977); but conversion - the sure way to success, especially in the field of education - was too great a price for most Hindus and Muslims to pay (Samaroo 1982). Consequently the vast majority of rural Indians remained illiterate until after the Second World War (Kondapi 1948: 271).

Table 2.3 Indians in Trinidad, 1851–1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Indian population</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>82,978</td>
<td>3,993</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>99,848</td>
<td>13,488</td>
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<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>126,692</td>
<td>27,425</td>
<td>21.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>218,281</td>
<td>70,218</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>273,899</td>
<td>86,383</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>333,552</td>
<td>110,911</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>365,913</td>
<td>121,420</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>412,783</td>
<td>138,667</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>557,970</td>
<td>195,747</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>827,957</td>
<td>301,947</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>940,719</td>
<td>373,538</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>1,055,763</td>
<td>429,187</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Censuses of 1946, 1960, 1980; CSO 1973

The Indian community of Trinidad received a major boost towards a more complete incorporation into the overall society following the Sanderson Commission’s Report to the British Parliament in 1910. After hearing testimony regarding the Indians from a number of colonial observers, the Commission recommended Indian representation on Trinidad’s Legislative Council (BPP 1910: 101; previously the Indians’ welfare was advanced only by the Protector of Immigrants, who was a member of the nominated council ex officio). In 1912 the first Indian member of the administrative body took his seat. After 1924, seven of the twenty-six members of the Legislative Council were designated to be elected by an electorate of 6 per cent of the population; by 1928 three of these seven seats were held by Indians (albeit all Christians; Kondapi 1948: 272–3).

In the 1910s and 1920s various Indian newspapers were printed as part of the gradual consolidation of an Indian collective identity. The years following were to see a substantial heightening of consciousness among Trinidad’s Indians during a period of severe socio-economic difficulty. While the majority of rural Indians continued to live on or work for plantation estates, ‘The new social order which followed the end of Indian indenture in Trinidad in 1917 left management–employee relations in the agricultural industry essentially unchanged’ (Basdeo 1982: 49). In the early 1920s, the Wood Report found the Indian community ‘largely illiterate ... living a life of its own’ under conditions of hardship and poverty (in Tinker 1976: 41). The collapse of the cocoa industry in the late 1920s and the onset of the Great Depression made the situation worse for the Indian labourer. Though output from sugar factories actually doubled between 1927 and 1937, estate managers refused to grant pay raises, holidays, or task reductions. In that period there were purposeful moves by the government and powerful businessmen to stifle the trades union movement and to thwart the rise of any Indian leader (Tinker 1976: 163–5; Ryan 1972: 44–58). Drought, inconsistencies in pay allotment, and huge redundancies devastated the lives of Indians throughout the sugar belt. By July 1934 the economic situation was intolerable, and a widespread state of unrest ensued. Fifteen thousand sugar workers participated in demonstrations, ‘hunger marches’ were held, violence and arson on estates occurred, and many arrests were made. ‘The 1934 disturbances made it clear that the Indian working class had now become a major force to be reckoned with; that they were at last shaking free from the grip of the plantocracy’ (Basdeo 1986: 55). Moreover, ‘The organization and unity which the Indian labourers exhibited throughout the July demonstrations were indicative of the degree to which they had developed a collective awareness of their own socio-political identity’ (Basdeo 1982: 62).

Mass demonstrations again took place in 1937. This time, the Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Union, a predominantly Indian body,
protested alongside the African-dominated Oilfield Workers Trade Union (Basdeo 1986, Cross 1988). The scale and impact of these labour disputes, which were largely inspired by the trade unions leader Adrian Cola Rienzi (an Indian originally named Krishna Deonarine), led the Secretary of State for the Colonies to establish a special commission to inquire into their causes. Its report cited ‘a lack of regard’ and ‘indifference’ on the part of estate managers for ‘the well-being of their labour’. Among workers they found poor pay rates and ‘deplorable’ living conditions. The Commission concluded: ‘It would be unreasonable to expect anything but discontent in such surroundings’ (in Kondapi 1948: 268).

Around this time, too, a report to the Government of India further noted the Trinidad Indians’ generally poor conditions and limited acceptance into politico-economic structures, suggesting the situation needed amendment; the report’s author was dubious of such a possibility, however:

The East Indian community [in Trinidad] is very far from having obtained even the share that it might reasonably expect in the direction of affairs of the colony and the prospect referred to seems, for as far ahead as anyone need look, quite illusory. (Tyson 1939: 39–40)

In addition to forms of organization dedicated to political and economic betterment, during the 1930s a number of formal associations were founded which directly promoted traditional culture and a sense of Indianess. Prominent among these were Hindu religious bodies (see below). Muslims also experienced an important growth in organizational and public activities during this period. While Muslims in Trinidad had long maintained local jamaats (congregations) and muktabhs (schools for teaching Arabic and Urdu), in the 1930s they created two national bodies, the Tackveeyatul Islamic Association and the Sunaat-ul-Jamaat. However, as we will see with the Hindu community, schisms and sectarianism fragmented the Muslim segment during this important period of institutionalization (R.J. Smith 1963). Finally, on the secular level too, from the 1920s to the 1940s Trinidad quickly became home to several Indian social organizations and clubs.

The introduction of films and popular music from India in the 1930s sparked a ‘cultural re-awakening’ among Trinidad Indians (Mohammed 1985). They were further inspired by continuous news of the progress toward the independence of India. In 1941–42, a series of public addresses by a visiting spokesman of the Indian National Congress, Dr D.P. Panda, had ‘resulted in a national awakening among Indians and a keener interest in the progress and fortunes of their motherland – India’ (Kulkarni 1974: 19). An example of this growing sense of Indianess came after the Bengal famine of 1943–45, when an ‘aid to motherland’ campaign in Trinidad raised over $54,000 in relief funding.

Organizational skill and a sense of collective identity among Indians in Trinidad were not always readily achieved, however. One contentious issue with which the Indian community struggled concerned the legal recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages. Since the earliest days of immigration, public authorities refused to recognize as valid marriages under Hindu or Muslim rites. Indians had circulated petitions for such recognition, and in 1881, an Ordinance was passed allowing for public registration of non-Christian couples. But the Hindu and Muslim ceremonies were still ignored, and Indian couples generally did not take advantage of the Ordinance.

The lack of Western education, the ignorance of the English language, and the inability to understand the provisions of the ordinances all contributed to the failure of the registration law. The resulting illegitimacy of their children did not bother them as long as they lived in the closed world of their villages where their marriages were absolutely valid. (Jha 1982: 118)

After the turn of the century, however, the middle-class Indians came to seek marriage recognition more and more. Both the EINA and the EINC had the Hindu/Muslim marriage issue high on their lobbying agendas in the 1910s. The colonial legislature did little until 1924, when a bill for compulsory registration was moved. The entire Indian community was divided: pundits and other traditionalists wanted special provisions for their ceremonies, while those with modernizing interests advocated the bill. The controversy continued undecided for the next two decades while serious in-fighting occurred within the Indian populace and between its national organizations. Muslims succeeded in arriving at a consensus sooner, and the government recognized their marriages in 1936. The Hindu segment remained disunited over the issue much longer, and did not gain legal recognition of its marriages until 1945. Over the years the internal friction caused by this matter doubtless did much harm to the collective spirit of the Indian community. But all involved would agree that, given the Indians’ minority status, the fight was an important one for gaining essential rights.

Another important legal struggle was fought and won by Indians in the early 1940s, this time proving to strengthen Indian communality. With the approach of the first elections under full adult franchise, the West India Royal Commission created a Franchise Committee in Trinidad to make recommendations towards requirements for voter registration. Among its proposals, the Committee included the qualification that voters should ‘satisfy the registry officer that he or she can understand the English language when spoken’. The Trinidad Indian community, a great many of whom still spoke a creolized Bhojpuri (see below), took this qualification as
a direct assault on their rights and as a measure to reduce the community to political impotence. Powerful opposition was mounted, successfully ensuring the language stipulation was removed. The campaign had been fought by Indians from all levels of society, and their unity and sense of purpose greatly consolidated the entire community (see Kirpalani et al. 1945: 109–11; Tinker 1976). Thus Ryan (1972: 69) writes,

The acute group-consciousness and seeming cohesiveness of the Indian community . . . received a great deal of its driving force from this event, perhaps just as much as it did from the independence movement of India itself.

Similarly, Poynting (1985: 372) concludes that ‘[T]he experience did much to strengthen the position of those who were encouraging the community to think of themselves as Indians first and Trinidadians second.’

Indians fared remarkably well in the first elections under universal suffrage in 1946: four out of nine elected members of the legislature were Indians (although two of them owed much of their success to African party support; Ryan 1972: 73–8). The 1950 elections were politically fragmented, this time with four Indian representatives elected under the African and oilworker-dominated Butler Party. Yet in 1952, a significant new era in the history of Indians in Trinidad began under the controversial leadership of Bhadase Sagan Maraj.

In that year Maraj, a self-made millionaire and sugar union leader, merged two Sanatanist Hindu bodies to create a much more powerful pressure group and public organization, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. As described below, this was a major step towards systematically unifying the Hindu population. Not unrelatedly, in 1953 Maraj launched the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Maraj’s primary political opponent, the historian Dr Eric Williams, attacked the PDP by way of attacks on the Maha Sabha. Williams accused the Trinidadian Maha Sabha of being linked with the zealous All-India Maha Sabha, cleverly using Nehru’s and Gandhi’s denunciations of the latter body in India to the disadvantage of Maraj’s similarly-named body in Trinidad. (Maraj and his associates denied any affiliation with the organization in India.) Williams further stated that the PDP ‘was nothing more than the political voice of the Maha Sabha’ (Ryan 1972: 141), and this observation rang fairly true, since the two organizations were practically inextricable in membership and leadership. This was Maraj’s strength.

The PDP in fact had never really functioned as an autonomous political party with a constitution and a grass-roots organization. It felt no real need to organize since the branches of the Maha Sabha and the priesthood were easily convertible into political instrumentalities. Apart from the role which the Hindu priesthood played in keeping the flock together, it had always been the source to which politicians turned for help in their political careers. Pundits were among the principal opinion leaders within the Hindu community, and a few of them used this advantage to seek political office.

There is considerable evidence to support the charge that many religious meetings in temples and in homes became political meetings, and that Hindus were enjoined to support their religion by ensuring that Hindus were elected to public bodies. Pundits were known to make individuals swear on the lotah (a holy Hindu vessel) to support candidates, and would threaten religious sanctions for broken pledges. (Ibid.)

By pointing to the DLP’s Brahman-dominated control and Hindu support, Williams managed to split the Indian segment and gain the electoral support of many Muslim and Christian Indians (Vasil 1984: 309–12).

The 1956 elections marked the beginning of a legacy of racial party politics for which Trinidad became well-known. The PDP gained 5 of the 24 seats in the Legislative Council, while Williams’ People’s National Movement (PNM) secured 13. In 1957 the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) replaced the PDP yet remained under Maraj’s Hindu-centred leadership. Racial polarization increased in the 1958 federal elections for the first Parliament of the West Indies. This time, the opposition DLP won 6 of the 10 seats allocated to Trinidad. Williams and his party were shocked, blaming the outcome on ‘race, pure and unadulterated’. He labelled Trinidad Indians as a ‘recalcitrant and hostile minority masquerading as the Indian nation, and prostituting the name of India for its selfish, reactionary political ends’ (in Ryan 1972: 192). Maraj and Williams continued to verbally counter-attack each other, and a tense socio-political atmosphere between the two ethnically-backed parties has existed in Trinidad until recent times.

The attempts to establish a Federation of the British West Indies was radically opposed by Indians who feared a collective domination by Africans throughout the region (Proctor 1961). This, and the fight for the 1961 elections, motivated Hindu Indians into a more powerful collectivity than they had ever been. Their decisive defeat by the PNM in those elections, followed by Williams’s success in leading the country to independence in 1962, witnessed the beginning of the end of Indian leadership and Hindu political vivacity. The DLP ceased to be an effective opposition party in the decade to follow these PNM successes. Malik (1966) attributes the DLP’s downfall to: a decline in leadership, a lack of a definite policy or programme, personal clashes within the party, poor organizational structure, and a failure to develop a poly-ethnic following (particularly during the general
strikes of 1965 when workers of all races were discontent with the PNM government. The continued divisiveness of the Indian community along religious lines likewise contributed to the DLP’s weakness.

The 1970s began no better for Indian collective consciousness in Trinidad. In 1970, the radical Black Power movement — which led to a declaration of a state of emergency by the government — alienated the Indian segment in many ways (Nicholls 1971; Sutton 1983). In 1971, the opposition parties boycotted the national elections (save for Maraj who, under his newly-independent party, failed to hold even his own constituency). With the PNM now completely in control, these elections ‘virtually finished off the East Indians as a political factor in Trinidad, at least for many years’ (Tinker 1977: 82).

Throughout their history in Trinidad, Indians very slowly gained socioeconomic parity with other segments of the society, along with organizational skills and a developing sense of communal identity. A critical part of this history involved complex changes which took place as the original immigrants and their descendants undertook cultural adaptation and restructuration within a new and constrained social environment.

**Part II  Cultural homogenization**

In 1859 a colonial official commented that the average Indian immigrant stubbornly upheld the customs and behaviour of his homeland: ‘Looking ever to return to India, he retains the habits and prejudices of the country where he was born . . . He does not identify with the population around him, nor does he admit the religious instruction which is offered him’ (in Poynting 1985: 305). As prominent factors contributing to the maintenance of Indian culture in Trinidad, historians have pointed to such things as the early Indian immigrants’ dreams of returning to India, the ‘cultural reinforcement’ provided by a steady stream of new immigrants, the linguistic and geographical isolation of Indians on estates, and a kind of psychological boost provided by the continuation of religious rites and precepts. Others have regarded post-indenture settlement in independent, virtually homogenous Indian villages as the most significant factor contributing to the perpetuation of pre-migration values and customs. In contemporary Trinidad, various aspects of Indian culture certainly exist; but what are their forms, why these, and in what manner have they been maintained over time?

Virtually all social scientific observers have recognized that many social and cultural forms found among Indians in Trinidad are modifications of those originally practised in India. ‘However “Indian” East Indians in the West Indies may be,’ Lowenthal (1972: 146) writes, ‘they are not much like Indians in India. . . . The extent to which those long cut off from intimate contact with the homeland retain Indian ways depends on how cultural persistence is understood.’ Indeed, the nature of cultural persistence and cultural change among Indians in the West Indies has been the focus of much study and debate. With regard to these issues, various theoretical orientations or methodologies have stimulated different kinds of social scientific treatment (Nevadomsky 1982b; Vertovec 1991b).

It is assumed by many students of overseas Indian communities that the Indian ways of life were re-established once estate routine, or post-indenture settlement, allowed for the free exercise of tradition. This has included suggestions that Indians underwent successive stages of ‘deculturization’ on the estates (Ramesar 1976a: 8–9) and of ‘reinstitutionalization’ in nascent villages (Sharma n.d.: 9–16). Describing traditional features of life as being parts of the migrants’ ‘cultural baggage’, many take for granted that immigrant Indians, as it were, ‘picked up’ in Trinidad ‘where they left off’ in India. This is an oversimplified, and even misleading, approach to cultural continuity and change. Instead, the following sections describe how this was certainly not the case. It is argued that a variety of complex and rather new facets of culture – nonetheless Indian – emerged and developed as the variegated migrants communicated with each other, gained independent livelihoods, and managed their daily lives in constant interaction with the changing social–political–economic surroundings of colonial and post-colonial Trinidad.

**Cultural diversity among Indian migrants**

The foremost problem militating against any simple re-establishment of Indian traditions in Trinidad was the remarkable heterogeneity of the migrant population. During the initial years of indentured migration to Trinidad, Indian labourers embarked from Madras as well as Calcutta (see Table 2.4). Just as they do today, some of the most fundamental differences in Indian society and culture existed between North and South India. These include dissimilarities in agricultural bases and systems of economic exchange, primary linguistic families (Dravidian vs Indo-European) and other language groups, kinship structures (dominated by patrilineal and village exogamous patterns in the North, as opposed to matrilineal and village endogamous traditions in some parts of the South), the nature of kingship and other political structures, the degree of influence or power of Brahmans, village layouts and architectural styles, extent of influence from Islamic cultures, and the basic orientations of religious traditions, sects, calendars and practices.
Moreover, the North India emigrants were primarily rural villagers, while those from the South, it is believed, tended to be urban dwellers from the immediate vicinity of Madras (Gamble 1866: 33–4; Wood 1968: 139–40). Once assembled on foreign plantations, migrants from these two ends of India must have found it exceedingly difficult to communicate and to establish common norms outside estate-regulated life. Estate-owners regarded South Indians as harbouring particularly ‘filthy’ habits, as acting in generally troublesome ways, and as being the labourers most likely to break their contracts by running away (Erickson 1934: 142; Campbell 1976: 422; Mangru 1983). So great were the owners’ complaints against the ‘Madrasis’ that migration from Madras to Trinidad was terminated in 1860 (Brereton 1981: 103). Thereafter, all Indians migrating to Trinidad came exclusively through Calcutta.

The fact of a common port of embarkation, however, by no means meant that migrants shared common social or cultural traditions. Tables 2.5 and 2.6 give the regions of origin for migrants to Trinidad through the port of Calcutta between 1845–71 and 1875–1917. A number of differentiated culture areas can be identified in North India which roughly correspond to the boundaries of the provinces listed. Such North Indian culture areas can be differentiated in terms of the following criteria: form of political structure (from the level of rajas or princes to zamindars or large landholders); systems of taxation and colonial administration; land tenure systems (between types of co-sharing, individual ownership, or lease systems) and methods of revenue payment (including variant methods of yield distribution, payment of headmen or middlemen, etc.); density of village population (substantially decreasing, in the nineteenth century, east to west from Bihar through Uttar Pradesh); house types and variation of village form (including, according to Nandi and Tyagi [1961], ‘isolated homesteads’ and ‘linear assemblages’ in West Bengal, ‘shapeless agglomerates’ in North Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, and ‘dispersed clusters’ in western Uttar Pradesh); variety of caste composition and prevalence of caste,
Table 2.6: Emigrants from India to Trinidad by province of origin, 1875-1917

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<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>1875-85</th>
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<th>1896-1906</th>
<th>1907-17</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td>Northwest Provinces¹</td>
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<td>15 395</td>
<td>9 865</td>
<td>9 917²</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(48%)</td>
<td>(59%)</td>
<td>(46%)</td>
<td>(52%)</td>
<td>(52%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oude [sic]</td>
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<td>5 217</td>
<td>5 261²</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21%)</td>
<td>(18%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(28%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behar [sic]</td>
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<td>5 035</td>
<td>1 145</td>
<td>1 722²</td>
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</tr>
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<td>(19%)</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
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<td>Nepal and Native States³</td>
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<td></td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>(6%)</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
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<td>(4%)</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. Bombay)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5²</td>
<td>144</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajmere</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>26 228</td>
<td>26 107</td>
<td>21 285</td>
<td>18 623</td>
<td>92 243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Known as 'United Provinces of Agra and Oudh' after 1902 (today known as Uttar Pradesh).
Tabulated with Oudh in 1910 and 1911.
² Tabulated as 'Bihar and Orissa' between 1912 and 1917.
³ Recruitment of Nepalese was prohibited after 1895.

Source: Protector of Emigrants, 1876–1918

Indians in Trinidad

tribal or ethnic groups (including a high proportion of those generally categorized as Chamars and Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh, Ahirs and Brahmins in Bihar, Sheikhs and Mahishyas in West Bengal, and Santals and Oraons in West Bengal and Bihar); staples of diet and degree of vegetarianism (per caste and sect in the various areas); religious sects (broadly more Hindus devoted to Shaktism in Bihar and Bengal and to Vaishnavism – especially in bhakti sects – in Uttar Pradesh) and dominant pilgrimage sites; and of course, languages and dialects (see below).

Such significant variation in geographic, economic, social and cultural backgrounds must have presented enormous hurdles for migrants thrust together in the constrained contexts of estates overseas. The quandary of trying to communicate and arrive at consensus social forms was exacerbated by the continuous arrival of immigrants from different regions of North India. Interactions among Indians on Trinidad estates were in constant flux, and new arrivals complicated ongoing tendencies toward social and cultural amalgamation.

Further, in the last two decades of migration to Trinidad, greater numbers of tribal s (most likely Oraons, Bhuiyas and Gonds of Chota Nagpur and Santals of West Bengal) were sent. The tribals usually held substantially different cultural, religious, and linguistic traits, and were never entirely incorporated into the main Trinidad Indian community until recent times.¹⁸

Even if a set of migrants came from a single province, they would have been drawn from a multitude of districts and villages. In the Appendix to this book, the data regarding emigrants’ districts of recruitment show quite substantial geographical variation throughout most of the period of indentured migration.

Depending on migrants’ original district, precinct, nearest town, or village, the following features would have varied in important ways: population density, caste and subcaste composition; caste and local dialects; the nature and practice of power surrounding ‘dominant’ castes; caste hierarchies and system of caste interdependence; biraderis, bans, gotras, and other classificatory systems associated with descent and marriage; inter-village networks for exchange of labour, goods, and marriages; weekly markets; local fairs and festivals; systems of land ownership, management, distribution, and patronage; degree of village self-sufficiency or dependence, isolation, and scale of communication vis-à-vis other villages or towns; proximity to major ritual or trade centres; feuding relationships between lineages or villages; frequency of visits from itinerant sages, actors, vendors; and, particularly, the entirely localized set of religious phenomena including folklore and practices surrounding protective godlings, deified humans, malevolent supernaturals, and sacred landscapes or sites associated with myth. With regard to such distinctive cultural complexes and socio-economic
networks, Gould (1960: 481) observes that ‘a district represents in the villagers’ minds something more than a mere geographical abstraction’. Indeed, all of these features constituted the day-to-day worlds of Indians prior to emigration, and could not be easily substituted or discarded abroad.

Nevertheless, the diverse population of Indians in Trinidad eventually came to form a mutually agreed-upon style of life, system of social relationships, and set of cultural institutions during their course of settlement in the new colony. Simply ‘re-institutionalizing’ pre-migration social and cultural forms was impossible, given such significant diversity – and given, of course, the wholly different context of colonial Trinidad.

The blending of Indian traditions

Even before leaving India, the migrants had to begin modifying the ways of life they had been used to. Recruiters would bring individuals from their home areas to a sub-depot or port depot, where they would be housed together with people from other areas who had also contracted themselves as indentured labourers or ‘coolies’.

While under the control of the recruiter, the coolie was at least in the company of people who were of his junabhami, his own country, and who spoke his own dialect, though they were strangers of different castes. But now he was surrounded by folk whose speech was unintelligible, and whose physical characteristics appeared foreign, while their ways of eating and other habits would seem all wrong. However, he would have to conform to these strange ways. . . . (Tinker 1974: 140–1)

Confusion and anxiety were doubtlessly widespread among the contracted Indians in the depots. The situation would grow worse for the unaccustomed villagers on the hundred-day voyage around the treacherous Cape of Good Hope, since the passage was dangerous and often disease-ridden. Yet the harrowing experience did serve to instill camaraderie among the heterogeneous set of Indians:

A feeling of solidarity did arise in the group of emigrants. They were all in the same boat, not only in the literal sense, but also in being victims of their own impulse. The long voyage, and uncertainty about the future, further strengthened cohesion between them. (Speckmann 1965: 25)

A deep friendship – the renowned jihaji bhai, or ‘ship brother’ relationship – was often forged between diverse individuals (even between Hindus and Muslims) on the voyage to the new country. Such friends often sought to serve their indenture contracts on the same estates, and settle near each other afterwards on newly-purchased Crown lands. Thereafter – and among many of their descendants to this day – they came to treat each others’ families as nata or fictive kin. Strong emotional bonds of this sort acted as important foundations for the subsequent creation of shared social and cultural institutions. Below, historical developments regarding language, caste and family are discussed, while facets of religious change are discussed in Part 3 of this chapter.

Creation of a common language

One of the first and most formidable hurdles to overcome was the considerable linguistic differentiation found among the Indian immigrants. Following their original geographical distribution in India, the languages spoken by immigrants to Trinidad would have included Bengali, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Oriya, Nepali and some Gujarati, along with Telugu, Tamil, and the tribal languages of the Oraons, Santals, and others (cf. Schwartzberg 1978: 100, and District Gazetteers). This broad range of speech would have been multiplied by the distinct dialects of Vanga, Radha, Varendra, Rajbangshi, Magahi, Maithili, Shadri, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Eastern and Western Hindi, Bangaru, Ajmeri, and Tondai Nad. Further, each of these would be internally diversified by local and caste dialects (Gumperz 1958).

Even within single districts in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh, whence most Trinidad immigrants came, there were striking differences in regional and local dialects often making for mutually unintelligible tongues (Fox 1969b: 29). Bi- or multi-lingualism apparently varied considerably as well; for instance, bilingualism was reported to be minimal at best in nineteenth-century Shahabad (Chaudhury 1966) while it was found to be more commonplace around Bhagulpur (Chaudhury 1962).

The linguistic diversity of the early Indian labourers was a characteristic feature of the immigrant community. 'When these people meet in Trinidad,' one contemporary observer wrote, 'it strikes one as somewhat strange that they may have to point to water and rice, and ask each other what they call it in their language' (Gamble 1866: 34). The plantocracy, however, preferred this virtual Babel of Indian tongues. A baptist missionary to the West Indies noted:

The variety of languages spoken by our East Indian population makes the work of a Christian missionary very difficult. The proprietors or managers of sugar estates purposely choose men speaking three or four separate and distinct languages not understood by each other, in order to prevent combination in cases of disturbances among them. (Bronkhurst 1888: 18)
Despite the estate-owner’s strategies, the Indians in Trinidad (as in other sugar colonies) gradually came to create a common tongue, sometimes referred to as ‘plantation Hindustani’ (Tinker 1974: 208, 211). (Merchants in many parts of India have long been known to formulate and use such purposefully blended and refined languages.) While a pidgin English sufficed for important transactions with plantation staff, the Indians developed a shared language among themselves which facilitated communication irrespective of regional or caste origins. Bhojpuri, the Hindi dialect of eastern Bihar, became the basis for this Indian lingua franca in Trinidad. Bhojpuri naturally became a kind of linguistic middle ground, since Bhojpuri has many signs which bring it nearer to its sister languages like Magahi, Maithili and Bengali, yet from the point of view of its word-stock, case-endings, pronouns and pronunciations, it has similarity, to a great extent, with Awadhi and other sub-languages of Eastern Hindi. (Chaudhury 1966: 122)

There is no complicated system of verb, number, gender, etc. in it. This is why, it is within the easy approach of all . . . Even a non-Bhojpuri-speaking person finds it easy to adapt and speak within a short period of time. Due to these qualities of the language, it would be no exaggeration to say that as Hindi is the simplest language of all the languages of the Indo-Aryan Group, Bhojpuri is the simplest one of all the sub-languages or dialects of Hindi. (Ibid.: 126)

Given its ideal position linguistically then, the general corpus of Bhojpuri came to be sifted and refined further by reducing the number of non-semantic utterances (articles, prepositions, inflections) to promote accessibility to non-Bhojpuri speakers (Durbin 1973). Today’s ‘Trinidad Hindi’, which survives conversationally only among those over about the age of 40, is actually the resultant, creolized Bhojpuri (cf. Mohan 1978, Sperl 1980). Standard forms of Hindi are often used during Hindu religious ceremonies (especially through recitations of Tulsi’s Hindi-language Ramayana), and individuals’ utterances in Trinidadian Bhojpuri are appreciated as of higher or lower eloquence according to norms of standard Hindi as found in religious texts and films or songs imported from India (cf. Gambhir 1983).

Another important aspect of language change and cultural blending among the early immigrant Indians, which Durbin (1973) points out, concerns the disintegration of the caste system. As part of the trend towards common linguistic forms, caste dialects were dropped. Further, the speech indicators conveying higher–lower caste status were eliminated in favour of inter-caste forms. This may have facilitated social and attitudinal changes toward more equality in interaction among migrants. Of course, such a shift was not causal in the breakdown of caste overseas, but it may be seen as an augmentative process.

Attenuation of the Caste System

In Chapter 1, factors contributing to the demise of the caste system overseas were discussed. While all of these obtained for Trinidad, a few more detailed statements should be made here regarding this highly important socio-cultural development.

Perhaps the leading factor contributing to the attenuation of caste among Indians in Trinidad was, once again, the significant diversity of immigrants’ places of origin. The nature of caste identities and caste practices varied substantially from area to area in India, such that a common structure or mode of practice surrounding caste was virtually impossible to institutionalize among the assembled group of Indians abroad.

Schwartzberg (1968) has suggested that India can be mapped according to a set of general caste regions, determined by a number of criteria:

Among the variables, the locally dominant caste, the degree of dominance, the degree of ramification of the system as a whole, the rate of rise in the number of castes with increasing village size, and the relative heterogeneity of caste structure within the villages of a particular locality are considered of special importance. (Ibid.: 112).

According to Schwartzberg’s schema, then, migrants to Trinidad came from no less than eight separate caste regions. Within each region, several other basic distinctions would have been found to vary from locale to locale, including: different caste networks, hierarchies and other inter-caste relationships; subcastes and caste-related lineages, status groups, allied castes and status-related caste ‘clusters’; patterns of geographical segregation; caste-associated dialects, styles and stereotyped behavioural traits, ritual duties performed by and for others; caste-specific deities and their related religious practices and practitioners.

Caste, as manifested in towns and villages of their homeland, could not be operationalized in any viable manner in Trinidad estates or villages because the immigrants lacked the common frameworks – integrating ‘layers’ of caste identities, economic and religious bases, and essential power relations – which underpinned each local caste complex in India.

It is difficult to arrive at any clear picture of the caste backgrounds of immigrants to Trinidad. Table 2.7 presents data pertaining to certain caste categories as compiled under the auspices of the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta. These categories are, of course, wholly artificial and based on the discretion of colonial bureaucrats; they do not reflect actual categories or status groups found within indigenous classificatory schemes – especially since they are generically used regardless of individuals’ areas of origin. At best, this data indicates the fact that, in terms of very general caste background, the migrant population was indeed drawn from a significantly broad base.
Table 2.8 reproduces Comins’ list of caste names and numbers pertaining to one year’s intake of immigrants in Trinidad. This is certainly more useful for identifying caste groups than the records provided by the Protector of Emigrants. However, as pointed out in Chapter 1, these, too, are unreliable since individuals would hold a number of caste identities: when asked by colonial officials what their ‘caste’ was, they could answer according to a number of categories. Thus, for instance, Comins lists ‘Ahir’ and

| Table 2.8 Statement of castes of immigrants migrated to Trinidad during 1879–80 |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Mohammedan                      | 648            | Lohar          |
| Takoor, Chatri                  | 294            | Barai          |
| Rajput                          | 255            | Kewat          |
| Chamar                          | 274            | Mali, Bari     |
| Ahir, Satope                    | 175            | Kvesh          |
| Brahman                         | 128            | Nochi          |
| Kahar                           | 125            | Kalwar         |
| Kurmi                           | 88             | Harywe         |
| Kori                            | 73             | Bhuja          |
| Lodh                            | 72             | Musahir        |
| Koiri                           | 59             | Tatoa          |
| Teli                            | 57             | Gosaine, Athit |
| Murais, Murao                   | 54             | Bhuaar         |
| Dosad                           | 52             | Bahalea        |
| Passi                           | 49             | Bind           |
| Kunbi                           | 49             | Muhurutta      |
| Kachi                           | 47             | Sonar          |
| Bhurr                           | 45             | Dhrukhhar      |
| Nonia                           | 34             | Gar, Gour      |
| Kessan                          | 32             | Christian      |
| Garania                         | 31             | Googar         |
| Gowala                          | 30             | Rungwa-j      |
| Kandu                           | 26             | Patowa         |
| Bat                              | 26             | Kau            |
| Nao, Hajam                      | 24             | Kol            |
| Buncah                          | 22             | Napith         |
| Mullah                          | 19             | Boes           |
| Bhungi, Mehte                   | 19             | Bhatt          |
| Halkore, Lalbegi                | 19             | Tucha          |
| Kumar                           | 19             | Koli           |
| Dhobi                           | 19             | Naph              |
| Katick                          | 119            | Bunch          |

(Source: Protector of Emigrants 1877–1918)
Castes are themselves reified or 'objectified' categories or orders rather artificially constructed from an analysis of phenomena for ultimately provided by colonial officials in the Censuses, Gazetteers, and as discussed below). Castes’ fared comparatively better than any (1.8 males to 1 female). Consequently, hypogamy (marrying down in group status) and hypergamy (marrying up) of castes came to be widespread practices within the Trinidad Indian community. This was even observed by Comins (1893b: 79), who noted that ‘Members of the Chattri, Rajput and Thakur class frequently get married to or form connections with women of a lower class.’

In Trinidad, as a number of social scientists have suggested, the ‘all-India’ framework of varna has come to ‘replace’ caste as an endogamous unit and criterion of status. Drawing upon an extensive survey conducted in the 1960s, Clarke (1967, 1986) indicated that among Hindus in San Fernando,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribe</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Subdivision</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhogohan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Onaie</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghatwat, Ghutoal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chundul</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bostom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ghahai</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beldar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jogi</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanu, Tanta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jaswar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattahar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suri</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Kosoriban</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamoli</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Benghoneg</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banspore</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manjee</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhabbooju</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Awasti</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aanarbasi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3,108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Comins 1893b: 37)

‘Kessan’ (‘Kisan’) – labels which, we previously saw, may include a variety of jatis and other caste groups (some of which are listed separately in Comins’ statement). Such a list, even given its length, nonetheless obscures the actual complexity of caste grouping as the migrants would have known and lived it at home. This is particularly evident regarding the categories of Brahman and Chamar.

The reports of the District Gazetteers and encyclopedic accounts in the Tribes and Castes Series are filled with detailed (though sometimes somewhat contradictory) information regarding the staggering complexity of caste organization in nineteenth-century India. Regarding the category of ‘Brahman’, most point to the fact that in North India, this was divided into a set of major classes including Saraswatas, Kanyakubjas or Kunaujiyas, Gaudas or Gaurs, Utkalas and Maithiks. These, in turn, included important subdivisions such as Sarwariyas, Dihuwars, Niwans and a host of others, each further subdivided into gotras and arranged by way of status groups. In all, Crooke (1896, Vol. II) suggests 902 Brahmanic subdivisions in the Northwest Provinces alone. Regarding the ‘Chamar’ category, Crooke (ibid.) indicates sixteen major sub-categories, such as Jatuas, Kurils, Azamgarhias and Jaiswaras, and overall, no less than 1156 further subdivisions. Similar complexity can be found in accounts of numerous other caste categories as well. Representative of what happened to many caste categories in Trinidad, both of these major categories, ‘Brahman’ and ‘Chamar’, each became a sole identity in itself, while all subdivisions – representing levels on which caste relations were actually practised in India – were wholly subsumed (this development has special significance regarding religious practitioners, as discussed below).

Now, as Cohn (1987) importantly points out, the descriptions of caste provided by colonial officials in the Censuses, Gazetteers, and Tribes and Castes Series are themselves reified or ‘objectified’ categories or orders rather artificially constructed from an array of phenomena for ultimately imperialist, political purposes. Thus we cannot take them at face value; but once more we can at least acknowledge that they roughly indicate ways in which caste in nineteenth-century India involved a highly intricate and multilayered social structure. The fact that caste identities became so simplified in Trinidad – that is, channelled into a relative handful of categories – can be seen to represent a key facet of cultural change whereby actual caste relationships (based on a host of social, economic, political and religious considerations) were no longer possible, such that only vague identities and status relationships (based on regional caste ‘clusters’ or varnas) remained. This was not enough to structure, from day to day, generation to generation, anything like the relationships inherent within the caste system in India.

The history of caste in Trinidad has largely followed a trend predicted by Comins (1893b: 38) before the turn of the century:

Caste, which is such a mighty power in India, becomes very much modified here, and its rules are not much observed by the children of immigrants born here... it is predictable that if immigration from India were to cease now, caste as known in India would in fifty or sixty years be a thing of the past, except among a few ‘Brahmins’ or ‘Chuttrees’ who might still cling to it.

Other early evidence of the breakdown of the caste system in Trinidad was provided by Morton (1916: 22), who described the loss of purity/pollution concepts among Indians, and by Grant (1923: 72–3), who noticed that Indian shopkeepers were far more concerned with economic status than with status surrounding caste (cf. Underhill 1862: 52–3).

The disproportion of sexes within the immigrant population (see below) created a context in which caste endogamy or in-group marriage – even if only associated with the broadly-derived caste categories – was extremely difficult to maintain. Table 2.7 provides the varying ratios of sexes and caste groups for four periods between 1876 and 1917. The ‘Brahman’ groups had the worst overall ratio (2.6 males to 1 female), while the ‘low castes’ fared comparatively better than any (1.8 males to 1 female). Consequently, hypogamy (marrying down in group status) and hypergamy (marrying up) of castes came to be widespread practices within the Trinidad Indian community. This was even observed by Comins (1893b: 79), who noted that ‘Members of the Chattri, Rajput and Thakur class frequently get married to or form connections with women of a lower class.’
73 per cent of all marriages were varna-endogamous (while 50 per cent were still caste-endogamous, mostly among the ‘twice-born’ castes). Yet Clarke points to the fact that in this urban context, higher-caste individuals are in greater number, thus facilitating such intra-varna unions. On the other hand, Schwartz (1964, 1967b), working in a rural area of Trinidad, found that it was the low-caste Sudra farmers who showed the endogamous patterns. Both authors agree that it is only at the extreme ends of the varna system where such caste considerations occur in any significant manner.

Yet Schwartz and Clarke disagree with regard to the relation between caste and class in Trinidad. Schwartz (1967b: 134–6) claims that there are no socio-economic reinforcements of caste differentiation in the village of ‘Boodram’. Clarke (1967: 178–83; 1986: 93–7) has given evidence of a clear relationship between high/low caste and high/low economic status in San Fernando. Again, the rural–urban distinction is important, for more socio-economic stratification is bound to appear in the latter, where higher population density, greater diversity of castes, and more occupational heterogeneity are present; in the former, the range is limited due to a smaller population and a common base in agriculture.

Pocock (1957b) points out that for Indian communities in East Africa, notions of ‘difference’ often do remain as survivals of caste stratification among South Asians overseas. A similar situation has developed in Trinidad, where caste no longer operates as a feature which determines social structure, nor as a consideration which prominently colours aspects of social interaction. Caste in Trinidad can be approached as ‘a residual aspect of prestige’ (Nevadomsky 1980: 41) entering into evaluations of esteem, or as ‘a social attribute in its own right’ (Clarke 1967: 182) sometimes offsetting other social characteristics. (For example, a rich community leader may be from a Chamar background: he will be respected and admired in most matters of style, and ingredient of personality’ (Lowenthal 1972: 150).

It is essentially the high castes, particularly Brahmans, who advocate the maintenance of caste identity and hierarchy (according to a normative ideal based on certain religious texts). This is especially the case with Brahman priests, who vehemently seek to protect their claims to occupational specialization (van der Veer and Vertovec n.d.). Therefore the question of whether non-Brahmans can become priests is one that has been, and continues to be, hotly debated within the Hindu community of Trinidad. Most members of younger generations of Indo-Trinidadians, however, have lost practically all concern for caste: although many are still able to identify their caste group or varna, most young people simply shrug and say that caste is ‘an ol’ time Indian t’ing’, best forgotten.

**Modifications of family structure**

In Trinidad, the family has received perhaps more social scientific attention than any other dimension of society and culture among Indians. Some writers on the subject see the Indian family in Trinidad as an example of cultural survival par excellence (Niehoff 1959, 1960; Klass 1961), others, as the basic unit of culture change (Nevadomsky 1982a, 1985). Some have pointed to the continued existence of the joint family model (Lowenthal 1972; Jha 1974; Malik 1971), and still others, to its replacement by the nuclear family ideal (Schwartz 1965; Tikasingh 1980; Nevadomsky 1980; 1983b). At least two studies claim that the traditional Indian family has both changed and stayed the same: one suggesting it is ‘all form and no content’ (Davids 1964), another saying its structure has survived not due to tradition but to socio-economic conditions (MacDonald & MacDonald 1973).

Many examinations of Indian families in Trinidad have not taken into appropriate consideration certain important features of families in India as discussed in Chapter 1, especially the variability of the category of ‘joint family’ and the structural position of families vis-à-vis other levels of social organization. These features have consequence for the forms which were to arise among Indians in Trinidad. Once the amalgam of Indian peoples was assembled on estates or nascent villages, families could be acceptably composed of any type or number of members, as long as they were incorporated under the most important values of patrilocality (the central importance of the father) and filial solidarity (mutual support of brothers and sisters). Without the complex framework of kin, marriage, and caste organization which existed in India, the domestic unit became the key referent for social identification and status. These situations were possibly accentuated due to the way in which many, if not most, of the early Indian families settled after indenture: that is, on widely scattered and often remote parcels of land which made many families, as it were, social islands.

Perhaps the most outstanding condition of immigration which affected early family formation in Trinidad was the dramatically unbalanced ratio of sexes. Colonial administrators were conscious of the harmful social implications of high disproportions of males to females on estates, and various measures were taken, through the years, to regulate the sex ratios of migrants. Nevertheless, a great imbalance occurred.

Figure 2.1 depicts the ratio of sexes by age for the latter part of the period of migration from India, 1874–1917. The numbers for this period are 63,798 (68%) males to 30,148 (32%) females, totalling 93,946 migrants. Almost half of the population were single males between the ages of 20 and 30 years old. By 1911, when the great majority of immigrants had completed their indenture contracts, the sex ratio was still vastly out of proportion and, by then, had spread across the age groups due to a constant influx
of newcomers. Figure 2.2 shows this range of ages and sexes among the original immigrants.

The ramifications of this disproportion of sexes and ages were considerable. The shift in patterns of caste endogamy have already been noted. The relative absence of families and children meant that unmarried males and females were generally open to create new types of relationship.

The role of women, many writers suggest, was substantially altered due to their scarcity and position as wage-earners on estates. MacDonald & MacDonald (1973: 193-4) claim that Indian households on plantations became matrificol, while Nevadomsky (1982b: 192) believes that women were given more authority than they had been used to in India. Historical accounts portray Indian immigrant women as capable of breaking marriages or entering into consensus unions quite readily if dissatisfied with their immediate situation (Hart 1865: 101; Morton 1916: 342). Indian men, consequently, were seen as wild-eyed husbands prone to murdering unfaithful wives (Collens 1888: 197; Froude 1909: 67; Morton 1916: 185). Indian daughters were highly prized in Trinidad, as opposed to their position in India: one observer wrote in 1889 that among Trinidad Indians, ‘a person with two or three female children here has very valuable property, because men want wives’ (in Tikasingh 1980: 129). One aspect of this revaluing of daughters, Josa (1913: 30) witnessed, was the replacement of the institution of dowry with one of bridewealth. Of course, in India systems and ideals of dowry varied regionally and in terms of economic and status groups. In addition, they were just one part of a complex set of reciprocal obligations between affinal (related through marriage) families (Tambiah 1973: 92–8). Yet the conspicuous loss of dowry in the early immigrant population in Trinidad does nevertheless constitute a significant change in Indian marriage structures.

The imbalance of sex and ages was fairly quickly righted, however. Figure 2.3 indicates the levelling of sex ratios among the younger, essentially second-generation Indians, and the continued disproportion among the over-30 generation in 1921. Figure 2.4, regarding the Indian population in 1931, shows the further development of this trend with the rise in the number of children and the advance in age group of the unequal sex ratio. By 1946, as depicted in Figure 2.5, the Indian community had for the most part assumed a balance of sexes, and was characterized by a very young population. With the gradual change in sex and age ratio by the 1930s, a stable pattern of family-life was established among rural Indians.

The question for many, then, becomes: was the ‘new’ form ‘joint’ (i.e. ‘traditional’) or ‘nuclear’ (i.e. ‘acculturated’)? These categories, as I suggested in Chapter 1 and above, are not helpful. Households composed of various sets of extended kin – from parents and widowed grandmothers, to filial married couples and their children, to the children of other kin – do
live in the same household for periods of weeks to years. MacDonald and
MacDonald (1973) and Nevadomsky (1982b) concur that 'the kinds of
family and household units that came into existence were more likely the
outcome of environmental and economic factors rather than throwbacks to
the preindentured cultural model' (ibid.: 97).

But too many features of Indian family persist, in ideology if not in
practice, to be written off as functionally determined as these writers claim.9
Such traits include: the ideal of virilocality (however shortlived), authority
based on sex and age, the role of a wife as obedient and serving to the
husband (pativrata, exemplified today among women over about 40 years
old, who still follow behind their husbands at some distance and avoid
addressing him by his proper name), restricted interaction of a barka (older
brother-in-law) and chotki (younger brother's wife), maintenance of a fam­
ily shrine and ritual duties performed by women and children, restrained
behaviour by sons out of respect for the father (e.g. refraining from swear­
ing, public smoking or drinking in the father's presence), and other non­
quantifiable yet distinguishable principles.

It is true that in modern Trinidad, the nuclear family is an ideal type for
all, created in part by the increased use of contraceptives and the belief that
the form indicates an 'economic success story' (Nevadomsky 1982a, 1985).
Yet Indian family forms vary between the rural/urban settings and between
socio-economic class groups within the population (Malik 1971: 28). But extremely close and interdependent families continue to be the norm. Moreover, when sons do marry and move out of the paternal household, they do so quite often into houses built immediately next door to, or on the same property as, the father’s house (while the last son inherits the latter for his own). This is a fact too often overlooked by writers on Indian families in Trinidad; contiguous households of kin continue to interact as ‘joint’ families, sharing larders, debts, childraising, recreational, social and ritual activities (Vertovec 1987).

As Soleim (1960) has advocated, one must distinguish between family structure and domestic organization in the Caribbean. The structures, among Indians in Trinidad and elsewhere overseas, will exhibit certain variations from those found in different places in India; these are open to the effects of changing socio-economic conditions through history and within the life of a single family. The varieties of organization among families, it is suggested, are aspects of value systems which do not change so readily with contextual changes. On the one hand, the meanings, rules, and roles ordering Indian families in Trinidad are drawn from cultural models (and embodied in sacred texts and popular films); on the other, the size and distribution of families in Trinidad are alterable, as they always have been in India.

Part III Religious institutionalization

Religious diversity among Hindu migrants

The wide range of geographical and social origins of the indentured workers in Trinidad meant that the religious backgrounds of the Indian migrant population were comprised of a massive and jumbled medley of beliefs, doctrines, rites, experiences, relationships, restrictions, polities, economies, and orientations regarding matters supernatural and spiritual. Below, some examples of traditions within North Indian Hinduism are mentioned in order to convey such a diversity of religious backgrounds.20

On the broadest level pertaining to the regions from whence emigrants came, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa have been dominated by Shaktism (characterized by a more ecstatic type of religious activity, directed toward the Mother Goddess and her various manifestations) and to a lesser extent Vaishnavism (including the Krishna-centred Chaitanya sect). Eastern and western Uttar Pradesh have been overwhelmingly Vaishnavite, with a marked influence of bhakti sects (primarily the Ramanand, Kabir, Raidasi, and Siva Narayani or ‘Sienarini’ path). In contrast, throughout these regions certain centres (like Benares) have long been strongholds of Shaivism, greatly influencing nearby vicinities.

Each region has important pilgrimage centres (variously devoted to aspects of Vishnu, the Mother Goddess, Shiva, or local godlings and saints). Among them are Bishnupur and Kenduli in West Bengal; Gaya, Baidyanath, and Sonpur in Bihar; Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Devi Patan, and Ayodhya in eastern Uttar Pradesh; and Soron, Anupshahr, Garmukhtesar, and Gola Gokarnanath in the emigrants’ areas of western Uttar Pradesh. Innumerable local pilgrimage sites for healing, exorcism, and propitiation have also prominently conditioned the religious worlds of Hindus.

From place to place – often in association with important religious sites – there have been a marked presence and impact of a great variety of sampradayas (sects or religious orders following the doctrines of some, usually historical, enlightened teacher). Each would have identifiable symbols in dress or markings, and each would variously influence lay Hindus with their specifically formulated beliefs and practices. The members of some sampradayas were itinerant, while others were based in monastic dwellings in the larger towns and cities. There were seven separate monastic cloisters in Ayodhya, for instance, eight orders in Allahabad, while Benares was home to no less than sixteen Vaishnavite sampradayas.

In addition to the ‘higher’ deities worshipped to varying degrees in each region (especially Ram, Hanuman, Durga, Krishna, Shiva, Kali, Ganesh, Surya, and Satyanarine), a host of ‘lesser’ gods and goddesses were popular in different regions. In Bihar, these included Gaininath, Naika, Amasan Bibi, Sokra Baba, Guraiya and Salais, Dharha, Kamalo Bibi, Geian, Karu Das, and Hadi. Many tribes also emigrated from here, each group with their own gods (for instance, Rikhmun among Bhuiyas and Ban Singh among Bhogtas). In Uttar Pradesh, popular minor deities included Bhumiya, Maiya Mor, Joginya, Zahir-Miyan, Bernata, Masani, Sitala (Sheetla), Saanji, Bamki, Babuvahan, Baba Kalu, Bhairon, Bansapti Devi, Panch Pir (the five heroes, including Ghazi Miyan), and Meeran Sahib.

Each district and village, too, recognized an array of godlings, saints, spirits and other supernaturals. There were several categories of these, among them the grandevata (protective village deity, often called Dih, Dihwar, or Dih Baba), sati (or suttee, a widow who voluntarily burned herself to death), deified bhut (ghost of a renowned person), braham (spirit of a martyred or particularly holy Brahman), satyyad (deified martyred Muslim), pir (hero or saint), baghaut (deified person killed by a tiger), rakshas (demons), malevolent supernaturals (like the kichin or seductress and churail or witch), and a vast number of sacred features of the landscape (special trees, wells, rivers, mountains, stones, animals).

Within villages themselves, religious heterodoxy has abounded from kin and caste group to group. In one village in Uttar Pradesh, Marriott (1955: 175) explains that religious activity is
fragmented to an extreme point. There is no temple of the whole village, no one cremation ground, no sacred tank or well. Instead, dozens of different trees and stones and tiny shrines are made objects of worship separately by members of the many caste and lineage groups.

Therefore, even among emigrants from common locales, there was no guarantee of agreement regarding the beings calling for some sort of necessary devotion or propitiation.

The heterogeneous caste make-up of indentured migrants also meant that further religious diversity characterized their ranks. Those generally categorized as Ahirs (cowherders) worshipped Birtiya and Vindhyabasini Devi in many places, and Kasinath particularly in the east, Birnath in Mirzapur district, and Bangaru Bai in south Bhandara; Doms (menial workers) had their own deities Gandak and Samaiya, plus Bhawani in Mirzapur and Juthaiya in Gorakhpur; Kurmis (cultivators) were said to have worshipped Thakurji in eastern UP, as well as Surdhir in Goruckpur and Babi Pir in Basti; Lohars (blacksmiths) in many places worshipped Aghornath and Narasinha Deo, while in Farruckabad their deity was Kurchina; Chamars (leatherworkers) – the largest general caste category in the region and the largest to emigrate – varied enormously in their religious devotions: these included cults directed toward Bhawani, Jagiswar, Nagarsen, and Kala Deo; in the district of Bhandara, Chamara and Kuanwala in Agra, plus Terha Deva, Banru Bir and Sairi Devi in Mirzapur. Members of each caste group, moreover, gave particular attention to specific spirits and demons as well.

Finally, religious practitioners for each caste varied as well, with certain castes performing certain ritual services for others. For instance, low-status Sarwariya Brahmans served both Lohars and Kurmis in eastern UP, Kanaujiya Brahmans served Kurmis in the west. At that time, Morton (ibid.: 52) claimed ‘They had no temples. Gatherings for worship were conducted at any selected spot by their Brahmins or priests. . . . ’ Yet small ritual platforms, like those of village shrines in India, were created on numerous estates (described some years later by Comins 1893b [ Diary]: 6,7). Eventually, more elaborate structures were built.

By the early 1860s, Underhill (1862: 52) had observed ‘On one estate a rude temple has been set up.’ Some historians believe the first Hindu temples in Trinidad were erected in the 1860s (Wood 1968: 150–1; Jha 1985: 5), others say the 1850s (Brereton 1981: 103). In 1871 the novelist Charles Kingsley provided the first detailed description of one of these early structures in Trinidad:

The coolie temples are curious places to those who have never before been face to face with real heathenism. Their mark is, generally, a long bamboo with a pennon atop, outside a low dark hut, with a broad flat verandah, or rather shed, outside the door. Under the latter, opposite each door, if I recollect rightly, is a stone or small stump, on which offerings are made of red dust and flowers. From it the worshippers can see the images within. The white man, stooping, enters the temple. The attendant priest, so far from forbidding him, seems highly honoured, especially if the visitor give him a shilling; and points out, in the darkness – for there is no light save through the low doors – three or four squatting abominations, usually gilded. Sometimes these have been carved in the island. Sometimes the poor folk have taken the trouble to bring them all the way from India on board ship. Hung beside them on the walls are little pictures, often very well executed in the miniature-like Hindoo style by native artists in the island. Large brass pots, which have some sacred meaning, stand about, and with them a curious trident-shaped stand, about four feet high, on the horns of which garlands of flowers are hung as
Hindu Trinidad

Froude (1888: 75–6) described another structure at a rural Indian settlement:

[T]he coolies had brought their gods to their new home. In the centre of the village was a Hindoo temple, made up rudely out of boards with a verandah running round it. The doors were locked. An old man who had charge told us we could not enter; a crowd, suspicious and sullen gathered about us as we tried to prevail upon him. So we had to content ourselves with the outside, which was gaudily and not unskilfully painted in Indian fashion. There were gods and goddesses in various attitudes; Vishnu fighting with the monkey god, Vishnu with cutlass and shield, the monkey with his tail round one tree while he brandished two others, one in each hand, as clubs.

These first, small structures were called kutiyas in Trinidad (after the Hindi kutsis, small shrines tended by religious mendicants which were common in villages of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; see Grierson 1885: 331; Planalp 1956: 237). They represented the growing establishment and consolidation of Hinduism in the island. Yet the amalgamation of diverse beliefs and practices doubtless was not a smooth process.

Morton (1916: 52) witnessed that within the Hindu community, ‘each priest had his own disciples’. Bronkhurst (1888: 17) tells us that in British Guiana – where the heterogeneous indentured population mirrored that in Trinidad – followers of many Hindu traditions vied with one another, ‘each strenuously contending for the supremacy of the chief object of their worship, and the consequent inferiority of the other.’ It can be assumed a similar situation existed in Trinidad. In the new context of the plantations and early settlements, a kind of open market must have existed between pundits and prospective clients (jajmans). The language barrier would have governed this relationship initially; Hindus from roughly approximate areas of India probably would have followed priests from these same parts. Eventually, as a lingua franca developed, they might congregate around those with the most popular message. Gradually, too, the sporadic rites of Brahmans would become more and more standardized as Hindus throughout the island would come to expect equal treatment and paradigmatic ritual forms.

Klass (1961: 25) suggests that on the plantations, ‘Indian customs and religious practices were derided and even forbidden.’ Although the Hindu and Muslim religions were looked down upon with some contempt (Indians were officially referred to as ‘our heathen population’; Brereton 1981: 112), they were quite tolerated. Tikasingh (1980: 134) points out that as long as religious activities among workers did not clash with the smooth functioning of the estate, there was no interference or pressure to change by the management. More than that, official observers from the British government witnessed that on Trinidad plantations,

All facilities are given to immigrants for the performance of marriages and other ceremonies and for celebrating religious festivals. Material for mandapams or temporary pavilions is often, possibly always, lent by employers to indentured and free immigrants at times of marriages and festivals. Want of consideration in these matters was never suggested. (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 32)

In addition, Hindus were fairly successful in reconstructing some of their religious environment through transferring sacred items from India. Pipul, neem, and tulsi trees, bells, lotahs and tarihas were all imported to Trinidad (Poynting 1985: 327). The Vedas, Puranas, and Ramayana were among the sacred texts brought to the Caribbean as well (Bronkhurst 1888: 92). Pilgrimage sites, too, were found in two locations: a stone said to drip milk and grow, dedicated as a Shiva linga (phallic representation of the god) in the town of Penal, and a statue of a black Virgin in Siparia, regarded as a manifestation of the Goddess and deemed by Hindus Sipari ke Mai (‘mother of Siparia’) or simply Sipari Mai (see below and Chapter 5).

The localized traditions of minor deities and their associated rites were soon diminished in Trinidad in favour of a standardized, Sanatan Dharma style of Hinduism. A smaller pantheon of Sanskritic gods became dominant, while local godlings were for the most part disregarded. Primarily, this pantheon consisted of Vishnu (especially in his incarnated forms of Rama and Krishna), Satyanarayan (technically another form of Vishnu, but regarded as a more all-inclusive god), Hanuman, Ganesh, Shiva, Suryanarayan, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kali. A Vaishnavite bhakti orientation became pervasive for reasons outlined in the first chapter of this book. As early as 1881, a Sanatan Dharma Association was founded in Trinidad in an attempt to consolidate Hindus and lobby on their behalf (Kirpalani et al. 1945: 61).

However, prominent sects had been introduced to the colony along with the migrants, each enduring to differing degrees until the present day. Comins (1893b: 38–9, [Diary:] 11), for one, attested to the presence of the ‘Ramanund’ (Ramananda), ‘Kabeer’ (Kabir), ‘Owghur’ (Aghor), and
‘Sewnarain’ (Siva Narayan or Sieunarine) ‘phunts’ (panths) in nineteenth-century Trinidad. Although these sects continued to be active in Trinidad (in some places, informants say, these were dominant), they were always subject to organizational problems. Membership gradually flagged, and some Hindus participated in both sectarian and Sanatan Dharma practices. Jayawardena (1966: 228) suggests that since the caste system ceased to function, the Ramanandi, Kabir, and Siva Narayani panths which had attracted and congregated members in India. The generalized Hinduism which developed in Trinidad also carried a strong bhakti theme, which at least allowed for dual affiliation among sect members, if not for an outright lapse of sectarian membership in favour of a classically-based and communally-shared Sanatan Dharma. On the other hand, the Aghor panth – because of its lurid practices – was ostracized, in effect, from the increasingly orthodox Hindu religious community in Trinidad. Soon the Aghori rites were undertaken almost wholly ‘underground’, while members publicly took part in the ritual activities carried on by most other Hindus. A select set of communal ritual forms among mainstream Hindus took form and grew in the island, eclipsing those of smaller sects and cults.

Routinized religious activity

Compared to the enormous number and types of rites and celebrations which take place among Hindus in villages across India, the corpus of predominant religious rites practised by Hindus in post-indenture settlements in Trinidad seems fairly limited. Nonetheless, a variety of important rites were conducted on family, village, and extra-village levels.

Hindu families in early Trinidad villages carried out a fairly common set of ritual functions. Foremost were the life-cycle rites (samskara). Of the sixteen such rites prescribed by classical Hindu texts, only the following were regularly practised in Trinidad: the rites six days (chathit) and twelve days (barahi) after the birth of a child (rites involving purificatory and protective measures for both mother and child); a child’s first haircut (mundan, performed any time between two and four years of age; great numbers of Hindus would make pilgrimage to Siparia to conduct this rite there and offer the hair, together with rice, to Sipari Mai in an act of prayer for the child’s health and wellbeing; in India, this rite and offering would often be made to a local mai (mother goddess) as well; marriage (rites usually occurring over seven days, including the actual vows between bride and groom (kanya dan and saptapadi), which took place at night); and funerals – usually burials, as cremations were illegal until the 1940s (see Kirpalani et al. 1945: 63); funerals involved a succession of rites, usually performed by an eldest son or brother of the deceased ten days (shraddha), sixteen days (bandara) and one year (prit puja) after the funeral itself.

It is important to note that in each of these family-based rites, ritual assistants from specific castes were still required to remove impurities or otherwise provide service. Such acts represented the last vestiges of purity/pollution functions of caste relations. In village and extra-village religious celebrations, few caste-associated institutions were maintained; but in life-cycle rites, where families’ greatest concerns regarding physical and spiritual safeguards were to be found, these ritual prescriptions were rigorously maintained until recent years. From the time of a child’s birth until six to twelve days afterwards, a mother would be under the care of a Chamain (Chamar midwife) as well as of her own mother. At the chatthi rite, a Naonia (female member of the Nao or barber caste) was required to trim (often only symbolically) and paint the toe and fingernails of both mother and child. The child’s hair would be cut first by a Nao, and for weddings, a Nao was always sought to extend invitations and build the wedding altar. Finally, the shraddha rite performed ten days after a burial was always carried out by a mahapater (also called mahabrahman in India), a Brahman who specializes in this particular rite. Even though caste was generally disregarded in most social interactions, these caste groups continued to be invested with limited special roles for specific activities.

Other rites undertaken by individual families were practised in idiosyncratic fashion. Pindar puja, consisting of offerings of food and water to ancestors during the period of Pitr paksha, was performed by each head of household in his own manner. Similarly, family preparations and prayers at Diwali were open to variation, as were more regular prayers at the household shrine and/or at the patch of ground at the base of the jhundi or ‘prayer flags’ (see Chapters 4 and 5). Many families, regardless of caste or place of origin in the subcontinent, came to perform an annual Dih puja, demonstrating a significant transformation of village Hinduism from its precedent in India.

As mentioned previously, Dih was a general name or category for a protective village godling (gramdevata) throughout Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (see, for instance, Conybeare 1881). Grierson (1885: 404) noted that in India ‘there is supposed to be a separate one for each village’, but as new, isolated homesteads were founded in Trinidad following residence on estates, the propitiation of Dih came to be undertaken separately by individuals on their own plots of land. This was likely a rite of fundamental concern to the new settlers, since in rural India,

When a settlement is being founded it is a matter of prime necessity that the local godling or group of godlings should be
brought under proper control and carefully identified, so as to ensure the safety and prosperity of the settlement. (Crooke 1896a: 101)

Hindu heads of household came to sacrifice annually a cock, rum, cigarettes, biscuits and butter to this tutelary, being, in order to land, crops, and the general wellbeing of their families. Eventually, instead of a collective village godling, Dih (or Dih baba) was associated with individuals’ landholdings. [Thus there remains today some confusion, among older informants, as to whether Dih – ‘de Master a’ de land’ – is one being looking after all fields or whether each field had its own Dih.]

Other families conducted yearly sacrifice as well. Chamar families in a village would collectively sacrifice a hog each year to Parmeshwari (see Chapter 5), while individual Chamar families did the same on the occasion of a marriage or birth of a son. Certain ‘Chattri’ (Kshatriya) families were also known to sacrifice a goat annually. Such practices came increasingly to be frowned upon by more orthodox Hindus as they sought legitimation in the eyes of non-Hindus, for all families, as well as ‘god-father’ a Brahman pundit. In many settlements a single Brahman especially males. In the former role, he consulted the Patra (astrological text) to give advice regarding auspicious dates for various activities, and officiated at all family pujas, weddings, and funerals. In the latter role, he imparted to individuals in their teens a special prayer, chant, or sound (mantra) in a ceremony (gurudiksha) which Hindus came to call ‘christening.’ For all ritual services, the pundit received dakshina (an appreciative offering, rather than mere ‘payment’): this included seedha (rice and produce), a kurta (shirt) and dhoti (loincloth), and sometimes even a cow or land. The pundit would usually bless the seedha and give part of it back to the sponsoring jajman. In later years, money came to be the main contribution of dakshina, although seedha and cloth were usually maintained ceremonially.

At least once per year, ideally, families sponsored a formal puja conducted by the Brahman pundit. This event, held on Saturdays, actually involved two sets of rites. The first was to Hanuman, a rite called rot puja (pronounced ‘roat’, and named after the special kind of bread offered); along with the usual course of puja offerings, the Hanuman Chalisa was sung (a ritual text very familiar in villages of Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, which draws great attention to Lord Rama as well; Planalp 1956: 141). The second was the Satyanarayan katha, another common rite found in villages of India (Babb 1975: 181). The focus was Satyanarayan (symbolized by a smooth saligrama stone). The katha or Puranic text was recited, havan (or homa, oblation into fire) offered, bhajans sung (accompanied by kanjoris, small tambourine-like instruments), and prasad (blessed food) distributed in an occasion which lasted several hours. A red jhandi (triangular flag atop a bamboo pole) for Hanuman and a white one for Satyanarayan were erected at a selected spot near the sponsor’s house, a place which would then be kind of sanctum.25

In perhaps the 1920s or 1930s, a third puja became part of this ritual complex. Held on Sunday mornings, it involved a standard set of offerings directed to Surujnarayan (the solar deity, also known as Suryanarayan), and culminated with the erection of a white jhandi. Rot puja, then, was relegated to Friday while Satyanarayan katha remained on Saturday, so that an entire weekend was devoted to ritual activity. These pujas were generally small, but public affairs involving extended kin and invited members of the village. Guests would contribute milk, dahee (yogurt), rice, aloe (potato), channa (chick pea), or flour; these would be eaten with sohari roti (fried flatbread) off large leaves while all sat in the yard next to the house and its temporary vedi (altar for puja). Sponsors would reciprocate with donations when invited to others’ religious celebrations. Thus family pujas were important events in many ways: for gaining spiritual merit through offering prayers and ‘gifts’ to deities, for ideologically linking villagers through listening to and discussing pundits’ sermons, and spiritually linking them through receiving prasad, for reinforcing social networks through mutual invitation, attendance, and donation, and for sheer collective entertainment through sharing a feast and singing bhajans.

In many villages Satyanarayan katha was performed by the local pundit each month on the day of the full moon (purnima). This would take place at the village kutiya (or Shivala, a similarly small temple dedicated to Shiva) or at the pundit’s own residence. Donations of food were given by all, and the meal was cooked by a random team of village women – their mixed-caste composition testifying to the demise of commensality proscriptions. Even more important group activity was found in a weekly or fortnightly satsang (meaning ‘true company’), held among various families with local areas of rural settlement.

A satsang was a gathering at which, in the absence of a pundit, Tulsidas’ Ramayana (called the ‘Ramayn’ in Trinidad) was sung and commented upon. Grant (1923: 71) witnessed the popularity of such Ramayana-focused gatherings in Trinidad, noting that ‘snatches or slokas from this great epic are often heard in song, accompanied by cymbals and drums, when the day’s work is over . . .’. Group-singing accompanied by small cymbals (jhal) characterized the event, such that this kind of satsang came to be commonly called the ‘jhal Ramayn’ or ‘shrota (co-celebrant) Ramayn’. Each week or fortnight the satsang was held in rotating fashion at the house of a different family. Often the gathering might include a brief havan or fire
oblation offered by an elder, and food was usually shared afterwards. *Satsangs* also typically followed Satyanarayan *kathas*, normally carrying on throughout the night. Adult males would frequently smoke *ganja* (marijuana) and drink *bhang* (a mixture of *ganja*, datura, milk and sugar) before and during *satsangs*; this practice generally ensured a vibrant and euphoric atmosphere.

A less frequent, but socially important, religious occasion in early Trinidad Indian villages was a week-long reading and exposition of the Bhagavata Purana, and event thereby locally called a ‘*Bhagwat*’. A large bamboo tent would be constructed by village men at some local site (often adjacent to the pundit’s house), and donations of food would be collected from most nearby households. Three times each day for seven days or more, *puja* would be performed (usually directed to Krishna, on whom this Purana focuses), *prasad* and other food distributed to all in attendance, and gifts presented to *sadhus* (world renouncers) who travelled all around the island from *Bhagwat* to *Bhagwat*. Decorations were not lavish, and all removed their shoes to enter the bamboo structure and sit on the ground. The *Bhagwat* was a highly significant event when it occurred, for it represented one of the few large-scale, wholly congregational forms of worship among village Hindus.

Infrequent ‘fire-passing’ ceremonies took place, in which individuals who were considered to be possessed by *shakti* (cosmic energy associated with the Divine Mother goddess) walked over hot coals between two shrines. These rites came to be attributed wholly to the south Indian, or ‘Madrassi’, immigrants. Colonial authorities found the ceremonies horrid, and passed legislation to outlaw them (Jha 1985). Many Hindus in Trinidad also did not care for the fire-passing rite: Collens (1888: 235) reported that ‘it is not observed by Hindus of Northern India, but, on the contrary, is repudiated by them’. Nevertheless, fire-passing rites in Trinidad continued until at least the middle of the twentieth century.

Other congregational activities took place to mark important dates on the religious calendar. These most likely included *Maha Shivratri* (the ‘great night’ of Shiva), *Nav ratri* (or *Naoratam*, nine nights devoted twice yearly to the Mother Goddess and her manifestations), *Ganesh jyanti* (the birth of Ganesh) and *Ram naumi* (the birth of Lord Ram). *Diwali* (in honour of the goddess Lakshmi) and *Phagwa* (or *Holi*, a festival recalling the triumph of a Krishna devotee) were the most widely celebrated Hindu holy days during and after the years of plantation indenture.

Finally, there existed, in the early years of post-indenture settlement, some activities which took Hindus out of their villages to engage in religious celebration with others from throughout the island. The pilgrimage site of the miraculous ‘growing *linga*’ in Penal was especially frequented at *Maha Shivratri*, as was Sipari Mai in Siparia on Holy Thursday/Good Friday (days when labourers had been allowed to leave estates). On *Kartik Snan* (marking the start of the holy month of Kartik), Hindus would collectively make excursions from their villages to bathe in the sea. And as in India, around the time of *dashara* (when the demon Rawana was said to have been slain by Lord Rama; mid-September to late October), certain villages would stage week-long *Ram Lila* plays, to which villagers from surrounding parts would journey (Laurence 1985: 113).

By the late 1920s and 1930s, Hinduism in Trinidad had become inadvertently routinized through relatively informal means. Only in some family-conducted rituals were idiosyncracies perpetuated. Otherwise, most religious activity was drawn from a refined body of widely-recognized rituals. Brahmanic orthodoxy was promulgated at semi-public family rites and especially at village-wide *Bhagwats*. Collective beliefs and emotions were bolstered by small-scale communal activities, *satsangs* in particular. Large-scale events such as the annual *Ram Lila* further enhanced a shared Hindu paradigm of Vaishnavite *bhakti*. Soon, formal organization would see successful attempts to standardize and institutionalize most aspects of the religion.

**Organizational Hinduism**

Although the national Sanatan Dharma Association had existed in Trinidad since 1881, it is not known for any particularly significant advances in Hindu organizational development. Other groups existed by the 1920s, including the Trinidad Hindu Maha Sabha, San Fernando Hindu Sabha, Sanatan Dharma Prabartakh Sabha, as well the more secular bodies, the East Indian National Association, East Indian National Congress, and the Colonial Indian Club. But these, too, were not especially dynamic in shaping the course of Hindu history. The most significant advances in Hindu organizational development came as a response to the Arya Samaj and its outspoken missionaries.

The Arya Samaj in India wished to unite all Hindus and recall them to Vedic ways. It was highly aware of the Indian population in diaspora, and saw this population as an important one to instill with cultural pride (by way of the Vedas); they therefore sent well-trained missionaries throughout the world to promulgate Swami Dayananda’s message.

Forbes (1984: 20) suggests that some Arya Samajis most likely were among the original migrants from India. If so, their presence was not very evident. The first Arya Samaj missionary to lecture in Trinidad was Bhai Parmanand, who arrived via British Guiana in 1910. Years before Parmanand had toured Europe and preached in East Africa, and had met Gandhi while in South Africa. His was a fleeting visit, but Trinidad received its first
sustained missionary, Pundit Hariprasad Sharma, from British Guiana in 1914. He was joined by Kunj Beharry Tiwarry in 1917, and the two travelled the island and advocated their doctrines of adherence to the Vedas, the futility of idol worship, the equality of women, the importance of religious education, and so on. They gained only a modest following, however.

In 1928, Pundit Mehta Jaimani arrived in the colony, sponsored by the International Aryan League, based in Delhi. Jaimani was a highly experienced missionary: during his career he toured Southeast Asia and Mauritius (1925), Fiji and Burma (1928), British Guiana and Trinidad (1928–29), East Africa (1931) and South Africa (1934), as well as the United States, Japan, China, and Europe. Rarely had Hindus in Trinidad ever witnessed a religious leader of such sophistication and scholarship, and his impact was considerable. A contemporary English woman in Trinidad wrote of Jaimani:

> He opened an epoch of wide significance and created in the minds of East Indians, especially the younger generation of educated ones, a vital interest in their motherland which they had scarcely thought of previously. It was indeed, a renaissance having far-reaching consequences. . . . (In Forbes 1984: 48)

Under Jaimani’s influence, a school was built in Marabella to conduct classes in Hindi. Further, his book *The Sublimity of the Vedas* was serialized in the *East Indian Weekly* during 1929, “providing much material which was new to most Hindus but has since become part of the culture of Trinidad Hinduism” (ibid.: 49–50). These innovations included the public use of ‘Om’ and its Sanskrit symbol [ॐ], as well as many other Vedic mantras. Yet Jaimani’s eloquent Hindi alienated him from most creolized-Bhojpuri speaking Hindu villagers, and local pundits in particular were deeply set against him.

Among the followers which the Arya Samaj gained at this time were many well-to-do Hindus who had received advanced education at Christian schools. Their participation greatly boosted the sect’s image and activities in the island. For instance, in 1930 Hindu and Muslim parents removed their children from the Chaguanas Canadian Mission School in protest over the fact that vocations in education could not be gained without religious conversion. An island-wide fund-raising effort was undertaken among Indians, and the first Hindu–Muslim school in Trinidad was established in that year. It operated successfully until 1935, when it was amalgamated to the local government institution. An example of effective organization and a great source of pride among Indians, this school was associated in the popular mind with the Arya Samaj, largely due to its prominent sponsorship by Seeraram Maharaj, the largest cane farmer in the region and an outspoken Arya Samaji (ibid.: 65–6).

The Arya Samaj received an additional boost with the arrival of Pundit Ayodhia Prasad, who came to Trinidad directly from Chicago after representing the Arya Samaj at the 1933 World Parliament of Religions. Followers consider him the ‘father of the Arya Samaj movement in Trinidad’ (Kirpalani et al. 1945: 66). Prasad had a remarkable knowledge of religious texts of all kinds (including the Bible and the Koran), and his public lectures and debates with orthodox pundits were always fully attended. He was the bane of sanatanis across the island through his critical attacks on the illiteracy of Brahman pundits (he would purportly write them in Sanskrit, knowing they were unable to read it), idol worship, the doctrine of *avatara*, and other mainstream beliefs and practices. Subsequently, sanatanis and Arya Samaji laymen came to be at constant odds as well. Whereas sanatanis always expressed the greeting ‘Sita Ram’, Arya Samajis advocated ‘Namaste’. Even in such a simple matter, the two camps were bitterly opposed. ‘Namaste . . . became both a calling card and a battle cry’ (Forbes 1984: 69–70).

The controversies stirred by Arya Samaj spokesmen acted as a kind of catalyst for leaders of the Sanatan Dhharma community to make greater strides toward effective organization, in order to combat the inroads or damages which the sect had instigated. Having thus re-ordered itself, the Sanatan Dhharma Association was incorporated by act of Legislature in 1932. The Association listed as its objectives:

> To propagate Hinduism, teach the tenets of Hindu Dharma and establish branches in various centres in the colony;
> To establish Mardassars (schools);
> To teach morality and temperance, to promote harmony and goodwill and to take an interest in the social welfare of the people;
> To settle disputes among Hindus;
> To seek religious rights from the Government, and
> To raise funds to enable the Association to carry out its aims and objects [sic].

(Kirpalani et al. 1945: 61)

However, strangely, the President of the Association was a Christian (Mr Sarran Teelucksingh, who was also head of the East Indian National Congress). A group of conservative Hindus established a rival organization, the Sanatan Dharma Board of Control, which was also incorporated in 1932. They were as critical of Teelucksingh as they were of the Arya Samaj. In that year, the Board stated
The registration of this society is regarded by the Hindu community as being an important step in the direction of the unification of Hindu interests under purely Hindu control, and it is laid down as a definite policy that the Board of Control shall always be predominantly composed of orthodox, practising pundits. (in Forbes 1984: 60)

In 1935, in a move to demonstrate greater legitimacy, the Board became formally affiliated with the Sanatana Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha, based in Lahore, India (the latter itself was one of the organizations founded in the nineteenth century as part of the counter-reformation against the ideas and practices preached by the Arya Samaj). Meanwhile, in 1934 the Sudhar Sabha had been created with the promotion of Hindi schools as its main function (in opposition to the Arya Samaj’s successes in education). In response to such steps taken by sanatani organizations, the Arya Samaj founded its own Association in 1934, under Ayodhia Prasad’s guidance and with the recognition of the Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, in India. 27

The Kabir panth and Sieunarini panth eventually created formal bodies themselves. As for the Ramanandi panth, many Hindus say that the beliefs and rites which became predominant in the early village years and which were adopted by Sanatan Dharma organizers in Trinidad are those same ones (viz. Vaishnavite bhakti) which at one time this panth maintained exclusively. Therefore, no separate panth continued to exist; ‘we all Ramanandi’, one old man proclaims (though there are at present many Hindus who do not know of Swami Ramananda, instead thinking this label merely refers to a devotee of Rama).

The 1930s saw a great deal of organizational activity among Hindus in Trinidad, resulting in argument, slander and factionalism. The Hindu community was therefore fragmented. The Sanatan Dharma Board of Control made strong efforts ‘to convince Government of the justification of an allocation of an annual grant out of the Colony’s revenue on the same basis as grants given to other religious groups’ (Kirpalani et al. 1945: 63). These measures were refused as long as Hindus showed no sign of being a united religious community. Much of the factionalism and sectarianism which characterized the Hindu community was due to personal animosities among prominent persons as much as to opposing policies or ideologies.

As pundits and laymen in villages throughout the island became affiliated with one or another of the national bodies (the Sanatan Dharma Board of Control, for example, had branches in 32 towns and villages by the late 1930s), certain changes in the style of Hindu activity began to emerge. Pundits formally consulted one another on matters of orthopraxy ordained ritual presence. Mass yagnas could be arranged and advertised over greater distances. And, in a set of trends which may represent a drive for higher status in the eyes of non-Hindus, a number of Christian congregational forms took shape within Hindu religious practice.

One of the foremost shifts may have begun as early as the 1920s. The first large temples (mandirs) built in Trinidad after the turn of the century had followed the model of those in India (basically, a building with a separate, inner shrine [garba griha] to house the main deity, with an adjoining room or building for other shrines and a linga: see photos 1 and 2). Eventually, temples were constructed in Trinidad with more and more structural similarity to Christian churches (including a large, open space which in later years came to be filled with rows of benches, a stage-like platform in the front with a central vedi [altar for performing puja], a central wall niche behind the vedi for displaying murtis [statues of deities], and – reminiscent of a pulpit – a sinhasan [raised chair] for seating a pundit during the course of his sermon); this temple architecture is now common (see photos 3 and 4). Generally in India, temples were primarily for individual acts of worship, and only certain castes or persons could enter concentric zones of greater purity. In Trinidad, temples came to exist fundamentally for group worship by all, irrespective of caste. Moreover, shoes are usually not even removed to enter, and the only vestige of a zone of purity in Trinidad mandirs exists immediately surrounding the vedi, an area into which no shoes, leather products, nor menstruating women may enter.

Other Christian forms entered Hinduism in Trinidad via Arya Samaj innovations. As previously mentioned, many Trinidad Arya Samajis were well-to-do Indians who had been educated at Christian schools. Many were notorious for their ‘modernizing’ and ‘pro-Western’ reformist attitudes (especially concerning the education and liberation of women, the end of child marriages, and the proliferation of daytime weddings; Forbes 1984: 66–70). Christian forms often represented their organizational ideals. When they wrote to India seeking a permanent Arya Samaj missionary to Trinidad, they mentioned their efforts to create a ‘Church for the Vedic denomination’ (ibid.: 89). In each temple, which they referred to as a ‘Vedic church’, Sunday services were held, men wore Western suits, and all sat on benches facing the front where havan was offered. All ceremonies were meant to be ‘short and agreeable to Western customs’, and by the 1940s, Arya Samaj leaders were advocating the inauguration of ‘a pope with supreme powers to control all Vedic followers, churches, and properties’ (ibid.: 222). Many progressive-minded sanatanis sought to emulate their Arya Samaji rivals, and soon congregational temple forms, daytime weddings, Sunday services, and Western suits were standard features of all types of local Hindu practice around the island.

In the early 1940s, the activities of Indian organizations of all kinds bolstered Indian ethnic consciousness. This took place especially through the campaigns for the legal recognition of Hindu marriages and the literacy
issue surrounding voting eligibility, the propaganda of nationalists from India, the efforts to collect relief funds for the Bengal famine, and the first general elections with universal franchise. These kinds of secular issues produced debates and collective actions within the Hindu associations. Following the independence of India, sanatani missionaries came to Trinidad to preach Hindu unity. Further, 1947 saw the arrival of the first Indian High Commissioner to Trinidad, Satya Charan (who had been an Arya Samaj missionary to the island), an avid nationalist who urged Trinidad Indians to identify with India. All of these spokesmen from the subcontinent advocated the importance of education among Indians. During the 1940s Hindu and other Indian organizations successfully lobbied the government to grant Indians the right to build their own denominational primary schools.

Perhaps the greatest development in Hindu communal activity in Trinidad began in 1950 when Bhadase Sagan Maraj united the Sanatan Dharma Association and the Sanatan Dharma Board of Control. The new organization, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, was incorporated in 1952. Maraj’s strong-arm tactics saw that infighting was kept at a minimum. The Maha Sabha’s *parishad* or council of pundits worked towards a complete coordination of temple activities and the standardization of ritual procedure, particularly weddings (all the Maha Sabha’s pundits had become registered wedding officers). Yet foremost on the organization’s agenda was education, which its members saw as the key to promoting Hindu unity in all parts of the country, to promulgating the faith among second- and third-generation Hindus, and to providing Indians with greater opportunities for social advancement.

Part of Maraj’s fortune had come through war-surplus trading; with this experience behind him, many US army buildings sold after the war were creatively reconverted to become Hindu schools. Between 1952 and 1956, the Maha Sabha built no less than 31 schools all around the island. Many temples were constructed or affiliated as well. In order to ensure uniform teachings and practices, the Maha Sabha published literature to be used at all schools and temples. Among these publications was *My Prayer Book*, a collection of Sanskrit *mantras* (with English translations) and tenets of faith written in a question-and-answer format designed for memorization. It also included ‘Our Creed’:

I believe in god, the unity that lies behind the manifold universe, the changeless truth that is behind all appearances, transcendent over all and immanent in all the Divine Essence which permeates the Universe.

I believe that God manifests Himself from time to time and from Age to Age as the creating, preserving power of the whole universe, and unto Whom it periodically returns.

I believe that God assumes form from time to time.
I believe that man is not only a gross material body, nor yet a finer organ called the mind or intellect, but something greater called the Atma or Soul.
I believe that the Soul is part of the Divine Essence and by nature pure and perfect, infinite in power and blessed, was never created, will never die, but will pass from body to body until it achieves perfection (Nirvana).
I believe in the Law of Karma – that is, that I am the Creator of my own destiny, that my present condition is due to my past conduct and that my future state will depend directly on my present actions.
I believe that the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Shastras, the Mahabharat, the Ramayan and the Bhagavad Gita contain all the eternal truths of religion.

These same declarations were also prominently posted in all Maha Sabha schools. The creed exemplifies how far Hinduism in Trinidad had come since the first assemblage of Hindu villagers had arrived on the island and set about conventionalizing their diverse religious backgrounds.

Hinduism had become fully institutionalized in Trinidad by means of a national, wealthy (they succeeded in gaining government ecclesiastical grants), hierarchical, and elected organization, schools and temples whose activities were set by the organization, pundits who functioned like Christian parish priests, and literature published to standardize concepts, prayers, and rituals. Such complete institutionalization soon carried over into the secular sphere.

Primarily through the ambitions of Maraj, the Maha Sabha and its pundits became enmeshed in politics. This occurred via the People’s Democratic Party (later the Democratic Labour Party), Maraj’s vehicle for parliamentary power. As noted earlier, Maraj could use the structure and power of the Maha Sabha to his own political ends.

Maraj and others warned that the Ramayana and Hindu *dharma* were in danger if non-Hindus gained political office. The politicizing of Hinduism further acted to condense Hindu social solidarity, though at the same time secularizing a great deal of religious activity. The intensification of ethnic rivalry which the PDP/DLP vs PNM contests wrought bore consequences for Hindu identity: being Hindu increasingly became both an ethnic and a political marker. Participation in Hindu activity became a statement to this effect.

The defeats and disorganization which the DLP suffered in the early 1960s reflected poorly on the Maha Sabha’s influence over the Hindu community. Additionally, allegations began to be made of corruption within the Maha Sabha’s ranks, while Maraj’s heavy, sometimes violent manner
upset many Hindus. Although Hindu schools were full, parents complained of inferior educational standards and poor exam results. The study of Hindi in schools also began to flag. Such perceived institutional breakdown was matched, some say, in lapses of Hindu sentiment and activity.

By the mid-1960s, Schwartz painted a negative picture of Hinduism in Trinidad. He identified ‘infrequent and selective commitment to Sanatanist beliefs and practices’ by priests and laity alike (1967d: 245), along with a general decline in the religious dimension among Hindus in favour of ‘increased economic and political opportunities’ (1964b: 13). Schwartz (1967d) also claimed that many Hindu rituals, when performed, were done solely to pray for monetary and similar worldly gains.

Perhaps characteristic of a decline in ritual attitude, in the 1960s the most prevalent form of Hindu marriage ceremony to arise was that known as the ‘table wedding’. In this style of ceremony, bride and groom were seated on the floor around a special vedi. The ceremony itself was extremely brief – about one hour – compared with the all-day series of rites surrounding the longstanding wedding ceremony. Little interest was shown in the elaborate religious rites which previous generations had followed.

Many Hindus depict the 1960s as a time of religious languor which allowed an incursion of fundamentalist Christian missions into their community.

As if discerning a golden opportunity, new evangelical groups pitched their tents in Hindu villages in Trinidad and came away with a fair number of converts. The swift response of orthodoxy to the earlier Arya Samaj challenge was missing this time, and while inaction might be made to appear as the Hindu virtue of tolerance there is no doubt that privately community leaders were very troubled. (Haraksingh 1985: 165–6)

The exact number of converts in this decade is not known, but it did not amount to any drastic reduction in the Hindu community. However, what is important is that Hindus themselves believed their community was especially singled-out and decimated by these Christian missions. The evanglist were highly spiteful toward Hindu polytheism and use of ‘idols’, and they even accused Hindus of ‘devil worship’. Throughout the island Hindus felt themselves to be ‘on the defensive’ against evangelical Christian criticism. This attitude contributed to an overall sense of decline among Hindus.

The 1970s began with organizational turmoil for the Hindu community in Trinidad. The Black Power movement, through supported by many radical Indian students, had alarmed rural Hindus and contributed to a feeling of persecution. Bhadase Maraj advocated ethnic confrontation. Such a reactionary tendency, his autocratic tactics, and various rumours of corruption combined to make many Hindus weary of his leadership. By June 1971, letters appeared in the national newspapers claiming that most Hindus did not support the Maha Sabha because of Maraj.

Potential organizational chaos was realized in October 1971, when Bhadase Sagan Maraj died. The contest for the leadership of the Maha Sabha, after two decades of stern directorship, brought renewed factionalism, mud-slinging between prominent Hindus, and other divisive measures which gave a great deal of bad publicity to a supposedly religious body. On 3 November 1971, the Trinidad Express printed an article entitled ‘Politics behind tussle for new Maha Sabha head’. It noted that the two strongest candidates were county politicians, who ‘probably have their eyes glued as future parliamentary leaders via the Maha Sabha’.

The confrontation between orthodox Hindu factions continued through May 1972, when the island’s Dharmacharya (some call the post ‘the Archbishop of Hindus’) tried to unite them. But even his position itself was called into question by rivals: they promoted the Maha Sabha’s constitution which stated that the Dharmacharya be appointed by the executive members, while he and others claimed the decision should be made by the Pundits’ Parishad. This example demonstrates at once the extent to which Hinduism had been organized along Christian lines, and how internal politics actually separated the national organization from religious matters.

Nearly two years after the passing of Maraj, the Maha Sabha’s leadership was still in question. On 3 June 1973, the Trinidad Guardian pointed out that ‘Since the Death of Mr. Bhadase Sagan Maraj, there have been numerous squabbles among Hindu leaders to gain leadership of the powerful Hindu community.’ In that month the Maha Sabha held its first election of officers since 1969. Even prior to the Annual General Meeting, at which the elections would occur, controversy arose. Many Maha Sabha branches were deliberately not issued registration cards which would allow them to attend. Instead, false delegates were said to have attended in order to stack votes. Following that, letters continued to appear in newspapers drawing attention to the organization’s misuses of ecclesiastical grants, its lack of proper financial records, the lack of support for certain pundits and temples, the poor condition of schools, and the continued marriage of religion and politics. The Maha Sabha elections of 1974 did not amend the situation: it is alleged that up to 65 per cent of the delegates were from false or non-existent branches (Express, 6 July 1974).

The incursion of fundamentalist Christianity and the controversies surrounding the Maha Sabha weighed heavily upon the opinions of Hindus throughout Trinidad. Many believed the community’s religious participation and commitment had waned significantly since the days when their fathers lived in the first post-indentured settlements, or even since the early days of the Maha Sabha’s triumphant school-building programme. In 1974, a visiting swami from India scolded the Hindus of Trinidad for becoming
slack in their faith and practice. The Trinidad Express (9 January 1974) covered his tour with an article headed "Put on your dhoti" guru tells Hindus:

In most instances, we hear at jhandees, kathas, yagyas (religious feasts) that the devotee does not know how to wear the dhoti, the priest observed. Mention was also made of a sharp decline in attendance at Hindu functions.

This kind of ritual laxity was evident to Nevadomsky during his fieldwork in 1973, as was a growing lack of regard for pundits as part of a general shift away from religious sentiments (see Nevadomsky 1980, 1983a). Both Nevadomsky and Schwartz saw the gradual educational, occupational, and economic advances affecting the Indian population of Trinidad as factors contributing overwhelmingly to the demise of significant Hindu practices.

While it cannot be maintained that the beliefs or communal spirit of Hindus were thoroughly debilitated by the institutional difficulties of the 1960s and early 1970s, many organized activities—especially the functions of the nationally representative association—had deteriorated, in public perception if not in fact. However, subsequent economic change did not serve to finish off Hinduism in Trinidad, but quite the opposite.

Overseas, the pattern of change which affected social and ideological forms of Hinduism is, in important ways, parallel to that described by anthropologists studying modernization and urbanization in India. Both the overseas and urban Indian migrants have been confronted with changing, cosmopolitan contexts which in many ways divorce migrants from their original socio-religious backgrounds. These new contexts provide opportunities for pursuing economic mobility while they create conditions whereby migrants seek cultural amalgamation with kindred sorts. Subsequently, caste rules and behaviour are slackened, common classical tenets are selected, the roles of pundits and formal religious organizations are shifted, and personalized attitudes to the divine are combined in a 'Protestant' manner with congregational forms of worship through a devotional (bhakti) orientation.

Yet Hindus outside India are faced with the additional factor of being ethnic and usually racial minorities; this fact often tends to augment processes of cultural, social, and religious homogenization. It also gives a different impetus to formal organizations than in non-minority situations. In urban India, the overarching Hindu environment and proximity of kin and home locale generally allow for greater persistence of many cultural, social, and religious forms.

The course of religious change among Hindus is not unilinear, however, and various modifications in the prevailing social or economic context can produce multifold effects on the nature of religious practice. The socio-economic developments which took place in Trinidad during the late 1970s and 1980s wrought a number of changes in village life, Hindu activity notwithstanding.

The next two chapters examine the contemporary socio-economic structures and lifestyles in an Indian village within the span of socio-economic development in Trinidad, the rapid changes which took place there in response to a national oil boom, and the effects of these radical shifts on religious practices and social roles in contemporary Trinidad Indian villages.

Notes

1 By the first half of the nineteenth century, Trinidad bore the stamp of many cultures: Spanish (it was a colony of Spain from 1498 to 1797, and was further populated with Spanish-speaking immigrants from Venezuela), French (after the Spanish Cedula of 1783, land grants and tax-free status were given as incentives to French and French Creole planters from other islands to boost the island's economic capacity), English (Trinidad became an English colony in 1797), and African (from the slaves taken from a wide area of West Africa, including Ibo, Yoruba, Mandingo, and Rada peoples). The aboriginal Arawak peoples were dying off, pushed to the interior or absorbed through miscegenation. Social status accompanied these differences, and 'each of the conventional three-tiered colour - class strata - the blacks, the coloured, and the whites - was divided by differences of nationality, religion, and culture' (Campbell 1976: 409). Also, various linguistic pockets were to be found around the island. Post-emancipation immigration made the colony's social structure even more complex. See Wood 1968; Breerton 1979, 1981.

2 For details of the debates and legislation surrounding the introduction of indentured Indians to Trinidad, see Geoghegan 1873; BPP 1874, 1910; Erickson 1930, 1934; Shlens 1967; Tinker 1974: 61-115.

3 Indian immigration temporarily ceased between 1848 and 1850. Weller (1968: 2-3) claims this was due to improper administration in the recruitment and care of migrants, but other historians believe this was due to contemporary financial constraints in most sugar colonies (Erickson 1934: 139; Laurence 1971: 37).

4 For most of the period of indentured migration, the government of Trinidad paid all costs of return passage to India for labourers who had fulfilled their contracts. After 1894, those who had completed the ten years of industrial residence were required to pay ½ the cost (for males) or ⅔ the cost (for females). By 1898, males were required to pay ⅔ the cost of return passage, females ⅔ the cost (Central Statistical Office 1946: 15; Wood 1968: 120; Breerton 1981: 28).

5 Beachy (1957: 40-7) attributes this period of prosperity to a number of factors in addition to cheap Indian labour. These include: an increase in trade following the American Civil War, the introduction of the vacuum pan to refining technology, a series of reduced duties and a high price overseas, and an overall increase in sugar consumption in the United Kingdom.

6 After two years of their contracts, a stipulation provided that 'An immigrant may redeem the last two years of his indenture by payment at the rate of 5s. a month for the unexpired term plus 2½d, for every day absence [sic] from work endorsed on the indenture' (Geoghegan 1873: 122). However, Beachy (1957: 103) points out that 'This practice led to many coolies becoming hopelessly
indebted to their own countrymen who were merciless money-lenders, and who induced labourers to leave the estate.'

7 The specific regulations for land-passage commutation were changed numerous times, including from a basic allotment of 10 acres in lieu of return passage after 10 years of service (1869) to a grant of 10 acres or £5 and 5 acres (1873), to an allowance of 5 acres if selected by the immigrant or 10 acres if selected by the government (1879). See Ahsan 1963: 91–2; Laurence 1985: 95–105.

8 This price obtained for most of the late nineteenth century. It rose to £1.10/acre in 1903, £2/acre in 1904, and £2.10/acre in 1905 (cf. Laurence 1985: 104–5). In addition to rising costs, landbuyers were restricted from many areas due to the expansion of oil-prospecting (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 40–1). Swamplands usually cost half the amount of other types of land (Richardson 1975a: 243; Johnson 1971: 45); but by the 1920s, the price of swampland rose to three times that of other lands. Singh (1985: 43) attributes this to an attempt by sugar plantation owners to prevent the expansion of the local rice industry.

9 This was particularly the case in the early decades of this century, when 'cocoa was king'. Tikasingh (1982: 12) estimates that by 1921, 60 per cent of Indian lands in Trinidad were dedicated to cocoa cultivation. Cf. Ramesar 1976c.

10 Indians who lived in Port-of-Spain or San Fernando usually fared much better than their rural counterparts, especially in terms of education and commerce. A large number of these town-dwelling Indians were successful businessmen or shopkeepers (see Grant 1923: 72–3; Tikasingh 1980: 127). Further, a higher proportion of urban Indians were Muslims than in the Hindu-dominated rural areas (de Vertueil 1884: 162), and San Fernando was a major centre for well-educated Presbyterian Indians. On the development of the Indian community in San Fernando, see Clarke 1986.

11 In the later years of the nineteenth century when more Indians were obtaining land, greater numbers of estate labourers would be absent from their estate jobs in order to maintain their own plots, particularly in rice planting season (Weller 1968: 52). Deserters from indenture contracts would often flee to the homesteads of these free Indians (MacNeill and Lal 1914: 4–5).

12 These included the Subbar Sabha, the Indian Progressive League, the Indian Youth Movement, the Young East Indian Party, the Indian Welfare Association, the India Club, Hindi Vidyapeeth, Sashratha Sabha, Hindustani Seva Sangha, Friends of India Association, the Indo-Caribbean Cultural Institute, and the All-Trinidad Indian Conference of 1942. Locally, many smaller groups and affiliates of these were also founded. See Kirpalani et al. 1945: 61–6; Kulkarni 1974: 20–30.

13 Samaroo (1987) details a variety of ways in which Indians in Trinidad have historically interacted with and were affected by events and ideologies concurrent in India.

14 Indians were extensively involved in major labour disputes which occurred in 1975, but these were not considered to revolve around especially ethnic issues; see Baptiste 1976.

15 There are no available records between 1871 and 1875. The colonial sources from which this data is derived, it should be noted, are not precisely reliable. However, these figures do serve to indicate significant overall ratios.

16 This largely follows the reasoning of the contributors to A Historical Atlas of South Asia (Schwartzberg 1978), who suggest India can be divided into a number of distinct culture 'regions' which are comprised of distinguishable culture 'realms'. Those which pertain to the areas of emigration to Trinidad are: the 'Hindu Eastern Indic Region' which contains the West Bengal and Calcutta Metropolitan culture realms; the 'Transition from North to East India Region' including the Eastern Hindustan [Bihar] culture realm; the 'North Indic Region' which includes the Western Hindustan [Uttar Pradesh and northern Madhya Pradesh] culture realm; and the 'Central Indic Tribal Region' where emigrants likely came from the Jharkhand, Gondwana, and Mahendra culture realms.

17 Sources suggesting such differentiation by area include Crooke 1897; Baden-Powell 1896, Sharma 1961, Nandi and Tyagi 1961; Mandelbaum 1970: 381–404; Schwartzberg 1978: 61, 109, 132.

18 Surprisingly, previous ethnographers have not pointed to the presence of Indian tribes in Trinidad. Some writers have noted a group known as 'janglis', yet most descriptions depict them only as an unknown caste. In fact, jangli is the term used in India to denote tribal peoples, whether or not they have been incorporated into local caste hierarchies. Klass (1961: 44–45, 60) describes a 'jangli tola' (which he deems a 'jungle district' rather than a 'tribal district') in the village of 'Amity'. He observed the jangli community there was isolated geographically, culturally, and occupationally since it was considered by other villagers to be 'wild' and exceptionally low in status and custom (cf. Schwartz 1967b: 126–8). Groups such as janglis, Madrassis, and Punjabis or western Uttar Pradeshis (who, in Trinidad, were generally called pachanyas or 'westerners') were all, at one time, disdainfully regarded by other Indians due to maintained differences in tradition and behaviour. But cultures associated with regions of origin in India – like caste – have largely been displaced by more common Indo-Trinidadian cultural phenomena. Thus, like caste, regional culture of origin (especially for janglis and Madrassis) has now become but a prejudicial label usually attributing low status, while actual demonstrations of cultural difference are rare.

19 Smith and Jayawardena (1959) depict Indian family ideals in Guyana as essentially continuations of traditional forms in India. Yet they point out certain ongoing changes within the family form, particularly in response to socio-economic change and mobility. They predicted its downfall, especially aspects such as patrifiliation. Smith (1978) re-examined the context years later, hoping to see the impact of new technologies of rice farming, increased levels of education, and other socio-economic factors on the Indian family, given his earlier hypothesis. 'What effects has all this had upon family structure?' he asks; 'So far as one can tell, hardly any' (ibid.: 356).


21 Wood (1968: 150) adds, 'That the sacrifice took place on Christmas Day is not evidence of the syncretic capacities of Hinduism. It was a public holiday and no work was done.' However, though not 'syncretic,' this does point to the fact that Hindu activity – normally constrained or dictated by astrological and calendric parameters – had to conform to plantation or other British colonial schedules. Thus, Underhill (1862: 52) reported: 'I did not find any of the pure Hindu holidays, such as the durgah poojah are kept. The Christian sabbath is observed on the estates.'

22 In addition to the substantial cognitive and emotional void created by this 'sudden' absence of a large part of individuals' religious milieu, the decimation of the religious calendar must have caused Hindu migrants no little confusion. Prior to migration, their yearly life was profuse with religious activity. Opler (1959) records no less than 302 days per year on which special religious activity took place in one North Indian village! Most of these dates revolved around practices associated with local or regional supernaturals (see Wilkins 1887;
214–39; Marriott 1955: 192–3; Babb 1975: 127–76). In the new environment, these would be drastically reduced in number and kind to suit the days associated with the Sanskritic pantheon (not to mention the plantation schedule).

These sects, all critical of the caste system, were well established (primarily among lower castes) in North India before the period of indentured emigration. The Ramanandi panth represent in an exemplary way ‘popular Vaishnavism’, following the bhakti teachings of Ramandanda (b. 1299) with their specific devotion to Rama (see Wilkins 1887: 61–4). Kabir (1440–1518) combined many tenets of Islam with those of the vaguely monotheistic Hinduism of Ramananda; the Kabir panth sing Kabir’s bhajans and conduct rites without the use of idols (see Wilkins 1887: 64–6); Siva Narayanis (Sieunarinis) revere the scriptures written by Siva Narayana, an early eighteenth-century monotheist (see Crooke 1896b [Vol. 2]: 185ff.). The Aghor (Aughar) panth is radically different from any of the above. It is an ascetic, Tantric or shakti sect devoted to Aghorisvara (a fierce aspect of Shiva) and is renowned for its horrific practices of eating filth and faeces, sucking wounds, wearing skulls and bones, and (some claim) cannibalism (see Crooke 1896b [Vol. 1]: 26ff.).

As with most aspects of village Hinduism in India, sanskara show great variation with regard to the number, degree of elaboration, and particular details of rituals even within a single region. ‘Differences may be observed’ in the practice of life-cycle rites, says Babb (1975: 72), ‘between localities, between castes, and even between different families of the same caste and locality.’

The raising of such flags in Bihar, according to Chaudhury 1962: (21), was mainly associated with popular devotion to Hanuman, otherwise called Mahavir (thus the flags were known as Mahaviri jhandi), and especially took place at Ramnaumi. The great proliferation of jhandi raising in Trinidad (described in Chapter 4), associated with a broad range of deities and coupled with the sanctity given to their standing places, further demonstrates how certain religious practices became standardized for many modes of worship.

However, O’Malley (1935: 160) points out that similar ceremonies in India were carried out in Bihar and Chota Nagpur, particularly among tribals. Since immigrants came from these parts as well, fire-walking rites in Trinidad needn’t have been exclusive to the South Indian Hindus. (Nevertheless, present-day Madrassi informants, who witnessed these events decades ago, testify to a largely South Indian ritual style and the use of Tamil or Telugu utterances.)

After Prasad’s departure in the late 1930s, the Arya Samaj Association suffered setbacks in the form of personalistic factions. In 1940 it was reorganized as the Arya Pritindhi Sabha, and was incorporated in 1943, when it opened the island’s first Hindu secondary school.

Notwithstanding the Maha Sabha’s consolidation of sanatani Hindus, sectarian Hinduism still persisted in Trinidad. Both Niehoff (1960: 113ff.) and Klass (1961: 145ff.) note the presence of Sieunarinis in Indian villages, and in the mid-1960s Clarke (personal communication) interviewed professed Aghoris. Yet the broad-based beliefs and celebrations advanced by the Maha Sabha allowed the members of these sects (along with the Kabir panth) to participate and gain, as it were, dual affiliation in terms of ritual practice. Only members of the Arya Samaj were known to spurn sanatani activities by matter of course.
3 Hanuman Milan Mandir, temple built in 1962, Southern Trinidad.


5 The elaborate ritual setting of a yagna.

6 A family priest oversees the anointing of a jhandi pole during the course of puja.
CHAPTER 3  Socio-economic change

In postcolonial countries characterized by multi-ethnic populations, economic change can have variable effects. Differences or even hostilities between groups can be exacerbated or assuaged; economic niches or classes can be ethnically consolidated or diversified; ethnic groups may ally with one another for resource control or wealth sharing; and other ethnic groups may particularly benefit by or become excluded from the development process.

Trinidad and Tobago provides a unique, almost laboratory-like case for examining these kinds of issues. Historically, the society has exhibited a rigid, racially-determined socio-economic structure which was geographically expressed. Recently, in a relatively short period of time, the country experienced exceptional economic growth followed by a plunge into recession. After setting the scene with a brief description of the structure of Trinidad’s society and economy over the past century, this chapter examines the events and effects of the period 1972–85, when dramatic transformations occurred on both the national and village levels.

Social and economic development in Trinidad

Throughout the twentieth century, Trinidad has been fairly slow to diversify its economy from the economic patterns which flourished in earlier periods. Sugar dominated the island’s economy in the nineteenth century, while in the first decades of the twentieth, ‘cocoa was king’. By the 1930s, both of these bases were on the wane: cocoa had been devastated by witches’ broom disease and by foreign competition, and world sugar prices had plummeted after their post-First World War highs.

Oil had long provided an alternative to the plantation crop economy, having been first struck in Trinidad in 1857. By 1910 a refinery had been built at Point Fortin, and the industry received a major boost in that year when the British Navy adopted oil as its fuel replacement for coal (Mulchansingh 1971: 73–4). By 1938, Trinidad was providing 38 per cent of the British Empire’s oil, though at that time only 3 per cent of the labour force was employed in the oil sector, compared to over 25 per cent in sugar.

In terms of its importance to the island’s overall economic structure, oil had
become at least equal if not superior to sugar. The poor economic conditions of the 1930s affected workers in both sectors, resulting in the numerous labour disturbances of that period.

Many substantial economic changes occurred in Trinidad with the onset of the Second World War. Some 15-20 per cent of the labour force gained employment on the American military installations founded there in 1941. Further, the halting of most sea trade at that time compelled the colonial government to impose rationing and price controls, and to provide guaranteed prices and other incentives for food crop cultivation. By the end of the war, the total food acreage of Trinidad was two-and-a-half times that of 1939. Yet after the war, these patterns of diversification proved shortlived: as one local economist wrote, Trinidad quickly returned to the vulnerable pattern of ‘consuming what we did not produce and producing what we did not consume’ (Carrington 1967: 49).

In the 1950s, sugar and oil remained the central features of the island’s economy; yet the latter rapidly usurped the role of the dominant contributor. Agriculture as a whole, and sugar in particular, lost more and more producing power as the 1950s progressed into the 1960s (see Table 3.1). The late 1950s saw the beginning of a series of five-year plans under Dr Eric Williams’ PNM government. Williams was very much in favour of industrialization at the expense of agriculture, a platform which further alienated his party from the primarily rural Indian community.

The first five-year plan (1958–62) sought to improve the country’s infrastructure and develop light industries for export. It did not succeed. By 1962, only 99 new industries — costing TT$85 million — had been created; 84 per cent were foreign owned and only 4666 jobs resulted (whereas the workforce had grown by 100 000 during the previous decade). British journalists labelled these attempts at diversification in Trinidad ‘unmitigated political window-dressing’ (The Times 25 January 1966).

The second five-year plan (1963–68) led to state consolidation of utilities, and further attempts by the government to stimulate the growth of private manufacturing industries in order to bring about national import substitutions. Again, the plan brought no results, as Carrington (1968: 38) concluded: ‘If the share of manufacturing in domestic production is taken as an indicator of economic transformation, it seems little or no progress has been made.’

The third five-year plan (1969–73) set out to procure the same goals of creating industries for domestic consumption and foreign export, but once more no significant accomplishments were achieved. Trinidad’s plight worsened as its financial assets were continuously declining at this time. 1969–72 saw a major slump in Trinidad’s oil industry, when production fell at 6.5 per cent per annum, depriving the country of its critically-needed foreign income. Meanwhile, agricultural and manufacturing production shrank as well. By 1972 the economic situation in Trinidad had become so poor that for this reason Dr Williams came close to unilaterally resigning from the office of Prime Minister (Sutton 1984: 43).

Just as Trinidad’s economic structure was slow to expand and develop, so was the country’s social structure slow to break from its rigid, racially-based hierarchy. As a nineteenth-century colony, Trinidad’s plantation-centred society maintained a strict status and occupational system in which skin colour wholly ascribed or limited individuals’ placement. The administrative and elite class consisted of whites, the middle class of brown or ‘creole’ planters or merchants, the labouring class of blacks; Indian agricultural labourers at this time were considered only as peripheral to the social structure due to their relative isolation and from the widespread belief that they were only temporary migrants (Brereton 1979. 1981). As it became evident that the Indians were in Trinidad to stay, their alien culture and language combined with their ‘coolie’ image to cause them to be relegated to the bottom end of the social scale.

In the twentieth century, the gradual trend away from an entirely plantation-based economy did not, however, increase possibilities for changes in status or occupation for the majority of islanders.

The Spanish and British colonists in Trinidad and Tobago admirably demonstrated the technique for creating an elite. The planter class was given land, the means of communication, cheap labor, and generous tax incentives. Similar incentives were later extended to emerging manufacturing interests under aid-to-pioneer industries legislation. In both cases, the development that resulted was the kind that was hostile to social mobility in an economic and social milieu that was already nearly frozen solid. (Robinson 1971: 60)

Braithwaite’s (1953) Social Stratification in Trinidad underscored the racially-ascriptive nature of status and occupation still prevailing in the

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Table 3.1 Trinidad and Tobago: prominent sectors as per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 1952–82

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Oil</th>
<th>Manufacturing</th>
<th>Construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Mulchansingh 1971; Pollard 1985; Central Statistical Office
island after the war. This colour-class hierarchy would change little over the next two decades, for the lack of economic prosperity afforded little chance for individuals of any group to obtain material gains through occupational advances. Yet Braithwaite also pointed out other status referents (such as approximation to a British lifestyle) as well as the locally varying nature of the country's social and economic hierarchy (cf. Stewart 1973). The construction of ethnic and occupational status differs given the area of Trinidad one considers (especially considering extent of rural–urban setting and African–Indian makeup; cf. Map 3.1 and Table 3.2).

The distribution of wealth and poverty over the years in Trinidad is also revealing of such ethnic disparities. In the late 1950s the national income was distributed in a grossly uneven manner, with the top 5 per cent of households with the highest incomes controlling 22.5 per cent of the country’s wealth, compared with the bottom 20 per cent of households who held only 3.4 per cent (Ahiram 1966: 105). Further, urban incomes were almost twice as high on average as rural ones. Indians have been by far the most prevalent segment in rural areas (Table 3.2), and this geographical inequality of income is thereby reflected in distribution of wealthy by race: in 1960, the annual per capita income of whites was £1250, of blacks £260, and of Indians £195 (Cross 1972: 11).

Table 3.2  Distribution of Rural and Urban Populations in Trinidad by Race, 1964

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Malik 1971

Through the course of the 1960s, the socio-economic conditions prevailing in Trinidad remained dire. By 1972, when 70 per cent of all incomes were under the national average and one-third of the population were assessed as living in ‘real poverty,’ rural peoples and particularly Indians were shown to represent the highest proportion of all the poor nationally (Henry 1975: 17–21). Within their own group, Indians were also found to have a greater gap between rich and poor than any other segment in the country (ibid.: 9–10). While a nascent Indian middle class (primarily composed of Christians) made some inroads into higher levels of social status (LaGuere 1974), the Indian community overall was least represented in the professions and civil service, and had the highest number of unskilled workers of any ethnic groups in the island. Economic constraints on social mobility throughout Trinidad were made worse by clear signs of racial discrimination in many areas of employment (Camejo 1971; Harewood 1971).

Poor conditions and social disparities in the late 1960s fuelled tense ethnic relations and political upheaval (see Hintzen 1981: 308–18; 1985). The situation reached a climax in 1970 with the Black Power movement, a radical consortium of university students and disaffected urban blacks. Seeing the country’s contemporary plight in terms of a heritage of colonialism and slavery, the movement sought revolution in the form of a removal of all vestiges of white elitism or foreign domination. Certain members called for Indian support to do so, and various spirited marches and rallies were held. The results achieved were quite different from those desired. Chaos ensued in many quarters, the military attempted a takeover, and the Prime Minister declared a State of Emergency. The rural Indians reacted in their own way by consolidating and reasserting many ethnic values in opposition to the African community’s growing atavism. The greater proportion of Indians also went on to protest at the poor economic conditions, assertion of African community values, and government clampdown, by boycotting the 1971 national elections.
One form of panacea which Prime Minister Williams offered to many was the creation of the Development and Environmental Works Division (DEWD). This programme provided considerable public funds for casual employment on various projects such as road construction and maintenance. However, it proved to be a ‘money for votes’ venture in which most projects benefited PNM-dominated areas and most jobs were given to African, PNM party members. Hintzen (1985: 128) describes the programme as ‘no more than an expansion and formalization of racial patronage’.4 Only 5 per cent of DEWD’s funds were spent on roads for Indian-dominated agricultural areas (Craig 1985: 183). Thus racially polarized politics continually acted to maintain economic distinctiveness.

In the early 1970s, therefore, Trinidad’s socio-economic situation was severe. The island had seen a dwindling of productivity and a shrinking of foreign reserves, discrimination in public and private employment, racially-inspired unrest, an attempted coup and a State of Emergency, boycotted elections, and the perpetuation of widespread poverty within inner urban and especially rural areas. Rural Indians felt themselves to be particularly alienated from the rest of society. The economically exacerbated tensions in Trinidad might have led to even greater social fragmentation and potential violence had it not been for sudden changes in the international economy, changes which bore unprecedented consequences for this small island in the Caribbean.

The years of prosperity, 1973–82

Trinidad’s onshore oil wells neared exhaustion as the country moved into the 1970s with an unsure economic future. Important offshore finds were made in 1971, but high costs of drilling and production made their viability questionable. Meanwhile in 1971 and 1972, on the other side of the world, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) were holding talks which would soon change the structure of the global economy. The major result of their meetings was that in December 1973, OPEC raised the standard price of Arabian crude oil from US$3 to US$5 per barrel; in February 1974 this price was increased to US$11.65 per barrel, and the world began to feel the impact of an international ‘oil crisis’.

Although Trinidad had on several occasions unsuccessfully applied to join OPEC, the country followed other non-OPEC nations in adjusting its own oil prices in relation to OPEC’s. Whereas Trinidad asked only TT$1.57 per barrel of its oil in the late 1960s, the country demanded TT$21 per barrel by 1975 (contemporary exchange rate TT$2.40 = US$1). A global oil shortage meant that Trinidad could sell at a high price as much oil as it could produce; therefore, crude oil production in Trinidad (especially from the offshore reserves) nearly doubled between 1971 and 1978.

Since the greatest proportion of oil production facilities in Trinidad was in the hands of American companies, the government introduced new tax legislation to maximize national gains. In January 1973, foreign firms like Amoco paid tax and royalty of only US$0.50 per barrel produced. By December 1973, after the first major price hikes, they were required to pay the Trinidad government US$4.69 per barrel produced. This tax rate nearly doubled again in 1974. This meant a virtually instant economic windfall for the small country. World oil prices fell slightly in 1975–78, then redoubled in 1979–80 to peak at US$35 per barrel. Over the decade, Trinidad received overwhelming, multifold economic benefits.

Whereas in 1973, foreign exchange reserves were the equivalent of less than two weeks of the country’s exports, by 1980, the net foreign exchange reserves had risen to $4,782 million, the equivalent of 14 months’ imports. The balance of payments position had also moved from a deficit of $32 million in 1973 to a surplus of $695 million. . . . Government revenues likewise increased almost three-fold from 1973 to 1974 and grew at an average annual rate of 44 per cent over the period 1974–80. (Ryan 1988: 126)

Overall, it has been estimated that between 1974 and 1983, Trinidad and Tobago received a total of US$10 000 million in windfall oil revenues (Thomas 1988: 279). With its newfound wealth, the government of Prime Minister Eric Williams set aside the models of previous five-year plans. ‘Rather than resuscitate its development programme, the regime made a decision to embark on a massive endeavor of industrial diversification spearheaded by the state in partnership with foreign investors’ (Hintzen 1985: 116). The consequent crash industrialization programme quickly saw plans for the creation of two petrochemical plants, a second ammonia plant, an aluminium smelter, an iron and steel plant, additional fertilizer plants, and widespread electrical expansion. Most of the development was designed to be located at the industrial estate at Point Lisas, fuelled by a new natural gas pipeline. Most, if not all of the projects got off the ground during this boom period of the mid- to late-1970s. Further, the government sought nationalization of the major industrial sectors, including the purchase of Shell Oil’s operations in Trinidad in 1974.

Domestic relief was also high on the government’s priority list during the days when Dr Williams boasted that ‘money is no problem’: this included a comprehensive system of subsidies for food, fuel, and utilities, reduced taxes, and an expansion of public work programmes aimed at reducing unemployment (by 1976, in fact, over half of the country’s labour force was employed within some branch of the public sector). In addition, some twenty-six special funds were established to promote small businesses.
The PNM took special measures to ensure that its voters—especially urban Africans—were the primary beneficiaries of the government's economic policies.

The entirely fortuitous circumstances of the post-1973 oil boom enabled the regime, through authoritative decision-making, to employ the state as an instrument for reallocating the phenomenally expanded oil income into politically strategic sectors of the domestic economy. . . . With the tremendously increased revenue, the regime was able to sustain and expand the system of patronage directed at the black lower-class population. It was also to meet the accumulative claims of the country's middle and upper classes, while at the same time increasing its control over the non-oil sectors of the economy. (Hintzen 1989: 143)

Nonetheless, overall, the island appeared to be exceedingly prosperous. By the late 1970s, the Gross National Product (GNP) reached a remarkable annual expansion rate of 6 per cent to 8 per cent. For the average Trinidadian, the effects of the sudden national profit were not felt immediately. Unemployment reached 15 per cent in 1975 before declining, and in that year there was a violent national dispute between a united labour front and the government (Baptiste 1976). Yet gradually, unemployment began to fall and average weekly earnings in all sectors grew dramatically.

As a result of the oil boom and the construction activity associated with the new enterprises . . . , between 1974 and 1982 total GDP [Gross Domestic Product] in Trinidad-Tobago (measured at factor cost in current prices) grew by a factor of nearly 5, that is from TT$4,000 million to over TT$19,000 million. Over the same period, per capita incomes (in current prices) grew from TT$3,937 to TT$19,682. Almost all the expansion centred on the performance of the oil sector. (Thomas 1988: 287)

Within a short time, the island society quickly became absorbed in an 'easy money', free-spending, consumption-dominated ethos which one popular calypso at the time described as 'Capitalism Gone Mad'. The number of cars in the small country increased by 65 per cent between 1974 and 1980, and the number of televisions trebled over the decade. Electricity became more readily available throughout the island, and refrigerators, stereos, TVs and video recorders became universal possessions.

In particular, manufacturing, construction, and transportation sectors grew rapidly through government contracts or as spinoffs from expansion in related, state-backed sectors of industry. Businessmen and entrepreneurs of all groups and areas prospered significantly during this period (cf. Sandoval 1983: 257–66).

[T]he black, coloured, East Indian, white and Chinese middle classes (the last three concentrated primarily in the private sector) have derived enormous benefits from the regime's chosen strategy for development, concentrating as it is on the use of foreign exchange and budgetary surpluses derived directly from international capital to expand the scope of participation of foreign investors in the Trinidad economy and to expand, develop, and strengthen the local business sector. (Hintzen 1985: 123)

Among other observers, the Ministry of Finance (1978: 131) noted that the main economic benefits of the boom were to be found especially in the urban zones. This concentration had several side effects, including those described in a report by The Economist (13 September 1980: 91) on Trinidad's industrialization programme:

This dash for heavy industry has sucked people in from the countryside to the city; 40% of the island's 1.1 million people now live in the miles of sprawl behind Port of Spain, producing urban squalor and a rash of arson in the city centre as suburbs expand.

The bulk of migrants who came from throughout the country to the city were African, thus serving to maintain the longstanding political and geographical differentiation between the largest ethnic groups (see Map 3.1). Although this kind of pre-boom ethnic pattern stayed the same, another changed fundamentally. During the decade of the 1970s, the Indian community as a whole rapidly achieved more prosperity and social mobility than it had during its previous 130 years in the island. They accomplished this through making educational advancements, by engaging in a great deal of capital investment, and by manipulating their own patronage networks. The majority of Indians continued to be rural, but came to engage in far greater extra-village employment due to the demise of the agricultural sector.

The collapse of agriculture in Trinidad had already begun in the 1950s (cf. Table 3.1), but was deepened by a combination of factors in the 1970s. As previously mentioned, the PNM government under Dr Williams never gave much priority to agriculture. With the new oil wealth and ensuing crash industrialization measures, agriculture in Trinidad slipped even further into the politico-economic background (Pollard 1985). 'Where sugar cane was once cultivated,' Dr Williams said at the opening ceremony for the Point Lisas industrial estate, Trinidad 'will now produce iron and steel.'

Though middle-class Indians fared rather well in their business activities in the 1970s, Indian farmers and agricultural workers felt themselves blatantly neglected by the government.
Conditions of regime survival preempted the implementation of a viable agricultural and fishing policy. The East Indian population, which has an almost exclusive predominance as agricultural labor and own-account small-and medium-sized farmers, was not politically strategic for the PNM's hold on power. The regime depended for its mass support upon the racial mobilization of lower-class blacks. To survive it had to allocate resources in ways that proved most beneficial to the middle- and upper-class sectors of society while engaging in a system of racial patronage directed at this black lower-class population. This meant that spending upon agriculture had to be neglected. Such neglect was clearly evident in the pattern of developmental spending undertaken by the regime. (Hintzen 1989: 176)

During the boom years, the influx of wealth throughout the country resulted in a massive rise in imported, high status foodstuffs which also acted to undermine domestic production. Per capita food production in 1973-82, the value of food imports to the island soared from TT$161 million to TT$904 million (see Ching 1985). Consequently the price paid to cane farmers in Trinidad more than doubled in a single increment in 1974-75 (this was not only in response to the international market, but also to the impact of a series of national strikes in that year centred on the creation of a new trade union for farmers).

The government nationalized the country's sugar operations (Caroni Ltd, previously owned by Tate & Lyle) in 1975. Subsequently, there were allegations of the government's mismanagement of this company, while the PNM's emphasis on industry over agriculture resulted in a downfall of sugar as never before. Difficulties with negotiating contracts, disorganization and poor maintenance of cane weighing, transporting, and processing facilities, and irregular payment practices were among the complaints raised by many cane farmers. Although the price paid to farmers remained high, wages for labour in this sector became unmanageable because of competition with wages in other sectors. Average wages for sugar workers rose from TT$50 per week in 1971 to TT$51 per day in 1982. Meanwhile, world sugar prices had fallen back to the moderate level of f250/ton by the mid-70s, after which they continued to rise and fall in a highly unstable fashion (see The Economist 15 August 1985). For these reasons, by 1982 Trinidad was producing less than 80,000 tons of sugar per annum. The bottom had fallen out of the conventional production-and-marketing system; yet for largely political reasons, the government continued to keep this industry from collapsing altogether.

While agriculture – particularly Indian-dominated food crop and sugar cane production – decreased in output over the 1970s, oil came overwhelmingly to dominate the island's economy. By the early 1980s, oil was responsible for over 40 per cent of the GDP and 80 per cent of all export earnings. Still, most Trinidadians felt that times were good, and few realized the precariousness of their economic position.

The years 1973-82 witnessed widespread and deeply-rooted socio-economic change in Trinidad. The enormous influx of wealth derived from oil exportation allowed the government to undertake large-scale industrial-
zation efforts as well as to bolster its patronage— and the working-class African community— through selective public spending. Furthermore, the upper and middle classes of both major ethnic groups simultaneously received the ruling power’s backing. Hintzen and Premdas (1984: 209–10) describe this dual policy which the government’s newfound wealth afforded:

The Trinidadian regime has used the legitimacy derived from its majoritarian based to cater to the interests of the upper and middle classes by adapting a capitalist development policy which emphasizes state participation. At the same time, it has preserved an ethnic ‘definition of the situation’ for electoral purposes. The combination of ethnic mobilization and elitist policies has resulted in the buttressing of the regime’s power position while freeing it from the need to engage in a program of wealth redistribution.

Such a combined manipulation of interests ensured the PNM’s return to power in the 1981 general elections (La Guerre 1983). Moreover, Hintzen (1983, 1985) has suggested that within this context, ethnic communalist sentiments have eroded among the middle and upper classes while ethnic identification has been reinforced in both the African and Indian working classes. This became evident in voting patterns and the general adoption of habits and values, suggesting a great deal of fragmentation. The well-to-do of all ethnic groups took on the Anglo-American lifestyles which wealth provided for, especially in terms of material culture and interests in the pursuit of commerce. On the other hand, the DEWD programme and similar schemes under PNM patronage positively favoured and consolidated the African working class, while the decline in agriculture and other perceptions of economic discrimination against the rural Indian populace acted in a negative manner to promote their own forms of communalism.

However, rural Indians, as we have seen, did manage to benefit considerably during the boom years in Trinidad. As some community members achieved a degree of economic advancement, the activation of village- or kin-based social networks often led to occupational opportunities for a great many rural Indians (particularly in the construction and transportation sectors, which were not under direct management by the state). Sometimes the initial economic injections into rural communities came through the sudden rise in sugar prices after 1974, other times due to work programmes created by local government (see below).

Thus, following the high degree of socio-economic alienation with which the rural Indian community entered the 1970s, the government’s specialized use of economic gains after 1973 did little to amend the situation; in fact, it was exacerbated. The prosperity which rural Indians did manage to obtain through ‘secondary’ means did not act to dissipate their ethnic identity, although many fundamental aspects of their village lifestyles were transformed. An examination of one village, through the course of these years of prosperity, reveals some of the multiple ramifications which national and international socio-economic change had for rural Indian communities in Trinidad.

An Indian village in the boom years

The village known as Penal Rock Road is set in a relatively remote part of southern Trinidad, five miles from the market town of Penal and some fourteen miles from San Fernando, the island’s second largest urban area. Settled around the turn of the century by ex-indentured Indians (many having served on the same estate, La Fortuna near San Fernando), the village long exhibited exemplary characteristics of Trinidad Indian society and culture. From its founding through the 1950s, thatched houses and tethered cows dotted the bushy landscape, a kuti or small temple was serviced by a Brahman pundit, a panchayat or selected council gathered to settle local affairs and the advice of a mokya or headman was held in esteem, village-exogamous marriages were arranged by a regional aguwah or marriage-maker, and a Presbyterian ‘Coolie School’ held classes mainly attended by boys. Cocoa was the major cash crop in the 1920s and 1930s, until it was largely replaced – due to the island’s acute food needs – by rice in the 1940s (see Jolly 1948). In the 1950s, Tate & Lyle sought to boost its sugar production by extending its enterprises southward (Maharaj 1969: 44–60), and since then sugar cane cultivation has been the dominant agricultural activity of Penal Rock Road villagers.

Klass (1961) vividly describes how sugar cane once regulated nearly every aspect of life in the Trinidad Indian Village of ‘Amity’. To a certain extent, this was true for Penal Rock Road, too; but its distance from the major plantations of Tate & Lyle (Caroni Ltd) meant that large-scale, agricultural labour surrounding cane was not as available as in ‘Amity’ (which is located in the heart of the sugar belt). Instead, since the 1950s, Penal Rock Road’s agricultural workforce was largely dedicated to small, independently-owned cane farms. Wage labour obtained for much of the cane work, while family-based labour was used for food crops. Over the past few decades, the village has grown only moderately and has altered but little in ethnic composition (Table 3.3); however, its occupational structure has changed significantly.

Around 1960, many villagers were already engaged to a large extent in extra-village occupational activities. As their families tended garden plots,
a number of men would leave the village each day to work as carpenters or
construction labourers, oil-field workers or foresters. Table 3.4 provides
the occupational structure of Penal Rock Road village in 1960. Individuals
wholly engaged in agricultural activities (farmers and labourers) comprise
about two-fifths of the working population.8

Seasonal employment within the village fluctuated markedly, for sugar
cane was still the economic mainstay of the area, and cutting season
demanded intensive manual labour. Over half the population at that time
was involved in non-agricultural, manual labour, a great deal of which must
have been located outside of the village vicinity. However, most of that
work, according to informants, existed within the Penal region or perhaps as
far as the oil-field region near Siparia and Fyzabad. Rare were the individuals
who travelled as far as San Fernando or beyond for employment.

The first major economic event which took impact on the village was not
the oil boom; this took some years to be felt in Penal Rock Road. Rather, the
sugar price rises of 1974 turned many village cane farmers into local
nouveaux riches. Whereas farmers had been receiving TT$18.25 per ton of
cane delivered to the scales in 1973, in 1974 they suddenly received TT$40.78
per ton. The price continued to rise through the 1970s until it peaked at
TT$104.69 per ton of cane in 1982. Cane farmers quickly began to accu-
mulate several times their previous income simply for growing the same
quantity of cane (or even less).

Almost instantly, farmers throughout the area went on buying sprees, not
only for investment in tractors and vans, but also in luxury items. Tales are
still told of this now almost mythic time: exaggerating somewhat, villagers
say that you could drive your car into any cane-growing village or trace, sell
it to the first farmer you met, and even receive the taxi-fare home. Others
use stories about the excesses of the period to poke fun at individuals or
members of other parts of the village: they characterize people from Bunsee
Trace as being like one fellow there who, they say, took his first bountiful
paycheck in 1975 and excitedly bought a television and refrigerator ... only
to arrive back at home and recall that Bunsee Trace had no electricity.

The numerous villagers who laboured seasonally for the farmers, too,
received more and more wages throughout this period beginning in 1975.
Cane harvesting season soon became not only a time of much work, but of
much cash as well. The late 1970s and early 1980s was a period of ‘en’less
money’, when a man could work in the fields for a few hours in the
morning, eat well and relax in comfort at home all day, and drink excessively
in the rumshop all night.

By the late 1970s, in many parts of the country, a large proportion of the
African working-class population was working for DEWD and similar
state-organized schemes. At that time a number of African villagers from
the nearby village of Morne Diablo also gained employment through such

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**Table 3.3** Population of Penal Rock Road Village, Trinidad
by sex and race, 1960–80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>174/165</td>
<td>1301/1346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>2647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per cent)</td>
<td>(10.6%)</td>
<td>(8.26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.4** Employed persons by type of labour, Penal Rock Road Village, Trinidad 1960

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agri.</td>
<td>Skil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per cent)</td>
<td>(39%)</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Central Statistical Office

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1 The abbreviated occupational categories are ‘agricultural,’ ‘skilled,’
‘semi-skilled,’ ‘unskilled,’ ‘professional,’ ‘administrative,’ ‘service.’
programmes. No Indians from Penal Rock Road worked for DEWD, either due to ethnic discrimination on recruiters' part or to ethnic pride on the Indians'. Instead, many workers from Penal Rock Road and other Indian villages in that part of the country went to work for St Patrick County Council. This local government authority provided similar job creation schemes for work on road construction and maintenance, bridges and drains, and landscaping.

The County Council had been an employer for some villagers since the 1950s. Yet the enormous increase in central government revenue in the 1970s also meant great increases in local government funds. Moreover, after 1977 St Patrick County Council was under control of an active opposition party, the United Labour Front (ULF). The ULF Council, one of the few in the island at that time, was strongly Indian-backed and therefore highly acceptable as an employer in the eyes of most Penal Rock Road villagers. 1978–81 saw a massive expansion of the Council’s work projects (a political move often perceived as a direct challenge to the programmes of the PNM central government). A number of these large projects, particularly road extensions and paving, were in the general vicinity of Penal Rock Road; thus gainful employment was obtained by scores of village men.

County Council work provided considerable sums of money for brief periods of work (up to TT$80 per task, which may take from two to five hours to complete), and most job sites were relatively near to individuals' homes. The majority of projects took the form of ‘five-day work’, in which crews of people were hired to work on a job for five days at a time; another crew would then work for five days on the same project, thus ideally ensuring that the lucrative employment opportunities were spread around to as many as possible. County Council programmes contributed much employment and large sums of money to the village as a whole, and few are the village men who have never ‘worked a five-day’.

With the rapid growth of industry and commerce throughout the island in the 1970s, the construction industry profited and expanded in turn. New warehouses, shops, schools, and houses were built in great number, and much labour was drawn from places like Penal Rock Road for construction purposes. Unlike cane and County Council workers, however, construction labourers went further and further afield as their employers gained contracts throughout the South. Therefore, this sector represents perhaps one of the first increasingly to pull villagers into ever-expanding socio-economic networks.

Another sector which took villagers far from home was transportation. If a man could obtain a large truck in the late 1970s and early 1980s, contract work was readily available transporting cement, bricks, or lumber. With some initial capital investment – often gained through County or construction work – a number of village men bought trucks and stepped into an occupation which took them the length and breadth of the island. ‘Eh [ain’t] a damn village in de whole country I eh know somebody,’ one trucker boasted.

Another form of transport into which many villagers entered was taxi service. Again, with capital acquired from other sources, they bought cars or ‘maxi’s’ (vans seating from ten to forty passengers) to shuttle between set locations. Cars and maxi’s with ‘H’ (Hire) plates were licensed by the government to work as taxis; these were generally full-time drivers. Cars with ‘P’ (Private) plates were owned by individuals working in other fields who occasionally used their cars for part-time taxi work. The latter called this occasional occupation ‘P-H’ work, which for some years was not legal but tolerated. After a few hours work on a County job or some other task in the morning, a villager would often take his car to ‘go do a lil’ P-H’ on the main road between the village and Penal, leaving the major routes between Penal and Siparia or San Fernando to full-time taxi drivers. This localized, part-time taxi work became quite lucrative as more and more villagers came to work and shop outside the village itself.

By 1980, the structure of the village labour force had been transformed significantly (Table 3.5). Since 1960, agricultural labour was more than halved. While the proportion of manual labourers changed little between 1960 (51 per cent) and 1980 (56 per cent), the number of villagers engaged in construction, production and other related, unskilled labour came to dominate employment of this type. Non-manual labour increased greatly,
from 9 per cent of all occupations in 1960 to 28 per cent in 1980. Sales and service occupations, in fact, became the second leading group after labouring.

Not only did the occupational structure of the village in general become modified, but the distribution of jobs among females changed most dramatically. The ratio of employed females to all workers shifted only slightly over twenty years (7 per cent in 1960, 9 per cent in 1980), yet females came to work almost predominately in office and shop-based occupations. In 1960, 40 per cent of employed women worked in agriculture, 43 per cent in manual labour, and 15 per cent in non-manual jobs; by 1980, the figures were 4 per cent, 18 per cent and 76 per cent respectively. This change can be attributed not only to the increased availability of non-manual jobs, but also to improvements in female educational levels. For some, this also represented a greater readiness of husbands and parents to let their wives and daughters work outside the village; but such an attitude is not very widespread, or even larger numbers of women would be seen in the employment figures.

Tables 3.6 and 3.7 show the distribution of occupations by age in 1980. For both males and females, the greater number of clerical, sales, service, and highly-skilled jobs are held by the youngest, best-educated section of the community. In fact, the village working population as a whole is young, and over half are under 35 years of age. This youthful labour force not only has a high proportion of non-manual labourers, but of agricultural and general production or unskilled workers as well. The large number of workers of this latter type reflects the high wages available in those sectors in the late 1970s and early 1980s (since most young men aspire to non-manual jobs, and claim to prefer ‘liming’ (hanging around) to entering into employment for the sake of it). By the time the decade of the 1970s had turned, the village had seen a much greater diversification of occupational and other economic activities than had existed among any of its previous generations.

In Penal Rock Road there are certain families (described with pseudonyms) who characterize the processes of occupational and other economic change which have transformed the entire village. For instance, Lal Goberdhan is a cane farmer whose father was a plantation labourer and later a cane farmer himself. In the early 1970s, if Goberdhan could produce as much as 500 tons of sugar cane from his land, he might receive between TT$8000 and TT$9000. Then, the ‘sugar boom’ took place. In 1974 he produced 427.25 tons of cane, 345.34 tons in 1975, 455.96 tons in 1976 and 495.07 tons in 1977. At the prices which were subsequently paid in those years, this meant Goberdhan received TT$200 to plant, TT$1000 to weed and bank, TT$100 to transport, and other costs to fertilize and pesticide. Further, his labourers – local young men – very quickly began to demand high wages in the mid- to late 1970s. Goberdhan had been used to paying around TT$10 per task (about four to five hours of work), yet the rate soon became TT$40. Compromise with workers failed in the boom years; he jokes about that period, ‘you cyan [couldn’t] tell dem you go pay $20 . . . dey kill you, leave you right dey!’ Nevertheless, Goberdhan received a substantial increase in his income, and he has re-invested it by various means. First, he bought a tractor to replace the bullock cart he once used. In 1979, he rebuilt his house, located on the main
Table 3.7 Employed female population of Penal Rock Road Village, Trinidad by occupation and age, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>65+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects, engineers, and technicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical, dental, and related</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other professional, technical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and managerial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and related</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts and trades</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and equipment operators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other production workers and labourers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Central Statistical Office

road, to include a rumshop beneath. Now his wife and youngest two daughters maintain the rumshop while he and his sons see to the farm.

Govindra Narine has worked for the County Council drainage division since the mid-1960s. Due to his experience, he was promoted to supervisor when County work projects proliferated. Since the mid-1970s, he has been responsible for a crew of twelve workers on jobs throughout the Penal area. Four of Narine’s children are in their twenties, two in their teens, and all are very well-educated. While Narine himself has achieved a position of some status, his children have gone even further. The oldest male works as a clerk in the Post Office in Penal, and the other son, in the Central Post Office in Port-of-Spain; one daughter attends a teachers’ college near the capital, while another works there for the Ministry of Finance in a modern, high-rise office building. The latter three commute on a daily basis out of the village from their wooden house on a pitch-paved road set among cane and coconut trees. They drive all the way to the urban congestion of Port-of-Spain in the young man’s shiny new Toyota, with an expensive tape-deck blaring Hindi film songs the entire way. The youngest daughters are pursuing their ‘O’ and ‘A’ level certificates at secondary schools in San Fernando, hoping to follow the footsteps of their older siblings in gaining well-paid jobs in modern offices ‘in town’. Narine is proud of his children’s achievements, and he is not terribly worried about their extra-village lifestyles: for although they work and study in contexts far-removed from the village scene, he knows that each night they are all together once again to share a meal and complete their household chores.

Other families aren’t so complacent, however. Working and socializing outside of the village has caused a good deal of dissatisfaction with home life among many young people. A ‘communication gap’ exists, they say, between their modern, outward-looking orientation and the parochial values of their parents. Sometimes upward mobility transforms the habits of the entire family, sometimes there is a disjuncture between generations, and yet at other times, entire households exhibit both traditional and modern social and cultural patterns.

The compound of the Boodoo family is a hive of activity and a village in miniature, characterizing many kinds of economic and occupational change coupled with traditional ways of life. Five brothers (out of thirteen children) live together with their families on the 20-acre parcel left to them by their father, who had been an original immigrant to Hermitage estate near San Fernando. The brothers have from three to nine children each, and three of their married sons have houses and families on the compound also. Two households have doolahins (son’s wives) living there. Eight houses are built almost on top of one another, and in total, forty-three people live at the site on one of the back traces of the village, about a half-mile from the main road. Among the oldest men are a construction supervisor, two carpenters, a printer, an oil-field worker, and a taxi driver; among the younger males are a truck driver, two carpenters, and two taxi drivers. Virtually all work outside the village, and most had worked County Council jobs at one time or another (some then used their high payrolls to finance their vehicles to undertake new transportation occupations). The family used to farm both cane and rice, but they ceased cultivating both crops in the late 1970s. It was simply too much work, they insisted, and too little gain when other sources of income were available. A great number of food crops are still cultivated in garden plots by the women, however; some are shared amongst the extended family, others are sold in the weekly market in Penal. None of the
Boodoo women is employed. The young women stopped attending secondary school after one or two years, and now work at home, looking after elder brothers or little children until the day when a marriage will be arranged for them. Older women tend the gardens, manage the household, and have come to relish watching the daily ‘soap operas’ on TV. One of the elder women, with her son and his van, buys produce each week in Port-of-Spain or San Fernando to sell again on Saturdays in Penal or Sundays in Siparia. As the sons of each household have acquired savings over the years, it is they who have bought stereos, refrigerators, or TVs for their homes. Further, the sons still give a considerable amount of their income each week to their fathers, as contributions to the household coffer. These sons will one day marry and build their houses adjacent to their fathers’, in this manner increasing and maintaining the tightly-knit Boodoo family-community.

The economic advancements of the boom period are not only evident within individual families, but can be observed throughout the village as a whole. There are numerous physical manifestations; rice paddies have been left uncultivated and used for grazing cows; electricity poles are found on all but a few traces (after villages in various quarters successfully petitioned to acquire electricity in the late 1970s and early 1980s); new houses are widespread; and perhaps most obvious of all, the main road has become thoroughly lined with commercial enterprises of all kinds. This commercial density is a very recent phenomenon; it came into being particularly in the late 1970s when enough capital funds were finally accumulated to launch new businesses. Table 3.8 indicates this recent growth of commercial activity in the village.

Various manifestations of economic change also found their way into homes. Since the late 1970s there has been a proliferation of housebuilding. Although the house styles (most with high posts supporting the main house frame, leaving living-space in the open air beneath) have changed very little, traditional building materials have been replaced. Wooden posts and walls quickly gave way to cement posts and, ideally, brick and plaster walls. Fresh paint now finishes the homes, whereas in previous days they had remained bare. Corrugated, galvanized steel sheets continue to be used for roofs, though often these are now painted, too. Inside, increasing numbers of homes throughout the village have come to be equipped with several modern accoutrements. Among 121 houses surveyed in 1985, no less than 98 are equipped with TVs, 91 with refrigerators, 44 with stereos, 36 with video recorders, and 29 with washing machines. Further, 55 have cars and 27, trucks. These additions represent radical change, the old-timers note, from the small, poor village they knew as youths.

Socio-economic change also found its way into homes. External networks have grown considerably through employment outside the village. After delivering materials or working on a construction site at various locations throughout south Trinidad, men from Penal Rock Road established the habit of drinking in the nearest rumshop, thereby gaining regular acquaintances in villages and towns over a wide area. This sort of outside ‘liming’, or hanging-around, was more frequent and of a different nature than other sorts of extra-village socializing men had previously been accustomed to (that was, primarily at weddings or funerals). Meanwhile, within the village social relations were also undergoing significant modifications, often for the worse.

Even though they enjoyed the material benefits of the prosperous years, many villagers have nonetheless come to regard the days before the boom as a kind of golden age in terms of village solidarity. Some say, ‘Den was more a sharin’ way . . . a closer relationship.’ In characterizing those days, they recall that the spirit of neighbourliness at that time was such that ‘If you need some’in’, an’ I have it – you get it.’ Soon, with the growing number of well-to-do cane farmers and newly-promoted construction and County Council supervisors, many of the once seemingly egalitarian relationships within the village began to disintegrate. One well-educated young clerk describes the process which took place regarding certain individuals and their rapid socio-economic mobility.
Some did move up de ladder very quickly . . . promotions an’ t’ing. Dey de furs’ to get a big house an’ t’ing in de village . . . makin’ inves’ments, buyin’ . . . Dey was considered a sort of elite class. You find people look up to dem. But a couple a’ years before, . . . all line up togedda, you see?

Whereas previously they had simply been co-villagers pursuing roughly similar lifestyles, those village men who moved into supervisory positions eventually became perceived sources of jobs and money. ‘Ya had to respec’ dem,’ a labourer reflects, ‘caus’ a de jobs an’ power an’ t’ing. What took place, as a supervisor at dat time . . . ya find dat whateva ya wanted, [snaps fingers!]’ New alliances were formed to gain jobs among some, hard feelings and slanders consequently followed among others. Throughout the village in the 1970s, the clerk concludes, ‘all day sought was monetary gains . . . dat causes a sort a’ division’.

Conspicuous consumption and relative deprivation vis-à-vis neighbours brought about disruptions in home life, too. Once electricity arrived on one’s trace, family members came to call for numerous new material items like refrigerators, TVs and stereos. The more money one had access to, some say, the more one’s family became discordant. New values and interests took hold of various family members. Thinking of those early days of relative wealth, one man laughs and says:

When de economy uplif’ now de fadda eh got time to talk to he chil’en, de mudda is so busy . . . before she shop in de li’l shop right dey, now she goin’ to San Fernando an’ t’ing, she want to shop in de Hi-Lo [supermarket].

In the eyes of many people, then, the rapid ‘modernization’ of the village carried with it many disruptions in community and family life. In response, new organizations were created to help reconnect or foster the sorts of ties which most villagers have come to idealize. One kind of community organization took the form of religious groups (see Chapter 4). The other was secular, including groups like the ‘United Youths [sic] Sports and Cultural Group’ (a cricket club and fund-raising body for community functions), created in the mid-1970s, and the ‘5 Mile Community Welfare Association’.

The Association was formed to promote values of greater communality and self-maintenance within their own, predominantly Hindu neighbourhood. The elected executives of the Association claim ‘to know de true ’70s’, when personal gain came to predominate and interpersonal relationships became strained; their first step towards repairing widespread social fragmentation was to try to instill togetherness in their own immediate community.

Both positive and negative consequences of Trinidad’s years of prosperity transformed villages like Penal Rock Road virtually overnight. The rapid accumulation of material wealth, the formation or expansion of networks, occupational mobility, social fragmentation, family breakdown, and other changes took place, and such villages will never be the same. Yet the economic boom could not last forever, and by the first years of the 1980s, a major economic downturn was underway.

Economic recession, post–1982

The economic wellbeing of Trinidad in the 1970s was fundamentally based on oil. The enormous wealth gained so quickly brought with it high lifestyles and big ideas, while many overlooked the precarious economic ground upon which the country’s economy was placed. The Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Finance himself admitted that

The country was spoiled by a sudden injection of money which created a kind of euphoria. The Government after the first oil shock, found itself on a wave of affluence and embarked on a number of large capital projects. They lost sight of the fact that if anything went wrong with the revenue system there would be problems. (Financial Times 8 July 1985: 13)

The global ‘oil crisis’ eventually subsided, and international adjustments over the years led to a reduction in the high oil prices which had prevailed through the 1970s. OPEC began to cut its prices in 1981 and 1982, and similar producers like Trinidad were forced to follow. World prices of crude oil tumbled from US$34 per barrel to US$29 then US$27. By April 1983, Trinidad had cut its price by 22 per cent, and the country’s earnings began to plummet. In 1982, foreign reserves totalled TT$7.6 billion; at the end of 1984 they had dropped to TT$2.8 billion. Oil production fell steeply, and in turn, other sectors began to feel an impending recession. Gross Domestic Product, which had seen such exorbitant levels a few years before, only grew at 3.4 per cent in 1981–82; by 1983 it actually declined by 5 per cent, declining a further 7 per cent in 1984. Trinidad’s balance of trade also fell deeply into the red for the first time in 1982, and in 1983 the country showed a balance of payments deficit of TT$1.7 billion. By 1985, a Financial Times Survey concluded that economically, ‘the carnival is over for Trinidad and Tobago’ (ibid.)

As the oil revenue declined, it became increasingly apparent just how dependent on this resource the country had become, and how badly the government had failed to use the boom-wealth productively for economic diversification and stable job creation. At the beginning of the decade of the
1980s, the oil sector’s contribution to the national economy was ‘nearly three times the contribution of the next highest sector (transportation, storage, and communication), nearly five times that of manufacturing excluding petroleum, and eighteen times that of agriculture’ (Sutton 1984: 71). The crash industrialization programme proved to be highly capital-intensive (creating few jobs), often poorly conceived, and more often corruptly managed.

By way of example, ‘the most telling criticism of government policy is what happened to the Vanguard of the industrialization drive, the Iron and Steel Company of Trinidad and Tobago (Iscott), (The Economist 3 November 1984: 68). This massive plant cost US$458 million to construct, but has failed to find a secure market. It has therefore necessitated huge government support to maintain it as a political showpiece. Foreign observers concluded that Iscott ‘continues to be a financial embarrassment to the government...[By 1985] Iscott was costing the government nearly US$500,000 per day’ (South September 1985: 245). Likewise, ‘Fertilisers of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, a joint-venture project between the government and Amoco, was established at a cost of US$250 million, but suffered a loss of US$9 million in the first six months of 1983, with further losses recorded since’ (ibid.). Overall, the manufacturing industries had never really become very well established as productive contributors to the national economy.

In Trinidad and Tobago between 1973 and 1980, therefore, one had the classic boom conditions of a massive upward displacement of money income trends and income levels, euphoric expectations and little widening of the structure of real output. (Bourne 1985: 153)

As a recession gradually became widespread through all sectors, the well-paid jobs to which Trinidadians had grown so accustomed became fewer and fewer. Under pressure from its varied financial disasters, ‘the state began a massive program of retrenchment which contributed to a drop in total employment from 411,000 in 1984 to 392,000 in 1985’ (Hintzen 1989: 182). Unemployment climbed from 10.3 per cent in 1982 to estimates of some 22 per cent by 1985, with manufacturing, transportation, and construction industries particularly hard-hit. Moreover, the government was forced to reduce subsidies for domestic energy consumption and other supports. These cutbacks especially affected the working class. Agriculture had remained neglected throughout the boom, so that when it ended the island was importing 75 per cent of its food requirements. The economic tide had turned in Trinidad after 1982, serving to transform once again many of the socio-economic structures which had so rapidly changed during the boom years.

While the effects of the national, post-1982 economic downturn took a couple of years to be felt deeply in Penal Rock Road,13 by 1984–85 clear signs of recession could be observed. A long row of empty rumshops and groups of young men liming on junctions throughout the day are some of the most visible signs. Each evening during the boom days, men would crowd into rumshops and proceed from one to another in the course of a night. Now, most simply lime outside, and frequent only one if they are to drink at all. Liming, the characteristic Trinidadian social complex based around simply hanging around, has become more profuse and has taken on new meaning.

‘Liming’ is now a different sort of village pastime than what it was in the past due to two aspects of the same problem: unemployment. In 1985, in a survey of 291 males, it was found that the distribution of types of employment had not changed much since the 1980 Census. 'But unlike the situation in 1980, in 1985 no less than 55 men (19 per cent) were unemployed. Of these 55, 46 were between 17 and 25 years of age. The ranks of the underemployed are even greater, especially since County Council and construction projects are few and far between; transportation work, too, has become highly competitive. Not only are jobs harder to get, but many young men choose not to work. Well-educated and used to well-paid work, they simply refuse to engage in tedious, poorly-paid labour, especially in agriculture (where wages have been depressed). ‘Makin’ a lime’ and waiting for appropriate work to arrive through social channels is preferred. This partly structural, partly voluntary unemployment among young men, some say, has led to an increase in ganja smoking and further fragmentation in family life. Many villagers predict that jobs of any sort will be more valued as the economic situation worsens.14

Supervisors and other high-ranking members of the village are no longer regarded as figures to pay tribute to, as before. One labourer sums up his attitudes to them as ‘Ya cyan give me more work so I won’ look up to you again.’ Even the continuation of high prices for sugar cane has failed to retain farmers’ economic well-being. Caroni Ltd is buying less and farmers therefore must produce less. The 304 farmers who weigh their cane in Penal Rock Road collectively produced a peak amount of 30,497.33 tons of cane in 1978; by 1983 their combined amount was only 15,807.18 tons. Many of the smaller farmers cannot make ends meet with contracts forcing them to produce smaller harvests of sugar cane.

Throughout the village, there have been fundamental changes from the ways of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Whereas once ‘money be flowin’,’ a villager points out, ‘today dat is changin’, I’s movin’ back to de ol’ system because dey losin’ job. Employer contractin’ job is much slower, an’ so you back to a dif’ren’ standard a’ livin’.’ There is much more dependence on gardening for subsistence, and many more villagers have taken to selling...
their produce in the weekly Penal market (thus deflating prices there and making profit harder to gain). Many have already returned to rice farming, regarded by most as the last resort for supporting one's family.

It is not yet clear whether the gradual swing back to pre-boom economic levels will bring about the ideal of a communal golden age generated by nostalgia during the period of prosperity. Organizations like the '5 Mile Community Welfare Association' see their role in promoting such an ideal now as importantly as ever: with many families re-entering states of economic difficulty or even semi-poverty, the Association's executives hope to forge a new sense of collective goodwill and village stewardship. Underpinning such communal drives are strong ethnic sentiments, which were critically affected during Trinidad years of boom and bust.

**Ethnicity and economic change in village Trinidad**

Before the oil boom, economic conditions were dire and Indians in villages like Penal Rock Road disdained the PNM government's policies responsible for the erosion of agriculture, the lack of economic opportunity, and the perpetuation of racial politics. During the years of prosperity, village Indians made considerable economic gains, yet they still opposed the African-dominated government by rallying around ethnic symbols. They felt that the PNM industrialization programme and other development schemes were deliberately intended to exclude Indians. Whatever wealth rural Indians did obtain, they insist, was through their own initiatives and social channels.

Since around 1982 and the onset of the recession, Indians have pointed to the squandered national funds and marginally productive, government-sponsored industries and — cognizant of the massive wealth the nation once had — accusingly ask, 'Whey [where] de money done gone?!' If the oil windfalls had been invested in agriculture, Indian villagers claim, the country would still be in good economic standing once the oil sector had collapsed. Thus, though practically all citizens gained higher standards of living and adopted various aspects of Anglo-American culture, the mishandling of resources fuelled racial tensions both during and after Trinidad's oil boom years.

These findings contradict predictions made in many previous studies of socio-cultural change among Trinidad Indians. For years, social scientists predicted that a distinct Indian culture in Trinidad would decline or even dissipate in the face of economic development and accompanying westernization. Most of these studies described the impending absorption or assimilation of Indians into a single, national cultural and social system (a process often deemed 'creolization').

With regard to the longstanding differentiation between Africans and Indians in Trinidad, La Guerre (1974: 106) suggested that 'economic development and the re-allocation of economic resources between and among groups will erode the traditional relationships'. Dookeran (1985: 80) proclaimed that 'An economic system that creates the need for a trade-off between cultural persistence and economic betterment accepts implicitly a strategy for the absorption of the sub-culture into the dominant culture.' And Deosaran (1978: 9) warned against what he believed to be a gradual domination of Indians by 'an unwieldy mixture of American influence with African support'. Indian young people, Nevadomsky (1980) indicated, are particularly susceptible to such influences.

Schwartz (1964, 1967b) has suggested that Indian villagers' incorporation into a cash, rather than a subsistence, economy has caused various changes in the institutions of family (from a joint to a nuclear type), caste (breaking down the final vestiges of endogamy), and communalism (particularly caused by a shift from collective labour to individual wage earning). Schwartz (1967c) also claims that in Trinidad, increased concern with social prestige, economic advancement, and immediate material rewards have been leading to the general demise of Indian traditions, especially Hinduism.

Members of the Indian community in Trinidad have been described as having generally higher aspirations than those of any other group in the island (Rubin and Zavelloni 1969; Baksh 1979). Nevadomsky (1981, 1983a) has suggested that as the socio-economic context in Trinidad develops, such aspirations among Indians bring about ever-higher values and prestige surrounding types of jobs, levels of income, and degree of education. When Indians assume new socio-economic patterns he claims, their distinct cultural dimension falls by the wayside.15

In the 1970s and early 1980s, rural Indians undertook many new roles, relationships, occupations and lifestyles. Their own sense of social and cultural distinctiveness, however, has not lessened in the least. As described in Chapter 2, social and cultural phenomena among Indians have been subject to substantial transformations since their initial introduction to the island in the mid-nineteenth century. Regardless of such transformations in their patterns of life, rural Indians have steadfastly maintained a distinct sense of identity and cultural practice. This has been particularly true of Hindus, whose beliefs, actions and values continue to comprise a rich, living world of experience.

Focusing primarily on acculturation of structural phenomena like occupation or level of education, anthropologists like Schwartz and Nevadomsky foresaw the ultimate downfall of Hinduism in Trinidad. This was predicted to occur due to the growing preponderance of secular, materialistic values (Schwartz 1967d) and according to (Nevadomsky 1983: 78), to the 'obvi-
ous irrelevance of many Hindu rituals to the newly emerging lifestyles'. The reverse, instead, has ensued. Hinduism has undergone a considerable revival or 'renaissance' in rural Indian villages since the 1970s. Ethnic assertiveness among Hindus has emerged, prompted by heightened racial tensions and facilitated by newfound wealth.

Notes


4 Cf. Sutton 1984. Craig (1985: 183–4) details the various improprieties which accompanied the DEWD programme. ‘The very arbitrariness of the projects,’ she writes, ‘allows them to become the spoils of party patronage; at the same time, it leads to poor planning, improper accounting, bribery, corruption, low productivity and waste of resources.’ Also see Taylor 1980.


6 Nevadomsky (1981) noted this trend among young Indians already well under way in the early 1970s, and such a general attitude toward achievement was also evident in the studies of Trinidadian young people conducted by Rubin and Zavalloni (1969). By the mid- to late-1970s, white collar jobs, large incomes and higher standards of living became a readily accessible reality for many well-educated young people.

7 Cf. Pollard (1985: 828): ‘Given its economic stake in the industry and the untold social havoc and political repercussions that would follow the allowance of any collapse, the government’s continued injection of funds into Caroni is inevitable. For this is an industry that is directly responsible for the livelihood of 20–25 000 persons including 7600 farmers who sell their privately-grown cane to Caroni’s factories, while the great majority are drawn from the rural Indian ethnic group in the geographically concentrated area of Western Caroni and Victoria counties.’

8 This figure, of course, does not indicate the fact that virtually all villagers cultivate large gardens for home consumption, as well as crops for the local market in Penal. Such often considerable agricultural activity is largely the domain of women.

9 The numerous strikes over the pros and cons of recognizing a new union in that year greatly hampered the cutting, transportation, and processing of sugar throughout the country. All the cane farmers in Penal Rock Road suffered reduced production levels in 1975.

10 Their favourite method of managing such acquisition is by means of susus, which eight to ten of them run amongst themselves or with local friends. By pooling savings for rotating payment of large sums to each individual, a susu member is more readily able to pay off his car installments, buy power tools or tyres, or purchase luxury items.

11 In a survey of 121 houses in 1984–85, no less than 50 houses were less than ten years old.

12 See Vertovec 1987 for a description of types of egalitarian and asymmetrical relationships in past and present Trinidad Indian villages, including a critique of Klass’s notion of the so-called praja relationship.

13 This economic lag is discernible in Table 3.8, since new businesses were still being established after 1983. The proliferation of ‘parlours’ or small wooden stands or shacks selling cigarettes, candy, and soft drinks, however, do not represent capitalist entrepreneurship through invested wealth. Rather, many villagers set up such stands because of job loss or the need for income supplementation.

14 Since fieldwork was conducted in 1984–5, there has been an increasing, massive exodus of Trinidad Indians – particularly rural villagers – to the United States and especially Canada, in the latter of which they often now receive ‘refugee’ status. Reports suggest that up to half the young men of Penal Rock Road village have emigrated.

15 It should be noted that Nevadomsky’s fieldwork was conducted in the early 1970s, prior to the economic boom period.
CHAPTER 4  Socio-religious change

In the 1970s, Trinidad experienced the virtual collapse of political opposition, racial tension surrounding the Black Power movement, a perceived government misuse of oil-boom wealth, and the rapid accumulation of wealth among rural Indians. Up to this time, according to Hindu informants, participation in many of the religious activities had dwindled, stunted ritual forms persisted, doctrinal knowledge was limited, conversion to Christianity was considered rampant, and a general sense of collective pride was hard to find. Hinduism in Trinidad – as a communal force or source of personal identity – could have indeed suffered an insurmountable breakdown or collapse in the face of these factors so seemingly non-conducive to religiosity. This demise might have taken the form of outright abandonment of religious rites and institutions, especially among ‘westernized’ young people. Or, the pattern of decline might have been one of ‘secularization’ (in which religious institutions cease to organize the community, and religious values increasingly lose sway over numerous spheres of individual life).

Among other possibilities for socio-religious change created by the new context of the 1970s, Hinduism might have been subjected to a kind of ‘compartmentalization’: on the one hand, it may have been retained and manipulated only as a kind of tool utilized periodically for collective gain (especially for political mobilization). On the other hand, some religious adherence might have been maintained merely to provide a kind of aloof air of spiritual superiority over other groups, such as Kuper (1960: 215) noted among some Hindus in South Africa. Conditions which could have led to any of these processes were prevalent, potentially marking the end of a living Hindu tradition on the island. Instead, through the course of the 1970s and early 1980s, Hinduism was revitalized – marking a period many Hindus themselves have called a modern ‘Hindu renaissance’ (Special Issue, Sunday Express 2 March 1986).

On revitalization movements

According to one longstanding body of anthropological theory, ‘revitalization movements’ arise from situations in which a certain socio-cultural group is perceived by others as culturally inferior; is perceived by its own members as socially, politically, or materially deprived relative to other groups; is under pressure from a dominant group to adopt the latter’s ways; and/or, is undergoing forms of stress or disorganization due to these factors combined with rapid change (Linton 1943, Wallace 1956, Aberle 1962). In many ways, the intensification of Hindu activity in Trinidad during the 1970s and early 1980s can be understood as a kind of revitalization movement, particularly as defined by Wallace (1956: 264):

A revitalization movement is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture. Revitalization is thus, from a cultural standpoint, a special kind of culture change phenomenon: the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it, as a system (whether accurately or not); they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well as, in some cases, new traits.

By the mid-1970s, rural Hindus in Trinidad had been subject to a range of communally debilitating conditions. Not only had they inherited the lowest position in the society’s social structure, but they were also regarded by others as archaic or heathen in their beliefs. They were pressed, through the media and the national educational curriculum, to adopt a more typically (Afro-) Caribbean culture. As pointed out in the previous chapter, high achievement aspirations among youth led to conflicts with parents, patterns of conspicuous consumption produced tensions with families and between neighbours, nepotism surrounding jobs and new standards of status evaluation produced new patterns of patronage, rivalry and envy; in these and other ways, the village community came to be regarded as socially fragmented and morally unwholesome. Although large numbers gained materially through spin-off industries resulting from the oil boom, many Indians nonetheless felt deprived of most of the nation’s benefits due to the PNM government’s selective development policies.

However, in light of their increased perceptions of unequal treatment in society, and through their reflections on village social life as it had been in the pre-boom years, many Hindus became ever more self-conscious that their social, cultural and religious practices were parts of a distinct whole under threat. Subsequently, they took conscious, deliberate steps to bolster Hindu tradition with new forms of social organization and ritual practice. Since the early 1970s, significant transformations in Hindu social and ritual activity occurred by means of individual initiative and through group organization. The Hindu socio-religious forms which were ushered in by certain individuals, as well as those which were organized by new local
groups, have served to routinize a given way of understanding and practising Hinduism. They have also both importantly fuelled collective sentiments. But although many effects have been similar, the preconditions and intentions underlying these two modes of change have differed considerably.

**Change owing to individuals**

Hinduism in Trinidad – as in India – has always been an essentially family-based religion, in terms of most rites, and an individually-based one, in terms of devotion to a particular deity (ishthdevata). The chief religious event in the family’s routine was the annual, three-day set of rites: Hanuman rot puja, Satyanarayan katha, and Suruj narayan puja. Occasionally, families would host the fortnightly or monthly Ramayan satsang which rotated among households in their immediate vicinity in the village. Little else was sponsored by individuals and their families (aside from infrequent rites of passage for family members).

The mid-1970s saw a great proliferation of religious events organized and financed by individuals throughout the village. Cane farmers, truck drivers, shop owners, and work-crew supervisors were foremost among others who began to host elaborate religious functions to which their immediate kin and fellow villagers were invited. Much of their newfound wealth was poured into Hindu religious activity at the same time it was invested in tractors, taxis, and TVs. For some, it must be said, sponsoring large sets of rites, with accompanying decorations and feasts, was primarily a show of affluence: by hosting an elaborate religious event certain individuals hoped to gain secular prestige more than spiritual merit. But for many, hosting a yagna, series of pujas, or a satsang has become a genuine form of devotion. ‘You mus’ do it wit’ a free mind,’ says one yagna sponsor, ‘for no special gain.’ ‘I sacrifice myself,’ says another, who purposely keeps no financial account of the enormous expenses extended for the seven-day celebration. He is not concerned with the amount he spends, and declares ‘Ya not bargainin’ wit’ God, you know.’

*Yagnas* are perhaps the single most important socio-religious institution in Trinidad Hinduism today, while puja are the most common, and satsang, the most intimate. These are described below in terms of recent modifications, means of organization, courses of action, and social ramifications.

**Yagna**

Since the turn of the century at least, the week-long series of pujas and readings from the Bhagvata Purana, an institution colloquially known as the *Bhagwat*, has been a key public event among Hindus in rural Trinidad. These days it is classed by pundits as one type of yagna (or yagya or jag, a large-scale sacrificial rite¹), but in earlier years the Bhagwat was the only religious celebration of its kind.² (Klass only came upon the term Bhagwat, never yagna, during his fieldwork in the late 1950s; personal communication.) For decades, Bhagwats were group-sponsored (panchaitii), involved little preparation or decoration, were publicized by word of mouth, and provided little food – usually only prasad (food offerings to deities, also called ‘parsad’ in Trinidad). Now, the basic structure of Bhagwat-like institutions (week-long series of pujas, scripture readings, music, prasad) has been maintained under a general rubric of yagna, while the nature of sponsorship, organization, texts, setting, and scale of these practices have all changed dramatically.

The first modification or addition to the ritual category was the Ramayan yagna. Its roots can be traced, of course, to the Ramayan satsang in which all individuals present sang verses (dohas) and stanzas (chowpais) of Tulsidas’ epic, while accompanying themselves with jhals or small cymbals. It was a fundamental transformation of the satsang itself which eventually led to the institutionalization of Ramayan yagnas. With the growing popularity of Hindi film music in the 1950s – thanks to a famous contemporary radio programme and an increase in the number of Indian cinemas – the music and techniques then used in many social and religious contexts changed rapidly (Mohammed 1986). Professional recordings of devotional songs became more accessible at this time also, leading to the growth of various, so-called ‘classical’ types of music. Durpat, ghazal, turi, tilana, and other traditional musical motifs were heard increasingly throughout the island at a variety of religious occasions. Ramayan satsangs were no exception to the ongoing transformation of religious music, experiencing a shift from one longstanding style of rendering the verses and stanzas (with a rigorous beat, communal singing with jhals) to another, more ‘modern’ style closer to the ‘classical’ songs or Hindi film music (with a melodious rhythm, central singer with musicians playing dholak drum, harmonium, majira cymbals and dhantal percussion piece).

The new style of singing the Ramayana became so popular that by the 1960s it altogether replaced the former style of satsang. Also, whereas previously the participants sang the next straight through, the modified Ramayan satsang provided pauses for a lay leader to interpret the scripture (usually in English). This innovative and popular ‘musical Ramayan’ inspired a few local temple groups to promote a new Ramayan yagna, to be conceived as a kind of extended satsang. A temple in Scotts/Mendez, a small settlement adjacent to Penal Rock Road, boasts the first Ramayan yagna in Trinidad in 1963; members claim over 1000 people were in attendance each of its seven days, flocking to witness the novel event. Until the 1970s,
Bhagwats remained the predominant event of its type, but panchaiti Ramayan yagnas (organized and sponsored like the former by local communities) gradually proliferated.

This opened the door for further innovations. In Penal Rock Road, a Gita yagna (celebrating the Bhagavad Gita) was performed in the mid-1960s, around the time when a Devi yagna (in praise of the Mother Goddess) took place in Penal. Neither of these, however, became regular events.

It was especially the 1970s which saw the creation of a number of new yagna types, and their frequency multiplied significantly as well. But instead of remaining community-sponsored, individuals—with their newly-obtained wealth from oil boom spinoffs—came to donate nearly all of the several thousand dollars needed to hold a yagna. Sponsors practically spared no cost in making their yagna the most ornate, with the best food, best bhajan group, best pundit, and overall ‘best vibration’. Moreover, in attempting to ensure a unique and therefore well-attended event, some individuals organized yagnas based around less familiar Hindu texts. Regardless of textual focus, however, an essential structure dominated all yagnas.

Yagnas in Trinidad are of at least seven days’ duration. (Some Bhagwats can be fourteen days long, if the sponsor has the means to maintain such a marathon celebration.) Calendrically-fixed yagnas vary in length depending on the occasion. Each night a puja must be conducted, a text recited and interpreted, havan (fire oblation) and arti (homage by waving light before a deity’s image) performed, prasad distributed, and a feast supplied. (In Bhagwats, this must be done three times each day, thus accounting also for additional expense.) Bhajan singing by a group of musicians occurs before, intermittently during, and after the recitation and havan; during his sung recitation, the musicians also accompany the presiding pundit (honorially called the vyas, after Vyasa Deva, legendary sage and purported compiler of the Puranas and other sacred texts). They also play specific songs for arti, depending on the main deity worshipped. Usually on a particular night during any yagna, a special puja is performed relative to the type of yagna event (Table 4.1). Yagnas may also be scheduled to coincide with a certain holy day.

The individuals who originally sponsored yagnas are men who acquired fairly large amounts of capital during the oil and sugar boom. Most held their yagnas with the express purpose of religious praise and devotion, though a few did so as fulfillment of some promise made to a deity, or to seek some personal boon. In any case, the ideal goal is to host yagnas for three to five years consecutively, although the richest seek to make it an annual event.

Jagroop, a cane farmer who also works for Caroni Ltd, held a Bhagwat in 1978, a Ramayan yagna in 1979, a Shiv Puran yagna in 1980, and Ramayan yagnas again in 1981 and 1982. Each year, he reflects, his yagna week was

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‘de bes’ time a’ me life!’ Ballo, also a cane farmer, has held yearly Ramayan yagnas at his home from 1983 through 1986. Even though he admits the economic recession will probably curb his ability to host future celebrations, he deeply wishes to host a number of yagnas devoted to different deities, simply because he ‘loves to hear about all a’ dem’. Samaroo, in contrast, is a grocery-store owner who has held only Shiv Puran yagnas since the early 1980s; Shiva, he declares, is his ‘isht’ (personal deity). However, Samaroo insists on different vyas pundits each year, to provide new insights on the Purana he knows so well. Ramnath, who made a great deal of money transporting construction supplies with two large trucks, says of his five annual yagnas in the late 1970s, each provided ‘de only time a’ year I feels real happy’. Rampersad, a less well-to-do worker in an office in San Fernando, is more reserved with regard to his three Shiv Puran yagnas in the early 1980s; they were held as a prolonged prayer towards healing an ill member of his family. These sponsors’ choice of yagna type is wholly personal. (The other types listed in Table 4.1 are primarily tied to holy days, and have been organized by local groups, as described below.) In all, between 1974 and 1986, seven Penal Rock Road villagers individually...
undertook various yearly yagnas, whereas prior to then, only infrequent panchaiti or collective Bhagwats were known.

The amount of organization required to stage a seven-day yagna is enormous, and worth detailing to indicate important social aspects of such religious undertakings. The essential tasks to accomplish, regardless of yagna type, are as follows:

1. Some three to six months prior to a proposed yagna, the sponsor must first choose and contact a pundit to act as vyas. Quite often an individual chooses his, or his wife’s or children’s, guru or ‘godfather’ (see next chapter) to fulfill this role. The same vyas pundit may serve year after year, or the sponsor may wish to obtain a different one each year in order to receive a variety of styles and discourses (many people complain that certain pundits say the same thing whenever they serve as a vyas). Also, vyas pundits are often chosen because of their humorous anecdotes, unique religious knowledge, renowned singing voice, or simply because they arrive with their own group of musicians (thus saving the sponsor extra organizational effort). They are almost invariably Brahmans (while pundits who perform ordinary family pujas may often be non-Brahmans). Once contacted, the pundit must consult his diary (which is usually quite full – not only due to ritual duties, but because many pundits in Trinidad are also full-time teachers, insurance salesmen, engineers, or members of other white-collar professions). More importantly, the pundit must consult the patra (astrological almanac) in order to make sure the proposed yagna dates are auspicious. Once the dates are set with the vyas pundit, further organizational measures can proceed.

2. Usually around three months prior to the yagna, the sponsor and his family begin to ‘fast’. In Trinidad, where vegetarianism is not a norm for Hindus, this means abstinence from alcohol and flesh (chicken, goat, and pork; beef is never eaten). Sex is ideally (but not always successfully) avoided as part of this fast. The essential idea is to ‘make oneself clean’. (This is done prior to any puja as well.) A further essential facet of ritual purification is ideally to consume only fruit, nuts, and unspicy vegetables – food considered satwic, referring to the purest and most subtle of the three gunas or forms of energy which, in Hindu philosophy, are said to comprise the cosmos. No specific duration of time pertaining to such ‘fasting’ is actually set or agreed upon: some say fasts prior to yagnas should be for three months, some say sixty days, others say forty days. The important point is that fasting is considered an act essential to prepare oneself to undertake a yagna. One must purify oneself physically and mentally, one sponsor stresses, ‘to get de real salvation an’ de right t’ing’ from the yagna.

3. At least one month before the yagna, publicity is arranged. Personal invitations are printed and delivered by car, while handbills announcing the yagna have become perhaps the most common form of Hindu ephemera. These are usually deposited at most local shops throughout the area. Moreover, announcements are submitted to national newspapers, to Indian radio shows, and to community television programmes. Thus massive audiences are sought for any yagna. (Perhaps half or more of actual attendance is drawn from the host’s immediate village neighbourhood, some 30–40 per cent from other parts of the village and vicinity, with the balance travelling from other nearby parts of the island.) The notification of, and attendance by, people from areas outside the immediate vicinity not only tends to create new external networks but also acts to establish a greater sense of overall Hindu ethnic communality than in the past, when all activity was familial or local. Village Hindus presently know what religious activity is taking place within the region, know exactly what is going to happen there, and know that they can attend at any time and be treated as welcome guests.

4. Within three to five weeks of the yagna, the sponsor must arrange for the performance of bhajan groups (four to ten musicians and singers of religious songs). The same group may be present throughout the week, but the ideal is to have a different group each night to provide a greater array of entertainment. Often, upon hearing of a forthcoming yagna through advance publicity, it is the bhajan group which contacts the sponsor, seeking to perform at his event. They will receive some pay – some TT$50–$100 – but it is the chance to play and to sing which motivates them. The last night of any yagna is the engagement sought by most groups, for it is then that the largest numbers – 500 to 1000 persons – are in attendance, and the post-ritual singing can last until the small hours of the morning. Also, sponsors often invite well-known ‘classical’ Indian singers, whose inclusion can add considerable prestige to the event.

5. One week before the yagna, a large enclosure or ‘tent’ in which to hold the ceremonies must be constructed adjacent to the sponsor’s home. A group of men (usually sons, extended kin, and close neighbours) cut a large quantity of bamboo from the forest and transport it to the site. There, it is trimmed and lashed together to form a large structure surrounding the base of the house (most village houses are elevated on poles; thus the area beneath the sponsor’s home becomes part of the yagna setting). Galvanized corrugated iron is rented and attached to the bamboo frame to form a roof and walls. Inside, then, a centrally located sinhasan or raised stand is constructed for the vyas pundit, where he will sit cross-legged to deliver his recitation. To the side, a platform is built which will be occupied by the bhajan groups at night and by sleeping sadhus during the day (the latter often stay at the site for the entire duration of the yagna).

6. The inside of the structure is decorated soon after being constructed (see Photo 4). Wall-sized paintings of deities are rented and placed around the inside. Lengths of paper cuttings are bought or rented, to be hung in rows from the ceiling, creating a colourful and festive effect. (Sometimes
the purchased paper decorations include shiny Christmas tree shapes and other Christmas ornaments! Flashing lights are often mounted around the sinhasan. Immediately in front of this stand, a vedí (floor-level altar) is set off by small railings and a white awning with dangling mango leaves; it is an area which will be considered sacred space once the yagna commences. For the most traditional sponsors, the vedí itself (its structure, designs, and ritual trappings) must be created by a member of the Nao or barber caste. However, significantly, the greater trend is to have any creative person fulfil this role, for which they are simply given the title of 'the Nao' \(^\text{10}\). A special hawan pit is dug to the north of the vedí, while a triangular box is built to the east to house the chowsat yogani or sixty-four powers (these are two structures adjacent to the vedí which are only found in yagnas). The Nao must remain for the entire duration of the yagna, each day cleaning and preparing the altar and general vedí area.

\(\text{(7)}\) Within a few days of the yagna, hundreds of chairs are rented and delivered to the site. Long tables and benches for feeding large numbers of people are also borrowed or rented, as are huge pots for cooking. Portable gas stoves and gas must be obtained, and sometimes chulhas or earthen, wood-burning stoves are constructed. If the latter are used, a great deal of wood must be procured to provide sufficient fuel for the massive quantities of food to be freshly cooked each day. Loudspeakers, microphones, and amplifiers are rented too, and arrangements are often made with professional companies to videotape the forthcoming proceedings. Large tanks of water must be filled for cooking, drinking, and washing; in the dry season, water may take a good deal of effort to find and transport.

\(\text{(8)}\) All materials necessary for daily puja (see below) are obtained within a day or two of the event, including huge amounts of ingredients for mohan bhoag (flour, sugar, ghee, rice, milk). In Trinidad, mohan bhoag is the standard form of prasad distributed after any Hindu rite. (A small quantity of this is always offered in puja, then mixed-in with the larger mass, bagged, and distributed so that all who receive it gain the blessing of the food offering.) While an entertaining and charismatic vyas and a talented bhajan group are commonly recognized as important features, another primary criterion for judging the success or popularity of any yagna is whether the food served each night is "up to mark" or even "first class". Obtaining enough food to feed several hundred people each night for seven days is another necessary task to accomplish in organizing any yagna. An open credit account is normally established with some local grocer, which allows needed ingredients to be purchased at the last minute as well as in advance. Donations of food are regularly made by kin and neighbours, sometimes well into the yagna week; many food items (such as rice and potatoes) can be returned to the grocery following the yagna, if donations have offset the amount originally purchased. The basic fare is always the same: parata roti (a kind of flatbread, usually called 'bussupshot' because it is pulled into pieces before being consumed), rice and karhi (lentil balls), curried channa (chickpeas) and aloe (potatoes), and anchor or kouchila (spicy condiments). Mashed pumpkin, salad, baigan (fried aubergine), and some form of tarkari (cooked vegetable) are other food items which are included, if expenses permit. Several hundred large leaves, from which individuals eat the feast with their hands, must be cut from the nearby forest on a daily basis throughout the yagna week. If these are not fresh or not available, it means many participants will go without eating – a horrifying thought for any yagna sponsor!

Throughout the course of the yagna, many things need to be monitored or restocked. Foodstuffs, mohan bhoag ingredients and the small paper bags to distribute the prasad, water, parts for the lighting and sound systems, puja offerings, fuel, and other items must be checked and possibly replenished at a moment’s notice. Labour, as well as paraphernalia, needs to be managed effectively to maintain a smooth event. Of course, the sponsor and his immediate family cannot fulfil all of these organizational and managerial tasks, although they are always at the core of the supervision. A reliable network of extended kin (most of whom, on the husband’s side, reside nearby) and neighbours has to be called upon to furnish help at all stages. The requirements for setting-up and carrying-out a yagna are now known so well by most village Hindus that they can undertake the necessary tasks without much instruction. Most men know how to fell bamboo and build an enormous tent; by the age of ten or so, boys knows where in the forest or bush to obtain leaves for plates as well as how to lash them together for carrying; small girls contribute by gathering bunches of flowers, and almost all women, young or old, have come to be experienced in cooking for huge numbers.\(^\text{11}\) All volunteers, whether kin or friends, believe they will derive great benefits from lending such assistance: reciprocal aid will be one certain function, but more importantly, spiritual merit is believed to accrue. Rather than merely aiding a yagna sponsor and gaining his favours, one young helper comments, ‘It’s God’s work – He go bless me.’

On the first day of the yagna, the kitchen bustles with activity throughout the morning and afternoon. It is a makeshift setting, a place under the tent in a far corner from the sinhasan and vedí. Food preparation must be well-timed so that all items are ready before the early evening, when the yagna will get under way. In the main area, young men set up hundreds of chairs in rows and make final adjustments to the lighting and sound systems. A stereo tapedeck is usually plugged into the loudspeakers, so that Hindi film music or tapes of professional bhajan singers can be played loudly all day. The mood among all the ten to fifteen helpers at this point is jovial, and they joke or play tricks on each other while making their more serious preparations.
During the day, a few participants begin to arrive, particularly relatives from other parts of the island (usually these are the host's affines, owing to Hindu Trinidad

other norms of village exogamy). Other early arrivals may be *sadhus* from within the village and region. In the late afternoon, the *vyas* pundit arrives. He is greeted with much veneration, and tradition-minded hosts will wash his feet and receive his blessing. The pundit who is to perform the *puja* each day also eventually comes, and although he is greeted with honour, it is not on the same scale as that accorded to the *vyas*. The pundits inspect the setting and arrangements, and casual conversation with the sponsor and his family ensues until the rites begin.

By 6:30 p.m., the *puja* segment of the *yagna* begins (an outline of *puja* rites is provided below). The sponsor and his family sit around the *vedi*, males dressed in white *dhotis* (loincloths) and *kurta* (shirts), women in their best *saris* (wrapped dresses). While one pundit conducts the rite, the *vyas* eventually takes his place on the *sinhasan* and silently begins to prepare his discourse. On the first night of any *yagna*, the *puja* takes somewhat longer than usual since specific ritual items which will be used the entire week must first must be 'installed' (set in place and venerated); these include nine small flags on the *vedi* representing the *Naagra devatas* (nine planetary deities), sixty-four small flags in the triangular structure next to the *vedi* for the *chowsat yogani*;*12 *jhandi* raised outside the tent, and certain symbolic articles relative to the type of *yagna* undertaken (including a coconut for *Devi yagnas, murti* (image) of Ganesha for *Ganesh jyanti yagnas*, *Shiva linga* (phallic representation) for *Shiv puran yagnas*, and a model of Mount Goberdhan, recalling a Krishna myth, for *Bhogwats*).

Few people are in attendance during the early phases of *puja* on any night. As participants gradually arrive, they pay little attention to the *puja*, preferring instead to greet friends, look at the decorations, and chat. Men, women, and children immediately segregate themselves upon arrival, and usually stay separate throughout the course of the night. Young men most often stand by the door or just outside, acting 'cool' and watching girls. Older men joke with each other in Trinidad Hindi, occasionally going outside for a smoke. Children are remarkably well-behaved: though acting silly in their little groups, they rarely have to be reprimanded by adults. Young single women gossip in sets of three or four, quite aware of the watchful eyes of the young men. It is only the older women, most wearing their *oronhis* (white head veils) who tend to become absorbed in the ongoing religious rites. The *bhajan* group also arrives at some undetermined point, unpacking their instruments, tightening their *dholak* drums, and arranging their microphones. While the sponsor and his family concentrate on spiritual devotion, they are surrounded by the loud murmur of pleasant social activity.

On most nights the *puja* is finished by 8:00 p.m., by which time the tent is almost overflowing with hundreds of people. The final *arti* of the *puja* is performed, then, while all in attendance stand and the *bhajan* group plays the requisite song. The *vyas* follows immediately with an invocation in Hindi, sings a *mantra* or prayer with which all join in, and always finishes with a series of calls in Hindi to praise various deities (or *sanatan dharma* itself): to each call, the entire congregation responds with a collective shout of 'jai!' ('victory').

The *vyas* gives a welcome in English, and asks the musicians to begin with a few *bhajans*. He then commences his Puranic recitation: singing a few lines of the given text, pausing to elaborate in Hindi, then interpreting and disgressing in English.*14 Some sermons address concepts like dharma and karma and their place in everyday life. Far more often, however, the lesson concerns devotion (*bhakti*) to God and right behaviour towards fellow humans. Stories from the Puranas and other Hindu lore tell of certain mythical characters whose actions are meant to be exemplary. The sacred tales also legitimate present forms of practice: one *vyas* described a *yagna* held by an ancient king and attended by gods, where all the characters built a tent, did *puja*, listened to sacred texts, and ate a communal meal – just like in Trinidad. Most *vyas* pundsits are also sure to lace their sermons with humorous stories or 'present-day examples', often concerning relationships between husband and wife or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. To these there is loud laughter, and old men interject with 'yeah, mon!' or 'dat is it, babal!' A good *vyas* can hold the crisp attention of all for well over an hour-and-a-half, including the casual young men who stand at the back or outside the tent. Periodically, throughout his readings and interpretations, the *vyas* will call on the musicians to render more *bhajans*.

By 9:30 or 10:00 p.m., the *vyas* ends his discourse.*15 A final *hawan* and *arti* are performed by the sponsor and his family, who have remained seated in the *vedi* area throughout the evening. Again, all in attendance stand for the *arti*, and the *vyas* closes proceedings with a *mantra* and series of calls for praise, to each of which the response 'jai!' is shouted by the crowd. Participants are asked to remain in their seats and receive blessings by way of the following, all brought round by children volunteers: *chandan* and *bhabut* (sandlewood paste and *hawan* ashes for a *tika* mark on the forehead), perfume and sweet milk (components of *prasad*), and a *tariah* tray with a *deya* oil lamp and flowers (on to which individuals may make cash donations, or simply make a gesture of collecting the *arti* fumes on their hands and transferring these to their heads). Young men distribute bags of *mohan bhoag* for *prasad*, and all are invited to eat their fill at the long tables in the rear of the tent. It is the young men who delight in dishing-out the food, for they use the role to flirt with girls. People gradually leave after eating and further chatting, but by midnight there are still perhaps two score remaining (even more on the final night).

Each day this process is repeated, from the first set of kitchen tasks in the morning to the last few *bhajans* at night. The food and flower offerings
made at each night’s *pujas* are collected and kept until the day after the *yagna*’s close, when they are taken to a river or the sea and respectfully laid in and allowed to float away (a simultaneous offering to the goddess of waters, Ganga Mata, and a conceived dissipation of elements back to the cosmos). The dismantling of the tent, decorations, *sinhasan* and so on must be organized and carried out by a set of volunteers (often harder to assemble than in the stages of preparation). Borrowed and rented items are returned, and the credit accumulated at the grocery store is tabulated and settled. Many of the hosts will continue to fast for about a week; otherwise, within a day or two, life is back to normal for the sponsor, his family, and the village.

Over the week, the *yagna* will have cost from TT$6000 to $8000. This may include TT$1000 for the **vyas** pundit alone, TT$400 for the **puja** pundit, TT$150 each night simply for the **prasad**, up to TT$400 for vegetables, flour, and other food items, TT$100 for lighting and sound equipment, TT$200 for chair rental, and perhaps TT$400 in **dakshina** (respectful offerings) to sadhus, visiting pundits, and the local needey of the village. But again, the sponsors, donors and volunteers believe their investments of time, money and effort are well worth it. For them – and participants as well – *yagnas* represent ‘somet’in’ to be proud of, somet’in’ to preserve’, ‘unity’, ‘education’, and a will to create ‘a devotional-type vibration’, ‘a nice li’l shakti’ and a revived ‘sense of community’. The proliferation and elaboration of *yagnas* since the mid-1970s has brought together people in many ways, all deemed by Hindus as positive benefits for the perpetuation of their religious tradition and the strengthening of their religious identity.

**Puja**

Sponsoring a large-scale religious rite like the *yagna* was possible only for a wealthy handful of villagers during the boom years. Yet construction labourers, taxi drivers, cane-cutters, and ‘5-day’ workers for the County all had more income at their disposal in the latter half of the 1970s and early half of the 1980s. They too wished to allocate some of their new resources towards religious affairs. For them, family-centred **puja** was the appropriate level of activity on which to expand.

Previously, most Hindus tried to manage a yearly **puja** in their home (Cf. Niehoff 1960: 115–17; Klass 1961: 175); suddenly, they were able to engage in **puja** not only as an annual function for its own sake, but also to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, memorials, holy days, and to offer prayers prior to children’s exams or the emigration of a loved one. Since the mid-1970s, **pujas** have not only multiplied in number, but have been affected by other changes within an entire ritual complex.

In years past, older informants recount, of the three **pujas** conducted on successive days of the weekend (Hanuman, Satyanarayan, Suruj narayan) it was the Saturday *katha* which was considered the most socially and spiritually significant. A small group of personally-invited guests would listen to a reading from the Shri Satya Narayan Brath Katha for some three hours, sing *bhajans* at length while accompanying themselves with tambourine-like *kanjoris*, and often carry-on with a *satsang* until the early hours of Sunday morning. At some point a modest meal of *roti*, curried *channa* and rice was eaten: men would be served first, then a curtain was raised behind which the women would eat. All sat on mats laid across the ground. The length of the entire set of proceedings was of no concern.

More recently, **pujas** are often relatively brief affairs. According to the ritual texts (for example, *Puja Padhati* or *Sandhya Bandanaa*) imported from India and used by pundits in Trinidad – the course of an entire **puja** should consist of sets of offerings made separately to a long series of deities. In Trinidad this has become much condensed, as one pundit explains:

*Puja* in detail is a’ elaborate t’ing. But in Trinidad we have it confine’ to de shortes’ amount a’ time. If you do dese t’ing separate, separate, separate, *puja* go take a whole day, ya’ understan’? So we put dem all togedda. De same amount a’ time you will take to do one, we do five.

Many Hindus now become impatient if a pundit takes too long performing **puja** rites. Pundits may have to apologize for this, as one did, saying ‘Sorry ‘bout de lengt’ a’ time, but I wan’ do a good **puja** for you. Ya cyan go ha’f way, mon.’ Just as often, on the other hand, people complain that, too regularly, pundits hasten through **pujas**, leaving out certain features and trying to get away quickly to complete as many appointments as possible. ‘I will put it dis way,’ one villager suggests, ’some a dese pundits does jus’ like to make money.’ Another complains, ‘Dese damn pundits . . . it’s bam-bam-bam [making rapid ritual gestures], blow a li’l *sank* [pundit’s conch shell used in satsang], an’ he dust it up de road!’

Pundits’ schedules are packed, especially at certain times of year (*Nav ratri* and *Diwali* foremost). Years ago, one or two pundits performed all the rites in a village. Now the sheer volume of rites has made this impossible; therefore clients now receive the services of pundits from all over the region (often these ‘outside’ pundits are the ‘godfathers’ of some member of the family). It is especially since the oil boom that pundits’ diaries have been over-booked, and their performance of rites increasingly condensed. This is but one indicator of how there has been a general escalation of socio-religious activity in the village since the 1970s. The two primary reasons for this are related: (1) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, villagers had more money to allocate towards religious ritual, and (2) they were inspired to do
So through the message and model of yagnas (which were themselves facilitated by this same availability of capital). Since that time, one Hindu observer says, people in the village have directly become ‘more educated and enlightened to do pujas because of jags [yagnas].’ The wealthy held yagnas, others with new money held pujas, and still others followed their leads by holding yet more pujas.

In addition to greater frequency, new types have been added to the corpus of pujas in Trinidad. Most of these additions are rites devoted to manifestations of the Divine Mother Goddess. During the second (of the twice-yearly) period of Nav ratri, peoples’ minds turn primarily toward these manifestations – the devis or goddesses. This autumnal Nav ratri is a period associated predominantly with female deities, and includes celebrations for Durga ashtami (the birth of Durga, who is synonymous with the Mother Goddess), as well as a special day for devotion to Saraswati, goddess of arts and learning. Nav ratri also precedes, by a few weeks, perhaps the most important Hindu holy day, Diwali, which is associated with the goddess of light and prosperity, Lakshmi. Throughout the nine days of Nav ratri, pujas are performed to a number of deities in combinations idiosyncratic to the different hosts or their pundits. During this week in a single compound of extended families, for example, one household held pujas to Durga, Hanuman, and Satyanarayan on Tuesday, another had rites for Hanuman, Lakshmi, Durga, and Shiva on Friday, and on Sunday, another family conducted pujas to Suruj narayan, Hanuman, Shiva, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga. Elsewhere in the village, one home witnessed rites not only for Shiva, Saraswati, and Durga, but also one especially for ‘the nine shaktis’ – a general name for lesser goddess manifestations often associated with healing (in this case, the rites were specifically to gain blessings towards a forthcoming hernia operation). The main point to bear in mind regarding such a wealth of ritual activity is that, again, it is all considerably new to Hinduism in Trinidad. As one villager put it, ‘dis jus’ a recent t’ing, you know, all dis’ Lakshmi, Saraswati. Years ago, Nav ratri had a somewhat impure or roughly occult connotation, since it was during this period when low castes and others ‘took up Kali business’ (that is, conducted blood sacrifice of pigs or goats to the lesser goddesses). Now, to a large degree as a result of widespread Puranic teachings received through yagnas, goddess worship has a positive reputation in Trinidad.

The tendency to combine pujas and the rise of devis rites have brought about shifts in the procedural norms surrounding pujas. The longstanding pattern had been: Friday – Hanuman rot puja, Saturday – Satyanarayan katha, Sunday – Suruj narayan puja. Now, many families organize a ritual schedule of: Friday – Durga or devis puja, Saturday – Hanuman rot puja and Satyanarayan katha, Sunday – Suruj narayan puja. Old-timers may criticize the modification as unorthodox, but other Hindus see it as a beneficial expansion of religious devotion.

Like the process of organizing a yagna or any other orthodox ceremony, arrangements for holding puja begin by contacting a pundit one or two months prior. His diary is checked and the patra is consulted regarding the day suggested for the rite; both being confirmed, little organization need be done again for some time. The period of pre-puja fasting is, again, open to question. Many Hindus insist that twenty-one days is the appropriate amount of time, while there are others who abstain from alcohol, animal flesh, and sex for as little as three days before their puja. Invitations are extended by word of mouth. The twenty to thirty people who will attend are mostly extended kin (agamic and affinal), although nearby neighbours, workmates, or other friends from the village may be invited as well. The bulk of organizational tasks for puja are accomplished merely the day or two before the event, and are on a scale small enough to be achieved by family members only.

The entire house and its grounds are thoroughly cleaned (women and girls take care of the interior, men and boys, the yard). Usually, no external structure or tent is constructed. Chairs may be rented or borrowed, but just as often guests will sit on sheets or bedspreads laid across the lipay (cow dung and plaster) or concrete floor underneath the house). The earth-and-cow dung, wood-framed vedis made by some member of the family, complete with a small banana tree in its centre (a symbol of life and fertility). A creative daughter often receives the chore of decorating the vedis with a geometric design of rice flour. As at any ritual function, large leaves are cut to serve as disposable plates for the post-rite feast. Virtually all of the food must be purchased, if not grown; donations are usually not made by guests, and all of the puja expenses are met by the host household. Since the number in attendance will be relatively small, more elaborate food preparations can be made if the sponsor wishes. The same basic fare as the yagna feast is prepared, with the addition of perhaps two special tarkaris, dhal puri roti (flatbread with crushed peas), sweet rice, and fruit juice.

Required ritual articles for any sort of puja comprise an extensive list. Along with his sank (conch shell), ganti (gong), bell, and perhaps an image of the deity, the pundit might bring only one or two items to be used; the sponsor must supply almost all other elements. Certain offerings are available in a ready-made ‘package of parsad [sic]’ for sale at TT$10–$12 from any village’s local variety store: this includes camphor, a small bottle of perfume, cotton cord, sindur (vermillion), saffron (turmeric) agarbati (incense), and sopari nut. Other essential puja items are: a deya oil lamp and wick, dube grass, paan (betel) leaves, mango leaves, tulsi leaves, pitchpine or sandalwood sticks, a lotah and tariah (brass vessel and plate), kalsa and parai (clay vessel and saucer), ghee (clarified butter), gogol (a gum), clove, elychee (cardamom), sugar, rice, a variety of colourful flowers, murtis (images) or pictures of the devata, a bamboo pole and an appropriate jhandi cloth. If any of these numerous items is missing when the pundit calls for them during
the rite, it is cause for great embarrassment for the host. Families usually tend to obtain all the items on the long list of requisites through questioning amongst themselves on the previous day or prior to the pundit’s arrival.

The host household will have everything prepared early in the morning of the day on which puja is to be held. All members are sure to bathe well that morning. Pujas are ideally scheduled for around 10:30 a.m., after setting everything in place, there is then organizationally little to do until the pundit arrives. Children are dressed in fine clothes, and they are scolded if they dirty these during their impatient horseplay. Women conduct various minor chores, while men swing in their hammocks, chat and relax. Invited guests rarely arrive early, and extended family or neighbours nearby simply watch for the pundit’s car before coming over. Pundits are often notorious for being late to arrive and early to leave, on account of their busy schedules.

When the pundit finally appears, he is greeted with various degrees of reverence (in contrast to decades ago, when the pundit commanded great respect). While some are treated without much deference, many pundits, in turn, enjoy a somewhat avuncular relationship to sponsoring families (particularly if they serve as ‘godfather’ to one or more of its members).

After greeting various individuals and exchanging pleasantries, the pundit sits cross-legged on the south side of the vedi and begins to arrange the various items to be used in the ritual. Two or more family members, dressed in white, sit next to the vedi on the west (thus maintaining the importance of cardinal directions in Hindu worship – though participants are unable to explain such importance; cf. Das 1977). These persons will be the shrotas or shrutidas, ‘listeners’ who actually make the offerings while the pundit directs them and utters the appropriate mantras. The role of the shrota is normally rotated among family members over the course of the three pujas performed in a standard Friday-to-Sunday set. (There is cause for excitement when a child, of perhaps eight years or more, becomes a shrota for the first time; the family is happy and very proud of them.) The mother and father of the household are usually the shrutis for the Saturday (Satyanarayan katha) ceremony, since it is considered the most prominent of the set.

The basic sequence of puja ritual consists of (1) the pundit invoking the presence of a deity, represented on the vedi by a murti, (2) the shrota making a series of, ideally, sixteen offerings to the deity at hand, and (3) in a rite characteristic of puja in the Caribbean, the anointing of a bamboo pole (Photo 6) followed by volunteers raising it outside the home, topped with a jhandi, or pennant. Each puja must honour a standard set of deities before beginning ritual worship of the main god or goddess: the Earth Mother, the kalsia (each part of this clay vessel represents a different aspect of godhead), Gowri mata (a goddess manifestation, symbolized by a lump of cow dung), Ganesha (the beneficent, elephant-headed god who will ensure the puja’s effectiveness), and the Naogra devatas (nine planets, in order to seek their astrological providence in daily life).

With these prefatory acknowledgements accomplished by means of various abbreviated offerings, the central deity (Satyanarayan, Hanuman, Durga, etc.) is invoked and propitiated with the sixteen offerings. In addition to the standard ritual foodstuff in Trinidad, mohan bhoag, most of these deities are offered particular forms of prasad. The pundit then usually sings a Chalisa (text of praise) specific to the deity being worshipped. The final acts in the rite are havan (offerings of ghee and prasad into a fire) and arti (always accompanied by the pundit blowing his sank and a volunteer clanging the ganti). No bhajans are sung throughout the proceedings. As at a yagna, when the puja closes, children are given the task of providing each person with a tika (forehead dot) of chandan or bhabhút, perfume, a tarij and deya used in arti (affording participants the chance to share in the act’s blessings), and a package of prasad (containing some of the food substances offered in the rite).

Save for some of the older women and some children who are told to sit and watch, many individuals present pay little attention to the puja; only when arti is sounded do most stop what they are doing to participate. Throughout most of the proceedings, people go in and out of the house and talk amongst themselves as they please. This behaviour is by no means regarded as disrespectful or irreverent. The important fact for household members is that the ritual is being performed in their home and that blessings will accrue to all; their rapt attention to the ritual undertakings – most of which is in Sanskrit and Hindi, and all of which they have seen countless times – matters little.

Ostor (1978: 123) has pointed out that in India, ‘Puja as a sequence of action consists of various elements: gesture, utterance, and artifact.‘ Similarly in Trinidad, the combination of these elements gives affective and conceptual significance to the event. The ritual artifacts and ingredients listed above are meant to symbolize all aspects of creation, while their more general effect is to instill an atmosphere of great ritual complexity. The Hindi and Sanskrit utterances of the pundit legitimize the proceedings with ancient sanctity. The gestures by both pundit and shrota are seen and felt to enact pure devotion or bhakti. It is particularly these gestures which provide much spiritual satisfaction to the shrotas. The primary action of these participants is to lay the various offerings at the foot of the deity’s murti (an act called charawe, to offer or set in place). Each time a shrota places a flower, cotton cord, bit of prasad, or any other offering next to an image (done so with the right hand, while the left hand gently touches the right forearm), he or she follows this act by one or three movements with the right hand, from the foot of the image to their own forehead. Only one shrota actually performs charawe and this accompanying movement; yet several shrotas may
be involved in any puja (especially during yagnas, when members of an entire family serve in these roles). Regardless of how many other shrotas there may be, in Trinidad they may all participate in these acts by touching the shrota next to them, in a row, until the penultimate shrota is touching the one performing charawe (all similarly hold their left hand to their own right forearm to do this).

The act of touching the feet of the deity is recognized in India as ‘one of the most characteristic gestures of Hindu ceremonial’ (Babb 1975: 5); anthropologists have explored the possible meaning of this act (gōr parna, considered as part of a general category of pranam or respectful action; cf. Planalp 1956: 168–9). Harper (1964) and Babb (1975) both believe the gesture is one of ‘respect pollution’: that individuals willfully show their inferiority to any personage who is considered more pure than they by touching the latter’s feet (the gesture is traditionally made to Brahmans and sadhus as well as to murtis).25

Especially given the attenuation of the purity–pollution complex in Trinidad, such an interpretation does not seem to be applicable to the gesture as conceived and performed in the island. Here, rather, the gesture is enacted as a means of transferring blessing (which is felt to be like a kind of energy). One’s forehead is widely recognized, among most Hindus (in India or abroad), as a focal point of metaphysical power, a part of the body open to a subtle level of spiritual or psychic energy.26 The devotee’s bhakti – displayed by the act of charawe – receives the favour of the deity; the offerings therefore become sacred, and this sacral energy is believed to be transferred or conveyed subsequently from the offering to the offerer through the gesture of touching the gifts and immediately touching their own foreheads. Doing this three times is a further routinization (it is not considered mandatory, but simply adds a greater sense of bhakti). Moreover, a generalized notion of the transference of blessings is the basis for the practice of shrotas touching one another each time an offering is laid: the blessing is thought to pass through, like an electric charge, all the shrotas who are touching one another. The idea of transferred blessings, through such gesture, is also found during hawan (when shrotas touch their foreheads after the offering of ghee and prasad into the vessel containing the sacred fire, as well as when they fan towards themselves the fumes of this fire), in Ramayan satsang (when the book itself is the object of charawe), and when the tariyah and deya used in arti are brought around to individuals following almost any ceremony (when each person holds their hands over the deya flame, then touches their forehead and/or passes their hands along the top of his or her head). By conducting these actions, Hindus in Trinidad feel themselves to be directly interacting with the godhead.

Oster (1978: 158–63) describes how, in India, the structure of local communities – as well as Indian society at large – is reflected in puja activity. Such an analysis cannot hold for puja among Hindus in Trinidad, of course, because many of the formal procedures of puja remain largely the same as those in India, while the social structure of their current setting is radically dissimilar from that of villages of North India whence the rites derive.27 The symbols and practices of Hindus in Trinidad originate in a society far different from that in which they presently live. Yet these symbols, beliefs, and practices remain highly significant for giving meaning to individual lives. The increase in frequency and types of pujas during recent years has wrought little change in the rite’s basic composition, gestures, utterances, and artifacts. But the changes in puja activity have instilled an even greater sense of religious sentiment and collective identification among village Hindus through more recurrent intercourse, as families and neighbours, with that which they deem transcendent and sacred.

Satsang

Changes in satsang activities took place long before the oil boom, when ‘jhal Ramayans’ were gradually displaced by ‘musical Ramayans’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Notwithstanding this transformation, the satsang remained, for the most part, a community-based institution. Within local neighbourhoods in Indian villages, satsangs or gatherings for the recitation of Tulsidas’ Ramayana continued to be carried out in a rotating fashion. Each household would host the monthly or fortnightly assembly of family and friends in turn. All participants would donate money for purchasing the necessary instruments (harmonium, dholak, dhantal, and majiras) to be used on all occasions, and certain individuals would teach themselves how to play.

With no substantial social pressure to participate, families would arrive at the designated house early in the evening. (Non-attendance by any normally involved community member was not frowned-upon, perhaps until several occasions in succession were missed.) The event would be as much social as religious, for casual conversation took place before and after each communal satsang. Each time, donations of food were usually made by satsang members, and a very modest meal (parata roti, channa and aloe, rice and dhal) was prepared before the function’s commencement. Food preparation and the gathering of large leaves for plates were the only two organizational tasks required for this kind of satsang.

At the onset of the satsang in the 1950s and 1960s, all would be seated on the ground beneath the house or inside, space permitting. The presence of God would be invoked by some leading man (a lay individual of any caste; no Brahman pundits have ever been required for satsang in Trinidad). The Ramayana itself was considered to be the murti or image embodying
God. Flowers and prasad (usually mohan bhoag) would be offered, and the ritual gesture of touching the book, then one’s forehead, would be performed by some member present. A brief hawan took place, and the reading would thereafter begin. One or more older men who could read Hindi (an ability surprisingly found among a number of elder male villagers) took charge of singing the verses and stanzas of the sacred epic. Following these, either the same or another member would translate or otherwise comment upon each narrative segment. Recitation and interpretation would carry on for perhaps an hour or more, and bhajan singing by selected individuals (often children) or by the group as a whole might occur intermittently throughout the proceedings. At the end of the session (around 10:00 p.m.), all would partake in a meal. All would finally walk home, each with a small bag of prasad.

The quiescence said to have beset the Hindu community during the 1960s was particularly evident in neighbourhood religious activities like the satsang. After a wane in the ‘musical Ramayn’s’ initial popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, collectively maintained satsangs began to decrease in number in the latter half of the 1960s. They died out completely in some places by the arrival of the early 1970s. The oil boom years, with all of its concurrent stimulation of religious activity among village Hindus, witnessed a resurgence of satsangs as well. The actual content of satsangs proceedings has not changed since the economic windfalls of the 1970s and 1980s. Many local communities came to reinstitute their practices exactly as described above. Yet satsangs also came increasingly to be sponsored and hosted by individuals on behalf of their families, on birthdays and wedding anniversaries, or for any purpose of prayer or thanksgiving.

In this newer style of Ramayana reading event, the host gains the services of a local satsang goal or mandali (group or ‘circle’) of four to six singers and musicians — who undertake the performance of satsangs in addition to their ordinary daytime jobs. The group is contacted only a week or two in advance, and will receive a donation of TT$25-$100, depending entirely on the host’s means. The type of food to be served after the satsang varies: the standard fare as in years past will be cooked, but other, more special, dishes may be added. Sometimes a host will have a satsang the night following a puja, or the event may occur on any ordinary weekday night. For the host, the advantages of holding a satsang over sponsoring a puja are: (1) a local group can be informally contacted and scheduled for a satsang at short notice, as opposed to the more formal arrangements for puja which must be made with a pundit; (2) preparations by way of invitations, setting, ritual paraphernalia, and food are minimal for a satsang compared with a puja; (3) the social setting of a satsang is generally more intimate, with 10–20 household or family compound members as the primary participants (whereas puja usually comprise a slightly larger number of individuals, many from outside the immediate vicinity); and (4) satsangs are simply religious functions which are cheaper to sponsor than pujas (the former, held often for under TT$50; the latter, for usually well over TT$100). The fact that satsangs are held on any night of the week is also an advantage for household heads who work during the days or on weekends – both times when puja are normally conducted.

The revitalization of community satsangs and the rise of familial ones are part of a single process involving the institutionalization of more frequent and more localized gatherings for devotional expression. The rapid acquisition of capital resources among Hindu villagers between the mid-1970s and early 1980s allowed for such a unique proliferation of socio-religious activity. Most of this activity was initiated by individuals, who sponsored religious events variously involving different levels of participation. These include rites for: the sponsors’ own household (satsangs), their household, extended family and friends (pujas), and their household together with the entire community (yagnas). At the centre of each type of socio-religious activity, the sponsor and his immediate family are believed to receive direct spiritual merit (as well as a pious reputation within the village). Each type of activity also calls for various degrees of collective organizational effort or coordination, for which the assisting volunteers are also believed to gain blessings. The overall proliferation and elaboration of socio-religious practices have stimulated greater senses of pride and communality among Hindus than existed in the decade previous to Trinidad’s boom years. Moreover, the rise of individually-sponsored religious activity – with its associated, albeit temporary, networks of organization – has stimulated or has occurred side by side with the creation and expansion of Hindu community organizations.

Change owing to formal groups

In one form or another, Hindu organizations have existed in Trinidad since the days of plantation indenture. The Sanatan Dharma Board of Control and Sanatan Dharma Association were the two most important Hindu organizations to arise in the post-indenture years, reaching their culmination in the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. Each of these served to represent the interests of at least part of the Hindu community with regard to social action or issues surrounding orthodoxy; they also served to liaise with colonial or parliamentary authorities. Locally, there were few formally organized Hindu groups.

In the early Indian villages of Trinidad, elected panchayats or councils settled secular disputes; rarely would they be called upon to manage religious matters. The Friendly Societies which were formed in certain settlements
could, on occasion, coordinate the funding and organization of religious activities; but their often inter-religious makeup precluded favouritism towards any one faith. While a village kutiya was tended by one or more sadhus, the local pundit served as sole propagator of doctrine and instigator of ritual activity in rural settlements. Bhagwats or Ram Lillas (plays depicting the events of the Ramayana) were infrequent undertakings, and communal satsangs were conducted without much formal ado.

Relatively few structured, permanent religious groups existed in Trinidad Indian villages until sometime around the 1950s, when the Maha Sabha’s programme of building Hindu schools and temples throughout the island led to the founding of affiliated branches. Schools and temples needed locally-composed Boards to manage finances and coordinate activities. These Boards and their practices, in turn, were overseen nationally by the Maha Sabha, which contributed some financial assistance and convened Trinidad-wide assemblies of local representatives. This was the situation which largely characterized Hindu organizational activity through the 1960s.

As the decade of the 1960s reached its close, Hindus throughout Trinidad witnessed the increased allegations of impropriety made against Bhadase Maraj and the Maha Sabha (as well as a faltering of the Hindu-backed Democratic Labour Party). In a large part due to the fact that practically all sanatanist groups were dominated by the Maha Sabha, there was great popular discontent with formal Hindu organization on both island-wide and local levels. Elected representatives to the Maha Sabha claimed their views were not listened to. Village Hindus complained that their temple or school no longer received the attention – financially or otherwise – of the national organization. Lack of support within villages themselves caused the local temple and school-centred activities to lose effectiveness. This period of growing dissatisfaction with contemporary Hindu organizational structures coincided with an ebb in the popular practice of a variety of other, non-organizational Hindu socio-religious activities.

However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, isolated efforts were made to assemble independent local associations or groups for the purpose of promoting Hindu activities. In 1968, Satguru Sant Keshwaridas, a renowned Hindu writer, singer, and mystic from India, visited Trinidad. Deeply impressed by his lectures, local community leaders such as Sieruj Rambachan (one-time County Councillor and later, foreign ambassador for the NAR government) subsequently toured the country, holding satsangs and urging Hindus everywhere to organize themselves toward propping-up their flagging religion.

Yet with revitalized religiosity and economic capital to pursue its ceremonial expression, post-oil-boom Hindus have created numerous new, more or less formal organizations. These have been created and maintained for the local, regional, and national benefit of Hindus. Most significantly, it is these groups that have been able to maintain important socio-religious activities since Trinidad’s plunge into economic recession. Understandably, the wealthier individuals have not been able to continue to host many of the rites (especially yagnas and elaborate pujas) on the same scale or as frequently as they did before this economic decline. Instead, cooperatively financed and communally-organized groups have assumed many of the former’s functions. Such relatively new groups range in size from a half-dozen friends to neighbourhood, village, regional, or island-wide associations. Their rise has brought about new structures of social relationship in villages and elsewhere, in addition to instilling renewed or modified modes of religious practice.

Satsang and Bhajan-Kirtan groups

As described earlier, for years Ramayan satsang recitations and the singing of bhajans or kirtans (both, kinds of devotional hymns) were traditionally carried out by neighbourhood-based groups of Hindus. Following a lapse of such activities in the 1960s and early 1970s, they were eventually re-instituted in the wave of socio-religious activity witnessed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Persons in various neighbourhoods contributed to the cost of purchasing instruments while individuals took upon themselves the task of playing and singing for the benefit of all in the local setting. Concurrently, as economic resources grew throughout the village, certain families wished to have satsangs of their own, and they arranged with local community singers and musicians to provide their services privately. The groups became increasingly recognized and sought after. Further, with the proliferation of yagnas, such musical groups took the opportunity to perform before large audiences, for which they received substantial donations. The use of private cars or trucks, which became increasingly available in the village throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, meant that these satsang/bhajan-kirtan groups began to play at venues in various parts of the village, or indeed, in other parts of the island.

Performing ritually important Hindu religious music (including accompaniment for the sung recitation of texts in yagnas and satsangs, as well as singing and playing the bhajans and kirtans popular in both activities) became frequent engagements for many local ensembles of talented individuals. Their originally loose relationships – as friends interested in devotional music – soon became structured commitments – as semi-professional public performers. Some have since become so adept at their self-taught arts that they have appeared and won prizes on the nationally-televised Indian variety programme Mastana Bahar. Meanwhile, the members of such groups have
maintained their occupations as farmers, taxi-drivers, carpenters, students, ‘5-day workers’, and so on.

The composition of the local groups who conduct the *satsangs* and who perform *bhajans* and *kirtans* is never exclusive; they almost invariably overlap. That is, a local *satsang* group will include a harmonium player, a *dholak* drummer, *dhantal* percussionist, one or more *majira* cymbal players, and at least one Ramayana reader/singer. The reader/singer has, in most cases, tended to be an older male, for he must possess the ability to read Hindi. (Younger members are, however, currently learning how to read and sing Hindi in order to fill this role.) The *bhajan-kirtan* group will usually comprise the same musicians and a larger number of *majira* players (perhaps two to six), while the Ramayana reader-singer tends to be absent from this group.

Whether a group’s donations are received from *satsangs* or *yagnas*, they are deposited in the same purse tended by an elected Treasurer. A President, Vice-President, and Secretary are also elected posts, some of which may be held by non-performing supporters. In many cases, at least two members are usually related in some manner, while large groups composed almost entirely of a single kin network are not unheard of. Ordinarily, members are predominantly male, but females are rapidly becoming an integral part of *bhajan-kirtan* groups (the latter’s participation in *satsangs* performance is less common). Groups usually adopt names for themselves (sometimes as ‘cultural groups’ or goals and mandalis, ‘circles’). They hold regular meetings to practise their music, review recent performances, discuss future venues, assess finances, and discuss plans and prospects for the future. Although serious frictions can arise and may split a group (most often over the use of money or the alleged weakening of effort by certain members), more often than not the individuals of *satang/bhajan-kirtan* groups remain close friends.

Examples drawn from Penal Rock Road indicate the growth of such groups and their contemporary centrality to much village Hindu activity. Penal Rock Road village currently supports no less than nine *satsangs/bhajan-kirtan* groups. The oldest of these was founded in 1971 (under its leader’s original inspiration derived from Sant Keshwardas and Sieruj Rambachan). The majority date from 1979–84. Most have given themselves titles: the Panduranga Cultural Group, Shri Ganesh Ramayn [sic] Group, Shardaa Prakash Ramayana Goal, Bunsee Trace Ramayan [sic] Group, Pioneer Cultural Group, and Sivananda Kirtan Mandal. Others are simply known locally as ‘Seegobin’s,’ ‘Jambahadoor’s,’ or ‘Bali’s’ group, after the name of the Ramayana reader/singer. All but two of these groups can be said to draw their members from specific parts of the village. Since practically all performances are arranged directly with prospective hosts (through kinship, neighbourhood, occupational, or friendship networks), rather than on a ‘market’ basis, these numerous village groups generally do not feel they are in competition.

The diary of the Shardaa Prakash Ramayana Goal, which is composed of only five members, gives evidence of the rapid progress of such groups (and of the proliferation of the events at which they perform). Formed in 1979 (after its leader had fallen out with a similar group of longer standing), they first sang the Ramayana for *satsangs* arranged for themselves, for extended kin, and for friends in the area. The demand was substantial, and in their first year they conducted 45 *satsangs*. The next year they had 54 *satsang* venues, and were asked to play each night during a *Ramayan yagna* in Penal Rock Road village. In 1981 there was the same pattern: 53 *satsangs* and one *Ramayan yagna*. In 1982 their Ramayana readings numbered 65, while they played at two unique events, a [Bhagavad] *Gita Gyan* [knowledge] *yagna* and a *Garud Puran yagna*. Sixty-nine *satsangs* were conducted by the Shardaa Prakash in 1983, along with two *Ramayana yagnas*. And in 1984, the group performed at 68 *satsangs*, two *Bhagwats*, two *Ramayan yagnas*, and a *Gita Gyan yagna*. In the most recent years, this has meant an average of over five *satsangs* each month (in actuality the numbers vary, with up to ten *satsangs* in the month surrounding *Nav ratri* and *Diwali*). The locations of the Goal’s venues range considerably: of those attended in 1984, 20 were in Penal Rock Road village itself, 20 in the greater Penal area, 7 just outside this (Debe, Barrackpore, Moruga), 4 near Siparia in Southwest Trinidad, 3 in San Fernando, and others as far away as Rio Claro in Central Trinidad. Through the years the group has averaged TT$800 in annual donations. The funds were accumulated and spent as needed (especially on sound equipment: microphones, amplifier, speakers), or saved towards buying an expensive new harmonium. The members of the Shardaa Prakash Ramayana Goal are proud of their popularity, and they believe they have played a direct role in the uplifting of Hinduism.

The Shri Ganesh Ramayn Group draws its members from among the households of northern Bunsee Trace (as distinct from the Bunsee Trace Ramayan Group, which is based within the road’s southernmost reaches). Like Shardaa Prakash, the Shri Ganesh group was also founded in 1979 and has experienced similar success. However, the Shri Ganesh has evolved in a different manner. It began as a simple *satsang/bhajan-kirtan* group, but now has come to be considered the basis of a community organization. In the 1940s and 1950s, the residents of northern Bunsee Trace maintained a wooden, thatched *kutiya* around which a *panchaiti* (communally sponsored) *katha* occurred every full moon. The structure disappeared and the practice had been discontinued by the 1960s. In the late 1970s, with a spate of socio-religious activity occurring throughout the village as a whole, the residents wished to re-establish their older practices. Old men brought out their Ramayanas, and young men taught themselves how to play newly
purchased instruments. The monthly *katha* (where the group sang *bhajans* and *kirtans*) was re-established, conducted each month at one centrally-located home. A weekly *satsang*, too, took place once again at rotating households. Subscriptions of TT$1 at *satsangs* and TT$10 at *kathas* were gathered from all participating household heads or employed males. The musical group was perceived as the hub of the social circle and its religious practices. Meanwhile, families within and outside Bunsee Trace began to call upon the services of the singers/musicians for private *satsangs*. They also started to perform at local *yagnas*. Sums received from outside *satsangs* and *yagna* venues were also added to the subscription pool. The money was accumulated to maintain the musical group and the vicinity’s religious events. Yet on occasion, special donations were collected from the participant households to give to needy villagers (for example, to a family whose youngest daughter needed an operation, and to a family whose house had burned down). In 1983 the Shri Ganesh Ramayn Group organized their own *Ramayan yagna*, which was so successful that it has become an annual event. The group wishes eventually to raise funds to construct their own temple on Bunsee Trace. Their continuous objective, says the 25-year-old Vice-President, is ‘to enlighten de area, de whole village, along de lines a’ Hinduism.’ The course of development represented by the recent history of the Shri Ganesh Ramayn Group reveals features which have characterized transformations among temple-based associations.

**Temples**

Since their rapid construction by the Maha Sabha in the 1950s, most temples have been organized and managed in a standardized way. By the late 1960s, the Maha Sabha boasted well over one hundred affiliated temples or branches nationwide. Their Boards have consisted of local, elected members (President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, and Trustees), while their activities have centred on specific holy days (especially a *katha* at full moon, and *pujas* for *Durga ashtami*, *jyanam ashtami*, *Shiv ratri*, *Diwali*). Some of the more dynamic temple groups arranged Sunday *puja* services and religious education or Hindi classes. Maha Sabha financial support, many Board members claim, decreased considerably through the 1960s and early 1970s, however, and others attest to villagers’ own deepening lack of support for temple activities during those years.

In general, temple-based socio-religious activities lagged behind advances of local, individually- and group-initiated endeavours. By the end of the oil-boom years, however, temple-based associations were funding and organizing a range of successful social as well as socio-religious events.

Hindu temples now organize a number of regular events, while continuing to host Sunday services and Sunday schools, monthly *kathas*, and calendrical rites. Foremost among their newer proceedings are temple-based *yagnas*, which grew in the wake of events conducted by individual sponsors. *Yagnas* became so important, when arranged by wealthy villagers, that it was soon agreed among villagers and temple Board members that the rites, readings, and social activities found in *yagnas* were appropriate functions for temples as well. While individually-sponsored celebrations were still popular, temples began to organize and conduct *yagnas* – in ways identical to those undertaken in the former type (most persons who contributed their efforts to temple-based *yagnas* had gained relevant experience at the individually-sponsored ones). As the recession arrived and the local *nouveaux riches* could no longer afford the same levels of ceremonial exuberance, temples increasingly became important sites of Hindu socio-religious activity in Trinidad villages.

*Yagnas* undertaken by temples follow the same course of organization and performance as those conducted by individuals. However, since, by their nature, temples are maintained by a set body of local individuals, there is a ready network of labour and management which can be called upon throughout each stage of the *yagna*. At one of the four temples in the vicinity of Penal Rock Road, for instance, temple officers called a meeting of the entire local congregation nearly three months prior to a proposed *yagna* date. At the meeting, attended by over forty villagers, finances were discussed and tasks set forth. The President was firm in his opinion that ‘Everyone should know how to do ev’ry’ting. No one should say “1 cyan [can’t] do dat.” De yout’s mus’ learn from de older heads how to do ev’ry’ting.’ The assembly applauded. Specific roles were delegated, giving individuals, from young boys to old women, important responsibilities surrounding the preparation of the temple and its grounds, the acquisition of ritual and decorative paraphernalia and food items, and various managerial features surrounding the forthcoming event. Persons were designated ‘Minister of Advertisement’, ‘Minister of Decorations’, ‘Minister of *Prasad*’, and so forth. Young women were insistent that men must be included in the chores of preparing food and washing pots. Also, individuals were allowed – indeed, encouraged – to volunteer to act as *shrotas* for the *pujas* to be performed each day. All should be given their chance to perform this role and thereby to receive blessings, they agreed; For the *shrotas* ‘We mus’ change de people all de time’, the President said. (‘Yeah,’ joked a teenager loudly, ‘get some Muslims in there!’) The preparations and performance were carried out diligently and cheerfully by all, and the subsequent *yagna* was a great occasion, spiritually (the air of devotion among participants was sincere and moving), socially (hundreds jovially attended and feasted each of the seven nights), and financially (after receiving many donations of all kinds, the temple actually made a profit on the event).
Other activities organized and staged by temples now include: Hindi and religious education classes for young adults, *hatha yoga* classes, ‘cultural events’ (variety shows or talent contests of music and dance, addresses by national dignitaries), and *Diwali* programmes (which usually include *Lakshmi puja*, musical and dance performances, plays depicting religious stories, and massive decorative displays of *deyas*). These affairs – and *yagnas*, too – are accomplished by various types of fund-raising. The main ways of raising finances by temple or other community religious groups are: solicited donations from prominent businesses, raffles (with prizes supplied by such donor businesses), ‘excursions’ (day trips by hired coach to popular beaches, usually on the island’s north coast), special film evenings (when a local cinema agrees to donate all box-office takings for a given Hindi film), and ‘baazars’ or *melas* (highly popular outdoor occasions at which numerous stalls for games-of-chance are manned, home-made ‘Indian delicacies’ and food (and sometimes beer) sold, a disc jockey and massive sound system hired, ‘bazaar queen’ crowned, and similar festive events staged and managed by group members and attended by the whole village; these occasions in particular can raise up to TT$6000 in a single afternoon). Temples and associated Hindu community groups therefore represent significant economic and social, as well as religious dimensions within the village. Subsequent ties forged on a variety of levels have brought about a new kind of integration among Hindu villagers (and for that matter, new kinds of links with non-Hindus and even non-Indians, who also attend activities like *yagnas*, cultural programmes, plays, and bazaars for the sheer social vibrance and entertainment offered).

**National organizations and networks**

Presently in Trinidad there exists a large number of organizations whose activities take place on a national level. In addition to the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, there is the National Council of Hindu Organizations (NCHO, formerly the United Hindu Organization, which includes the Arya Pritinidhi Sabha, Inc., Kabir Panth Association, Inc., Divine Life Society, Inc., Seunarine Dharma Sabha, Inc., and Trinidad Sevashram Sangha, Inc.), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Seva Sangh, Trinidad Academy of Hinduism, Vedanta Society, Sanatan Vidwad Vidyalaya, Bharatrya Vidya Sanstan, Caribbean Hindu Council, Satya Sai Centre, Raja Yoga Centre, Sidha Yoga Dham, Academy of Indian Knowledge, and certain councils to promote specific national Hindu celebrations for *Phagwa* and *Diwali*. Some of these have been founded as a response to discontent with the Maha Sabha, others are for the promulgation of specific schools or tenets of Hindu philosophy. No organization besides the NCHO has the resources to compete with the Maha Sabha in staging large-scale events. Both organizations hold national contests for the best *chowtal* (special song for the season of *Phagwa*) singing group each year, in association with large-scale festivities for the celebration of *Phagwa* (*Holi*).

In many ways, the fairly recent multiplying of national Hindu organizations has not benefited the cause of the religion in Trinidad, since they often tend to engage in much criticism of one another. However, the programmes, ceremonies, or classes which these organizations produce are themselves considered by most Hindus to be welcome contributions.

Below the national level, there are formal bodies which function regionally, and are connected with other bodies to promote socio-religious undertakings. The Southern Hindu Sabha of Penal is one such organization, as is the Penal Rock Road Hindu Youths (sic). Through fund-raising efforts akin to those of temples or community groups, these regional associations organize celebrations meant to draw Hindus from the greater Penal area and beyond, contacting temples and community groups therein to advertise their events. Reciprocally, these more regionally-spread organizations co-sponsor or make widely known the *yagnas*, bazaars, or cultural shows of the smaller groups. This network of support is a relatively new feature of Hindu organizations, and represents a considerable degree of social and economic coordination (particularly taking into account the fact that there are scarcely any telephones in most rural areas).

The Hindu Seva Sangh (‘Helping Association’), founded in the early 1980s (Vertovec 1990b), specializes in this kind of inter-organizational contact. The Seva Sangh organizes a widely attended *Sankirtan* (chanting procession) which travels through central Trinidad each year. New, nationally-distributed, Hindu-focused publications have recently been established, including the monthly newspaper *Sandesh* and the journals *Moksha* and *Jagriti*. These also serve to publicize certain activities and to promote the cause of the ‘Hindu renaissance’ in Trinidad. Given the birth of so many independent, village-level groups and organizations since the mid-1970s, this decentralized approach toward the national promulgation of Hindu activity appears to have great potential for maintaining the vitality which has come to characterize Hinduism in village Trinidad.

*From the undertakings of isolated individuals to those of nationally administered organizations, there has been a substantial regeneration of Hindu socio-religious phenomena since Trinidad’s years of economic prosperity. Yet the rapid socio-economic changes experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not ‘cause’ the revitalization of Hinduism in the villages of Trinidad; rather, they facilitated it.*
In the years preceding the oil boom, informants attest, there was a dearth of social expressions of devotional enthusiasm and collective pride among Trinidad Hindus. Further, by the early 1970s, Hindus perceived themselves to be under ever-worsening social, economic, and political threat. With the sudden, and unexpected, resources afforded to Indian villagers by the oil and sugar booms of the 1970s and early 1980s, there occurred a kind of socio-religious ‘involution’ – or communally internal, rapidly developing set of processes affecting Hindu sentiment and practice. This amounted to a stimulation of personal and collective involvement and sense of worth surrounding things Hindu, and was achieved through newly-institutionalized and elaborated activities. By way of these processes and activities, Trinidad Hindus sharpened their spiritual sensitivity and increased their doctrinal knowledge, forged or bolstered all kinds of social ties, and revitalized or reworked a variety of cultural forms and values. In short, an ethnic resurgence took place.

Notes

1 The term ‘socio-religious,’ though cumbersome, is used in order to underscore the interpersonal relationships which are formed by, or are integral to, the organization and performance of certain devotional practices.
2 For the case of contemporary Hinduism in Trinidad, this is perhaps as far as theories concerning revitalization movements are appropriate. Most ‘classic’ revitalization movements tend to involve quasi-magical, prophetic, messianic, or millennial cults which seek to bring about some kind of spiritually-ordained golden era. The process of revitalization of Hinduism in Trinidad involves none of these features.
3 In the early Vedic religion in India, yagnas were the central rituals of sacrifice. In Trinidad they have taken on a meaning of their own, associated wholly with the socio-religious activities described in these pages.
4 Some informants say that roughly similar practices sometimes took place for Ganesh jyanti (an eleven-day period celebrating the birth of the god Ganesh) and for Nav ratri (also called Nao rata, a twice-yearly, nine-day period dedicated to the goddess Durga and her manifestations). However, these were usually for puja solely, and rarely involved Puranic recitation and interpretation – features which have become the hallmark of yagnas in Trinidad.
5 For instance, Garud puran yagnas span the period of Pitra Paksh, fourteen days devoted to ancestors; Ganesh jyanti yagnas take place over eleven days, from the birthday of Ganesh to the next full moon; and Devi yagnas or Durga yagnas are celebrated over the full nine nights of Nav ratri (one such period around March, another in October).
6 Like so many aspects of Hindu orthopraxy in Trinidad, much argument surrounds the question of which days of the yagna are proper to have the special rite. The special rite at any yagna is usually supervised by a member of the Gosain caste. (Their presence is reverently sought by all yagna hosts: ‘if you can get a Gosain,’ a host declares, ‘you is a lucky man – your yagna is fulfilled!’) One Gosain insists the sixth day of any yagna is the proper time to hold the special rite. However, he points out that Thursdays have become the habitual day for this in any type of yagna (a habit patterned after bhagwats, which begin on Saturdays, therefore having Thursdays as the sixth day). He bemoans this fact as an example of how Trinidad Hinduism, in his eyes, has ‘become slack’ in its fulfillment of ritual prescriptions.
7 The main examples of holy days celebrated with yagnas are: jyanam ashtami or the birth of Krishna with Bhagwats, Ram navami or the birth of Rama with Ramayan yagnas, Maha Shivratri or ‘the great night of Shiva’ with Shiv Puran yagnas, and Durga ashtami or the birth of Durga with Devi yagnas.
8 Bitter allegations are sometimes made to the effect that some pundits interpret the patra in relation to their own personal diaries: that is, if the proposed dates conflict with prior engagements, they tell the jajman (client) that the planets are in poor aspect – until they actually have an open date, thus ensuring the lucrative yagna appointment. This is an allegation made regarding the arrangements for puja dates as well.
9 These are usually retired men who are strict vegetarians and well-versed in sacred lore. In India, most sadhus are landless and wandering ascetics, most of whom belong to religious orders. This is not the case in Trinidad. However, here many have been invested with a kanthi (cotton cord wound round the neck, bearing a bead of tulsi wood), a Vaishnavite symbol. Though living comfortably with their children or grandchildren, Trinidad sadhus devote much of their time to attending various ritual functions, and are generally well respected throughout the village outside of religious contexts (even by non-Hindus).
10 Kuper (1960: 36) notes this same phenomenon in South Africa, as does Jayawardena (1971: 107) in Fiji.
11 In addition to the women’s cooking expertise, yagnas and weddings represent perhaps the only two social occasions on any scale in which men also help in the kitchen.
12 Most village Hindus are unclear as to what the sixty-four chowsat yogani flags actually represent. Some say they are all the stars and planets, referring to the many astrological influences over one’s life; other villagers believe they are aspects of shakti or cosmic energy. Another general idea is that the chowsat yogani are symbolic of the entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses, and that the number sixty-four simply represents a more vast number. With this interpretation in mind, one sadhu says that the chowsat yogani remind people that a yagna is ‘de time to invite all de deities’.
13 Among the mantras collectively sung at occasions like yagnas, the following is almost invariably the first and last, a prayer which in effect frames all collective religious activity:

Om Twameva Mata Chapita Twameva
Twameva Bandhusha Sakha Twameva
Twameva Vidya Dravina Twameva
Twameva Sarvam Mama Deva Deva.
[Thou art my mother, thou art my father,
Thou art my brother, thou art my my friend,
Thou art my learning, thou art my wealth,
O Lord, thou art all in all.]
Many young people become quite vexed if a 
vyas pundit carries on too long in Hindi, for they understand little of it (especially with such textual overtones). Often the technique of the 
vyas is rhetorical: he will ask a certain question in English (for example, 'how did Queen Kaikkeyi persuade King Dasarashta to banish Rama? ' or 'why do we need a banana tree in puja?'), for which he provides the answer in Hindi through a sung verse or proverb. The young find this particularly irritating, because they often never do get the answer in English.

If it is a Thursday night, or the sixth night of the 
yagna (when a Gosain temporarily takes over most proceedings; see note 6, above), an elaborate additional 
puja is performed at this point. (These are listed in Table 4.1.) At this time, any members of the audience can come forward and queue to worship the specific deity to whom the 
yagna is devoted. They do this as directed by offering their own 
prasad, flowers, and money; by anointing a murti (image) with 
sindhur (vermillion); by pouring either of two special liquid mixtures over the murti, either 
dhar (to Durga) or 
panch amrit (to Shiva); by doing 
arti; and by touching the foot of the murti with their hand, then touching their own forehead. If the 
yagna is held in conjunction with 
ýajnam áshrami (birth of Krishna) or 
Ráma navami (birth or Rama), a suspended cradle holding the appropriate 
murti is venerated and rocked by each of these voluntary devotees.

Yagnas are one of the few occasions where young males and females of the village have the parentally condoned opportunity to meet and flirt in public. Many marriages are still arranged on the basis of a couple's original meeting in this context.

Durga is considered by most Hindus in Trinidad to be the general embodiment of the Divine Mother, or female aspect of God. Most Hindus harbour vague beliefs about the relation of Durga to other goddesses (mainly Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kali): when asked, individuals will ultimately insist these are all parts of the same goddess; some persons can even cite scripture or Puranic tales with reference to this. (When he had to use a Lakshmi murti to do Saraswati puja in the local Hindu school [a child had brought the wrong one], the presiding pundit shrugged, and simply remarked 'same t'ing, same t'ing'.) In prayer and ritual practice, however, each goddess is addressed as separate. There are prayers directed towards all female deities (devis), and one sometimes hears of devotion to 'the nine devis' or 
shaktis (cosmic energies, associated with the Mother goddess) or 'the nine Lakshmis' (cf. Planalp 1956: 178–88 regarding a parallel set of goddesses in an Uttar Pradesh village). Beliefs concerning the multiple manifestations of goddesses characterize the fluid and indeterminate nature of lay ideology in Trinidad Hinduism. Though these collective sets of 
devi are regularly propitiated, rare is the village who can name more than a few of them (two pundits list the former nine as Bhagwati, Bhgala mukhi, Bhumawati, Chitramasta, Bharbhee, Tara, Huneshwari, Vidya and Mahakali, and the latter as Gaja, Veera, Dhanya, Adhi, Sathana, Vijaya, Aiswarya, Dhana, and Shri Lakshmi Narayan). Kali, in particular, has a very ambiguous place: she is sometimes regarded more importantly as a consort of Shiva or Bheryo than an aspect of Durga. Kali maintains a somewhat sinister reputation in Trinidad, particularly because she is associated with blood sacrifice.

Some cynical Hindus (who nonetheless see the merit of goddess worship) suggest that the relatively recent proliferation of these new 
pujas, as well as the combinations of 
pujas, are merely moneymaking ploys by pundits who realized that their clients had more money to spend in the late 1970s. Even if this has occurred in some cases, the fact remains that it is the lay Hindus themselves who have avidly and continuously sought to conduct these numerous rites.

The design (yantra or 
mandala) on a 
vedi (also called a chaup) should ideally have a specific symbolic form (cf. Planalp 1956: 172–3; Arya 1968: 14–16): through a precisely overlapping set of lines and squares, at least sixteen identifiable 'seats' for deities are necessary in basic puja. The sixteen sacred person­
shaped worship in all 
puja (see below) are: the nine planets (Naogra devata), the 
kalsa, Gowri mata, Ganesha, the Earth Mother, the 
guru, the sage Vyasa deva, and the particular devata to whom the puja is devoted. In Trinidad, basic de­
signs are available in imported pundits' texts such as the Vashishtha Hawan Paditi. Additional patterns on vedis in India are often extremely complex, al­
lowing for worship of a host of deities. In Trinidad, the precise nature of 
vedi symbolism is seldomly recognized, and the designs used are usually for aesthetic purposes only.

One informant claimed he practically wanted 'to beat' a pundit after the latter arrived five hours late to conduct a puja. This man also related that in recent years, many people have become more critical of pundits, suggesting Hindus have come to realize that the bond between a pundit and a jaim (see below) only consists of 'a commercial t'ing – you is payin' for a service'. While villagers in India also complain about pundits' financial haggling (O'Malley 1935: 191), there is usually nevertheless a highly structured, respectful relationship between the Brahman priest and his client. The structure of Brahman–non-Brahman ritual interactions in Trinidad has been almost completely relaxed. This particularly stems from the diminished role of notions of purity which traditionally informed Brahmins' district status. Therefore, given this key loss, aspects of disrespect surrounding the financially contracted relationship of pundits and jaimans in the island represents a logical progression of the context in India itself, where the acceptance of payments 'is financially essential to the priest and spiritually to the donor, but their receipt subverts the Brahman's status . . .' (Parry 1980: 88).

Regarding the use of murtis in puja, many Hindus go out of their way to make the point to non-Hindus that 'we not really worshippin' dat t'ing, you know'. This constantly sounded apologia springs from the severe criticism launched against Hindus' purported 'idol worship' by fundamentalist Christian groups since the 1960s. Many Hindus have learned to counter such attacks with arguments such as (a) God is everywhere, so He is also in the image and can be worshipped through it, (b) Christians themselves use images in the form of the crucifix or statues, and (c) human minds are fickle, therefore needing such physical aids to assist devotional concentration. Hindus also point to murtis as devices for children's religious education.

The shrodoshapachara or sixteen 'modes of service' are, in order: 1. 
avavahata (welcome), 2. aasan (providing a 'seat'), 3. padya (washing feet with water), 4. 
arghya (rice and flowers), 5. achmanna (water to drink), 6. 
snan (ceremonial bathing), 7. vstra (clothes), 8. upavasstra (sacred thread), 9. 
gandh (anointing with sindhur, saffron, chandan), 10. pushpa (flowers and tulsi leaves), 11. 
dhoop (fragrance: incense and perfume), 12. 
dip (light; the act of reciting a mantra), 13. 
aivedya (food), 14. dakshina (money, refreshment), 15. 
pushpaanjali (devotion for fulfillment of desires): NB – in India, circumambulation occurs at this point, but not at all in Trinidad, 16. 
namaskar (farewell). If a number of rites are to be conducted, only five items (water, flowers, incense, 
arti, food) may be offered. Some pundits in Trinidad are alleged to be uncaringly lax in their habitual performance of puja; this is evident, for example, when a pundit may be hurriedly reciting the mantra for pushpa (10) while the shrota is actually still offering
The centre of one's forehead is deemed the 'third eye', a concept stemming from Hinduism.

The colour of each jhandi represents the type of puja performed. The proliferation of new puja types is evidenced by the number of new jhandi colours outside of homes in Trinidad today. Whereas years ago only red (for Hanuman) and white (for Satyanarayan and Suraj Narayan) jhandis flew, presently the jhandi colours include pink (for Lakshmi), blue (for Shiva), green (for Gobindan), orange (for Ganesh), and yellow (for Durga, Saraswati, or any collective set of devis). Less frequent are black jhandis for pujas to Kali or gra (a planet, particularly that one governed by the demon Kets; this rite is done as a preventative measure against dangerous forthcoming astrological alignments). These last two pujas retain a somewhat sinister character (Kali puja, because of her potentially destructive power; gra puja, because it enlists the aid of a demon). See next chapter for more on jhandi-related practices.

In the same way, these two scholars suggest the concept of prasad is based on a similar principle: that one brings 'respect pollution' on oneself by eating the food that has been offered the god (in effect making the prasad, says Babb [1975: 66], 'sacred leftovers'). Just as he criticizes Babb, Harper, and others with regard to concepts of purity and pollution, Fuller (1979: 470) argues that such an approach to pranam and prasad does not concur with a number of other structural features of Hindu ideology and action.

The centre of one's forehead is deemed the 'third eye', a concept stemming from yogic or tantric ideology. Though often calling it by this name, the great majority of Hindus in Trinidad, of course, cannot discuss the related philosophical aspects of this notion. The spiritual importance of the forehead is reinforced by Hindus anointing humans and murtis with tika, variously made with sindhur, chandan, or bhabhut.

Smith and Jayawardena make a similar set of points regarding Hindu activity in Guyana. They (1958: 190–1) observe that anthropologists often attempt to look at 'each element of the ritual as having a symbolic meaning which can be linked to some aspect of the social structure of the Indian group; in other words to treat the Indians as if they were living in a self-contained society in which there is a high degree of integration and consistency between all parts of the social structure and between the social structure and an "Indian" culture. In fact this is not so; the Indians are a sub-group of a larger social system, and the structure of social relations with this wider system has to be considered even when dealing with apparently "pure" Indian customs.'

Klass (1961: 169–79) differentiates a parallel typology of Hindu ceremonies in Trinidad: 'community' (including Bhagwats, satsangs [which, indeed, were entirely communal in those days], and calendric rites), 'semi-private' (pujas), and 'private' (annual Di-puja, or sacrifice to the local guardian demigod). A family's annual shraddha rite to patrilineal ancestors during Pitra Paksh was a rite which Klass found hard to classify (it bears both 'semi-private' and 'private' features). Also see Schwartz (1964b) for another set of categories regarding popular Hinduism in Trinidad.

The Arya Pritinidhi Sabha (Arya Samaj), Kabir Panth Association, and Seunarine Dharma Sabha all continued to function since their respective formation in the 1930s and 1940s. However, these bodies have ceded to diminishing numbers over the years, and further, have had little impact on Hindu social organization among the dominant sanatanist population.
CHAPTER 5 | Contemporary Hindu practice

Opler (1959: 225) observed that in villages of northern India, ‘Although they are not ceremonies in any strict sense,’ there are many examples of ‘religious behavior which feed the stream of religious consciousness.’ In Trinidad, too, Hindus carry out a variety of individual, familial, and communal acts which continuously structure and bolster their particular way of life. Given Hindus’ position in Trinidad’s overall social structure, these acts also work to reinforce Hindu ethnicity, or sense of distinctiveness. Numerous, habitual Hindu practices among individuals draw their significance from an unwritten, though shared, corpus of meaning; at the same time, these practices function to re-establish, in an ongoing way, a particular ‘taken-for-granted’ worldview which, in certain important ways, sets Hindus apart from all others in Trinidad. The following sections explore some of these practices and their significance within Trinidad Hindu life.

Individual, domestic, and communal practice

Particularly since the increase and elaboration of Hindu socio-religious institutions in recent years, many Hindus have come to take special pride in their unique beliefs, rites, and relations. ‘I love dis Hindu t’ing’, ‘I kill myself fuh dis Hinduism’, ‘I mus’ be Hindu’ are typical of utterances heard from people concerning their regular performance of various Hindu practices. These practices are carried out on different levels of participation, and, along with the socio-religious activities described in Chapter 4, comprise the key features of living Hinduism in Trinidad.

Individual features

The ishtdevata or personal deity is the most intimate of Hindu religious concepts. Not all Hindus in Trinidad feel special affinity to a particular deity but those who do, make special efforts to pray to or propitiate their chosen god or goddess. Individuals may carry a locket or wallet with a picture of their ishtdevata, may keep a picture on their desk at work or school, or have an image centrally located in their bedroom or household shrine (or in their ‘deya house’; see Photo 7 and below). Prayers to this deity will be offered regularly, at night or during the course of any day. Many persons make an extra effort to show their devotion to the deity by fasting each week on a day associated with the specific god or goddess (Suruj Narayan on Sunday, Shiva [Mahadeo] on Monday and Wednesday, Hanuman [Mahavir] on Tuesday and Saturday, the guru on Thursday, and Durga or any goddess on Friday). Some claim that they even dream of their ishtdevata. Moreover, Hindus take special delight in hearing about a personal deity at yagnas or seeing them portrayed in religious films or plays.

Another important, highly personalized aspect of Hinduism as currently practised in Trinidad is the guru mantra. Received when an individual is ‘christened’ (undergoes the guru mukh rite), this mantra or sacred utterance — such as ‘Om namah Shivaya’ — is meant to be a person’s secret, special prayer, putting him or her in contact with the divine and potentially serving as a measure of spiritual protection. Informants tell of certain terrifying circumstances — such as walking through a dark forest or along a road alone at night — when their guru mantra spontaneously comes to their lips. On the night before Diwali (Yama rata, the night of the god of death), persons should jaap or repeat this mantra (and any others they know which are supposed to have special power) five, or seven, or up to one hundred and eight times; the act is intended to jagawe or ‘keep awake’ the mantra’s effectiveness.

Private rites for personal religious benefit are comparatively few, however. Most individually-performed acts occur within family-centred religious contexts.

Domestic features

Immediately prior to moving into a new house, a rite known as ghar bhuj is conducted by a pundit, with the household head serving as shrota. Hawan is offered, along with prayers to Shiva, Ganesh, and Hanuman for the family’s protection and happiness. Although this rite is performed seldomly in a person’s life (villagers rarely move house), it is nonetheless important in that it establishes ritually the domestic presence. More frequent and substantive are rites individually performed on behalf of the entire family.

One such recurrent act is that known as ‘throwing jal (water).’ This brief rite is often rotated among the children of a household. Ideally, it is performed on a daily basis (though now it is often relegated to Sundays only). The chosen family member wakes up early in the morning (normally, before sunrise), bathes thoroughly, and goes out to ‘throw jal’ before breakfast is consumed. It is a practice performed near the household’s jhandi, where most families grow a small tulsi tree (a sacred basil, identified with Vishnu).
Here, the individual slowly pours a *lotah* full of water and flowers while reciting any *mantra* he or she wishes. The pouring and prayers are performed twice in succession: the first time in honour of the sun (Surya narayan), the second in honour of the tulsi tree. Young children will rise from bed – before anyone else in the household – in order to engage diligently in this practice for their family’s sake.

Similarly, certain individuals are given the role of offering daily prayers at the household shrine. As in India, each Hindu home in Trinidad normally has some place identifiable as such a shrine. It may simply be a *murti* and a few pictures on a shelf or in a corner, a small open cupboard, or an entire room filled with religious paraphernalia. Daily habits here, for selected family members, are usually to light a *deya* and perhaps some incense, to offer a flower (and make the gesture of transferring blessing), to anoint the images with *sindhur* or *chandan*, and to recite one or more *mantras*. The mother or grandmother of the household often are the ones who do these acts, but the whole family is believed to derive spiritual benefit.

One of the few times each year when families gather collectively at their household shrine is *Yama rata*, the night before Diwali when the household head will perform *hawan*, recite *mantras*, and make offerings or prayers on behalf of and in the presence of the family (these are specifically to invite the presence, the following day, of Lakshmi, goddess associated with light and wealth, to whom *Diwali* is devoted). The individually-conducted *jagawe* or ‘waking’ of *mantras*, if persons wish, then follows.1

Perhaps even more important than the household shrine, the *jhandi* (in Trinidad the term is usually used for both singular and plural) and their location outside a family’s house represent a prominent focus of religious practice for Hindus in Trinidad. With reference to these phenomena, it is appropriate to describe an entire *puja/jhandi/sanctum* complex.2

Every *puja* performed at a home includes a course of ritual acts involving a *jhandi*, a coloured, triangular flag atop a bamboo pole.3 During the course of *puja* in Trinidad, the bamboo meant to hold the flag is anointed by the *shrota* with *sindhur* and *saffron* five times on the fifth joint from the bottom, where a cloth which has been blessed is also tied (the number five, local pundits say, signifies the five elements: air, fire, earth, water, ether); the *jhandi* cloth is included with other *prasad* offerings in an act of *charawe*, and is tied on to the end of the now sacrosanct bamboo (one pundit advised a parent to let her child hold the pole for a little while before it was taken outside, thus allowing its sanctity to be conveyed as a blessing); the pole and flag are brought out to a special spot in the yard where a hole has been dug (next to any previously raised *jhandi*); a mixture of milk, *sindhur*, paan leaves, rice, and betel nut is slowly poured from a *lotah* into the hole, an act consecrating the site; the pole is sunk into the hole while being held by five hands; those who positioned the *jhandi* pole touch their hands to its base, then to their foreheads, one or three times (the gesture transferring blessing). The colour of the *jhandi* signifies the deity to whom the *puja* was offered (see Chapter 4, note 23), thereby serving notice of a household’s devotion. The bamboo and flag are left to disintegrate with weathering, while new *jhandi* are erected successively in the same place each time *puja* is conducted (see Photo 8).4

The immediate locale (some 4 sq. metres) surrounding the base of the *jhandi* poles is considered holy ground, a kind of sanctum. It is always swept clean by family members, and respected by other Hindu villagers. (Once while staggering home drunk at night, a young Hindu man stopped and almost inadvertently urinated in foliage near someone’s *jhandi* site; he was instantly stopped before doing so by his similarly drunken friends, who, knowing there were *jhandi* nearby, verbally castigated him and cuffed him on the head. The near-perpetrator was ashamed that he had come so close to what would amount to sacrilege.)

Next to the base of the bamboo poles, a tulsi tree is usually grown and small, symbolic items are placed (several *saligrama*, smooth ovular stones representing Vishnu; Shiva *linga*, the phallic image of Shiva; conch shells, suggesting *puja*).5 Also, at this place many Hindus also build a small structure or ‘*deya* house.’ This little box regularly shelters pictures of deities and a small *deya* lamp which Hindus light, while reciting *mantras*, beneath their *jhandi* each night at dusk. The task of lighting the outdoor *deya*, as in the case of the *deya* at the indoor shrine, is allocated in rotating fashion to some family member. The entire family, however, receives a kind of grace or merit for such acts of *bhakti*.

Each component of this household religious complex informs or completes the meaning of the others: *pujas* are directly associated with the anointment and erection of *jhandi*, as well as with the consecration of the latter’s location; *jhandi* invoke specific *pujas* (by their colour as well as their sheer presence) and thereby add a deity’s blessings to the sanctum in which they are placed; and the spot in which the flags are located provides a holy ground in which the flags and poles can gradually disintegrate (conceived as a return to the five elements), while the space itself acts as a constant reminder of religious devotion as expressed in *puja* and maintained through simple daily rites. Thus the significance of each of these elements is partly a combination of the other two.

Hindus throughout Trinidad, by their attitudes and behaviour toward *pujaljhandi/sanctum*, convey the importance of this complex within their daily lives. Parents get vexed if a child is late lighting the *deya* in the sanctum; when a smooth, ovular stone is found on the beach, Hindus carry it home to add it to the other *saligrama* at their outdoor sanctum; one villager held a *puja* at his father’s house (because his own was under construction), but made sure the *jhandi* were erected in a place next to his own...
house site; the man mentioned earlier, who held a puja to the nine shaktis, insisted on raising nine yellow jhandi to signify more manifestly the fact, in an attempt to guarantee blessings – even though the pundit suggested one jhandi would suffice. Even Hindus living in apartment buildings or suburban houses often reserve a corner of their balcony for a structure filled with earth, fitted with jhandi, and arranged with ritual items.

In India today, jhandi are found predominantly at temples or shrines, as during the days of indentured migration, when they were known to be ‘the abode or shelter of some deity’ (Crooke 1894: 250; see ibid.: 199; Crooke 1896a: 24, 96f.) A multitude of locally sacred places have traditionally dotted the landscape of northern India. These features of religious geography were fundamental components of the everyday worlds of Hindus, abruptly removed from their lives in the course of migration. Carrying over and extending the northern Indian tradition raising Mahaviri jhandi or flags in honour of the monkey-god Hanuman, it is likely that once Hindus settled in countries like Trinidad, jhandi and associated sanctums were created in association with puja/jhandi/sanctum specifically to create sacred places in an otherwise alien, profane landscape. Establishing small shrines on consecrated grounds can be seen as a means of reconstituting the phenomena of small, locally sacred sites, marked by jhandi, so prevalent in Hindus’ home villages in India. As they left the estates and settled in isolated homesteads, the act of creating one’s own sacred spot was also probably considered spiritually edifying by these new landowners. The devotional merit gained by establishing a household puja/jhandi/sanctum complex remains a vital aspect of domestic Hinduism in Trinidad today.

Life-cycle rites are infrequent but highly significant forms of family religious practice. Few of these samskara rituals which were maintained as routine features of Hinduism in post-indenture settlements have continued to be conducted by a majority of Hindu villagers. After a birth, chathi (sixth-day) and barahi (twelfth-day) rites are performed, primarily by women, to purify and bestow spiritual protection to a mother and her newborn child. The first haircut of a child is still undertaken by many parents with a pilgrimage to Siparia, where the hair and other items are offered to the goddess manifestation, Sipari Mai (see below). The foremost rite of passage for teenagers is Guru mukh, when puja on behalf of the initiate is performed and a (usually Brahman pundit) guru or ‘godfather’ whispers a special, secret mantra into the initiate’s ear. The ‘christening’ ritual can occur at any age, but it must be performed before an individual gets married; otherwise, he or she is not considered a full adult, and marriage would be premature.

In Trinidad, weddings involve perhaps the most intricate set of rites in the entire Hindu ritual corpus (necessitating at least an entire chapter in itself to describe and interpret adequately). De Klerk (1951: 124–200), in fact, outlines no less than sixty stages in the marriage ceremony enacted by Hindus in Surinam! (Cf. Speckmann 1965: 136–46). These begin at the time when the two family representatives meet to discuss the possibility of an engagement (a meeting, therefore, at least some six months before a marriage), and end a week after the wedding service itself, when the bride leaves her home for the last time to take up residence with her husband and his family.

Formal proceedings commence with two sets of mutually-attended engagement ceremonies, one at each party’s home (involving exchanges of gifts from both families, a display of subservience by the prospective bride to her future in-laws, and in years past, the tilak rite or dowry-passing and forehead-marking; this latter ceremony now usually occurs as part of the dwar puja stage of the wedding sequence itself). Taking place a few months before the weddings, these occasions are more social than religious.

Next comes a complicated, three-day set of rites and activities simultaneously performed at the home of each of the engaged individuals. On the Friday preceding the wedding, the requisite actions include: harti rites in which the individual to be married begins a sequence of purification with turmeric and anointment by virgins (to be carried out each day until the Sunday wedding ceremony); muti kurwa, the digging of clay by the betrothed’s father’s sister, which is carried home by the mother in her oronhi veil and used in building the nuptial altar; and highly suggestive dancing by women – often utilizing a cucumber as a phallus – carried out to the beat of tassa drums. On Saturday, so-called ‘farewell’ activities include more harti purification; the parching of lawa or paddy rice (to be exchanged during the wedding service) while old women sing bawdy songs in Hindi; the construction and decoration of a maro or nuptial tent; and night-long singing, drinking, and dancing by scores of guests inside a specially-built enclosure. On Sunday, ritual acts involve final harti purifications (totalling seven times over the three days); ritual eating of sweet rice by each of the betrothed along with five others of the same sex; the bathing and dressing of the betrothed; the acts surrounding the groom’s departure from his mother; the travel of the groom with a large baraat or procession (of cars, led by one playing Hindi film and devotional music through a loudspeaker); the milap of meeting of father and male relatives on the road in front of the bride’s home (where the wedding service is held); and the parchay or meeting of mothers and female relatives at the entrance to the house.

The actual marriage ceremony takes over one-and-a-half hours, since it includes an extremely detailed and symbolic course of rites: dwar puja – prayer offerings performed by the groom prior to entering the maro; emli ghatai – final blessing of the bride by her mother; pirha puja – welcome of the groom by the bride’s father and invocation of Ganesha to bless the proceedings; a presentation of garlands and gifts; kanyadan – ‘gift of the
bride’, gestures involving the bride and groom, bride’s parents, and bride’s younger brother; paaaw puja – gift offerings of lotus and taraih by guests, who also may wash the feet of the couple; asmorohana – the bride treads on a stone, promising devotion and fidelity to her husband; lawa bhawar – circumambulation of the sacred fire by the couple, accompanied by mixing and burning the rice previously parched by each party; sapta padi – seven steps taken together, each representing a household duty; marriage vows – seven by the groom, five by the bride; sindhor dan – while both are covered with a cloth, the groom marks with vermilion the centre parting (manga) of the bride’s hair; thag paat – the elder brother of the groom vows to protect and guide the bride; final hawan and invocation; kichri – the groom is invited to eat a meal of rice and peas, only doing so after he receives a substantial amount of money from the bride’s relatives and guests. Then, after changing clothes – from traditional jorojama of the groom and red sari of the bride to tuxedo and white wedding dress, the newlyweds leave the bride’s home and proceed with another baraat to the home of the groom’s family, where more wedding gifts are accepted from guests and a social reception ensues. The bride then returns to her parent’s house for one week before ultimately moving into her husband’s home (however, now many young couples embark immediately on a honeymoon to Tobago or Margarita, after which they may or may not fulfil this prescribed week-long hiatus).

Hindu weddings and their accompanying rites present an overwhelming set of symbols and practices. Important social and economic dimensions are also evident in marriage activities (including the activation of labour networks to construct the tent-like structure [using the same architecture as for a yagnas], to prepare food, and to acquire necessary elements; the expenditure of hundreds if not thousands of dollars on gifts, decorations, rented equipment, ritual accoutrements and social amenities; the specific roles of certain kin throughout the variegated rites; and the large-scale gathering of guests).

Rather than attempting to provide a detailed interpretation of such a huge ensemble of symbols, roles, gestures, utterances, and interactions, the object here is to stress that elaborate marriage rites can be thought of as a religious sequence exemplifying an important sociological and ideological feature of Hindu practice at large. Just as the range of Hindu beliefs and practices constitutes a vast set of specific acts and meanings which are fully recognized and understood by only a few, but frequently participated-in by many, so does the assembly of beliefs and actions surrounding marriage. A pundit directs the activities and provides the explanations for puja and other specific rites in the wedding ceremony itself. In contrast, the array of acts conducted days or weeks prior to the marriage are arranged and carried out wholly through collaboration of family and friends. Certain people generally know what to do at each stage of these informal but complicated proceedings; others correct, modify, or criticize them; most know through which sequence to move at what time; some have their own interpretations of what various items or motions mean. At each point, certain persons prescribe what is to be obtained, created, or undertaken; others follow their lead and quickly habitualize the pattern. However unsure participants are of the meaning of marriage symbols and gestures, they are quite satisfied if the proceedings ‘feel right’ (cf. Smith and Jayawardena 1958: 190–1).

The sheer wealth of ritual trappings and actions surrounding Hindu marriage is ever-impressive, regardless of whether individuals on any occasion actually witness one or a number of the composite parts. Furthermore, pundits conduct only a portion of the religious rites, while consensus (or even idiosyncratic) forms of belief and action predominate in a greater number of associated contexts.9 This is not particular to Trinidad; it is endemic to Hinduism generally, and may even serve to characterize popular or ‘folk’ religion universally. On frequent occasions, like weddings, Hindus know what to do, though they often don’t know (indeed, don’t question) why they do it. Individual Hindus are immersed in an ocean of subtle beliefs and symbolic acts, in the marriage ceremony as in their overall religious life. Yet the breadth and wealth of their religious world provide a sense of comfort and order rather than perplexity and doubt.

Mortuary rites comprise another rich assembly of both collectively construed and pundit-directed ritual sequences, along with a number of related personal duties and social interactions. Due to their lachrymose nature, these activities understandably represent one of the most affective, as well as cognitive, aspects of Hindu practice. Little has changed, since the time of migration, in the way death is conceived and funerary rites performed. The maintenance of such a high degree of similarity, in religious ideas and actions, between mortuary rites in Trinidad and India attest to their fundamental position within the Hindu system.

The death of an individual entails the rapid mobilization of kinship and friendship networks. In addition to the process of spreading the sorrowful news, various persons are needed to accomplish a host of tasks without delay, because the burial or cremation will occur (in most cases) the following day. Initial tasks include (1) the contacting of authorities: police and registry of death (to make official notification), doctor (to sign death certificate or perform autopsy), funeral home (to embalm), caretakers of cremation site or cemetery (to arrange space); (2) the transport of the body to a funeral home; (3) the building of a temporary shelter adjacent to the deceased’s house and the renting of chairs and tables to accommodate people at the forthcoming wake; (4) in the case of cremation, the acquisition of wood (often donated by local sawmills), or in the case of burial, the digging of a grave;10 and (5) the borrowing of a car-mounted loudspeaker (the same ones used to announce yagnas and bazaars, and to lead wedding baraths), which will be utilized by a volunteer to drive throughout each tract of the village,
broadcasting the recent death. Friends and co-villagers know, then, that a wake will occur that night.

The Hindu wake is a gathering of acquaintances, who drink coffee and eat biscuits outside while the family of the deceased stays indoors, usually holding a Ramayan satsang. Male neighbours tend to stay at the wake virtually throughout the night, playing cards and drinking rum during the latest hours (although drunkenness and gambling among the visitors often cause tensions to run high, no violence or hard feelings ever result; someone always reminds the agitated members of their inappropriate actions given the social context). The wake is conceived by some as a measure to keep the ghost of the deceased away, since it has not yet been put to rest. The more expressed motive, however, is simply to provide consolation to the bereaved family.11

The lengthy and involved course of Hindu rites which are performed on the occasion of death have two purposes: to remove the impurity which death imposes upon house and kin, and to assist the soul of the dead in acquiring its proper form and place.

A house is considered defiled when a death occurs therein; even when a death occurs elsewhere, the deceased’s home is considered impure. Curtains are taken down, pictures and mirrors are turned towards the wall (both acts are thought to facilitate the potentially lingering spirit’s departure). A deya is lit in the deceased’s bedroom, but no other fire nor any form of cooking will be allowed until after cremation or burial. Thereafter, the house is thoroughly washed. Close kin are also considered impure, particularly those of the nuclear family.12 For ten days after the death, they must eat exclusively sadha (boiled, saltless, vegetarian) food, and only in their own home. They will also conduct morning ablutions each day throughout this ten-day period. Further, even visitors to the house which has had a member recently die should, after leaving, sprinkle water over their heads, rinse out their mouths, and wash their clothes.

The actual funeral ceremony is relatively simple. After the body returns from the funeral home (where, after embalming by undertakers, it is washed and dressed by relatives of the same sex), a brief puja is performed and some kind words are extended by the family pundit. This may also include a reading of the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, which concerns death and bereavement; it may also be recited on the tenth and/or sixteenth day after the death. If the deceased was a married man, his widow puts sindhur on his ring-finger, manipulating it to anoint her manga or hair-parting as he did on their wedding-day. Bhajans are sung, arti is offered by close kin, flowers are placed by everyone in the open coffin, and a young boy or girl (often the child or grandchild of the deceased) is passed over the top of the body three times (the purpose of this last act is uncertain: some say it is ‘to keep down de spirit so it won’t come an’ frighten’ people, others say it is to instill courage in the child). Sanctifying water is sprinkled in front of the hearse, and a procession of cars (led by one holding two white jhandi and a loudspeaker through which the Ramayana is read) drives to the cemetery or cremation site.

Upon arriving at either site, the coffin is removed from the hearse and carried by male relatives to its ultimate resting place. Along the way, five brief stops (manjils) are made for arti (each stop represents one of the five elements, serving notice that the body is on its way toward returning to its composite parts). Around either the grave or the pyre, five male relatives make five clockwise circumambulations before the coffin is buried or burned. Afterwards, these same five circumambulate five times clockwise once more, then leave the site without looking back. At either site, two white jhandi are unceremoniously erected by friends of the family.

The rites regarding the soul of the dead are much more detailed, occurring at particular intervals up to one year after the funeral, and yearly after that. The governing concept throughout all of these continues to be that predominating in India:

At death the soul becomes a disembodied ghost or preta, a marginal state dangerous both to itself and to the survivors. The object of the mortuary rites is to convert this marginal ghost into an ancestor, or pita, and to facilitate the arduous journey of the deceased to the abode of the ancestors (pitr-lok) where he arrives on the anniversary of his death. (Parry 1985: 614–15)

A cycle of shraddha rites is performed to affect this transition. ‘Shraddhas are faithful offerings to the ancestors in the same way that pujas are horrific offerings to the gods’ (Nicholas 1981: 373). These begin with the informal placing of any kind of food offerings outside the house on the morning after the funeral. During the ten days after a death, family members daily ‘throw jal’ on to a specially planted, knotted stem of khus grass. Ramayan satsangs are also held at the house during this period. On the tenth day, the most important shraddha offering, pinda dan (the gift of pinda), is conducted by the oldest or youngest son or brother of the departed. Just prior to this rite, a final purification is performed at the house: five females of the household have their nails clipped by a Nao, all bathe and ‘throw jal’ on to khus grass; a fire is then lit, and a proper meal is cooked for the first time since the death. At the onset of pinda dan rites, a member of the Nao or barber caste shaves and trims the hair of five brothers and/or sons, and shaves the entire head (save for a churki or tuft at the top) of the one to make the offerings. The shaving and shraddha must be performed near a body of water: this is where the offerer bathes, and where the items offered are eventually submerged.
Mortuary rites can be considered telling examples of religious complexity and consensus, like the marriage rites described above. A pundit only performs a small puja at the home, constituting the funeral, and a mahapater plays the central role in pinda dan. All other preparations, symbols, acts, and shraddha rites are fulfilled by individuals acting in conjunction. Their attitudes towards impurity and to the spirit of the dead are shared, though generally unspoken. They know what must be done, again, but they cannot articulate its precise reasons. Yet such vagueness does not diminish the significance or effects of mortuary rites. The satisfactory performance of such acts imparts a sense of religious order, a sense that everything has been put in right relationship (people with people, people with the dead, people with the gods, the dead with the gods). This can be summarized by a comment made at a graveside by a 19-year-old farmer, who partook in much debate among participants over procedural matters, such as which way the head of the coffin must lay [north], whether flowers should be buried with the corpse [no], and who should perform the final arti [each of the five brothers or sons may, but particularly the one who is to perform pinda dan] once these issues were settled, the young man shook his finger and declared, ‘I like to see t’ings go correc’, mon!’

Implicit notions of order also inform rites performed on a cyclic basis, including ones for the dead. The graves of all dead relatives will be tidied and decorated each year on November 1st (All Saints Day), and numerous candles will be arranged and lit on that evening. It is an interesting institution to find among Hindus here, for it seems to be a Latin American Catholic custom also conducted in Trinidad by Muslims, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Spiritual Baptists, as well as Catholics (see Crowley 1957; Niehoff 1960; Clarke 1986). This manner of honouring the dead is perhaps a kind of conceptual carry-over associated with the oblations made to the ancestors during Pitra Paksh, which occurs just before this date (varying according to the lunar year). Pitra Paksh is a fortnight dedicated to honouring ancestors of the entire agnatic descent group, a time when these departed souls are supposed ‘to be closer to this world.’

Ideally, the head of each household should ‘throw jai’ for the ancestors on to knotted khus grass each day during the period of Pitra Paksh. Many Hindus, however, perform this on the last day only. Further, on this last day, a bandara akin to one after a funeral is prepared: a variety of the best dishes are cooked, and each person fills their leaf-plate full; before any are permitted to eat, a portion from each person’s leaf is collected on one leaf, and this is placed outside, well away from the house and next to the special grass representing the pitras. The practice is brief and informal, but solemn. Throughout this fortnight, no puja or marriage or new construction can be undertaken. One or two temples or individuals have, during this period, sponsored yagnas for reciting the Garud Purana, a basic text concerning

*Pinda dan* is an extremely exacting set of symbolic items and gestures, the core of which entails placing sixteen *pindas* (doughballs of rice and flour) and other offerings on a roughly keyhole-shaped *vedi* (said to represent the body of the deceased). In effect, these *pindas* are meant ‘to feed’ the soul of the recently deceased. ‘If the deceased is not properly fed, then it will linger on in its preta form, capable of giving survivors unpleasant reminders of its permanent suspension between death and life’ (Nicholas 1981: 375).

Unique to *shraddha* rites, the offerer faces south (Das 1977: 104–5). This required alignment acts to set these rites well apart from rituals addressed to deities. As one local participant put it, ‘face sout’ for deat’ business, face eas’ for all kinda godly business’. A distinct feature of the tenth day *pinda dan* in particular is the role of a specialized Brahman pundit, the mahapater (more often called mahabrahaman in India). In Trinidad, as in India, these figures have a fairly sinister reputation. Mahapaters maintain their apparently anomalous status as impure and highly inauspicious Brahmins, who by virtue of their work are identified with and are regarded as physical embodiments of the marginal and malevolent ghosts they serve. (Parry 1980: 88)

Mahapaters take upon themselves the sins of the dead, as well as their gifts. Along with a standard set of items which they receive on behalf of the dead, mahapaters also receive cash for their services. Almost as a norm, they have a ‘reputation for rapacity’ (ibid.): practically regardless of how much they receive, mahapaters demand more (cf. Niehoff 1960: 135). For instance, one bereaved man became furious following a *pinda dan* for which he paid the mahapater TT$200. The latter asked for more money, and the former burst into a string of obscenities and curses. After refusing to pay, the man continued to complain about the funeral priest afterwards, saying ‘de Prime Minister don’t make de amount a’ money he do!‘

A bandara or feast for many guests is held ten and/or sixteen days after the death, and during the latter a final food offering is made to the dead. According to orthopraxy, this should be attended by one to ten Brahmans. ‘This rite of commensality signifies the reincorporation of the bereaved into the normal social order from which they have been set apart during mourning’ (Parry 1985: 623). By this time, the dead have become pitras (ancestors), the house and family are for the most part considered no longer impure, and most normal household activities are re-established. Pujas should not be performed for one year, however, and on the following Diwali, no deyas are to be lit. The house is still not expurgated enough to invite the deities for the former activity. Regarding the latter, one informant suggested the absence of deyas indicates that due to their grief ‘de family is still in darkness’.

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death; although the subject and text are appropriate to this time of year, the most orthodox Hindus are critical of any socio-religious activity occurring. *Pitra Paksh* is but one period in a year-long cycle of holy days and associated rites, most of which are communal in their celebration.

**Communal features**

The socio-religious activities surrounding *yagnas, pujas*, and *satsangs* are practices which have significantly reinforced Hindu values and behavior within recent years. Accompanying this so-called ‘Hindu renaissance,’ there has been a renewal of interest, organization and participation in communal activities pertaining to a number of special days and periods which comprise the annual Hindu religious calendar.

Dates throughout the Hindu religious year are based on lunar cycles and the movement of the (Indian) zodiac. According to ancient texts and longstanding practices in India, the course of each day, week, month, and year is given specific ritual requirements for certain individuals, castes, and sects. By far most of these specificities are unknown to, or have little value for, Hindus in Trinidad. Processes of homogenization and routinization of religious belief and practice, generally described earlier, have wrought a standard set of communally-held calendrical observances.

Daily, the only rites normally conducted are ‘throwing jāl’ in the morning (yet now this is becoming more of a weekly act) and lighting *deyas* while reciting *mantras* indoors at the family shrine and outdoors in the household *jhandi* sanctum. These are both domestic, rather than communal acts, however. Similarly, the performance of other, more optional daily practices (mainly fasting and specific prayer) on certain days of the week is undertaken mainly by individuals on the day of the week associated with their *ishdeva*. Further, it is only a few *sadhus* or other especially devout Hindus who observe monthly fasts and offerings determined by lunar phases (*ekadashi*, the eleventh day after a full moon, and *amavasya*, the new moon) or during *panchak*, the five-day period marking the month’s end. *Purnima*, or full moon, however, is regularly maintained as an occasion for congregational *katha* at many local temples.

The Hindu religious year in Trinidad (which of course runs concurrently with the secular calendar) essentially begins around February–March following the festival of *Holi* – more popularly known in Trinidad as *Phagwa*. The preparations for this festive occasion actually commence forty days beforehand, on *Visant Panchmi*. On the evening of this prior date, a castor oil plant is ritually planted on some donated land; the plant is said to symbolize Holika, the witch burned in the Puranic tale of Prahalad, a child whose devotion to Vishnu is the subject of celebration at *Holi*. For the next forty days, heaps of straw and wood are piled over this plant by teams of local villagers, eventually creating a mass some fifteen feet high. Throughout this period, too, local community groups gather to sing *chowtal* (rigorous devotional songs particular to this time of year). Many such groups (themselves usually based around temple or *satsang/bhajan-kirtan* groups) compete in regional or national *chowtal* competitions sponsored by larger Hindu organizations.

Mid-way through this forty-day period occurs *Maha Shivratri*, a night dedicated to worshipping Shiva. Either as families at domestic shrines or as congregations in temples, persons wake the entire night making a series of offerings toward a Shiva *linga*.

Finally on the evening of *Holika Dahan*, the structure which has been gradually constructed over forty days, is circumambulated five times by a host of people singing in praise of Vishnu. It is then burned in a huge bonfire (as Holika herself was burned as the climax of Prahalad’s Vishnu-inspired victory over evil). The gathered devotees sing and dance joyously as the fire burns, symbolizing the destruction of the previous year’s sins. The next day, *Holi*, is characterized by a great deal of play. It begins with young people romping in the Holika bonfire’s ashes, followed throughout the day by people of all ages chasing and staining each other with *abir*, a red dye. Whereas this has occurred within Trinidad Indian villages virtually since their founding (having originally been one of the most popular annual events in India), additional celebratory phenomena surrounding *Holi* or *Phagwa* have been recently institutionalized. Nowadays, massive, extra-village celebrations, sponsored by large Hindu organizations, are commonly attended: *chowtal* and temple groups dress in special festive clothing, rent trucks, and ride all day to various venues throughout the island where they play music, dance, and play with *abir*. It is day greatly loved by all Hindus, when pranks are enjoyed by all, and when a considerable degree of licence is allowed in flirtatious relations between the sexes.

Immediately following *Holi* are the fifteen days of *Khalmaas*, a liminal period before the Hindu New Year begins, during which no religious rituals or new construction should be undertaken. *Nayabarash*, or New Year’s Day (in March–April) is not marked by any particular celebration. However, the same day marks the beginning of the year’s first holy period of *Nav ratri* (also called *Nao rata* in Trinidad). Though generally associated with the mother goddess, the nine nights at this time of year have come to be celebrated these days with *Ramayan yagnas*, since the period ends with *Ram navami*, the birth of Ram. Alongside the rites devoted to Ram over these nine nights, still, *Durga* or *shakti puja* is performed.

Little or no calendrically-based, communal religious activity occurs through much of the Spring and Summer months (April–August). In Trinidad this gap fortunately corresponds with the latter part of the dry
season when cane harvesting and other agricultural or similarly time-consuming outdoor labour is undertaken.

The first major holy day after the long hiatus is Krishna jyanam ashtami, the birth of Krishna (in August–September). One- or two-week-long Bhagwats are the main way of celebrating this, including a special Gobardhan puja (alluding to a famous Puranic story involving Krishna and Mount Gobardhan) on the date itself. Krishna lillas, plays enacting stories from the life of Krishna, are also performed in some villages at this time, too.

Next, less than two weeks later, Ganesh jyanti (marking the birth of Ganesh) begins an eleven-day period in praise of this beloved deity. This is usually celebrated by yagnas dedicated to Puranic tales regarding the elephant-headed god. A special murti of Ganesha is created and ritually installed on the first day of the ‘jag’, to which puja is thereafter offered daily throughout the period. By sunrise following the last night, the murti is ceremoniously carried to a beach or river, stopping five times for arati (as in a funeral); then, after sorrowfully bidding Lord Ganesha farewell until the following year, the murti is completely submerged. Pitra Paksh commences from that day forward, during which time only domestic rites honouring ancestors should take place.

Immediately upon the ending of Pitra Paksh (September–October), the second Nav ratri of the year begins. This period has, in recent years, become a time of widespread ritual activity, witnessed in the profusion of yagnas at temples and at the homes of wealthy individuals, and of pujas and satsangs at the homes of most other Hindus. Durga ashtami (the birth of the Mother Goddess) is a particularly important date within this period, being communally celebrated by special puja to her and to all the goddesses whom she embodies. Occurring roughly in October, this busy period of worship is well into Trinidad’s wet season, when villagers need engage in relatively little agricultural or other outdoor work. Ram lila plays enacting the Ramayana are staged in certain villages around this time of year, in conjunction with Vijay dashmi, the day on which the demon Ravan was supposed to have been killed by Ram.

Preparations soon get under way, then, for the following religious occasion which is doubtless Hindus’ most famous. This is Diwali, which is recognized as a national holiday in Trinidad. Every Hindu home and jhandi sanctum is well-cleaned, sweets are prepared, and members of each household begin to build elaborate, artistically shaped structures of split bamboo which will hold scores (if not hundreds) of small, coconut oil fuelled deya lamps. On the night preceding Diwali itself (a night called Yama rata, in honour of the god of death), families conduct appropriate domestic rites and temples or community religious groups stage plays or other celebrations. The daytime of Diwali sees no special activities; but in the evening, Lakshmi puja is conducted at temples and the small deyas outside homes are lit to produce magnificent displays of light. All villagers, regardless of religion or ethnic group, spend much of the evening strolling around the main road, chatting and appreciating the splendid sights.

Kartik snan, at the end of the holy month of Kartik (October–November), is a date set for Hindus to journey to the seas for a ritual bath. Whereas this seems to have been rather popular in the past (Niehoff 1960: 123; Klass 1961: 161–2), it is currently much less widely observed. Christmas sees a well-established, though thoroughly secular, pattern of merriment: independently, groups of men, women and children make their way from house to house in their immediate neighbourhood, stopping at each to eat special delicacies – and in the case of men, to drink fairly heavily. After this date, little calendrically-based socio-religious activity occurs again until Visant Panchami in January, when the yearly cycle begins anew.

The observance of these religious days and periods, each associated with specific stories, deities, and ritual duties, is as much an integral part of yearly life for village Hindus as cane harvest, rice-planting, and the change of seasons from wet to dry. Calendrically-based practices comprise a basic feature of children’s enculturation, provide a recurrent source of communal interaction, and act (in however modified form) as basic fulfilsments of textually and astrologically prescribed modes of worship. These practices also embody Hindus’ understanding and expression of mythic (especially Puranic) beliefs, and ultimately represent a refined and unitary religious system. Nevertheless, various ‘unorthodox’ and less institutionalized forms of Hindu practice can be found in pockets throughout contemporary Trinidad.

Peripheral Hindu practice

That Hinduism has been considerably standardized and institutionalized since it came to Trinidad is a point stressed throughout this book. A highly routinized kind of Hinduism has proliferated and currently continues to flourish. Yet throughout both historical and more recent periods of religious innovation, some Hindus have retained certain beliefs, activities and symbols which were excluded from the emergent orthodoxy. Many are beliefs, activities and symbols disapproved of or actively denounced by mainstream Hindu religious authorities. These have therefore remained phenomena which are on the ‘periphery’ of accepted Hindu practice in Trinidad – phenomena which, as van der Veer (n.d.) has put it, tend to take place ‘back stage’ from the more orthodox forms of Hinduism.

Given the contemporary renewal and embellishment of collective practices centring on ever-more standard concepts and activities, some of these more peripheral Hindu practices may be within their last generation in the island. To the extent these do persist in Trinidad, rites of propitiation
toward lesser deities and supernatural, magical practices and healing cults are more prevalent in rural villages than in urban areas (owing to the former’s greater social insulation, to greater privacy in conducting personal and domestic affairs, and to a kind of conceived greater propinquity, and thereby greater access, to supernatural forces).

On lesser deities and supernaturals

The rural Indians who migrated to places like Trinidad had lived in conceptual worlds densely populated with a variety of supernatural beings. Gods, demons, ghosts, and other personified powers were regularly propitiated or otherwise dealt with through the course of Hindus’ daily lives before emigration. Most of these beings, and the acts which they demanded from humans, were associated in various ways with the lowest caste groups. Low-caste, non-brahmanic traditions were considered, by other caste groups, as ecstatic (engaging in possession), impure (involving alcohol and blood sacrifice), and powerful (involving shakti or cosmic energy). The stigma attached to these traditions was effectively transferred to Trinidad: as the processes of homogenization and institutionalization transformed (under the direction of Brahmins) the breadth of Hindu ideas and practices into a unitary system, the ‘low caste’ aspects were increasingly regarded as undesirable. Hindus anxious to leave caste affiliations behind quickly dissociated themselves from rites surrounding lesser deities and supernaturals. However, while publicly adopting mainstream practice, many Hindus continued to conduct, in private, minor rites concerning such beings.

In Trinidad, the rite most clearly associated with low castes is the pig sacrifice to the goddess Parmeshwari, made by Chamar families. Parmeshwari, who is associated with Chamars by all Hindus, is considered a ‘sister’ (that is, a manifestation) of Kali. The sacrifices should be conducted annually by a consortium of Chamar families, and by each separate family on the occasion of a birth or marriage of a son. If collective, prior to the rites a set of women go from house to house in the neighbourhood, banging a drum and singing a special song (Bedassie 1975) while collecting contributions toward the ritual expenses.

Parmeshwari sacrifice is directed by any knowledgeable man, with the assistance of one or more others (especially to hold the massive pig). The sacrifice should be performed on a boundary between two plots of land (an indication of the rite’s liminal, rather tantric or magical, and therefore powerful nature). Most of the same items as for Durga puja are offered: lepsi, sohari, neem leaves, and dhar (see Chapter 4, note 24). Yet other offerings here include onion, garlic, cumin, and salt – all considered tamasic substances (that is, of the lowest order of the three gunas or universal substances, thereby further demonstrating Parmeshwari’s lesser status compared to Sanskritic deities). These offerings are set on to nine paan leaves, representing the ‘seats’ of the various related goddess manifestations. Hawaiian is also performed. After a wooden stake is anointed with sindhar and saffron, the heart of the pig is quickly pierced. Any participant may then pour dhar on the dead animal’s head, and offerings of rum and cigarettes are set before it. Possession by the goddess traditionally occurred at this point, but it is less frequent among most practitioners today. The lepsi and sohari, pork meat, and alcohol are later consumed as prasad in a feast involving all who contributed.

Participants in no way see such rites as malevolent or non-Hindu. (Nonetheless, during the course of one such rite, a participant gestured to a Hindu temple down the road to which all present belonged, commenting about the sacrifice and the temple, ‘We mustn’t mix dis an’ dat.’) Chamars believe they have a duty to propitiate Parmeshwari, who they believe to be their special group deity or kuldevata. It is an essential part of who they are and how they have descended. ‘Dis de way de ol’ people did t’ings’, says one man of the rites and his forebears, ‘so dis de way we do it.’ But by far most active participants these days are over forty years of age; they lament the fact that young people currently have no desire to maintain these longstanding traditions.

Another type of blood sacrifice is performed by Hindus of many caste backgrounds, a rite also involving alcohol and cigarettes as well. This is a yearly sacrifice to Dih or ‘Dih-baba’, the tutelary demigod of lands. Though generally considered ‘low’ in its means, many individuals take little pain to justify sacrifices of cocks to this deity. They simply consider the annual rite to be an important measure to ensure good harvests and a healthy household. It is performed by one or two individuals at any place within their plot of land. As with Parmeshwari sacrifice, the meat and alcohol are subsequently eaten as prasad.

A demigod less attended to is Bheyro, a ‘brother of Kali’ (or fierce aspect of Shiva; Dih is sometimes himself regarded as a manifestation of Bheyro). Bheyro is the focus of no puja or sacrifice, but he is recognized during collective pujas for the shaktis or minor goddesses. However, while seven or nine ‘seats’ (paan leaves) are provided on a vedi for these goddesses, Bheyro’s place is a leaf off the altar. When the yellow jhandi for the goddesses are erected in front of the house at the normal sanctum, only a deya for Bheyro is placed separately at the back of the house. Thus he is worshipped, but he is considered to be of an entirely different, somewhat sinister nature than other gods and goddesses who are given holy ground. Many Hindus are slow to discuss, or sometimes even to admit, their propitiation of such lesser deities – especially those considered to be on the ‘dark side’ of the godhead.
Following the suggestion of an informant, Klass (1961: 169ff.) distinguishes two basic types of religious ritual in Trinidad: *suri* (godly, referring to *pujas* and other devotional acts directed toward the Sanskrit pantheon) and *asuri* (demonic, pertaining to the kinds of rituals and lesser deities described above). This is an unfortunate and unfair categorization, telling more about the orthodox (even elitist) attitudes of Klass’s informant than about the phenomena under discussion. My own informants, who – alongside standard Sanatanist practices – conducted rites and observances surrounding lesser deities, were shocked and somewhat hurt to consider such rites and observances as ‘demonic’. Instead, they insisted that the lesser deities propitiated in such rites were merely manifestations of Sanskritic gods in forms more appropriate for dealing with evil forces so as to protect devotees. They considered such rites and deities as wholly in line with mainstream belief and practice.

Other supernatural or ‘folk’ beings are believed in by many Trinidad villagers, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian – African or Indian. These include: *soucouyans* (female vampires), the phantom (an extremely tall demon), Papa Bois (a satyr-like forest guardian), *legahus* (werewolves), and *la diablesse* (a demonic seductress with feet facing backwards – exactly as a *kichin* was described in nineteenth-century Bihar; Grierson 1885: 408). None of these is propitiated by any means, but are merely attributed sources of nocturnal fright. *Jumbies*, on the other hand, do require some ritualized manipulation. Described as spirits of the unbaptised dead, *jumbies* are said to live in silk cotton trees; many are believed to be the ghosts of slaves killed by Spanish pirates in order supernaturally to guard buried treasure. *Jumbies* are believed to possess unwary passers-by (drunk men in forests are likely targets), therefore requiring exorcism. For this pundits are seldom called upon; instead, other local men with knowledge of the supernatural and with powerful *mantras* or prayers are sought after. Such men may gain widespread reputations, within and outside the village, for their successes in exorcism. (Hindu specialists may be visited by non-Hindu Indians or Africans, and Hindus themselves may seek renowned non-Hindus or Africans for like purposes.) The sharing of certain supernatural concepts and practices among Hindus and others, also characterizes certain magical and healing complexes.

**On magic and folk healing**

The system of magic popularly known as *obeah* is common to Trinidadians of all religious and ethnic groups. Originally drawn from West African *obayifo* (witchcraft) systems, these magical beliefs, acts, and symbols have been combined or made interchangeable with those from North India, known as *ojha. Obeahmen or ojhamen* (both also called ‘seer-men’) may be African or Indian, and of any religion (however, they tend to be Spiritual Baptist or Shangoists in the first case, Hindus in the second); their clients are equally mixed. These practitioners perform a number of duties (some for extremely high prices), including the finding of lost objects, the performance of love magic, and casting curses or protecting people from them. Hindu *ojhamen* are known to use the Indar Jal, a notorious occult sourcebook for manipulating supernatural powers.

Less awe-inspiring than *obeahmen/ojhamen* are those Hindu men who have learned curative *mantras* with which to conduct healing by *jharay-phukay* (stroking and blowing). These utterances (which must be pronounced in a single breath) and gestures (which may or may not utilize certain implements, such as broom straws, mustard oil, and *tariáhs*) are wholly remedial. Their most prevalent uses are for snake or spider bites, scorpion and hornet stings, jaundice, headaches, and *najar* or *mal ojo* (both local names for evil eyes, the latter from the Spanish *mal ojo*). Again, villagers of all religions and ethnicities receive the services of these men. However, their clients tend to be mostly Hindus; Muslims often utilize wrappings with written words from the Koran, while African villagers more often prescribe natural ‘bush medicines’ to relieve similar maladies.

Preventative magic among Hindus may take two forms: *tabij* and *totka*. The former is a talisman (associated with Muslim curers [the word is from Arabic], but Hindus make use of them too): Sanskrit or Hindi letters are written upon a geometric design which is folded and kept in a locket as a means of spiritual protection. The latter is a category of acts meant to prevent or alleviate personal mishap: for example, men will always pour the first few drops of a newly-opened bottle of liquor on to the ground before drinking (some say this is to appease the local Dih or *jumbie*); five stones or dirtballs are thrown in different directions upon the first arrival of a bridegroom at a wedding or mother and baby at home (a gesture meant to drive away evil). Some remedial measures are also considered as *totka*, such as ‘cutting’ the water in a glass five times with a knife, then drinking it, to cure a sore throat. While many *totkas* are well known, some are highly idiosyncratic (the latter are often laughed at as ‘nonsense’ by people who may profess different *totkas*).

In case of very serious or worrisome personal matters, many Hindu villagers make trips away from the village to cult centres devoted to female deities with special powers.
On goddess healing cults

The North Indian countryside is dotted with shrines and cult centres dedicated to minor mother (*mata* or *mai*) goddesses who are associated with particular healing abilities. There are two examples of these in present-day Trinidad: one is devoted to South Indian-style worship of Kali (there are three centres of this kind in the island); the other is based at Siparia, where pilgrims come to make offerings to a goddess manifestation which has come to be called Sipari Mai.

*Kali Mai puja* consists of the most characteristic set of Hindu rites practised by Madrassi-descended Indians in the Caribbean. It is particularly prominent in Guyana, where it has continuously flourished since the days of plantation indenture (Phillips 1960; Khan 1977; Bassier 1987). In Trinidad, however, Madrassi religious activity of all sorts was selectively suppressed by white colonial authorities and Hindus themselves: Madrassis’ ecstatic possession and firewalking were regarded as the most extreme forms of heathenism by the former, while the latter, increasingly ‘orthodox’ North Indian majority regarded Madrassis’ *shaktism* and blood sacrifice as especially ‘low’ religious modes of practice (this was their opinion of Chamar practices also). Where Madrassis settled individually amongst North Indians and their descendants, the distinct South Indian styles of Hinduism gave way to the developing mainstream forms. Only in the few places in Trinidad where a large number of Madrassis settled together, did socio-religious activities like *Kali Mai puja* continue in any institutionalized manner. By the 1970s, such practices were quite rare.

In the early 1970s, two Madrassi-descended Trinidadians (each of whom had family connections in Guyana) independently set up Kali Mai centres in the island (one, in the North, the other in the South). Both had been disciples of one of the most prominent *Kali pujarjis* (priests) in Guyana, James Naidoo. These centres now rival each other; their founders are not on good terms. (*Meanwhile, another centre of Kali-worship unrelated to either of these men has been founded in Central Trinidad; but this is not quite as popular as the other two, for possession is not as dramatic, nor is blood sacrifice conducted.*

At the two main centres, people from all over Trinidad come every Sunday seeking help for physical or personal problems (including skin disease, epilepsy, suspected possession, marital disorder, depression). Specific offerings are made at a number of *murtis,*

subsequently offering direct consultation, exorcism, or hands-on healing – as a *devata* incarnate – to any and all who wish (waiting their turn while standing in a lengthy queue); this may continue for well over an hour, during which time the possessed ones periodically lapse into greater states of abandon or uncontrol. Much of the advice supplied by the temporarily-present deities concerns devotion to them, fasts, and offerings the supplicant is required to make subsequently at home or on the following Sunday(s) at the centre. The tales of miraculous cures, told by participants, are plentiful.

*Kali Mai* centres in Trinidad are anomalies; they grew in popularity precisely at the time when a unitary, *bhakti*-oriented Hinduism was rapidly increasing in intensity and activity. Perhaps these centres represented an outlet for people drawn to ecstatic, personalistic, and miraculous forms of religion while other forms of Hinduism were becoming more methodical, collective, and doctrinal. The fact also remains that the period of growing popularity of *Kali Mai puja* was also the time of vast social changes throughout Trinidad: new relationships, new pressures, new anxieties were part of the country’s overnight ‘modernization’. The availability of the kind of charismatic religion offered to Hindus by Kali Mai centres (as by Christian Pentecostal sects for others) provided the kind of direct, immediate salvation or cure many people desired – with the particular characteristic of being within an accessible Hindu context.

Most village Hindus know of the existence of the Kali Mai centres, or perhaps know someone who has been to one. Many Hindus stay well away from such ‘dark’ places; nonetheless, they recognize the effectiveness of the *shakti* supposed to be present there. Ultimately, they admit that in the case of some incurable ailment or insurmountable personal problem, they, too, would travel across the island to seek help at a Kali Mai centre.

*Sipari Mai* embodies a much more acceptable source of spiritual-curative aid. In Siparia, an old statue of a black Virgin is found in the Catholic church of La Divina Pastora, which was originally established by Spanish Capuchin monks in the 1750s. The exact origin of the statue is a mystery. (Spanish Capuchins venerated La Divina Pastora – the Virgin Mary as ‘the Divine Shepherdess’ – as well as various black Virgins; it should be noted, however, that La Divina Pastora, in Spain, is not one of these black Virgins [Mary Vincent, personal communication].) Many folk tales abound about how the statute was found by Arawaks or by indentured Indians, as well as how the statute was known to behave in miraculous ways (‘growing’ from a small girl each morning to become an old woman by night; leaving the church at night and walking around the countryside). Numerous cures as well as grantings of children to supposedly barren women, have been claimed throughout the statue’s long history.
Since the days of plantation indenture, Hindus have made pilgrimage to Siparia to make offerings at the statue (regarded as a murti, which in fact looks remarkably like an Indian woman). Non-Hindu sources have promulgated the idea that Sipari Mai, for Hindus, is Kali. (This somewhat uninformed notion is based on the superficial observation that Hindus call the statue, these non-Hindus say, ‘Sipari K. Mai’ – the ‘K’ supposedly standing for ‘Kali’. This explanation is provided in official pamphlets sold by the Catholic church. In fact, Hindus are actually saying, in Hindi, ‘Sipari ke Mai’, or translated, simply ‘Mother of Siparia.’) Rather, Sipari Mai is a goddess manifestation unto herself, bearing the same relationship to Kali and Durga and Lakshmi – and to all the other devis – as does any goddess (just as healing goddesses are considered ultimately to be aspects of one another in India, yet revered as separate, sacred personalities). ‘She all a’ dese’, says one female Hindu devotee regarding Sipari Mai and her relationship to the other devis. (During one Nav ratri period, it was fascinating to observe that someone had placed a small plastic murti of Lakshmi beneath the statue in the church, attesting further to the co-recognition of goddesses.)

Throughout the year Hindus and others come to Siparia to offer prayers or thanksgiving to Sipari Mai, pinning on her long dress a variety of votive offerings (such as small eyes, limbs, babies made from gold). The church remains the sole place where many Hindus will bring their children for their first haircut, seeking blessings and protection for the children by placing the hair (along with rice and money) at the statue’s feet. Hindus conduct their offerings and prayers in the church alongside Catholics and Spiritual Baptists.

Each year on the Thursday and Friday before Easter, up to ten thousand Hindus make pilgrimage to the church, queuing all night and day (while countless beggars receive alms, and traditional transvestite dancers dance with babies – a mode of blessing unique to the site on these days). Each person individually files past the statue/murti, to charawe gifts (with the accompanying gesture to their forehead) and to place a tika of sindhur on the forehead of the Mai. This period is when most will bring their son or daughter for the haircut rites: the churchyard is filled with barbers and bawling children. Nearby, streets are lined with stalls selling sweets, produce and religious paraphernalia (appropriate to any of the religions on the island). The undertaking is massive, and the local Catholic priest currently tries his best to accommodate the Hindus in their devotions.

As popular as pilgrimage to Sipari Mai/La Divina Pastor is, it is nonetheless regarded by orthodox Sanatanist leaders as an aberration. This attitude was expressed in one article in a national newspaper:

Pundit Seeraram Jadoonanana, spiritual leader of the Sanatan Vidwad Vidyalaya of Penal, said: ‘The La Divina worship is not related to Hinduism in any way. The Hindus who worship the Catholic saint do not out of superstition, not out of an identity with any Hindu goddess.’

He added: ‘The Hindus who go to worship the La Divina in the Siparia R.C. Church are not real devotees of Hinduism.’

(Express 5 April 1985, p. 3)

The struggle by some to create or maintain what they consider to be orthodox norms continues. Because Sipari Mai worship is informally centred on what can be regarded as a minor (though miraculous) goddess manifestation – but more so, perhaps, because it is conducted without pundits at a Catholic church – it is relegated to a peripheral position in ‘official’ Hindu practice. Such is the case, too, with Kali Mai puja, since it is closely associated with ‘low’ Madrassi practices involving possession and blood sacrifice. Both of these are popular forms of Hinduism, but ones not integrated into the unitary brand of the religion advocated by a highly institutionalized and organized majority. But longstanding and organized Hindu sects have similarly been pushed into secondary status in the island; moreover, at least one has been branded as heresy.

### On Hindu sects

It has been described earlier how Hindu sects or sampradayas like the Ramanandis, Seunarinis, Kabiris, and Aghoris came to Trinidad with the indentured migrants. Much of the doctrine or orientation espoused by the Ramanandis evolved, for the most part, into the consensus Sanatan Dharm religion practised by most Hindus in the island today. The Aghoris, due to their extreme practices, were virtual pariahs; they are now practically extinct in Trinidad. The Seunarinis (Siva Narayanis) and Kabiris, along with the Arya Samajis, still survive on the island in ever-decreasing minorities with few young people. These minor sects are organizationally allied with the Divine Life Society, a more philosophically-oriented Hindu body which maintains close links with the society of the same name in Rishikesh, India. All of these are recognized and respected by Sanatanists in Trinidad as a parallel mode of expression of Hinduism. Moreover, members of these sects tend to participate in most Sanatanist socio-religious activities, while at the same time conducting their own rites amongst themselves.

Seunarinis’ central rite is centred on a chauk (altar) on which Swami Narayani’s Guru Anyas (compilation of sixteen holy books) is venerated. Kabir panthis perform chauk ceremonies involving the invocation of the satguru (‘true guru,’ embodied by Kabir himself) and the singing of Kabir bhajans. Arya Samaji rites are wholly centred in havan (homa) and ex-
pressed in Vedic mantras toward a single God. Each of these sects conduct weddings and funerals which only slightly deviate from Sanatanist rites. Divine Life ceremonies are identical to Sanatanist pujas (indeed, members of this body are considered by themselves and others as Sanatanists); they are highly bhakti-oriented and make great use of bhajans (many Sanatanist bhajan-kirtan groups use songbooks published by the Divine Life Society); however, the sermons given at Divine Life events tend to express Vedantic or yogic philosophy in contrast to the heavily Puranic sermons of orthodox (viz. Maha Sabha) Sanatanists.

Many of the other, smaller Hindu bodies such as the Vedanta Society, Raja Yoga Centre, and others (listed above under ‘National Organizations and Networks’) are recognized by most Hindus as acceptable, but not very mainstream, forms of Hinduism. This is due to their emphasis on certain doctrines (such as ‘non-dualism’) or practices (such as meditation) which have appeal only to well-educated or philosophically-minded Hindus. It is only those who profess faith in Satya Sai Baba who cause considerable controversy within the Hindu community.

Sai Baba is a religious leader presently living in South India who claims to be an avatar or incarnation of God (Swallow 1982). In Trinidad, widespread devotion to Sai Baba began in the early 1970s, and has spread until the present day. It is important to note that the bulk of devotees tend to be well-educated, urban or semi-urban, middle-class Hindus – the number of which swelled during the oil boom. In rural villages his veneration is less apparent. The thought of a living avatar in India may be more attractive to the well-to-do Hindu, who has the money to go and see him in person; a large number from Trinidad do just this.

Since Sai Baba and his devotees promote the idea that he is an avatar, orthodox Sanatanists in Trinidad have regarded the sect as heretical. A teacher at a Maha Sabha school was threatened with dismissal if he taught about Sai Baba; at a yagna, a vyas pundit publicly castigated the performing bhajan-kirtan group for singing Sai bhajans. Nevertheless, Sai Baba’s picture is alongside other devatas in many temples and at some yagnas. Most common Hindus simply recognize Sai Baba as ‘a great man’, and are not nearly as upset over the avatar claim as pundits and other Hindu religious officials.

This variety of Hindu groups, acts, and beliefs still prevails at the fringes of accepted Hindu practice in Trinidad, withstanding the heightened trends of standardization predominating since the mid-1970s. Yet most of these less widely-accepted facets of Hinduism are finding little recognition among young Hindus, who have tended instead to embrace the more recently-revitalized forms.

‘We is Jewaan’: religious practice of Hindu youth

By and large, young Hindus (that is, under age 25) have been prominent participants in the vibrant socio-religious activities arising out of the oil boom years. They have been regular shrutus in family pujas and – most significantly – young people have been the leading members of satsang/bhajan-kirtan groups (for example, of the twenty-five most active members of the Shri Ganesh Ramayn Group mentioned earlier, fourteen are under 25, with a further five under 30). In temple groups as well, it is young people who play possibly the largest part in maintaining the building, organizing yagnas, and (particularly) in running bazaars. Many have even founded their own Hindu youth groups, or joined similarly-composed national organizations.

For example, in 1977 the Penal Rock Hindu Youth Group was founded by ten young men and women (average age 19) from different parts of the village. They sent circulars to all young Hindus in the village, drew up a constitution, and became affiliated with the County’s Community Development Office (thus becoming eligible for funding). Their expressed purpose was to link all the Hindu groups in the greater Penal area, to coordinate or co-advertise the activities of these groups, and to stage large gatherings themselves for Diwali displays, cultural shows, and Phagwa festivities. By the end of the decade, despite their growing success they found that the Presbyterian-dominated Village Council was not cooperating with the Group. So members of the Group campaigned and managed to get themselves elected to the Council in order to take a direct hand in local community organization. Today, the Penal Rock Hindu Youth Group continues to promote popular Hindu socio-religious activities of many sorts, while their links with other organizations have expanded and strengthened.

Young people as little as nine years old have begun to participate actively in nationally-sponsored events coordinated by the Hindu Seva Sangh. Formed by disaffected members of the Hindu Jewaan Sangh (‘Youth Association’), the Maha Sabha’s youth wing, the Seva Sangh has undertaken a successful programme of energetic religious education. In addition to their weekly classes, this organization also sponsors summer camps located at various places throughout the island, each attended by hundreds of children and teenagers, their key task is to promote ‘aggressive Hinduism’, an attitude meant to take Hindus ‘off the defensive’ in their relations with other religions and ethnic groups. By stressing the perceived historical insults to Hindus in the past (indentured labour, religious prejudice, lack of media time, political opposition), an ethnic ideology is forged and promul-
gated, calling upon young Hindus to be firm in their devotion and identity (Vertovec 1990b). Songs and lessons emphasize that Hindu dharma is ‘threatened’ from outside, and that it is the young people who must maintain the vigour of Hinduism’s current religious culture.

In addition to promoting certain outlooks and attitudes among Hindu youth, Hindi classes are provided by the Seva Sangh, and the teachings of Vivekananda are promulgated (providing young Hindus with newer, more philosophical insights on their traditions than those ideas held by their Purana-oriented parents). Such emotive and educational approaches are very successful, especially for the highly-educated and greatly-Westernized young Hindus of Trinidad today.

The Bharatya Vidya Sanstan (BVS) is another organization wholly dedicated to young people, which also sponsors classes and camps at various centres around Trinidad. Their message is more classical: in addition to Hindi, Sanskrit is taught; in addition to songs, lessons in sitar, tabla, and Indian musical composition are conducted. The members of the BVS (some of whom attend Seva Sangh functions, too) are almost entirely recipients of at least secondary education, and many have well-paid jobs in urban areas.

Young Hindu men and women of the village, who have not had access to the educational and promotional opportunities provided by these kinds of groups, have still experienced other means of religious inspiration. Temple and yajna activities and satsang/bhajan-kirtan group performances are an obvious type of practice which has bolstered their religiosity. For their weddings, most young Hindus nowadays insist on having the fully elaborated ceremony – complete with traditional dress, much decoration, and lengthy ritual sequences – as opposed to the brief and westernized ‘table wedding’ preferred by Hindu youth in the 1960s.

Another asset for developing the ethnic ideals of Hindu youth has been the greater availability of Hindi film music (played on expensive tape decks) and videotapes of Hindi films from India (played on videotape recorders purchased for their families) since the oil boom, when young people made enough money to afford such luxuries. Their constant attention to Indian music and films (also viewed at cinemas in nearby towns) has served inadvertently or unconsciously to intensify their identity as Hindus and Indians. Music and film have helped create a myth of India, to which they aspire. Although youths can’t understand many of the words of the songs or movies,26 they are never bored, and insist on satisfying their appetite for the Indian media’s latest songs and movies. ‘Look at me,’ said one 23-year-old Hindu, while his Sony tape deck blasted hit songs from the latest Hindi film, ‘I cyan understan’ dis t’ing – but I mus’ hear it!’

Religious films from India, too, provide an important vehicle for conveying religious myths and concepts to young people. One teenage male touchingly confided that while watching a scene from the film Ram Bhakt Hanuman, when the god Hanuman demonstrates his love and devotion by tearing open his chest to reveal Ram and Sita enthroned on his heart, he himself began crying. Even recalling the scene he became emotional, an example of how young Hindus can feel deeply for the stories and tenets of their religion.

Nonetheless, as dedicated to Hinduism as village youth of Trinidad are, there is a considerable generation gap with their parents and elders. The youth want explanations during ritual, not sacerdotalism. They want meaningful guidelines and philosophical interpretations from sermons, not platitudes. And they want to live as the modernized, educated young people they are, not (as they say) ‘like dem ol’ Indians’ or ‘dem ol’ coolies’. Much of this attitude is expressed in the single utterance below (made with the stress on the Hindi term for ‘youth’), pronounced by one man in his late teens who, when asked what he felt about the caste system and the practice of castigating alleged ‘low’ practices of certain groups, became slightly cross and stated emphatically ‘No, mon, look! We is Jeewaan! We is yout’, mon! [It] is not for we.’

The Hindu village youth will likely continue the upsurge in devotional practice, religious education, and social organization which they helped launch in the 1970s. While maintaining a bhakti orientation, they may, however, take Hinduism into a more Vedantic (rather than purely Vaishnavite or Puranic) orientation. Compared to times past, a higher level of education and a more sophisticated understanding of the world among village youth (some of whom even attend university) are factors leading toward this more philosophical approach to Hinduism. The benefits and acts called ‘peripheral’ in this chapter may or may not fall by the wayside (practices surrounding lesser deities and magic will dissipate probably more than the healing cults). The process which Hindu youth and others like to call ‘the Hindu renaissance’ will likely continue for some time yet, given the enormous momentum it achieved following the economic prosperity-turned-religious activity experienced in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Notes

1 Years ago, Trinidad Hindus would also sweep their houses on this night, beat a rice winnowing tray in all rooms to drive out evil, and light a special deya (Yamdeep) – kept on the road outside and away from their jhandi – to honour Yama. These doings are well known in villages of Uttar Pradesh (Planalp 1956: 326–31). The practice is rarely found among Trinidad Hindu families today.

2 The term ‘complex’ is employed following Meyerhoff (1974). ‘Complex’ is emphasized because ‘it focuses attention on the close association between the individual symbols. It is used . . . to refer to a system of related parts, which are discrete but rendered especially meaningful and expanded when used in combination’ (ibid.: 193).
In Guyana, the flag’s inclusion in the ritual connotes such an integral part of the service that ‘holding a puja’ is often interchangeably referred to as ‘holding a jhandi’.

The extremely tattered condition of some of these flags has been cause for criticism by some non-Hindus. Niehoff (1960: 117–18) relates the story of one Hindu who lived on grounds owned by Shell Oil Co.: when a non-Hindu manager requested that a weathered jhandi be removed, the Hindu refused, saying he would sooner move quarters than take the flag down.

Certain Christians, especially fundamentalist evangelicals, believe jhandi and the items at their base connote devil worship or black magic. There is much similar misinterpretation among non-Hindus in Trinidad over the meaning of Hindu jhandi. Too often these prayer flags are confused with the large, coloured flags flying at the ritual centres of the syncretic, Afro-Caribbean religion known as Shango. The latter are associated with different orisha (personified powers, stemming from the West African Yoruba tradition). In some respects, then, these are similar to jhandi in that they broadly represent supernatural beings. However, Shango flags are not erected each time a ceremony of worship is conducted, they are square and sometimes multi-coloured, and they are much larger than jhandi. Further, the places at the base of Shango flags are used for entirely dissimilar ritual practices. Since these flags fly at Shango centres, which are popularly identified (rightly or not) with the activities of Obahmen (black magicians), jhandi flags have become associated with the same sinister magic (Obeah).

The ritual erection of jhandi is also found in other post-indenture overseas Hindu communities, doubtless for similar reasons. The history and meaning of this practice would certainly comprise an interesting subject for comparative study. Regarding aspects of jhandi practice in South Africa, see Kuper 1960: 200, photo between pp. 204–5; in Fiji, Mayer 1961: 85, plate X a; in Guyana, Singer 1967: 99–100.

Many observers have suggested that jhandi merely serve to indicate Hindu homes. Jain (1988: 139), on the other hand, offers an interpretation of a different sort: ‘The raising and periodic renewal of the flags is the visible mark of “distinction” (as Bourdieu would have it), a sign of the Indian in Trinidad having arrived, the symbolic embodiment of his position in the social space. A house on land owned by the community signals that the economic capital has been acquired and the installation of the flag through proper ritual means signifies “for all time to come” that the economic capital has been converted into symbolic capital.’ It remains open to question whether an effect or subsequent function of jhandi is as Jain proposes; yet this interpretation does not ask what jhandi mean to Hindus. It is this latter question which the abstract notion of ‘puja/jhandi sanctum complex’ seeks to address.

For Brahmans, the sansksara of janeo (sacred thread) investiture is seldom practised, unless a teenage male is dedicated to becoming a pandit. When the rite was performed on one occasion some years ago, a national newspaper covered the event with a headline, ‘Rare Hindu Ceremony Performed in Debe’ (Express 10 August 1975).

The high degree of ritual and textual knowledge possessed, overtly or not, by a substantial percentage of the Hindu community distinctively shows the error of Schwartz’s (1964b: 8) statement that the ‘viability and perpetuation of Hindu beliefs based upon the creeds and scriptures is directly dependent upon the activities of the pandit’.

The immediate family must quickly decide which will be the means of disposal for the deceased. Though cremation is recognized as the Hindu ideal, a strong tradition of burial was formed in Trinidad in the early years of post-indenture settlement (Niehoff 1961: 132). This was essentially because cremation was not legal until the mid-1930s, and a formal cremation site was not available until the 1960s. Moreover, the site eventually constructed by the Maha Sabha, many Hindus felt, was most unsatisfactory (a fact which suggested to them that gross irregularities must have involved the substantial government funds given to the organization to build such a site. In the mid-1970s, however, a splendid new site was built in County St Patrick by the Indian-dominated Council; it has served to re-institutionalize rapidly this most orthodox type of mortuary rite.) While both types of funeral normally involve an expense of up to TT$1500 for a coffin, hearse, and funeral home provisions, cremations cost at least TT$350 more than burials (in order to purchase the large quantities of each ritual item burned with the corpse: 20 lb of ghee, 10 lb camphor, 4 lb gogol, 5 lb rice, 5 lb sugar; only small portions of these items are symbolically placed in a coffin to be buried). If wood is not donated, furthermore, its purchase adds considerably to the cost of cremation.

Many consider this institution to be one diffused from the Afro-Trinidadian community. Indeed, wakes are an integral part of the mortuary practices of practically all African groups in Trinidad – Catholic, Anglican, or Spiritual Baptist. The African pattern includes the additional practice of rhythmically beating pans and sticks throughout the night.

While purity and pollution have been concepts which lost effectiveness regarding castes, they remain significant among Hindus in Trinidad in matters of birth and death. The maintenance of these concepts here is not surprising, since they relate to critical personal transitions and relations. ‘Family impurity is the most important’, writes Dumont (1970: 55). ‘[I]t is that of birth (sutaka) and above all death. Birth only lastingly affects the mother and the newborn child. Death affects the relations collectively and the impurity essentially affects not the people in whose house someone dies, but the relations of the deceased wherever they may be. Moreover, the effect varies according to the degree of kinship.’

The full list of elements for pinda dan indicates, to a large extent, the symbolic complexity of the rites: mango leaves, congolala bush, milk, ground rice, sugar; only small portions of these items are symbolically placed in a coffin to the cost of cremation.

Regarding mahapaterismahabrahmans, ‘sinister’ is appropriate in both its denotations as ‘malignant’ and ‘referring to the left side.’ Just as rites for the dead are associated with facing south, so too are they conceptually linked with practices ‘of the left’. ‘The opposition between right and left . . . is clearly associated with “rites to gods” and “rites to ancestors” – the former being associated with propitiation of divine beings who are friendly and benevolent, the latter being associated with those supernatural beings who have to be appeased, who inspire terror and have the potential of causing great harm if they are not regularly propitiated’ (Das 1977: 99).

Among the gifts to the dead (via the mahapater) normally requisite at the tenth day shraddha are: a piece of gold, a lotah and a tarih, rice and flour, onions, garlic, oil, a dhoti and a marina, a bed or foam mattress, a blanket, bedsheet, and pillow, an umbrella, lamp, and slippers. A cow, in years past, was also an ideal gift. The costs include: 20 lb of ghee, 10 lb camphor, 4 lb gogol, 5 lb rice, 5 lb sugar; only small portions of these items are symbolically placed in a coffin to be buried). If wood is not donated, furthermore, its purchase adds considerably to the cost of cremation.
16 There is regular public debate in Trinidad, among pundits and other religiously learned Hindus, regarding the proper calculation of astrological periods and dates. One wing claims that the almanacs received from India must be adjusted to account for local Trinidad time, while another wing insists—in the name of strict orthodoxy—that the India-based times should be observed. Mayer (1961: 67n.) noted the same dilemma among Hindus in Fiji.

17 In the Trinidadian folk occult system known as Obeah, the belief in which is widespread among Indians and Africans alike, the castor oil plant is used for a variety of mostly malevolent magical purposes. It therefore serves as a locally appropriate symbol for the mythical witch, Holika. In Fiji, however, Mayer (1952: 10–11) reports that the sapling planted at the base of the bonfire is said to represent Prahalad.

18 While Phagwah is renowned for its freedom from social restriction (almost anyone can stain anyone else with abir), certain restraints are nevertheless maintained. If any person is clearly not wishing to participate, it is considered poor fun to stain them. With regard to more structured relationships, it is interesting to note that while married women of any age particularly love to stain their younger brothers-in-law, none will go near their brother-in-law, with whom there is a requisite avoidance relationship at all times.

19 ‘Indian Arrival Day’ on 30 May has recently become an important day of secular communal activity among Trinidad Indians, as it commemorates the landing of the Fatel Rozack, the first ship full of indentured labourers to reach Trinidad in 1845. Though meant to instil feelings of Indian ethnic solidarity, most festivities are organized predominantly by and for Hindus (see Vertovec 1990b).

20 Many pundits and others suggest that in addition to worshipping Lakshmi, Diwali also celebrates Ram’s arrival at this kingdom of Ayodhya after his defeat of the demon and the rescue of his wife, Sita. Advocates of this interpretation hold that the massive lighting of deyas recreates the act of Ayodhya’s citizens, who displayed such lights upon the avatar-king’s triumphant return. However, each year many other Trinidad Hindus dispute such an interpretation by citing the Ramayana itself, which indicates that Ram returned to Ayodhya in the month of Vaishakh (April–May), not at this time of year.

21 It would be unwise, of course, to advance such an outright prediction since such nonorthodox practices—though in a minority—are very affectively based and therefore very diehard religious complexes. In fact, decades ago the Niehoffs (1960: 126) put forward that ‘in recent years many low-caste believers have abandoned their propitiation of these [blood-taking and apparently malevolent] godlings and have substituted ordinary Sanatanist rituals’. Nevertheless, I still witnessed a variety of practices of this type during fieldwork in 1984–85.

22 The relation to Kali is rather vague, however, as are most shakti or goddess-related concepts. Klass (1961: 172–4) describes these rites entirely in terms of Kali, but also notes their reference to ‘other goddesses—the “seven sisters”’. Planalp (1956: 166–8) provides a myth suggesting that Parmeshwari was actually a Chamari girl, devoted to Parvati (Shiva’s consort), who was eventually deified. She is associated with Chamar throughout large areas of North India.

23 The gods and goddesses represented at Trinidad Kali Mai centres include an interesting combination of orthodox and ‘black’ deities, as well as Madrasi deities worshipped nowhere else in the island (indicated here by an asterisk *). They are: Suruj Narayan, Mother Earth, Ganesha, Krishna/Ram, Hanuman, Nag (a snake form of Shiva), Shiva, Ganga Mata, Koteri Mata* (identified with Parmeshwari), Sangani* (identified with Dih), Madra Viran* (or Kasirajan*), Munishprem*, Nagura* (‘a Muslim deity’ or jinn), Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Kali Mai (or Badra Kali*), and Kalbheyro (Bheryo, as specifically associated with Kali). Sangani, Madra Viran, and Munishprem all demand rum, blood, and cigarettes as part of their prasad, while Mother Kali (Kali Mai) takes blood—often requiring the one she possesses to drink it directly from the body or head of a decapitated cock or goat.

24 It is uncertain why these two days have become institutionalized as the time specifically for Hindus to make pilgrimage here (Catholics and Spiritual Baptists do so the second Sunday after Easter). Some local scholars have suggested that perhaps, since Holy Thursday and Good Friday were major holy days for the predominantly Catholic plantocracy, these were two of the only days each year when Indians were allowed off estate. Another possible contributing factor is that the first Nav ratri of each year takes place around this time (both Nav ratri and Easter are astrologically determined, therefore annually cooccurring), meaning that Hindus would be especially involved in goddess worship during this period.

25 Lee (1982) has studied the impact of the Sai Baba movement among overseas Hindus in Malaysia, where devotees of this figure also tend to be from the same socio-economic backgrounds as in Trinidad. Similarly, Lee’s analysis may be applicable to the situation in Trinidad as well: ‘The stringing of many Indians towards obtaining a Western secular education imply that they are likely to become less attached to the classical Hindu traditions. As a result, Hindu rituals that are grounded in the classical traditions [as are the strong Puranic forms in Trinidad] are likely to be perceived by many Westernized Indians as lacking in meaning. Thus Westernization has created conditions in which an English-educated member of the Hindu community can easily express religious alienation. Under such circumstances, he can easily become attracted to a cultic guru who claims to provide instantaneous satisfaction for his salvationary needs through miracle performance and popular discourse. Sai baba is one such cultic figure’ (ibid.: 133).

26 At cinemas, Hindi films with subtitles were introduced to Trinidad in the 1970s (most videos, however, are without them). Older Indians attest to how this innovation suddenly provided much impetus for young people’s appreciation of their culture. One informant, in fact, believes the entire revival of Hinduism in the island is due to ‘dis subtitle t’ing’.
Conclusion

Regarding the possibilities for divergent socio-cultural development among overseas Indian populations, Jayawardena (1980: 430) has written that 'the nature and manifestations of the traditional culture of immigrant peoples are influenced by historical processes that may or may not engender “ethnicity”,' a term which he defines as 'the consciousness of sharing a common culture derived from a set of traditions attributed to a common homeland.' In each chapter of this book, we have seen the unfolding of historical processes through which patterns of Hindu cultural practice in Trinidad have been continuously transformed. Further, differing degrees or kinds of Hindu self-consciousness have gradually emerged and found articulation in a variety of ways and forms, including the early organizational efforts stimulated by doctrinal confrontation in the 1920s and 1930s, the dynamics of party politics wrought by decolonization and independence in the 1950s and 1960s, and the sentiments and activities engendered by political partiality and economic change in the 1970s and early 1980s. In these ways, contemporary Hindu ethnicity in Trinidad can be seen to have been forged within a succession of contextual arenas.

Despite a variety of historical transformations, the sustained performance of everyday religious routines within individual, domestic and communal domains has ensured continuity in beliefs, actions and feelings, linked by genuine ideals of spiritual devotion and a sense of underlying order to which, it is urged within the community, all Hindus should orient themselves.

At times the perception of cultural continuity among certain communities is of a rather taken-for-granted nature: 'we do these things because those before us did them’ is the usual, and only necessary, justification of cultural practice. At other times the issue of continuity is increasingly called into collective awareness – even forged into an ideology and institutionalized: here, the reasoning for performing cultural practices becomes something along the lines of 'we do these things because they underscore our distinctiveness within this society, ensure our self-esteem, and manifest our ties with those who have come before us.’

It is changes in social, economic or political structures which most effect a stimulation of people’s reflections on the past, present and future plights of their culturally (and/or racially and/or class) based communities, reflec-
Appendix

Emigrants from India to Trinidad by District of Registration, 1881–1917 (source: Protector of Emigrants 1882–1918)

It should be noted that ‘District of Registration’ is not necessarily the same as district of origin, owing to the fact that many emigrants were recruited for indenture whilst away from their home area. This holds particularly true regarding persons recruited in large towns such as Benares, Patna, and the 24 Pergunnahs surrounding Calcutta. Many District names and regional groupings provided below, now rather antiquated, are those used in the original Annual Reports on emigration to foreign colonies. The Reports prior to 1881 do not provide comparable information on District of Registration.

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Glossary

Most frequently-appearing non-English terms

**Aguwah**: an emissary who arranges marriages
**Arti**: homage to a deity by waving light before an image
**Arya Samaj**: reformist Hindu sect following teachings of Swami Dayananda (1824–83)
**Avatar**: an incarnation of God (Vishnu)
**Bhagwat**: colloquial term for a type of yagna based around a reading from the Bhagavata Purana
**Bhajan**: a devotional hymn (usually collectively sung)
**Bhakti**: religious orientation of loving devotion to God
**Chandan**: a sandlewood paste used for a tika
**Charawe**: a ritual hand gesture by a devotee from the base of a murti to a devotee’s own forehead; used to transfer blessing
**Dakshina**: respectful offering to a pundit or sadhu
**Devi**: a goddess and manifestation of the one Divine Mother
**Deya**: a small clay lamp
**Dharma**: (a) moral duty, (b) universal order, (c) religion
**Dih (or Dih Baba)**: a local guardian deity
**Guru**: a spiritual teacher or guide
**Hawan**: ritual oblation of ghee (clarified butter) into a sacred fire
**Ishtdevata**: a deity especially worshipped by an individual
**Jihaji (or jehaji) bhai**: lit. ‘ship brother’, a close friend made during the passage from India
**Jhandi**: a coloured pennant signifying puja to a specific deity
**Kabir panth**: sect of followers of Kabir (1440–1518)
**Karma**: accumulated merits of action
**Katha**: ceremonial recitation of a sacred text
**Kirtan**: a devotional hymn
**Kuti, Kutiya**: a makeshift village shrine
**Mahapatra**: special variety of Brahman priest who performs funerary rites
**Mandir**: a Hindu temple
**Mantra**: a Sanskrit or Hindi prayer or ritual utterance
**Murti**: an image (usually a small statue) of a deity
**Obeah**: Trinidadian system of magic (from West African obayifo?)
**Panchayat**: a group (of usually five) village councillors
**Panth**: Hindu sect
**Prasad, Persad**: food ritually offered to a deity

Puja: Hindu ritual conducted by a pundit, generally directed towards a specific deity and consisting of sixteen offerings
Ramanandi Panth, Ramanandis: sect of followers of Ramananda (b. 1299)
Ramayan(a), Ramayn: Hindu epic of Lord Rama
Sadhu: originally in India meaning a religious mendicant, in Trinidad the term refers to one who is particularly devout
Saffron: turmeric
Sanatan Dharm: lit. ‘eternal duty, order or religion’, the term represents the form of generalized Hinduism which evolved in India and overseas particularly since the nineteenth century; in Trinidad, often ‘Sanatan Dharma’
Sanatanis, Sanatanists: followers of Sanatan Dharm
Satsang: lit. ‘true company’, in Trinidad the term refers to a domestic religious occasion involving the reading of the Ramayana
Shakti: cosmic energy
Shango: Afro-Caribbean religious sect, derived from Yoruba religion
Sindur: vermillion powder
Tika: spot made on the forehead as a sign of religious devotion
Vaishnavite: dedication to Vishnu and his incarnations (avatars)
Vedi: an altar (for puja)
Vyas (pundit): honorific title given to a presiding pundit at a yagna; after Vyasa Deva, legendary sage and purported compiler of the Puranas
Yagna: lit. ‘sacrifice’, in Trinidad the term refers to a seven (or fourteen) day series of rites and ceremonial readings from a sacred text
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