

## Indian Indentured Servitude in Trinidad and the Continuation of Culture

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### Abstract

Indians in Trinidad have been able to maintain a strong sense of self identity due to their response to emigration into a foreign land. Indians have not only adapted to societal change via indentured servitude and the period afterwards, but they have also managed to form a culture unique to East Indians in Trinidad that is both independent and integrated in Trinidadian culture. I will demonstrate this by illustrating the situation in which the Trinidadian Indian community was born, why the Indian traditions that remain in Trinidad do remain, and how this enabled a strong retention of Indo-Trinidadian culture.

**Key words:** Trinidad, indentured Indian labour, Indo-Trinidadian culture

### Indentured Servitude

Trinidad has a long history with indentured servitude. As a sugar producing island, a great workforce is needed in order to produce enough sugar to be profitable. Up until 1660 indentured servitude remained more economical than slavery for plantation owners on British islands. This changed when the Dutch helped to finance the switch from tobacco and cotton plantations to more profitable sugar plantations. Since the sugar plantations required a greater work force and could not afford land to be given to former servants, Beckles states that “only after the mid-1660s, when adverse forces affected the servant market, drastically reducing supply and pushing up costs, did enslaved African labor gain a clear cost advantage over servant labor” (2011, 209). This resulted in the near eradication of white indentured servitude.

Slave labor was very profitable for plantation owners in Trinidad, however this could not last forever. “Over the 19th century, slavery was gradually abolished in the Caribbean...

Emancipation presented plantation owners with a dilemma: ensuring sugar and other production

at high levels without the benefit of enslaved labor, or with diminishing numbers of freed workers willing to engage in plantation labor under the conditions offered by plantocracy... Another form of 19th century indenture brought immigrant laborers from Asia into the region” (Khan 2011, 400). Since India was a British colony, it experienced indenture as a government regulated industry (Khan 2011, 400) and between 1835 and 1917, almost 700,000 workers arrived from British India in Trinidad and British Guiana (Barker 2011, 34-35). This was the second largest wave of immigration into the Caribbean, only following the forced migration of African slaves.

### **Indian Labor to Trinidad**

A great number of Indians came to Trinidad through indentured servitude for a multitude of reasons. According to Jha in the Caribbean Quarterly, rural Indians were facing many hardships in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to climatic problems such as famine and flooding. This made agricultural life under British rule in India very difficult, and many accepted the offer of the crown, to go to Trinidad and find guaranteed work for a certain number of years (1973, 30). Since the majority of Indians that went to Trinidad as indentured servants were in the business of agriculture, they were accustomed to owning land. This provided Indians with a specific goal in mind once they finished their servitude. Jha states that “By the late 1870’s the Indians in Trinidad owned race horses and farm cows, and by 1885 and 1909 they had acquired about 69,087 acres of land” (1973, 30). As a result, Indians in Trinidad were able to build tight knit communities supported by steadily increasing monetary resources.

### **Not Treated as Equals**

However, just because Indians began to acquire land, did not mean they were treated as equal Trinidadians. Within servitude, and even post servitude, Indians were treated poorly, both by Afro-Trinidadians and plantation owners. They were treated as intruders in the labor market, as second class citizens, were required to have a passport on their persons at all times, and were barred from citizenship. All of this in spite of the fact they had helped to build up the colony and contributed to the revenue as taxpayers. These feelings of inferiority translated into a sort of exclusivity that became more prevalent as Indians began to own land and create their own

settlements. This exclusivity, both voluntary and involuntary, is precisely what allowed Indian culture to continually flourish (Jha 1973, 46).

### **Indo-Trinidadian Culture**

While Indian culture flourished, Indo-Trinidadian culture was and is not identical to East Indian culture, since servitude did alter the culture of former East Indians in Trinidad to a great degree. For example, Nevadomsky agrees with Schwartz (1964) and states that “sugar dictated the social structure, organization, and values of the labourers. For example, the caste hierarchy disappeared under the impact of a hierarchy based on management-labour relations” (1982, 92). Since the caste system was not practical during servitude, it was not reincarnated fully once servitude ended. Instead, the caste system “persisted in attitudes rather than in actuality. It no longer described a set of relations between interdependent and hierarchically ordered occupational and ritual groups” (Nevadomsky 1982, 93). The lack of a caste system is one element that exemplifies East Indians adaptation to Trinidad and makes Indo-Trinidadians different from East Indians.

### **Indian Social Organization**

Although migration and indenture exerted a powerful force on Indian social organization, this does not mean that Indians completely assimilated. For example, Jayawardena states that due to structural values, interethnic relations, and the policies of the host country, Indians were able to both change their customs and continue some traditions as well (Nevadomsky 1982, 94). In addition, endogamous marriages are also fairly unique to East Indians in Trinidad. Schwartz states that “East Indians comprise a distinct ethnic group in opposition to other similar ethnic groups on the island, i.e., Creole, Chinese, Armenian, etc. East Indians are endogamous within their own group. The overwhelming tendency is for East Indians to marry other East Indians” (1964, 59-60). The exclusivity of Indians in the early post indenture period allowed for the continuation of endogamous marriages. These endogamous marriages allowed the perpetuation of both marriage customs and religious rituals, the two strongest apparent traditions of East Indian culture in Trinidad (Nevadomsky 1982, 95).

### **Significance of Endogamous Marriage among Indo-Trinidadian**

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The continuation of endogamous marriage is significant in numerous ways. For example, not only does endogamous marriage perpetuate marital traditions, which are an integral component to any culture as they represent what the culture values most and allows people to come together. Furthermore, endogamous marriages keep Indian culture strong as they perpetuate family structure, cooking styles, language, education, clothing, and religion.

However, although the rate of mixed marriages between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians has been rising since the 1960's due to increased economic opportunities because of increased industrialization (Schwartz 1964, 65), a child is only considered mixed or "dougla" for one generation. After that, if the child marries an Indian, the Indian family system is reinstated. Specifically, "the concept of joint (extended) family, 'joint in food, worship, and estate' - one economic unit under the common shelter of which children and grandchildren would work for the economic betterment of the family" (Jha 1973, 40-41) can be seen even now in the Indian community in Trinidad. In this way, Indian marriage in and of itself helps to continue the legacy of Indo-Trinidadian culture and structure.

### **Religion, a Key Element**

Furthermore, religion has been a key element in the ability of East Indians to maintain a unique culture in Trinidad. Jha states that "In Trinidad in 1891, 85.9% of Indians were Hindu and 13.4% were Muslim. Religion has always been a core of Indian culture and to those that emigrated it served as a sustainer" (1973, 31). Since religion served as a sustainer for many Indians during servitude, it continued to bring Indians together post servitude as well. Traditions and ceremonies that were tied to religion remained prevalent, and the religious ceremonies even brought many musical traditions to Trinidad: from instruments like the sitar, to prayer songs (Jha 1973, 31). Some religious festivals have now become a part of the larger Trinidadian culture as a whole- as well as some Indian dishes playing roles as national dishes (Jha 1973, 44). In this way, the preservation of religion not only made the East Indian culture in Trinidad stronger, but it also allowed the integration of East Indian culture into the greater Trinidadian society.

### **Culture Preservation through Marriage**

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Overall, it is clear that while East Indians in Trinidad do not share an identical culture to that of their Indian ancestors on the subcontinent, the unique culture that they do practice has been nonetheless effectively preserved through marriage and religion. Nevadomsky states that “Social cultural change is seen to be an additive and highly selective process which has not undermined or eroded the core values and institutions of the rural community, but has only modified them in relatively minor ways” (1982, 111). It is clear that even as the rate of mixed marriages between Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians rises, East Indian culture will remain a central component to Trinidadian culture as a whole due to Indians ability to adapt, the lasting effects of marriage patterns, and religion.

### **My Visit to and Experience in Trinidad**

After visiting both India and Trinidad, and having experience with the Indian community in America, I feel as though I now have a more complete view of Indian culture as a whole.

Before visiting Trinidad, I had expected to see some people of East Indian descent and remnants of East Indian culture, but what I saw far surpassed my expectations. While Indo-Trinidadians have managed to preserve a distinct and unique culture, what I saw in Trinidad was an integrated society that simply included many facets of traditional East Indian culture that are now considered Trinidad’s own. Trinidadian culture is far more multi-faceted than what I had expected, and this interim course and visit provided me with the invaluable experience of witnessing it for myself. As French fries are to America, roti is to Trinidad.

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