

Future Directions for Indo Caribbean Culture :

Values and ethical Challenges in managing Indian Culture in a Westernized society

National Council of Indian Culture International Diaspora Conference

Dr. Lakshmi Persaud

For any culture to survive well, in a Westernized society is no mean feat. Why is it difficult? Indian culture has done well. What accounts for this? I shall look at important aspects of the social history of both the West and India, for their history will inform their thinking: values and ethics.

In the West, both Reason, and the Rights of the individual: the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression for all, freed men's productive capacity from the tyranny of the state and religious dogma. Trying to live by this ideal, led to the blossoming of what is now identified with the West: exploring and utilising the capacity of science and technology for the betterment of all. The invention of a succession of new products which improved many aspects of our lives, created wealth, that financed yet more inventions and discoveries resulting in a people with increased freedom, wealth and health. It is this combination that defines the West today and it is this which attracts many to Europe and the Americas, especially the young. It is this enhancing of individualism, the freedom it bestows to all that makes it difficult for conservative cultures to survive in the West.

Indian civilisation is amongst the world's most ancient, going as far back as 2000-3000BC. India's long history narrates the adventure of invaders into its country. A significant number of invaders remained and in time their culture was absorbed into that of the host country. The cultures of the invaders were: Hellenic, Chinese, Islamic, Persian and English. India's inherent, humane philosophy of inclusivity, of peace on earth, enabled it in good time to slowly assimilate the cultures that came to its shores.

India's population (1.27 billion) is large, and its sub continental size is 2,973,190 square kilometres. But what makes India unique, despite the size of its population and regional differences, is its commonality, the underpinning of all aspects of the lives of its people by religion; its healthy working democracy, (so difficult to have in developing societies) influences its inclusivity and tolerance of differences. An example of this is that there are far more Moslems living in India, a secular state than in the Moslem state next door— Pakistan. India's philosophy, Satyagraha enables the process of inclusivity to take place peacefully.

Westernized culture, especially in the past 50 years, has undergone enormous, rapid changes in many fields. Here I am especially concerned with the changes brought about by its own technological inventions: primarily the internet, the mobile phone and skype. These have revolutionised the speed and ease, in accessing a wide range of information as well as in contacting anyone anywhere on the planet, at anytime. Time itself has lost its long duration; it has become a moment at the click of the button "send."

A cursory look at the values and ethics of both the West and India show that they both respect, an independent judiciary, and a healthy working democracy. However, a closer look will reveal that there is an area of conflict. In Western culture, freedom of the individual which enhances individualism, conflicts with that aspect of Indian culture that expects the family (especially parents and grandparents) to offer guidance to teenagers, to show them the way to living well, in order to make the most of life's short duration.

Historically, India absorbed its many invaders, yet today, in the Caribbean, Indo Caribbeans are not as inclusive as their cultural heritage shows. Although, there are strong historical reasons, which I shall show later that are responsible for this, the time has come for Indo Caribbean peoples to offer a welcoming hand to all, in keeping with their heritage. Not doing so has had grave consequences; the suicide rate amongst Indo Guyanese is high. And though suicide is brought on by poverty and all the other issues, like that of exploitative power imbalances that emanate from it, nevertheless, cultural and religious issues are by far the main causes of a high percentage of Indo

Caribbean suicides. The excessive intake of alcohol by the wage earner on pay day means that there is very little money to run a household. This also contributes to much misery. A greater inclusivity should be encouraged by all. The internet refers to an Indo Christian parent who would not allow her daughter to marry a Hindu boy. This led to her daughter committing suicide, yet the reverse is more common.

Indians of mixed heritage need to know about their Indian cultural heritage; they should be welcomed by Indians and encouraged to understand and so to benefit from all aspects of their two heritages, joyously offered with their birth. The extent to which Indian culture has retained much of itself after many years is an important indicator of (1) how well it met the challenges to its values and ethics. This in turn reflects its strength, depth and resilience. The healthy practising presence of India's religion, its birth, marriage and death ceremonies and its foods reflect this.

The Indian Diaspora came from two main waves of Indians settling in a Westernized society. The first came from British India in the 19thC. Indentured workers were recruited to work in British sugar cane plantations of Mauritius, Fiji, Natal and the Caribbean; later, Indian workers went to East Africa to build the railways. The second wave came from the emigration of Indians from an Independent India to North America and Europe mainly in the 20th and 21st C. These were largely professionals and business men or those on life's upwardly mobile ladder. More recently, Indians have emigrated to Australia. For the "Keep Australia White policy" has gradually faded.

In this composition, I will concentrate mainly on the values and ethical challenges that faced Indo Caribbean peoples.

Indo Caribbean Culture of Trinidad and Guyana in the Westernized Caribbean

I am referring mainly to the cultural features of Hindu India as they form the vast majority in India with a much smaller percentage of Moslems; about 13% .The proportion of Hindus to Moslems who were indentured to the Caribbean closely resembled the same proportion that was present in India at the time. Although there are very small percentages of Indians in India whose religions are:

Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, too few persons of these faiths arrived to have had any impact on Indo Caribbean culture.

The challenges were strong that Hindu and Moslems indentured agricultural workers faced in the Caribbean. Being landless and working for very low wages in the countryside, meant that their status in the society was low. Clerks in the lowest rung of the Civil service had a higher status.

In addition to these setbacks, the indentured workers, initially lived far away from the towns where there were many amenities, e.g. electricity and piped water brought to homes, superior hospitals, schools, libraries, roads and public transportation. These helped to improve the standard of living of the urban communities who were mainly Afro Caribbeans and a small number of the descendants of Europeans.

Another important factor that affected Indian upward mobility (by 1937, in the civil Service in Guyana, numbering one thousand and eighteen, only 38 were Indians) was their religion – Hinduism. Christianity was the religion approved by those who recruited government clerks or civil servants. Afro Caribbeans were Christians; they also acquired the prejudices of Christians towards Hindus.

For a very long time, Afro Guyanese and Afro Trinidadians said openly that the culture of their respective countries must be Creole, i.e. African and British. They implied that their Creole culture was the national culture and that there was no place for a non-Christian Indo Caribbean culture.

Indo Caribbean culture they regarded with hostility, and even when this slowly abated, it never left and accounted for the disparaging attitude of Indian culture by Afro Trinidadians. It is this disparagement still present in the 1990's which our Nobel laureate, Derek Walcott heard and felt when he visited Felicity Village.

A Hindu was perceived as a heathen with all its associations: lacking in culture and moral principles and therefore not enlightened. On their travel documents, the word "heathen" was often written under the column: Religion.

When the Hindu children of former indentured workers studied and gained the appropriate qualifications, they could not find employment in Christian schools as teachers. A significant number converted to Christianity for economic reasons. Many of those who converted were told by Christian missionaries that if they did not, hell fire awaited them. It would appear however that it was the hell on Earth, i.e. no employment possibility that forced a number to be converted. Even when converted, they were seen as second class Christians for some time.

The depth of Hindu religion can be seen in the fact that even under such trying circumstances, the majority of Hindus did not convert. In the civil service, they also faced discrimination arising from their rural, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Their holding on to their cultural heritage, was perhaps not surprising, for when a people are made to feel threatened, all the more they hold on tenaciously to the reassurances of their communities, their religion, their gods and their culture which define them. For example, their pujas, kathas, feast days, their music and poetry, literature –the Vedas, the Upanishads and the great epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Indian films and music, their commonality with India, eased the process of separation of Hindus and Moslems from the rest. To this day they have continued to celebrate their religious festivals, special holy days e.g. Diwali, the festival of light, which celebrates both Rama returning from Lanka with his wife, the kidnapped Sita, as well as the celebration of having light itself, which saves us from darkness and so ignorance of our surroundings. It is also a celebration of the enlightenment of the human spirit. Shivratree, the birth of Shiva, Kartik-ke-nahan : bathing in the river very early in the morning (October/November) as dawn breaks , to wash away the sins of erring humans is still practised.

What has been lost or is fast losing its significance.

1) It is a matter of regret that though the first generation kept the Hindi language alive, as well as the yearly narration of the great epics in the open savannah, by the third generation, it was the Hindi language that was gradually being lost to the majority of the later generations of the indentured

workers. To lose a spoken and written language, another human way of thinking, feeling and expressing oneself, especially the mother tongue of one's forefathers is distressing.

Derek Walcott, our Nobel Laureate, on receiving his Nobel Prize, in 1992, addressed the audience in Sweden by narrating what he did not know and wished he knew. He spoke of the sad reality that has arisen from the disparaging attitude towards Hindu culture in Trinidad which led to his loss: "I am only one eighth of the writer I might have been had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad." He used this unique opportunity when the world's eyes were upon him, when all were listening to him, to describe the Ramayana played in Felicite village; this is a very small part of what he said.

"Deities were entering the field. What we generally call "Indian music" was blaring from the open platformed shed from which the epic would be narrated. Costumed actors were arriving. Princes and gods, I supposed. What an unfortunate confession! "Gods, I suppose" is the shrug that embodies our African and Asian diasporas. I had often thought of but never seen *Ramleela*, and had never seen this theatre, an open field, with village children as warriors, princes, and gods. I had no idea what the epic story was, who its hero was, what enemies he fought, yet I had recently adapted the *Odyssey* for a theatre in England, presuming that the audience knew the trials of Odysseus, hero of another Asia Minor epic, *while nobody in Trinidad knew any more than I did about Rama, Kali, Shiva, Vishnu, apart from the Indians, a phrase I use pervertedly because that is the kind of remark you can still hear in Trinidad: "apart from the Indians".*"

2) At the age of about 7 to 14, young Brahmin boys were asked to take part in the Upanayanam Samskara or sacred thread ceremony in which the pundit officiated, in the presence of the family. The purpose of this ceremony was to initiate the boy into manhood, into sharing the responsibilities of his elders, like participating henceforth in family rituals. The way it was done, with dignity and grace, assisted the initiated to be more aware of what behaviour expected of him by his community as he becomes an adult. This ceremony has faded. The ever widening knowledge and

understanding available with ease on the internet is phenomenal. It enables children to comprehend far more than was possible before. Children today are presented with many aspects of adulthood, far too quickly, if what they are permitted to download is not supervised.

3) The caste system is rigid; whether you're high caste or low caste, this hierarchy can only be passed on through birth. It has greatly lost its significance however, for economic reasons. The concepts of modernity, education for all, even at the tertiary level, attaining the professions and a good salary are gradually taking its place. However, one needs to be aware that the combination of poverty and belief in the caste system continue to debilitate the consciences of many; this continues to permit indefensible killings. The law is seen to be protecting the indefensible.

A good education is the means by which anyone can rapidly climb the ladder of upward mobility. However, one must bear in mind, that human beings do not relinquish their assets easily. I am aware that Goan Catholics will let it be known to their friends that they are Brahmins.

By the 1950's in Trinidad, (Not in Guyana) the Maha Sabah built many Hindu primary schools and later a few secondary schools. This improved the employment of Hindus. Many families realising that finding a job in the Civil Service was a gamble, encouraged their children to take to business and trading. Later, many of their children and grandchildren also became self employed by taking to professions as medicine, law, and accountancy. This could only be done at the time by the self sacrifice of parents, denying themselves much, to support the education of their children. Sadly these parental sacrifices are seldom honourably acknowledged by those who benefitted.

The University of the West Indies, with one of its campuses in Trinidad, and now the addition of the University of Trinidad and other institutions, have enabled Trinidadians to have a tertiary education; the government pays the fees of its citizens. The University of Guyana also assists in this way.

What has been retained

Despite the hostility I have already mentioned meted out to them, Indians did not discard what was theirs: their cultural heritage. It is remarkable how much has been retained.

1) The ceremonies of the important stages of life: birth, marriage and death ceremonies, as well as the religious ceremonies already mentioned.

2) There is much that is good in Indian culture that has been retained and because of its worth, has spread widely. For example, Indian food has become national and international dishes. Indian jewellery is very beautiful; this too has been quietly spreading. The strong family ties of Indians have led to stability in the homes. This is to be admired, for happy and stable marriages do not come naturally, they need to be worked at continually. Stability in the homes is essential for the rapid mental, social and physical development of children. Strong family ties also mean that intelligent parents are able to be friends to their children, guiding them to an enhanced future, especially during their gullible teenage years. This way of living should be adopted far more widely in the Caribbean.

However, there have been times when something good has been shunned in Guyana and Trinidad primarily because it was made and sold by Indians. For example: in the past, dahee (fermented milk) was a cottage industry; it was made, sold and consumed only by Indians, by no one else. However, when this fermented milk was later sold by Europeans as yoghurt, it was consumed by all.

3) The architecture of Hindu Temples with sculptures of the gods; splendid Moslem mosques and the celebration of the memory of the Moslem martyr Huysan.

4) Though Western dress is the norm, the saris and the shalwar kameeze for women and the kurta for men have been retained. They are worn on certain formal Indian occasions. The festival of Lights: Diwali has evolved from the use of small earthen pots, locally made, called dias, which hold

oil and lighted cotton wicks that flutter in the breeze, to strings of multicoloured electric lights strewn on nearby trees and patios.

5) Indian music, both classical and popular is played at home and in cars. The tassa drum, the tabla and harmonium are popular; the sitar which requires years of training is not as common. Indian Classical dance is growing in interest and in performances. Popular Indian music: Chutney music and dance in Trinidad, including Chutney Soca and Chutney Calypso, reflect the influence of calypso music.

Finally, as the Indo Caribbean population became better off, as many became wealthy and a large number took to business and acquired professional skills in many areas such as teaching/lecturing, medicine, engineering, accountancy and law, the status of Indo-Caribbean citizens rose substantially. In the process they became more urbanised, the quality of their houses, food, clothes and ambitions rose appreciably.

There is, however, an aspect of Indian culture that has been sorely neglected by many scholars.

Recently there has been much discussion amongst scholars of indenture about the fear, intimidation and terror within early families of Indenture. This took place because two destabilizing factors of life were thrown closely together. First, the proportion of men to women was unbalanced and unhealthy about 100 men to 41 women, with this disproportion varying up or down with each shipment.

This meant that women quickly understood the basic concept of economics: price is related to the supply and demand. They were in short supply and so constantly on the look out to better their position; this meant that often they left their husbands to better themselves with another. This endangered their lives and that of the angry and frustrated husband who seeing that his position would not be improved overnight, sought swift revenge.

The second destabilizing factor was the difficulty recruiters had in getting women to sail far away to an unknown for what they were told were better wages. They found it somewhat less difficult to recruit women who with persuasion, decided they would be better off away from the country; be it women who were wanted by the law, shunned by their family for all manner of reasons, women who had no place in the society, prostitutes, and those who felt that they would take the chance and survive by their wits which had served them well in past dire situations.

These two destabilizing factors when they were tied together exploded into the situation scholars vividly describe. However, what scholars do not say, what they fail to report cogently, is that the moment the proportion of men to women became more representative of the norm, and economic conditions were bettered, Indian culture, blossomed beautifully. This is due to the inherent resilience and depth of Indian culture. Its conservatism, its close family ties, the faithfulness of wives all swiftly came together and with it the quality of Indian family life we know today, returned and stayed.

Time has shown that when this happens, their children and grand children can attain with hard work some of the highest positions in the land.

The history of Indo-Caribbean indentured workers is the history of the Homo sapiens specie in minuscule form. They met the travails of life thrown at them stoically, but worked on doggedly to plant, to cultivate the good and in time has reaped many a bountiful harvest.