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EAST INDIANS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950. VERENE SHEPHERD. Leeds, U.K.: Peepal Tree Books, 1993. 281 pp. (Paper £12.95)

Survivors of Another Crossing: A History of East Indians in Trinidad, 1880-1946. MARIANNE D. SOARES RAMESAR. St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: U.W.I. School of Continuing Education, 1994. xiii + 190 pp. (Paper n.p.)

Les Indes Antillaises: Présence et situation des communautés indiennes en milieu caribéen. ROGER TOUMSON (ed.). Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994. 264 pp. (Paper 140.00 FF)

Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora. PETER VAN DER VEER (ed.). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. vi + 256 pp. (Cloth US\$ 39.95, Paper US\$ 17.95)

In the decade since 1988, Caribbean nations with Indian communities have commemorated the 150th anniversary of the arrival of East Indians to the West Indies. These celebrations are part of local revitalization movements of Indian culture and identity stretching from the French *département* of Guadeloupe in the Windward Islands to Trinidad and Guyana in the south. Political changes have mirrored the cultural revival in the region. While the debate so often in the past centered on the legitimacy of East Indian claims to local nationality in these societies where African or Creole cultures dominate, in the 1990s leaders of Indian descent were elected heads of government in the two Caribbean nations with the most populous East Indian communities: Cheddi Jagan as President of Guyana in October 1992 (after a 28-year hiatus) and Basdeo Panday as Prime Minister of Trinidad in November 1995. Both men have long been associated with their respective countries' struggles for economic, political, and social equality. Outside the region

during the summer of 1997, fiftieth-anniversary celebrations marking the independence of India and Pakistan from Britain confirmed that Indo chic – or “Indofrenzy” as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls it (Sengupta 1997:13) – has captured the American imagination with the new popularity of literature, art, and film emanating from India and its diaspora.

The books under review here attest to the combined academic interest in and local thirst for cultural expression among overseas Indians in the Caribbean; however, they also point to the unevenness of research in this growing field. The two case studies, both originally M. Phil. theses, provide an interesting comparison: one on Jamaica with its East Indian minority and the other on Trinidad where Indians and Creoles, though numerically quite equal today, have historically been differentially integrated into the economic, political, social, and cultural fabric of the nation. The two collected works may be similarly viewed as complementing each other. One is compiled from a conference and festival celebrating *indianité* (“Indianness”), held December 1990 in Guadeloupe, while the other is a product of the 47th Annual South Asia Seminar, held at the University of Pennsylvania during 1991-92 and concerned with South Asian migration, nationalism, and the construction of religious and ethnic identity within a largely Anglophone global context.

In this review we will begin with the particular and move to the general. The case study of Jamaica provides a natural point of departure. Whereas in Trinidad indenture was central to sugar production and the plantation economy, in Jamaica it was a peripheral adjunct to a technically free labor system (Look Lai 1993:xi-xii). In the introduction to *Transients to Settlers*, Verene Shepherd writes that “the present unbalanced state of the historiography of Indians in the Caribbean is a major obstacle to the development of a comparative approach to the study of the Indo-Caribbean settlers” (p. 14). She points out that all too frequently attention has been focused on immigration and the indenture period, with the marginalization of Jamaica even though this island received the third largest number of Indians in the English-speaking Caribbean. Of the approximately 37,000 Indians who immigrated to the island between 1845 and 1916, only 38 per cent were repatriated.

Shepherd’s monograph focuses on the post-indenture experience of Indian immigrants in Jamaica “as they made the transition from contract labourers to permanent settlers attempting to adjust to the ‘host society’ while maintaining a degree of ethnic identity” (p. 15). Chapters on indenture, patterns of rural and urban settlement, economic activities, missionary activities, education, social customs and institutions, and political participation provide a comparative framework for examining variations within the larger Indo-Caribbean experience.

It is generally perceived that Indians in Jamaica were the most economically depressed in the region and were less successful in maintaining their cultural autonomy, and Shepherd offers some historical explanations for Indo-Jamaicans' differential socioeconomic and cultural experiences. Unlike Trinidad and Guyana where Indians were able to move off the estates and into communities organized around Indian cultural practices, Shepherd points out, Indians in Jamaica lacked the base of land ownership which was so essential for residential separation and greater nucleation of the population. While the two factors of population – size and density – have long been considered by anthropologists to be crucial for immigrant groups' cultural persistence and subsequent resistance to acculturative influences of the host society, Shepherd examines other possible causal factors as explanatory variables for the loss of Indian cultural traditions in Jamaica. She argues that the role of missionaries, the school system, the small size of the Indian community (which affected the extent to which it was accorded special consideration by the government), the internal organization of the community, and its weak economic base marked by few opportunities to establish economic niches, all contributed to cultural assimilation and absorption of Indians within the larger Jamaican population.

In examining the opposing pressures of resistance and adaptation, Shepherd focuses on the overt forms of cultural persistence rather than the covert level of village life and ethnic identity. While she uses historical and archival data resourcefully throughout the work, the themes of retention and persistence raised in the chapter on social customs and institutions would better be taken up by a cultural anthropologist who is trained to look beyond the obvious to hidden forms of cultural continuity. Shepherd never attempts to define ethnic identity over time and space in Jamaica or to offer folk designations, but curiously always refers to the minority ethnic community as “Indians” notwithstanding their propensity for mixed-race unions. While she mentions that the disproportionate number of Indian men to women played a role in their marrying outside their group, she fails to explain fully why “such relationships, legalised or not, played an important role in the process of assimilation, particularly as the progeny of such unions, called Indian coloureds, tended to demonstrate a greater preference for things ‘Jamaican’ than for things ‘Indian’” (p. 209). Here she seems to miss an opportunity to delve more deeply into the role of gender in socialization and cultural transmission. In contacts between Indians and the Afro-Jamaican majority she contends that “cultural transfer tended to take place in one direction” (p. 205), but she fails to consider evidence to the contrary, such as the introduction of Indian culinary practices, food items, religious practices, or linguistic contributions to Jamaican popular culture. In debat-

ing the problem of incorporation versus cultural retention, she might have benefited from more comparisons of Jamaica with the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where small Indian minority populations have similarly been unable to resist the pressures of group exogamy and cultural assimilation to the creole norm.

Unlike the Jamaica study, *Survivors of Another Crossing* does not fill a void in Indian historiography since East Indians in Trinidad have received considerable scholarly treatment over the last two-to-three decades. Marianne Soares Ramesar divides her book into six main chapters which follow the chronology of East Indian arrival, indentured labor, settlement as free laborers, and integration in colonial Trinidad. Curiously, the period under study, from 1880 to 1946, neither conforms to the whole indenture period in Trinidad (1845-1917) nor continues to the end of the colonial era with the advent of independence in 1962; hence the choice of dates appears quite arbitrary.

The first two chapters, "The Migrants Leave India" and "The Indians Under Indenture," actually deal quite extensively with historical materials prior to 1880. While this is understandable given that indentureship was introduced to the island in 1845, it is inconsistent with the book's time framework. Both Chapter 3, "The Role of Indentured Immigration in Trinidad," and Chapter 5, "Opposition to Indian Migration," are comparatively short pieces which superficially treat the two central and interrelated questions regarding Indian indentured labor in Trinidad – first, the debate on the impact of immigration on conditions for Afro-Creole labor (e.g., savior or death knell), and secondly, the anti-immigration debate in the colony, England, and India, which eventually led to the end of the policy in 1917.

Chapter 4, "Activities of the Time-Expired Indians," covers a range of issues, including economic activities, the formation of villages and Indian settlements, social life, religious activity, education, and the emergence of Indian pressure groups. This section, however, is limited to a discussion of conditions for *free* ("time-expired") Indians during the indenture period. Here the text might have benefited from integrating these issues with the subsequent period, 1917-46, which forms the basis for Chapter 6, "The Integration of Indian Settlers in Trinidad after Indenture and until the Second World War." Whereas Shepherd's work on East Indians in Jamaica is organized around overarching themes, Ramesar follows a strict focus on chronology and historical periods. By choosing to tell the East Indian story in Trinidad in this way, Ramesar fails to view history as dynamic or to analyze the tensions and contradictions of an ever increasing group of free Indians which, by 1891, outnumbered indentured Indians by nearly 6:1 (p. 77). The largest immigrant group in Trinidad, East Indians were still a much maligned minority in a multilayered and multiethnic colonial society, fur-

ther bifurcated by the social and racial distinctions maintained between “Indians” and “non-Indians.” However, the study does not adequately address Indian/Afro-Creole relations.

Another weakness in the book is the lack of systematized classificatory terms for the ethnic and racial groups in Trinidad. Although Ramesar states that the term “Indians” will be used in her work to refer to “the East Indian immigrants and their descendants ..., except where it is necessary to distinguish the India-born” (p. iii), the term “East Indians” also appears in the text, tables, and title. Indian immigrants who completed their indenture are variously called “time-expired Indians,” “free Indians,” or “ex-indentured Indians.” Ramesar also explains that the term “Creole” will be used to describe “natives of Trinidad, prefaced by the adjective African, European, or French to determine ancestry” (p. iii). However, the phrase “white Creoles” appears on occasion, and Ramesar uses the unmarked term “Creoles” and on occasion “African-Americans” to refer in general to Trinidadians of African descent. Indians of mixed parentage are labeled “East Indian Creoles” (p. 131) or “Indian Creoles” (p. 146), with no discussion of their ambiguous role or status in the society. Immigrants to Trinidad from other West Indian islands, such as Barbados, St. Vincent, Carriacou, and Grenada, are referred to as “British West Indians” even though in normal parlance this term can and does include Trinidadians. The proliferation of terms, lack of consistency in their choice, and disregard for the change in their usage over time, space, or context all conspire to confuse the reader.

It should be mentioned, however, that the work benefits from a wealth of tables, charts, and photographs from the nineteenth century to the present which add significantly to the text. Tables dealing with East Indians’ occupations, extent of their savings, and land acquisition are especially informative. Unfortunately, these tables appear in fine print and are frequently turned on their sides or spread over two or more pages (e.g., Tables 4:7, 4:8, and 6:3), decreasing their legibility.

Both case studies end before the advent of the islands’ independence and the modern era of independence, Indian nationalism, and cultural revitalization in the Caribbean, so the two collected works are well situated to pick up where the monographs leave off. *Les Indes Antillaises*, coordinated by Roger Toumson, consists of the conference proceedings of the Festival International de l’Indianité, which took place in December 1990 in St. François, Guadeloupe at the initiative of the town’s mayor, Ernest Moutoussamy. While there have been earlier conferences dedicated to the East Indian presence in the West Indies, this was the first to take place in the French West Indies; it therefore marks an important beginning for the *départements français d’Amérique* as they seek to become full partners and

participants on the greater Caribbean geopolitical and cultural stage. The significance of Guadeloupe as the venue for the conference should not be overlooked. This French island boasts the fourth largest East Indian community in the Caribbean today, with an estimated 54,000 people of Indian origin; in addition, Moutoussamy, a native of Guadeloupe, is the first East Indian deputy elected from the French West Indies to serve in the French National Assembly.

This two-day international conference brought together scholars, writers, journalists, performers, artists, and politicians from India and its diaspora in the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Canada, the United States, France, and England. The purpose of the combined conference and festival was to validate Indian contributions to Caribbean societies and at the same time to “rehabilitate a dimension of the Indian personality, nourish the collective memory, facilitate the appropriation of Indian values, and better authenticate Antillean identity” (translation of Moutoussamy’s opening address, pp. 8-9). Of the twenty-three articles in the collection, two-thirds are contributions by academics in the fields of history, anthropology, geography, social psychology, literature, and linguistics, with the French Antilles the main focus. Topics include a general overview to Indians in the French Caribbean (Singaravélou); conditions and mortality rates aboard the ships in the passage from India to the Caribbean (J. Weber); immigration of Indian women to the French West Indies (F. Lacpatia); Indian deities, religious rituals, and myths (G.F. Ponaman, G. L’Étang); the influence of Tamil in Guadeloupean Creole (D. Colat-Jolivière); Indian communities in Trinidad, Guyana, Guadeloupe, and Martinique (L. Davidas, Cheddi Jagan, H. Bangou, G. César, J. Smeralda-Amon); cultural ideology and the concept of *indianité* (J. Lirus-Galap, R. Burton, M. Prat); and representations of Indians in Caribbean literature (H. Pyne-Timothy, M. Hippon, C. Dabydeen, V. Pollard, R. Toumson).

As with any volume that attempts to integrate scholarly and lay articles, the pieces vary in quality, substance, and length. A number of articles contribute to gaps in East Indian historiography in the Caribbean, and as a whole the volume adds a new dimension to the current debate on *créolité* in the French islands. Several contributors view *indianité* as an integral part of Antillean identity – as a component of *antillanité* that is now interpreted as being synonymous with *métissage* or hybridity (Lirus-Galap, p. 22) – and they claim that *indianité* and *créolité* are not in conflict but instead mutually reinforce each other (Ponamam, p. 71). These statements, while adding support to the definition of *créolité* adopted by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant (see Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant 1989), may heat up the counterattack by critics who view *créolité* at best a concept

that gives only lip service to non-African or non-European elements in the cultural mosaic of the French West Indies and at worst an ideology that is exclusionary, Afrocentric, and gender-biased (see Condé & Cottenet-Hage 1995).

Nation and Migration is the outcome of a year-long academic seminar dedicated to issues of nationalism and territoriality within South Asian international migration, held at the University of Pennsylvania in 1991-92. In his introduction to the volume, "The Diasporic Imagination," editor Peter van der Veer stresses that to understand the modern articulation of nation and migration, one has to look first at colonialism, since colonialism has transformed older notions of community and movement (p. 4). "Overseas South Asian communities have different historical trajectories because they have developed in widely divergent historical contexts in many parts of the world. It is the fragmented nature of these contexts and experiences that complicates the use of 'the South Asian diaspora' as a transparent category" (p. 1).

This collected work comprises much more rigorous scholarship than Tounson's edited volume. As a unit the articles point to the complexity and diversity of the South Asian diaspora and offer important insights for the understanding of international migration processes. For the purposes of this review we will be concerned only with the cluster of three essays which treat the specificities of the diaspora of (ex-)indentured peoples in Trinidad and, to a lesser extent, Guyana: "Projecting Identities: Empire and Indentured Labor Migration from India to Trinidad and British Guiana, 1836-1885" (Madhavi Kale); "Homeland, Motherland: Authenticity, Legitimacy, and Ideologies of Place among Muslims in Trinidad" (Aisha Khan); and "Hindus in Trinidad and Britain: Ethnic Religion, Reification, and the Politics of Public Space" (Steven Vertovec).

Kale looks at the debates that accompanied the introduction of Indian laborers to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. She argues that the various positions in this debate over the conditions of indenture tended to result in static and reified notions of Indian culture which, in turn, influenced both representations of Indians in the Caribbean and policies for governing them. These notions constrained the attempts of Indian workers to define themselves, but they were forcefully challenged in public festivals, such as the Indo-Muslim festival of Muharram, known as Hosay in Trinidad.

Vertovec is concerned with the articulation of religious discourse and compares the situation of the ex-indentured Indian population in Trinidad with that of more recent Indian immigrants in Britain. In Trinidad he sees the rise of a political Hinduism (an ethnicized religion) which was conditioned by bipolar ethnic competition, but he argues that since the 1950s

there has been a depoliticalization of Hinduism in the island. In Britain, no unified ethnic Hindu identity appears for the very reason that there is no bipolar competition between two colonized peoples of almost the same size, as in Trinidad. According to Vertovec, the main issue for Hindus in Britain is the construction of their own multiple identities when faced with unifying projects, such as assimilation and multiculturalism, of the British nation-state.

Khan looks at the relationship between religious idioms and the processes of identity construction within the Muslim community in Trinidad, a minority Islamic group composed of Trinidadians of Indian and of African descent. The universalism of religious ideas does not extend to religious space or group interaction within this "frontier" (Bowen 1989) diaspora population, for Islamic practices do not transcend the bipolar ethnic boundaries between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. As with Hindus in Trinidad, Khan finds that the bipolar competition with Afro-Trinidadians defines the Muslim discourse on identity in which religious interpretation and expression serve as important contested domains of questions about culture and tradition, authenticity of identity, and legitimacy of social place (p. 101).

All four works under review contribute to the emerging field of Indian diaspora studies in the Caribbean. With time we hope that other gaps in research will be addressed – different Muslim minority communities in the Caribbean; smaller East Indian communities in the Lesser Antilles, as in Grenada, St. Lucia, and even Barbados; and the role of East Indian women in Caribbean societies and economies. This research will then allow for the cross-cultural, inter-island comparisons for which Verene Shepherd so passionately argues in her work.

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