

# The Materiality of Diasporic Identity: Hindu Temples in Trinidad and Malaysia

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## Introduction

Expressing one's ethnic identity as a minority community in a plural society is achieved in a multitude of ways. Much of the academic literature on the subject focuses upon political, social, economic and cultural contexts and behaviors. Some of these behaviors result in concrete expressions, such as foodways, musical systems and art, while most others are less tangible in form, such as political behaviour and religious beliefs. A less common form of research in this area is the analysis of religious material culture in the landscape as a means of assessing the collective identity of a minority community.

Sullivan (in P. Lewis 1994: 82) notes that people and the buildings they create express each other within and without, and that buildings can be used as an index to a community's identity. In addition, Pierce Lewis (1994: 84) goes on to explain that people's houses, like culture itself, springs from the past. Thus, migrants are likely to carry their ideas about proper house types with them to their new home, and one can trace the persistence of their culture through time and space by observing continuity or discontinuity in the kinds of houses people build.

In this paper, I propose that Hindu temples, like houses, reveal much about the communities that build them in Trinidad and Malaysia. As public, material expressions of religiosity in the landscape, temples are imbued with issues of collective intention regarding identity and community cohesion. For the Hindus of Trinidad and Malaysia, temples are laden with social, political and religious meanings that reflect generations of tension and negotiation within the community in counterpoint to the dominant social and political milieu in which they live. In this project I formulate a typology of temple forms in Trinidad and Malaysia, and I track the history of building and rebuilding in order to illustrate the synergistic relationship between people, their identity and their landscape.

## Method of Study

My primary objective is to investigate the evolution of the form and function of temples in diasporic Hindu communities.<sup>1</sup> More specifically: how do the temples function for devotees? how do the physical attributes of the temples reflect the collective choices of Hindu communities over more than a century of presence in former British colonies?

A combination of academic literature research and field work in the form of a structure survey was the primary means of collecting data for this study. Work in Trinidad (eastern Caribbean) began in 1984 with a preliminary study, and a full survey of temples on the island in 1985. Since then I have returned to Trinidad in 1988/89, 1993/94, 2003 and again in 2009 for follow-up studies. In 2003, I specifically resurveyed a random sample of the original field survey and also found new temples along the way. Work in Malaysia (southeastern Asia) began in 1993 with a feasibility study, and a full survey of temples in the state of Pulau Pinang (the colonial name is Penang & Province Wellesley—in north-western, peninsular Malaysia) in 1994. Given the large size of Malaysia, the state of Pulau Pinang was selected for study because it is one of the oldest areas of settlement by Hindus since British contact in the region, and it is representative of the Hindu community at large. Since then, I have remained current with political, cultural, and religious events important to Malaysia's Hindu community. Finally, visits to villages in the central part of the Bhojpuri Hindi speaking region (between Varanasi and Patna) and Tamil Nadu (from Madras to Madurai) in India during the summers of 1988, 1995, and 2005 completed the fieldwork. They represent the dominant regions of origin for Trinidad's and Malaysia's Hindus respectively.

Both surveys generated a mass of architectural, demographic, historical and site/situation data on 186 extant temples in Trinidad and 140 extant temples in Malaysia. In both cases, large scale topographic maps (1:25,000) were used and every road was systematically driven to identify temples. When a temple was located, informants were easily found and interviewed about the history, usage and meaning of the temple. In addition, I observed and noted structural and site/situation features. Finally, supporting data and documentation was acquired in local libraries and government offices.

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1 My focus is on the mainstream Hindu traditions (folk and Sanskritized) that the earliest Hindu migrants carried with them from 19th century India, and which persist to this day. I do not consider sectarian movements such as Arya Samaj (Forbes 1984), Kabir Panthi, and the more recent phenomena of Satya Sai Baba worship (Klass 1991; Kent 2005).