
There has been a flurry of research and publications on the Indic populations of the Caribbean in the past decade, much of it on Trinidad, which has the most substantial population of East Indians in the region. A significant portion of this new body of literature has focused on issues of ethnicity and identity within the broader context of cultural politics. The volume under review here contributes to the study of Indic identity in the Caribbean, but does so by dealing specifically with the religious and performative contexts in which one specific “text” is enacted, remembered, or simply read within, to, and among Hindu communities residing on the island. In so doing, Sherry-Ann Singh means to move away from religion as a secondary phenomenon in the shaping of Indian identity on the island to viewing it as a primary phenomenon in the shaping of Indo-Trinidadian Hindu identity. While this is an interesting perspective to take, it says virtually nothing about the minority Indian communities in Trinidad, which are made up of Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Christians. Nonetheless, Singh departs from the all-inclusive model of analysis precisely because it has been done so many times before. She thus focuses on the intimate relationship between one religious community and one religious text.

The text in question is the Ramayana, arguably the most famous and popular narrative of Hindus worldwide. The story, which relates the peregrinations of the deity Ram and his wife Sita, has been rendered in virtually every vernacular language spoken in India, making it a distinct subgenre within the larger category of epic (mahākāvya). Singh gives the text even more significance in Trinidad, where, she argues, it has become the quintessential religious text for the Hindu population. The reasons for this are many, but it basically hinges on the fact that one specific Hindi version of the text attributed to the author Tuslidas came to take prominence in Trinidad because the majority of the island’s Hindu ancestors originated in what is today Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the core ethnolinguistic region where his version of the text continues to remain most prominent not only in liturgical contexts but also in dance, song, and theatrical forms.

An historian by training, Singh focuses on the period 1917-90, 73 years that began with the end of indenture and ended with the full incorporation of Hindus into the fabric of Trinidadian society. The latter date seems
somewhat arbitrary, since no major event marks that particular year as a milestone. What the period does allow her to do is draw on archival sources both in India and Trinidad as well as on oral history, which is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the work in question. She argues that the need for an “insider’s” view is one that has not really been explored in the current scholarship on the Ramayana; hence, she incorporates 75 interviews, 31 with women and 44 with men, to demonstrate the centrality of this particular holy book in the lives of local Hindus.

Although not evoking them, the argument echoes the worn anthropological debates over *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) categories in cultural analysis. Singh makes her case more cogent, however, by suggesting that because the *Ramayana* is a performed text existing primarily in the oral tradition, there are not enough written documents to understand the dynamics of its function in Trinidad’s history. The interviews thus serve as the essential primary data for her study. This is a tricky proposition for Singh, since she herself is one of the insiders being represented. The divide between subjective and objective, though never fully breach-free, sometimes poses a problem of analysis, since she periodically moves too close to theological apologetics, despite her historical approach. Here is where the thin line between historical inquiry and ethnographic participant observation converge to create some difficult moments that are never completely resolved.

Having stated the obvious methodological problem, one can then point more productively to the innovative theoretical position that Singh takes. Noting in passing that the concepts of “selective creolization” in the Caribbean and “sanskritization” in India have been the two dominant modes of analysis for mapping social change in these two vastly diverse geographical regions, she points out their respective limitations for analyzing Trinidadian Hinduism and its practitioners. She therefore devises a hybrid way of utilizing both concepts simultaneously, which she cleverly labels “selective sanskritization.” The alliterative concept itself can be identified as a creolized theory, since it takes individual concepts crafted in both the Caribbean and India to develop a new form of analysis, combining the two to identify the subtle ways that the *Ramayana* conveys changing historical circumstances while also acting as a barometer for change. This method allows her to appreciate how the oral versions of the text have been shaped by social history but also how the versions of the text have impacted that