The Trinidad Ram Lila: Indentured Indian Diaspora Remaking a Caribbean Civilization

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Abstract

The Indians in the Caribbean (Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and other islands) represent India's nineteenth-century "first diaspora." Originating primarily from North India and to a lesser extent from South India, these individuals, often referred to as indentured Indians, jahajees, or girmitiyas, embarked under deceptive colonial labor conditions, akin to a new form of slavery. Many were impoverished and oppressed, their homeland exploited by colonial powers. Although most initially planned to return to India after their contracts, few did, as community ties and familial bonds took root in the Caribbean. Instead of mourning their detachment from their homeland, they reestablished their cultural and communal infrastructure, overlaying their memories of India onto their new environment, effectively solidifying their presence as a permanent diaspora. It wasn't until the 1970s, during Trinidad's oil boom, that significant travel between India and this diaspora began. By then, the community was well-established. Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott highlighted this through his depiction of Ram Lila in Trinidad, using it not to signify a search for a "lost India" but to celebrate a "real presence." He likened this to the repair of a broken jar, where the reconstruction is done with a love that surpasses the original, symbolizing a people creatively mending their history and shaping a new Caribbean civilization.

Keywords: Ram Lila, Ram Leela, Trinidad Indian Diaspora, Cultural Heritage, Indentured Labor History

Ram Lila is the annual, folk, amateur, open-air enactment of the life of avatar Sree Ram, as told in Ramcharitmanas. It is a form of Vaishnava devotion and takes place in the shared navratri period (Oct – Nov) during the popular and ecstatic festival of Navratri dedicated to Shakti or Devi worship (viz. deities of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga, in various manifestations). It runs for ten days with great battles and the grand burning/cremation of Ravan on the tenth day.

Trinidad is a tiny, almost invisible island on the globe, and the larger of the twin island state of Trinidad and Tobago. It was Nobel Prize Winner Derek Walcott (born in St Lucia but lived many years in Trinidad) who, in 1992, brought this tiny island's open-air Ram Lila to international fame when he crafted his acceptance speech3 around the motif of the open-air Ram Lila. He recognized that this was no ordinary drama.

People of Indian Origin in Trinidad and other parts of the Caribbean are largely descendants of indentured laborers. These indentured laborers came from North and South India (though mainly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century to work on contract on colonial plantations. They expected to return at the end of their agreement/contract to what they called not Bharat desh or India (which was not yet born when they left) but which they lovingly referred to as 'muluk' or 'muluk desh.'

Trinidad and Tobago lies between Latitude 10°37' N and Longitude 61°21'W, with an altitude of 15 m. The two islands lie off the northeast coast of South America. The larger of the two islands, Trinidad has an area of 5,128 km (1,981 miles), running 143 km (89 miles) north to south and 61 km (38 miles) east to west. The islands are bordered on the East by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the Caribbean Sea. They have a tropical climate with two seasons – the wet (June to December) and the dry (January to May). The capital is Port of Spain (Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1992).

The term Indian has political, national and ethnic connotations. It may refer to nationals of India and, in an ethnic sense, to their descendants in the diaspora. The Caribbean Indian definition refers to descendants of indentured Indians who came from Hindustan (renamed India after Independence) to the Caribbean region during the Indenture ship period (1845-1917) and citizens of India who might have migrated subsequently. I will use Hindustan and India interchangeably. The label East Indian originated in academia but, generally, local Indians do not use it to describe themselves.

People of Indian Origin (PIO) are a term that was coined by Indrani Rampersad (this researcher) and Ravindra Dev (of Guyana) during the late 1980s at a meeting held by Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) in New York. We asserted the unique identity of the descendants of indentured Indians born in the diaspora compared with Non Resident Indians (NRIs) born in India and living in the diaspora. We determined that the term NRI was not relevant to our experience and so was born the term People of Indian Origin or PIO. Ravi Dev

suggested the term PIO, and we both agreed to take it forward. GOPIO subsequently adopted the term in the context in which we now use it.

Theirs is a story of largely deceptive labor schemes with contracts that kept them bonded to their plantation owners; of broken promises, broken dreams, and broken hearts; and of creativity, new beginnings, and new dreams. Scripture, literature, and the performing arts provided a major pillar of stability for the jahaji-s (also called girmitiya-s and indentured Indians) and their descendants. The Hindus brought the Srimad Bhagwat Purana, Shiva Purana, Sukh Sagar, Prem Sagar, Garuda Purana, and Ramcharitmanas and the Muslims brought the Holy Quran and Hadith. Hindus would later add other texts from India like the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, Upanishads and other Puranas.They came with a rich oral, music, song and performance tradition with both Hindus and Muslims being experts in singing Indian songs like bhajans, qawwali, dhrupad, thumri, and ghazal, for example. They performed dramatizations in nautanki10 style and had long ten--day Lila-s. These ancestral traditions provided fertile ground on which the jahaji-s would forge a new Caribbean identity.

This paper looks at how Nobel Prize Winner Derek Walcott saw Ram Lila as reflecting a people, not in search of a "lost India," but celebrating a real presence. He saw the remaking of a people and their culture as analogous to putting together the fragments of a broken jar with a love.

Kapoor's research (as cited in Kumar & Murali, 2015, p. 43) shows that the indentured laborers in many cases did not know where they were going. Of the 324 Indians on the Salsette that left Calcutta for Trinidad in 1858, less than five knew their destination, purpose, and length of stay.

The girmitiya-s/jahaji-s/indentured Indians referred to their motherland as 'muluk desh' not Bharat desh or India (which was not yet born when they left) (Parasram, 2016).

Bhakti poet Go swami Tulsidas (c.1532-1623) who wrote the Ramcharitmanas is termed the "Father of Caribbean Hindu Dharma" because of the immense impact of the text and its traditions on the jahaji-s and their descendants. It is India's famous epic written written in the sixteenth century in the then popular Avadhi language. It is the story of Sree Ram, worshipped by many Hindus as an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and inspired by the original story as told by Sage Valmiki and called Ramayana.

A popular form of folk entertainment in North Indian villages. It incorporates music, dance, song, humor and drama and is based on popular folk themes.

That was stronger than that "which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole." This metaphor parallels the Japanese art of kintsugi or golden joinery where broken pottery is put back together carefully with a mixture of gold and other elements. The philosophy is about embracing a broken history by making the repair process and new elements part of the history of the pot – not rejecting the broken pot – but of turning it into a new work of art. As Walcott had

noted, the love in this process was stronger than the love for the unbroken pottery. He saw a similar process of life and creativity in Indians and Africans – all remaking themselves and, in the process, remaking a Caribbean civilization.

Derek Walcott put the Indian face of Trinidad and Tobago on the international stage when he used Ram Lila as a metaphor for re-making a new Caribbean civilization in the wake of European colonization. In an instant, he brought fame to this tiny island and the significant contribution that Indo-Trinidadians/Tobagonians were making in the process of identity formation in the region.

Here in Trinidad I discovered that one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain. . . . I am only one-eighth the writer I might have been had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad. “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent" (Walcott, 1992).

Deities were entering the field. What we generally call "Indian music" was blaring from the open plat formed 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 theater, 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 theater in England, presuming that the audience knew the trials of Odysseus, hero of another Asia Minor epic. In contrast, 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" (Walcott, 1992).

Everything in the Ramlila had been transported from India in the memories of people. And though as theatre, it was crude, and there was much that I would have missed in the story, I believe I understood more and felt more that I had done during The Prince and the Pauper and Sixty Glorious Years at the local cinema. Those were the very first films I had seen, and I had

never had an idea what I was watching. Whereas the Ramlila had given reality, and a lot of excitement to what I had known of the Ramayana.

The Ramayana was an essential Hindu story. It was the more approachable of our two epics, and it lived among us the way epics lived. It had a strong and fast and rich narrative and, even with the divine machinery, the matter was very human. The characters and their motives could always be discussed; the epic was like a moral education for us all. Everyone around me would have known the story at least in outline; some people knew some of the actual verses. I didn't have to be taught it: the story of Rama's unjust banishment to the dangerous forest was like something I had always known. It lay below the writing I was to get to know later in the city, the Andersen and Aesop I was to read on my own, and the things my father was to read to me.

When my father got a job on the local paper we went to live in the city. It was only twelve miles away, but it was like going to another country. Our little rural Indian world, the disintegrating world of a remembered India, was left behind. I never returned to it; lost touch with the language; never saw another Ramlila (Naipaul, 2003).

Here are two Nobel Laureates from the same part of the world, having lived in the same country, one an insider to the Ramayana Tradition (Naipaul), the other an outsider (Walcott), and each having a different perspective on the open-air Ram Lila. Walcott saw the LILA style of telling the story of Ram, as not about recalling a "lost India" but, rather, as "a single gasp of gratitude," and "celebrations of a real presence." Naipaul acknowledged the personal impact of Ram Lila on him, but saw it as part of a "disintegrating world of a remembered India." Nonetheless, he admitted that Ram Lila helped him to "feel" and "understand" more about the Ramayana than what he could "feel" or "understand" about western films like "The Prince and the Pauper" and "Sixty Glorious Years" 12 that he had seen.

Tulsidas had taken the original Valmiki Ramayana and created a new and unique version, based on the old story, to suit desh-kaal-paristithi (geography, times, special circumstances). The new text was called the Tulsi Krit Ramayana or Ramcharitmanas. So too, Ram Lila reflects the recreation of identity in time and space – of adapting and shaping an antecedent culture to suit diasporic space and time. Liminal Ram Lila space became a healing space for the jahaji-s. Here they could experience their cosmic realities and physically travel through their muluk desh13 that was physically mapped out in the Lila Ground and walk in the footsteps of Sree Ram

In the LILA performance style, the story is presented through mime according to theatre conventions that are amateur, folk, simple, and realistic for communicating meaning that cater to the tastes of the common folk (lokadharmi) and held in open-air performance sites. The performance is an act of Vaishnava (devotees of Lord Vishnu and the avataras) devotion and aimed at devotees. This is in contrast with the professional, dramatic/theatrical conventions of the proscenium stage, that use stylized movements, gestures, and symbols for communicating

meaning, and cater to connoisseurs (natyadharmi) who are not necessarily devotees (Naipaul & Mishra, 2003).

Additionally, the jahaji-s referred to their motherland as ‘muluk desh’ not Bharat desh or India (which was not yet born when they left) (Naipaul & Mishra, 2003).

Remembered their motherland with despair, sadness, and hopelessness, they could find solace in this Ram Lila space to which they made an annual pilgrimage, not having seewala-s and mandirs in early times. Just like Ram, they too were in exile, overcoming obstacles along the way. A major theme was always that of victory – of return to Ayodhya, of overcoming hardships.

For today’s Indo-Trinidadians/Tobagonians, that “Ayodhya” is no longer the physical one of the jahaji-s. It is the “Ayodhya” that Naipaul reached when he appreciated how Ram Lila helped him to understand the Ramcharitmanas better. It is the “Ayodhya” that so many descendants of the jahaji-s reach when they can positively and psychologically connect with India as the ancestral land and heal any psychic rupture that they might have.

Many India Indians tend to view local Indians (and others in the indentured diaspora) as a people frozen in the static memory of a nineteenth-century rural Hindustan/India from where their ancestors came. It is an uneducated dismissal of the struggles, achievements, and creativity of the jahaji-s in lands cut off from India by time, distance, and communication.

Dismissing the girmitiya-s as stuck in some frozen mold is a form of elitism that looks down on and fails to see the vibrancy of the rural and folk traditions of India. This judgment embodies prejudices of Varna and cultural differences since the vast majority of jahaji-s- were.

Seewaala is derived from shiva-alaya – the abode of Shiva. Early seewaala-s were humble structures of mud walls, dirt floor, and thatched roofs, aesthetically in harmony with the rural environment. The deity of worship is Shiva.

India Indians and India People are terms that People of Indian origin in the Caribbean used to designate people who are born in India. Local Indian is a term used to designate descendants of people born in India.

The terms caste and varna have not been translated adequately in the English language and in western academia, thereby distorting their meaning. See this attempt to correct distortions. The word “caste” should not be conflated with the indigenous Indic jati / varna / kula system. ‘Caste’ derives from the Portuguese word ‘casta’ and describes something distinct from the jati / varna / kula system, which is a complex and ancient socioeconomic ordering system that developed in various manifestations within Indian society over thousands of years. The European concept of “caste” is not an accurate term to describe this indigenous Indian system .

The jati / varna/kula is determined by a number of factors, namely birth, clan, quality, conduct, of the lower varna-s. A similar elitism exists amongst the jahaji-s, though caste/varna is no longer functional in most aspects of life, retaining a diminishing ritual status amongst the majority of Hindus in the Caribbean. It was the so-called lower castes/varna-s of the chamars, for example, that sustained the Indian folk culture and performing arts in the Caribbean.

It needs to be reinforced that Hinduism came to the West not with Swami Vivekananda (who went to Chicago in 1893) but with the indentured Indians/girmitiya-s/jahaji-s who first came to the Caribbean in 1838 (Guyana – 1838; Trinidad – 1845 and Suriname – 1873)

Spiritual knowledge and profession. It is not determined by birth alone as perceived in certain quarters…. The original system of jati / varna has been corrupted and distorted in practice over the course of history, primarily due to the destructive influence of colonialism and systematic destruction of traditional institutions of Dharma over many centuries" (Waves, 2011, p.17). For more, see Jain, Pankaj. "Varna and Jati: Social Structure of Hindus." For more, see Welcome to Dr. Pankaj Jain's Blog. N.p., 10 Oct. 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2009.

The tangible and intangible cultural elements of the Caribbean Indians18 are marked by factors of retention, change, adaptation, creativity and something deeply emotional and psychological. These factors have given Caribbean Indians their unique identity - connected to an India of the past and present, but rooted in the lands of their birth or domicile, be it in the Caribbean or the large, twice-removed, very visible diaspora in North America and parts of Europe (like Britain and Holland).

Walcott wrote:

"It is such love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent."

The analogy parallels that of the Japanese art of kintsugi where the artist repairs a broken ceramic piece, using a lacquer based glue mixture of gold, silver or platinum. The aim is to integrate this glue into the object being repaired without seeking to disguise it, resulting in a new piece that is more beautiful than the original.20 This process describes a similar "beauty" in the Caribbean Indians and Africans engaged in the post-colonial process of reassembling pieces of memories and practices broken off from colonial India and Africa.

When the jahaji-s in Trinidad started forming free communities in the 1800s after their indentureship ended, they relied on the memories of village India for their social, religious and political institutions, values and so on. It is a miracle that India needs to celebrate - when its poor

Caribbean Indian is a term that refers to People of Indian Origin who are citizens of any Caribbean country (Walcott, 1992).

The downtrodden of colonial times, mainly of the lower varna-s, could remake a life based on Indian values and culture in lands so far away. The jahaji-s recouped core institutions like joint family, panchayat, pandit, imam, jamaat, mandir, katha, yajna, and performance traditions, for example. They used their traditional knowledge (like wet rice farming, pottery making, adobe hut construction, and brick making) and entrepreneurial spirit to catapult themselves into a business class. Women took to running small shops, selling crops from their kitchen gardens, and selling in what we call “the market” (a common place where farmers and vendors come to sell their “goods” to the public).

A joint family is a family structure where family members of three or more generations live together under the same roof with their spouses and children. The lifestyle is defined by cooperative living, shared incomes, common kitchen, and shared living space. Today, the joint family has given way to extended and nuclear styles of family structures but family members tend to remain emotionally close and continue to support each other, despite geographical distance.

The panchayat is an Indian social institution that the indentured Indians brought with them to the Caribbean. It is an assembly of five elders coming from within a community. This group not only mediated in conflicts but also ensured that social norms and cultural values were upheld by members and they would impose sanctions for breaking community rules. The panchayat no longer exists amongst Indians in the Caribbean.

In the Caribbean, the “pandit” is a title given to one who performs rites and rituals (including lifecycle ones), who combines roles like a spiritual counselor, personal spiritual guide or guru, singer, astrologer, and learned enough to read, interpret and teach from the sacred texts. In the latter role, the pandit is called a vyasa.

The imam is a Muslim religious leader who leads the prayer in a masjid/mosque.

In the Caribbean, jamaat usually refers to an assembly of Muslims in a geographical region. It may also refer to a “community,” “group,” or “assembly” of Muslims not necessarily confined to a geographical area.

Mandir is a Hindu place of worship and abode of a deity.

Katha refers to a musical and ritual style of telling sacred narratives from scriptures like Ramcharitmanas and Purana-s to devotees. The narrative is told by a learned pandit/vyas who offers commentaries that reflect different levels of interpretation of the text. Katha also refers to rituals of fasting and sacred storytelling like the Satyanarayan vrat katha that includes a fast and puja and commentaries by the pandit, after which a white jhandi is raised.

Yajna is a sacred ritual performance dating to the Vedic yajna of offering grains, ghee, herbs, etc. to Agni, the sacred fire, for the benefit of environment, humanity, etc. and not for one's self. Yajna also refers to the ritual reading and exposition from a scripture, by a learned pandit/vyas, and to a wide audience of devotees. In Trinidad, a yajna is usually accompanied by puja, katha, devotional singing, music, and communal sharing of meals.

As the indentured Indians and their descendants emerged from the sugarcane fields to embrace education, the wider society, the new economy, politics, and so on, their traditional rural life underwent yet another wave of challenge and change. The descendants of crab catchers, sugar cane workers, rice planters, farmers, leather workers, laborers, sweepers, shoemakers, cowherds, weavers, barbers, shopkeepers, moneylenders, potters, cooks, for example, rose significantly in social status. Some became prime ministers, presidents, heads of international agencies, Nobel Prize winners, business owners, and, also, occupied positions of power in a variety of national, regional and global entities. In the process, however, the Abrahamic thrust in post-colonial societies severely undermined the religions and self-esteem of religious and ethnic groups like the Hindus and Orishas, for example. Alcoholism remains a serious problem amongst Indians coming from a culture of sugarcane where the men got rum in exchange for working extra hours. Today, in Trinidad, that industry is now closed, but alcoholism remains endemic.

The early jahaji-s lived a life of great sacrifice, discipline and responsibility to lay a new foundation and make life better for their descendants. They purchased land; invested in gold via jewelry; built homes; educated, first, their sons, then their daughters; participated in politics and labor struggles; and laid the infrastructure for full participation in national life.

Land is one of the rich resources that the Indian ancestors bequeathed their descendants. The close connection between identity and land explains the Indian love for owning his/her land and home, as well as planting the land with flowers and food crops. Land is consecrated before it is occupied in traditional Indian culture. In the jahaji experience, the jhandi or tall bamboo with

Since they initially lived in joint families, the head of the family would take care of all and that person was usually the eldest son. The sons would all jointly own property while the women shared in the family jewelry. The eldest son remained in the patrilocal residence and continued the traditions of the ancestors. Daughters, however, upon marriage, would leave this residence for that of the spouse and did not head the family. Economics therefore dictated that males be educated first. Later on, both males and females accessed education equally and today such

discrimination does not exist. Women now head homes and ancestral property is usually divided with equity.

Flags flying atop is a sacred axis mundi or cosmic pole that, as a final ritual of the puja, is ritually planted in the east or northeast of the homestead amidst sacred flowers and plants. The jhandi signifies the cosmic connection between the individual, earth and the wider cosmos. The Hindu locates his human presence within an astrological framework that pinpoints details like time, space, the position of the stars, and so on during the performance of any sacred ritual. The home is the center of the Hindu's world. Land, therefore, has a sacred and ritual significance to most Indians, and the earth finds its way in almost all Hindu rituals.

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