

Emigration Against Caste, Transformation of the Self, and Realization of the Casteless Society in Indian Diaspora

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Abstract: Regardless of British colonial motives, many Indians migrated against caste/casteism across Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans. British Guiana marked the entry of Indian indentured laborers in the Caribbean in 1838. Paradoxically, thereafter religious and caste identities have risen among them. This article aims to unravel the intersectionality of religion, caste, and gender in the Caribbean Indian diaspora. Based on the recent field study in Guyana and Suriname as well as from the interdisciplinary sources, this essay examines: how brahminical deities, temples, and patriarchal institutions have re-invented caste-based asymmetrical sociality in the plantation colonies. Contrary to such re-establishment of brahminical inequalities, it argues, the castefree Indo-Guyanese religio-cultural practices foster inter-religious and inter-racial inclusive integration. And that this has led to self-transformation as well as in the making of a casteless society in the Caribbean.

The institutionalized structures and violent practices of race, caste, and gender have always been crucial push factors of migration in the modern period. Recent philosophical and interdisciplinary studies have engaged with how aspects of race, gender, and nationality intersect with migration.¹ However, thus far, theories of migration and philosophies of immigration have inadequately engaged with the emigration of caste-based

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oppressed communities during European colonialism in South Asia or with the postcolonial transmigration of such communities between the global South and North. The hitherto unexamined interrelations between colonial policies and marginalized Indians' emigration against caste, on the one hand, and the oppressed Indians reconstructing their castefree life overseas, on the other, nevertheless, provide critical philosophical dimensions to migration.

Colonial racial capitalism depended for its success (and stability) on comprador privileged caste groups. A large majority of Indians were, as a result, culturally *othered*, spatially segregated, and economically underprivileged as lower castes and untouchables through the colonial state's legitimization of precolonial privileged caste identities and practices. The brahmins—who are not even five percent of India's population, then and now—through the propagation of their caste-power and by predominantly working the British colonial apparatuses reaped maximum benefits.² Such caste groups not only viciously appropriated the labor and land of the oppressed communities but also normalized their dependency on the colonialist-casteist structures.³ Nonetheless, the emergence of Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 in Europe and the colonial Indian Indentured Policy to circumvent it unwittingly opened the possibility for the subordinated Indians to resist religio-casteism i.e., caste-imposing religious prescriptions/identities and labor exploitation by privileged caste men, by migrating in and emigrating outside South Asia.⁴

Communities in diverse linguistic regions and their organic intellectuals welcomed indentured policy and emigration to plantation and mining colonies, since 1834, only because it was an opportunity for emancipation against casteism of brahminical groups. Such a stance of the underprivileged was in rejection of the caste-nationalism of the privileged castes and their opposition to the colonial indentured policy.⁵ Unsurprisingly the emigration of the marginalized not only led to their breaking free from the domination of the casteist groups but also enabled their re-membering and re-establishing castefree cultural and religious identities overseas—it also guaranteed better economic and social environments for the repatriated after their return migration.

Modern emigration of the oppressed Indians, during colonialism or in the post-independence period, has confirmed that the Indians abroad are not a homogeneous community, i.e., "Hindus." In fact, categories and outfits such as "Hindus," "Hindu Associations," "Hindustanis," and "Sanatanis" in North America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere have entrenched casteist divisions and discriminatory practices—a majority of emigrants

from postcolonial India were privileged caste groups who have disproportionately benefitted from the state subsidized medical and technical education.⁶ The philosophy of multiculturalism, purportedly celebrating diversity and pluralism, advocating state and civil societal recognition of the categories and practices of the privileged caste Indians is, therefore, problematic—philosophers, historians, anthropologists, and postcolonial specialists are yet to critically engage with the rise of local and global brahminism. Evidently lawsuits and reports in North America and Europe confirm the crises of casteism and racism within Indians—and in their interrelations with Africans, African Americans, Afro-Europeans, and Afro-Caribbeans.⁷ In fact, what are presented as the entitlements of the “Hindu Indian Americans” and “American Hinduism” in “multicultural” America, for instance, is based on a concerted effort to view “that the caste system was never religiously sanctioned by Hinduism and thus was not central to Hindu practice.”⁸ Such maneuvers have actually led to privileged caste groups’ exponential establishment of brahminical temples and entrenchment of casteism in the US i.e., American brahminism. In contrast, the assertion of castelessness of diverse vernacular Indian communities, after their emigration to the plantation colonies and transmigration elsewhere, point to their divergence from and challenge their being assimilated into caste-reinforcing “Hindu” homogeneity in multicultural societies.

In this paper, I argue that the Indian diaspora is divided into privileged caste groups and castefree/anticaste communities. And that caste-based social, cultural, political, and economic exclusion, which is historically associated with the invention and oppression of self-privileging caste groups, is present within Indian diaspora. Nevertheless, this study points to the contexts of emigration of Indian communities that were oppressed under caste but considered themselves as castefree in colonial India and chose to emigrate across the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans. More importantly, it also examines how the Indians who emigrated against caste/casteism found agentic religio-cultural self-emancipation, on the one hand, and established the collective transformation of their social life in faraway lands in the Caribbean, on the other.

To subvert the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British enforced the Indian indenture policy to recruit Indian laborers for the plantation colonies since 1834. Regarding the indentured Indians in the Caribbean, Lommarsh Roopnarine writes, “For over three-quarters of a century (1838–1920), British, Danish, Dutch, and French governments transported an estimated 500,000 indentured Indian laborers from the Indian

subcontinent to the Caribbean. The laborers were distributed over British Guiana (238,960), Trinidad (143,939), Suriname (43,404), Guadeloupe (42,236), Jamaica (37,027), Martinique (25,404), French Guiana (8,500), Grenada (3,200), Belize (3,000), St. Vincent (2,472), St. Lucia (2,300), St. Kitts (361), Nevis (342), and St. Croix (325).⁹ Many indentured laborers did not know where they were going—the plantation colonies were not hospitable lands, but some envisioned such distant lands would offer them a personal and collective transformation. Given the hard labor requirements of plantation economies caste-based oppressed agrarian Indians constituted the majority of the emigrated.¹⁰ And yet, paradoxically, caste/casteism is very much present outside India. Some Indo-Caribbeans even re-invented their identities as brahmins and kshatriyas by purportedly relying on colonial documents and tracing their ancestral connections.¹¹

However, emigration, I argue in this essay, was a means by which the oppressed Indians succeeded in the reembedding of castelessness, both during and after their indenture in the European plantation colonies. That is, although the virulence of colonialism and casteism disembedded the marginalized Indians from their local life-worlds in India, through the indentured contracts they reembedded casteless time and space overseas.¹² And this—I will show—is evidenced in the castefree consciousness, identity, and practices of some Indian communities in the Caribbean. The indentured Indians and their descendants believe that their individual and collective life is not putatively determined by or dependent on their birth into a caste; particularly as a lower caste or untouchable. Instead they retain diverse positive vernacular identities and reject such caste categories, which were originally invented by and imposed through brahmin-male power. Nonetheless, I point toward a struggle within the religious practices of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora between those who are cultivating and strengthening a castefree identity (characterized by inclusive practices), and those who re-invent and re-impose a caste-based identity (characterized by brahmin-male dominated exclusionary ideologies, institutions, and practices).

Brahmin-male Power, Indian Indenture, and Castefree Indians

It is true that the colonial indentured labor policy was designed to perpetuate the European empires across the world; it was “A New System of Slavery.”¹³ However, for the oppressed Indian women, men, and children the European indenture contract was an opportunity to escape the internal religio-casteism. The prosperity of the privileged caste men meant

that the segregated majority of Indians were denied educational, economic, and other opportunities of colonial modernity. It is not a surprise then that the privileged caste women themselves were at the receiving end of brahmin-male power and its violence.¹⁴ Although women were only a small percentage of the emigrants they did not hesitate to avail the colonial indentured opportunities. Gaiutra Bahadur shows how brahmin women left India and vowed never to return because of sexual and other forms of oppression of their own privileged caste men.¹⁵ Indian diaspora studies confirm that such women found more sexual and labor autonomy in their lands of emigration than in their “homeland,” and retained ownership of their own house, land, and cattle overseas.¹⁶

Unambiguously caste/casteism was a clear push factor in the emigration of the Indians who have been subjugated as lower castes and untouchables since the precolonial period—although there were some pull factors, such as contractual wage employment. In fact, casteism and colonialism became the double-edged sword which ruptured multiple native vernacular Indian communities. This is amply evident from the anticaste organic intellectuals such as Iyothée Thass (1845–1914) who openly wrote against the caste-based exploitation, marginalization, and cultural violence of large majority of Indians by minority groups of brahmins who flourished under European colonialism. Thass urged the reading public to call the Indian National Congress, which led the Indian national movement, a “Brahmin Congress.”¹⁷ More directly, Thass wrote against the brahmin-male controlled Congress’ stand against the British indentured policy as a way to preserve the caste-based oppressed Indians under the brahmin exploitation in India. In contrast, Thass and his fellow anticaste Indians showed how repatriated Indians from Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, and South Africa brought back prosperity, which was not otherwise possible due to brahminical oppression before their migration from India.

The significance of emigration against caste was evident in the case of “An Australian” who had migrated from South India to Australia in the 1870’s. The Australian, who identified himself as a Tamil Buddhist but never revealed his name due to the fear of reprisal from privileged caste groups as well as colonial authorities, joined hands with Thass to establish a castefree vocational training school for the oppressed Indians called “The Non-Caste Dravidian Industrials Limited” in Chennai, South India in 1909. Likewise, other indentured-turned-freemen from the Tamil speaking regions who stayed in their destination countries demonstrated their self-emancipation abroad. For instance, they began

to self-represent themselves as casteless persons through establishing Buddhist Associations in Owenport, Durban, and Natal in South Africa, and publishing and circulating Tamil magazines, such as *The Tamilian* (1907–1914). These intellectuals, organizations and publications critiqued the brahminical capitalism and casteism, and in turn also contrasted the caste-free memory, knowledge traditions, Buddhist culture, and historical sense of castelessness of the marginalized Tamils/Indians, in the early twentieth century.¹⁸

In the Caribbean, after the independence of plantation colonies many Indo-Caribbeans moved to UK and Netherlands, and then to USA and Canada. Clearly, their breaking free from the privileged caste groups in India enabled the possibilities to establish new ways of life to transform their selves, and reconstruct and reembed new societies sans caste. It is only right we examine some instances from the Caribbean to learn about how the Indians who decided not to return to their homeland after their indenture dealt with caste.

Indentured Indians and the Re-fabrication of Caste

It is indeed paradoxical to see the rise of caste/casteism among some Indians in the Caribbean. This is because caste was not a requirement or a condition to be recruited as an indentured laborer. Instead, it was their capacity to do hard plantation and mining labor in hostile environs across the world. Nevertheless, some indentured Indians and their descendants re-invented themselves as privileged caste men. And they made sure some of their linguistic fellow men and women were also recruited into such exclusionary social formations. The direct consequence of such re-institutionalization of caste in the Caribbean was the scrambling to identify oneself as a privileged man by birth. This was to gain more favorable work, monetary, sexual, and other benefits. More perniciously, it led to the subordination of fellow Indians by their language, food habits, and color as lower castes in the plantation colonies. Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec have shown through their pivotal study that “Caribbean Hinduism” is nothing but a privileged caste dominated religious institutionalization of “Brahmanism.” As is the case in India, those who self-identified and self-promoted themselves as brahmins re-planted caste in the Caribbean.¹⁹ This means that the brahmin-male power re-emerged from among Indians whose caste-identity did not matter in the first place or whose privileged caste identity and their lack of agrarian knowledge traditions would not have allowed them to be recruited for indentured labor. And that the perilous voyage for months which led to

Indians forming “close social ties of *Dipwa-Bhai* and *Dipwa-Bahin* (depot brothers and sisters) and *Jahaja Bhai* and *Jahaja Bahin* (ship brothers and sisters) across caste and religion” were betrayed after their arrival in the faraway lands.²⁰ As a result of the rise of such brahmin identity and power (often through unverifiable personal claims), a birth-based and subordinating Hindu religious social structure was re-fabricated and perpetuated in the Caribbean. Migration and transmigration during colonialism and after independence (to Europe and North America) has exacerbated and reinforced the casteist tendencies of self-privileging Indian migrants.²¹

In Guyana there is evidence of a Shaivite temple in Berbice which is said to have existed since 1846. Nonetheless, the five brahminical *murtis* i.e., Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, and Hanuman (Shakti is the only goddess in this ensemble of gods) and their other derivative avatars, such as Ganesha, began to take roots in the Caribbean only in the 1920’s, after the indenture policy came to an end. And Indians who were influenced by the North Indian religious movements, such as Arya Samaj, sought to recruit Indo-Guyanese in their folds by promoting reformist ideas, such as priesthood for non-brahmins.²² Crucially, Indian Muslims and regional deities (such as the goddess Kali) worshippers were some of the first to assert their inclusive religio-cultural practices (inter-ethnic) through festivals such as Muharram and Kali pujas with animal sacrifice and communal feasts. But those who self-promoted themselves as brahmins were for a Caribbean brahminism i.e., the caste-based re-establishment of an exclusionary cultural, economic, and social institutions and practices in which brahmins remained on top as the most superior group in the Indian diaspora of the Caribbean. This was in contrast to the Kali, Arya Samaj, Muslim, Christian, Indo-African, and other more egalitarian and inclusive Indo-Caribbean traditions.

Self-privileging caste men, thus, shaped the emergence and institutionalization of what is called the “Sanatani Dharma.” It stands for the brahminical myth that there is an “eternal order/duty/righteousness” which a “Hindu” ought to follow at all space and time. Such claims were first propagated with the establishment of “Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha” (SDMS) in Trinidad in 1951, with the efforts of Bhadase Sagan Maraj, who aimed to reach out to the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean. Unambiguously, SDMS stood for brahminical values and identity.²³

Not surprisingly, Indo-Guyanese took the cue from SDMS of Trinidad, and established their own Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha (GHDS) in 1974. Reepu Daman Persaud founded GHDS and remained the presi-

dent of this organization till he passed away in 2013. His name had/has a prefix Pandit which refers to his brahmin identity—although some non-brahmin privileged caste priests also refer to themselves as Pandits in the Caribbean. Reepu Persaud's father Durga Persaud's arrival in Guyana in 1914, purportedly with a caste-bearing colonial document, authenticated his descendant as a brahmin bearing the mantle of institutionalization of GHDS. The GHDS is presently overseeing over 125 temples in Guyana, some of which are also caste free temples such as the Kali temples. After Reepu Daman Persaud's demise, his daughter Vidhya Persaud was elected to be the next President of GHDS in 2013. Interestingly, she says "even though she is a vegetarian, teetotaler, and a Hindu the Pandits i.e., the brahmin priests of GHDS, are not happy about her being the president, since she is a woman."²⁴ Such gender disparities have led to the formation of *Mahila Mandali* (women's association) within the GHDS. Nonetheless, it is clear that the GHDS, its priest training programs, and other festivities unambiguously stand neither for gender equalities nor for anticaste integration of the Indo-Guyanese but instead for caste-based unequal integration.

Suriname received its first indentured laborers in 1873. They were mostly from the Central (United) Provinces and Bengal Presidency of British North India i.e., Uttar Pradesh and Bihar of present India.²⁵ Like other parts of the Caribbean, Indo-Surinamese were mostly lower caste Indians and Muslims but the brahminical gods, goddesses, and temples took shape in Suriname with the predomination of those Indians who identified themselves as brahmins. They found success with the establishment of certain Surinamese laws in their favor. For instance, only brahmin males were deemed qualified priests, and allowed to officiate marriages of Indo-Surinamese who identify themselves as "Hindus."²⁶ In fact, like in Trinidad and Guyana, Suriname also has its own Sanatan Dharm Maha Sabha (SDMS-Suriname) which, as a brahmin dominated association, institutionalizes brahminical religio-cultural practices.

Indo-Surinamese brahmin priests are clear when they say that "caste is permanent because it is Sanatani dharma, vice versa. And as per Sanatani dharma even Sanatani brahmin women cannot become *pan-dita* (priestess) but only *pracharika* (propagator)."²⁷ Such caste-inflected standpoints of the Indian diaspora mirror the rise of brahminical/Hindu fundamentalism in colonial and postcolonial India.²⁸ And the advent of global brahminism i.e., the international ascendance of local racism and casteism of the Indian minority community, brahmins, which by mythically imposing the birth-based *varna* and *jati* i.e., color and caste,

in social relations culturally and economically benefits and violently perpetuates casteism overseas—such tendencies are also mimicked by some non-brahmin privileged groups.

The inauguration of Sanatan Dharma Sabhas of Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname in the twentieth century points to the self and social transformation of the indentured hard labor skilled Indians and their descendants in the Caribbean. Their rise now as *Sanatanis* i.e., Indians who identify themselves as “orthodox Hindus,” is a euphemism for caste-based identification of oneself as a brahmin or non-brahmin privileged caste person and belonging to such caste groups. The institutionalization of such caste-based identities is evident in their places of worship (temples), marriage rituals, food restrictions (vegetarianism), educational institutions, and birth-based brahminical occupations (priesthood). It is through these practices some of the descendants of Indian indentured laborers, who were mostly from the caste-based oppressed communities, are now increasingly self-proclaiming their supposedly brahminical identities. Problematically, such orthodoxies begin to be valorized as the *only* identity of the Indo-Caribbeans by some Indians.

In contrast, the Indians who dared to break free from the shackles of caste/casteism and became indentured labor also wrote poems: “Brahmans and Kshatriyas. . . . Who attach untouchability. . . . While keeping the company of the prostitutes. . . . The subjects escaped and came to the islands. . . . India turned on her side.”²⁹ Their castefree religio-cultural institutions and practices have also continued to thrive in the Caribbean—in opposition to and differing from the Sanatani brahminical claims. Such anticaste spirit and historical sense of castelessness manifest among the Indo-Guyanese, for instance, who have retained vernacular Kali and Amman religious traditions which are also identified as “the Madras Tradition.”³⁰ Understanding these casteless modes of worship and practices reveal how the Indo-Guyanese have held on to their ancestral castefree values to transform their self and to establish a casteless society in the Caribbean.

The Politics of Coopting Castefree Identities Under the Brahminical Garb

The castefree deities, priests, priestesses, and worshippers are diverse in Guyana. They have a long history of being intricately connected to the Indo-Guyanese communities since their arrival in 1838. In fact, some anticaste Indo-Guyanese point out that their own ancestors played a crucial role in establishing the very first temples of Guyana. Keith McNeal

poignantly writes in the context of Kali worship in Trinidad, “Parameshwarie and Katerie, although derived from different Indian geographic zones, meet at the kali temple for those seeking the divine intervention of *Shakti*.” Furthermore he shows that such non-brahminical traditions have been “gaining ground among increasingly wide segments of the Guyanese Hindu community and among Afro-Creoles as well.”³¹ Historically it is part of the lore of the indentured Indians and their descendants that many of these non-brahminical deities, such as Parameshwarie, Kali, Katerie, Siparee Mai, Sangili Murugan, Muni, Madurai Veeran, Maari Amman, and so on were brought along by the Indian indentured laborers from across the Indian subcontinent since they first landed in Guyana. Thereafter due to the colonial racism inflected Christianity, on the one hand, and the gradual ascendance of brahminical deities and rituals, on the other, these non-brahminical traditions have assumed distinct identities in diverse localities of the Caribbean.

However, McNeal misreads such changes in the non-brahminical Caribbean traditions when he says that behind the animal sacrifices oriented deities in the Caribbean what one could see is the “Hindu conceptualization of cosmic power or energy that emanates from the devis, or female goddesses, that generates and continues to activate the universe.”³² At the outset, this is a condescending cooption of the non-brahminical deities and worship of the Indo-Caribbeans into brahminical categories and practices. The category “Hindu” was not popular even during the early twentieth century colonial India when the indenture emigration came to an end. And the indentured Indians were mostly unrelated to the brahminical religio-cultural notions. In fact, they were victims of the caste-violence of privileged caste groups who self-proclaimed their identity as “Hindus” after the British promotion of this category.³³

Some scholars who study the Caribbean Indian diaspora carelessly foist the category Hindu with a hindsight on communities which are unconnected with or would not like to be identified *only* as Sanatanis i.e., orthodox privileged caste groups. This is because such misrepresentations depend on seeing the diversity of Indian diaspora *only* as Hindus. They not only overlook the modalities of brahminical impositions but also legitimize the cooption of linguistically diverse and polytheistic non-brahminical deities of India in to a monolithic brahminical/Hindu *Shakti* and *devi* forms. For that matter what is also identified as “Ma-drassi Tradition” does not provide enough light on the critical caste aspects of non-brahminical deities, temples, priests, and publics.

Castefree Identity and Transformational Modes of Worship

The castefree temples in Guyana that are in focus in this article are of two kinds: 1) Kali temples; 2) Mariamman temples. Such temples, however, house multiple other non-brahmin deities (as well as some brahminical deities) from diverse regions of India. These temples mostly have priests—although priestesses serve in various such non-brahmin temples from time to time across Guyana.

Kali and Mariamman temple architecture mostly do not have the imposing grandeur that brahminical temples have. Such spatial structural design makes the deity accessible to all devotees. As soon as they enter these temples the worshippers are instantly surrounded by and get connected to the deities that are there—a clear contrast to the hierarchical spatial divisions of brahminical temples which mimic the caste and gender hierarchy i.e., in the descending order of gods, goddesses, priests, worshippers, separate entrance and seating arrangements for men and women as well as patriarchal prevention of menstruating women from entering such temples. In the non-brahmin temple complexes in Guyana one finds a female deity at the very entrance. It is usually either a Kali amma/n (mother Kali) or Kateri amma/n (mother Kateri)—and not Ganesha as is the case with brahmin temples. And women retain lot more autonomy in comparison in their accessibility and worship than in brahmin temples—however, the gender-based violence and suicide rate of women are very high in the Caribbean irrespective of the religious affiliations of the Indo-Caribbeans.³⁴

Although a shrine might be identified as a Kali temple, it invariably hosts a pantheon of deities, some of which are even absent in brahminical deity temples in Guyana or India. Christ, Mary, and Islamic images are also present among the diverse non-brahminical deities. That is, in-between them and not at the periphery. The priest of a Kali temple says “Muslims and Christians regularly visit the Kali shrine for healing their psycho-somatic challenges in life. While the Muslim and Christian worshippers retain their own distinct religious identity they liberally accept Kali as well to ward off their travails and to seek wellbeing through her blessings.” In addition, the Kali shrine priest explains that he wanted to express Kali’s and his own “we feeling” gestures in return to these Muslim and Christian worshippers of Kali by keeping Mary, Christ, and images of Islam in the shrine at the center at par with Kali and other vernacular castefree deities.³⁵

Clearly one not only witnesses the heterodox aspects in this Kali worship but also the inclusive casteless religiosity of the worshippers in

three ways: 1) despite the manifest non-brahminical identity and religious space of Kali, the brahminical deities are also incorporated into the shrine. 2) Besides non-brahmin and brahmin deities, other religious deities and images of Muslim and Christian traditions are also vital to the Kali shrine and worship. 3) Animal sacrifice, alcohol and smoking are indispensable features of the Kali rituals. Such practices not only reject brahminical stigmatization of such rituals but they are also meant to empower meat eating, alcohol drinking, and smoking habits of the devotees of Kali—who are invariably disparaged by the brahmin-male gurus in the Caribbean as is the case among Indian diaspora and their Hindu temples elsewhere. Markedly there is a rejection of brahminical exclusionary practices that manifest in the worship of brahminical deities, thus, embedding casteless and raceless spatial and temporal values. In the Kali temples of Guyana the castefree consciousness and identity of the devotee as well as the priest is evident.

Mariamman temples of Guyana are also remarkable for their distinctness as not only a place of non-brahmin deity but also a space where casteless subjectivity is reinforced. Architecturally, the Mariamman shrines are almost an extension of the house of their multilingual and modern priests. The main deity in one temple is, of course, Mariamman, which has a replica of the Mariamman temple of Samayapuram in Tamil Nadu, South India—a phenomenon of castefree memory and casteless Tamil influence nine thousand miles away. In fact, this Mariamman temple entrance welcomes a worshipper with a Tamil god, Sankili Murugan, i.e., a god who wears a chain around his body, which is a protecting deity of the worshipper. Then one moves to see Muniandavan, another Tamil god which is also known as Muniandi or Muniyaswaran in Tamil Nadu today, a popular deity of the casteless Tamils. Muniandi is also a reference to Buddha, who was also known as Muni or Sakyamuni among the Tamil Buddhists and other Buddhists across the world due to Buddha's attainment of nirvana through his meditating prowess.³⁶ And then one moves to pray to Madurai Veeran, another Tamil god whose origin is traced to Madurai in Tamil Nadu. This deity is also known for his valor as the Tamil word "Veeran" signifies. It is also a popular deity among the casteless Tamils due to the legend about Madurai Veeran's struggle against caste/casteism in the Tamil speaking regions of South India. Finally, one reaches the goddess Mariamman, the main deity. She is decorated with *Kungumam* (vermilion) on the forehead and a red Saree around her body. The ritual items such as Neem and Mango leaves in bowls of water, a semi-husked Coconut and a sickle to cut, camphor in a

plate to be lit, and Sambirani (incense powder) to be put in a simmering charcoal pan are kept ready for the ritual performances for the worshippers' by the priest. Interestingly, the priest encourages the participation of the worshippers in the very rituals while he chants the Tamil words in praise of Mariamman that are mostly intelligible to the worshippers of this deity. Adjacent to the Mariamman deity is a pit where a fowl or a goat or a pig is sacrificed on important occasions. The meat of these sacrificed animals is then cooked for communal feasts in the temple complex, which is meant to emphasize castefree commensality. These practices are a clear contrast to brahmin temples' caste-based asymmetrical social gathering and handouts of small plastic packets of vegetarian devotional-foods (*prasada*).

In the Mariamman temples, the priests, priestesses, and devotees occupy a castefree horizontal space and experience a direct communion with the goddesses and gods by their own ritual performances aided by the priest. Considering the caste-valorizing and "North-Indian" predominance of the Sanatani Associations in Guyana and their inter-linkages with other such organizations in Trinidad and Suriname, a Mariamman priest said "there is a marginalization of non-Sanatani Indo-Guyanese with alternative beliefs, practices, and associations which are inter-religious and interracial. Kali and Mariamman temples have always been known for their inclusivity of Muslims and Christians as well as African, Chinese, and native Amerindians. Disparagingly, such humanistic Indo-Guyanese religio-cultural practices traditions have been dubbed as *obeah* (African religious cult)."³⁷ Nonetheless, Kali and Amman priests say integrating such Indo-Guyanese traditions are becoming more popular among Guyanese in general. And this is because they are embedded in working-class oriented, interracial, and casteless society.

Castefree Priests and Rituals of Healing

Unlike the brahmin priests of Sanatani temples, the priests of Kali and Amman temples do not identify themselves by caste. A Kali temple priest said, "Such caste-claims of priests are not only shameful but also anti-God."³⁸ In fact, such temple priests explain that the caste-based hierarchy perpetuated via the brahminical deities is also a senseless degradation and alienation of the worshippers even as their financial support is sought for the prosperity of the brahminical temple complex. In contrast, the Kali and Amman priests manifest castefree accessibility to any common worshipper, woman and man. Their ritual chanting is mostly in simple English and/or Tamil, unlike the brahmin priests' Sanskrit (and

Hindi) interspersed English sermon that is mostly unintelligible to the worshippers.

The Kali and Amman priests often directly involve the worshippers in their rituals. Close proximity of the priest and their bodily touch enhance the healing-experience of the worshippers. Such oneness between the priest and the devotee brings about reassuring self-empowerment as well as collective casteless belongingness—a clear contrast to spatial segregation and non-touching interaction between brahmin-male priests and their worshippers. Thus there is no glaring priest dominance and worshipper subordination between the Kali and Amman priests and the devotees. In fact, these priests deliberately practice more endearing closeness with the devotees. For instance, a Kali temple priest has seating arrangements in the shrine in such a way to facilitate a horizontal communion and communication with the worshippers, even though only the priest knows the rituals of healing. In this arrangement the devotee benefits from immediate counselling by the plain-speaking nature of the priest surrounded by the goddesses and gods as well as fellow worshippers. Animal sacrifice and community feasts thereafter bring together the devotee-families and fellow worshippers together on a shared sacred ground to overcome their life-challenges.

True to the interracial and interreligious nature of the devotees, the Kali and Amman priests show an ethical understanding of humanity by rejecting caste and race differences—some have interracial partners. Particularly, they understand caste as casteism. In this sense, a Mariamman temple priest said, “Claiming one’s identity as a brahmin priest is bogus and it is meant to gain material prosperity by putting down the devotees of the deities they officiate as priests.”³⁹ Instead such priests say that all humans irrespective of their births face unsettling moments in their lives. And healing the devotees by invoking the sacred blessing of the deities is incumbent on the priests if one identifies himself or herself as a priest or priestess. In this sense, the castefree non-brahmin deities, their priests, and their ritual performances are for an explicit healing purpose through what could be called a “casteless inclusive integration.” It is in such non-discriminatory religio-cultural interpretations and healing practices that the castefree identity in general, casteless Tamil identity in particular, is forged, the Mariamman priest said.

Emigration, Transmigration, and the Future of Casteless Society

Among all the push factors of Indian indentured emigration the most virulent was the problem of caste under the colonial regime. It was more

due to the ascendance of privileged caste groups, and their collusion with the British colonialists that the Indians who were now branded, stigmatized, and categorized as lower castes and untouchables increasingly lost their labor, land, education, jobs, and dignity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries colonial India. Not surprisingly, they welcomed the indentured labor policy. And sailed away, emigrated and transmigrated, to shed their subordination under caste. Nearly eighty percent of them vowed never to return to India. This is because they feared the privileged caste groups, such as brahmins, will re-casteize them as their subordinates.

Disconcertingly, some indentured Indians, true to their birth-oriented caste-based beliefs and identities, reinvented not only the homeland deities and temples but also *othered* fellow Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans for their castefree ways of life. The Sanatan Dharma Sabhas in the Caribbean served to reinforce the brahminical orthodoxy to elevate the privileged and their prosperity, while the Indian Muslims, Indian Christians, and casteless Indians are relegated as inauthentic Indo-Caribbeans. It is through them that the brahmin and kshatriya identities of the priests, patrons, and devotees are established. In addition, they cater to caste-valorizing endogamous marriage and business interests. The prefix Pandit before an Indo-Guyanese, as is the case elsewhere in the Caribbean, helps a person of Indian origin to elevate “himself” as a privileged caste man over other Indians who are denied or don’t embrace such titles—although some casteless and anticaste Indo-Guyanese priests of Kali and Amman temples also identify themselves as Pandits. Personal claims and recognition by one’s group only matter in such caste-based elevation of one’s status and prosperity as a middle or upper class priest (some crisscross the Caribbean as fulltime priests) and/or an entrepreneur (some brahmin priests also work for corporate enterprises). There are instances of brahmin identity claims of Indo-Caribbeans turning out to be false when their ancestry was traced back to the villages of North India where Indians oppressed by caste i.e., those who are categorized as lower castes and untouchables, forced to live since the colonial period.⁴⁰

Sanatani Sabhas are financially more endowed and control predominantly brahmin-oriented temple and educational enterprises. But some of them have co-opted non-brahmin traditions such as Kali and Amman temples. The Sanatani Sabhas have the support of privilege-caste-based “Hindu” associations from India and North America, and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, the Sanatani Sabhas disparage the interracial influence of Christianity and Islam on the Indo-Guyanese, even as they promote caste-reinforcing social relations within and through them. For

these reasons they seem to have belied the hopes of their own indentured ancestors' castefree self and social transformation.

In contrast, the non-Sanatani women and men, have continued the ethical values of their ancestors. Clearly the Indo-Caribbeans who do not identify themselves by any caste have reembedded their castelessness. Indo-Guyanese tell how their ancestors arrived in the Caribbean from diverse linguistic zones of India. But they are also proud about how their ancestors in Guyana forged inter-racial and inter-religious casteless identities. Reembedding diverse castefree deities, such as Kali and Amman, and building temples of inter-religious inclusion stand in contrast to brahminical deities and temples of the Caribbean (and North America and Europe) where brahmin and kshatriya identities of the priests, patrons, and devotees are embellished.

Did the Indians who emigrated to escape caste oppression in colonial India succeed, after close to two hundred years of their voyage? It is evident that they did from the Indo-Guyanese descendants of indentured Indians who have followed vernacular Kali and Amman traditions in the Caribbean that they shun caste, as their ancestors did. And they find brahminical identity, priesthood, and temples as an abomination against fellow Indians, Indian diaspora, and their castefree humanity. Among such Indo-Caribbeans, thus, there is a sense of self-transformation and belongingness in a casteless society.

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and children who, after their emigration from South Asia, have become casteless Indo-Caribbeans.

Endnotes

1. See De Genova, *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States*; Song, "Political Theories of Migration;" Cole, *Philosophies of Exclusion: Liberal Political Theory and Immigration*.
2. See Fuller and Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmins: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste*.
3. See Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*; Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*.
4. See Ayyathurai, "Living Buddhism: Migration, Memory, and Castelessness in South India."
5. See Ayyathurai, "The Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and the Marginalized in South India."
6. See Subramanian, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*.
7. See Diwakar, "A Silicon Valley Lawsuit Reveals Caste Discrimination is Rife in the US"; Dhanda, et al, *Caste in Britain: Socio-legal Review*. Regarding the Indian government's effort "to avoid international scrutiny of caste discrimination" see Berg, "Race as a political frontier against caste: WCAR, Dalits, and India's foreign policy."
8. Kurien, "Multiculturalism and 'American' Religion: The case of Hindu Indian Americans."
9. Roopnarine, "The Repatriation, Readjustment, and Second-Term Migration of Ex-Indentured Indian Laborers From British Guiana and Trinidad to India, 1838–1955."
10. Roopnarine, *The Caribbean Indian: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*.
11. See Veer and Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion"; Rocklin, *The Regulation of Religion and the Making of Hinduism in Colonial Trinidad*.
12. For disembedding and globalization see Eriksen, *Globalization*.
13. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labor Overseas, 1830–1920*.
14. See Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*.
15. See Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*.
16. See Mishra, "'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji;" Fokken, "Beyond Stereotypes: Understanding the Identities of Hindustani Women and Girls in Suriname between 1873 and 1921."
17. Ayyathurai, "The Foundations."

18. Ibid.
19. Veer and Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad."
20. Roopnarine, *The Caribbean Indian*, 14.
21. See Vertovec, *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, Ethnicity, and Socio-Economic Change*.
22. Dr. Yog Madadeo in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 5 September 2019, Georgetown, Guyana.
23. See Jayaram, "The Metamorphosis of Caste among Trinidad Hindus."
24. Dr. Vidhya Persaud in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 14 September 2019, Georgetown, Guyana.
25. Professor Maurits Hassankhan in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 28 August 2019, Welgedacht, Paramaribo, Suriname.
26. See Hoefte, *Suriname in the Long Twentieth Century: Domination, Contestation, Globalization*.
27. Pandit Nitin Jagbandhan in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 23 September 2019, Paramaribo, Suriname.
28. See Ludden, ed. *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*.
29. Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*, 80.
30. See Kloss, "Manifesting Kali's Power: Guyanese Hinduism and the Revitalization of the Madras Tradition."
31. McNeal, "Doing the Mother's Caribbean Work: On Shakti and Society in Contemporary Trinidad," 236–237.
32. McNeal, "Mother's Caribbean Work," 242.
33. See Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*.
34. See Lal, "Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy on Fiji Plantations."
35. Pandit Parasaram Samaroo in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 18 September 2019, Timehri, Guyana.
36. Ayyathurai, "The Foundations."
37. Pandit Deodat Muridall Tillack in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 11 September 2019, Georgetown, Guyana.
38. Pandit Parasaram Samaroo in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 18 September 2019, Timehri, Guyana.
39. Pandit Deodat Muridall Tillack in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 20 September 2019, Georgetown, Guyana.
40. Swami Aksharananda in discussion with Gajendran Ayyathurai, 19 September 2019, Cornelia Ida, West Coast Demerara, Guyana.

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