

Understanding Our Indianness



by Ram Angod, MBA

Ram is a business risk management consultant (www.riskveda.com). For enjoyment, he travels with Josie, his wife, to mingle in esoteric cultures like Peru, East Africa, Zanzibar, Tibet, Nepal, Myanmar, Bali, Java, Himalayas, India, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Japan. He is a fervent Hindu who enjoys the study of Vedanta. (info@riskveda.com)

Almost 90 years ago, the delegate from India stood before members of the British Guiana East Indian Association and passionately urged them: *“I ask you ... not to forget that you are Indians, that you are the sons, like I am of a country with a very great past; of a country whose civilization is one of the oldest in the world (cheers); of a country which has produced one of the greatest founders of religion - ... the Great Gautama Buddha; a country which has produced some architecture and magnificence of buildings, which are the envy of the world; a country which has a very brilliant literature and drama; a country which has inculcated, in its best day, a spirit of humanity and of tolerance. I ask you never to forget such a country, and I ask you again never to forget that you are that country’s sons.”* (Taken from Professor Clem Secharran’s: *India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese Imagination 1890s – 1920s*)

This reminder is as relevant today as it was in 1925. In fact, our Caribbean Indianness runs far deeper than we realize, and our kinship with National Indians (those in the diaspora without an indentured heritage) is much closer than either of us is aware; our differences are only cosmetic. Holding views to the contrary is an unfortunate self-denial that works against our opportunity to enjoy India’s rich heritage and engage our fellow Indians in meaningful relationships. This article is meant to dispel misinformation about our Indianness and to inspire us to embrace our Indian legacy.

(This narrative is aimed mainly at Indians of Hindu descent, given this magazine’s target audience. Also, by Indianness, I refer to the extent to which our Indian heritage is reflected in our ideas, values, attitudes and behaviours.)

Misconceptions

Caribbean Indians need to be assertive, less defensive, and more confident about their Indian identity. One National Indian confided in me: *“You Indians are*

confused as to whether or not you are really Indian!” an assertion that says a lot. We can begin to uncover our Indian identity by throwing out pejorative and condescending terminologies employed by the British to describe us. For example, our own historians insistently refer to us as “labourers”, which might have been the hidden purpose for which our forefathers were destined when recruited in India, but Indians did not think of themselves as “labourers” but as “workers”. There is substantive difference between “indentured labourers” and “indentured workers”, a distinction that needs to be asserted, in view of the fact that many were unemployed skilled tradesmen, farmers, and artisans.

It must be emphasized also, that every Indian worker, whether or not coerced, contracted to leave India as an emigrant to another country, and was neither a cast-out nor a refugee. Each was given an official “Emigration Pass”, and far from being simply indentured labourers (and whatever tragedies this notion suggests) they were pioneers in a labour project in which they had the right to live abroad or be returned to India. The fact that they endured horrors on the transport ships and plantations is a significant but separate issue from the status by which they left India. Over-emphasis by our historians of the exploitative features of indentureship diminishes the reality that these Indians possessed some essential rights and freedoms.

Caribbean Indians have been unwittingly supporting the idea of their own low social status. The pejorative “coolie” label was adopted by the British to refer to the Indian worker recruited for plantation life. It was originally an objective description and useful classification. But in the Caribbean (and elsewhere

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in the diaspora), the term stuck and became synonymous with “Indian”, such that after Indians ceased being labourers, even as they ascended the social ladder and became doctors and lawyers, creole society continued to refer to them as “coolies” with denigrating intent. Our own modern-day historians and other writers carelessly perpetuate the “coolie” stigma with publications like “Coolie Odyssey”, “Coolie Connection” and photographs of “coolie” emigrants. The “coolie” term has a similar history to “nigger”, a derivative of “negro”, but do we see reputable African American writers referring to their social history in like manner? We have to hope this self-deprecation is more the result of thoughtlessness than low cultural self-esteem.

Among the 27 million people of Indian origin in the Indian diaspora, Caribbean Indians are the only ones who refer to themselves as “East Indians”, thereby creating the misperception that they are a distinct kind of Indian. (Three years ago, this same magazine published an article in which *all Indians* were referred to as “East Indians”!) Indeed, the term is used to differentiate Indians from West Indians and aboriginals, but why do our scholars and leaders subject us to this mindless partitioning rather than help the West to extricate itself out of Columbus’ folly? We are Indians of Caribbean descent and there are no other Indians but us Indians! Now that North American Native Peoples have rejected the “Indian” label, it is time for us to get rid of the retrogressive “East Indian” differentiation.

As for the social status of Indian emigrant workers, the concern that we all descended from low status Indians is dispelled by Professor Brij V. Lal, who after investigating 45,000 Emigration Passes issued in Calcutta, said: “*I proved conclusively, statistically, that the indentured labourers were not all low caste riff raff, but represented a fair cross-section of rural Indian society, including higher, middling and lower castes ...*” Many were in fact Brahmins, Kshatriyas, skilled craftsmen, artisans, and traders (not “labourers”). The present-day nouveau-elite in the Indian diaspora should also remind themselves that up to three

generations ago in India and the Caribbean, over 80% of us originated from very humble circumstances.

Indian Nationals often mention our failure to retain the Hindi language. This loss however, didn’t result from lack of trying. Throughout Guyana and Trinidad, local pandits and others courageously endeavored to transmit Hindi to the children but because of the language’s irrelevance in formal schools and creole culture, it was simply not sustainable. The same trend is taking place with Canada’s National Indians as illustrated by this comment from an Indian participant in a web discussion forum: “*Since most of us now only know English, we need the intermediation of English to understand our dharmic concepts in Sanskrit.*” Judging from this comment, the lineup for English sub-titled Bollywood movies will only get longer!

Emigration A Success Story

The experience of Indian indentureship is a success story both for emigrant Indians and for India. From a cosmic point of view, the spreading of Indian genes across global North, South, East and West benefits the world with plurality of spiritual, religious, and cultural perspectives, and ultimately ensures global civilizational balance. (This is also true for other world cultures.) Consider for a moment also, that the emigrants who boarded the *kala pani* ships may have been “chosen” to fulfill a particular mission. In fact, many of the descendants of these early migrants are currently making a significant impact in their respective diasporic environments. Consider that for over 175 years, a groundwork was being laid and it will still take several generations more before global cultural pluralism achieves its desired effect of balancing world tensions and anxieties.

The Wisdom of India

India is unique in that it possesses a cosmological and spiritual heritage that has guided its people through an unbroken experience for over five thousand years. The power of Indian ideas is not well known to the West because of: 1) India’s tradition of orally handing down knowledge; 2) the country is not given to commercialization and ethno-centrism about

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its esoteric knowledge; and, 3) Western practice of appropriating, marginalizing, and denigrating the wisdom of India. The action of this wisdom on the lives of ordinary Indians is as unseen yet as powerful as the ether, and over tens of centuries, through spiritual osmosis, this particular ethic has lodged itself into the psyche of Indians, governing the very way in which they perceive the world and respond to it.

Indianness as Dharma

Let me suggest that “Indianness” never left the diasporic Indian mind. It may have been tarnished by adversity in the way silver tarnishes from atmospheric stress, but under the surface, the inherent nature of silver endures. The silver of the Indian mind, the “Indianness” I refer to is *dharma*, the ethical and philosophical principle that has guided the lives of a nation of Indians for several thousand years.

Briefly, *dharma* is about duty, doing one’s duty to God, man and nature relative to the laws that govern them. This duty is not discretionary, it is prescribed for Hindus in their sacred texts (as much as other cultures have their own commandments and codes of conduct). Underpinning *dharma* is the idea that the cosmos is the outcome of God’s will and man’s first duty is to seek union with God, which includes performing obligatory acts, or duties, towards God, others, and nature. Hindu’s sacred texts, the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, the ones which have most inspired the lives of ordinary Hindus for nearly three thousand years, are almost all about one’s duties towards God, king, work, warrior, teacher, priest, mother, wife, animals. Indianness (not just Hinduness) is the degree to which we have retained *dharma* – the inner sense of obligation we have towards all that influences our own lives.

As a Hindu, I was raised with my indentured grandmother’s constant reminder: “*you must always follow your dharam*”. I took this to mean that I was supposed to be loyal and respectful to my religion, my parents and elders. The idea of duty stayed with me all my life and instinctively extended to my wider social relationships, responsibilities, and to nature.

For most of my years, though I was guided by innate *dharma*, I didn’t comprehend what it meant to be Indian or Hindu. Eventually, however, the silver within me wanted to be relieved of its tarnish and now, I firmly believe my experience as an Indian is not unique; there is a dharmic presence in varying degrees in all diaspora Indians and it is this that is the source of their Indianness.

In the Caribbean, as elsewhere in the global diaspora, Indians demonstrated a consistent response for dealing with hardship and separation. In their transplanted geographies, racial and class rejection forced them into a *jahaji* community existence that caused them to cling to their Indian values and traditions. With a kind of collective *dharmic* consciousness, everywhere they prayed to their gods, applied a disciplined work ethic, and practiced thrift, as they held before them a steady vision of family advancement. The Indian paradigm of success was more or less the same throughout the diaspora - owning land, operating a business, earning an income from farming, and making sacrifices to educate their children to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, and engineers. The powerful dharmic forces that had shaped their civilization for hundreds of centuries prevailed in their diasporic lives to ensure their individual, family and community progress.

Early Fostering of Indianness

Retention of Indianness in the diaspora didn’t just happen; it was actively fostered by powerful Indo-centric individuals in the colonies. These people worked hard to establish and maintain dynamic cultural and educational ties with India, which included regular two-way visits. Ironically, Guianese Indian champions were mostly Christians in whom feelings of Indianness were strong, evidencing the transcendence of Indianness over religion. Indian leaders operated through institutions such as the British Guiana East Indian Institute, British Guiana East Indian Association, East Indian Young Men’s Society, Christian Indian Society, the East Indian Cricket Club, the East Indian Ladies Guild, the Dharam Sala, etc.

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Caribbean Indians understood their unique roots and vigorously defended their culture within their communities. The Indians' efforts to maintain distinctiveness are revealed in the following exchange between Lord Moyne and CR Jacob representing Indians during the 1938 Moyne Commission hearings in British Guiana:

“Mr. Jacob, we have received this submission from the East Indian Association. Do you wish to remain as Guyanese, or do you wish to become a separate entity of East Indians?” and Jacob said: “No, my Lord, we do not wish to become a separate entity, but we wish to preserve our racial and national identity.” (Reported by Frank Birbalsingh in *“From Pillar to Post”*):

The will of early Indians in the Caribbean to stay connected with India manifested in tight identification with Indian life: the 1919 Amritsar massacre; Gandhi's leadership and heroism in defying the British; Tagore's literary genius and world fame; the international prestige of reformer Ram Mohun Roy; the impact on North America of Swamis Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda; adoption of the Mahabharata in national stage plays; India's independence; reverence for the Indian cricket team that visited the West Indies in 1952/53; etc.

The India Connection Today

More recently, Indian efforts in North America and the Caribbean to connect with India are boosted by their growing affluence and demonstrated by: elaborate temple building, e.g. the Dattareya Mandir complex in Trinidad with its 85-foot high Hanuman deity; pilgrimages and cultural visits to India; the growing adoption of Indian music, dance, drama, and religious education; the attraction to Bollywood; spending on Indian cultural ceremonies, festivities and religious events; proliferation of household shrines; accelerated search for Indian roots; emergence of Indian cultural associations in small settled communities like St. Lucia; etc.

At the diaspora level, communities of the 27 million Indians all over the world are endeavoring to achieve cultural, intellectual, and professional cooperation

through The Global Organization of People of Indian Descent (GOPIO), an institution with Caribbean Indians in leadership positions (www.gopio.net). The organization works with the government of India to achieve their mutual objectives. India competes with China, the largest diaspora of all, for harnessing its people's loyalty outside its shores. The role model for all diasporas, however, is the Jewish one, characterized by a high level of integration and cooperation globally for the benefit of individuals, their communities, and their epicenter, Israel. Yet, wherever they are, Jewish people are fully acculturated within their host societies and make themselves barely visible.

Caribbean Indians' claim to Indianness is authenticated by the Indian Government, which makes its PIO (People of Indian Origin) Card available to individuals up to four generations removed from India. The card *“entitles the holder to visa free entry to India in association with a valid foreign nationality passport, investment facilities, education, etc.”* (<http://www.cgitoronto.ca/PIO/pio-home.html>)

Reflection

In summary, the Indian way of life in the Caribbean survived, prospered and is rebounding despite a history of physical, emotional, religious, and political hardships. These Indians could have been broken, but they weren't. Their *maha*-achievement, witnessed in other parts of the world, was possible because of India's dharmic civilizational effect on its people. *Dharma* is at the root of Indianness, and the fact that Caribbean Indians triumphed over indentureship and suppression is a credit to India as a civilization and is reason for people of Indian origin everywhere to be proud.

Individually, Caribbean Indians should look at the bigger cosmic picture and consider that the migratory path that brought our ancestors out of India to Guyana and then to the West, may not have been an accident. There may be purpose to this and as a consequence, each of us should consider fulfilling the duties we have towards one another, to other Indians, and to the wider society in which we live. The place to start is to realize our Indianness. The rest will follow.