What Are 270,000 Hindus Doing on Trinidad Island?
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When Columbus anchored offshore this fecund island lying barely seven miles off the northern coast of South America, 35,000 Amer-Indians inhabited Trinidad. The Portuguese captain-and subsequent colonizers-enslaved them and worked them so mercilessly, only 1,000 remained by 1798. Slaves were then imported from Africa until the practice was replaced by "indentureship." In 1845, a sailing ship from Calcutta unloaded 225 Indians-mostly laborers from Uttar Pradesh. By 1917 the East Indian population swelled to 144,000.

The following report of how Hindus are faring there today is from a young native of this exotic land.

By Vindra Harrypersad, Chaguanas, Trinidad.

Looking back over the years, I find much has changed in my country-change in discipline, the way people think, lifestyles, morality and adherence to religion. Although some changes are good, others are retrograde. I remember as a little girl when everyone lived as an extended family, mediocrity was unacceptable, social values were high and, most importantly, children were taught religion as a way of life. Growing up as a little girl, I noticed we had a code of dressing and children respected elders. It was a time when going to school to get an education, played an intrinsic part of life. Parents took special interest in children, making their growing years as healthy and fruitful as possible. I feel very lucky to have been raised in an orthodox Hindu family where even at a tender age, religion was imbedded in me. I recall parents would always spend quality time with their children, teaching most of the necessary aspects of Hindu Dharma. It was also a time of simple living.

Presently, we have an economy causing rising unemployment and a high cost of living. Both parents have no alternative but to go out and work. Because of this, children are left unsupervised. As a result, drugs, alcoholism and delinquency creep in slowly. Our Vedic Mission of Trinidad addresses this problem squarely by imploring for better Hindu parenting: "Cultural and religious education must not be left to external agents (temple, state, television, school, etc.) but must be undertaken by the family which exerts a more powerful influence on the formative years of the individual. Children devoid of a sense of religious awareness and ancestral culture are invariably more disruptive and deviant."

This is really true. When I look around I see teenagers exhibiting a dramatic decline in moral standards. In most cases, parental guidance is completely ignored and a major breakdown in communication exists. Materialistic tendencies tend to outweigh spiritual and ethical values.

With our two major ethnic groups being East Indians (40%) and Africans, we find that ethnic conflict is perpetually prevalent. Still, many claim that the degree of racial harmony in Trinidad and Tobago is unmatched if compared to other multi-racial countries. University student Prakash doesn't like this perennial undercurrent of racial tension. He says, "We need a change in attitude, a different outlook in life for Hindus and non-Hindus."

Drugs and Dub Music

More and more Hindu youth are lured by the glitter, tinsel and titillation of imported Western ways. Nari, a youth, shares: "Today young people are going after dub music drugs and alcohol-in most cases, copying the Western way of life and completely discarding dharma. The nucleus of the problem is the family." Vishnue, 24, feels, "The leaders in society, have a major role to play in educating the younger. They are the role models."

"Some Hindu youths in racially mixed communities are turning to other churches due to a lack of temples and Hindu priests to serve their spiritual needs," reflects Beedor Maraj, a teacher at Hill View College.

On the Bright Side

In an effort to combat these and other problems like teenage pregnancy and domestic violence, Hindu leaders are taking a more active part in generating a renaissance of Indian culture, music, dance and philosophy and reaching out to the younger children, even adults. One example of this is big youth camps where children are engaged in lecture discussions, workshops, leadership classes, sex and family life education, drama, poetry, music classes and much more. These youth camps, staged annually, are increasingly popular.

Until recently, religious and cultural education was left solely in the hands of our parents or the local pundits. Today we are lucky to have many non-family agents contributing to the spiritual education and social development of Hindus throughout Trinidad. One such institution that has won recent popularity is the new radio station 103 FM. Apart from providing entertainment and information, this station is primarily geared towards the East Indian community and strengthens the Hindu population through its segments on Hindi language, music, traditional Indian cooking, Hindu philosophy and customs. Presently 20% of the East Indian population tunes into this station.

Swaha Inc. of Trinidad, consisting of pundits along with other Hindu organizations, recently mobilized thousands of youth as well as senior citizens in a huge Kartic celebration in November, 1993, at the Manzanilla beach. Also a television program called Swaha focuses on various aspects of Hinduism and dedicates a large percentage of its programming to children.

Though it is now in the hands of my generation to keep alive and pass on this great religion to the next generation, this is not such an easy task in our mutli-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Making it even more difficult with the heavy influence of Western non-culture. But if we keep defining Hindu needs, airing honestly our problems and then are willing to try out and implement solutions, maybe children today will experience the real joys of religious life I did while growing up and still do now.

Festival Time!

Trinis," are serious merriers. Its an indigenous benign virus that infects all who

visit or reside. No paralyzing sobriety, anesthetizing propriety is allowed to reign in this humid equatorial realm. In the worst of economic climes and hurricane times there is laughter, music, rhythm. Fifteen national holidays and two major festival seasons that climax in the Bacchanalian, two-day fete called Carnival guard well the island's joi de vie. Even the characteristically more reserved East Indian population can't resist Carnival magnetism and gladly joins this national parade/party-a wild, but still discernible expression of racial friendship.

The rest of the year, Hindus stage their own stream of grandiose religious festivals-Shivatri, Holi (called Phagwa), Ramleela and Divali (a national holiday) with clearly much more devotion than Carnival's emotion. For Ramleela, it is a must that all players fast in a prescribed way and abstain from meat and alcohol. One of the most sublime religious events is Kartic Nahan when devotees rise before dawn, pilgrimage to river or sea and worship Goddess Ganga, setting small boats of lit camphor afloat in the water as the sun rises.

Bastions of Bhakti: Temple Memories

By Usha Param

Being mostly from North India, Hindus here worship Rama and Sita, Shiva, Krishna, Hanuman, Lakshmi and Duruga. "Sita/Ram," not Namaste, is the most popular greeting. Devotees generally worship all the Deities. If you tell someone that you are a Shaivite or Vaishnavite of a particular sect, they don't understand. Almost no one wears saris or dhotis to the temple unless you are having a samskara performed. Traveling around the island, you see flags flying everywhere on bamboo poles in the yards of homes and temples. They indicate which Deities are worshiped there. White is for Vishnu (Ram/Sita too); yellow, Duruga; blue or green, Shiva; pink is for Lakshmi and red is for Hanumanji. Few temples have a daily schedule of pujas or a full-time pujari. Often a man or woman in the neighborhood comes daily to light a deepa, offer flowers, incense and ring a bell. There used to be more pujaris. Pundits, however, are well cared for and are the main religious leaders. They get called to go from place to place to do ceremonies. Often the temples have benches like in Christian churches. Usually the sanctum sanctorum is open to anyone to do their own puja. Puja items are right there and available. Lord Shiva is very popular with the women and most temples have a Sivalingam in it. At one old Shiva temple I met a sadhu with eyes of fire who lives and sleeps a few feet from the lingam. One lady I met converted the corner of her home into a temple and has a Siva lingam with a hole beneath it where a cobra lives. She keeps a deepam lit there and a bowl of milk there for him. She moves with energy as she talks of visions of Shiva and snakes. I visited a new Krishna Balarama temple where they had a large tv screen

on the altar with all the Deities so they could watch Indian movies too. It has two meditation chambers. Another Shiva shrine (below) came about after a man struck a stone when cutlashing and said milk came out. A tiny shrine was built and now thousands now converge at this remote highland site each Shivaratri for nightlong vigil and bhajans.

Island Murthi Makers

Nowhere in the world will you find images of the Deities so distinct, so human-like, so expressive and made out of materials so oddly unorthodox-fibre glass, auto body filler, concrete, ceramic and clay. Though they might make an Agamic stapathi (temple and icon master) wince, Trinidadians are proud of their novel murthis and matchless murthi makers.