

## [What Are Over 200,000 Guyanese Hindus Doing in New York State?](#)

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# What Are Over 200,000 Guyanese Hindus Doing in New York State?

Far from their Grandfather's India, a Determined Community

Lavina Melwani, New York

A brilliant red flag flies outside every home in Richmond Hills, New York. Red is the color of the Monkey God Hanuman, the devotee of Sri Ram who set the city of Lanka ablaze with his tail and did so many brave deeds in the Ramayana. Now instead of carrying a mountain with magical herbs to an ailing Lakshmana, he is carrying Hinduism to America, in the shape of hundreds of thousands of devotees from the West Indies. The fluttering red flags outside many West Indian homes proclaim that the spirit of Hinduism is alive and well in this Mecca of MTV and materialism.

Indeed, the people of Indian origin who have come to America from Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname are the hidden Hindus of America. While the Hindus from India are the focus of media stories on religion, the people of Indian origin from West Indies are often overlooked. Yet this community is even more diehard and staunch in its Hindu beliefs than Indians from the motherland.

The people of Indian origin from the West Indies are collectively known as Indo-Caribbean. Here we focus on the Guyanese community living in New York. In many families it has been several generations since a member set foot on Indian soil yet the music, the dance, the foods-but most especially the religion-are an integral part of their lives. They have managed to keep their faith alive in spite of adversities every immigrant group faces.

Indians first came to the West Indies as laborers for the sugar plantations in 1838. According to author Dr. Basdeo Mangru, during the period of Indian indentureship, from 1838 to 1917, about one million Indian workers were shipped from North India to over a dozen countries. Roughly 400,000 came to the Caribbean and today form majorities in Guyana and Trinidad, and a sizable community in Suriname. Guyana and Suriname are located between Venezuela and Brazil on the northeastern corner of South America; Trinidad is nearby in the Caribbean Ocean. Guyana is 83,000 square miles and today has a population of 750,000. The population is concentrated along the coast and the inland area remains-barely-untouched rainforest.

Observes Mangru: "Indians introduced a rich note of cultural differentiation in the Caribbean. The culture which they brought to the region was a blend of various local practices, but soon the Bhojpuri tradition dominated. This was epitomized in language by Bhojpuri and in literature by the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It was these two works which defined culture ideals in the Indian community."

Eventually most indentured laborers put their roots in the land, and their descendants became farmers, entrepreneurs and also entered professional fields. By the 1960s many of these descendants of Indo-Caribbean people, disillusioned by the political situation in Guyana, started migrating to America. In the decades since, there has been a tremendous influx of Guyanese, fleeing troubled land for better prospects. Now the new government is trying to improve the living conditions, but there are still tremendous hardships for food and jobs, and consequently, rising crime. Like Indian families, the Guyanese also have very close family ties, so immigrants continue to sponsor other family members to America.

The professional Guyanese have entered technical and educational fields. The majority, however, work in factories and stores. There are close to 200,000 Guyanese in America, with the major community settled in Richmond Hills-Jamaica area of Queens, a borough of New York City. Other Guyanese enclaves can be found in Brooklyn and the Bronx. As the community took roots, temples and social organizations were formed. A prominent businessman and community leader, Ramesh Kalicharran, was the creative force behind many of these, including a radio program geared to the Indo-Caribbean immigrants. There are now six radio programs and two TV shows for the community.

As cultural promoter, Kalicharran has had a hand in promoting many social causes for the last three decades. He founded the Gyaan Bhakti Satsangh and initiated the

Indo-Caribbean Federation of North America and the East Indian Diaspora Steering Committee, along with community leaders like Vishnu Bisram, Gora Singh, Roop Narain Persaud and James Permaul.

Kalicharran was also instrumental in the formation of Pandits Parishad or Council to promote Hinduism and to train new pandits in serving the needs of the community. Vishnu Bisram explains that the aim was "to plan and implement programs for the enrichment of the daily lives of Hindus in America, based on the cultural traditions and religious values of Sanatana Dharma; to encourage the study of Hindi and Sanskrit and to promote fraternal relationship with Hindus around the globe."

To many Guyanese religion is a central fact of life. The biggest and most beautiful temple has been created by the Trinidadian community but the Guyanese have set up over 40 temples-an amazing number compared to the size of their community. The Indian-American community, while much larger, has far fewer temples. One of the biggest Guyanese temples is America Sewa Ashram Sangh.

Temples are indeed the life force, the nerve center of the Guyanese community, guiding every event from birth to death. All holy days like Navratri, Janmashtmi and Ramnavami are celebrated with fervor. Kirtans, yagnas, kathas, jandas are all held here. There are weekly services on Sunday which are well attended. Events like naming ceremonies, weddings and shradhor death ceremonies are all the tasks of the pandits. Many women follow the Hindu calendar to the letter with kathas and pujas at home, especially Hanuman Jhandi and Satyanarayan Katha. Pandits are kept busy going to various homes to do the pujas. Yagnas are held in back yards under tents, especially on Saturdays and Sundays when families have the leisure time from work.

Diwali, as in all Hindu communities, is celebrated joyfully. Back in Guyana, Diwali meant large motorcades of neon-lit cars and trucks carrying the images of the deities. This has not been duplicated in New York due to the cold weather during the Diwali season.

Phagwah, known in India as Holi, is the biggest Guyanese contribution to New York's plentiful parades. Having been farmers, they celebrate the reaping of the

harvest, offering grains to agnior fire. The festival also stands for victory of good over evil, ushering in spring season, and the beginning of New Year in the Hindu calendar. The Phagwah parade, initiated by Kalicharran in New York, is a colorful one with decorated floats, and over 50,000 Guyanese singing and marching with banners proclaiming "Victory to Shri Ram."

Pandit Arjun Doobey is the Dharmacharya or the head of all 50 Guyanese pundits in New York, and there are over 40 temples, including Lakshmi Narayan, Ram, Krishna and the Jagganath Temples. These temples are especially lively on Sundays with services attended by capacity audiences, be they big temples or shrines set up in private homes and basements. Although the Bronx and Brooklyn have Hindu mandirs set up by the Guyanese community, by far the largest number are in Queens.

Observes Doobey, who has been in the U.S. for 18 years: "When I came, there were no temples, and prayers were conducted in the houses." Asked why the Guyanese are so staunch in their religion, Doobey says: "Our forefathers came from India and left their culture, and we have preserved it-it's growing day-by-day."

Gyaan Bhakti Satsangh is a spiritual institution in Queens which was formed in 1985 by Ramesh Kalicharran and Pandit Anand Sukul. Sukul explains the choice of name: "We can only acquire real peace, grace and peace through gyaanwhich is knowledge, bhaktiwhich is devotion, and satsang-association." Besides all the functions of a temple, GBS also arranges many cultural activities.

He adds, "The stream of dharmic activity will never run dry, but we are living in a very modern society in a scientific age. I have been a pandit for 32 years. Some of our pandits who came from Guyana are old pandits and may not have the university training we may have, and this is a setback. Putting the message to the young minds is not there."

Since many Guyanese cannot read or speak Hindi, GBS conducts Hindi classes taught by the Bharati Vidya Bhavan. Sukul himself reads Sanskrit and Hindi, and translates from Sanskrit to Hindi and then to English so "that those who do not understand the language can get the message very clearly."

Explains Sukul: "We were under the British rule for a very long time. Only our forefathers could speak Hindi, and English was the mother tongue." He points out that things are changing and that over the last 10-15 years, Hindi has taken a real foothold in Guyana. There are many schools teaching Hindi and many brilliant students. I was very surprised and moved to see they were conversing in Hindi language."

Hindi masala films, whatever else their failings, can also take some credit for acquainting Guyanese with the Hindi language. Sukul says, "There was a time when there were no subtitles to these films and after a while people started understanding the language. The movies have been a very good contribution to the Indian population there."

According to Sukul, the Hindus who have migrated from Guyana are effectively keeping the culture alive. "In every Hindu home there is a jandha flying. Hanuman katha is known to all."

Sukul's father was from India, and he and his father and grandfather were all pandits. He recalls his childhood in Guyana: "There was always this compatibility between the old and the young. There was always satsang in mandirs, Ramayana was read and Bhagavad Gita. With the passage of time our rituals were kept to perfection throughout the three counties in Guyana. Dharma was the foundation for the welfare of all. When we migrated to America, we brought with us the rich spiritual heritage we inherited from our ancestors."

Prakash Gossai, who heads the Bhuvaneshwar Temple (dedicated to Siva) in Brooklyn, is also a teacher of marine biology at a New York public school. He regards himself as a Hindu missionary out to propagate Hindu culture and religion. He feels the Guyanese participation in the religious life could be even stronger in America: "Guyana's life is different from that of America. People came here for a better life and got so wrapped up in the work world that there's very little time for anything else. It's creating a vacuum, especially for the younger generation who are growing up in the Western world."

"The ideal Guyanese Hindu family is very concerned about dress and behavior, but in New York influences of television, the streets, and the schools we see our children

slowly drifting away from what we like to consider a very rich culture. When the parents realize this, then they make the response of coming to the temple. So it's done for the purpose of correction rather than for spiritual upliftment."

Pandit Doobey is also concerned about the effect of the MTV culture on the youth, and so in the temples religious chants, lectures and seminars are arranged for educating the children.

Indeed, the Guyanese community is deeply concerned about the effect of the American culture on their children. While there have been very good efforts by leaders to provide cultural and spiritual activities, it is felt that what is needed is a recreation hall, a common meeting place for kids, to get them off the streets.

Gossai observes: "It's a very enquiring world, and children when asked to perform a puja want to know the reasons behind the rituals, why do we sip the water, why do the murthis have so many hands, and so on. So we need that kind of education. But I find that once the children are made aware of the symbols and their application, we find them very, very willing to participate in these functions."

Sukul agrees: "The activities are there, but much more has to be done to enhance the youth. They come to the mandir, but when they are back in the American society there is so much for their minds to play with, so there should be many more spiritual and academic activities in the temple to attract them. The younger generation has shown interest in learning Indian dancing and playing Indian instruments."

Social problems such as alcoholism or juvenile delinquency have crept into the community. The temples continue to serve as a bulwark in an uncertain world. Observes Gossai: "Not every one is involved. It's a busy city, and there's so much to be done. But people are still finding time for their Lord and for their consciousness of God. As a community leader, I would like to see it on a much larger magnitude, but I suppose we have to start somewhere. I feel that so long as the temples are offering something appealing, the children will come out."

While many feel that Guyanese here in America are not as religious as those in Guyana, Gossai says the opposite is true. "They get changed to the religious side once they come here. When I was in India, I was surprised to see people even in small village were not doing pujas as regularly as I would have imagined; they were taking religion for granted. The same thing in Guyana: religion is taken for granted. But here I have seen men and women who have never gone to a temple in Guyana very actively involved in the temple life. As they grow older, they turn more toward the spiritual life."

Another reason is that in Guyana they were surrounded by a cocoon of Indian culture, while in America there is such an onslaught on those values, that they want to save their culture and be identified with it.

Having left India generations ago, many Guyanese are now feeling the pull of their original homeland. Kalicharran and others are emphasizing the community's Indian roots and seeking communality with Indians from India as PIO-people of Indian origin. Says Kalicharran: "This union of identity strengthens the Indian presence in this country and many other countries where they could take their rightful place in mainstream society worldwide." Kalicharran organizes annual "Bharat Yatras," tours which promote the rediscovery of India by Guyanese immigrants. He says: "Taking these groups of people to India every year has helped many who have thirsted to understand their roots. They return to New York refreshed and revitalized."

During summer time tents sprout up all over Guyanese neighborhoods as large-scale yagnas take place. They even ask American neighbors to lend their yards, and invite 500-1000 people for these ceremonies. Many Americans, intrigued by the flags and tents, attend and get involved with the chantings of holy scriptures. With great pride the Guyanese leave their Hanuman jhandas permanently flying in their yards, proclaiming their faith.

School teacher that he is, Gossai gives high marks: "If you have to grade the Guyanese for the upkeep of the Hindu religion on a scale of one to ten, they will get 9.5." With such a glowing report card, the hidden Hindus of America certainly deserve an A for perseverance.

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