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DIASPORA

Hindus of South America

How differently Hinduism developed in the adjacent nations of Suriname and Guyana

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The Indian subcontinent has not been the only source of major Hindu migrations in the last 50 years. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus have emigrated from the former British colonies of Trinidad and Guyana to America and England, and from the former Dutch colony of Suriname to Holland. These communities, whose forefathers left India 150 years ago, have unique elements today, some the result of colonial policies, others customs preserved intact from the mid-19th century India of their ancestors. Hinduism Today Trinidad correspondent Anil Mahabir visited the region, meeting with religious leaders and lay Hindus. Here is his engaging report on the countries' similarities and differences.

The day I arrived in Guyana, I travelled 45 miles by speedboat from one bank of the Esequibo River to the next. For the first time in my life, I was standing on one side of a river unable to see the other side. My whole country of Trinidad, in fact, would fit inside this river, only slightly overlapping the banks. We

don't have rivers back home, just streams, canals and ditches. Rivers aside, there was much that was similar to Trinidad--every Hindu home flies the jhandi flags in front, the Ramayana is the main text, the Deities and festivals are the same, the food is the same. The similarities are, in part, because of common origins in India, but also seemed to have been shaped by a shared Caribbean experience.

I was most struck by the temple culture of both countries. Wherever I went, I found simply-built temples that exhibited a most compelling beauty. I had not felt this way about the temples in my own homeland. Obviously the Guyanese and Surinamese take great pride in their temple buildings.

Despite the fact that Guyana and Suriname sit side-by-side, their histories are vastly different. Guyana was colonized by the British, Suriname by the Dutch. The obvious result of this was that Guyanese learned to speak English, while Surinamese learned Dutch. The colonial policy of each country was also very different with regard to religion. The Dutch pursued a "hands off" attitude as far as the culture of the Hindus was concerned. In Guyana, explained Swami Aksharananda of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad of Guyana, "The British sought to interfere, control and convert the Hindus and Muslims. Many missionaries were brought to Guyana to evangelize the Indian population and to destroy their language and culture. That is why Hindi has persisted in Suriname and not in Guyana." This is the same tactic the British used in India. "During the colonial period," Pundit Reepu Daman Persaud, head of the Dharmic Sabha and Guyana's Minister of Agriculture (ministeragric@sdp.org.gy), told me, "the Hindus were forced to convert to get jobs in the public

service, even if they did not want to. Many who converted continued to be Hindus within the private confines of their homes."

Devanand Jokhoe (jofanick@sr.net), an economist in Suriname, explained, "Conversion was not an official policy of the Dutch as it was of the British in Guyana. Hindus were not forced to convert as a prerequisite to get jobs. That is why less than five percent of all Indians living in Suriname are Christians. Some non-Indians can also speak Hindi, for example, the Javanese and Blacks who live in Indian villages."

Suriname, whose 121,500 Hindus comprise 27% of the population, is the only country in the Western Hemisphere where all the Indians speak Hindi. That this is so--after so many years away from India--is amazing. In neighboring Guyana, where 238,000 Hindus form 34% of the population, it is the opposite. Almost no one speaks Hindi. Everyone speaks

English. This is a perfect example of the differences in colonial rule between the British and the Dutch. The British sought to destroy everything Indian and Hindu, while the Dutch allowed it to flourish. So, from the youngest toddler to the oldest nani, the Suriname Hindus all speak Hindi.

I was struck by the divisions among Hindus in Guyana. There were people whom I met who did not want me to speak to others, and even went out of their way to prevent me from doing so. Perhaps this is related to the overall pessimism of the Guyanese. Even the very wealthy talk of migrating. Even so, paradoxically, most seem quite happy and go about their daily routines with smiles on their faces. They were also very hospitable to me. The country's president

himself, Bharrat Jagdeo, loaned me a car and driver to tour the capital. Where else would that happen?

In Suriname, my lack of any fluency in Hindi hindered a smooth rapport with several in the country, especially among those who spoke little English.

Unfortunately, this included most of the pundits, and I found myself relying upon intellectuals, businessmen and others for information.

The first Hindus: It is generally agreed in both countries that it was India's poorest who emigrated to the West. They were inclined to leave the India of the mid-19th century because of famine, drought and poverty. The first Indians arrived in Guyana on May 5, 1838. Pundit Reepu

Persaud pointed out that these were the first to bring Hinduism to the Americas, not Swami Vivekananda. The first shipload of Indians to Suriname arrived June 5, 1873. Trinidad's first group came in 1845. Slavery was abolished in Suriname in 1863, and in Guyana in 1834. Freed slaves refused to continue working the sugar plantations. Several nationalities were brought as indentured servants to replace them, but only the Indians adapted well to the harsh tropical climate.

The Indians came from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar, an area known as Bhojpuri's Belt--Bhojpuri being a regional dialect of Hindi. Most were farmers, though a few brahmins also came, even though this was against the policy of the British, who considered the

more educated brahmins as potential trouble makers. Perhaps ten percent returned to India from Guyana after their contracts were fulfilled, but later almost none did so. Pundit Persaud said his parents went back to India in 1930 and then returned to Trinidad. He said, "The West Indies was generally recognized as a place better to live than India."

Between 1873 and 1916, 34,000 Indians came to Suriname. Nearly 23,000 stayed. As in Guyana, after an initial group which returned to India, hardly anyone left. If they did, it was to go to Holland, as is the case today, according to historians Hassan Khan and Sandew Hira.

It is believed the ratio of migrants was 100 men to 20 women, creating

enormous social problems. According to Swami Aksharananda, "Indian men forged unions with black women, not marriages." I could not find out what became of the descendants of those unions, whether they were in the Black or the Indian communities of today.

The early years: The plantation system had a dramatic effect on Hinduism.

People were not allowed to move from one plantation to another. They were sequestered and had to get passes to leave. In any event, plantation work left very little time for anything else.

According to Swami Aksharananda, "Only Sunday was left to the Hindus to practice Hinduism. Indeed, Hinduism became a kind of Sunday thing in the early days in Guyana." The legacy of this is the popularity of Sunday morning temple

worship in this part of the world.

During indentureship, there were tremendous efforts by the Hindus to assert themselves as Hindus. This was so even though the colonial policy of the British in Guyana was to crush Hinduism at all costs and Christianize "the heathens."

"The policy of the Dutch in Suriname was more relaxed." says Anoop Ramadhin. "Hindus were more at liberty there to practice their religion. There were no forced conversions," he continued. "The Dutch separated the various groups from one another and allowed them to live in their own villages. That is why today you have Black, Indian and Javanese villages. Even the Bush Negroes are set apart."

HVP Bronkhurst, a Euro-Asian missionary and writer says, "Hindu pundits in Guyana would go from home to home getting people to gather and sing the Ramayana." The Gita became a major text. People would gather at nights. This was how they were able to maintain their religion. The only thing which kept them going was the memory of Rama and Hanuman. Similarly, in Suriname the Ramayana reigned supreme.

Later, Guyanese-born Hindus took up the cause of Hinduism. One of those early pioneers was Dr. J.B. Singh, who is credited with heightening Hindu consciousness, setting up Hindu organizations and fighting for the cremation rights of Hindus. In fact, he was the first Hindu to be cremated in Guyana, in 1956. Prior to that, Hindus had

to be buried, even though this was very contrary to the Hindu faith.

Swami Purnananda came directly from Bengal in India in the mid-20th century. He established Bharat Sevashram Sangha, which is today called the Guyana Sevashram Sangha and run by Guyanese-born Swami Vidyanand. Swami Purnananda popularized the "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna" mantra. He printed a small book called Aum Hindutvam, which was the first catechism or question-and-answer booklet for Hindus in Guyana. He developed mantras for different occasions and popularized havan service (the fire ceremony). The present-day Guyana Sevashram Sangha is unique among organizations here. It is the only institution in the Caribbean which has produced its own swami. It is

the only institution which trains young men to become bramacharis. It offers free medical services to all groups in society.

The Surinamese I met did not seem to have quite the same keen sense of history as the Guyanese. In general they said it was the elders and the pundits who kept Hinduism alive in the early days. More recently, the name of Nanan Panday, leader of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha of Suriname, is mentioned as the key personality. "He has been at the helm of Hindu leadership for 40 years," says Anoop Ramadhin. The names of Pundit Haldhar Mathuraprasad and T. Soerdjbaille, leader of the Gayatri Mandir, have also been mentioned as playing key roles in the Hindu community of Suriname.

Conversion: Swami aksharananda is firm on this question: "Conversion is very high. In fact, conversion in Guyana is defined as 'conversion from Hinduism to Christianity,' nothing else. The Muslims hardly ever convert. The Christians do not convert. It is only the Hindus who are coaxed into dispensing with their religion." At the beginning of the 20th century, he says, "about one percent of the Indian population were Christians, now it is about 15%--a 15-fold increase in one century. The Pentecostals are doing the most conversions."

Pundit Reepu Daman Persaud agreed, "The Pentecostals are studying the demography of the country. They attack rural areas where they believe the Hindus are more vulnerable, illiterate or weak. Since we have found out the strategy, the

Dharmic Sabha is going into the same areas and combating their anti-Hindu propaganda."

I met Parmanand Samlal, who visits the homes of converted Hindus and gets them to reconvert to Hinduism. I had never heard of such a program before. He said he has achieved four re-converts for the year 2000 so far. He is a member of the Dharmic Sabha and a "worshiper," as he put it, of Pundit Reepu. Pundit Reepu is highly respected in Guyana as one who has always stood for the Indians and Hindus, even in difficult political times, who never abandoned Guyana for better circumstances, though easily available to him, in another country.

Dirgopal Mangal, says conversion is on

the decrease. He told me of Blacks in Guyana who attend Hindu temples, giving the example of "Minister Collymore, who attends the temple every Sunday morning in Parika."

Suriname is different. Radjen Koemarsingh of Suriname (radjenk@hotmail.com) told me there is some conversion from Hinduism but not much, due to the binding factor of Hindi. Accountant Anoop Ramadhin agreed, "Conversion from Hinduism in Suriname is less than one percent. Some Javanese are also Hindus."

Schoolteacher Algoe Harrynarain said, "The Christian churches in Suriname pay poor Hindus to

convert. They have funding from abroad. They are well organized. The Hindus do not have such funding." He said the Jehovah Witnesses pay a salary to Hindus to convert to Christianity.

While conversion exists in both countries, it is not on a large scale, and meets active resistance from Hindus, even with their limited resources. In my entire visit, I did not meet a single Christian Indian, and I think this says a lot about the situation.

Intermarriage: As in Trinidad and Tobago, intermarriage between Hindu and Muslim Indians is very common in Guyana, constituting perhaps eight percent of all weddings. Black/Indian marriages are rare. Hindu activist Bharat Kisson estimates that in six out of every ten Guyanese Hindu/Muslim marriages, the wedding follows the Islamic line. The result of the unions are combined names such as Kishore Mohammed (a Hindu), Salisha Singh (a Muslim) and Anil Khan. Such names are also common in Trinidad. Suriname is much different, and while I could not find any official statistics, intermarriage was obviously rare.

Hindu activists in Guyana say that intermarriage has been on the increase over the past ten years. Normally both parties are allowed to keep and practice their faiths, though some Hindu girls convert to Islam. It is very rare to see a Muslim in such a union convert to Hinduism. Hindu and Muslim leaders are silent on these unions for fear of possibly rocking the boat or destroying whatever Indian unity exists. Politicians dare not speak of it either.

Country politics: The prevailing view is that, culturally, Guyana is at its lowest ebb since Independence

was granted in 1966. The "oppressive" reign of the Peoples' National Congress PNC, the party of the Blacks, and what one person called its ethnic "insensitivity to Indian culture" is seen by most Hindus as one of the principal reasons why the Indian culture is undeveloped.

Another reason is the constant stream of emigration from Guyana to other parts of the world.

"Migration took our best people," says Pundit Persaud. "Our best artists, dancers, singers, musicians left for greener pastures because they simply could not make a living

producing Indian culture in a country where the political directorate was hostile to Indian culture," says one activist who declined to give his name.

Swami Aksharananda said, "The national culture in Guyana is often portrayed as a Black and creole culture which neglects or deliberately shuns the Indian output. The present majority Indian government is often accused of being an 'Indian government.' [That is, partial to Indians.] They are afraid to develop Indian culture, afraid of being called racist. This is not my perception, but that of most

Guyanese. Indian culture gets little funding. The National Dance School is a Black dance school, for example." I was told that Guyana does not have a single all-Indian radio or TV station.

There is more optimism and enthusiasm for things Hindu in Suriname. Indian musician Radjen Koemarsingh noted, "There is an Indian cultural center, seven radio stations with an all-Indian format and four television stations exclusively devoted to Indian programming." Hindi is taught in some schools as an official language.

Schoolteacher Algoe Harrynarain commented, "Yes, emigration has hurt us, but there is a cultural revival right now. In any case because we all speak Hindi here, the situation is different to that of Guyana. It is difficult for the culture to be lost."

Emigration is even more a factor here. Some 250,000 Surinamese now live in Holland, compared to just 450,000 in Suriname itself--making this country one of the most sparsely populated in the world. A dismal economic situation continues to motivate people to leave. I even met teachers and

businessmen with stable jobs who were still anxious to migrate if they got the chance.

Hindu home life: Most Hindu homes in both countries have a small shrine or prayer house located at the front of the home. Like the houses, these will vary in nature and appearance, depending on the wealth of the owner. There is also a jhandi or flag hoisted on bamboo next to the shrine or by itself, as with one I saw in a rice field.

The main daily observance in both

countries is the pouring of water early in the morning. Water from a brass pot is used to bathe a Siva Lingam located at the base of the jhandi. Some Hindus also chant bhajanas and meditate afterwards. Those who are free from employment may go to the temple on a daily basis. One day a week is set aside for havan, or fire worship ceremony, and fasting from salt and meat. At least once a year, most Hindus will try to have a grand puja or Ramayana Yagna, an event where the entire community is invited to participate. The biggest festivals of the year are Diwali and Phagwa (Holi) in both countries. Lesser festivals include Ram

Navami, Sivaratri and Karthik Nahan.

The main Deity in both countries is Hanuman, because of the conquering role he played in the Ramayana and His popularity in the Bhojpuri Belt, whence came most of the original Hindu immigrants. Other Deities include Siva, Durga, Kali and Ganesha.

There would seem to be more vegetarians in Suriname than in Guyana. Estimates are that about 10% of Hindus in Suriname are

vegetarians. Less than five percent of Hindus in Guyana are vegetarians. They are mainly the pundits and the swamis and the spiritual leaders. However, Dr Satish Prakash of the Araya Samaj says that vegetarians among his group in Guyana are as much as 35%. But overall it is not popular. One activist told me, "When Lord Rama was in exile in the jungle with Sita, according to the Ramayana, were they not eating meat to survive 14 years? And if Lord Rama could eat meat, why can't I?" I conducted a brief poll out of curiosity and I found that most Hindus I talked to in both countries do not know what ahimsa is, or that

it is an integral part of Hinduism. Nonviolence remains an esoteric, opaque, Gandhian concept, not taught by the leaders or drummed in by the pundits. Little or no reference is made by anyone to the Vedas as the source of Hinduism, or the Upanishads or even the Mahabharata, except for the Bhagavad Gita. The Ramayana, as in Trinidad, is the main text.

As is unfortunately the case among too many Hindus, priest-bashing is common in both Suriname and Guyana. Many I met said the priests were "not up with the times," "too concerned with ritual" and other

complaints similar to what is heard in Trinidad. There are some legitimate concerns because of the emigration of some of the best pundits to other countries. This has broken up the traditional father-to-son training system, and now some become pundits without being properly trained.

Suicide in Guyana: Many people I talked to in Guyana expressed concern about the high rate of suicide among the Hindu community and the fact that virtually no one is doing anything to address the problem from a Hindu angle. Suicide is not a major

problem among Surinamese Hindus. Dr. Vivekanand Brijmohan, a forensic pathologist in the Berbice district, said the suicide rate among Hindus in Guyana is "alarming." In one three-year period in Berbice, there were 197 suicides, 160 of them Indian males, mainly Hindus. Brijmohan said, "It is a cultural thing. Hindus are more strict in the household than the blacks. Certain Indians have a longing for freedom, to go out at night, etc. Some of them do not get that freedom due to their strict Hindu upbringing. It makes them dissatisfied with life, depressed. Alcoholism and marijuana addiction is another cause of suicide."

Swami Aksharananda runs AYUPSA: a National Centre for Suicide Prevention. He sponsors a national health program which attempts to eradicate the prevalence of suicide among the Hindu community. He does this by holding seminars, making press releases and going into the villages for direct contact with the Hindu people, particularly the youths.

Jailhouse preacher: Bharat Kisson is a Hindu activist and retired economist who ministers to the Hindu inmates in the Georgetown prison every Sunday. He told me, "I was drawn to this work because of

the particular case of a Hindu prisoner in Trinidad, Dole Chadee, who was hanged last year. The day before he was hanged he longed for a pundit to do his final rites. He could not find any Hindu who was willing to go to the prison and, therefore, he had no choice but to resort to a Christian pastor."

There is a famous story here, that of Salim Yaseen, a condemned prisoner who was about to be hanged on the 12th of September 1999. He allegedly told Bharat that before leaving he wanted to hear the Hanuman Chalesa, a traditional scripture in praise of Lord

Hanuman. He got his wish, and he was not hanged due to a legal loophole. Now, according to Bharat, "all prisoners want to hear the Hanuman Chalesa."

Connections with India: The Surinamese I spoke with said they don't think that Hindus in India even know there are Hindus living in Suriname. They could not recall any visit by a major Hindu leader, nor recount any significant assistance received from India in any way.

A few swamis have come to Guyana. Early ones, such as Swami Chinmayananda and Rishi Ram, came in the 1960s and helped develop Hinduism. But those coming today, said Pundit Persaud, "do not stay and assist us in developing Hinduism. They come to talk about yoga and meditation only." In Trinidad, travel agencies often advertise "journey back to your roots" programs to India. In Guyana and Suriname there are greater economic restraints, and those who have the money to travel use it to emigrate.

The future: Both countries have

suffered from the chronic brain drain and seem to be perpetually entangled in the politics of racial and religious division. Both countries are relatively poor, but the people do not want to be labeled as such. They feel ashamed when people from the outside boldly come to visit, analyze and recommend solutions for their assumedly insufficient social and economic existence. They are content with living very simple lives, not caring whether or not they have a cell phone or a computer. Dharma dictates daily how they should act. The jhandis flying proudly before every Hindu home, rich or poor, are their own

statement of identity. From cows roaming the roads freely in Guyana, to pundits walking miles to puja service, I believe Hinduism, though simple, will never die in this part of South America.

Guyana at a Glance

Economic woes cloud country's future

Emigration is so common among Guyanese that for a country with 700,000 people today, another 200,000 live in the New York area. Each year, one in every hundred people is expected to leave, contributing to the country's negative population growth rate,

and to the fact it is one of the poorest countries in the world.

The small nation of just 83,000 square miles is situated on the northern coast of South American between Venezuela and Suriname, with the island of Trinidad not far up the coast. Eighty percent of the nation is covered by tropical rain forests like that of the Amazon basin. The principle industries are aluminum and gold mining, sugar, rice, timber, fishing and textiles.

The indigenous inhabitants were

the Carib Indians. The Dutch settled the area in 1615. The British took control in 1796 and set up sugar plantations. Some slaves brought to work the plantations fled immediately to the interior where to this day they live as they did in Africa. When slavery was abolished in 1834, the Africans refused to continue working on the plantations. Indian indentured laborers were imported in 1838 to fill the void--becoming the first Indian settlers in the New World. Guyana is the only country in South America where English is the official language. The population is 51% Indian, 43% Black/Mixed and 4% Amerindian. Christians are 52%,

Hindus 34% and Muslims--mostly Javanese--9%.

Guyana is a democracy, and the present prime minister is a Hindu, Bharrat Jagdeo. The country's politics tend to polarize between the Indians and the Blacks, who are at the bottom of the social scale. Emigration is draining the country of trained workers. Even the more skilled Hindu pundits have left to minister to communities in North America. The country has vast natural resources but faces serious environmental issues in exploiting them, as well as protests from Amerindian and Black residents of

the interior regions.

Suriname Snapshot

Massive emigration depletes population

The search for greener pastures is even more a factor in Suriname's history than Guyana. The country's population is 450,000. Another 250,000 Surinamese emigrated to Holland, many in the 1970s following independence. It, too, suffers from a poor economy and political instability, but at least its population growth rate is positive, in part due to a higher birth rate and lower death rate than Guyana. Even so, the country is

underpopulated.

At 64,000 square miles, the country is slightly smaller than Guyana and has different demographics--37% Indian, 31% Creole (mixed white and black), 15% Indonesian and 10% "Maroons," the descendants of ex-slaves who escaped upon arrival from Africa and fled to the interior. The citizens are 48% Christian, 27% Hindu, 20% Muslim and 5% indigenous. Seven major rivers cross Suriname, many partly navigable by large ocean-going ships.

Christopher Columbus himself landed in Suriname in 1498, and Spain claimed the land in 1593. The first Dutch settlers arrived in 1602. It became an official colony of Holland in 1682 when the Dutch developed coffee and sugar plantations using slave labor. Slavery was abolished here only in 1863, and indentured servants were brought from China, Java and India. Suriname gained independence from Holland in 1975.

The economy is dominated by the bauxite (aluminum ore) industry, which accounts for more than 15%

of the gross domestic product and 70% of export earnings. Poor economic policies and deteriorating relations with Holland have resulted in a 1999 inflation rate of 190% and an unemployment rate of 20%.

Economist Devanand Jokhoe said, "There is a need for agricultural diversification. So far, the emphasis is only being placed on bananas and rice. The 'brain drain' has drained us."

The National Front government, consisting of all the diverse parties

was just sworn in, bringing with it a hope of political stability.