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French-lettered Indians in a remote corner of the Caribbean reclaim their Hindu identity

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Journey to Guadeloupe, the twin- island outpost of France in the paradisiacal French West Indies, and you will encounter a kaleidoscopic diversity of skin colors, facial features and ethnic praxes. The majority of the 400,000 inhabitants are descendants of freed African slaves. Nearly eight percent, 30,000, are Indian. In 1854, after the atrocious slavery period ended, the French and British brought our ancestors to the islands to service the sugarcane fields as indentured workers. Four generations ago, they came from the Malabar coast, Pondicherry and regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, via Calcutta. The vast majority of them have been Christianized and have imbibed French culture so deeply that, put aside occasional goat sacrifices and strong remnants of the Indian folk and religious musical traditions, mostly everything Indian has vanished--until recently.

In contrast to the nearby islands of Trinidad and Tobago and the distant but kindred islands of Mauritius and Reunion in the Indian Ocean, where the Indian majorities have safeguarded their Hindu culture, Guadeloupean Indians do not usually wear Indian clothes or cook Indian food except on a few special

occasions. Similarly, Indians in nearby Martinique number much fewer and feel somewhat ostracized, although their work in Indian dance has become well-respected in the field of the arts. Most Indians in Guadeloupe are Catholics or belong to one of the active Christian groups, especially Jehovah's Witness and Seventh Day Adventist. In a cultural coup d'État executed with devout ecumenicism, the Virgin Mary's image is often worshiped with Hindu rituals.

But recent trends indicate that this may all be changing. In the last ten years or so, many associations for the promotion of Hinduism and Indian culture have appeared. The Institut du Monde Indien (Institute for the study of the Indian world) was begun by Jacques Sidambarom, Jean-Claude Petapermal and Roland Gopy to resuscitate Hindu rituals and network with other Hindus of the world, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, Reunion, Pondicherry and Paris. Among other groups that have coalesced over recent years are the Hindu Sabha, the Guadeloupe Inde Sangam, Les Amis de l'Inde (Friends of India), ISKCON and devotees of Siddha Yoga Dham. In 1997, I took the helm as host and producer of Guadeloupe's one and only two-hour weekly Indian FM radio program called *Musique À l'Inde*. The popular program features classical and modern Indian music as well as discussions on Hindu philosophy and culture.

But the central motif of the Hindu revival here is the yearly celebration of Diwali, the festival of lights. It seems that everyone, including many non-Indians, has rallied around this occasion for revelry. During the 1996 celebrations, public radio announced that Diwali would be celebrated every year without fail, earning the festival a place on the Guadeloupe calendar as

an unofficial but requisite popular holiday. Many Guadeloupeans and tourists who had been attracted to Hindu philosophy, yoga, music, fashion, food and temples while visiting Europe, the USA or India, were delighted with the news and turned out in large numbers for the 1997 festival held at Le Moule.

Let there be light: Besides private observances, only one small group led by Jocelyn Nagapin, a pusali (priest), had been celebrating Diwali. Nagapin's grandfather came from India and passed onto him his knowledge of Indian scriptures, inspiring Nagapin to hold on to his heritage. Another pusali, Marguerite Perian, wanted to participate in the revival of Diwali rituals, but he first had to learn Tamil, because his ancestors had forgotten how to speak it. More influential impetus came from a Kerala engineer, Mr. Mohanan Vaddakekara, who was sent to Guadeloupe in 1992 by the European company he works for. In 1996, Vaddakekara issued a directive to the Guadeloupe Indian community, unequivocally declaring, "This is the year we must celebrate Diwali!" That year, they celebrated in St François, a seaside resort town whose mayor, Mr. Ernest Moutoussamy, is an Indian and which is home to a significant Indian population. Some 400 people gathered for the festival.

But there was a hitch. In the final preparations they realized they had no diyas, the small clay lamps that are critical to any festival of lights. Like a Hindu Olympic torch, diyas darted over from Trinidad via Federal Express, arriving just in time.

Enthusiasm and wherewithal fructified in 1997, and Diwali was celebrated in the city of Le Moule, where a great number of

Indians live. The Mayor of Le Moule, Madame Louis-Carabin, assisted in securing the use of an attractive open-air venue by the sea. With guidance from Vaddakekara, a small Kerala-style wooden temple was built the preceding night with volunteers working till 2:00am. Eighteen bamboo poles were raised with multicolored "OM" flags along with a special flag flying Lakshmi (which was also specially delivered from Trinidad).

Lakshmi puja was performed in the afternoon, and many people bought diyas to illuminate the arena. The religious ceremony was followed by a cultural fñate. The Mayor performed the ritual lighting of the kuttuvilaku, standing oil lamp, and gave an insightful talk on the value of Diwali for all Guadeloupeans. She described Diwali as an occasion for rejoicing and celebrating the virtues of tolerance and cooperation. She commended the Indian community for their high values and active role in society. The Mayor was presented with many gifts, including a compact disc of Indian music, Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography and an Indian scarf by two too-cute, sari-clad girls. She finally thrilled the audience when she revealed that her daughter's fiance is Indian, and that she is contemplating a visit to India.

The sea breeze kept blowing out the diyas, but this could not darken the mood. Instead, we had fun running and relighting them. There were over 1,000 people of all races and religions. The press, including television, gave substantial coverage. Of course, there was lavish food--laddus and other Indian sweets prepared by Mohanan's wife and volunteers, vegetarian meals prepared by the Taj Mahal and Maharajah Monty restaurants and rotis served by an Indian family according to their great grandmother's recipe. A very successful table of books on

Indian culture and Indian music gave attendees a chance to learn more--and there were fireworks! It was the biggest Diwali ever on this small island.

Even so, the ambitious and motivated Vaddakekara sees this as just the fledgling beginnings of the recently awakened Hindu community. He relates, "Last year, we built a simple altar with banana trees. This year, the Deities were housed in wood. In ten years," he foretells, "we'll have gold! With the blessings of the Gods and Goddesses, how can this not come true?"