CARIBBEAN HINDUISM ON THE MOVE

by

RUPA NARAYANA PILLAI

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Student: Rupa Narayana Pillai

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Anthropology by:

Lamia Karim	Co-Chair (Primary)
Carol Silverman	Co-Chair
Ana-Maurine Lara	Core Member
Arafaat A. Valiani	Institutional Representative

and

Sara D. Hodges	Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Rupa Narayana Pillai

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of how members of the Indo-Guyanese community traveled from Guyana to New York City, carrying with them distinct understandings of Hinduism informed by their multiple dislocations and how they utilize religion as ideology and practice to help cultivate their identities as Indo-Guyanese Americans. I argue religion as a mobile concept, what I have termed as 'religion on the move,' gives a theoretical frame to understand how devotees adapt religion to help them navigate their identities in unknown territories. By studying more than devout individuals in places of worship, I have followed Caribbean Hinduism and Indo-Guyanese Hindus in New York City to various sites to appreciate how religion informs their experiences, operates on different scales (spatially, politically, and temporally), and negotiates power structures. I found that the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community asserts their ethnicity through Caribbean Hinduism to become visible, to overcome marginalization and to claim belonging in the United States.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Rupa Narayana Pillai

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

    University of Oregon, Eugene
    University of Chicago, Chicago
    University of Texas, Austin

DEGREES AWARDED:

    Doctor of Philosophy, Anthropology, 2017, University of Oregon
    Master of Arts, Social Sciences, 2007, University of Chicago
    Bachelor of Arts, South Asian Studies and Anthropology, 2006, University of
        Texas

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

    Migration and Mobilities
    Race and Ethnicity
    Anthropology of Religion
    Postcolonialism

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

    Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon,
        2010-2011, 2012-2013, 2014-2017

    Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of Oregon,
        2011-2012

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

    Laurel Research Award, Indo-Caribbean Gender Negotiation in New York City
        Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon, 2011

    Research Experience for Graduates Supplement, Hinduism's Alternate Route:
        Caribbean Hinduism in New York City, National Science Foundation,
        2010

    Graduate Student Summer Research Award, Hinduism's Alternate Route:
        Caribbean Hinduism in New York City, Center on Diversity and
        Community, University of Oregon, 2010

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For Dada and Ammoomma

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INTRODUCTION

Om Gam Ganpataye Namah
Sanskrit *mantra* to Lord Ganesh for overcoming obstacles

We pray to Ganesh…to remove all obstacles in our life, to give us wisdom…
Pujari, Indo-Guyanese Hindu Priest in Brooklyn

<u>Worshipping Ganesh in Queens</u>

On a Saturday evening in September 2016, I received a text from my friend

Usha.[1] "Hi Rupa, tomorrow at 10am, am [*sic*] going to the Ganesh Temple. Please let me

know if you want to go." Usha, an Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman in her early forties, had

invited me to accompany her to the *Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam*, also

known as the Ganesh temple in Flushing, Queens. The Ganesh temple, New York's most

famous Hindu temple (Hawley 2004), was in the middle of Ganesh *Chaturthi*, an annual

ten-day festival held around the end of August and the beginning of September to

celebrate the birthday of Lord Ganesh. Better known as the elephant god, Lord Ganesh, is

the deity of intellect, wisdom, and arts in Hinduism. Before Hindus start a ritual, begin a

trip, or undertake a new endeavor, they first pray to Lord Ganesh to remove obstacles and

to ensure the success for the task at hand (Fuller 2004, 34).[2]

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[1] Unless otherwise stated all names of individual, temples and organizations are pseudonyms to respect the privacy of the individuals who graciously helped in my research through interviews and conversations.

[2] As I will illustrate in this dissertation, what we understand as Hinduism is complex and diverse. While the majority of Hindus, both in India (Narayanan 2004, 78) and around the world (Knott 1998, 53–54) worship Ganesh, He is not the most revered deity to all Hindus. For instance, in West Bengal, Kali and Durga are preferred to Ganesh (A. Singh 2016, 198).

Usha was visiting the Ganesh temple for the first time since she returned to New York a few months earlier after a two-year course at an *ashram* (Hindu monastery) in India.[3] To sit and offer devotion to Lord Ganesh during this auspicious time was worth the effort of getting up early and driving thirty minutes in traffic from the southern parts of Queens to Flushing in the north, which we did the following day.

Upon arriving in Flushing, Usha drove around for another ten minutes until she found street parking nearby the temple. She emerged from her sedan, dressed in a white, synthethic *salwar kameez* (traditional Indian clothing) and flip-flops. Before locking her car, she removed an umbrella to protect her fair skin from the sun as we walked towards to the temple.[4] Leaving our shoes at the entrance, we entered the main building of the temple to find a group of twenty-five or more Indian women and children sitting on the white marble floor performing *puja* (ritual) on banana leaves before a small brass *murti* (statue) of Lord Ganesh. Unlike Usha's understated *salwar kameez*, these women wore bold, colorful *saris* (traditional Indian clothing) with intricate gold embroidery and lots of gold jewelry.

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[3] Usha, who grew up in a devout, Hindu family in the countryside of Guyana, always valued education. Following the death of her father in her early twenties, Usha's mother suggested she pursue an arranged marriage to be able to immigrate to the U.S. for better opportunities. Usha refused, concerned that marriage would prevent her studies. A few years later in 1998, "as *Bhagwan* (God) planned," she arrived in New York to pursue college. After completing her B.A., she worked in an insurance office and dreamed of pursuing more education. Finally, in 2014, she sold her car, placed her possessions in storage, and traveled to India for a two-year course at an *ashram*, an experience that has transformed her. Now back in New York and still not married, she is determined to commit the rest of her life to the study of Hinduism, with the plan to share her knowledge with people, particularly women in her community. Outside her current job in logistics, she spends the rest of her time studying Hindu religious texts, teaching yoga, and leading a *Bhagavad Gita* (a Hindu religious text) study group at the Indo-Guyanese Hindu temple she used to worship at prior to traveling to India.

[4] While Usha does have a dermatological issue that requires her to limit her time in the sun, she also walks with an umbrella to prevent the darkening of her skin. Her preference for fair skin is informed by colorism in the Caribbean and South Asia, where race and class/caste are informed by the color of one's skin (Khan 2009, 100). Although colorism did come up numerous times in my research (*e.g.* dark-skinned Indo-Guyanese being referred to as black Indians or black), I will not be exploring the issue further in this dissertation. For a discussion of colorism in relation to Indo-Caribbeans see Khan 2009 and 2010.

Figure 1.1. Entrance of Ganesh Temple, Flushing, Queens (photo by author)

After forty-five minutes of chanting *mantras* (prayers) the *puja* concluded and the Hindu priests from South India directing us devotees outside the building to receive *prasad* (blessed food) and to circumambulate the temple with the *murti*. As we moved through the exit, the priest offered each devotee a pale, yellow string. This type of string or *kalava* is often tied around the wrist of Hindus following a *puja* to invoke the blessing of the deity, in this case Lord Ganesh.

As Usha and I took turns tying the string upon our right wrists, the appropriate wrist for unmarried women, we noted a few fellow devotees awkwardly holding their *kalavas* and looking around in confusion as they tried to figure out what to do with theirs. After tying my *kalava,* Usha immediately approached an Indian woman in her fifties who stood close by observing us with interest. "Do you need help?" she asked in her slight Guyanese accent. "Yes. I don't know what to do with it," answered the woman in her

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Indian accent. Usha took the *kalava* and followed up with two questions: "Are you married? And do you live a good life?" Answering in the affirmative to the first, the Indian woman asked Usha to clarify the second question. "Do you fast? Do you refrain from eating beef? I ask because you must be a proper Hindu and lead a good Hindu life to wear this," Usha explained. Having taught this Indian from India the meaning and significance of the *kalava,* this Indian from Guyana proceeded to tie it upon the woman's left wrist before continuing in her own worship of Lord Ganesh.

I open my dissertation with this encounter because it captures not only the realities of Hindu worship in New York City, but also the tension that arises within the Indo-American community, which, at the surface level, appears homogenous. For an outsider observing Usha and this Indian woman, differences may not be apparent. They are both Hindus of Indian descent who came to temple to honor Lord Ganesh and to receive blessings from Him. However, while both women are part of the global Indian diaspora and the growing South Asian American and Indo-American communities in the United States, their paths of migrations to Queens represent significant differences that go beyond the observable distinctions in style and accent. Their different histories of migration are important in understanding why Usha could explain the significance of the *kalava.* Also, their different trajectories from India clarifies why Usha poised such an invasive question about being a proper Hindu to the Indian woman, a question that clearly asserts Usha's authenticity as a Hindu and Indian while slyly questioning the woman's own claims of being Hindu and Indian. Their different routes to the United States will elucidate their similar but different observances of religion, maintenance of

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culture, and experiences of race and ethnicity in New York City. The origins and significance of these differences motivate my research.

To better examine the impact of itineraries of migration on the formation of Indo-Guyanese identity and community in New York City, I utilize the "new mobilities paradigm," which I will explain more later, and focus my research on Hinduism because, as religious scholar Thomas Tweed argues, "religions designate where we are *from*, identify whom we are *with*, and prescribe how we move *across*" (2006, 79). Religion, although contested in definition and as a category of analysis (Asad 1993, 42–48; McGuire 2008, 20–25; Vásquez 2011, 9; Levitt 2013, 161–62; McCutcheon 2015, 32–33; Vial 2016, 8–9), is a significant part of many individuals' lives and requires serious study. In forming religious communities, one defines their individual and collective identities. By embodying religious practices and communities, one is motivated to move and act in society in distinct ways. And through religious practices, one's past, present, and future are communicated, embodied, and enacted.

By understanding how our histories impact our present and our futures, my objective is to highlight how the unique movement or itinerary of migration of Indo-Guyanese continues to impact how the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community practices and ultimately mobilizes its religion(s) in the city to build community, to develop a sense of self, and sometimes to inspire action or engagement in the larger American society. To achieve this, I, like sociologist Peggy Levitt, advocate for a more nuanced theory of religion on the move, which embraces the "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller 2014) to examine social, spatial, and cultural mobility and immobility (Adey et al. 2014, 3–4; Kirsch 2014, 35–38; Murray and Upstone 2014, 3–9). Such an approach continues the

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research begun by anthropologists and sociologists of religion in the 1990s and 2000s

(Brown 1991; Warner and Wittner 1998; Vertovec 2000; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002;

Levitt 2007). While these earlier studies examine how individuals move and worship in

new contexts while remaining connected back home, there is a need to further complicate

this approach. How exactly are religious ideas and practices boundless and in motion?

How do earlier histories of migration impact present adaptations of worship in new

contexts? And what forms/structures of inequality are encountered in migration in

relation to or experienced through religion?

By approaching religion as "on the move," researchers like myself may recognize

religion as networks or "assemblages, made up of actors, objects, technology, and ideas,

[that] travel at different rates and rhythms, across the different levels and scopes of the

social fields in which they are embedded" (Levitt 2013, 160). In effect, viewing religion

as assemblages enables "a way of seriously approaching the multiple effects of power

that religion carries, expresses and is subject to" (Wilcox 2014, 156). Thus, this approach

focuses on material relations and how such connections give meaning to religion (Tweed

2006, 55–59; Vásquez 2011, 291–97; Puar 2012, 57–63).

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of how members of the Indo-Guyanese

community traveled from Guyana to New York City, carrying with them distinct

understandings of Hinduism informed by their multiple dislocations and how they utilize

religion as ideology and practice to help cultivate their identities as Indo-Guyanese

Americans. By adopting a theory of religion as a mobile concept that shapes and is

shaped by the movement of people, I examine the practice of religion, that is, how do

Indo-Guyanese Hindus embody and inhabit Caribbean Hinduism as a marker of their

multiple identities as racially marked subject.[5] In this introductory chapter, I will offer a

brief discussion of previous studies of immigrant religions in the United States and how

mobility may contribute to this scholarship through this idea of religion on the move.

Then, I will briefly introduce the community and establish my own positionality as a

researcher. And after discussing my approach to this research, I will outline the itinerary

of this dissertation. But first, I will discuss how religion, race, and ethnicity intersect to

define who belongs to a nation. By focusing my discussion on the South Asian American

community, I will clarify why I chose to study the Indo-Guyanese community in New

York City through Hinduism.

The Hindoos/Hindus of America: Clarifying Religion, Race, and Ethnicity

In May 2015, the Pew Research Center published *America's Changing Religious

Landscape*, a report of their second U.S. Religious Landscape study.[6] According to this

study, while Christianity is on the decline, other religions, such as Hinduism, are growing

(Table 1.1). In fact, with Hindus reported to be among the youngest relative to other

religious Americans, the data suggests that they will continue to grow in the coming

decade.[7] However, this study inadvertently fails to address several key questions: who or

what is Hindu and what is religion?

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[5] This study focuses on the practice and performance of religion. The internalization of religion, such as the manifestation/feeling of the divine in devotees (prayer, meditation, etc.), will not be explored in this dissertation.

[6] In 2007 and 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted Religious Landscape Studies over the phone. The 2014 study included around 35,000 respondents. Since "there are no official government statistics on the religious composition of the U.S. public" (Pew Research Center 2015, 6), these studies are unique in its attempt to record the religious makeup of America.

[7] Relative to the other religious groups, Hindus and Muslims tend to be younger; "the median age of adults in each group is 33" (Pew Research Center 2015, 49).

Table 1.1. Decline and Growth of Faith in the United States. Data from *America's Changing Religious Landscape* 2015 report.

Religion	2007 (% of population)	2014 (% of population)
Christianity	78.4	70.6
Jewish	1.7	1.9
Muslim	0.4	0.9
Buddhist	0.7	0.7
Hindu	0.4	0.7
Sikh, Baha'i, Taoist, Jain, other	< 0.3	0.3
Unitarian, New Age religion, Native American Religions	1.2	1.5

Although terms such as Hindu, Hinduism, and religion are used throughout this report, Pew offers little to no clarification in how the researchers and their respondents understood and used them.[8] In fact, the reporting on Hindus illustrates how respondents' understandings of Hindu and religion are not stable (McCutcheon 2015).[9] For instance, in their 2007 study Jains were reported as Hindus while in 2014 they were designated as "other world religions" (Pew Research Center 2015, 93).[10] These differing classifications capture how Jain, Hinduism, and all religions are not static and consistent, but rather, are concepts that fluctuate in relation to context and that are often "used for all sorts of strategic political purposes, manipulations, and the reifications of *difference*" (Miller 2015, 5). In fact, Hinduism is a product of colonialism because the practices and beliefs

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[8] Respondents were asked "What is your present religion, if any?" with a short list of religions offered as options (Pew Research Center 2015, 150). The report offers no clarification in how Pew understood and defined the religious traditions used. Also, the methodology indicates no attempt to have the religious traditions explained by the respondents.

[9] Like anthropologists Talal Asad (1993) and Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt (2003), I approach religion not as separate, universal entity with a distinct essence, but as an entity that is produced and reproduced through power and that should be studied in relation to the secular.

[10] Jainism is a religious tradition indigenous to the Indian subcontinent (R. Williams 1998, 183–84). While Jainism and Hinduism share certain concepts (*i.e. samsara, moksha, karma,* etc.), each tradition understands these concepts in philosophically and theologically distinct ways (Knott 1998, 113–14).

understood and defined as Hindu were categorized as such by British colonialism for its empire building (Knott 1998, 113; Levitt 2013, 165). As religious scholar Wendy Doniger notes, Hindus identified and knew themselves as Hindus "only after the British began to define communities by their religion, [… and] put people of different religions into different ideological boxes" (2009, 25). The shifting meaning of Hindu in the United States, which I will briefly discuss in this section, illustrates the constructed nature of religion and its relationship to race, ethnicity, and ultimately power.[11] How Hinduism intersects with race and ethnicity through time in the United States will help clarify why religion is the optic of this study of the Indo-Guyanese community in New York City.

Individuals of South Asian descent living in the United States are marked as other by their race, ethnicity, and religion, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes independently as other (Joshi 2006a; Iyer 2015; Maira 2016a). When South Asians first immigrated to the United States, Hindu served as a racial marker.[12] For instance, when Punjabi Sikhs arrived in California in the late nineteenth century as agricultural workers, they were categorized and described as "Hindoo" because of their brown skin (Leonard 2010). At that time all South Asian immigrants regardless of religion were classified as

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[11] In the United States, there is a lack of knowledge about world religions, which often results in violence. For instance, since 9/11, South Asian American faith communities have been the target of such violence. Sikh Americans in particular have been victims of hate crimes because of their visible articles of faith (*e.g.* beards and turbans). For a more in depth discussion of how South Asian Americans experience and engage the increased xenophobia and Islamophobia in the United States since 9/11 see Iyer 2015 and Maira 2016b.

[12] In this discussion I will focus exclusively in how individuals of South Asian descent self-designate as Hindu or are labelled Hindu. I omit part of the history of Hinduism in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, religious teachers such as Swamis Vivekananda and Paramhansa Yogananda, proselytized Hinduism to an American public who were drawn to its Orientalist packaging as a mystic solution to the alienation of industrialization (Prashad 2000; Jain 2015). These "white Hindus" of Vivekananda's Vedanta societies and later, the International Society of Krishnan Consciousness (ISKCON) complicate understandings of race and Hinduism both in the United States and globally; however, this topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Hindoo (Haney-López 1996; Prashad 2000). In fact, the U.S. Census included Hindu as a

category or sub-category for South Asian Americans/Asian Indians in 1910, 1920, 1930,

1940, and 1960 (Koshy 1998, 294).[13]

As sociologist Khyati Y. Joshi points out, this classification of South Asian

individuals as Hindoo is an example of the racialization of religion, "a phenomenon

wherein the fact of an individual's race creates a presumption as to her religious identity"

(2006b, 212).[14] This phenomenon is further compounded by the lack of knowledge of

non-Judeo-Christian religions, which has real impact on people's lives. For instance, an

individual with brown skin, and possibly a turban, in the 1900s would have be viewed as

Hindu whether they were or not. Today, some assume that certain brown skinned

individuals are Muslim and therefore enemies and/or terrorists (J. Singh 2003; Kurien

2005; Puar 2007, 2014; Bayoumi 2015; Iyer 2015). Through such racialization,

Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam "are rendered theologically, morally, and socially

illegitimate" (Joshi 2006b, 212). This is accomplished by understanding whiteness and

Christianity, particularly Protestantism, as the norm, thus defining that which is not as

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[13] The census plays a key role in defining communities. As anthropologist Bernard S. Cohn discussed in his study of censuses in South Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "the census was one of the situations in which Indians were confronted with the questions of who they were" (1987, 248). To accurately collect revenue in its territories in South Asia, British officials developed categories and classification systems drawn from religion and caste, which they believed "were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people" (Cohn 1987, 243). These categories failed to capture the diversity of castes and subcastes, instead producing a fixed set of definitions and classifications that Indians themselves negotiate to gain access to status and privileges (Cohn 1987, 248–50).

[14] Race is a social construction that has real impact on individuals. Through the process of racialization, "an ongoing social process that integrates (or excludes) immigrants into (or from) the dominant political economy" (Chao 2015, 60), individuals are categorized as other or not belonging to the nation. Racialization is a political process that is based on essentialized differences with no meaning outside the conceptual frame devised by the privileged group (Omi and Winant 1986; HoSang and LaBennett 2012). The racialization of religion has a long history dating back to the 12th century with anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim discrimination, which many scholars argue is the precursor to the concept of race devised in relation to Atlantic slavery (Fredrickson 2002; Meer 2013; Vial 2016).

other (Brodkin 1998; Orsi 1999; Yoo 1999; Busto 2003). Through the racialization of religion South Asian Americans "went from being excluded in society because of their religious beliefs to being excluded from society because their religious identification became a biological trait that could not be changed, and so they as human beings were seen as evil" (Joshi 2006b, 212). In such situations, "religion determines race" (Bayoumi 2015, 50).

But the positioning of South Asian individuals as other through religion and race also inspired them to mobilize around religion to assert ethnicity in order to overcome such cultural racism. Ethnicities, like race, group individuals by shared culture, religion, or ancestral origin (B. F. Williams 1989), but, as Frederik Barth points out, "are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves" (1969, 10), not primordial.[15] The boundaries and cultural aspects that define ethnicity are not fixed. Ethnicity is "relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated" (Brubaker 2002, 167). Or, more relevant for my research, ethnicity is instrumental "as a reaction against threats to the integrity, interests, and self-determination" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 39). By approaching ethnicity as relational and instrumental, my research examines how Hinduism is utilized to develop a sense of Indianness and Indo-Guyaneseness in response to the situation.

Religion helps to maintain ethnicity by offering a space to be in community with co-ethnics and to preserve cultural traditions (Kurien 1998; Min 2003). In the development of Hinduism in the United States, worship shifted from being in the home

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[15] To clarify, Barth points out that actors both within and outside an ethnic group may define an ethnicity. As a constructivist Barth "claim[ed] that ethnicity is the product of a social process rather than a cultural given, made and remade rather than taken for granted, chosen depending on circumstances rather than ascribed through birth" (Wimmer 2008, 971).

and private spaces to being in temples and public spaces (Gupta 2003). These early

temples in the 1970s emerged from social and cultural centers organized around Indian

national identity to aid in the cultural upbringing of the second generation; because the

majority of members were Hindu, such organizations became religious in nature (R.

Williams 1998, 182–83), resulting in Indian being synonymous with Hindu (Kurien 2001,

282; Maira 2002, 137–46).

Through ethnicizing religion, minority/marginalized communities politicize their

faith in order to be recognized, to assert belonging and to seek resources and rights from

the multicultural nation-state (Gupta 2003; Kurien 2007; Bender et al. 2013a). Such a

move is productive in the context of the United States, a nation founded on religious

pluralism (C. L. Cohen and Numbers 2013b, 6–9). For instance, many government

officials host *Diwali* celebrations to engage with their South Asian American

constituents.[16] President Barak Obama was one such official, hosting the White House's

first *Diwali* celebration back in 2009. But while such efforts accomplish the goals of

recognition and resources to an extent, ethnicity appears to replace racism with a

celebration of difference that continues to disenfranchise and to marginalize select

communities in a nation, as Stuart Hall astutely points out in his discussion of "new

ethnicity" (1996, 445–47). The Indo-Guyanese Hindu community in New York City is

one such community.

From Diasporic Religion to Religion on the Move

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[16] Around the world, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists celebrate *Diwali*. In fact, *Diwali* is an official
public holiday in the United States and Guyana. In Guyana, large public parades and celebrations occur in
the capital city. The holiday is also celebrated in schools with all children, including non-Hindus, coming to
school in Indian clothing. In the United States, Diwali is slowly becoming the official holiday for South
Asian American Hindus. There is currently a movement in New York City to include *Diwali* as a school
holiday. A few members of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community are involved in this effort.

For decades now, studies in anthropology, sociology, and religious studies "highlight religion as a major force shaping and changing constructions of personal and community identity among immigrants" (Leonard 2005, 1). As individuals leave their home countries by way of exile or migration, they mobilize religion to integrate into a new society (Ong 2003; Prothero 2006; Foner and Alba 2008) as well as to cultivate an identity to counter marginalization and claim rights from the state (Kurien 2004; Selka 2007; Mooney 2009). While earlier studies of immigrants in the United States focused on how religion facilitated or prevented assimilation, recent studies are more nuanced in their design. In addition to studying non-Christian religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism (Guest 2003; Ong 2003; Asad 2003; Leonard 2005; Kurien 2007), scholars consider how religion impacts our transnational lives where ideas, capital, and individuals now move more frequently across national borders (Basch et al. 1994; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Levitt 2007; Bender et al. 2013). As religious organizations, institutions, and individuals crisscross national borders and spread across continents and oceans, "religious beliefs and practices relate to migration and civic life in both old and new homelands" (Leonard 2005, 4).

Since we exist in a transnational reality, the question becomes how do scholars study religions and their roles in peoples' lives. The existing scholarship offers a few suggestions, but largely it is not successful in offering theories that fully capture the complexities at play in religions operating in transnational fields (Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde 2011; Bava 2011; Wong and Levitt 2014). For instance, religious scholar Thomas Tweed critiques anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's proposal of –scapes to approach and understand globalization's effects on culture. To Tweed, this proposal of -scapes limits

our understanding of how religions adapt transnationally "unless we suggest that religion is nothing more than ethnicity, economy or ideology" (Tweed 2006, 61). To correct this limitation, Tweed offers his analytic of *sacroscapes*, which "invites scholars to attend to the multiple ways that religious flows have left traces, transforming peoples and places, the social arena and the natural terrain" (Tweed 2006, 62). However, Tweed does not adequately differentiate sacroscape from Appadurai's –scapes and fails to offer a framework to correct for the deficiencies in the original theory. Most importantly, *sacroscapes* appears celebratory in its engagement with movement, failing to address how flowing through borders may mark people and ideas as other and excluded from the nation (Vásquez 2011)

Inserting the "new mobilities paradigm" into studies of diasporic and transnational religions offers another way to conceptualize how people travel across borders carrying different embodiments of religion and identifications as religious/pious people. Emerging from anthropology and sociology, this paradigm merges spatial, social and cultural issues to "track[] the power of discourses, practices, and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects (and affects) of both movement and statis" (Sheller 2014, 794). This paradigm challenges the researcher to consider not only when practices and people move, but also when they do not. There is also an emphasis on scale, where the researcher may focus on the self and body and the community at large. Through this paradigm, the researcher may pursue questions of uprooting, dwelling, and homemaking that lay at the root of immigrant or diasporic religious practices by "develop[ing] historically rich genealogical studies" (Vásquez 2011, 303).

Peggy Levitt (2013, 161–62) incorporates aspects of this paradigm in her call to study religion on the move. Although scholars acknowledge the transnational reality of religion, there is a lack of consideration of how the borders that religious actors, beliefs, and practices flow across actually shape and limit the lived experiences of faith. Like Levitt, I view "religion not as a packable, stable set of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular bounded time and space, but as a contingent clustering of diverse elements that come together within to-be-determined spaces riddled by power and interests" (2013, 160). How religion moves through borders and what shape it takes within and across borders is informed by history and power.

To consider the potential of the new mobilities paradigm, this dissertation examines and explores how people, religions and cultures move. As people move they move their religion and culture, but what happens in this movement? Movement is the quintessential part of human existence. For instance, movement defines my own life. From the political movements and economic policies of India that altered the trajectories of my parents' parents' occupations to my own parents' decision to move away from their family and everything they knew to pursue another life in a country half way across the world, movement in various forms defines who I am and the opportunities I have. As I will discuss, similar movements inform why and who Indo-Guyanese Hindus are in New York.

In the context of this research and dissertation I am interested in how religion helps form individual and community identity. This dissertation examines how the Indo-Guyanese community mobilizes various forms of Hinduisms 1) to negotiate an ethnic community identity, 2) to cultivate a notion of self and individual identity, and 3) as a

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means of homemaking or claiming belonging. While religious beliefs are important in forming an individual's worldview and sense of morality, religious practices are the means through which those beliefs become embodied and enacted. Because of religious practice "religion should be recognized as a powerful means of identity construction and self-discipline, and not simply as a source of social control or as a means by which the social order is inscribed onto subjects" (Selka 2007, 126).

A Hopeful Migration: The Creation and Trajectory of Indo-Guyanese

Bordered by Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname, Guyana is divided into three counties, Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice, which occupy a narrow coastal plain where the majority of its population lives (Figure 1.2). According to the 2002 Population and Housing Census conducted by the regional organization the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) 43.5% of the 751,223 population of Guyana is East Indian (Figure 1.3).[17] 30.2% is comprised of individuals of African heritage and 16.7% identifying as mixed heritage. 9.2% are Amerindians with the remaining .46% identifying as Portuguese, Chinese, white, or opting not to report their ethnic identity. The two largest ethnic groups, the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, dominate the past, present, and future history of Guyana. Afro-Guyanese are descended from slaves from different parts of Africa and Indo-Guyanese are descended from indenture laborers from parts of South Asia, but primarily India.

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[17] The Caribbean Community or CARICOM is an organization of twenty countries cooperating for the social and economic development of the region. Beginning in 1973 with the Treaty of Chaguaramas signed by the Prime Ministers of Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, CARICOM today strives to establish "a single market and single economy" ("Who We Are —Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat" 2016).

Figure 1.2. Location of Guyana in South America (Wikipedia Commons)
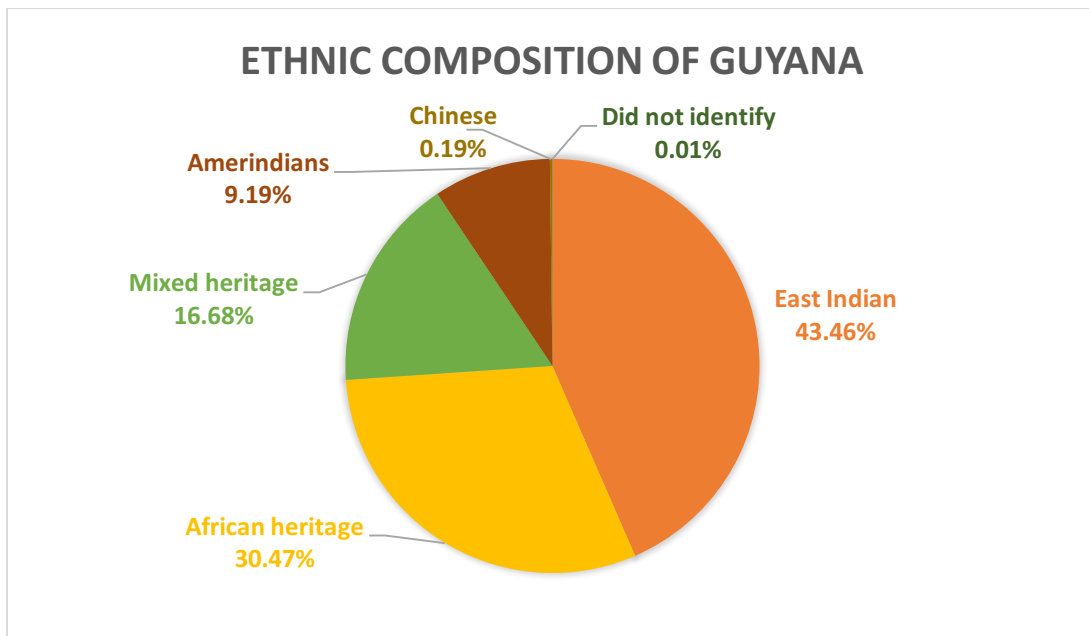
Figure 1.3. Ethnic Composition of Guyana

Guyana is a plural society which vacillates between ethnic acceptance and ethnic animosity (Jayawardena 1980; Mangru 2005), where Indo-Guyanese ethnicity is largely defined by religion—primarily Hinduism (Premdas 1995)—and blackness defines Afro-Guyaneseness (B. F. Williams 1991). These different identities collided in vicious ways following the nation's independence in 1966. Under the leadership of Forbes Burnham (1966-1985), the fledgling nation endured political repression and violence, mostly directed towards Indo-Guyanese (Halstead 2008). The roots of this bloody independence originate in its colonial history, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Both Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese started immigrating en mass to New York City in the 1970s and 1980s to escape this violence and to seek better economic opportunities. Today, the Guyanese population is one of the largest immigrant communities in the city (Table 1.2). The American Community Survey of the 2010 U.S. Census reports almost 140,000 Guyanese immigrants live in New York City (Semple 2013). Also, a 2013 report published by the Department of Planning of the New York City government states that Guyanese are now the second largest immigrant community in Queens, the fifth largest overall in New York City (Lobo and Salvo 2013). Unfortunately, this data is limited to nationality and prevents a racial breakdown of who Guyanese community. However, the 2013 report does note that the neighborhoods with the largest number of Guyanese, an area of southern Queens now known as Little Guyana, "were primarily of Asian Indian descent"(Lobo and Salvo 2013, 77).

Table 1.2. Foreign-born Population by Country of Birth (data from 2013 Newest New Yorker report).

	2000			2011		
	Rank	Number	Percent	Rank	Number	Percent
TOTAL, Foreign-born		2,871,032	100		3,066,599	100
Dominican Republic	1	369,186	12.9	1	380,160	12.4
China	2	261,551	9.1	2	350,231	11.4
Mexico	5	122,550	4.3	3	186,298	6.1
Jamaica	3	178,922	6.2	4	169,235	5.5
Guyana	**4**	**130,647**	**4.6**	**5**	**139,947**	**4.6**
Trinidad & Tobago	**8**	**88,794**	**3.1**	**8**	**87,635**	**2.9**
India	**14**	**68,263**	**2.4**	**9**	**76,493**	**2.5**
Bangladesh	17	42,865	1.5	11	74,692	2.4
Pakistan	18	39,165	1.4	18	39,794	1.3

In moving to New York City, Indo-Guyanese brought their religious traditions. Although Indo-Guyanese practice forms of Christianity and Islam in the city, my research focuses on how some Indo-Guyanese observe and practice Hinduism. Hinduism, according the 2002 CARICOM Population and Housing Census of Guyana, is the most practiced religion in the country with over 28% of the population reporting to observe and practice it (Figure 1.4).

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF GUYANA
(DATA FROM 2002 POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUS)

Other 1.30%
Not Stated 0.90%
Anglican 6.89%
Methodist 1.70%
None 4.30%
Other Christians 17.68%
Pentacostal 16.88%
Rastafarian 0.50%
Roman Catholic 8.09%
Jehovah Witness 1.10%
Seventh Day Adventist 5.00%
Hindu 28.37%
Muslim 7.19%
Baha'i 0.10%
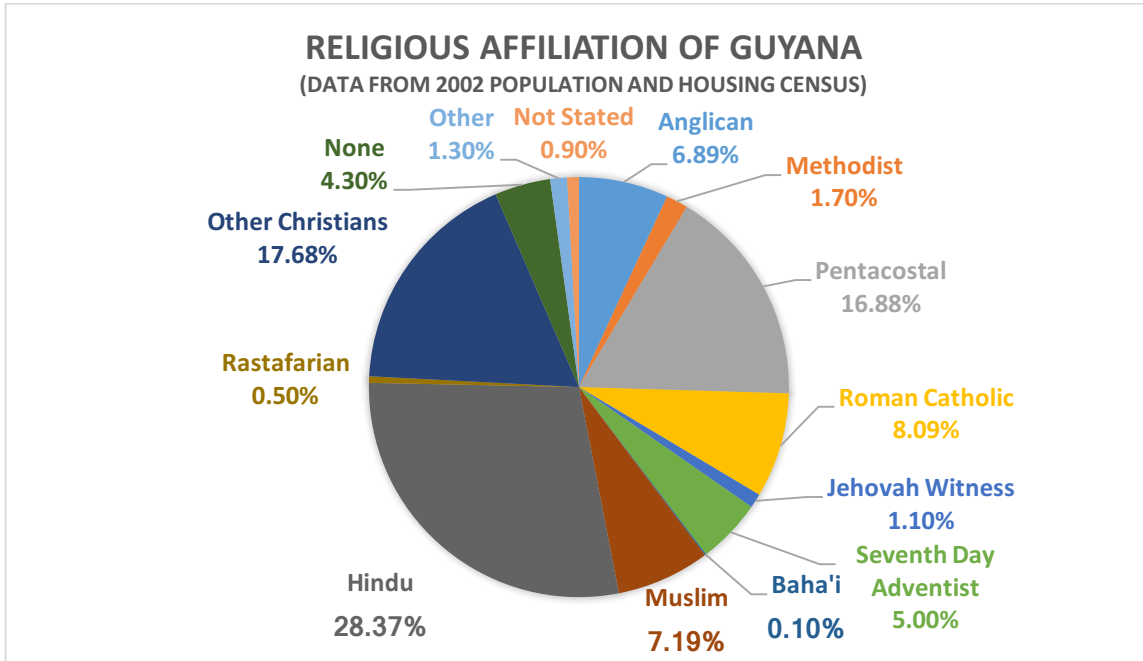
Figure 1.4: Religious Affiliation of Guyana

In New York City, there are no definitive numbers on how many Guyanese practice Hinduism or any other religion in the city. In fact, to ascertain how many Guyanese practice Hinduism is a difficult task. To begin, let's consider the 28% of Guyanese reporting to be Hindu in Guyana during the 2002 CARICOM study. Although it is tempting to assume the 28% to be entirely Indo-Guyanese because Hinduism originates from the Indian subcontinent, this is probably not the case. While this study does not provide an ethnic breakdown of religious affiliation, previous scholars have reported the inclusion of Afro-Guyanese devotees in Hindu temples (Younger 2010; McNeal 2011). In my research, I met at least five Afro-Guyanese individuals who identify as Hindu and who actively participate in Hindu temples in the city.

Another complication in studying Guyanese practicing Hinduism in the city is the emergence of Indo-Caribbean as an identity. Indo-Caribbean, a new political identity in New York City, refers to individuals of Indian descent with a history of migration from

the Caribbean nations of Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and Jamaica. Although the term dates to the 1990s in New York City, it only recently began to be more prominent. During the 2010 U.S. census, the Indo-Caribbean Alliance (ICA)[18], a local community organization started and run by 1.5 and second-generation Indo-Caribbeans, campaigned for community members to write Indo-Caribbean into the census. Part of this effort was to educate the community in what Indo-Caribbean means:

> Prior to [2010]…when you say Indo-Caribbean no one knows what that means. And so people just identify themselves as oh, I'm Guyanese or I'm Trinidadian….There is no unified identity as a people. We share a common culture. We share a common history and this is who we are.

Mindy, an Indo-Guyanese Muslim woman who works for ICA, pointed out how the Indo-Caribbean community is divided by nationality.[19] Indo-Guyanese identified as Guyanese. Indo-Trinidadian identified as Trinidadian. Indo-Surinamese identified as Surinamese. And Indo-Jamaican identified as Jamaican. But despite these national loyalties, individuals of Indian descent living in these Caribbean nations share a common history and culture. They all have ancestors who left the Indian subcontinent as indentured laborers; also, certain Indian religious and folk music traditions persist in all of these Caribbean countries (Manuel 2000, 2015).

Although there is a shared history and culture, there are slight differences. For instance, a local community leader pointed out the difference in Hindi language retention. "Suriname is an interesting case because it is one of the few countries in which they

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[18] ICA is the real name of the organization.

[19] Mindy, born in Berbice, Guyana, arrived in New York in 1988. Experiencing alienation at school, she with two other Indo-Guyanese organized the first Indo-Caribbean organization that focused on Indo-Caribbean issues and remained secular in its approach. Her and her co-organizers, while not religious, understand and respect the role of religion in this community. Mindy has a Master's in social work and continues to participate and advise the organization she helped to found in 2008. This organization is still active in Little Guyana.

speak Hindustani. So, when the Indians [from Suriname] come over here they can speak and read Hindi as opposed to [Indians from] Guyana and Trinidad." While Indo-Surinamese continue to speak Hindustani, a dialect of Hindi brought over by their ancestors, most Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese do not speak or understand Hindi. Despite these differences, Indians from different parts of the Caribbean live in the same neighborhoods in Queens, attend common Hindu temples and worship together. As a result, many of the Caribbean Hindu temples in the city are attended by Indo-Guyanese, Indo-Trinidadians, Indo-Surinamese, and Indo-Jamaicans, many of whom now identify solely as Indo-Caribbeans. While I spoke with and interviewed Indo-Caribbeans from Trinidad, Suriname, and Jamaica, I focus my research on the experiences of Indo-Guyanese, who were the majority in the temples I studied.

A Brief History of Caribbean Hinduisms in New York City

Indo-Guyanese immigrated in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, the community was largely dispersed around the city in areas like downtown Manhattan and parts of the Bronx (Table 1.3). As the community started to earn more money, many moved to parts of southern Queens for better schools, safer neighborhoods, and the possibility of owning a home. In time, this part of Queens became known as Little Guyana.[20]

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[20] In my research I have yet to determine when exactly Indo-Guyanese started moving to southern Queens or when this area of southern Queens became known as Little Guyana. During a conversation with a local funeral director, he noted that his family's funeral home organized their first Indo-Guyanese funeral in the early 1990s. This date correlates to when many of my interviewees moved to Little Guyana.

Table 1.3. Guyanese born by New York City Neighborhood (data from 2013 Newest New Yorker report)

	Number of Guyanese born	% of Borough's Foreign Born
Bronx	13,845	2.9
Brooklyn	41,637	4.4
Queens	82,538	7.6
Staten Island	0	0
Manhattan	0	0

For instance, Sheila, a second-generation Indo-Guyanese woman in her mid-twenties, grew up in New York City. Before her family moved and settled in Little Guyana, they lived and worshipped in the Bronx:

> So, when my parents migrated [to the Bronx] there were a few temples in the area, still are to this day. The Bronx Hindu temple is the temple that my parents frequented very often. When I was born, I went there. And even when we migrated to Queens we continued to go there because a lot of my family members, extended family members were still going there…. We just ended up going there because we knew it well…

Prior to the formation of registered Caribbean Hindu temples such as the Bronx Hindu temple, Indo-Guyanese worshipped in private every Sunday, first with their families and then, as the community grew, with their neighbors. These informal Sunday gatherings of families and neighbors began due to a mutual desire to practice Hinduism as they had in Guyana. Chacha, a sixty-something Indo-Guyanese man[21] explained how he started to worship in New York City after leaving Guyana in 1975:

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[21] Chacha, a school teacher in the capital of Guyana, arrived in New York in 1970. As he trained to be a medical technologist, he lived in Manhattan and worked part-time to pay for his rent and school fees. After graduating, he worked in the pathology lab at Bellevue Hospital, but after a few years gave it up after earning his real estate license. He now owns a travel agency and driving school in addition to being a real estate broker. In real estate, he views it as his duty to help his community integrate into America society by educating them in how to save and buy a home. Although Chacha is from a family that "would go to some religious function, but not on a religious basis," he helped to found one of the Caribbean temples in the city. Temple became a crucial way to teach his religion and culture to his three children and Puerto Rican wife.

> I [found], at that time I was living in Manhattan before I moved to Queens, [that] the whole [apartment] building was Guyanese and a few Trinidadians. Something was lacking. That was congregational prayers [or *satsang* service]. So, the people in the building got together. Me and a guy named Dilen started a *satsang*. So, myself and him, we use to conduct *puja* (ritual), the *hawan* (fire ritual) [*sic*].

In their apartment building in Manhattan, this group of Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Trinidadians began performing *satsang* in the living room. *Satsang* means to sit together with a *guru* (teacher) or people with the shared purpose of realizing the truth. As a group of devotees coming together for religious training and fellowship, *satsang* is the defining feature of Caribbean Hinduism, rather than individual worship, as in India (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2003), Caribbean Hinduism is more collectivist, centered on a unified religious community undergoing weekly services that include the group recitations of Sanskrit *mantras* (prayer), the singing of devotional songs called *bhajans*, ritual offerings to the divine often in the form of *hawan* (Figure 1.5)*, a Vedic fire ritual, and a religious lesson by a Hindu priest known as a *pandit* or *pujari.* All these practices together are known as a *satsang* service.

Figure 1.5. Outside *hawan* ritual, *Diwali* 2014 (photo by author)

Because the initial migration of Indo-Guyanese to New York City did not include

Indo-Guyanese Hindu *pandits* or *pujaris* starting temples, the early years of Caribbean

Hinduism were informal. However, as the community grew and more individuals who

trained as *pandits* and *pujaris* came to New York City, Caribbean Hinduism and *satsang*

became formalized. For example, Chacha's informal *satsang* eventually transitioned into

formal, registered temple after he met a *pandit:*

> Then about [a] year later…I went to a supermarket...and saw this older guy than
> me and we connect[ed]…. And when he disclosed to me he was a *pandit* we
> started talking. Then he discussed with me that he is having *satsang* every Sunday
> morning. He conduct[ed] [it] at his [place]…a hotel in Manhattan. So, the next
> Sunday when we got together, I'm not a *pandit* by the way…I told them this will
> be our last *satsang* here.

And so, because of a chance meeting with an Indo-Guyanese *pandit*, Chacha's *satsang*

group began attending this *pandit's satsang.* Because of the size of the group, they pooled

their resources to find a space to become a temple. When they found one, they completed

the necessary paperwork to be recognized as a religious organization in New York City.

Most registered Caribbean Hindu temples in the city have a similar founding story: an

informal *satsang* led by a *pandit* that eventually attracts a substantial group of devotees

and raises enough money to rent a space for a physical temple.

Currently the Caribbean Hindu landscape of New York City is highly saturated,

with *mandirs* or temples seeming to appear on every corner, in basements, and garages.

While many temples operate informally and illegally in garages, basements and living

rooms all over the city, there are over fifty Caribbean Hindu temples registered as official

places of worship (Verma 2010). With so many registered temples, it is easy to recognize

the diversity that is Caribbean Hinduism and to encounter the multiple ways to observe

Sanatana Dharma, Arya Samaj, and the *Madrassi* traditions. These three traditions define Caribbean Hinduism in Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and New York City.

The study of Hinduism in general has recognized that Hinduism is not a single, unified religious tradition. Practicing Hinduism can mean performing a *puja* (ritual) or initiating a deity to take possession of your body (Collins 1997; Ferrari 2011). Practices of Hinduism vary across the Indian subcontinent as well as in the Hindu diaspora (Van der Veer 1999). In the context of the Caribbean, these three distinct sects emerged: *Sanatana Dharma, Arya Samaj*, and the *Kalimai* or *Madrassi* traditions.

Sanatana Dharma, meaning eternal religion in Sanskrit, is the form of Hinduism most practiced by Indo-Guyanese. *Sanatana Dharma* is derived from North Indian Hindu traditions brought to Guyana by Indian indentured laborers from 1838 to 1917. To overcome the regional diversity of North Indian Hindu traditions religious leaders of the community began standardizing or homogenizing Hinduism (Jayawardena 1968). This Hinduism privileged upper caste traditions via the decline of most village traditions and the establishment of the Caribbean Hinduism pantheon of Sanskritic or upper caste deities (Vertovec 2010). Followers of this homogenized Hinduism identify as *Sanatanists*. *Sanatanists* are defined by their ritual worship of *murtis* or statues of Hindu deities (Figure 1.6), often called *deotas* in Caribbean Hinduism. Although caste has largely disappeared in the Caribbean context, *Brahmans,* the priestly caste, still persist in *Sanatana Dharma,* with many *Sanatanist pandits* identifying as *Brahman.*

Figure 1.6. *Murtis* on an altar (photo by author)

The next most prevalent tradition is *Arya Samaj*. Unlike *Sanatana Dharma* which emerged in response to colonial restrictions and Christian missionary threats in British Guiana, Guyana during British colonial rule, *Arya Samaj* is a Hindu reform movement founded in North India in 1875. In fact, it is a global Hindu tradition since it sent missionaries to indentured Indian societies in the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa. *Samajist*, devotees in *Arya Samaj*, differ from *Sanatanists* in two key ways. First, *Samajist* do not worship *murtis*. Second, they do not believe in caste or gender restrictions. Anyone may become a *pandit*. When *Arya Samaj* missionaries first arrived in British Guiana in 1910, they immediately challenged the authority of *Sanatanist pandits* (Younger 2010).

The third and final sect is the *Kalimai* or *Madrassi* tradition. The recruits from the Madras Presidency in Southern India, who account for only five percent of all Indian indentured laborers to the Caribbean (Shepherd 2002), are credited with bringing the *Madrassi* traditions to (Stephanides and Singh 2000). Unlike *Sanatana Dharma* and *Arya Samaj*, the *Kalimai* tradition is a *shakti* tradition. *Shaktism* is a strand of Hinduism where

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the devotee worships forms of the Goddess as *shakti* or "the female 'power' or 'energy' of the universe" (Flood 1996, 175). *Shaktism* materialized in Guyana through fire walking, animal sacrifice, and the invocation of the goddess Kali, when Mother Kali takes over a devotee's body. Because of these distinguishing elements, *Kalimai* is often viewed as a stigmatized tradition (Jackson 2016). Many devotees, both in the past and present, hesitate to reveal their participation in a *Kalimai* tradition, fearing judgment from *Sanatanists* and *Samajists* (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4. Comparing the Three Types of Caribbean Hinduism.

Arya Samaj	*Sanatan Dharma*	*Kalimai/Madrassi*
Theological Differences		
No *Murtis*	*Murtis*	*Murtis* & Possession practices
No Caste	Caste	No Caste
Sunday Satsang Program		
Avg length: 2 hours	Avg length: 2 hours	Avg length: 6 hours
Hawan Sacrifice (performed by anyone)	Chanting Mantras	Individual Offerings to murtis
Bhajan Performance	*Hawan* Sacrifice (anyone or priest)	*Bhajan* Performance
Katha	*Bhajan* Performance—Individual offerings to murtis	Group offerings (1st set)
Universal Prayer	*Katha*	*Gayatri* Mantra
Aarti	Universal Prayer	*Katha*/Announcement
Food	*Aarti*	*Aarti*
	Food	Group Offerings (2nd set)
		Invocation of Mother Kali

These theological differences not only separate these traditions, but also foster animosity and competition among their followers. For instance, a *Samajist pandit* offered some judgment of *Sanatana Dharma* in explaining the theological differences:

> Our worship involves us glorifying God and seeking to emulate God....when [*Sanatanist*] pray they pray for favors: "God please do this for me so that if you do this for me we will do a big service and this and that God [*sic*]," you know?

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We pray in that we worship God. Part of our prayer is glorifying his attributes, praying to Him for virtue and grace to be instilled in us, for emotional strength.

The *Samajist pandit* points out that *Samajist* worship is not about negotiating and striking a deal with God but becoming more like God. Also implied in this explanation are concerns of authenticity, particularly in the manner of worship. Since *Samajists* approach God for emotional strength instead of material gains their worship is authentic and exemplifies true religion/Hinduism in comparison to *Sanatanist* and *Madrassi.* These concerns of authenticity, which inform how the community practices religion and the conflicts that emerge and persist in the city both within the community and the larger Indo-American community, will be discussed more later in this chapter. But despite these theological differences and concerns/conflicts over authenticity that separate the three sects in Guyana and New York City, the practice of *satsang* described earlier, exists in all traditions. Also, all sects hold Sunday *satsang* service.

What is unique about Caribbean Hinduism in New York City is that the adaptations that are currently defining American Hinduism post-1965 have already occurred in Caribbean Hinduism. In her studies of the practices of Hinduism in the United States and how they strategically adapt to be recognized in US multicultural society, sociologist Prema Kurien noted the following:

> Religion has been the most legitimate form of ethnic expression in this country...Both the structure and the culture of these emerging ethnoreligious groups helped participants compete more advantageously with members of other groups. As such, it is not surprising that the latest wave of immigrants have formed ethnoreligious organizations in their attempt to adapt to American society (1998, 59).

Part of the adaptation of American Hinduism has been the formation of more formalized approaches to devotion and religious educations. *Desis*, or Indians who immigrated to the

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US directly from India, adopt congregational forms of service where devotees meet, do rituals, sing *bhajans* (devotional songs) and read religious texts together.[22] This service mirrors the *satsang* service brought by Caribbean Hindu.

Such approaches to American Hinduism illustrate both "structural adaptation" and "selective acculturation." "Structural adaptation" in the literature on immigrant religious communities in the United States (Warner 1998) refers to how a religion adopts cultural and structural elements similar to Christian congregations, particularly in regards to organization and services (Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Lien and Carnes 2004). These organizational and service adaptations are a strategic move. Since existing laws are informed by Protestant congregational understanding of worship, "[t]aking on a congregational form thus justifies and legitimates new religions within the context of American religious pluralism, providing room for new religious groups to practice and teach as they wish" (Smith and Bender 2004, 78). They also illustrate "selective acculturation," when "[second generation immigrants] incorporate themselves into mainstream society while retaining some of the parents' culture and remaining embedded in family and community networks (which provide a shield against racism and help achieve upward mobility)" (Kurien 2005, 437).

Interestingly, Caribbean Hinduism had already gone through this adaptation prior to moving to the United States. In his research of Hinduism in indentured locales, religious scholar Paul Younger developed the theory of new homeland to describe the adaptations of Hinduism in relation to the context in which the tradition arrived:

> …a new homeland is a set of rituals, values, and mythic stories that people agree will define their identity. The authority of this set of traditions is that they are

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[22] *Desi* Hindus also instituted their version of Sunday school called *bala vihar* where the second generation may learn about both their religion and culture.

understood as memories of a distant homeland, but the context in which they constitute a religious tradition is the new context in which people are sharing with others in the creation of a new social order (2010, 7–8).

His theory of new homeland captures the adaptations that Hinduisms in Guyana and Trinidad experienced in order 1) to promote a cohesive Indian ethnic identity 2) to establish the traditions as legitimate in the face of colonialism and Christian missionaries, and 3) to preserve, educate and pass on religious traditions and Indian culture to the next generation. Because of these previous adaptations, "when some Guyana Hindus subsequently moved to North America the Guyana-based religious traditions remained distinctive in the new cultural setting" (Younger 2004, 36).

As I mentioned earlier, the most significant feature of all forms of Caribbean Hinduism is the practice of *satsang.* In the context of Caribbean forms of worship this practice has morphed into a specific set of practices. Leela, a twenty-two-year-old Indo-Guyanese woman[23] explained *satsang*:

> I think the *pandits* here are *purohit* meaning they conduct rituals. So, they do the ceremonies but they also serve as an orator and interpret the scriptures. I think when Hinduism was taken to Guyana and Trinidad, the language was lost along the way. So, for instance, my parents are not fluent in Hindi….For the religion, [the priest] had to interpret things. The priest then had to form stories and so it was no longer just reading the scripture, but it was interpreting it. And I think that did well in some respects because, for example, my *guru* will interpret the script and make it very practical; and, the youth of today I think they want to hear that. And in some sense, that is very revolutionary because it is taking it to another level.

Satsang appears to mimic a Christian service. Although *Sanskrit* mantras and *Vedic* rituals (offerings of fire and flowers to deities) occur with the singing of *bhajans*, the

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[23] Leela, a second-generation Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman, grew up and attended mandir in Little Guyana. Currently studying to be a medical doctor, religion is a huge part of her identity. She attended *mandir* every Sunday and is heavily involved in *mandir* programs. While at college, she participated in the Hindu student organization on campus. As I will discuss in chapter three, she is not conflicted in being both a woman of faith and a woman of science.

main event is the reading and interpretation of a religious text by a *pandit*. This part of *satsang* is referred to as the *katha* or story. The *pandit* selects a series of verses from religious texts, offers his or her interpretation, and attempts to relate it to the present through a story.

The *pandit* serves as the *guru* of the temple, offering his or her interpretation of texts and providing spiritual guidance. In this adaptation, the *pandit* occupies a unique position in Caribbean Hinduism, both in the Caribbean and the United States. While the adaptations of Caribbean Hinduism appear to be a precursor of the adaptations of American Hinduism, Caribbean Hinduism is also about the cult of the *pandit*, a feature not present in American Hinduism. Devotees assess a temple on the performance of its *pandit*: how well they sing and how well they interpret the text. However, as I will discuss in the last chapter, *satsang* is currently in crisis in New York City as the rise of the *pandit* has spurred the proliferation of *pandits* with questionable training and intention, fighting in temples, and the State's intervention into temple administration.

Who is the Real Hindu or Indian?

As mentioned earlier, another critical aspect of this research is authenticity. Although authenticity is a social construct (Handler 1986, 2; Bendix 1997, 7; Maira 2002, 79; Silverman 2012, 53), it is a concept that informs and motivates how Hinduism is observed, practiced, and deployed in this community. Many Indo-Guyanese Hindus, as I will discuss in this dissertation, judge each other in terms of being a good or true Hindu, and by extension a proper Indian. Further, many Indo-Guyanese Hindus are concerned with proving themselves and their community as real Hindus and Indians in relation to the larger Indo-American community.

But while authenticity is a concern for many in this community, the question remains what is authentic? What does it mean to be a real Hindu or Indian? What metrics are deployed to assess authenticity or true Indianness? And what competitions or conflicts emerge from such concerns over authenticity?

As previous scholarship demonstrates, implicit in definitions and conflicts over authenticity is power, particularly hegemony (Brow 1990; Cheng 2004). For instance, in his discussion of how religious objects are now authenticated as holy in our contemporary moment, anthropologist Charles Lindholm notes that "[a]ny claim to authenticity is assumed to be, at best, a 'misrecognition' of what is in reality an unwarranted assertion of hegemony" (2002, 335). So, although claims of and searches for authenticity may offer individuals solace in the face of contemporary issues (Bendix 1997, 7–8; Lindholm 2002, 337), scholars should examine how authenticity perpetuates a certain understanding of the past and culture, which includes religion, that is constructed to continue hegemonic views of the present (Brow 1990, 3; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 375).

Previous scholars of South Asian American communities followed this advice in their studies, noting that to be authentic and Indian meant knowing and performing a certain representation of Indianness (Prashad 2000; Rudrappa 2004; Shankar 2008).[24] Or as Asian American scholar Sunaina Maira explains, "the notion of being truly Indian circumscribes for many the arenas or activities with which they chose to identify, for authentic Indian-ness seems to require knowledge of very particular kind[s] of Indian 'traditions'" (1999b, 141). Similar to earlier studies of Indo-Americans (Gupta 2003;

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[24] Scholarship on notions of Indianness within the subcontinent and in the larger global Indian diaspora make similar conclusions (Chatterjee 1993; Niranjana 2006; Weidman 2006).

Joshi 2006a; Kurien 2007), this research shows how being knowledgeable as a Hindu often becomes a way to perform and to prove one's Indianness for Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Caribbeans in the city. Consider the ethnographic episode which started this chapter. My friend Usha's ability to teach the Indian woman about the practice of tying a *kalava* presents Usha with an opportunity to demonstrate her knowledge of Hinduism and to confirm her Indian identity. In fact, Usha's question "are you a good Hindu" offers her the opportunity to question the authentic Indianness/Hinduness of the Indian woman at the temple.

However, while the Indian woman's lack of knowledge of this particular practice might prove to the Indo-Guyanese community that they are more Indian and Hindu, even morally superior (Maira 2002, 116), than Indians from India, it also demonstrates the competing notions of Indianness and Hinduism that operate in the city. Ideas of authentic Hinduism and Indianness for the Indo-Guyanese in my research are informed by different priorities in a different context than those that impact these concepts for the larger Indo-American community. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, within the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community there are competing notions of authenticity based on different ideas of what constitutes "true Hinduism." But despite the numerous ways of being Indian and Hindu in the diaspora (both in Guyana and the United States), which I will discuss in more detail in this dissertation, a particular understanding of authentic Indianness becomes ossified to serve the needs and desires of the middle class at the expense of others. And these needs and desires are informed by prevailing structures that ultimate perpetuates the marginalization of Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Americans in the United States.

<u>The Other Indian on the High Plains</u>

After almost six years of moving my parents finally settled in Amarillo, a small city in Texas in 1982. My father had left India back in 1976 to pursue additional medical training in the United Kingdom with my mother following a year later after she had completed her own graduate training. From the time they left India to the time they arrived in Amarillo they had lived in three countries, had their first child, my sister, and developed their own family of friends who shared similar experiences of migration. In 1982 my parents were in the right place in their life to put down roots. My father had just completed his oncology fellowship from M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and had a license to practice medicine in Texas. They moved for his job in Amarillo in the summer of 1982.

Amarillo is in the panhandle of Texas in an area known as the High Plains because of its high altitude and landscape (Figure 1.7). It is one of the flattest places with the horizon seeming to stretch for miles. Prior to Indians from India settling in the city, Amarillo and the surrounding areas were inhabited by the Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche, the nomadic tribes of the Southern Plains or Indians as problematic history textbooks taught me in school. Following the violent displacement of these indigenous peoples in the 1870s, the area became a hub for cattle shipping. The surrounding cattle ranches and railroad led to the founding of Amarillo in 1888. Since then, Amarillo has grown to be the fourteenth most populous city in Texas, one of the largest meat-packing areas in the United States, and the home of Pantex, the primary nuclear assembly and disassembly facility in the country.

Figure 1. Cadillac Ranch, Amarillo, Texas (Photo by author)

In 1982, Amarillo was also unique in relation to its Indian community. Every place my parents had lived prior to Amarillo had some form of a South Asian community in which they could meet individuals who shared similar experiences of departing from South Asia, adjusting to the "Western" world and pursuing special-skilled occupations. Although Amarillo lacked a substantial Indian community, it did have a small community feel in which my parents felt comfortable raising their children.[25]

In the winter of 1983 I was born the most privileged person in my family. I was born a full-fledged American citizen, more importantly a proud Texan. My parents drove me to their very first house in a new Chevrolet Suburban, both of which they owned. Unlike when my sister was born, my parents could afford for my mother's mother to travel from India to Texas to help. Of course, like a typical privileged individual I spent my first night at home with my family crying and demanding more, unaware of how good

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[25] To clarify, my parents lived in non-metropolitan areas of England and Canada prior to immigrating to Texas. In these places, they were fortunate to meet other South Asian immigrants pursuing medicine who advised them how to navigate the bureaucracies in their new homes. This was not the case in Amarillo, Texas. In 1982, Amarillo did have an Indian community that was mostly composed of individuals from the Indian state of Gujarat, some migrating directly from India and others from East Africa. Most of these community members did not pursue professional occupations, instead they managed and/or owned local motels. The community did organize a local Indian association in 1979, soon before my family arrived in the city.

I had it and what all my sister, my parents, and their parents had given up for me not to be an immigrant in the United States.

Thirty-three years later I am a bit more aware, but it took years to recognize my difference and privilege. Prior to pursuing my doctorate in cultural anthropology, I spent my youth as an unintentional anthropologist. Every day I went to school in Amarillo and heard my friends talk about what happened in their church youth groups or discuss exotic foods such as meatloaf and pot roast they consumed for dinner the night before. I distinctly remember the shock I experienced at the age of six when I realized that everyone did not have rice and curry for dinner every night. My older sister and I would share our discoveries with our Mom after school as she chauffeured us between music lessons and school group projects. She always listened to our chatter and did what she could to make sure we had a typical American childhood. My sister and I ate chicken nuggets, played Nintendo, and had birthday parties at McDonalds where everyone ate hamburgers.

In our chatter, we told our mother what American kids did and she and my father made it possible for us to be somewhat typical American kids. Only later did I start to think about what my parents went through raising us in Amarillo. Both my parents know multiple languages, with their first language being Malayalam, the language of Kerala, the southwestern state of India that they are from. I never learned it, explaining to my Mom at a young age, "I am American. I don't need to know Malayalam." However, as I grew older I realized that my entire life I have spoken with my father in his second language. We have amazing, intelligent conversations, but I am reminded of the possible limitations of our exchanges when he recently started asking for feedback on his English

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writing or if he is using a phrase or word correctly. I know a bit of Hindi and a bit of Spanish, but not to the extent that I would leave everything I am familiar with and build a new life in a place where I had to communicate daily in these foreign languages. My Dad and Mom did.

My Mom and I always had the same argument growing up. We fought over where I could socialize with my friends. My Mom would allow me to hang out with my friends almost everywhere, except in a church context. Although my parents had settled in a city where they did not need to worry about "big city" problems, they did find themselves in the middle of the Bible-belt. Church is big in Amarillo. In addition to Sundays, most of my friends went on Wednesdays and Saturdays for youth group events, often inviting me to participate. I had no awareness of my friends' possible conversion motives, but my Mom did. Her children could eat chicken nuggets and cheeseburgers, but they had to know they were Indian and Hindu. Besides eating Indian curry every day, she made my sister and I help her care for our small altar. Also, every year we would make a pilgrimage to Houston to spend thirty minutes in a South Indian style Hindu temple. My sister and I, dressed in Indian clothes, would follow our Mom around the temple, mimicking her moves and half-listening to her explaining who the deity was and why we prayed to Him or Her. This was the extent of my religious upbringing.

Although I had no significant knowledge of Hinduism or India for that matter, I found myself becoming the spokesperson for both in high school. My peers, maybe innocently or maybe maliciously, would ask questions about the Hindu pantheon of Gods or if I knew what I was in my past life. This upbringing inspired my interest in Hinduism

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and the Indian diaspora, but, ironically, I never fully acknowledged how much self-reflection and questioning my dissertation research would prompt until I was in the field.

Wearing ill-fitting, plain, cotton Indian clothing, I awkwardly walked into my first Caribbean Hindu temple in New York City. This New York temple bore no resemblance to the Houston temple I claimed to grow up in. In Houston, the temple is located almost an hour away from downtown with no traffic in an isolated part of a suburb. As we would approach, we would recognize the classical South Indian temple architectural features. When we entered the temple, we performed our individual devotion to each deity without the interference of a priest. Upon completing our round of the altars, we were done. In and out in thirty minutes flat.

In New York, this was not how temple worked. This Caribbean temple was in a repurposed building. White sheets were laid down upon a carpeted floor. The Indo-Guyanese devotees, wearing fancier, synthetic Indian clothing sat cross legged on the floor facing a raised stage where all the *deotas* were installed. Instead of the bronze or wooden *murtis* I was accustomed to in temples in Houston and Kerala, these *deotas*, seemed like marble with fair painted faces. In front of the *deotas* sat the *pandit* (priest) accompanied by three devotees. They all sat before an iron rectangle where they made a fire. As they made offerings to the fire, devotees chanted Sanskrit mantras. I sat awkwardly in this group very aware of my difference and not-belonging. Women older than me sat gracefully on the floor as I repositioned myself every five minutes to ease the pain in my legs and lower back. Beside my physical discomfort, I had no clue what mantras were recited or their meaning. Why is there a fire? Why are we mimicking the gestures of the individuals on the stage? Do they know I'm not Indo-Guyanese?

Following the completion of this service I waited patiently behind devotees who were waiting to speak with the *pandit*. After some time, I finally had the opportunity to introduce myself and my project: "Hi. I'm Rupa. I'm a student from Oregon. I want to learn about Caribbean Hinduism." The *pandit* responded positively and then asked two questions that I would hear repeatedly: "Are you Guyanese? Are you Hindu?"

The first question was easy to answer. "No. I'm from Texas, but my parents are from India." Interestingly, despite my explanation, I am often referred to as "India girl" in the field. Some *pandits* would introduce me as "the girl from India who has come to learn Hinduism from [them] since [their] Hinduism is so ancient." When possible, I tried to clarify my identity not as an "India girl," but a *desi* ethnographer. *Desi* is derived from the Sanskrit word *desh* meaning land, country, or homeland. Within the South Asian Diaspora, it is an identity marker which signals "a particular type of diasporic, racially marked, generally influenced consciousness" (Shankar 2008, 1). To be *desi* is to be part of the South Asia Diaspora or, more precisely in the context of this dissertation, to be an immigrant or a child of an immigrant from India, Pakistan, or Bangladeshi in the post-1965 wave of migration. For myself, I am Indian, but not Indian. The nonsensical contradiction comes from growing up outside South Asia. In the United States, despite being born in Texas, I am Indian first and American second because of my skin color, culture, and religion. But in India, because of my lack of language skills, Hindu proficiency, and cultural knowledge, I am American first. By identifying as *desi* I acknowledge the contradiction and ambiguity of my identity and relationship with all things Indian, a move that simultaneously is akin, but different from the Indo-Guyanese relationship with India as Motherland. I am but one generation removed from India,

while many of my interlocutors are two to four generations removed, a difference that is significant.

The other question about my faith, however, proved trickier. After hesitating to answer, most people immediately asked my background to clarify if I am Hindu. Since I have Hindu parents I must have grown up in a Hindu house and therefore am Hindu. This answer satisfied them, but their logic is dissatisfying for me. My religious upbringing of maybe attending temple once a year, mimicking rituals gestures in front of altars, and watching the *Mahabharata* miniseries of the 1990s seems insufficient to qualify as Hindu, especially after learning more about Hinduism from this community and observing their worship. Their level of belief, particularly their ability to explain and understand their daily experiences through stories of *deotas*, is something we do not share. I would rather explain my experiences in a different manner. I am skeptical that Mother Kali actually defeated the demon Raktabija and saved the world, preferring to discuss the feminist potentials of this story for the mundane realm. And while I do not believe in the power of rituals to bring blessings and remove obstacles, I am willing to participate just in case I am wrong. To best articulate my agnostic self, I settled upon the pithy label of Hindu-in-training, which captures my doubt, but willingness to believe or at least accept their belief in the Divine through Hinduism.

Regardless of these labels, this research has compelled me to consider my own relationship with Hinduism and faith. Also, I have started to probe more into my own roots and family's history of migration, asking similar questions of my parents that I did to the individuals I met in my research. As I came to appreciate the importance of

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knowing the past and one's own culture in this community, I realized it is a lesson I should actively be pursuing in my own life.

Methods

From August 2010 to September 2016 I conducted almost fifteen months of non-continuous ethnographic fieldwork in the Indo-Guyanese communities in New York City. During this time, I did participant observation in seven Caribbean Hindu temples (4 *Sanatana Dharma,* 2 *Kalimai*, and 2 *Arya Samaj*) and volunteered with community organizations (1 senior daycare center, 1 Indo-Guyanese folk art organization, and 1 community development organization). In addition to participating and observing Hindu holidays (*i.e. Navaratri, Diwali, etc*), temple youth summer camps, yoga and *Ayurvedic* classes, life-cycle rituals (*i.e.* baby naming, *matikor*, wake). I also attended community council meetings. Through these organizations and events, I recruited and conducted sixty semi-structured interviews with mostly Indo-Guyanese, some Indo-Trinidadian and Indo-Surinamese, individuals. These individuals included Hindu priests, temple leadership, devotees, individuals who identified as Hindu but did not attend temple, and non-Hindu Indo-Guyanese living in New York City.[26] This group included first, 1.5, and second-generation immigrants of both genders with the age range of 23 to 72 years. All interviews were conducted in English, Guyanese Creole, a creole version of English, or a mix of both.

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[26] As with most fieldwork, I encountered difficulty in finding individuals to interview. While many people expressed an interest and desire to participate in this research, the issue of time prevented them. Many Indo-Guyanese Hindus work full-time or work two or more jobs to meet the costs of living in the city, future education for themselves or their children, and family back in Guyana. The individuals I interviewed were primarily middle-class individuals who worked a single job or were supported by their family or husband.

I also spoke with Afro-Guyanese, recent Indian immigrants and white neighbors and business owners, but not in a consistent, systematic way. Although the bulk of my research focused in the part of southern Queens commonly known as Little Guyana, I also did some fieldwork in parts of northern Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx because of my "follow the people" approach (Marcus 1995). And on occasion, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with visiting Indo-Guyanese Hindus from Guyana, Toronto, Atlanta, Washington D.C., Minneapolis, and parts of Florida and New Jersey.

In addition to my fieldwork and interviews in New York City, I did archival research. In New York, I examined the local Queens neighborhood newspapers at the Archives in the Queens Public Library to learn the history of the formation of Little Guyana. To learn more about indenture and the debates surrounding the scheme I utilized digital archives to access English language newspapers published in India and the Caribbean as well as colonial and parliamentary reports and pamphlets published in England from 1830 to 1920. I also did content analysis of New York based Indo-Caribbean public Facebook groups to learn more about the issues Indo-Guyanese Hindus face in New York City.

Itinerary of the Dissertation

In chapter two I discuss the history of Indo-Guyanese migration. Interestingly their history does not begin with their individual stories of migration from Guyana to New York, but with their ancestors' migration from India to the Caribbean, a migration that made them coolie. Coolie, a term "[that] entered the European lexicon in the context of imperialism to index a person of inferior status who simply labors for hire" (Prashad 2001, 72), appears still to be salient in describing the experience of Indo-Guyanese in

New York. To understand how this community becomes and remains coolie I offer a brief history of Indo-Guyanese twice migration, first from India to the Caribbean and then from the Caribbean to New York City. In each movement, the idea of the coolie informs how culture and religion are observed, practiced, and mobilized in the new context. As will become apparent, knowing this history of migration and how the meaning of coolie alters in each movement is essential to understanding how the community chooses to worship and how it situates itself within the political and social landscape of New York City. To put simply, the past informs Indo-Guyanese present and future in the city.

In chapter three I discuss the place-making practices of Indo-Guyanese Hindus in New York City. By first explaining how Hinduisms understand and engage space, I offer a discussion of three incidents of Indo-Guyanese Hindu place-making. By examining conflict at the center of each incident, I explore how this community uses Hindu traditions to claim spaces in the city as Hindu places. These incidents offer the opportunity to consider how this community makes spaces home and deploys its religion to spatially claim belonging to the city and the United States.

In chapter four I examine the transformation of self that Guyanese Hinduism inspires through religious practices, both externally and internally. By discussing bodily practices advocated by Guyanese Hindu temples, I will examine how the Indo-Guyanese Hindu practitioners are educated to know and perform their body as an Indian body. From the food one eats to the clothes one wears, the Hindu devotee is being trained to become Indian and possibly to connect with their past through ritual performance. Interestingly, yoga is part of this bodily training. While Guyanese yoga classes may seem

like part of the Indianizing of this community, these classes also inspire a deeper,

spiritual transformation and knowledge of the body which is more than skin deep.

And finally, in chapter five I discuss the community's current search for *satsang*.

Satsang, sitting in spiritual community, is probably the defining feature of Guyanese and

larger Caribbean Hinduism. Existing scholarship of immigrant religions in the United

States suggest this is an adaptation to legal definitions of religion in the United States.

However, as I will demonstrate, *satsang* as it is practiced in the city is a continuation of

an earlier adaptation of traditions in Guyana. The current crisis of *satsang,* while

informed by adaptation to legal definitions of religion in the city also results in a crisis of

religious leadership and the need to redefine what *satsang* is in America. By discussing

alternative forms of *satsang*, I will highlight how Caribbean Hinduism is undergoing

another reworking to meet the needs and desires of its practitioners.

CHAPTER II

BECOMING AND BEING COOLIE:
A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDO-GUYANESE ON THE MOVE

> I do not forget the past that has molded the present.
> The present is a caterer for the future.
> Mahadai Das (1977, 1)

Introduction

"This is our sense of culture, of, you know, value, because, remember we are

practicing something Eastern in the Western world since a hundred years ago," Ajay[27]

explained after I shared my interest in learning about how Indo-Guyanese practice

Hinduism in the city. Like everyone I met or interviewed in this research, Ajay wanted to

make sure I knew and appreciated the history and the struggles behind the Hinduisms

they practiced. Further, he wanted me to understand how this history continues to inform

what Indo-Guyanese means in the city, illustrating "[how] the burden of the past [is] so

heavy that it will always haunt the present" (Sheller 2015, 171).

Their history does not begin with their individual stories of migration from

Guyana to New York, but with their ancestors' migration from India to the Caribbean. In

fact, before I could ask about their New York lives, this history had to be told in a

seemingly scripted manner that highlighted the suffering of their ancestors and their

ingenuity in preserving and practicing Hinduisms, which Indo-Guyanese in New York

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[27] Ajay, the son of rice farmers, is a thirty-year-old musician who grew up in the countryside of Guyana attending a *Sanatana Dharma* temple in his village. He moved to New York City back in 2003 since "in Guyana, if you are poor, you stay poor." In Guyana, he started playing *dhantal* (a steel rod held vertically and struck with a U-shaped clapper) in temple, eventually transitioning to *dholak* (a two-headed barrel drum) and singing. He is now proficient to be able to perform professionally in both religious and secular contexts in New York. He also established an organization that provides music, dance, religion, and Hindi language classes to the community since "the culture brings you to the religion." Although not officially attached to a temple in the city, Ajay visits and performs at many Caribbean Hindu temples to promote his organization. To read more about the instruments and genres of music performed in the Indo-Guyanese/Indo-Caribbean community see Manuel 2000 and 2015.

today continue to preserve and practice. As one Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman explained, "you must know this history to understand our migration." As a *desi* ethnographer, the act of hearing this history of "twice migration"[28] was critical in building rapport and trust in this community, which is marginalized in the larger Indo-American community and seen by some in this community as having "lost [their] culture and therefore [is] lost,"[29] a state some Indo-Guyanese describe as being coolie. Coolie, initially a derogatory term to name Indian and Chinese individuals who emigrated as indentured laborers in the mid-nineteenth century when African slavery was abolished (Benjamin et al. 1998; Jung 2006)[30], appears still to be salient in the diaspora to describe the experiences of Indo-Guyanese in New York.

To understand the significance of coolie to this research I offer this brief history of Indo-Guyanese becoming and being coolie through twice migration, first from India to the Caribbean and then from the Caribbean to New York City. In each movement, the idea of the coolie informs how culture and religion are observed, practiced, and mobilized in the new context. As will become apparent, knowing this history of migration and how the meaning of coolie shifts with each movement is essential to

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[28] Sociologist Parminder Bhachu coined the term "twice migrant" or "twice migration" to describe the trajectory of migration of East African Sikhs to the United Kingdom. Unlike other South Asians who directly emigrated from South Asia to the United Kingdom, East African Sikhs first moved from India to East Africa before settling in the United Kingdom. Besides referring to a different trajectory of migration, twice migrant is also characterized by the maintenance of culture and traditions that were transported from the home country, adapted in the location of the first migration, and then transported, preserved, and adapted in this second migration. I use the term to discuss the complexities present in the migration of Indo-Guyanese to New York City. For further discussion of twice migrant see Bhachu 1985, 1990, Kim 2004, and Schultz 2014.

[29] Interview with Ajay

[30] These individuals signed an indenture contract to work in colonies around the world for a set period.

understanding how the community chooses to worship and how it situates itself within the political and social landscape of New York City.

Who is coolie?

> The imposed and reductive term 'coolie' was the first identity given to the Indians in Guyana and whilst the derogatory nature of the stereotypes which attached themselves to the term have been strongly resisted by the Indo-Guyanese community, there has been in more recent years a recognition that within the term there was something which could be cherished.
> Joel Benjamin et al (1998, 39)

Coolie, was derived from the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning to hire or wages (Bahadur 2014, xix). [31] First used by Portuguese sailors and merchants in the late sixteenth century in India it was then adopted by other Europeans who traded and operated in parts of China and the Indian subcontinent (Tinker 1993). In the context of the Indian coolie, "the coolie label [was imposed] on a wide group of native people, from many castes and occupational backgrounds" (Bahadur 2014, xx).

However, coolie is more than a term. By naming an individual as coolie a form of racialization occurs. Historian Moon-Ho Jung argues with his research in the United States that "coolies were a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined" (2006, 5). Emerging and acquiring its derogatory connotation during the imperial sugar schemes pursued worldwide, the construction of the category of coolie during the nineteenth century transformed both Indian and Chinese indentured laborers into a racialized, lower class that was pursued as a cheap, free labor force by European colonial

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[31] The origins of the word coolie are still contested. While coolie could be derived from Tamil, it could be derived from the Gujarati word *koli,* the Mandarin word *kuli*, or the Portuguese word *cule.* The meaning of each of these three alternate origins are rooted in describing labor either as menial, for hire, or arduous (Look Lai 1993; Jung 2007; Goffe 2014).

powers.[32] The construct of the coolie not only restricted the opportunities and imaginations of the individuals hailed as such, but impacted the decolonizing and nationalist dreams of their home countries. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, the Hindu reform and Indian nationalist movements adopted the colonial view of the coolie as the lowly other whose existence complicated their own efforts of achieving self-rule in India (Seecharan 1992; Niranjana 2006). The rehabilitation of the coolie construct by Indian nationalist movements from afar would inspire a local rehabilitation and reappropriation of coolie in the Caribbean as the emerging Indian middle class positioned itself in the decolonizing efforts of their new homes in the West Indies (Benjamin et al. 1998).

From India to the Caribbean

> Some came with dreams of milk and honey riches.
> Others came, fleeing famine
> And death,
> All alike, they came--
> The dancing girls,
> Rajput soldiers--tall and proud
> Escaping the penalty of their pride.
> The stolen wives--afraid and despondent.
> All alike,
> crossing black waters.
> Brahmin and Chamar alike.
> They came
> At least with hope in their heart.
> On the platter of the plantocracy
> They were offered disease and death.
> Mahadai Das (1977, 1)

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[32] By free I refer to the autonomy of the individual to consent to labor by the conditions of the indenture contract. While the signing of a contract is meant to demonstrate the individual freely made the decision to enter this agreement, this is highly questionable since many indentured laborers were recruited through suspicious tactics. Further, many were illiterate and/or did not know the language of the contract they signed. For further discussion of free labor in relation to Indian indenture see Sturman 2014.

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The introduction of sugar cultivation is the most significant event in Caribbean history (E. E. Williams 1944; Mintz 1985) which coincided with "the global distribution of labor in the capitalist world system" (Trouillot 2003, 30). The prospect of sugar enticed the European colonial powers to the Caribbean, which eventually resulted in the destruction of indigenous communities, who first labored on colonial plantations.[33] The need for a large, disciplined, cheap labor force brought Africans as slaves through coercion and Indians and Chinese as indentured laborers through questionable notions of free will. From the white bodies who owned and/or oversaw plantations to the black, brown, and yellow bodies who worked the field, labor at this moment was re-organized in relation to power, industry, and, most importantly, race. In this section, I will discuss sugar, slavery, and indenture in the context of Guyana, then British Guiana, a sugar colony with the climate to produce sugar all year round (Green 1969).

Guiana, today's Guyana and Suriname, was under Dutch control in the 1630s when the first slaves arrived. The Dutch would eventually concede parts of this land to the British in 1831. Originating from different areas of Africa, the slaves who arrived in Guiana endured harsh labor conditions and an inhumane living environment until slavery was abolished in the British Empire on August 1, 1834.[34] The birth of the coolie is linked with the abolition of slavery and the resulting failure of apprenticeship.

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[33] Just to clarify, the Caribbean has numerous indigenous communities that are native to the area before the entrance of European colonial powers, African slavery, and Asian indentured laborers. The entrance of European colonial powers brought conflict and disease which led to the death of many indigenous individuals. To read more about the indigenous communities of Guyana and the surrounding nations (the Amerindians) see Whitehead 2009.

[34] The move to abolish slavery was less about the moral objections and more about its unprofitability; but such a claim overcorrects for the over-praising of the role of the morally compelled abolitionists in emancipation (E. E. Williams 1944; Knight 1990; Northrup 1995; Moore 1999). While the triangular trade, monopolies and policies ensured the profitability of West Indian sugar production by slave labor, these schemes proved unsustainable in the face of both the American and Industrial Revolutions.

Following emancipation, planters were concerned about the loss of their

workforce. This anxiety seems to be less about the shortage of labor and more about the

planters' desire for a reliable source of labor that would submit to their will and be

disciplined (Carter 1993; Moore 1999; Munasinghe 2001). From the historical documents

announcing abolition, it is clear the colonial government was aware of the planters'

apprehensions and had taken steps to ease their anxieties. For instance, on May 30, 1833,

a special committee of the House of Commons stated in their report, *Debates on the*

Resolutions and Bill for the Abolition of Slavery in the British Colonies:

> That it is the opinion of this Committee, that immediate and effectual Measures be
> taken for the entire Abolition of Slavery throughout the Colonies, under such
> provisions for regulating the conditions of the Negroes, as may combine their
> welfare with the interests of the proprietors (Great Britain Parliament 1834, 190).

This first clause of the resolution suggests that the committee, while advising for the

abolition of slavery, believed the improved conditions of the former slaves should not

come at the expense of the plantation owner. They proposed apprenticeship as a

compromise that would provide freedom and employment to the freedmen and women

while securing the planters a source of labor for a short period of time.

However, the supposed equal benefit of apprenticeship was a continuation of

slavery that required the former slaves to work approximately 40 hours a week of unpaid

labor for their former master. This contradiction presented itself differently in the

colonial documents. For example, the language surrounding apprenticeship in the 1833

resolution framed the scheme as a right that the "freedmen" were "entitled" to. However,

the language was slightly different in the Governor of Jamaica's 1834 letter to the

apprentices. Though the governor opened the letter in pleasant terms to signal that

England and the white inhabitants of Jamaica were the "friends" of the slaves, the tone

changed considerably as the letter progressed:

> You will, on the first of August next, no longer be slaves, but from that day you will be APPRENTICED to your former owners for a few years, in order to fit you all for freedom. It will therefore depend entirely upon your own conduct whether your APPRENTICESHIP be short or long, for should you runaway you will be brought back by the Maroons and Police, and have to remain in APPRENTICESHIP longer than those who behave well ("The National Archive of the UK CO 137/192/46" 1834).

Instead of being an entitlement, the governor presented apprenticeship as an opportunity

or a generous gift provided by the planters to prepare the former slave to be free. The

paternalistic language which linked freedom to conduct, announced to the former slave

the he must prove to be "deserving of all this goodness by laboring diligently during [his]

apprenticeship" ("The National Archive of the UK CO 137/192/46" 1834). This

difference in tone and language was probably due to the audience of the respective

documents. The 1833 resolution's readership was limited to colonial officials and to

subjects in England who were drawn to the moral uprightness of the abolition movement

while the Governor's letter was directed specifically to freedmen.

In addition to these public notices, the planters resorted to "physical abuse,

intimidation, and eviction of intractable workers from their dwellings and provision

grounds on the plantations" (Kale 1998, 43) to secure a compliant labor force.[35]

However, apprenticeship proved an unsuccessful solution to the labor problem produced

by emancipation. Planters could not legally compel the ex-slaves to work and were forced

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[35] Apprentices could also opt out of apprenticeship early by purchasing their freedom. Planters attempted to prevent this tactic by "over-appraising the value of apprentices who sought to buy their freedom early" (Kale 1998, 43).

to pay wages to the ex-slaves.[36] Despite the monetary incentive, the planters discovered

freedmen did not desire money. They preferred to earn the minimum to cover their living

costs (Millette 1999).

Following emancipation and the increasing difficulties of apprenticeship, planters

in the British West Indies were concerned about the loss of their workforce and profit. As

Henry Light, a former Governor of British Guiana, stated: "A combination of labor,

capital, and one directing head are necessary to make this colony flourish, without these,

it will become a swamp, and the population retrograde to their original state of nature"

(quoted in Green 1969). To save the colony and their investment European planters

needed to recruit a new, free, and cheap labor force that could handle the grueling work

of sugar cultivation and be controlled (Daly 1966; Brereton and Yelvington 1999; Jung

2006). Their solution: the indenture system.

The indenture system recruited workers to "freely" sign a contract of service.[37]

The most likely candidates were the poor who were desperate to escape overpopulation,

war, famine, and poverty to find better opportunities. Planters recruited laborers from

Europe, Africa, China and India, but preferred the "docile, tractable, intelligent and

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[36] Emancipation granted ex-slaves the right of choice (Millette 1999). While apprenticeship obligated them to work on the plantation, the initiative largely lay with them to decide whether, when and under what commitments they were going to work" (Millette 1999, 56). They could finally choose to work or not to work. Many ex-slaves sought employment in urban areas or found land to cultivate their own farms to be independent from the plantation (Northrup 1995; Brereton 1999; Brereton and Yelvington 1999). To entice them back to the estate planters offered higher wages and used their political capital to separate the former slave from his cultivated land

[37] The indentured labor scheme was initially viewed as the perfect replacement for slavery. It provided a cheap labor force without the coercive element of slavery. Individuals were understood to have freely entered into indentureship since they were required to sign a contract which sets the terms and duration of the employment. However, both at the time and according to current studies of indentureship, the reality of this freedom was questionable. Contracts were written in English, a language that many indentured laborers, who were mostly illiterate, probably did not know. For further discussion of indentureship as a "free" labor system see Jung 2006, 2008 and Sturman 2014.

industrious" (Moore 1999, 142) Indians, who, because of their agricultural backgrounds,

were believed to be best suited for plantation work. The preference and success of the

Indian indentured system was also largely due to the reliable system of supply of labor

negotiated between the British government and its Indian colony (Northrup 1995;

Ramdin 2000).

Indians were largely recruited from the Bengal Presidency[38] in the Northeastern

part of the Indian subcontinent and the Madras Presidency in the Southeast (Figure 2.1).

These recruits were a diverse group, ranging from Brahmin widows to poor, low caste

individuals, whose motivations varied.[39] Most recruits were attracted to the economic

opportunity and security, specifically the guarantee of food offered by indentureship.[40]

Others, however, were coerced into indentureship through kidnapping or as

punishment.[41] Usha, a forty-something Indo-Guyanese woman explained indentureship to

me as this:

> You see our ancestors were tricked. They weren't educated and [couldn't] know
> better….They got to the depots, signed a contract, and had no idea what they were
> signing up for…The ship voyage was brutal. And when they got to the plantation,
> the work was real rough. They had no shoes. They'd cut da cane in da field with
> no shoes [sic].

[38] A presidency was an administrative division of British governance in the Indian subcontinent.

[39] "About 80 percent were Hindu, and most of the remainder Muslims; a substantial, although
indeterminate number were tribals who assimilated to mainstream Hinduism" (Manuel 2000, 3).

[40] The labor need of the West Indian planters coincided with many events in the subcontinent. British
imperialism introduced the idea of private property and taxation, which altered the structure of Indian
village economy and society. Unable to pay their taxes or the rent to cultivate land peasants were exploited
by landlords, forced into debt bondage system known as *kamiuti*, and slavery in South India (Look Lai
1993). Also, the Great Famine of 1876-78 and a series of droughts and floods resulted in a major food crisis
(Dyson 1991).

[41] Many participants of the Sepoy Mutiny were forced into indentureship by the British Raj to ensure
another rebellion would not occur (Ramdin 2000) or to escape colonial justice (Anderson 2009).

In her description, Usha replicated the most common story of indentureship where ancestors were poor and uneducated. Such characterizations of indentured ancestors, which does not capture the diversity of people and motivations for migrating, seems necessary to highlight the level of preservation and innovation in culture and social, political, and economic progress of the community both in the Caribbean and New York City.

Figure 2.1. Contemporary map of India with area where indenture laborers were recruited circled

Although Indian men dominated this migration, Indian women also signed indenture contracts. In fact, the British actively recruited Indian women to maintain and control their Indian workforce in the West Indies. Planters and colonial officials reasoned if Indian men could marry someone and start a family in their indentureship they would be less likely to return to India. Despite their attempts, most indentured women were single.[42] Most scholars agree that these women "were less than passive recipients of an

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[42] Most emigrating women were single in some form. They were widows, married, but not emigrating with their husband, or single (Mangru 1987). Some women would marry at the depot before emigrating as strategy to protect themselves from sexual assault on the ship (Shepherd 2002). For a more detailed discussion of Indian women indentureship in the Caribbean see Shepherd 2002, Niranjana 2006, and Bahudur 2014.

unendurable fate" (Espinet 1996, 425–26). These women probably saw indenture as an opportunity to escape and overcome the social restrictions of India at the time.

For instance, the great grandmother of the Indo-Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh, Phuljaree Rampersad, arrived in Dutch Guiana a single mother with her five-year-old son. The only daughter of a *pandit*, Phuljaree became a widow at a young age in the Bihar region of North India. During a pilgrimage, Phuljaree, her son, and two other members of her family were separated from the larger family group they traveled with. Lost, they soon found assistance from some individuals who turned out to be recruiters who guided Phuljaree and her family to the emigration depot in Calcutta. As Gaiutra Bahadur discussed in her book *Coolie Woman* (2014)[43], recruiters often hung around large temples and pilgrimage sites as places of "recruiting." Such sites were ideal for recruiting because they drew large crowds of people, some the faithful visiting a new area to express their devotion while some destitute in search of alms from visiting devotees. They recruited individuals around large temples and pilgrimage sites since these spaces attracted individuals in destitute situations who begged for assistance or pilgrims themselves who were lost and easily manipulated into contracts. Phuljaree, her son and her two relatives were the later. They arrived at the depot and signed contracts. The family was separated with Phuljaree and her son boarding a ship for Dutch Guiana and their relatives on another for a destination unknown.

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[43] In *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2014) Bahadur offers a narrative history of indentured women. Her book is not a novel, but a reporting of her extensive research of archives, oral history, fiction, and poetry to locate the experiences and voices of indentured women. By incorporating her great-grandmother's story of indenture to British Guiana in 1903 into her book, Bahadur shares her personal stake in knowing this history, making the text a more intimate exploration of this silenced history.

Phuljaree, an educated high caste woman who knew multiple Indian languages, "always made trouble as she was not satisfied with life on board the ship" (Seenarine 2011). While Phuljaree's dissatisfaction is never clarified, we might assume she grew increasingly concerned about the safety and conditions for unmarried women who, as existing research has demonstrated, became targets of sexual harassment and violence from both the shipmates and indentured Indian men (Mahabir and Cudjoe 1985; Espinet 1996; Shepherd 2002). According to her granddaughter Alice's unpublished autobiography, Phuljaree's constant complaints resulted in her being appointed to be responsible for all unmarried women on the boat, offering a glimpse of how formidable a woman she must have been (Seenarine 2011).

Upon arriving in today's Suriname, Phuljaree and her son were sent to work on the sugar plantation owned by the Barnel Lyon family. Her granddaughter Alice suggests that because Phuljaree "was young, pretty, and a fighter" the family made her into an assistant nurse in the estate's hospital. As Phuljaree told Alice, "when she was told to go and work in the field and was handed a cutlass, she showed her soft small hands […] and then sat down and refused to move" (Seenarine 2011). Again, Phuljaree demonstrates her ability to negotiate a new position by resisting the conditions she found herself in. Phuljaree's story of indenture and migration does not exactly match the narrative of indenture offered by my research contact Usha. Phuljaree was tricked into traveling to the emigration depot in India, but she negotiated her situations both on the boat and the plantation to secure a position of social mobility for her son and herself. Likewise, Rajkumari Singh's great grandfather Dhan Singh has a different story of indenture. Indentured from Nepal, Dhan Singh was a dispenser or medical officer on the ships

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which transported indentured laborers from India to the West Indies, Fiji, Mauritius, and Africa. When he completed his contract, he settled in British Guiana to own and operate a somewhat successful tailoring business.

While the migration stories of Rajkumari Singh's ancestors present alter-narratives of indenture to illustrate the diversity of individuals, motivations, and experiences of indenture, most Indian indenture laborers share similar experiences of hardship during and following their indenture in the West Indies. The better lives that must have inspired these individuals to emigrate were not realized. In addition to the harsh condition they endured in their voyage across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans[44], they discovered that the work of the plantation was not like the recruiters had described (Look Lai 1993; Ramdin 2000; Shepherd 2002). Living in the same environment and doing the same harsh work as the slaves, the Indian indentured laborers' experiences mirrored those of the African slaves they replaced. In discussing the importance of history to Indo-Guyanese identity and culture, Rani[45] remarked to me:

> It is a shame not to know your history or your family connection. We need to know the brutal-ness of our history. You should know if your grandmother was stolen, beaten, and raped and know that is how your dad was born. Knowing this history will bring respect for the culture.

As Rani indicates, the hardship of the voyage across both the Indian and Atlantic oceans and the "brutal-ness" of cultivating sugar inform how Indian culture emerged in the

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[44] The experience of enduring and surviving the ship voyage bounded the indentured Indians into a community or family. As a result, they called each other *Jahaji bhai/behin*, meaning ship brother or sister.

[45] Rani, the only daughter of Chacha who was mentioned in chapter one, grew up learning her Indian/Guyanese heritage from her father and her Puerto Rican heritage from her mother. She speaks English, Hindi, and Spanish. She teaches and performs Indian and Puerto Rican dance professionally. As a devout Hindu in the *Kalimai* tradition, she recognizes the role of religion in her art, which I will discuss more in chapter three.

Caribbean and what purpose it played in this first migration, which ultimately impacts how the traditions are practiced today in New York City.

If the Indian indentured workers suffered situations of exploitation and isolation like those of the African slaves they replaced, it is also true that the Indians' existence, especially upon entering British Guiana, created hostility among the freed slaves. For example, the indenture system was financed by taxes the freed slaves paid. Also, the colonial power administered land polices that favored the Indians over the freedmen. Because of such policies, many Afro-Guyanese saw Indians as the root of all their problems, "bring[ing] stagnation to the economic life of the colony" (Moore 1999, 151).

Even though the planters had replaced the slave labor force, they were still concerned with maintaining their power and control of society. To ensure their position of power within the society, the planters manipulated the environment to guarantee their control of the new labor force. To bind indentured laborers to the plantation, planters controlled them through laws, living arrangements, and even religion. Instead of actively "civilizing" the Indians to Western conventions, the planters encouraged the preservation of Indian culture by permitting religious festivals and practices on the plantation (Hinds 2009, 157). This encouragement took various forms including planters sponsoring awards for the best drumming during religious festivals like *Holi* (Bisnauth 2000, 131). The Hindus could practice their tradition if such observance did not interfere with the work on the plantation. By encouraging "the attachment of Indians to their religious beliefs" (Daly 1966, 223) the planters hoped to limit the communication between Indians and freedmen. When this intermingling did occur, the colonial authorities voiced their disapproval. For example in 1873, a magistrate "excoriated the [freed slaves] for their participation"

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(Prashad 2001, 80) in the Muslim festival of *Hosay*. By isolating the Indians in such a manner, the planters could assert their control and eliminate camaraderie between the ethnic populations (Vertovec 1998).

Once the indenture contract was completed, an indentured Indian could renew his or her contract, leave the plantation to pursue other occupations in the country or urban spaces of British Guiana or return to India. Initially many Indians returned home since they "[regarded] themselves as transients who were to return home after their indentureship" (Samaroo and Bissessar 2004, 104). As a result, the planters became concerned about losing the work force they had just replaced. The colonial government was conscious of the possibility of losing its investment since the contract bound the government to pay for the laborer's return passage. Most of the Indians' wages were sent back to India instead of being reintroduced into the local economy. Colonial officials realized that the cost of re-indenture, paying the return passage to India, far surpassed the benefits of introducing the indentured laborers. To avoid more financial drain, the colonial government encouraged Indians to settle in British Guiana, taking steps such as the abolishment of re-indenture in 1870. No longer required to pay the return passage, the government hoped the need to pay their own fare were they to go to India would dissuade many laborers from returning home. However, many laborers still paid their own passage back.

The option of returning to India proved unrealistic because the dream of returning wealthy and with an improved status within the subcontinent proved a delusion. Many laborers who returned to the subcontinent found the experience traumatic. By leaving the subcontinent, the laborers had crossed the dark waters that polluted their existence and

stripped them of their caste status.[46] Viewed as impure and suspect, the returning laborers

could not re-establish themselves in the Indian subcontinent. Many returning laborers

signed another indenture contract to escape the unwelcoming environment. Disillusioned,

the myth of return slowly vanished from the Indian indentured laborers' imaginations as

ex-indentured Indians settled within British Guiana.

While the experience of return persuaded many laborers to stay in British Guiana,

"efforts were made by the Guyanese planters, as well as by the colonial government, to

[further] discourage repatriation and encourage settlement" (Bisnauth 2000, 135). Such

efforts included liberalizing land policies in 1894 and 1898, which helped Indians

purchase land to cultivate. The cheaper land came at a cost: such land policies required

the Indian laborers to give up their right to return if they were to receive the land at the

discounted price. With affordable land, many Indians took up rice cultivation, which

proved to be profitable and enabled them to transcend their coolie status. When the

former slaves left the plantations they initiated their own settlements and had to combat

the economic oppression of the planters without government assistance (King 1968). The

land policies that gave Indians access to affordable land were not available to the former

slaves, and the former slaves resented this land policy, and thus the Indians.

Colonial interference extended to the settlement patterns of Indians and Africans

in Guyana. Indians seldom founded their own villages but "exclusively or predominantly

Indian villages were formed by government sponsorship" (Jayawardena 1968, 432). The

colonial authority still desired the separation of former slaves and Indians through spatial

segregation to enforce the ever-growing gap between them (Prashad 2001). Although

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[46] Most Indians reluctantly left their homes to cross the dark waters that caste taboos forbade crossing
(Knott 1998; Bisnauth 2000; Khan 2004).

some ex-indentured immigrants settled within Afro-Guyanese villages, the majority settled in Indian dominated communities.[47] Spatial separation also served to maintain the peace because the movement of the Indians into the Afro-Guyanese settlements could lead to further communal tension since these Indians would purchase land previously owned by Afro-Guyanese.

This spatial separation during and after indenture led to "social relations of mutual contempt" (Prashad 2001, 77). Such actions fit into the colonial authorities' policy of divide-and-rule which ensured their power by setting the populations against each other instead of collaborating to overthrow the colonial power. As Indians left the plantation, the colonial authorities and European elites "[encouraged] the maintenance of cultural differences [and] physical segregation" (B. F. Williams 1991, 148). This division was also apparent in the types of occupational options available to the two communities. For example, the colonial elites hired Afro-Guyanese as guards and police to regulate Indian laborers thus increasing the distrust between the two communities and limiting opportunities for the communities to acknowledge their shared oppression.

<u>Becoming Coolie</u>

In moving West, indentured Indians were rendered coolie or lowly laborers twice, both in the Caribbean and in the Indian subcontinent.[48] In British Guiana, white planters and former slaves viewed indentured Indians as coolie. For instance, in local newspapers, the indenture scheme in British Guiana was debated. On August 4, 1883, the *Demerara*

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[47] Dale Bisnauth believes three factors influenced this tendency to settle in Indian village settlements: Indians preferred to settle with other Indians, Afro-Guyanese were not enthusiastic at the prospect of Indians settling in their village, and the availability of land (2000, 149).

[48] For the remainder of this chapter I will use Indian, indentured Indian, and Indo-Guyanese to refer to the Indian indentured laborers and their descendants in British Guiana and Guyana. I will refer to individuals from India as East Indian or Indian nationalists.

Daily Chronicle of Georgetown, Guyana published a portion of Mr. C.S. Salmon's

pamphlet *Capital and Labour in the West Indies.* Mr. Salmon wrote the following about

indenture in British Guiana:

> British Guiana is a very prosperous colony. The population in 1871 was reckoned
> at 193,491 and in 1881 at 252,186, including 2,538 Chinese and over 62,000
> Indian coolies. It may be said the cultivation of the soil is carried on by coolie or
> exotic labour and, therefore, broadly speaking, most of the trade and exports are
> due to it. The position can hardly be called a sound one, economically, looking at
> British Guiana as a colony. The arra[n]gement may be a very good one for the
> speculative capitalist; he is sure of the labour of his imported coolie for the term
> of the indenture, at the price fixed upon, and for the supply being repeated should
> no fortuitous circumstances to intervene beforehand, because the cost and amount
> of labour can be relied on, and his profits are, consequently, certain…But we
> know that if the market value of sugar were to fall for any length of time below a
> certain standard…The colony would then be in the throes of a mighty crisis and,
> as has been shown in this paper, the English Government would be responsible to
> the coolie and would have to support and, perhaps, to repatriate him. The coolie
> would not be like the British workman during the cotton famine, self-reliant,
> respected, and aided by his fellow-countrymen. He would be an alien demanding
> that his agreement be carried out by the Government responsible for his being
> there. The coolie system must hinder if not arrest the development of a native
> labour aided by a genuine immigrant labour.

As Salmon argues in his pamphlet, the indenture scheme is a risky prospect that could

stall the development of a "native" and "self-reliant" labor force in the colony.

Throughout the quoted passage, Indian indenture laborers are referred to as coolies who

are "alien" and not "self-reliant, respected" individuals. While demeaning the character

of indenture laborers, he calls for genuine immigrants who "have to adapt themselves to

such circumstances as may arise, will seek and develop other occupations and take steps

to establish themselves permanently" (Salmon 1883). By committing to an indenture

contract, Salmon assumes coolies could not become genuine immigrants and therefore

could not contribute to the socioeconomic and political development of British Guiana.

Such rhetoric further fueled hostility between Indian indentured workers and free Afro-Guyanese. The indenture system was financed by the taxes the former slaves paid (Daly 1966) and the introduction of the Indian labor force removed the leverage the freed slaves had to negotiate their standing within the colony after emancipation. As a result, Afro-Guyanese positioned themselves against immigration and blamed Indians for their poor state, even going so far as to support the immigration of Chinese who do not "hoard their money"(Mangru 2005, 75) as the Indians where accused of in anti-immigration newspapers published at the time. In this context, the Indian indentured laborer was reduced to the status of a coolie. Akin to the inferiority complex described by Albert Memmi (1965) and Ashis Nandy (1983), the resulting coolie mentality denigrated indentured Indians as devoid of culture and respect. As coolies, the indentured Indians remained separate from the rest of Caribbean society, occupying the lower echelons.

A similar view existed in the Indian subcontinent where East Indians viewed indentured Indians as coolie. Ek Bhartiya Hridaya wrote the following about indenture on February 11, 1920 in his letter to the editor of *the Leader*, a newspaper published in Allahabad, India:

> Evidently the scheme is a labour scheme, pure and simple. The British Guiana Government wants Indians of only one class, i.e., the coolie-class. Though the Deputation has skillfully avoided the word 'coolie' and they have used the words agriculturist or farmers in its place, but I don't think it will make any difference to the unfortunate Indian emigrant if he is going to be paid only half of what an African labourer can get or one-third of a Cuban labourer's wages....

Commenting on indenture as something Indian nationalists should not support despite the recommendation of the visiting delegation of Indo-Guyanese in India seeking support from Gandhi to continue indenture migration, Hridaya points out that only a specific type of East Indian is being recruited: the coolie-class. He notes how the Indo-Guyanese

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delegation is careful not to use the term, but coolies are who they want to recruit. In his writing, Hridaya appears to characterize coolies as individuals with farming backgrounds who are naïve and ignorant of the exploitation they may face in indenture. He goes as far as to describe an individual who might pursue indenture as "an ordinary Indian laborer [who] is quite illiterate." Because of this ignorance and illiteracy, Indian nationalists, such as Gandhi, need to be paternalistic towards them and intervene to protect them from potential exploitation.

From the perspectives of the Indian subcontinent, the indentured Indians or coolies around the world in the Caribbean, Africa, Mauritius, and Fiji presented a problem to the Indian nationalist movement. As part of their own decolonization, Indian nationalists recognized the importance of ending indentureship. "This lowly image of the Indian in the colony—the menial, ignorant 'coolie'—[] gnawed at the dignity of educated Indians" (Seecharan 1992, 27) and their dreams of self-rule. These educated East Indian had need to re-imagine the image of the indentured Indian as coolie in order to legitimate their claim for self-governance in the subcontinent. Religious reform movements, like the *Arya Samaj* and the *Brahmo Samaj*, and the influence of nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi attempted to emancipate the indentured laborer from the debilitating image of the lowly 'coolie' by inspiring self-confidence derived from India's glorious past (Seecharan 1992).[49]

Gandhi viewed colonialism and Western modernization as contributing to the immorality of India, and he identified indentureship as the root cause of the immorality

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[49] Both the *Arya Samaj* and the *Brahmo Samaj* are Hindu reform movements that emerged in the late nineteenth century in Colonial India to counter colonial social reform movements in the subcontinent. Both movements "endow[ed] the political struggle [of independence] with strong spiritual, cultural and social undertones" (Keay 2000, 458).

and inferior complex of the coolie (Kelly 1991). Gandhi's own political awareness and mobilization originated in his experience in South Africa with the indentured population there (Gandhi 1996). During these South African years, abolishing indentureship was a huge part of Gandhi's political vision, which he saw as the first step in rehabilitating the coolie.

Starting in 1910, Gandhi began this effort by banning recruitment to the colony Natal in South Africa and ultimately successfully extended this ban to all overseas colonies in 1917 (Niranjana 2006). While Gandhi would return to South Africa to lead and assist the local protests against indenture in 1915, a similar visit of support and training did not occur for the Caribbean indentured Indians. East Indians visiting British Guiana were few and focused upon the moral and cultural elevation of the coolie and less on political tactics. For example, Indian deputies Dewan Bahadur P. Kesava Pillai and Venkatesh Narayan Tivary[50] made the following observation during their 1924 visit:

> Every Indian, high or low, rich or poor, is a cooly. This contempt against East Indians…is a direct outcome of…the indentured system…the East Indian is fit to serve only as laborer and nothing more (Pillai and Tivary as quoted by (Seecharan 2011, 48).

By noting the inferior status of the indentured Indians, Pillai and Tivary imply that the need to rehabilitate the coolie is greater than the need to train him for political mobilization.

By entering an indenture contract, the indentured Indian becomes coolie. Indian nationalists and elites view them as coolies who lack agency and intellect because of their

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[50] Following the end of indentureship, British planters and the Indo-Guianese middle-class proposed a possibility of an Indian colony in British Guiana to secure a labor migration from India and to solidify the connection between British Guiana and the motherland. Pillai and Tivary visited British Guiana in 1924 to investigate the feasibility of this scheme. For further discussion of this scheme and their visit see Seecharan 2011.

labor. Colonial officials and European immigrants view them as coolies whose labor places the colony in economic danger. Some British individuals see indenture as a way of morally saving coolies from their uncivilized background. These views and representations of indentured Indians transforms them into coolies. And by internalizing these ideas, indentured Indians in British Guiana entered a state of being coolie, which informs how the emerging Indo-Guyanese community positions itself within Guyanese society.

Being Coolie in British Guiana

> You can't have a cane-cutter mentality. You got to move forward.
> Lalitha, Interview

In the years leading up to and following the end of indentureship in 1917, organizations and reform movements focused upon a single task: rehabilitating the coolie by elevating his or her status. To elevate the coolie and/or overcome being coolie, local and global entities re-centered India in the coolie imagination by showcasing the high culture of India's past and present as well as the Indian nationalist movements. Local organizations such as the British Guiana East Indian Institute discussed Indian nationalism and the budding field of Indology (Seecharan 1992, 2011). The British Guiana Dramatic Society, founded by Alice Bhagwandai Singh, wife of Indo-Guyanese politician Jung Bahadur Singh and mother of poet and activist Rajkumari Singh, performed Hindi and Sanskrit plays, highlighting the cultural genius that was Indian culture at the time and asserting the Indiannness of the coolie. Also, in 1910 *Arya Samaj* missionary Pandit Parmanand Sarawat gave his lecture "Ancient India" in British Guiana where he "articulate[ed] pride in an ancient, pre-Muslim, Hindu Indian [thus]

engendering a resurgence of Indian self-respect and self-confidence rooted in an Aryan atavism" (Seecharan 1992, 31).

The re-centering of India in the coolie imagination resulted in the continued questioning of the population's commitment to British Guiana and their forever foreignness (Ruhomon 1998). Thus, the collective memory and imagination of India did play a crucial role in unifying the indentured Indian community, but also in alienating it from greater British Guiana. However, these efforts to Indianize the coolie seemed restricted to British Guiana's capital city of Georgetown. Indians living in rural parts of British Guiana were not attending public lectures of Hindu missionaries. They were not participating in the middle-class Indian intellectual circles, which discussed the work of Max Müller and performed the plays of Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore.

The urban Indians differed from the village dweller in their ability to assimilate into the colonial construction of Guyanese society. While village dwellers adhered to traditional Indian customs, the urban Indians recognized the advantages to accepting 'the beliefs and values of the system [that] determined their status in creole society" (Glasgow 1970, 78). Like their Afro-Guyanese counterparts, these individuals "became increasingly acculturated to the 'European ways' of their Georgetown neighbors [by becoming] 'progressively ashamed of their (parents') heathenish ways" (Bisnauth 2000, 176). These urban individuals eventually became politically influential as their wealth grew. As their wealth grew, their status elevated. To ensure this new position, the urban Indians had selfish motives in participating in local politics.

This growing interest in political involvement peaked in 1916 with the formation of the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) which "provided an

organizational infra-structure responsible for arousing and orienting political consciousness" (Premdas 1995, 28). BGEIA "aimed at advancing the welfare of Indians in Guyana" (Bisnauth 2000, 179) and made efforts to unify the Indian population. Under the guise of Indian camaraderie, the BGEIA is best characterized as an organization dedicated to the advancement of the Indian middle class. BGEIA members lobbied for objectives that were conducive to their own class needs rather than improving the situation of all Indians in British Guiana. Their main objectives included campaigning for Indians' right to vote in the hope that voting could influence colonial policies and lobbying for the British Guiana Civil Service to employ Indians.

Its class aspirations could explain why the BGEIA alienated certain components of the Indian population, which formed organizations such as the Man Power Citizens' Association and the British Guiana Labor Union (BGLU) that could address these unanswered needs of the working class. The BGLU established itself as a multi-racial association by organizing around economic issues. It represented the working class, but it proved unproductive because the working class established other labor unions formed around ethnicity like the Man Power Citizens' Association for the Indian working class. However, this organization did not effectively represent working class needs since the middle class monopolized the organization's leadership positions.

Of these several associations, the BGEIA was the most productive. The process of re-Indianization that consolidated the differences within the Indian community was necessary in order for the community to be more productive politically (Jayawardena 1980). As a result of BGEIA's efforts, as of 1910 Indians were no longer labeled immigrants as they had been from the time of the 1891 Ordinance. However, the BGEIA

moved the population further away from a Guyanese identity since the group "[sought] to protect and further the interests of [solely the Indians] as far as it lay in [its] power to do so" (Bisnauth 2000, 179). The organization invested no time in improving the situation of British Guiana itself unless such actions would benefit the Indian population in some capacity. The re-centering of India in the Indo-Guyanese imagination resulted in the questioning of the population's commitment to British Guiana. The collective memory and imagination of India did play a crucial role in unifying the population, but also in alienating it from greater Guyana.

Besides the Indians' attachment to Mother India, Afro-Guyanese actions further estranged the Indians from participating in politics to advance Guyana as a whole. Before the Indians received the right to vote, Afro-Guyanese professionals could vote and run in elections. Afro-Guyanese leaders in the League of Colored People blamed the plantation system for the low political and social standings of the Afro-Guyanese, but "their economic deprivation they attributed to Indian immigration" (Bisnauth 2000, 219). Afro-Guyanese had political interests in organizing against Indians. With continuous degrading statements about the Indian populations, parts of the Afro-Guyanese population alienated and excluded the Indian population from Guyana. When Indians did receive the vote, they were less likely to vote for the Afro-Guyanese candidate who they felt did not support them.

<u>Guyana's Independence</u>

Despite these ethnic animosities, in 1950 the London-educated Afro-Guyanese lawyer Forbes Burnham and the American-educated Indo-Guyanese dentist Cheddi Jagan formed the People's Progressive Party (PPP), an organization striving to realize the

political dreams of the Guyanese people. Driven by radical anti-capitalist ideas, the PPP "[was] strongly supported by the colony's black and Asian Indian working class, the two ethno-racial groups that together comprised over 90 percent of the country's population" (Hintzen 2004, 112). With visions of a socialist society the aim, the PPP concentrated its efforts on petitioning the Waddington Constitutional Commission for universal adult suffrage and self-government.

Surprisingly, Jagan and Forbes presented the Commission with persuasive arguments, "result[ing] in the granting to [British Guiana] of the most liberal constitutional arrangement given to any British territory in the Caribbean" (Premdas 1995, 42): universal adult suffrage and a limited cabinet to govern the colony's internal affairs to be realized during the 1953 elections. Considering their supporters constituted the majority of the population, the PPP's victory was basically guaranteed. Nalini Persram argues that the British officials who participated in the Commission did not believe that a radically socialist, multiethnic party could survive and be a threat to the capitalist schemes of the Empire in this "racially fragmented society" (2001, 29). This underestimation of the potential of the PPP explains the Commission's concessions. Interestingly enough, former PPP member Eusi Kwayan (formerly known as Sidney King) shared a similar opinion about the organization, but not in terms of doubt of performance at the polls. In an interview with historian Clem Seecharan, Kwayan admitted "[he] had moved in the PPP Executive that [they] should not win a majority, and [his] reason was that the country was not sufficiently united" (Seecharan 2008, 721).

The PPP's landslide win in the 1953 election appeared to be the first step in British Guiana's road to independence. Winning the right to self-government in some

capacities, the PPP-led government proposed a series of programs which signaled to the anxiously observing British Crown that Jagan was a pro-Moscow leader that could undermine the spread of liberal democracy in the region. To contain this 'red menace,' the British suspended the new constitution and removed the PPP government after 133 days.

The multiethnic solidarity which resulted in the PPP success in the 1953 election proved to be short-lived. The naiveté of Burnham and Jagan of the mechanics of a social movement and the need to cultivate a true multiethnic solidarity around class demonstrated their limited understanding of the situation and the actual scope of their project.[51] With both Britain and the U.S. becoming increasingly interested in the politics of British Guiana, there was a move from within the PPP, supported by these foreign powers, to appoint Burnham as the leader instead of Jagan. Burnham would transform his wing of the PPP into the People's National Congress, which sought the advancement of the Afro-Guyanese population only. Eventually, elected as premier and then president, he would govern the colony until its independence, utilizing political repression and violence to extend his rule.

The events leading up to and following Guyana's independence saw increased animosity between Guyanese of Indian and African descent. As one Indo-Guyanese man in New York City explained to me:

> That is a big thing in Guyana. Racist prejudices are still there because in 1962 there was a racial war between the Indians and the black by the two political parties. One party lead by an Indian leader and the other party led by a black. So, we always saw each other, let's put it this way, not necessarily enemies, but not welcome. That's the kind of Indian, Hindu religion that see me grew up [*sic*].

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[51] For a further discussion of the limitations of Jagan's vision see Persram 2001; Persram 2004; Fraser 2004; Seecharan 2008.

With Forbes Burnham as the president, the People's National Congress (PNC) "started to address the cultural aspirations of the Afro-Guyanese which had been suppressed by the Eurocentric cultural dominance of the 'colored' creole elite" (Benjamin et al. 1998, 42). Afro-Guyanese came to define Guyanese culture and their desires informed the trajectory of the new nation's politics.[52] In an attempt to secure a position for Indo-Guyanese in this new government and in Guyanese culture, Indo-Guyanese poet and activist Rajkumari Singh joined the PNC.

Although Burnham did not create the ethnic landscape of Guyana during the period of independence, he did exacerbate the ethnic animosity through his control of the government and police forces. Soon after his election, he banned certain food items. Indrani[53], an Indo-Guyanese *pandita* (female priest) active in a *Samajist* temple in Queens described the ban to me. Growing up in an all-Indian village in Demerara County, she explained to me:

> …[Guyanese] didn't have a very popular government back at that time because as a people we [Indians] were victimized in a number of ways. Like our basic food items were banned. Like *daal* (lentils), *channa* (chickpea), you know things that we would use. Our basic food as people you couldn't get it. Flour. The government there banned flour. They banned split peas, *channa*, oil lots of things. Lots of things they banned so it was a little tough [*sic*].

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[52] To read a short history of the ethnic politics that plagues Guyanese politics postindependence see Hinds 2009.

[53] The eldest daughter of seven, Indrani grew up in a religious household. In fact, Hinduism drove her migration. Her family would attend religious services twice a week. She participated in *mandir* classes and competitions, which enabled her to travel Guyana. In 1989 she left Guyana on a Hindi scholarship to India. After her studies, she intended to return to Guyana, but traveled through New York and was encouraged to stay by the *Arya Samaj* temples in the city. As a *pandita* she spends her time counseling devotees dealing with the economic pressures and social concerns (*i.e.* difficulties raising children) in the city.

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While this ban affected all Guyanese, Indo-Guyanese, in particular, understood and

experienced the ban as a direct attack on their community, culture, and religion.[54]

<u>Becoming and Being Coolie in New York</u>

> That is part of the issue that people do judge you based on how much you know
> about the culture. Some people do. If you were born here and not Guyana or
> Trinidad or wherever then you were not necessarily Guyanese enough or
> Trinidadian enough.
> Monica, Interview

To escape this ethnic tension and violence, many Guyanese, of both African and

Indian descent, moved to New York City (Hawley 2004), a place for economic and

cultural opportunities, especially after the liberalizing of U.S. immigration laws through

the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. The Hart-Cellar Act abolished the national quota system

which limited the number of immigrants from a nation in a year. Nancy Foner (2001)

claims that the West Indian migrants as a whole, including Guyanese, constitute the

largest immigrant group in New York City. In fact, the American Community Survey of

the 2010 U.S. Census reports 140,000 Guyanese immigrants live in New York City

(Semple 2013). A 2013 report published by the Department of Planning of NYC

government states that Guyanese are now the second largest immigrant community in

Queens, the fifth largest overall in New York City.

While these facts obscure race and ethnicity in favor of nationality, they allude to

the strategic flexibility of Guyanese Americans. In the U.S. many Guyanese negotiate

their ethnic and gender identities to their advantage depending upon the context (Warikoo

2005; LaBennett 2006, 2011; Tanikella 2009; Halstead 2012). In February 2015,

Huffington Post published an article lauding the religiosity, cultural vibrancy, and sheer

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[54] To learn more about the ethnic tensions in Guyana see B. F. Williams 1991, Premdas 1995, and Halstead 2008.

size of the Indo-Caribbean community in North America. The category Indo-Caribbean, an emerging political identity in parts of the U.S. and Canada, encompasses individuals of Indian descent who emigrated from the Caribbean nations of Suriname, Trinidad and Guyana. Guyanese represent the majority of the almost 300,000 Indo-Caribbeans living in North America.

While Guyanese live all over the city, the ethnic division that separate Guyanese both spatially and politically in the Caribbean appear to persist. Most Afro-Guyanese live in Brooklyn while most Indo-Guyanese live in Queens, with a sizeable community of Indo-Guyanese in the Bronx. Little Guyana, the ethnic enclave of the Indo-Guyanese is located in south Queens, and is spread across the neighborhoods of Jamaica, Richmond Hill, and Ozone Park.[55] Interestingly, the Van Wyck Expressway, a highway that separates Richmond Hill from Jamaica also represents a racial divide. Richmond Hill is known for its Indo-Caribbean population while Jamaica is known for its Afro-Caribbean and African American population.

Little Guyana is where mostly Indo-Guyanese live, shop, socialize, and worship (Khandelwal 2002; Halstead 2012). In fact, Little Guyana might be best described as the center of Caribbean Hinduism since the Pluralism Project has identified over fifty temples (Verma 2010). This number does not include the various basement and garage temples that have not registered as religious organizations with the New York City or state government (Narine and Gosine 2005). In the next chapter I will discuss how the space of this neighborhood is rendered ethnically Indo-Guyanese and religiously Hindu.

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[55] In certain temples, Afro-Guyanese individuals were in attendance. Also, a few individuals I spoke with are of mixed heritage, half Afro-Guyanese and half-Indo-Guyanese. Because my project focused more upon issues of Indian identity, their perspective will not be explored in this dissertation. Also, the spaces I navigated in my research, I had little to no contact with Afro-Guyanese individuals.

Moving to New York has afforded many opportunities for this growing

community, but it has also introduced many problems. As Lalitha, an Indo-Guyanese

Hindu woman, explained to me:

> This new environment leads to a standoff….Women are working equally with
> men but are still expected to take care of domestic duties. Women are barely
> surviving themselves let alone considering the children. The children are raising
> themselves because parents are off working two to three jobs to make it. The
> children are adopting urban culture and getting in trouble. When the family does
> spend time together, what can they do besides drinking rum and
> fêting?....everything is commercial...lots of bacchanal…people are in competition
> here. They are spending and don't have cultural sense. This began in New York
> City and has spread to Guyana.

While New York provides job opportunities that are just not present in Guyana,

immigration has altered the family structure, with both husband and wife required to

work multiple jobs to make it in the United States. Working any jobs from being nannies

and seamstresses to office administrators, Indo-Guyanese can be understood as entering a

second indentureship[56] or as I described it, becoming coolie again. By immigrating to

New York this community finds itself rendered coolie again like their ancestors, taking

on menial work, as they describe it. Further, they occupy not only a lower-class position

in the U.S., but also a new position as a minority within a minority: first as a minority in

the U.S. and second as a subaltern in the Indo-American/Hindu American community.

In the United States, being Indo-American is largely defined by individuals who left India

post-1965. Anannya Bhattacharjee (1992) explores how East Indian immigrants,

specifically the middle class, construct their collective identity in a manner to preserve

their power of ex-nomination in the United States.[57] Prior to immigrating, the middle to

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[56] This idea of second indentureship in New York is proposed by a community leader and scholar Mahin
Gosine (2005).

[57] Ex-nomination refers to the ability to be un-named, but to have the power to name others.

upper class Indians enjoyed the status and advantages of being unnamed or invisible.

However, in moving to the U.S., these individuals were no longer anonymous and were

defined by their difference. To escape this fate, middle class East Indians resort to similar

techniques as those employed during India's independence. Instead of embracing and

displaying their regional diversity, the Indo-American middle class, through cultural and

religious organizations, constructed a unified, homogenous Indian identity, which links

into the myth of the model minority. By adopting this identity, the Indo-American

bourgeoisie demonstrates its willingness to participate/contribute to the American

nation/economy and preserve their cultural uniqueness. In order for this diasporic Indian

identity to succeed, traditions and festivals are standardized and performed for the

American public while certain histories and voices are silenced (Rudrappa 2004). One

such history that is silenced are the Indo-Guyanese.

When I mentioned my interest in studying Caribbean Hinduism in New York to

Ajay, an Indo-Guyanese drummer in his mid-thirties, he remarked "I know many *desi*

people who are of the opinion that we have lost our culture and therefore lost." Likewise,

Gina[58], an Indo-Guyanese woman in her late forties, mentioned the discrimination she

has experienced from Indians from India in the city:

> I've been kind of looked down upon by people who left India, could be considered
> Indians….I felt discriminated against the religion because they felt we weren't
> really good Hindus and that we didn't know what we were talking about. And it
> was a small minority of people I'm talking about. It wasn't much but they did look

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[58] Although Gina drags her only son to *mandir* every Sunday, she would not consider herself Hindu or
religious. In fact, Gina is "disillusioned" by Hinduism, and religion in general. Annoyed by the hypocrisy
of religious people and unsatisfied by *pandits* and *mandirs* who do not entertain her questioning, Gina
researches and learns about Hinduism on her own, a move to educate herself and to ensure her son is
learning Hinduism accurately at *mandir*. Her husband, a lapsed Catholic, and her, believe it is important to
expose their son to religion so he can decide for himself his faith. Gina grew up in Hinduism, but at an
early age drifted from the tradition, especially after her parents' divorce and her own migration from
Georgetown to Brooklyn at the age of seven. Growing up in a neighborhood with few Guyanese and no
mandirs, Hinduism disappeared from her life.

down upon those Indians who left India... It was more like you're not really an Indian.

As Ajay and Gina illustrate, the idea of coolie appears to emerge again in New York through discrimination the community experiences with the larger Indo-American or *desi* community that emigrated straight from the Indian subcontinent. Indo-Guyanese traditions and religions are being questioned in terms of authenticity and Indianness. While *desi* individuals never use the term coolie to describe Indo-Guyanese community or their culture, the specter of the coolie is present in this community as these comments indicate.

Although Ajay and Gina do not accept this view of being less than, some people in my study seemed to accept their secondary position within the Indian diaspora in the United States. Anything straight from India is more authentic and better, a view that mirrors the coolie mentality present in the Indo-Guyanese community in Guyana back in the 1920s. For instance, my perceived authentic Indianness was called upon to assess the authenticity and Indianness of Indo-Guyanese traditions in New York. Often after my initial visit to a temple I would spend time offering my insights on the difference between their religious practices and the practices in India, but only after interested Indo-Guyanese Hindus persisted in asking. These individuals, who failed to realize or appreciate that I too am a member of the diaspora growing up and learning Hinduism outside India, wanted to know if their religious practices were like those in India.

Situated in such a manner where their Indianness and Hinduism is questioned has resulted in many Indo-Guyanese describing themselves and the community as becoming lost in the United States. Rani, an Indo-Guyanese woman in her late thirties describes

Indo-Guyanese culture as being "erased". Or as Monica[59], an Indo-Guyanese seamstress

in her early fifties explains, "the struggle is when you are assimilating into another

culture then you're losing your own in the process." This feeling of being lost and being

less than others informs how the community organizes and the programs and events

pursued by the community to educate itself and the wider community of what it means to

be Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Caribbean. For instance, a local community organization

focuses its outreach on Indo-Caribbean youth. This organization, founded by Indo-

Caribbeans who grew up in the city, understands how the younger generation is

embarrassed by their culture and attempts to inspire pride in culture through education.

Mindy, an Indo-Guyanese Muslim woman in her mid-twenties, who works as a social

worker, helped found this organization ten years after she moved to the city from Guyana

in 1998. Her experiences in high school, college, and graduate school in New York City

inform the youth programming the organization pursues:

> And a big part of that program is just teaching these kids about their roots, their
> history, about their cultures because all the kids that we have in the program are
> Indo-Caribbean ….what you're finding is that the ones who are growing up here
> in the U.S., some of them migrated from the West Indies to here [ ] or came at a
> very young age and have no idea about their country or their history or India or
> our ties to India or anything like that and are sort of just again drifting by and
> going into a culture where you know their friends are into and they're more
> familiar with adapting with that.

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[59] Monica grew up in a religiously diverse, harmonious village in Guyana. At an early age, her *Nani*
(maternal grandmother) got her involved in religion through singing. Sending her to vocal classes and
pushing her to sing at temple, her *Nani* laid the path for Monica to find a platform to speak her mind. As
her skill improved, she began singing at *mandir*, religious ceremonies, and radio stations. Prior to singing
she would offer explanations of her *bhajan* (religious song) which would contextual the song and offer a
lesson of its relevancy to the moment. Eventually these explanations grew in length, inspiring Monica to
pursue courses in Hinduism and to teach others. Although active in the Hindu community in her village,
when Monica moved to New York in 2006, after her husband and children moved, she has limited her
engagement with the Hindu community of Little Guyana. Besides having limited time with her seamstress
business run out of her basement, she is hesitant of the *mandir* conflicts that are becoming more frequent,
which I will discuss in chapter five.

This organization believes that by educating the Indo-Caribbean youth about their past, they may help them overcome this embarrassment and be proud of their culture and history. And part of this move is to not use the term coolie, but to advocate the use of Indo-Caribbean, a new term that simultaneously claims Indian and Caribbean heritage.

Many community organizers believe this embarrassment experienced by Indo-Caribbean youth in the city is the fact that the history and existence of Indo-Caribbeans is still largely unknown in the United States. Because of this ignorance, Indo-Caribbeans are misidentified as Indo-Americans. For instance, Sukshma, a forty-something Indo-Guyanese woman is constantly misidentified as Indian, "I'm Guyanese, but a lot of people think I'm from India. It doesn't matter me [*sic*].... I guess I know how to blend in well."[60]

However, the dangers of blending results in their community-specific issues not being addressed or acknowledged. For instance, the lack of a unified community identity and the lack of engagement in politics locally have resulted in the community becoming underserved as Mindy explained to me:

> …for the past two years when you said Indo-Caribbean no one knew what that means…. There is no unified identity to say as a people. We share a common culture. We share a common history and this is who we are. And as a result of that the community has suffered drastically because there is no unified voice to come together and agitate for resources for the community…. And as a result of that we have schools closing. We have hospitals shutting down. Our roads are messed up. And there are some many things that are being taken away from our community…. And so because of that we are now fighting even harder to get certain resources or funds just so we can take it back to our community.

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[60] Sukshma, a divorced paralegal now living in the Bronx, grew up in Berbice, Guyana and immigrated to New Jersey in 1993. She "had no choice" but to be Hindu since all her mother's family are priests. She attends *mandir* weekly with her daughter. While she enjoys *mandir*, as I will discuss in chapter five, she prefers the knowledge and community gained through yoga and *Ayurvedic* classes held at her *mandir*. These classes offer her skills to navigate the stresses of her office and to improve her health.

To help raise their visibility within New York City, the community ironically copied the efforts of Indian community in the city. Inspired by the India Day parade held on India's Independence Day in Manhattan, the Indo-Caribbean community decided to start their own parade.[61] In 1989, in collaboration with two Indo-Caribbean Hindu temples, the community held its first *Phagwah* parade. *Phagwah*, more commonly known as *Holi*, is a Hindu holiday of a carnivalesque nature. Both Hindus and non-Hindus alike gather to celebrate the arrival of spring through good food, song, dance, and, most importantly, the throwing of colored powder. The first parade was a modest success, but each year it grew to the extent that past parade marshals included Caribbean politicians and even former Mayor Bloomberg. Dhiraj[62], a member of the organizing committee, in discussing how people from India and white Americans participate in the parade also explained the success of the parade:

> It has this visibility. This credibility. This respectability by the whole city of New York. The Mayor came and now it is established. It is a big thing.....we want to bring a Bollywood star to give it more visibility.

In addition to the *Phagwah* parade, community organizations also campaigned asking the Indo-Caribbean community to write in "Indo-Caribbean" when filling out the 2010 U.S. Census. Mindy explained the motivation behind this campaign:

> I mean everything you can think of was on that form. There was nothing towards Indo-Caribbean people. It was just black or other. Or like Caribbean. But

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[61] How the idea of this parade emerged remains unclear. Every community member has their own stories. One of the founding organizers of the parade claimed to have thought of the idea on his own while another explains a member of the India Day Parade organizing committee suggested the Indo-Caribbean community starts their own parade.

[62] Growing up in Georgetown, a son of a *pandit*, Dhiraj left Guyana to pursue his doctoral studies in London. After ten years in the U.K., he was set to move with his young family to Africa for a teaching position, but instead moved to New York since the "Lord has his own way of doing thing." Since immigrating in 1988, Dhiraj has been an important community leader, organizing the community through mandir and cultural events. When he is not teaching in the New York public schools, he hosts a weekly religious program on a local access TV channel.

Caribbean, when people think Caribbean they associated Caribbean with just African American. And so, our identity gets lost in that. We're not African American. We are own unique culture.

By writing in "Indo-Caribbean," the community attempts to gain recognition in a manner that is reminiscent of Rajkumari Singh's 1973 call to reappropriate coolie. Like Singh's 1973 interpretation of coolie, Indo-Caribbean as an identity and a category in New York City acknowledges and celebrates the community's unique history and trajectory of migration. Instead of accepting a secondary position in the Indian diaspora in the United States, the community is actively organizing and making Indo-Caribbean politically salient. In fact, in February 2017, for the first time ever, an Indo-Guyanese man, born and raised in New York City, announced his campaign for city council. If he wins, he will be the first Indo-Caribbean American person on city council.

Although coolie is not redeployed as Rajkumari Singh had hoped as a political and social identity, the term is still prevalent in the community, in both negative and positive ways. In 2014, Indo-Guyanese artist Mystic (Romeo Nermal) released his song "Coolie Bai Dance" in Guyana which became an instant classic in New York City. His lyric "me neva (never) shame me is a coolie bai (boy) [*sic*]" can be heard in the dance clubs, in cars driving around Little Guyana, and even in Hindu temples. During breaks in religious services in a few temples Indo-Guyanese children and teenagers sing the song to pass the time. In this song, Mystic claims and celebrates coolie. Being coolie is knowing the cane cutter past of your ancestors. Being coolie is eating rice and curry. Being coolie is dancing in an Indian style, including raising your arms like you "screw some bulbs." By singing about being a coolie bai, Mystic attempts to a make coolie cool.

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However, this move is not how coolie is always used in Little Guyana. While some Indo-Guyanese use coolie to describe Indian food or coolie food, others, particularly middle class Indo-Guyanese, deploy the term in a derogatory manner to refer to lower class Indo-Guyanese. "Be careful around those coolie people." "Coolie people don't appreciate art." Geetha[63], a young, twenty-something Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman, currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in sociology at a college in the city, explained the usage of coolie in Little Guyana:

> I never knew coolie was a derogatory term until when I came to New York. When I was back home people would say coolie just as a slang, you know? Coolie boy, right? When I came to New York, where I live in Queens, you will see a lot of coolie people so the word was just a slang. "Oh, that coolie boy. That coolie man. That coolie woman." And then I remember watching that Hindi movie with Amitabh Bachchan. It is called *Coolie*. And I was like, "Wait. I thought that was a Guyanese word only." And they were like, "No, it is not just a Guyanese word. It is a derogatory term. Coolie means those luggage careers in India." And then I was like, "Oh. That is the same significance as calling a black person a n*****." And she was like, "Yes."

After learning that coolie is a derogatory term from her older sister, Geetha stopped using the term so frequently, expect amongst friends and family as a way of jokingly point out how "fobby"[64] or fresh off the boat one might be; "You're so coolie." Coolie in New York City then can hail Indo-Guyanese who have just emigrated. As Geetha clarifies, "You still act in certain Guyanese ways. You still talk the same way. You still dress the same way."

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[63] Geetha, whose parents are divorced, moved from the countryside of Guyana with her two little brothers in 2006. They live with her grandmother, father, and stepmother in Little Guyana. She grew up in a Hindu home, but is uneasy with claiming to be Hindu or religious. Her grandmother lights their altar daily and she will occasionally say prayers and participate in home *pujas*, but she does not attend a *mandir*. Since her week is packed with work and school and a long commute to Manhattan, she spends her weekend doing school work, laundry, and catching up on sleep. She has no time for temple.

[64] For a further discussion of the term FOB (fresh of the boat) in Asian American communities see Shankar 2008.

Interestingly, Geetha learns the meaning of coolie by how India, in this case the Hindi film industry, defines coolie. This mirrors how her own ancestors probably came to understand the term's meaning, not through self-definition, but being labeled. Also, the porters who she understands as coolie, are referred to as such after the indenture scheme which popularized the term.[65]

But despite this meaning, Geetha views coolie as a way of being Guyanese: "I know it is a derogatory term, but I don't see it as [such]…I feel using coolie identifies us as being Guyanese or being from the Caribbean." Serena, a college educated Guyanese woman in her mid-twenties would clarify this definition.[66] Born and raised in Brooklyn, Serena is mixed race. Her father is Afro-Guyanese and her mother is Indo-Guyanese. Describing herself as *dougla*, a term prevalent in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname to describe mixed heritage individuals of Indian and African descent, she struggles to know her cultures and navigate the prejudices of the both communities. In sharing her experiences in the Indo-Guyanese community in the city, she offers a clarification in how coolie is not precisely Guyanese: "They will tell you that I am more "Indo-Caribbean" than a lot of them. I'm the one blasting Daler Mehndi.[67] I'm so coolie. I live with my grandmother. I come home to curry. I'm so coolie." In her use of the term, Serena demonstrates that coolie is not exactly Guyanese, but Indo-Guyanese. To be coolie, is to

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[65] Indian railway minister Suresh Prabhu calls for today's railway porters to be referred to as *sahayaks*, the word helpers in Hindi, and not coolies (Rodrigues 2016).

[66] Serena is a poet and a musician, now living in Little Guyana with her grandmother. Because she is mixed race, she grew up attending Christian and Hindu family functions, but, never attended church or *mandir*. She currently participates in a multi-ethnic singing collective that performs *bhajans* at local temples and city ceremonies. Although the collective's repertoire is limited to Hindu *bhajans*, their goal is to learn songs from other traditions to learn more about other culture and possibly their own spirituality.

[67] Daler Mehndhi is an Indian musician who performs *bhangra* music

eat Indian food, to listen to Indian music, and to be close to one's family. Her use of the term echoes that of the musician Mystic discussed earlier.

Serena and Geetha illustrate how the term is deployed in Little Guyana and how individuals are being coolie in New York. However, their usage fails to realize the political project Rajkumari Singh envisioned in Guyana back in the 1960s. The term Indo-Caribbean comes closest, but it does not accomplish the work of reclaiming the term to recognize what their ancestors endured and survived in leaving the Indian subcontinent in the late 19th century. Only one individual in my research offered a definition that echoes Singh.

Usha, a college educated Indo-Guyanese woman in her early forties, works in logistics in Queens. A devout Hindu and feminist, she left Guyana in her twenties to pursue a better life in New York. In her free time, she used to record oral histories of Indo-Guyanese elders to preserve stories of indenture. When asked about the term coolie and its use in the city, she offered this explanation:

> A lot of people think it is derogatory now….I don't give it that much importance. If I'm being called a coolie I take it with a smile. I like that. It's my history….It is a nice endearment in a sense. Our people were proud when they went to Guyana. They're enterprising. They're hardworking. They're dedicated. They brought the culture from India. They're life was reduced to a subservient level but they raised above that. And so, coolie encompasses all that good aspect of [what] our life is….And boy did they pass down the culture….We have so much to thank them and I think people should revisit the word coolie and give it a new meaning to let it encompass everything our people achieved in Guyana…I think now more than ever we need that kind of spirit in our life and not be stressed like what is happening in New York here now.

Like Singh, Usha sees a need to "revisit the word coolie" to help the community in New York to reconnect with its past and appreciate the sacrifice of their ancestors. By knowing their history, she believes Indo-Guyanese will be better positioned to deal with

the pressures of living in the city and to overcome the issues that are fracturing them as a community, which I will discuss further in chapter three and four.

In this chapter I have discussed the history of Indo-Guyanese migration from India to Guyana and then New York City by tracing the changing use and meaning of the term coolie. Coolie was a term to denigrate indentured Indians in the British West Indies until Indo-Guyanese cultural activists like Rajkumari Singh advocated for a reclamation of it following Guyana's independence in the 1970s. In New York City, the idea of the coolie emerges again as the community describes their migration to New York as a "second indentureship" as they negotiate their position as a subaltern in the larger Indo-American community. Rather than identifying as coolie, the community is mobilizing around Indo-Caribbean as a move that recognizes and celebrates their history and the innovations of their cultural traditions and religious practices. But despite this move, coolie is still present in the community to signify Indo-Guyanese or the Caribbeanness of their Indianness, both in its endearing and derogatory connotations.

CHAPTER III

MAKING INDO-GUYANESE HINDU PLACES

<u>Introduction</u>

In March of 2015, Sheila, a young Indo-Guyanese American Hindu woman born

and raised in New York City encountered a troubling sight on her walk home in Little

Guyana.[68] Upon a window of a building used by many in the neighborhood for

community meetings, including Indo-Guyanese Hindu and non-Guyanese individuals, the

words "Hindu Gang!!!" appeared in red spray paint. Graffiti has been a continuous

problem in the neighborhood for decades. In fact, since the late 1990s the neighborhood's

various ethnic inhabitants have tackled the problem by organizing street cleanups to

preserve the cleanliness of and promote respect for their shared space.[69] This tagging

incident, however, seems unique largely because the intended meaning is ambiguous. Did

a group of Indo-Guyanese Hindu youth tag this building to assert their belonging and

signal the complete transformation of this formerly Italian-American neighborhood into

Little Guyana? Or did a group of individuals spray paint these words in hate to

demonstrate their anger of the ethnic and religious transformations occurring in the

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[68] Sheila, the eldest of three girls, grew up in *mandir*. *Mandir* youth programs, which I will discuss in chapter five, inspired her to be engaged in community organizing and social justice. In fact, they inspired her to pursue law. She currently works in the De Blasio administration.

[69] During my own archival research with community newspapers archived in the Jamaica branch of the Queens Public Library I found numerous articles about graffiti cleanup projects dating back to 1991. Interestingly, these articles illustrate the ethnic transformation of the neighborhood. The earlier articles include pictures and quotes from Italian-American youth and community members who organized these efforts. More recent articles, including online articles from Queens-based newspapers, depict and quote Indo-Caribbean and South Asian youth and community members. Despite this shift in the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood's residents and business owners, the problem of graffiti remains the same for these stakeholders who view it as an indicator of the neighborhood on decline. For them, graffiti signals potential lawlessness that will deter business and reduce the safety of the community. In 2014, City Councilman Eric Ulrich gave $25,000 to fund an anti-graffiti program for Queens Economic Development Corporation to address the growing graffiti issue in Little Guyana and its surrounding neighborhood. The ultimate goal of such a program is to clean up the neighborhood to draw in new businesses and consumers.

neighborhood and possibly their fear of the increased organizing of this minority community? To put simply, what does "Hindu Gang!!!" mean in this context?

I open by exploring the significance of this graffiti as a way to introduce the questions which motivate this chapter. Over the course of my fieldwork issues of space constantly emerged, proving to be an important feature of the creation and maintenance of Indo-Guyanese Hindu life in the city. Where do Indo-Guyanese Hindus congregate and practice their religion? How do they render spaces into Hindu places? And how does such place-making fit into and/or come into conflict with mainstream, white American society? While such questions relate to my original interest in processes of translation and adaptation that a religious tradition undergoes in circumstances of migration, they need to be situated in the conversation among scholars of religion: the relationship between religion and space through place-making, the intentional shaping of an environment, both by an individual and a collective (Jacobs 1961).[70]

Religion is more than a set of beliefs or sacred narratives. Religion is also about practices which are situated in space. But this space is more complex than the division between sacred and profane that Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade suggested. The Eliadean understanding of sacred space[71] has been largely criticized and abandoned in favor of a social constructionist approach that "understand[s] religion as a creative mode of cultural meaning-making initiated by humans," (McAlister 2005, 250) transforming a space into a religiously meaningful place. Through religious practices or beliefs devout

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[70] Space and place are distinct concepts. Places are produced and made meaningful through the physical, cultural, mental, and social transformation of space. I will further explain the distinction of space and place and why scholars investigate them later in this chapter.

[71] For Mircea Eliade the sacred and profane are distinct spaces that are an essential part of the religious experience (1959, 20). The sacred is sacred in itself, not through social relations (Eliade 1959, 63).

individuals transform spaces into places, illustrating how spaces are dynamic (Soja 1996; Massey 1994; Tweed 2006; Vásquez 2011). Building upon the insights of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Doreen Massey (1994) scholars started to recognize that space is simultaneously physical, mental, and social in character and that individuals possess the agency to create meaningful places not only religiously, but also through nationality, class, gender and race. And, as Michel de Certeau (1984) argues, individuals produce and alter spaces through the practices of everyday life such as walking or, for the purpose of this chapter, religious practices.

By adopting such a social constructionist approach to space I will examine several examples of Indo-Guyanese Hindu creation of spaces as religious places and how "space is linked with power and difference" (Watson 2002, 293). In each instance, I will attempt to show the racial, ethnic, and religious character of space, particularly how the city is constructed as a white, Protestant, middle class place and how this minority community uses religious practices to redefine space in order to create places and a sense of emplaced belonging. Through these examples, I will 1) problematize what constitutes religious space in the United States; 2) discuss what constitutes the city and the expectations of how individuals should navigate city spaces; and 3) consider the politics of how Indo-Guyanese Hindus use the city for religious practice.

Theories of Place-Making and the City

Since the 1990s, the social sciences have had a renewed interest in space and place, particularly in how place is socially constructed and rendered meaningful (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Rather than assume space as a blank canvas upon which culture exists, scholars considered and recognized the agency of individuals in producing

place and "constructing their own realities and symbolic meanings" (Low 2000, 127).

Places are made physically, socially, and culturally (Lefebvre 1991; Low 2000). In her

study of public space and culture in Costa Rica, anthropologist Setha Low distinguishes

two types of place-making, arguing that place is socially produced and socially

constructed. While social production refers to the forces which impact the physical or

material aspects of space, social construction "is the actual transformation of space—

through peoples' social exchanges, memories, images and daily uses of the material

setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning" (Low 2000, 128). In the context of

this chapter I am interested more in examining the social construction of places by Indo-

Guyanese Hindus. While I will briefly mention how the community produces Indo-

Guyanese Hindu places through physical means, as in the graffiti example, I am mostly

interested in how Indo-Guyanese Hindu places are constructed through individual and

collective intention and performance. By focusing on the social constructive aspect of

place-making I will highlight how individuals have the agency to reinforce, resist, or

redefine the assumed character of places, particularly public, shared spaces in the city.

This exploration of place-making through the lens of the city is important since

"the city as a site of everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of []

macro processes with the texture and fabric of human experience" (Low 1999a, 2). For

instance, the history of public spaces in the city is associated with a larger project of

disciplining and managing individuals into ideal citizens. Drawing upon Foucaldian

notions of power (Foucault 1977), scholars have shown that public spaces of parks,

museums, and libraries were produced by the State to educate the masses of appropriate

behavior in the shared spaces of the city (Davis 1990; Bennett 1995; McCann 2002).

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Through the architectural design, or the social production of space, as Low (1999b, 2000)

explains, these spaces became sites or places where the individual is civilized into the

appropriate behavior of a middle class, white subject, the ideal citizen of the modern city

(Duncan 1995).

Although public places can be viewed as the physical or material representation of

hegemonic forces, individuals employ agency to resist and counter such understandings

of space. Michel de Certeau (1984) argues that individuals may subvert the disciplining

aspect of urban planning through everyday practices such as naming and walking. Rather

than being disciplined by place, the individual creates and transforms place (Low 2000).

Place therefore is more than the physical space and the material occupying it; "the

identity of a place is formed out of social interrelations" (Massey 1994, 115). These

social interrelations result in the identity of place being a double articulation: people

create places and places create people (Vásquez 2011).

Approaching space and place in such a manner enables scholars to recognize the

politics, power, and agency in negotiating the definition of a place. This focus on place-

making has been a key aspect in the literature on urban religions and immigrant religions

in the city (Brown 1991; Orsi 1999; Kong 2001; Kuppinger 2014). In addition to

facilitating integration and civic participation (Warner and Wittner 1998; Stepick et al

2009), religion plays an important role in place-making:

> Religion endows these places with symbolic meaning which not only helps
> differentiate them from ordinary spaces, but through their geography, design or
> architectural aesthetics have the capacity to also foster attachment, devotion,
> spirituality, and a certain "disposition", "ethos", and "worldview" (Geertz
> 1966) in its believers, and in some instances in others as well (Shampa Mazumdar
> and Mazumdar 2004, 387).

As Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar point out, religion gives place meaning and informs how believers approach and engage spaces.

In the context of migration, this religious place-making offers the opportunity to examine how places are made religiously meaningful and how religious minorities construct such places in relation to the hegemonic views of shared spaces (Waitt 2003; Kuppinger 2014). I will offer three ethnographic examples of how Indo-Guyanese Hindus make places in conventional sites through religious performance. Each episode looks at religiosity being performed in unconventional sites of religious practice. Instead of restricting worship to temples, Indo-Guyanese Hindus are practicing their faith in shared, public spaces, appropriating them, at least for a time as Indo-Guyanese Hindu places (Kong 2001). The first episode offers an introduction to the types of ritual practice that Indo-Guyanese Hindus perform in these shared, public urban spaces. Rather than a sacred space being a clearly defined place marked off from the profane this scene captures how multiple activities occur simultaneously in one space.

Ethnographic Episode I: A Scene from a Village *Puja* in the City

A great sense of excitement surged through the temple infecting almost everyone except the slumbering toddlers who whined and looked around in confusion after their mothers woke them. They were unaware the men were finally returning from the beach. Many devotees stood stretching their limbs to relieve the physical strain of sitting on the floor for hours waiting. Others completed the last-minute tasks assigned by the head *pujari's* (priest's) daughter as she directed us out of the temple. Everything needed to be in order. Everyone needed to be in the right place. Mother Kali was arriving that night.

Wearing colorful Indian clothing, the women emerged from the temple and tentatively walked barefoot across the broken cement sidewalk to the asphalt street. Cigarette butts, junk food wrappers, and glass that littered the sidewalk seemed an unsuitable path for Mother, but certain imperfections had to be accepted in worshipping Her in this urban setting. Crowding around the parked cars, we looked up the block toward the intersection. There the *pujaris* (priests) and participating men, lit by the light of the street lamps and the headlights of their rented van, formed a circle around Mother and the *karagams* (brass vessels) holding her power (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. *Karagam Puja* 2012, night 1, arrival of Mother (photo by author)

The introductory rhythm of the drums cued the priests to sing and begin their mini-parade to the temple's entrance. As they approached, observing *marlos*, individuals who become entranced by Mother Kali's power, began to dance in the street. Meanwhile individuals heading to the nearby subway station stopped to observe the spectacle of Mother's arrival. These onlookers did not ask for explanation, merely documenting this seemingly strange encounter with their camera phones before they continued on their way. The closer Mother came to the temple's threshold the louder the singing and the

faster the drumming as more devotees began to play.[72] Those of us who had not joined

the procession maneuvered around each other, hoping to glimpse Mother Kali, as She

entered Her New York house to care for Her children[73] in America (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. *Karagam Puja* 2012, night 1, arrival of Mother (photo by author)

This episode depicted the arrival of *Maha* Kali (Great Kali) on the first night of

the *karagam puja*, an annual religious ritual observed by many *Kalimai* temples. This

three-day *puja*, however, really started twenty-one days prior when the temple's *pujaris*,

marlos, and devotees start observing a fast and began the process of preparing and

purifying the temple for Her arrival. One evening during the weeks leading up to the *puja*

in July 2015, I sat with Menaka, a fifty-something Indo-Jamaican woman who

immigrated to New York in 1993 and is a housewife. With no tasks assigned to us,

Menaka and I spent our time watching the footage of the *puja* performed at the Guyanese

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[72] To play refers to when a devotee feels the vibrations of a deity. The individual enters a trance like state where "[they] would begin to dance wildly or take a martial stance and challenge those nearby to a fight" (Collins 1997, 5). The performance of such gestures characterizes those of Mother Kali who is a *devi* (goddess) called upon to rid the world of the demon Raktabija. These martial gestures communicate her strength and protective nature. For a further discussion of play in the context of Kali worship see Collins 1997 and McNeal 2011.

[73] Devotes of Mother Kali are also known as Her children since they see Her as the universal mother.

branch of this temple in February 2015. Menaka, a devotee of the tradition for nine years, has always wanted to attend the *karagam puja* in Guyana. Although she has participated in the *karagam puja* every year in New York, she believed the experience and the feeling of the *puja* will be different or more spiritual in Guyana. The meaning she attaches to the space of the *puja* is what drives these expectations.

As we watched the footage, Menaka kept pointing out how spatially different the Guyanese temple is from our New York temple. In Guyana, the temple is primarily outside. Each of the sixteen deities is spread across a large property and has their own altar. Surrounded by the natural vegetation of Guyana, the lush flowers and the foliage of mangrove trees, and the night sky with a luminous full moon, the devotee can truly appreciate how Mother's worship is tied to nature.[74]

In New York, all the deities are housed in a medium-sized building that packs fifty to seventy devotees every Sunday into its main altar space. A small potted garden of neem and tulsi plants meets the devotees before they enter the temple, but it does not counter the urban setting in which the New York temple is situated. Close to a busy street where no trees grow, the sounds of hip-hop and merengue music often blare from nearby businesses and passing cars. During the *karagam puja* at the evening public parading of Mother in New York, the devotee may appreciate the full moon, but its bright shine cannot compete with the fluorescent glow of the street lamps and commercial store signs (Figure 3.3).

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[74] The *karagam puja* like many Hindu rituals is connected with the phases of the moon (Narayanan 2004). The actual ritual activity of the *karagam puja* occurs during the full moon.

Figure 3.3. *Karagam Puja* 2012, night 1, arrival of Mother (photo by author)

Besides these environmental distinctions, the character of the *puja* is different. As

Menaka explained to me, almost everyone, devotee and not, participates or has the option

to participate in the ritual in Guyana since the *karagam,* the brass vessel housing

Mother's *shakti* (power) during the three-day event, passes through the village close by as

it is paraded from the beach back to Mother's temple. Such a path enables everyone to

see Mother and be part of the *puja*, ultimately capturing the main intent of the ritual: to

promote community or connectedness in the village.

Such elements not only capture the village character of the *Kalimai* tradition in

Guyana, but also the public nature of ritual practice and ultimately the Indo-Guyanese

Hindu understanding of religious places that has been transported to New York City. Not

limited to the *Kalimai* tradition, many Indo-Guyanese Hindu traditions, including the

Sanatanists and *Samajists*[75], perform rituals in public and are centered on the

transformation of mundane space into sacred place. While such transformations of place

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[75] As explained in the introduction, there are many forms of Caribbean Hinduism. The three main traditions are *Kalimai, Sanatana Dharma*, and *Arya Samaj*. *Kalimai* is the worship of Kali that probably originates in South India. *Sanatanist* are worshippers of *Sanatana Dharma* a North Indian tradition that involves the worship of *murtis* (statues of deities). And *Samajists* are followers of *Arya Samaj*, a reform Hindu movement that does not worship *murtis*.

characterize most religious traditions, it is important to consider the significance of place

and the importance of natural elements within Hindu traditions (Eck 1981; Narayanan

2004). As Knut Jacobsen explains, "places, according to Hinduism, possess sacred

power, that is, the power to grant health and moral purity" (2004, 142). Discussing the

nature of *tirthas* or sacred sites, Jacobsen (2004) notes that certain locales in India are

destinations for religious pilgrimages and understood as sacred because of features of

natural beauty or proximity to water.

While Jacobsen is helpful in noting the importance of nature to Hindu practices

and ideas of the sacred, he does not consider how the actual practices of worship and not

the location may produce sacred or religiously meaningful spaces (Grimes 1999;

MacDonald 2002). How do individuals do Hinduism in urban, western spaces? And how

do they produce Hindu places? Such questions are necessary to explore in the context of

New York City where temples are found not close to nature, but integrated into the

landscape of the city in the basements or garages of residential houses and in buildings

within commercial zones.

Architecturally, it is near to impossible to identify an Indo-Guyanese Hindu

temple. Most temples operate in repurposed buildings. For instance, over the course of

my fieldwork I encountered temples operating in former night clubs, warehouses,

churches and, most frequently, residential houses. A young Indo-Guyanese woman

attending the most popular temple in the community pointed out that the building where

they once worshiped in is now a *masjid* (Muslim place of worship) while the building

where they worship in now was a warehouse. Like other "storefront" places of worship

commonly operated by immigrants, these temples blend into the landscape of the city,

offering little to distinguish them architecturally from the surrounding buildings.[76] All temples have a sign clearly declaring the building as a place of worship and they might fly colorful flags or *jhandis* in honor of a deity or feature *murtis* (statues) in their storefront to communicate to the larger public this is a Hindu place of worship (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4. Exterior of *Kalimai Mandir*, Queens, New York 2014 (photo by author)

While these external cues signal the building as a house of worship, they are not what transforms this public space into a sacred place. The activity occurring within and the intention assumed and shared by the community is what matters. For instance, devotees remove their shoes and touch the ground and then their forehead before passing over the threshold into the space of worship in a temple. Such gestures of deference illustrate how Indo-Guyanese Hindu approach and understand the space within a building

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[76] Barbara Metcalf (1996a) uses the term "storefront" to describe buildings on commercial streets, often with a large display window facing the street for passersby to look in. Storefronts are originally designed for business, but as many urban religious organizations struggle to find buildings to worship, they opt to lease such buildings. In fact, on one block of Jamaica Avenue, a street in Little Guyana, there is a Dominican Pentecostal storefront church and an Indo-Guyanese Hindu storefront temple.

as sacred, pure and distinct from the space outside.[77] Also, devotees should not only maintain a certain standard of purity (*e.g.* observing a dietary fast) in entering a temple, but also maintain the purity of the physical space of the temple. Certain items such as meat and eggs are explicitly prohibited in most temples to preserve the sanctity and purity of the space which houses their deities. The *Kalimai* tradition, which is stricter and more vigilant about the purity of their ritual space, even prohibits leather shoes, bags, and clothing within the temple compound. These actions illustrate how "the corporeal enactment and performances involved in, for example, prayer, ritual and pilgrimages….are central to the maintenance and development of religious spaces and landscapes" (Holloway and Valins 2002, 8). Through such bodily practices and performances of ritual actions, Indo-Guyanese Hindus collectively transform numerous buildings in the city into temples, since "we know which places are sacred and which are not by observing what is enacted or not enacted in them" (Grimes 1999, 266).

This collective understanding of a space as religious, produced and reproduced through action, is not limited to temples. It functions outside temples in public, in other spaces Indo-Guyanese Hindus share in the city. Through ritual performances and symbols of ritual worship, this community alters the meaning of a space, sometime momentarily and sometimes for a longer period of time. As mentioned earlier, Indo-Guyanese Hindus daily perform and practice their faith in shared public spaces in the city. With colorful *jhandis* (flags) in honor of Hindu deities flying in front of many houses and Hindu *bhajans* (devotional songs) blaring from backyards, cars and storefronts, Hinduism

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[77] The practice of removing one's shoes before entering a temple is a constant in Hinduism that "symbolizes…a movement into sacred space and time" (Narayanan 2004, 81). Such practices, which I will discuss in further detail in chapter three, illustrates how individual's behavior alters when a space is sacralized (Nagarajan 2007).

permeates the public sphere of many neighborhoods where Guyanese individuals reside. Even the communal space of the street is frequently rendered Hindu as Indo-Guyanese Hindu affectionately greet each other with kisses on the check after uttering "Sita Ram." Such everyday encounter where Indo-Guyanese Hindu embody Hindu ritual and practice illustrate how they momentarily redefine spaces as Hindu (Metcalf 1996b; Henkel 2007; Knott 2009).

However, the frequency of these momentary encounters may actually transform sites completely into a Hindu space in the shared social geography of Indo-Guyanese Hindus (Henkel 2007). Petra Kuppinger (2014) argues as much in her study of Islam in Stuttgart, Germany. Through ephemeral encounters of greetings and chatting within a pious Muslim frame that occur in certain spaces of the city, the Muslim population of Stuttgart transforms and claims aspects of the city into a shared Muslim social geography. The continued use of a certain space for Muslim encounters and celebrations renders that space appropriate and a safe site in which the community may perform their religiosity and potentially stake claims of belonging to the city. The increased performance of religiosity in these spaces result in increased visibility which may translate into participation in the urban public sphere, which I will explore in my final ethnographic example.

This first episode, however, demonstrates how religious practices impact the construction and meaning of society and place and that the imagined separation of sacred and profane, religious and secular, and public and private does not objectively exist (Kong 2001; McAlister 2005; Brace, Bailey, and Harvey 2006; Nagarajan 2007). While this ethnographic episode offers a glimpse into how Indo-Guyanese Hindu perform

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rituals in public spaces and come to understand or approach said spaces as religious and sacred, the following episode demonstrates how the city is composed of "'lived space[s]'[] in which the dominant order is temporarily overturned by a groundswell of local activity and collective sentiment" (Knott 2009, 159). In this second episode, a group of Indo-Guyanese Hindu women performing a religious ritual in the neighborhood temporarily alter the meaning of the space as a sacred place. However, their transformation of space is met with an altercation. The resulting altercation highlights what may happen to individuals who exhibit agency in redefining place in ways that differ from the dominant understanding of that place.

Ethnographic Episode II: Altercation in the Street

During the late afternoon in July 2011, a group of twenty women, mostly Indo-Guyanese Hindus, gathered at Laura's parents' house in Little Guyana. Laura, an Indo-Guyanese woman born and raised in New York City was finally getting married in her mid-thirties.[78] To celebrate the marriage of their only daughter, her parents organized a lavish weekend of celebrations which included both Catholic and Hindu wedding ceremonies as well as the traditional Hindu pre-wedding rituals from Bihar, the region in India where their ancestors had originated. We gathered together that afternoon to participate in the *matikor*, an all-women celebration held days prior to the wedding. The *matikor* culminates in a night of singing and dancing with the attending married women

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[78] Laura, a writer and a teacher at a local high school, was born and raised in Brooklyn to Indo-Guyanese parents. Her family moved from Brooklyn to Little Guyana when she was ten. Her mother is Catholic and her father, raised Hindu, does not attend temple and is best described as a "spiritual agnostic." The middle child of three, Laura was raised in both Catholicism and Hinduism. As she explained her wedding, she points out that both traditions are important to her: "…I couldn't see myself not getting married around the Hindu fire. Also, I couldn't see myself getting married without a white dress. Because both of these things… they're both equally a part of my culture. They both make up one culture for me." She sees parallels in both traditions and does not claim either as her primary faith, rather identifying as spiritual.

educating the bride of the reality of married life. While the ceremony is known for the ribald songs and dancing which educate the bride about sex, it begins with a set of rituals to Mother Dirti, the goddess of earth, and Mother Ganga, the goddess of water, to bless the marriage with children. Since we were unable to perform the ritual by the shore of a body of water as tradition mandates, we improvised a small street parade to another site, the front yard of neighbor who offered their property for our rituals.

The bride's youngest aunt Usha led us away from the bridal house into the street.[79] She was preceded by the *tassa* group (Indo-Caribbean drum ensemble)[80] of six men wearing jeans and red shirts, all young Indo-Guyanese except for a white American man in his mid-thirties who performed a medium-sized drum. Providing the soundtrack for our seemingly impromptu parade, the *tassa* group announced our celebration to the neighborhood. A few white neighbors emerged from the houses next door to investigate the loud drumming noise, which interrupted the quiet typical of the early hours of a summer evening. These onlookers' looks of interest and recognition of some of the women in our group indicated their approval of our parading down this residential street in Little Guyana.

After ten minutes of walking in the neighborhood we arrived at a house about two blocks away. The home owners, friends of the bride who were not participating in the

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[79] Usha, the youngest of eight, grew up in Georgetown, but immigrated to Brooklyn at a time when ethnic tension and violence was high. While she did want to pursue the law, she opted to become a professional singer instead. Pursuing American pop instead of Indian classical, she has released a few albums, but has supported herself as the day manager of a boutique hotel in Manhattan. Usha grew up in *mandir*, but refrains from going in a consistent manner in New York, preferring to perform her own *pujas* at home and avoiding the politics of mandir. Like her sister, Usha occasionally participates in local peyote ceremonies.

[80] *Tassa* groups exist in North India and the Caribbean. A *tassa* group include at least a large bass drum, two smaller kettle drums known as *tassa*, and a cymbal. To read more about *tassa* see Manuel 2000 and 2015.

ceremony, had offered their front yard for the ritual. The street was eerily quiet now that

the *tassa* group had stopped performing. Standing off at the corner, some had removed

their drums and built a small fire on the street by the curb to tune them (Figure 3.5). We

women stood by the curb and on the sidewalk, forming a circle around the *pandit's*

(priest's) wife and Laura's two aunts Lalitha and Usha who were kneeling on the ground.

Serena was digging a hole in the ground when we heard a male voice angrily yelling,

"You can't do that! I'm calling the police!"[81]

We all froze and then looked in the direction of the yells. An elderly white

American man, probably in his late sixties, from a nearby house was making his way

towards us. He stopped four feet from us. The man was a little under six feet tall, wore

glasses, a white T-shirt, and khaki shorts and had a thinning head of gray hair. His

appearance was not menacing, but the anger and conviction of his threat were. Directing

his comments to us women, he asked us what we were doing.

Lalitha rose from the ground to explain we were performing a ritual. Meanwhile

the *pandit's* wife lit a small flame that rose two to three inches in the shallow hole that

Usha had dug (Figure 3.5). Before Lalitha could explain that we had the home owner's

permission to use their property for the ritual, the man interrupted her. "You can't make

all that noise. I have an old woman in there that you're disturbing. You can't do that."

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[81] Lalitha is Usha's eldest sister. She immigrated to Manhattan on her own in the 1970s and worked in advertising. Her father, siblings, and mother moved to New York later and settled in Brooklyn. Prior to taking over her brother's cultural organization in Little Guyana, Lalitha quit New York in the 1980s and lived in New Mexico for a few years. While there, she became a Sun Dancer and learned about the peyote tradition, which she introduced to all her siblings. They all participate in peyote ceremonies in New York. Lalitha sees the peyote ceremonies as a continuation of her religion. Growing up in Hinduism in Georgetown, she does not like the lack of art and energy in the Little Guyana *mandirs*. She finds those elements in peyote and in *Kalimai* temples.

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Figure 3.5. Scenes from a *Matikor*, 2012 (photo by author)

Before Lalitha could respond, the old man noticed the small flame the *tassa* group had built on the curb. "You can't start a fire on the street!" he yelled at the drummers. Returning his attention to us women, he noticed our small flame. "You can't do this! I'm calling the police," he yelled and started walking up the street back to his house. As he walked away another Indo-Guyanese woman in her fifties began walking after him yelling "We've got a permit old man. We're not doing anything wrong." As she returned to our group, the man walked back. More agitated and angry, he retorted, "This is public property. You can't dig it up. You can't start a fire. You're breaking the law." He turned again to walk towards his house.

During these interchanges, the *tassa* group refrained from entering the argument. Mostly silent, a couple of the young Indo-Guyanese drummers snickered at the old man's threats. This last exchange, however, spurred the white drummer into action. He removed his drum and started aggressively walking towards the old man saying, "This is their

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religion. This is their tradition." The bride's young cousins who were also born and raised in New York followed the white drummer, shouting "we're not doing anything wrong."[82]

The situation was quickly escalating and getting out of control. Before the drummer and cousins got two feet away from our group, Lalitha intervened. "This is my niece's life. I don't want no trouble [*sic*]. Let's finish this part and get back to the ceremony. Don't worry about him." Succumbing to her plea, the drummer and the cousins recognized the greater importance of the ritual at hand. Though still angry, they retreated from their attack. If we did not perform our offerings correctly, the *matikor* would not be successful and could taint the marriage. We quickly finished our offering and extinguished our flames. The *tassa* group started drumming as we women danced in the street back to the bridal house. The old man was nowhere to be found.

This altercation illustrates how the city renders Indo-Guyanese Hindu other. The city is a space that simultaneously produces subjects and is produced by subjects (Grosz 1992). As an individual is disciplined into ideal behavior and conduct by the structures and rules, both written and unwritten, of places in the city, the city itself is designed with such intentions. By walking through a street or sitting on a bench in a public park, an individual is conditioned into a certain relationship with the space she occupies and the other individuals who currently or may occupy the space as well. As a result of such

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[82] This snickering of the young Indo-Guyanese drummers suggests they did not view the man's threats as serious. In fact, the referencing of this man as "old man" by the Indo-Guyanese woman earlier diminishes his comments as irrational and non-threatening because of his age. This woman made her comment and returned to participating in the ritual. The conflict escalates largely because of the actions of the white, *tassa* drummer, whose comments to legitimize the actions of the Indo-Guyanese women and to protect them from this elderly white man emboldened the female cousins to participate in the exchange. The desire to not escalate the situation further and place themselves in harm's way, especially if the police were called, may explain the continued silence and lack of action of the Indo-Guyanese drummers.

conditioning, many spaces in the city mark individuals as undesirable, not belonging, and different (Bridge and Watson 2002).

However, the needs of the dominant populations do not solely dictate the transformation of the city. Any individual or community may articulate their needs by reinscribing the space of the city (Grosz 1992; McCann 1999). The remarks of the Indo-Guyanese women to the elderly white man illustrate how an ethnic community may reinscribe the space of the city or contest the city and "temporarily invert the urban power structure through symbolic control of the streets" (Low 1999a, 10). Further, this ethnographic episode raises many issues concerning the nature of the cultural production and use of space in the neighborhoods of South Queens, and introduces issues of conflict surrounding the ethnic transformation of these formerly Italian and Irish American neighborhoods into Little Guyana. By discussing how Indo-Guyanese Hindu in their everyday and special ritual practices render spaces Hindu and Guyanese places, I can consider how the community is challenging the hegemonic view of place as white and Protestant.

To appreciate the response of the elderly white man, it is necessary to understand the shifting racial and ethnic makeup of these neighborhoods of South Queens. Actually, Richmond Hill originally began as a planned community back in 1868 by Albon Platt Man and Edward Richmond. The vision was to create a retreat from the city for the more affluent residents of Manhattan (Ballenas and Cataldi 2002). Until the 1940s, Richmond Hill was just that, but after World War II, the ethnic, racial, and class makeup of the community changed as Irish and Italian middle-class families moved in when a ceramics factory started operating in the area. The village community of Richmond Hill that was a

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retreat of the rich became the neighborhoods of Richmond Hill, Kew Gardens,

Woodhaven, and Ozone Park. These neighborhoods of South Queens were situated

almost equidistant from the city's two main airports and a half an hour ride to midtown

Manhattan on the Long Island Rail Road. Also, they were highly desired for the quietness

and safety.

However, this area's reputation of safety momentarily disappeared after the

infamous stabbing and murder of Kitty Genovese, a twenty-eight year old Italian-

American woman, in 1964 (Cook 2014).[83] Starting in the late 1980s or early 1990s, these

Irish and Italian families were replaced by the growing Indo-Guyanese/Indo-Caribbean,

Sikh, and Bangladeshi communities. Many Indo-Guyanese moved from neighborhoods in

Brooklyn and the Bronx to South Queens for its relative safety, better schools, and

affordable housing.[84]

Unfortunately, the actual mechanics behind the shift in residents is unclear. One

afternoon while driving around the neighborhood with a member of a local historical

society I asked when South Richmond Hill became Little Guyana.[85] The member,

Richard, an Italian-American man in his late 50s who grew up in Queens, had no answer,

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[83] In the early hours of March 12, 1964, Kitty Genovese was stabbed by South Ozone Park resident Winston Moseley over a period of 33 minutes. Genovese, a bar manager in Jamaica, was returning to her apartment in Kew Gardens when Moseley attacked her two times. Despite hearing her cries for help, 38 neighbors failed to call the police or come to her aid, preferring not to be involved. Their refusal to help contributed to Genovese's murder and became known as the bystander effect. The episode altered the reputation of the neighborhood and could have contributed to next shift of neighborhood's ethnic makeup.

[84] Many Indo-Guyanese I interviewed ended up in Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, or South Ozone Park because the prices of house were affordable and the neighborhoods had less crime.

[85] Although Richmond Hill has been claimed as Little Guyana in newspapers and Indo-Caribbean community organizers, the neighborhood is actually South Richmond Hill. When I contacted this historical society, the president made sure I understood this. Ironically, a sign that welcomes visitors to the main commercial avenue of Little Guyana welcome them to Richmond Hill. While one would assume the sign is the property of the borough, surprisingly it is owned and maintained by a local real estate agent.

just remarking upon the slight changes that eventually transformed the neighborhood

such as the increase of West Indian restaurants and stores on the main commercial avenue

and the appearance of "those colored flags." Despite being a local historian of the

neighborhood, he had no idea of the meaning of the flags of various colors that fly in

front of many of the house (Figure 3.6). In fact, these flags, *jhandis,* which are raised

following a ritual to proudly signify devotion to a particular deity as well as being

Hindu[86], the lawn *murtis*[87]*,* and decorative elephants that often appear now on gate posts

altered the aesthetics of the neighborhood that some in the organization would describe as

tacky and as threatening the quaint charm of the old Victorian houses (Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.6. *Jhandis* and American Flag, Little Guyana, 2010 (photo by author)

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[86] For a richer discussion of the significance of the *jhandi* as a symbol of belonging in a multiethnic nation see Ryan 1999 and Rampersad 2013.

[87] Similar to shrine to Madonna that can be found in front of Italian-American houses in the city, Indo-Guyanese Hindu have started displaying small altars to deities such as Siva. While *jhandis* can be found on just about every street and block in Little Guyana, only a handful have such small altars that I call lawn *murtis*.

Figure 3.7. Lawn Shiva and Lawn Madonna, Little Guyana, 2015 (photo by author)

To help me with my project, Richard introduced me to the only Indo-Guyanese woman he knows. Operating a print shop on the main commercial avenue of Little Guyana, she recommended another storeowner for me to speak with. Richard accompanied me to this store, one of the numerous Hindu religious stores selling *murtis* and all the necessary items for ritual worship. As we walked towards the store, Richard pointed out buildings and told me about their past uses, but he often stopped along the way, marveling at the West Indian and Indian vegetables and clothing, the smell of curries, and the cacophony of chutney[88] and old Bollywood music playing from competing stores (Figure 3.8). With each exposure to the exotic, he asked me for explanation. By the time we arrived in the store our roles had switched. I was no longer the visitor but Richard's guide in his exploration of Little Guyana, educating him on the community's migration, culture, and religion.

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[88] Chutney is a style of music that incorporates Caribbean, Western, and Bhojpuri (Northwestern region in India) music. Chutney was created by Indo-Caribbeans in the southern Caribbean and popular in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad. For more information on chutney music see Manuel 2000, Ramnarine 2001, and Niranjana 2006.

Figure 3.8. Street in Little Guyana, *Diwali* 2016 (photo by author)

While I commend Richard for his willingness to ask questions, I was a bit shocked that someone so interested and invested in the neighborhoods of South Queens and who resides and teaches there was unaware of the communities who have so altered the neighborhood. But then again, it is rare to encounter an individual who is not Caribbean or South Asian on the commercial avenue. In fact, during my research I have observed two types of interracial encounters: an aging white resident running his errands without engaging the context and hurrying to return home or an aging white resident who reacts to the crowds of Indo-Guyanese and Sikh individuals while buying their groceries. For instance, when an elderly Sikh woman asked the elderly white man why he was angry and yelling "Hey Krishna, move!" at her as he tried to navigate out of an Indian grocery store he responded, "Why am I angry? I've always been here. I've fought in Vietnam and you just got here."

The man made his exit while the store full of Sikhs, Indians and Indo-Guyanese who witnessed the encounter either shook their heads disapprovingly or smirked, laughing off the discomfort of the tense exchange. The man's response however indicates a feeling of unease and resentment about the transformation of the area that probably

motivated the elderly man's response to the *matikor* episode that began this section. Without speaking with the man, I can only speculate about his actions, but I can discuss how both these incidents capture how public spaces discipline societies and communicate difference.[89]

As discussed earlier, public spaces are created and funded with the purpose of molding individuals into citizens and into a unified community. These spaces provided a place where various classes and ethnicities could intermingle, but also functioned to discipline bodies. In fact, the proliferation of public spaces in the late nineteenth century occurs in tandem with the rapid spread of industrialization. The upper and middle classes were motivated to fund such spaces in order to shape the lower class into proper citizens and productive workers. In these spaces the lower class would observe the ideal behavior of citizens from the middle class. Besides observing what appropriate behavior is, the lower class would be compelled to accept and perform this behavior. Anyone who did not perform appropriately would be ejected from the space, thus revealing inequality in public spaces.

To appreciate the old man's condemnation of the parading and ritual, one must view a neighborhood as a public space. While houses and their front yards are private spaces, the neighborhood, as defined by the street and the sidewalks, is a public or semi-public space. And like other public spaces, as discussed earlier, the neighborhood was created with the purpose of molding individuals into citizens and into a unified community. These spaces provide a place where different classes, races, genders, and

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[89] Both examples present conflicts between a white men and South Asian American women. The gendered aspect of this conflict, particularly how brown women question the rationale of white men, will not be explored in this chapter since it exceeds the primary argument of this chapter.

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ages could intermingle (Jacobs 1961; Watson 2002; Mitchell 2003; Preston and Ustundag 2005). The openness of the street and sidewalk, places the individual on constant display, compelling him or her to use the space in the appropriate manner defined by society or forming a public.[90] Or another way of understanding this disciplining force is that public spaces in the city inform the performance of bodies, educating them into the dominant ideology of appropriate ways of being in these spaces (Grosz 1992; Watson 2002). As Sophie Watson articulates it, "the city is the locus for the production and circulation of power and the city leaves traces on the subject's corporeality" (Watson 2002, 294).

However, this ethnographic episode illustrates something else besides the disciplining of a citizenry. At the core of both these altercation is not only a lack of understanding and knowledge of the culture and history of parties involved, but, more importantly, how one party is being named as different and/or not belonging. So besides disciplining individuals, the access and use of public space establishes standards and exclusions (Fenster 2005).

By starting a small fire, the Indo-Guyanese were misusing public space and breaking the social norms, if not the law, of the neighborhood. By playing drums loudly and dancing in the street, the Indo-Guyanese may be signaling their unwillingness to be disciplined to this understanding of "civility." But could the Indo-Guyanese's use of public space in this manner indicate a desire to redefine and claim a place as Hindu? By performing this religious rite in public, this group of Indo-Guyanese Hindu women used religion to "forge a sense (indeed an ethics) of self, and make and perform their different geographies" (Holloway and Valins 2002, 6). Through this ritual, the Indo-

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[90] The notion of being on display mimics the disciplining power of the panopticon in the prison. The openness of public space causes the individual to believe that someone is always watching.

Guyanese women can be understood as creating "forms of urban life through religious practices that may run parallel to, interrogate or challenge the modernist and liberal narratives of the state, planners or capital" (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 624). They were demonstrating their difference or better put their alternate way of being American, and their different understanding of space.

In fact such a conclusion seems viable since, "following Lefebvre's lead, we can see this [sidewalk] as multi-faceted, all at once a place that is unselfconsciously practiced, wittingly conceived, ordered and represented, and imaginatively and collectively expressed and 'lived'" (Knott 2009, 159). The production of places in the city, and ultimately the city, is done by thousands of individuals who all have the agency to contest and redefine the nature of the space by class, race, gender, and religion (Amin and Thrift 2002; Robinson 2006). In fact, situating Lefebvre's theory of space within the geographies of difference, both racial, ethnic, and religious, can illuminate a better understanding of the reproduction and contestations occurring within those geographies (McCann 1999).

Geographer Eugene McCann argues for the potentials of Lefebvre's theory in helping us to understand race in the U.S. "through its attention to the central role imagination and representation play in producing space" (1999, 164), specifically in regard to how political protests attempts to counter the assumed nature of spaces as white, middle-class. In such a space where black (and brown) bodies are understood as dangerous and endangered, protests challenge such understandings in claiming rights and ownership of public space (McCann 1999; Farrar 2002, 2012). While these women are not protesting, the ritual becomes a site where they create 'spaces of representation' to

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express themselves and to claim belonging to the U.S. nation. We can think of it as a

"ritual public," my variation of "temple publics" a concept proposed by Deepa Reddy and

John Zavos (2009) to describe how Hindu temples and practices create communities in

new ways in the urban context. The concept of the temple has changed with time, first

being a space that reinforced the monarchical structure of power (Appadurai and

Breckenridge 1976) to now a site where individuals may assert their collective identity

and consciousness (Eck 2000, Knott 2000). This emerging Hindu public is associated

with a temple, hence temple publics.[91] But such publics can emerge within Hindu rituals

outside associations with a temple. A "ritual public" therefore offers "a crucial *interface*

between the public and religion" (Reddy and Zavos 2009, 254) by providing devotees,

with or without the institution of a temple, the opportunity to perform rituals for

themselves while representing themselves religiously and ethnically to the greater public.

The space or moment of the ritual provides an opportunity to claim space and to educate

about the nature of this claiming, which is demonstrated by the responses of the women

and the drummer. In using space in this manner, the women are performing both their

religion and their ethnicity. The *matikor* and the space it occurred in is simultaneously

Hindu and Indo-Guyanese.

　　　While the ethnographic episode that opened this section offers a glimpse into how

Indo-Guyanese Hindus perform rituals in public spaces and come to understand or

approach said spaces as religious and ethnic, the concluding episode sets out to illustrate

how such uses of spaces can be understood as Indo-Guyanese Hindus transforming

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[91] By public I am referring to a Habermasian public sphere or space "as a web of spaces with a multiplicity of discursive registers, which frequently cut across and challenge one another" (Reddy and Zavos 2009, 251).

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structures of power and privilege "through a politics of identity and a politics of place, [to] reclaim rights, resist, and subvert" (Jacobs and Fincher 1998:2).

Ethnographic Episode III: Insights from Beach *Pujas*

Seema, an Indo-Trinidadian woman in her forties who works as a loan officer weaved in and out of lanes on the Van Wyck Expressway. She drove above the speed limit to try and catch up with the rented van full of *pujaris* (non-Brahman priests) heading towards Jamaica Bay (Figure 3.9). "We need to catch up. They don't know where to set up," she explained to our car full of women clinging to anything and everything to keep balanced and safe.

Figure 3.9. Jamaica Bay 2014 (photo by author)

We exited the expressway, but were met with a series of red lights which impede whatever small progress she had made in speeding. Resigning herself to the infeasibility of catching up she grabbed her cellphone to call *Panditji* to explain where the *pujaris* should set up. "I was in charge of the permit," she explained. "If we set up in the wrong place we'll get a ticket." In addition to this anxiety over placement, she was concerned with time. Although the *temple* had filed all the paperwork, there was a time limit to our worship. Anything longer than two hours will result in a ticket and fines if we were caught. We arrived to find the *pujaris* correctly set up on the stretch of beach opposite the

runways of the JFK airport. We women stood a distance from the ritual actions of the *puja*, observing the *pujaris* at work as the singing group sang *bhajans* (Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10. *Karagam Puja*, Invoking Mother, Day 1, 2014 (photo by author)

Standing in the sand and enjoying this retreat from the city, I noticed an issue that was discussed in the community papers and that was mentioned in my interviews with community leaders. Interspersed in the litter of fishing line, beer bottles and junk food wrappers on the beach were broken shards of clays pots, pieces of brightly colored cloth, and bits of aluminum foil (Figure 3.11). These items were recognizable remnants of *pujas* and offerings made by Indo-Guyanese Hindus to Mother Ganga in her form as the Atlantic which moved in and out of this bay (Figure 3.12). Considering the other trash which litters this beach, it seemed unfair to single out Indo-Guyanese Hindus as the lone perpetrators of the increasing ecological degradation of this bay, which is a federal wildlife reserve. However, the remnants of offerings were clearly marked as Hindu and Indo-Guyanese in this context; in contrast, the other trash was essentially unmarked, enabling the other litterers the safety of anonymity, unless caught in the act. Further, while many Indo-Guyanese Hindus come alone or with family members to make small

offerings to Mother Ganga at the bay, there is a well-established practice of groups of Indo-Guyanese Hindus congregating water-side to perform *pujas*, a clearly visible event that one could read as a deliberate claiming of the beach to perform a religious rite and a claiming of belonging to the U.S.

Figure 3.11. Remnants of *Puja*, Rockaway Beach, 2014 (photo by author)

Figure 3.12. Remnant of *Puja*, Rockaway Beach, 2014 (photo by author)

This recent problematizing of beach *pujas* offers a case study to consider the political implications and possibilities of religious place-making for this community. Angered by the ticketing of their worship, many Indo-Guyanese Hindus feel as though their traditions are under attack. This response is valid, but also captures the

misunderstanding of the purpose or intent of the ticket. While such a ticket for the Indo-Guyanese Hindus represent to them their foreignness in the U.S. or their marginalization and their ultimate intelligibility to the imagined community of the U.S. nation, for the officials of the State, the ticket is an attempt to protect the environment, not an exercise in marking this community as the racialized other that does not belong to New York City or the U.S. The ticketing is also an attempt of the State to discipline the community into using public space appropriately, as citizens belonging to the nation should. However, by ticketing, the State exacerbates the issue, preventing either party from considering the perspective and intent of the other's position, ultimately producing more misunderstanding and ill will.

The nature of this misunderstanding illustrates the complexity of this conflict over the use of the beach. The conflict is simultaneously environmental, religious, and racial. Therefore, productive solutions need to address all of these elements. Fortunately, second generation Indo-Guyanese Hindus understand this complexity and are using their unique experience and position to identify solutions through educating the wider community about their religion and maybe to start developing a religiously informed environmentalism for their community in the city. Or in other words, they see the potentials of this issue as a "ritual public" where these beach *pujas* "exist[] within a wider public that it needs to call upon—inform, educate, and above all engage with—precisely so as to be able to function effectively in relation to it" (Reddy and Zavos 2009, 247).

One such individual is Leela, an Indo-Guyanese woman in her mid-twenties. Raised in Queens and in a *Sanatanist* temple, Leela took up the issue for her honors thesis at a university in New York back in 2009. Believing that the issue was not that of

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religious freedom and the right to worship, but environmental she set out "to find an ecologically friendly and spiritually acceptable solution to making these offerings and the conflicts that have happen in making [them]." She interviewed representatives of the State, like park rangers, and her community, both religious leaders and devotees. While she was best positioned to conduct this project being a scientist interested in water and water health, a devout Hindu raised in the community, and an individual familiar with navigating the structures and representatives of the U.S. State, she did experience push back from the community who saw her project and efforts as an attempt "to viscerate [their] religion."

Facing this response in many community temples she visited to discuss the issue, Leela attempted to clarify her motivations: "That was not my aim at all. I always wanted to promote our religion. I really don't think there is a conflict between religion and the environment at all. And I'm out to prove that." To demonstrate that symbiotic relationship between religion and environment, Leela used the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and other sacred Hindu texts to illustrate how Hinduism has always advocated environmental protection.

Interestingly, her approach relied upon the notion of returning the Hinduism observed and practiced by Indo-Guyanese Hindu devotees in New York to its original, authentic, and traditional practice of worship, an appropriate approach for a community which prides itself in practicing the religion in the "true, ancient ways that are no longer observed in India." The remnants of the *pujas* and offerings which affect the ecology of Jamaica Bay are evidence of how this form of Hinduism has been adapted to modernity and migration. As Leela explained to me "*Shri* (Lord) Rama and other deities never had

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aluminum foil so for us to just dump aluminum foil into the bay out of convenience

because we were too lazy to take out the flowers and separate items, that's just

negligence. That's just being ignorant."

She is right to point out this change in the tradition. For Indo-Guyanese Hindus,

aluminum foil is now an accepted and unquestioned part of ritual practice, but this a

recent adaption as a result of migration. Unable to find the appropriate leaves in New

York City for parts of their rituals, Indo-Guyanese Hindus in the 1970s began using foil

as a replacement since it is easily procured and also simplifies the cleaning post-ritual.

And while Indo-Guyanese Hindus today may easily buy and/or grow the appropriate

leaves for offerings, foil is still preferred because of its cost and ease. Further, the

growing market of Hindu goods has introduced many non-biodegradable items such as

plastic *murtis* and posters of deities that are often included in offerings to Mother Ganga

Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13. *Murtis* and other *puja* merchandise, Hindu religious store, Little Guyana
(photo by author)

By pointing out how these elements are not part of the original offerings made in the Caribbean or India, Leela attempts to leverage the community's preoccupation with authenticity to change how *pujas* are practiced. This is a strategy still deployed by *Sadhana*[92], a progressive Hindu organization founded in 2011 and led by two Indo-Guyanese Hindus and a *desi* Hindu. With the mission "to inject a progressive, Hindu voice in the public discourse" *Sadhana* organizes monthly beach clean ups where *temples* from the community and park rangers clean up the beach together. The idea is that through cleaning together, park rangers might appreciate how Indo-Guyanese Hindus recognize the space as a Hindu place and how they understand their actions within it. At the same time, Indo-Guyanese Hindus will witness what happens to their offerings and understand the response of the State not as an attack on them as an unwanted minority community, but as a move to protect the ecology of the park.

It is still too early to determine the success of these cleanups now, but some progress is being made. Within a couple of years of Leela's research, the federal government, responsible for part of the management of Jamaica Bay, created an internship for a member of the community to work with the park rangers in developing possible solutions. These park rangers have expressed to both Leela and *Sadhana* their respect for Hinduism and their understanding that devotees are ultimately worshipping water as Divine. But despite their sensitivity to the issues and their respect for the religion, they are still concerned about how these types of ritual practices will affect the ecology of Jamaica Bay. Also, more Indo-Guyanese Hindus now understand the environmental impact of their devotion and appreciate that Leela, *Sadhana*, and the park

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[92] *Sadhana* is the actual name of the organization.

rangers are not out to destroy their religion. As I walked the beach with one of the founders of the *Sadhana*, an Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman who was preparing to make offerings of flowers and a *diya* (clay pot) to Mother Ganga, approached us. Before she made her offering, she showed her items to the organization's founder to ensure they were biodegradable. Her query captures how more in the community are aware of the ecological consequences of their devotional actions.

Despite this progress within the community, there are still some who are committed to worshipping in the manner that they have become accustomed to. For instance, during one of their beach cleanups, *Sadhana* encountered a group gathered on the beach performing a *puja* and preparing to make offerings to Mother Ganga. When a fifty-year-old Indo-Guyanese Hindu man volunteering with the organization attempted to stop the offering of non-biodegradable objects into the water, the officiating *pandit* shouted "This is our religion. We have the right to practice it."

Regardless of this *pandit's* response, which suggests the organization still has work to do, the most salient insight from these conflicts surrounding beach *pujas* are the claims of belonging such Hindu place-making inspires. As I demonstrated, the conflict is not solely about the material use of the beach and the resulting ecological concerns, but about the meaning of the beach, "which reflects differences in a war of cultural values and visions of appropriate behavior and societal order" (Low 2000, 128). By claiming the space as a form of the Hindu sacred river the Ganges in Queens, Indo-Guyanese Hindus contest and resist the dominant use of the space of the beach, asserting their Hindu and Indo-Guyanese identities to the larger public of New York City and by extension the U.S.

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And in adopting this understanding of place the progressive Hindu organization *Sadhana* fosters a ritual public that promotes civic engagement and a politically conscious Indo-Guyanese Hindu public (Reddy and Zavos 2009). Instead of using this conflict surrounding beach *pujas* to educate Indo-Guyanese Hindus of the societally approved use of and behavior in this shared public space in New York, the organization uses Hinduism to find acceptable solutions for both parties and to spatially claim belonging. The increase use of biodegradable ritual objects in Indo-Guyanese Hindu waterside worship is therefore not evidence of the community being disciplined into the dominant rules of public space, but a shift motivated in being better Hindus. As one Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman explained, "[they] want to make sure [the beach] isn't polluted [because its] Mother Ganga to [them]." By approaching this issue in this manner, *Sadhana* seeks to gain acceptance of this form of Indo-Guyanese Hindu place-making, a move that ultimately seeks to gain visibility and recognition for the community in the larger New York public.

Conclusion: A Thanksgiving *Jhandi* Burning

This chapter opened with an incident of vandalism with unknown intentions. Was the tagging of a neighborhood building with the phrase "Hindu gang" evidence of this community asserting its belonging to this neighborhood or did it illustrate the growing discomfort of the dwindling white residents' to the growing visibility of a marginalized community? While the intention still remains unclear, in November 2015, another incident of vandalism occurred in Little Guyana, the intention of which appears more easily discerned. As I discussed earlier, colorful *jhandis* (flags) often fly proudly in front of many Indo-Guyanese houses as a form of blessing as well as a visual proclamation of

their faith and identity as Hindus (Figure 3.14). In the early hours of the day following

Thanksgiving in 2015, an unidentified man set fire to forty *jhandis* in front of the house

of an Indo-Guyanese family.[93] The fire was quickly extinguished. Unfortunately, the

culprit still evades the authorities.

Figure 3.14. *Jhandis*, Little Guyana 2015 (photo by author)

The incident shocked not only the family, but the community at large since, as a

community organizer explained to the local press, "this crime went to the heart of my

identity as an Indo-Caribbean Hindu."[94] Although non-Guyanese neighbors may not

know the significance of *jhandis*, they do recognize them as symbols of the community.

Adam, a middle-aged resident of the community with Polish heritage indicates as much

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[93] Because it is inauspicious to remove *jhandis*, an Indo-Guyanese Hindu may have numerous *jhandis* flying in the front or backyard of his property. The number of rituals an Indo-Guyanese Hindu has sponsored both at home and at temples while living at that property can be counted by the number of *jhandis*.

[94] As I discussed in the introduction my dissertation focuses primarily on the experiences of Indo-Guyanese Hindus in New York City. Many of these individuals, particularly the second generation, currently identify as Indo-Caribbean, a political move that attempts to solidify Indo-Guyanese, Indo-Trinidadian, Indo-Surinamese, and Indo-Jamaicans into as single community to voice concerns to various levels of government.

when he discussed *jhandis* with me: "It is a Guyanese thing. Guyanese love those flags. I've never understood culturally what it is about. Maybe it is a Hindu thing?" Unsure if they are cultural or religious, Adam clearly understands that the flags appear in front of Indo-Guyanese houses. Because of this assumed understanding of *jhandis* as an ethnic symbol in the larger public, local officials are investigating this incident as a hate crime.

The intentions behind the raising of *jhandis* and their burning captures the motivation behind this chapter on Indo-Guyanese Hindu place-making. Throughout the neighborhoods of South Queens, Indo-Guyanese Hindus are redefining spaces religiously and ethnically as Indo-Guyanese Hindu places through individual and collective performances of Hinduism. From performing rituals in public spaces to greeting each other with Hindu salutations, the community alters, sometimes momentarily, sometimes longer, the prevailing social construction of space in New York City. Such performances illustrate how religious places exists all over the city and are not confined to conventional places of worship.

Also, by performing *pujas* on public streets and beaches and flying *jhandis* on their property, Indo-Guyanese Hindus are claiming and asserting belonging. Through such performances and acts, Indo-Guyanese Hindus make spaces in New York City into Guyanese and Hindu places. This transition is more than the linguistic move of referring to neighborhoods of southern Queens as Little Guyana. This shift illustrates how minority communities use religious place-making to create home in their migration. And, as we are increasingly witnessing in the United States, such claiming of space through religion results in a push back. In the years following 9/11, hate crimes are on the rise, with the majority being vandalism upon religious structures (Iyer 2015). Incidents like the *jhandi*

burning highlight the fallacy of the American nation as a nation for all and demonstrate the assumed nature of space in the city. However, the community's persistence in these practices shows their desire for a larger public to acknowledge and recognize their place-making efforts as American.

CHAPTER IV

CULTIVATING THE INDO-GUYANESE SELF THROUGH BODILY PRACTICES

Introduction

As summer fades into autumn, Indo-Guyanese Hindus prepare for *Diwali*, known as the festival of lights. Each year, Hindus around the world, particularly serious devotees of *Shri* Ram (Lord Ram), celebrate *Diwali*, a festival where Hindus light *diyas* (small, clay lamps) to guide *Shri* Ram from his exile in the forest back to Ayodhya, his kingdom and home. *Diwali* is a major festival in the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community, which includes a large, community-wide *hawan puja*, a night parade down the main streets of Little Guyana followed by a cultural program at a nearby park.

An interesting feature of the community's *Diwali* observance is the practice of young devotees dressing like *deotas* to be displayed on parade floats and religious scenes depicted at the cultural program. The highlight of such costuming is the annual *Diwali* flyer model contest where young Indo-Guyanese Hindu women in the community compete to be the image of *Mata* Lakshmi (Mother Lakshmi) displayed on the advertisement for the year's *Diwali* events. Local community personality, Lakshmee Singh announces the contest for the *Diwali* flyer each year on the public Facebook group page: "Show us your Best Goddess pose" (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Advertisement for the 2016 Diwali Flyer Model Contest (Accessed from Diwali Motorcade public Facebook page 9/18/16: https://www.facebook.com/groups/743174835788366/)

Indo-Guyanese Hindus post photographs of the young women in their family dressed in Indian clothing on the event's Facebook page. The photograph receiving the most likes wins. Wearing *saris* with rich embroidery and adorned with dazzling costume jewelry and flower *malas* (garlands), these women mimic goddesses, at least on the surface, to earn the coveted prize of being that year's *Mata* Lakshmi (Figure 4.2).
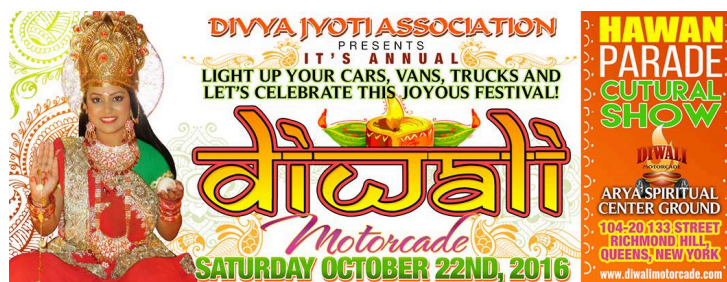
Figure 4.2. Image of the official 2016 *Diwali* flyer advertisement featuring the contest winner. (Accessed from *Diwali* Motorcade public Facebook page 9/18/16: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153756276186946&set=gm.95848835425 7012&type=3&theater)

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Such contests illustrate how Indo-Guyanese Hindu women "merg[e] the ideal presented by Hindu goddesses with a culturally Indian aesthetic and with the material culture expected of beauty contestants" (Hosein 2011, 147). However, there is more at play than winning and being the year's *Mata* Lakshmi. For Indo-Guyanese Hindus, the wearing of Indian clothing at *mandirs* and celebrations is an important way of knowing and performing one's ethnicity and faith. In fact, the performance of ethnicity extends beyond the clothing to the body in that one's body communicates one's identity.

The performance of the body reveals or communicates ethnic, cultural, and/or religious identity. From the wearing of Indian clothing to the way an individual moves or performs their body, the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community is commenting and assessing how individuals perform their bodies to be recognized as Indian, Hindu, Guyanese, Indo-Caribbean, and/or Indo-American.[95] For instance, a *Samajist* pandit often praised his Indo-Guyanese youth devotees for the way they approach their devotion and carry themselves during their Sunday *satsang* services. He made the following comment to an Indo-Guyanese teenage boy in front of the congregation: "Your hat and *kurta* (Indian styled shirt) looks very nice. Look at how he approaches *Guruji* (teacher). Mummy and Daddy should be proud." Complementing the boy's confident walk up to him, the *pandit* gushed at how the boy looked like a good *Samajist* (follower of *Arya Samaj*) in his white *kurta*.

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[95] As the literature on beauty pageants demonstrates, the performance of the body "showcase[s] values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place" (C. B. Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996, 2). Bodies, particular women's bodies, become sites of asserting a nation's modernity, ethnic authenticity, and upward class mobility on a local and global stage (Hosein 2011; Balogun 2012; David 2012; Ragbir 2012; Balogun and Hoang 2013).

Rani, an Indo-Guyanese woman active in a *Kalimai* temple, made similar comments during our interview. When she spoke about the troubles of the second generation in New York, her regret focused upon issues of performance:

> I was seeing a girl yelling at a guy…. And the way she was, her body language, the way she was going, I said, I thought she was a black girl. When I passed those kids, and I'm saying kids because they were so young, she was cursing at him and he was saying things that I was like you really shouldn't use that language because it is not your right first of all. And I'm like this is a phenomenon. These kids are trying to quote unquote talk black. And I'm like, your face is so kind looking. You look like you can wear a *sari* and be in a village cutting grass at any moment. That's the look that you have. And what's coming out of your mouth doesn't match your outside. Right? And I'm thinking does she know who she is or is this just the way that she is speaking and she really knows her culture?

In offering this observation of two Indo-Guyanese youths on the streets of Little Guyana, Rani expresses concern over the misperformance of this Indo-Guyanese girl. Instead of performing her brown body appropriately as a traditional Indian girl, she performs as "a black girl" through her use of a certain type of language and by being loud.[96] While she is uncertain the motivations behind this Indo-Guyanese girl's performance, Rani seems to believe that the outward appearance of one's body dictates one's performance and by extension your identity. Because the girl looks "like [she] can wear a *sari*" she should be reserved and navigate public in an "appropriate" manner. Although she criticizes this girl, Rani understands that one's performance changes with context:

> In order to portray the right you, you must also always know that you always have an audience, okay? And to be on the street of Liberty Ave there and you know that some *Nani* (grandmother) can be walking by and hearing this…. But at the end of the day, you know, I have to know who is around and know what setting I'm in and what is appropriate. The appropriateness is not really there anymore.

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[96] Rani's prejudiced description of loud behavior and inappropriate language as black echoes the sentiments of West Indian black parents whom anthropologist Oneka LaBennett interviewed in her study of West Indian girls in New York City and how they negotiate identity through consumption practices (2006, 2011). For a discussion of Indo-American youth's engagement with hip-hop culture in New York refer to the work of anthropologists Sunaina Maira (1998, 1999a, 2002) and Nitasha Tamar Sharma (2010). For a discussion of the impact of creolization and modernity on Indo-Caribbean femininity see Niranjana 2006, Hosein 2012, Kanhai 2011, Mohammed 2012, Ragbir 2012, and Hosein and Outar 2016.

While individuals may perform different selves in accordance to the context, Rani suggests that awareness of when to switch and what self to perform is no longer present in the community because the right thinking is just not there.

Her analysis mirrors that of many *pandits*, *pujaris* (priests), and other Indo-Guyanese Hindus I met in this research: in New York City, Indo-Guyanese Hindus are losing themselves. The loss of self is attached to the experience of migration and their changed priorities in New York. The cycles of conspicuous consumption and the dreams of home ownership which accompany moving to the United States result in Indo-Guyanese Hindus losing their "true selves" as they forget their culture, religion, and history and become American. Losing their selves results in inaccurate performances of their bodies. However, efforts to counter this loss appear to be pursued by Indo-Guyanese Hindu temples through a focus on bodily practices. From educating devotees in the proper performance of ritual practices and prayers to discussions of what suitable temple attire is, all temples are invested in educating its devotees in the appropriate performance of their bodies to cultivate their "true selves".

In this chapter, I discuss the Indo-Guyanese Hindu body and how displacement through its history of twice-migration has resulted in certain social attitudes towards the body. The body is the most intimate possession of an individual, but rarely does one have the ability to define it. For instance, when an individual is socially marked as an immigrant or a racial other, the body takes on new meaning. In analyzing the meanings that are attached to the Indo-Guyanese Hindu body, I will use performance and practice theory to examine how a body is rendered meaningful and how one assumes or resists

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such meaning through the cultivation of self. Further, I will examine how notions of authenticity are performed and policed through the body.

To begin, I will discuss the conventional temple practices of most Indo-Guyanese Hindus. From gestures in ritual performance to how to sit in temple, these concerns of the body are simultaneously about ethnicizing individuals while performing and embodying faith. Such practices ultimately alter the body while simultaneously "situat[ing] individuals and groups in time and space" (Tweed 2006, 100). Then I will discuss the performance of Hindu, Indian and Indo-Caribbean music and dance. Since most professional Indo-Guyanese artists (singers, drummers, and dancers) began their career in a temple, they view their art as a form of devotion. Their mastery of temple bodily performative practices through music and dance results in an internal spiritual transformation via a community approved vision of authentic Indo-Guyaneseness and Indianness. And finally, I will discuss yoga and *Ayurvedic* classes, which are increasingly becoming part of the regular services offered by Caribbean Hindu temples in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. By discussing the approaches of three Indo-Guyanese yoga teachers, I will consider in what ways the body is transformed and for what ends.[97] In all my discussions, I will focus on how Indo-Guyanese Hindus are conditioned into an ethnicized and/or religious self via embodied practices.

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[97] In addition to yoga classes being part of the regular services now offered by Caribbean Hindu *mandirs*, I discuss yoga because it has its origins in the *Vedas* and was part of religious practice before the modern, global systems of yoga that appears separate from a religious tradition (Jain 2015, 2–19). Further, some of the *asanas* (postures) and *mudras* (hand gestures) of yoga are included in Indian dance training (Zarrilli 1990, 132–34; 2000, 72).

Setting the Stage for the Self

To examine how bodily practices in the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community cultivates senses of self I will rely upon the insights of performance theory. As folklorist Deborah Kapchan explains "performances are aesthetic practices—patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment—whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities" (1995, 479). How Indo-Guyanese Hindus perform their bodies communicates how the individual and the group understands themselves and are understood in New York City (Taylor 2003, 3). The body itself, however, is not the lone subject of study, but rather is made meaningful through its interactions with society. The body is performed and understood in relation to other bodies. Also, these interactions are influenced by the context in which they occur; the specific setting influences and is influenced by the interaction (Goffman 1982). By considering the actors, the setting, and the history of displacement, this chapter demonstrates how "the dynamic and creative tension between continuity and innovation is precisely why the study of culture as performance is so fascinating" (Korom 2013, 3).

A Matter of the Body

The body is an important site of study since "it is both subjective and objective, meaningful and material, personal and social and can be considered the 'material infrastructure' of the production of selves, belonging, and identities" (Van Wolputte 2004, 256). Our bodies impact how we navigate and experience the world just as the world impacts how we experience and understand our bodies and ultimately our selves (Espírito Santo 2012). As a social construct, the body becomes knowable through the

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social categories that a society develops and defines to name bodies and the rules a

society develops to control bodies (Douglas 2002).

But while the body is rendered meaningful through such discourse, the cultural

and societal norms are materialized through the body (Butler 1993; Méndez 2015). For

instance, today in the United States, the possibility of violence in various forms

accompanies the movement of non-white bodies in public spaces. In her recent book, *We*

Too Sing American, Deepa Iyer discusses how the racial transformation of American

society creates anxiety about and for non-white bodies:

> …the American racial landscape is undergoing a rapid and radical demographic
> transformation. South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities, along with
> Latino, Asian and multiracial youth, are driving the changes that will within three
> decades lead to a time when people of color will be the majority populations. As
> such, their bodies and lives are already becoming the sites where new battles of
> racism and xenophobia are waged. They are simultaneously perceived as the
> targets of racial anxiety--as well as potential members of the expanding category
> of 'Whiteness' (2015, xii).

As the United States continues to diversify, non-white bodies are either hailed as targets

or tolerated as new white-like bodies. Therefore, through the body an individual is

marked as or becomes aware of how s/he is marked as different from the majority (Fanon

1968; Pandey 2013). This is best illustrated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The hailing of his blackness by a white French child illustrates the anxiety over the

meaning of his body in a white world:

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of
> his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a
> third-person consciousness.…A slow composition of my self as a body in the
> middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not
> impose itself on me; it is, rather a definitive structuring of the self and of the
> world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the
> world (1968, 110–11).

As Fanon explains, the body for the black man becomes his consciousness, or more pointedly, how others engage his body informs if not defines his self and how he navigates or performs his self in society.

Philosopher George Yancy further articulates this idea in his book *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008). In his opening chapter, Yancy discusses what he calls the "elevator effect," the feel of anxiety and fear that permeates a space when a black man enters an elevator occupied only by a white woman. As the elevator ascends, the tension of the space increases as the white woman only sees the man's black body and the danger and criminality society has ascribed upon it. In response to the woman's reaction to his black body, "her perspective, her third-person account, seeps into [his] consciousness" (Yancy 2008, 5). His body becomes black through her white gaze.[98] However, instead of accepting this engagement of his body and the double consciousness that emerges from the experience, Yancy advocates "resisting the white gaze" (2008, 6) so that his self is not defined by her recognition of his body:

> …Black resistance, as a mode of decoding, is simultaneously a process of recoding Black embodied existence through processes of opposition and *affirmation*….On my interpretation, under colonial/neocolonial conditions or enslavement, when Black bodies resist, they affirm. Resistance embodies onto-existential resources that might be articulated in the following forms: *I am, I exist,* I recognize myself as taking a stand against the white racist episteme that has attempted to render void my capacity to imagine other/alternative possibilities of being (2008, 112).

To resist therefore is to affirm oneself as a black body, as a black self not constrained or constituted by white hegemony. I argue that a similar reworking of the brown body is

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[98] "Within the context of white North America, before I am born, my body's meaning has been defined by those historically embedded racist practices, discourses, and institutional forces that often remain invisible. But even whites who do not profess to be racist, yet who nevertheless benefit from being embodied as 'white,' also have their bodies defined relative to racist practices, discourses, and institutional forces" (Yancy 2008, 26).

happening in the Indo-Guyanese community through bodily practices in Indo-Guyanese

Hindu temples. Since their brown bodies prevent them from being viewed solely as

Americans, the practices Indo-Guyanese Hindus learn within the temple inculcates them

with the pride that should be embodied by their brownness.

Breaking down the Four *Bhas*

 Pandit Vikram, a forty-something *Samajist* raised in the Guyanese countryside,

and I sat in a busy Dunkin' Donuts in Little Guyana finishing our interview.[99] For two

hours, we had discussed Hinduism, his experience growing up in Guyana, and issues the

community faced in New York. As we concluded our conversation, I asked him what it

meant to be Indian. His answer was: the four *bhas*. *Bha* is a consonant in the Hindi

language, but I had no idea what he meant by the four *bhas* until he offered the following

explanation:

> In Hindi, we say *bha*. To be Indian there is *bhasha.* There is *bhesh*. *Bhasha* means language, you know, retaining, maintaining that language. *Bhesh* means clothing. You know when you dress with your *salwar-kameezes* or your *kurta* pajamas. It identifies you as being Indian. *Bhasha, bhesh,* then there is *bhojan*, the food we eat. As an Indian I will not go to McDonalds….And *bhajan*, the songs, but the culture that surrounds songs. The dances, the *satsang* (community), the kind of experience that goes with when you sing a religious song. These four things here identify me, in as much as I am born a Guyanese, but this is what identifies me as Indian.

Attend any Sunday *satsang* service in the city and all four *bhas* are present. Language is

present through the chanting of Sanskrit mantras or the singing of Hindi songs. Clothing

is present with most devotees wearing their best Indian clothes for service. Food is

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[99] *Pandit* Vikram grew up in a small, Indian village in Guyana. Although raised in *Sanatanist* house, he attended classes at his local *Samajist* temple, which inspired him to become *Samajist* and eventually a *pandit*. He earned a scholarship to study Hindi in Delhi before immigrating to New York, where is a *pandit* during the weekend and works at the airport during the week. While it is difficult for him to juggle the demands of *mandir*, work, and his wife and two young daughters, he believes it is worth the effort.

present with all services ending in the eating of Guyanese-style Indian food together. And songs or culture are present through the singing of devotional music as well as the attention to the accurate performance of gestures in ritual worship. The four *bhas* offered a succinct explanation for why certain practices are observed in temples. The *bhas,* while observed in temples, appear to be more about ethnicity than religion, a means to mark and possibly educate the Indo-Guyanese body as Indian. In her discussion on the importance of cultural awareness for second generation Indo-Guyanese, Rani makes a similar claim:

> You know culture is there for a reason. We have to think why it is there. You know you have music, you have dance, you have food, you have fashion, you have tradition, you have religion, you have rituals...there is so much that is involved in culture, not just one thing. And like I always say, you cannot be an expert in every aspect, but you should know. Like I say, you got to know your self. Don't let anyone fool you.

To know one's self one should know their culture. And to know this culture is to engage it through the body, by eating the food, hearing the music, performing the ritual gestures, and wearing the clothes. Rani learned this from her Indo-Guyanese father and her Puerto Rican mother who met and married in Manhattan in the mid-1970s. Rani, born and raised in Queens, knows Spanish, Hindi, Sanskrit, and some Tamil, which she learned at a *Kalimai* temple where she met her husband, Mohan. She is also a classically[100] trained

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[100] Through my interviews the term classical was used by Indo-Guyanese singers, dancers, and musicians to describe performance genres that were Indian classical. While Indian music never went through a classical period, the term "classical" "combined ideas about art and the artist with a notion of Indianness formed in opposition to the West" (Weidman 2006, 5). To be classical is to be Indian in a way that was modern, but still tied to a glorious past (Weidman 2012, 249–53). Classical was often used in interviewers to indicate the authenticity of the art performed and by extension the Indianness of the performer. Classical was not used to describe genres that were Indo-Caribbean/Indo-Guyanese.

Kathak[101] and *Bomba*[102] dancer, which she wrote about in her master's thesis. She is

currently raising her two children and encouraging her dance students to know their

cultures so they may know themselves.

Ajay, a married thirty-something Indo-Guyanese Hindu man, also helps Indo-

Guyanese youth learn their culture. In 2013, he founded *Sangeet Samaaj* (music

society)[103], a local cultural organization in the community, which is still active today.

Rather than attend college, Ajay spent his youth learning music in Guyana.[104] In 2003, he

immigrated to pursue Indian music professionally in New York. By performing at various

temples in the city, he observed parts of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community, which

inspired him to create a cultural organization and to make the following observation of

Indo-Guyanese youth at temples:

> Lot of kids go to *mandirs* because they're attracted to the music or they're
> attracted to the fashion, right? Some of these young girls just go to dress up. Nice
> in their *saris*. Ok the *sari* is one thing, now you have to accessorize these things.
> You're a girl, you understand what I'm saying. Some of them just go for that. "Oh,
> how do I look in my Indian wear?" And they put up picture on Instagram and all
> these things.

As Ajay presents it, the ability to wear Indian clothes in temple is a main draw for some,

especially girls.[105] In a city where the opportunities to perform one's ethnic self are

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[101] *Kathak* is a form of Indian classical dance from North India (Srinivasan 2011, 70).

[102] *Bomba* is dance from Puerto Rico of African origins (Manuel 2006, 66).

[103] *Sangeet Samaj* is the actual name of the organization.

[104] Ajay learned to play *dholak* (double-headed drum played in North India and Caribbean) in the traditional way by accompanying and living with his *guru* (teacher).

[105] Indo-Guyanese/Indo-Caribbean clothing does not exist. One wears western clothes or Indian clothes. At temple and at cultural events, Indo-Guyanese girls and women wear Indian clothing (*e.g. saris, salwar-kameezes*) more than boys and men. This trend is probably linked to Indian clothing for men (*e.g. dhoti, kurta-pajamas*) being viewed as unmanly and low-status (Kloss 2016, 118–24). The Indo-Guyanese girls and women I met enjoyed buying and wearing Indian clothes. Special temple ceremonies and cultural events offered them the opportunity to show off their latest purchases. However, by wearing Indian clothes

limited, the context of the temple offers both the older and younger generation the opportunity to dress Indian on a weekly basis; as Lalitha, a sixty-something Indo-Guyanese woman running a local cultural organization, explained, "on Sunday everyone can be Indian." Sitting on the ground with their legs crossed, observing the *pandit* perform rituals for the *deotas* (gods), devotees often assess each other's outfits and offer compliments on the style and design of these clothes. Some even share the story of their clothing, remarking how they buy their "*saris* from Mumbai and their jewelry from Jaipur."[106] This desire to dress Indian is not only promoted by devotees and temple management, but also by the clothing of the *murtis* (statues of *deotas*). With their silk, bedazzled *saris* and *dhotis* (cloth tied around waist) and sporting gold jewelry, the *deotas* "all look like Bollywood stars" (Figure 4.3).

these girls and women "performed a kind of 'symbolic womanhood' at extended family gatherings, religious settings and cultural functions" (Ragbir 2012, 11) that asserted the community's Indianness.

[106] In moving to the city there is an opportunity to access Indian clothing in manner not possible in Guyana. Little Guyana has at least seven stores specializing in Indian clothing and Little India, located in Flushing, Queens, with its extensive Indian clothing boutiques, is a 35-minute ride on public transportation. For a more detailed discussion of Indian clothing in the Indo-Guyanese community in New York City and Guyana see Kloss 2016.

Figure 4.3. Altar of a *Sanatanist* temple, Little Guyana (photo by author)

While some lament the "bling" and Bollywoodification of temples, others

recognize that the temple space offers more than the opportunity to dress Indian. It

provides the opportunity to be in community with other brown individuals and recuperate

from the feeling of difference experienced outside the temple. Sheila, a twenty-something

Indo-Guyanese Hindu lawyer and activist born in the Bronx and raised in Queens,

explained her motivations for attending temple while growing up:

> ...when I was at school I was always the ugly duckling….even though my school
> was diverse, I was perceived as a bit strange…especially when I stopped going to
> public school and my parents enrolled me in private [Catholic] school. I was
> going to school…which is very Irish [and] Italian and so I was always looked at
> as the different kid…. And different equals ugly to kids. Temple…was a place for
> me to, I guess, like boys for the first time and you know be….

Being othered for her brown skin and curly hair, Sheila found the space of the temple

recuperative to her self-esteem or sense of self. It was the only space in her life where she

could be surrounded by other Indo-Guyanese and to learn about her culture, her religion,

and Indian aesthetics of beauty. By coming to temple, she learned to overcome her

feelings of inadequacy that emerged from attending her school and to be comfortable in

her brown skin. She even met her fiancée at temple.

Gina, a forty-something Indo-Guyanese housewife, likewise shared feelings of

anxiety for her brown body in the landscape of New York City, but this anxiety emerged

at a different point in her life. Born in Georgetown, she immigrated to Brooklyn at the

age of seven following the divorce of her parents. She attended a diverse middle and high

school in the city where she felt little prejudice except from *desi* students who questioned

her Indianness. Following 9/11, however, she became more aware of her brownness:

> It's hard. We're adjusting to America…So it is hard trying to figure out how to fit
> in and where to fit in…When 9/11 happened and people would look at me. I'm
> like no, no, no…. Please don't look at me like that.

Her brown body transformed her into a threat to United States and placed her in threat.

Although Gina herself and her husband are lapsed Hindus who question the authority of

temples as institutions of religion and knowledge, she returned to temple to give her teen

son "a foundation" to deal with such prejudice.

Beyond the Superficial through Practice and *Habitus*

By discussing the social construction of black bodies, Fanon and Yancy illustrate

how the body is rendered meaningful through a duality of self and body. This duality, can

also reveal a way to resist the othering of the body. If the self and body are not two

separate entities, but are the same, the individual may overcome their marginalization by

society through the body. This idea of the body and self as one has produced

anthropology's emerging interest in embodiment. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1990)

is probably the most famous advocate for the paradigm of embodiment:

> This approach to embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the
> body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as

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the *subject* of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture (1990, 5).

Csordas, building upon insights of phenomenonolgy through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty who argues that all objects are perceived into existence through our body, "raise[s] issues of the perceptual constitution of cultural objects (1990, 36).

The body is not a given. The body is not an object. But the body is integral to our perceiving of the world and ourselves (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). The body is actually a subject. If the body is approached in this manner, then the alterity assigned upon and experienced by marginalized bodies may be countered not only by resisting the gaze, but by appreciating that the mind and body or the self and body are not distinct entities. Therefore, society's engagement with your body does not define your self or subjectivity, but your body is yourself. Reclaim your body to know yourself.

In her discussion of how the sacred is made tangible through the body, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) makes a similar point by prompting us to consider how the Divine is experienced and accessed through the body: religious practice reworks one's understanding of body and self. For instance, in her work on transnational Santería, anthropologist Aisha M. Belíso De-Jesus (2014) discusses how the practitioners train and prepare their body to experience an Orisha upon it. Ritual practices such as donning appropriate clothes and observing a special diet prepare the practitioners to become the Orisha or the alterity of self (Csordas 2004). Such a practice "contributes to a reconstitution of the 'body'" (Méndez 2014, 2) and echoes the four *bhas* introduced by *Pandit* Vikram.

If the social world is a performance, then people act out roles through practices. These practices contribute to the formation of a new *habitus* for individuals; more

precisely, religious practitioners learn to use their bodies in spiritual ways. Pierre

Bourdieu explains the *habitus* as the following:

> The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed...the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions....The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1995, 32–33).

The *habitus* is formed through practice or the repetition of a practice or an action until it

becomes a habit that an individual subconscious does.

Saba Mahmood, in her ethnography *Politics of Piety* (2005)*,* uses *habitus*, like

Belíso De-Jesus, to explain how the alterity of self is cultivated through practice. By

examining the participation of women in a piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood describes

how a feminist subject is cultivated through embodied religious practices. For instance,

the act of wearing a veil (or other bodily performances) should be understood as a

repeated action through which the body is transformed. As the women in this piety

movement believe, this shift in how a woman performs her body signals an internal

transformation in self as well. Mahmood notes how embodied practice cultivates a certain

intention and ethical formation through repeated practice. The *habitus* is cultivated,

particularly how conscious repetition of an action is done to realize a virtue with the goal

of performing the action unconsciously to enact a virtue (Mahmood 2005, 139).

The *habitus* is cultivated in the Indo-Guyanese community through a focus and

consideration on the aesthetics of worship. Worship includes the accurate performance of

both *mantras* and gestures. As performance theorist Diana Taylor states, "performances

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function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" (2003, 3). Therefore, in Caribbean Hindu worship in New York City, the aesthetics and performance of worship sets out to achieve to two ends through the body: 1) transmitting a history of the past and 2) cultivating a new sense of self and *habitus*.

The Aesthetics of Worship

While some devotees seek guidance and support to recuperate from their daily experiences as marginalized individuals in the city, temple leaders demonstrate a desire to engage and to reclaim a lost history and sense of identity that may be realized and preserved by future generations. To access this past certain temples prioritize developing and teaching devotees a repertoire of gestures and other aesthetic skills. In developing this repertoire and receiving training, the devotee may recognize and access the past (Dejarlais and Throop 2011, Sheller 2014). Or as Rani explains, "it is to unlock our ancient memories because our memories are beyond our lifetime."

For instance, in one *Kalimai* temple, the leadership is deeply committed to teaching the repertoire of gestures and Tamil. In many conversations, I noted that the aesthetics of worship are a major concern for ritual specialists such as *pujaris* and *marlos*. Are they pronouncing and singing the Tamil right? Are they performing the drum rhythms accurately? Are the gestures of the *puja* executed correctly and with grace? For example, Mohan[107], the head priest of this temple, sought out the assistance of his elders in Guyana to learn how to properly perform songs:

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[107] Mohan is the eldest son of the head *pujari* at the Great Kali Church of New York. He grew up in the *Kalimai* tradition in the countryside of Guyana. Immigrating to New York City prior to his father, he did additional studies to be certified as an engineer and now monitors the heating/air conditioning systems of a local college. During his breaks at work he reads religious books and teaches himself Tamil so that he may better serve Mother Kali. Outside work he dedicates his time to his young family and the church. In fact, if is not home, he is at the church, either caring for the *deotas*, fixing up the building of the church, training new *pujaris* in the tradition or counseling devotees.

And when I went back to Guyana in 2000 I went and reached out to a lot of these old guys then that still continue to sing and do the *pujas* and stuff. And I use to invite them, every time I go, bring them over to my house, and we use to do singing and stuff like that because they know a lot of songs that we could sing….So I use to invite them to learn the songs from them because I want to hear the ear sound, that is how the songs must be singed [*sic*] because if I give you a copy of a song you still can't sing it. But if you hear the ear sound you can sing it…. After I pick up all the ear sound from these guys I had some of the songs and I practiced them [*sic*].

As Mohan points out, it is one thing to know the lyrics of the song and another to sing them. The importance of the sound, language, tonality, and the proper pronunciation are also part of the body as performance. The lyrics of these songs, have been documented and are available in books, but knowing how to sing them is only accessible orally through "the ear sound" or hearing a performance. Or rather, the knowledge is in the performance. Unfortunately, this knowledge is endangered since the older generation is dying without educating the next. Concerned for the potential loss of these songs, Mohan trains the children of his temple to sing. He believes that through performing the songs the children learn the tradition while preserving it. As a result, his temple is "one of the few [*Kalimai*] temples to actually sing in Tamil."[108]

Drawing on the insights of Karen McCarthy Brown, M. Jacqui Alexander also argues that the spiritual impacts the body praxis so that we may approach the body as an

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[108] Tamil is only spoken and taught in *Kalimai* temples. As mentioned earlier, the small number of indentured laborers from South India brought the *Kalimai* tradition to the Caribbean. These individuals spoke Tamil, but with each generation the language dissipated and was soon limited to temple rituals. In New York, a few *Kalimai* temples are teaching Tamil, both writing and speaking, but most devotees have no knowledge of the language. They have learned to accurately recite/sing Tamil prayers, *mantras*, and songs, but do not know how to translate them into English. Instead, they rely on translations given by *pujaris* to understand the significance of what they recite or sing. The *pujaris'* translations are based on the *pujaris'* limited knowledge of Tamil and the translations they learned from older *pujaris* and the internet. Most *pujaris* generally know a little more Tamil than devotees because of their *pujari* training. Like *Sanatanists* and *Samajists*, *Kalimai* devotees mostly speak English or Guyanese (Creole English) at home. Tamil and Hindi were never used as home languages for any individuals I interviewed. Despite the lack of everyday use of these languages, the accurate pronunciation of Hindi and Tamil words is promoted in the singing and the recitation of prayers in temples.

archive: "Body and memory are lived in the same body, if you will, and this mutual living, this entanglement, enables us to think and feel these inscriptions as process, a process of embodiment" (2005, 297). If the sacred is in the body, how does one access it? Through embodied practices. The learning of gestures, dance steps, and other aesthetic elements are geared not only to maintain the performance of rituals, but to guide devotees in experiencing or knowing their bodies differently and accessing knowledge in an alternative way (David 2012, 382). As many devotees have explained to me, the burning of incense, chanting mantras, and gestures which accompany ritual practices are geared towards focusing the mind to access and realize the self and the divine as one.

But to achieve this connection, the devotee should be knowledgeable of what and why they are doing gestures in the temple. Rani, a *marlo* (priest) at a *Kalimai* temple, stated as much when she explained the gestures that accompany the offering of *aarti* (offering of light) to a *deota*: "We're tracing OM with the *diya* (clay pot). Some people don't know. They're just monkey see monkey do. They don't know that's what they're doing." This lack of knowledge prevents individual from properly approaching *deotas* and having them present in their lives. By simply mimicking ritual gestures, some devotees are missing the significance and purpose of worship. Knowing the meaning of the gestures and its significance in relation to worship allows the individual to bring a proper intention to their ritual practice (Katrak 2008, 217; David 2012, 383). This intention, or conscious effort and understanding of how ritual gestures, prepares the devotee to know God in themselves (David 2009, 221–25).

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Professional Indo-Guyanese Hindu artists (singers, musicians, and dancers) best achieve this intention.[109] Most devotees know how to sing and/or play one or two instruments because music is a major element of Caribbean Hindu worship.[110] Few devotees go beyond the Sunday service to become skilled, professional artists. And although the classical Indian art forms (Hindustani music, *Kathak*, etc,) pursued by these professional artists are distinct from the music and gestures performed in temples in the city, they are derived from earlier temple traditions and are informed by the initial training of the body and performances of *bhajans* in temples, as I will discuss.

Further, in discussing their craft, professional artists reveal an incredible responsibility in performing their art accurately and properly; as Ranjitha, a skilled Hindustani singer in the community, explains: "You know how heavy, *kafi* (quite) heavy these topics are….You're talking about ideals and tradition and...[sigh] I don't know what else to call it. Prejudices? Paradoxes?" Ranjitha framed her experiences as a professional singer in terms of what it means to be an Indo-Guyanese Hindu in New York. Beyond her personal transformation of body and self in learning her art, the learning and accurate performance of classical Hindustani music (classical North Indian music) performs and proves the authentic Indianness of herself and her community.[111]

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[109] By professional Indo-Guyanese artists I refer to individuals who receive money for their performances.

[110] *Bhajans* or Hindu devotional songs are generally sung collectively at *mandirs* or religious gatherings by amateurs (Manuel 2000, 9). This singing is usually accompanied by a combination *dholak*, *dhantal*, small, hand cymbals and/or harmonium.

[111] Like Amanda Weidman (2006), ethnomusicologist Katherine Butler Schofield (2010) notes the constructed nature of "classical" in her study of Hindustani music. Hindustani music is a singing tradition of North India that is reworked and rendered classical starting in the colonial period (Schofield 2010, 488–89). It is a tradition that first originates in Mughal courts in the 1600s that later merges with Hindu traditions. While their ancestors brought *Bhopuri* folk music traditions to the Caribbean, Indo-Guyanese prefer Hindustani music for its authenticity and legitimacy as a classical form of art. The Indo-Guyanese community was first exposed to Hindustani tradition through Indian music radio shows and records in the 1930s and 1940s (Manuel 2000, 53–55). It is not a musical tradition transported by their indentured

Her story echoes many I have heard from other Indo-Guyanese Hindu artists during my fieldwork. Idolized as models of good Hindus and Indians, these artists, including dancers of *Kathak* (type of Indian classical dance), proficient Indian drummers and singers of Hindustani music and *Taan* (Indo-Caribbean music tradition derived from Hindustani music), have the challenging task of performing and maintaining the Indian authenticity of the Indo-Guyanese.[112] They train their bodies to realize the self and body as one, a feat not achieved by most Indo-Guyanese devotees attending temple.

Being a Classical Indian, Indo-Guyanese Hindu Artist

Ranjitha, born and raised in Brooklyn, is an Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman in her mid-thirties who dropped out of college following her mother's death from cancer to pursue singing professionally. Now a professional singer and vocal coach in Little Guyana, she began singing as a child at temples. In discussing her performance of Hindustani music as a teenager, Ranjitha talked about societal expectations and how the West Indian community viewed her as a "singing goddess." While her friends disparaged her rigid practice schedule which prevented her from hanging out, she notes how the elder generation, for the most part, revered her dedication: "I could see that it was a sense of pride. For my parents, they were so proud that the elder generation felt like, 'our tradition has been continued, this is great, you know.'"

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ancestors. In the community in New York City today, Indo-Guyanese Hindustani singers are accompanied by a harmonium and a *tabla* drum (barrel shaped, small drum). Although a constant feature for temple fundraising concerts and larger community religious events, Hindustani music performances rarely occur in temples. In fact, the *tabla* is an uncommon drum to find in temples, which could be connected with the instruments association with Islamic music tradition via the Mughal courts.

[112] According to the artists I interviewed, *bhajans*, Indian classical music and dance and Indo-Caribbean music, except chutney-soca, were first performed at temples in New York City. As time passed, only *bhajans* were performed at temples. The performance of other genres of music and dance are limited to cultural events or concerts. Chutney-soca, which I will define later, is never performed in temple.

Performing *bhajans* at local temples by the age of nine, she represented not only

to her parents, but also for the larger West Indian community, the future in which their

Indian traditions will persist in the face of migration to the Caribbean and then to New

York (David 2012, 386; Ragbir 2012, 9–14). This ideal as respectable, proficient classical

Indian artists that Ranjitha and her fellow artists embody, and at times resist, emerges not

only in response to the new racial and class structures Indo-Guyanese Hindu encounter in

New York, but mostly out of the manner in which Indo-Caribbean ethnicity and culture

are reacting to the ideas of Indianness and Hinduism in the United States.[113] By

promoting and performing classical Indian music and dance, the Indo-Guyanese Hindu

community not only attempts to access the status and privilege of the model minority, but

also strives to gain recognition within the larger Indo-American community, almost as a

way to overcome the coolie mentality as discussed in chapter two.

> Part of this process is making themselves visible. As Ranjitha explained,
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> …I don't think a lot of East Indians knew who Guyanese, Trinidadians, or Indo-Caribbean people were. I mean, a lot of them, I'm sorry to say, some people were very ignorant to the fact that people were removed from India and were not considered slaves. Like they were indentured servants. I mean they even took them to South Africa. They took them to all these other places. A lot of East Indian people never knew that happened. They were just completely unaware. "What do you mean you're Indian? What do you mean you're Guyanese? You're Caribbean? I don't get it."

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[113] Indo-Guyanese artists, particularly singers and dancers, are praised by the Indo-Guyanese community for skill in classical Indian music and dance traditions. Attempts to perform outside these genres are generally not approved. For instance, Ranjitha has released two albums. Her first album of Hindu devotional music sold well. Her second album where she sang "like Alicia Keys" did not sell well because her community "wants to hear the SA RI GA MA" or Indian music.

Learning that the greater Indo-American community was unaware of her ancestors'

history of migration, she continued to discuss how their ignorance resulted in limited

understandings of what constitutes the Indo-Caribbean community:

> …all they knew about Indo-Caribbeans were from channel 77 where the ones
> were dancing and doing chutney dances and they wanted to put you in that box.
> [114] "Oh, you must be like that. Really masala-ish kind of." I'm like, "No. I'm
> actually a classical musician and play the sitar" [*sic*].

Ranjitha's response to this limited view of the greater Indo-American community is

striking. She is not a "'masala-ish'" (mixture) version of an Indo-Caribbean woman who

suggestively dances to chutney music (Indo-Caribbean dance music), but a classically

trained singer. She sounded offended that as an Indo-Guyanese woman who has trained

for over twenty years in Indian classical music she would not be seen as authentically

Indian. She has learned the *ragas* and *talas* (Indian melodic and metrical systems) and

has endured rigorous training of her body to seamlessly perform and improvise

Hindustani music.[115]

Other artists share this resentment and want their commitment to perform their art

accurately and traditionally to be recognized. Rani shared the following insight about her

approach to *Kathak*[116]:

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[114] Channel 77 is a public access TV station in New York City that shows Hindu devotional programming
as well as Chutney (fast paced Indo-Caribbean folk songs)/Soca (fast paced calypso/Caribbean music)
music videos. "Chutney dancing" refers to *wining*, which anthropologist Philip Scher defines as "the erotic
gyration of hips, slightly bent knees, and rotations of the buttocks" (2003, 187). For a further discussion of
Chutney/Soca and ideas of Indianness in the Caribbean in relation to music see Manuel 2000, Ramnarine
2001, and Niranjana 2006.

[115] For a further discussion of the somatic training in Hindustani music see Rahaim 2012.

[116] As defined earlier, *Kathak* is a form of Indian classical dance from North India (Srinivasan 2011, 70). A
Kathak dancer is accompanied by many instruments, but most frequently with a harmonium, *tabla*, and
small, hand cymbals. The *tabla* drummer is the most important component of the accompanying music
since he augments the sounds of the dancer's feet or echoes her feet rhythm. And although dancers tend to
be women and drummers tend to men in this community there are exceptions. For instance, Gora Singh was
a proficient male Indo-Guyanese, *Kathak* dancer who taught many of the dancers in the community. Also,

That has been the attitude of a lot people. "Oh I'm Indian so I know this." Or, "I'm more Indian than you because you're from Guyana and I'm from India," you know? All that kind of things have to stop….And I'm like, Hey I'm half Puerto Rican and half [Indo-]Guyanese and I'm teaching an Indian from India so don't tell me whose better and whose not [*sic*].

As Rani argues, her mixed heritage does not reduce her authenticity or sense of

Indianness. For her, her authenticity is linked to her approach and engagement to her art:

…the students nowadays… want to do it as an activity not as a life training. It's a different way of thinking, you know? There are so many different parts of dance. You have the aerobic part of it. Then you have the spiritual part of it. The religious part of it. The physicality. The technique. The storytelling. The scripture that you have to learn. They lyrical part of it. You know, the emotional part of it. There is so much that you have to know.

These female Indo-Guyanese artists understand a connection between their art and

eliciting a certain, maybe spiritual response through their performance. The performance

is not limited to receiving praise from a mortal audience. But rather goes beyond the

conventional frame. In training how to move their bodies and/or use their voice, these

individuals connect with the Divine through their art. Raj, a talented *Taan* (Indo-

Caribbean singing tradition)[117] singer who arrived in the city at the age of ten in 1981[118],

captures this intention in describing a performance he gave:

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in my fieldwork I have observed women perform drums, but very infrequently. For a discussion of gender and drumming in Indo-Caribbean temples see Jackson 2016.

[117] While resembling North Indian folk music more than Hindustani music, "Tān-singing has arguably constituted the most dynamic, distinctive, and sophisticated form of Indo-Caribbean expressive culture" (Manuel 2000, 13). *Taan* singers are accompanied by an ensemble of musicians playing *dholak* (a two-headed barrel drum), harmonium, small, hand cymbals, and *dhantal* (a steel rod held vertically and struck with a U-shaped clapper). All these instruments are available at any Caribbean Hindu temple in the city. Like Hindustani music, *Taan* is known for improvisation, which is how *Taan* singers are judged. From the 1940s-1970s *Taan,* also known as local-classical, grew in popularity in Guyana and Trinidad, but has since declined. Many *Taan* singers in New York as well as in the Caribbean are attempting to revive the tradition. For a more in-depth discussion of the *Taan* tradition see (Manuel 2000)

[118] Raj grew up in the countryside of Guyana. When his family arrived in Brooklyn in 1981, his parents, three older brothers and two younger sisters would attend *mandir* every Sunday, regardless of the weather. In fact, they attended a *mandir* in New York that his father helped to found. Growing up in *mandir* played a huge role in his art. Coming from generations of *Taan* singers, Raj learned how to sing and play the

And whatever comes out of my experience and my understanding of what it should sound like I've connected to that God or Goddess…All of these songs are written to honor that God or Goddess and that is what I try to do when I sing these songs. To bring that connection, that conversation. For example, I feel if I am singing a song, like this morning for a prayer I went and I sang a song *Jagadesh* (God)*, Jagadesh, Jagadesh*. I connect myself with Ganeshji. I connect myself in a way that I'm singing to Ganeshji. I'm praising him….I'm speaking myself directly and that is my prayer to Ganeshji.

Through performance Raj connects and converses with the Divine. By singing a song and executing his voice to accurately produce the note and maintain a rich tone, he is offering his devotion to the *deotas*.

Whether it is Ganeshji, Ram, or Krishna or Durga or Kali, or Saraswati or whomever God or Goddess it is, it is a conversation between that person that's singing to that God…. we do use our flamboyance, our skills and whatever it is that we have learned or feel that is appropriate for a song to make the audience like it better but at the end of the day perhaps at the beginning of the day the whole point is to honor the God or Goddess.

Ultimately the audience's expectations and enjoyment is not the end for these Indo-Guyanese artists. The art, or the way in which the artists performs their body through dance or music enables them to transcend the body and the material problems of migration and marginalization in New York City is. To appreciate what Raj means by "connection" with the Divine or what Rani describes as the "spiritual" or "religious" I will examine how the body is cultivated to be open to such experiences through yoga. Yoga is related to classical Indian dance and music because aspects of their training draws from techniques from *Ayurveda* and yoga.[119]

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harmonium by accompanying his grandfather and father as they performed at mandirs and for religious functions in both Guyana and New York. And while he performs pop and chutney in addition to Hindu and Indo-Caribbean folk songs, "[he blends] in in both worlds."

[119] For instance, to sing Indian classical music requires singing with good posture and controlling one's breathing, while sitting on the floor, features that may be learned through yoga. The *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on dance and performance recommends exercise similar to yoga and "guidelines for maintaining health derived from *Ayurveda*" (Zarrilli 2000, 73).

Cultivating a Hindu Ethic through Yoga

With classes regularly offered in many Caribbean Hindu temples around the city

yoga is increasingly being practiced by both Indo-Guyanese Hindu women and men.[120]

But what is yoga and how does it prepare the individual to experience/know the spiritual?

The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yūj*, which means to yoke or bring

together. Yoga strives to connect the mind and body, but the body is the key. The body,

as Yancy and Fanon point out, may contribute to a false consciousness[121], but it also is

the means to true consciousness since through the body the individual connects with her

inner self or the *atman*.[122] As Swami Vivekananda explains:

> We have very little command of our minds. Therefore, to bring that command
> about, to get that control over body and mind, we must take certain physical
> helps. When the body is sufficiently controlled, we can attempt the manipulation
> of the mind. By manipulating the mind, we shall be able to bring it under our
> control, make it work as we like, and compel it to concentrate its power as we
> desire" (1972, 132).

Everyone possesses a body, but the body is not the individual's existence; the soul is.[123]

In making this point, Vivekananda argues that the individual's preoccupation with the

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[120] In her dissertation fieldwork of the ritual practice of Caribbean Hinduism in Queens, Michele Verma documented the various Caribbean Hindu *mandirs* in Southern Queens and the classes and programming offered. She found yoga classes to be offered in addition to Indian classical music and dance, Hindi, and Sanskrit classes (Verma 2010). My research found yoga classes offered at Caribbean Hindu temples in both Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. While both Indo-Guyanese men and women participate, the classes I participated in were solely for women, girl, and boys.

[121] "I am not the body. The body will die, but I shall not die. Here am I in this body; it will fall, but I shall go on living" (Vivekananda 1972, 8).

[122] The *ātman* is not only the individual's *ātman*, but also the ultimate *ātman* or universal self/Brahma (Vivekananda 1972). Thomas Csordas makes a similar claim in his discussion of Charismatic Christians experience of Jesus or the Virgin Mary during healing prayers: "I suggested that this experience is a genuine intimacy with a primordial aspect of the self that is the existential ground for both its fundamental indeterminacy and the possibility of an intersubjective relations—its own inherent otherness. In other words, the imaginal Jesus *is* the alterity of the self" (2004, 169). In Charismatic Christianity, the experience of the Divine is through the body such as a feeling of heavy limbs. In the context of yoga, the experience of the *ātman* is through focus exertion of the body.

[123] "I am a spirit living in a body. I am not the body" (Vivekananda 1972, 8).

body or the material world impedes one's ability to know one's true self or what I call for this chapter the Vedic self.

This idea of accessing and recognizing one's self is the goal of yoga practice. Through yoga practice the individual disciplines the body through poses to unify the body with the mind (Strauss 2004). But the performance of such practice is more than just the merging of body and mind, but the cultivation of self. In his research of Indian *kathakali* and *kalarippayattu*, a dance and martial arts tradition from Kerala, Philip Zarrilli notes how the "daily repetition of physical exercise and/or performance techniques encodes the techniques *in the body*" (1990, 131). Through rigorous training and practice, a *kathakali* actor thinks less about how to manipulate his body to perform a character and comes to inhabit the character. Yoga, a part of the training studied by Zarrilli, is a process of unification, which intends to reveal the true self that is obscured by *maya* (illusion) and materialism of the secular world (Vivekananda 1972; Jain 2015).

The cultivation of self discussed by Vivekananda and Zarrilli mirrors that of Saba Mahmood's argument about the body discussed earlier. Mahmood shifts our analysis away from what a ritual practice or other such spiritual exercise represents or means and towards how the practice contributes to subject formation. For instance, the veil should not be understood solely as a symbol of modesty and piety. Instead, the act of wearing a veil should be understood as a repeated action through which the body is transformed or rather how the individual moves or performs her body. As the women in this piety movement believe, this shift in how a woman performs her body signals an internal transformation in self as well. Mahmood notes how this understanding of how embodied practice cultivates a certain intention and ethical formation is actually the formation of

the Aristotelian *habitus*, which "is understood to an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person" (Mahmood 2005, 136). The Aristotelian *habitus* is concerned in how the *habitus* is cultivated, particularly how conscious repetition of an action is done to realize a virtue with the goal of performing the action unconsciously to enact a virtue (Mahmood 2005, 139). As a result, the Aristotelian *habitus* enables us to interrogate "how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world" (Mahmood 2005, 139). In the remaining part of the chapter I will consider how the repetitive actions of yoga practices may be learned in the hope of cultivating a Hindu ethic.

Yoga in Little Guyana

With the polar vortex of winter 2014 starting to melt away, Usha sent out a mass email invite to her network of Indo-Guyanese Hindus to join her *shakti* yoga[124] class. Restricted to women and children, her class is held every Wednesday evening in the main altar space of her *Sanatanist mandir*, an old Victorian house converted into a *mandir* back in 2010. In front of the brass *murtis* of the deotas, Usha stands in front of our small class of seven to lead us through a yoga routine of her own devising. Not trained to teach yoga, she relies upon YouTube videos, her own training at a *Rashtriya Sevak Sangh* (RSS)[125] summer camp in Trinidad during her youth, and her individual practice to

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[124] *Shakti* yoga is a style of yoga geared towards helping the practitioner connect with their *shakti* energy. *Shakti* refers to the feminine life energy which exist in all humans. Through a series of poses and breathing exercise, the practitioner may tap into their *shakti*.

[125] The RSS or *Rashtriya Sevak Sangh* is a paramilitary youth group founded in 1925 that emerged in British India to reform/reclaim Hinduism for political purposes. The RSS is connected with the Hindutva

educate our group of yogi ladies, most of whom have never practiced yoga before. Standing on the dated, maroon shaggy carpet, we mimic Usha's poses while maneuvering around the ornate chandeliers that hang low from the ceiling impeding a few ladies' abilities to execute the poses correctly. A slight breeze moves through the stuffy room from the open windows, as Usha explains the benefit of the pose: "Ladies, dis will burn da fat from da belly [*sic*]."

She continues to transition into fifteen more poses over the course of the next hour as we struggle to keep up, comprehend, and execute each of them correctly. After an hour of practice, out of breath, sweat dripping off our faces, Usha instructs us into the lotus position, asking us to clear our minds and meditate in order "to tap into the *mahasadha* spirit in [us]". With straight backs, legs crossed, and our hands resting upon our knees in the *gyan* mudra, we breathe slowly as Usha chants us out of our practice with the *Shanti mantra*.

This description of a community yoga class in Little Guyana is starkly different from the image now commonly associated with yoga[126] practice in the West. Instead of toned white bodies wearing constricting workout clothes performing their practice on the latest designed mats that lay upon a laminated hard wood floor, these Indo-Guyanese women, of various body types wear t-shirts and sweat pants opting to practice on a towel or the carpet floor of the *mandir*. Usha's class is just one example of the increasing number of yoga classes now offered in the community. With yoga studios proving to be

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movement and is global in nature (Dalmia 2009). For a more in-depth discussion of the somatic practices and training of the Hindutva movement see Valiani 2011.

[126] The yoga discussed in this chapter is *hatha* yoga which "was inherently physiological rather than metaphysical, even in its most philosophical articulation" (Alter 2006, 764).

too expensive in terms of price and time, many *mandirs* started offering free classes.[127] The intentions of these classes vary. While the leadership of *mandirs* views these classes as a means of Hindu and Indian education of the body (the four *bhas*), the Indo-Guyanese Hindu female teachers have different intentions, which often is not realized or appreciated by their students.

I will examine the approaches of three yoga instructors in the community to situate these Indo-Guyanese practices into a larger historical, transnational movement of yoga. As will become evident in this discussion, yoga as it migrates transnationally, changes meaning. In certain contexts, yoga is religious, while in others it is secular and even racialized and classed. To illustrate yoga as a shifting icon, I will draw upon performance and practice theory to discuss how the experience and feel of yoga produces a notion of self through the conditioning of the body. By following yoga in the Indo-Guyanese community in the city, I will also consider how the practice, through its goal of unifying the mind and body, cultivates multiple selves (*e.g.* religious, Indian/Hindu, Vedic/spiritual) to counter the experience of living in the city. In effect, I will read religion and culture back into contemporary practices of yoga.

Indo-Guyanese Practices of Yoga in New York City

Meera, Mary, and Usha are all Indo-Guyanese women who instruct free yoga classes in Hindu *mandirs* in New York City. Meera and Usha offer weekly classes in Queens to solely Indo-Guyanese Hindu women and children students while Mary runs a

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[127] The closest yoga studio to Little Guyana is in Forest Hills, Queens, about a 30-minute bus ride away from the main commercial street of Little Guyana. Unlike studios in Manhattan where a session costs around $20, the Forest Hills studio costs $15. However, to practice at the Forest Hills studio an individual must invest in a yoga mat and the cost of travel and commit to travel as well as practice. Such commitment is not feasible for the women in Usha's yoga class whose time is spent either working, caring for their children, and/or managing the family's household.

class in the Bronx which is attended by Indo-Guyanese Hindu women and their Latin and African American women friends.[128] Interestingly, all teachers share the goal of cultivating a certain intention in their students to counter the negative experiences of, or as I view it, the crisis of self emerging from living in New York City.

A *Sanatanist*, Meera teaches yoga to promote self confidence in Indo-Guyanese women and children.[129] Arriving in the city in 1985 after a failed marriage, Meera reinvented herself, first as a seamstress in a factory to now owning and running a highly successful real estate business in the community.[130] However, she acknowledges that her success is unique. Not all first-generation Indo-Guyanese, particularly single mothers like herself, will be able to own a house or a car. The inability of most of the community to share in a similar form of success is tied to the new pace of life in the "big metropolis of New York." Although she never frames it as such, Meera seems to characterize New York life as a fast-paced existence where the individual is constantly busy and enthralled in something. For instance, she describes her students as "hyper" and often refers to her real estate work as "hectic." To overcome this speed and pace of existence, Meera teaches yoga. Through yoga the individual may shift the focus away from the hectic pace of life in New York City and towards one self and a sense of calm or spirituality. She

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[128] Usha's class is the only class restricted to women. Meera's and Mary's classes are open to both men and women, but during my observations of the classes, men were not present.

[129] While Meera initially taught yoga in Caribbean Hindu temples, she has recently started teaching informal classes for her non-Indo-Guyanese friends at home."

[130] Although Meera lives outside Little Guyana now, her office and temple is there. For her, her success, which enabled her to purchase a house with a pool in a more affluent neighborhood, is linked to God who helped her find a path in a new country. Her faith inspires her to stay connected to her community, especially through her philanthropy. She has donated her time for temple youth programs, money to buy buildings for temples, and prizes for temple youth contests. Her work continues to be demanding and stressful, but she relies on yoga and *bhajans* at temple to keep her calm and connect to her faith.

gained this insight over ten years ago by attending a Deepak Chopra yoga treat in California.[131] During this retreat, she learned "how you can bring your breath to the motion and connect with your breath in a spiritual sense." For herself, yoga taught Meera to slow down the pace of her life

This calm also brings patience and confidence that may counter the experience of uncertainty and insecurity felt by many Indo-Guyanese in New York, who share stories of struggle in their initial years of navigating the landscape of the city. Unsure of where they belong in the city, they are often reminded of their foreignness by their accents and clothing. Meera went through such a loss in confidence, but built up her confidence in being Indo-Guyanese in the city through spirituality and yoga. Recognizing the role yoga played in her success, she began teaching yoga:

> Even though I am not an official teacher, at the end of these classes I think when I talk to these girls, most of these are, you know, 15 young girls and a few boys, if I had an opportunity at 10 years old to have somebody to teach me, you know, the path of yoga, the breathing, keeping yourself fit, the confidence, you know, what the practice of yoga can do to your lifestyle I would probably appreciated that. So, I felt that nobody did that for me, but I know how that would have helped me if someone did that. So, I know they can take that and adopt that.

Although she is not certified to instruct yoga, she offers the knowledge of the practice to help her community realize yoga is not a luxury, but a necessity to their hectic lives in the city. The "path of yoga" is about training the body and self to be in communication. Focusing on the body brings confidence by guiding the individual to not listen to societies view of their body, but to be one with the body and therefore their self and possibly their spirituality.

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[131] Deepak Chopra is an Indo-American who promotes yoga and *Ayurveda* as a way of dealing with the stresses of today. For a critique of Chopra and how he continues the work of Vivekananda see Prashad 2000.

Arriving in 1971, Mary describes herself as a "family woman." She worked during the days to pay for night school. After earning her undergraduate and graduate degrees, she worked as a civil servant for the state of New York while raising her daughter. Mary, like Meera, believes the practice of yoga and *Ayurvedic* nutrition, offers women in New York, particularly working-class women of color, skills to deal with the demands of working and living in the city. A student of Mother Maya[132], an Indo-Guyanese woman who established the Wise Earth School to educate everyone, especially women, in the utility of Vedic practices to reclaim one's self, Mary established some of the first yoga, meditation, and *Ayurvedic* nutrition courses in both Queens and the Bronx.[133] She currently teaches three yoga classes, offering *Ayurvedic* nutrition classes quarterly to educate her students in the appropriate foods and spices to consume in relation to the season.[134]

Mary herself is a recent convert of *Ayurvedic* living. Her husband fell ill in the 1990s. When Western medicine had no diagnosis or treatment, she researched options and found *Ayurveda*. Unlike her husband who is an Indo-Guyanese Hindu who might have known a bit about *Ayurveda* from his upbringing, Mary knew nothing because she

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[132] *Brimachari* Maya Tiwari is an internationally known spiritual leader who publishes extensively on *Vedantic* philosophy and the health and spiritual benefits of *Ayurvedic* dietary and bodily practices. Her school, books, and spiritual teaching situate her as a leader of a New Age spiritual movement. Interestingly, her own arrival to this path emerges from her experience of migration to New York City (Tiwari 2001).

[133] Her students continue to teach these classes in Queens, but on an inconsistent basis.

[134] Mary's class is open to both women and men. Her male students were unable to attend class when I observed because of travel and other commitments during the summer. I understand there are two or three men who do attend the weekly yoga class outside the summer months. However, this number is low, suggesting that men mostly do not participate in yoga since they view it as a gendered practice. Another possible explanation is the lack of time. Since most of the women students' husbands work, allowing them to not work or work from home, men's schedules, including their commute and work, could be too demanding to accommodate a weekly practice.

was raised Catholic. Since no treatment was working, she began integrating *Ayurvedic*

nutrition and yoga into her family's life. Soon after doing, her husband made a

miraculous recovery.

She believes passionately about teaching *Ayurveda* as a way of life, especially to

underserved communities, but only if individuals desire the knowledge. She does not

want to use her practice to proselytize, because, unlike Usha and Meera, Mary is not

Hindu:

> I'm not a Hindu, I grew up a Catholic. I brought my daughter up as a Hindu so I
> have to be part of the Hindu community to do that. And that too is very devoid of,
> apart from the rituals, the cultural, and the religious things, it is the void of the
> spiritual aspect of the Vedic life. And I'm so glad we have that yoga class there,
> right there in the *mandir*, because where is the meditation? Where is yoga, *hatha*
> yoga[135] for health? It is part of Vedic way of life, but it isn't part of our
> community. We don't have that.

As her statement reveals, the Hinduism observed and practiced in the community fails to

engage the spiritual aspect.[136] The Hindu community as she describes it appears to be in

crisis, concerned more with being seen in the latest Indian fashions at the *mandir* and not

about cultivating a particular sense of self or learning the *Vedas*. In fact, Mary's use of

Hindu presents an interesting way of distinguishing between culture and religion, or

rather culture-religion and spiritual. Hindu, as Mary deploys it, references anything

connected with Indian culture. Vedic refers to the engagement of the texts and practices

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[135] *Hatha* yoga is a type of yoga that emphasizes physical poses to focuses the mind through mastering the body and withdrawing attention from external objects.

[136] According to Mary, she is "spiritual" not Hindu. She is a major supporter of *Ayurveda* and yoga which made her spiritual. She follows a strict vegetarian diet and a regular schedule of yoga and meditation practice. She does not cite Hindu texts to offer guidance or explanations, but she references *Ayurvedic* ideas, such as humans should be in sync with nature, as solutions to issues. Her class is included in this chapter because the majority of her students are Indo-Guyanese Hindus. Also, her approach to class (to bring the spiritual into everyday life) provides an opportunity to explore how a religious and/or spirituality self is negotiated through practice.

for inner or spiritual education and growth. Therefore, in her class yoga is not a means to achieve a Hindu self, but a Vedic self: "I can teach people how to care for themselves *Ayurvedically*, to know their *Ayurvedic* constitutions, their deficits, their strengths, using *Ayurvedic* nutrition and *Ayurvedic* way of life to bring themselves back to balance."

This Vedic self is accessible to anyone. Although her classes tend to occur in *mandirs* and are predominantly Indo-Guyanese Hindus, the class includes others. Her students are Indo-Guyanese, Indian, and Hispanic/Latino individuals "who are interested and want to make [*Ayurveda*] part of their lifestyle," but who may not have the time or the means to seek out courses in Manhattan. By offering these courses, she aspires to help her student become equipped so "they can help each other out and point each other in the right direction." The benefits of yoga and other aspects of *Ayurvedic* living should be accessible to all. As she explains the importance of *Ayurvedic* living to our New York existence:

> People have to be nurtured into it. It is hard. It is not easy. It is not easy to live this way in the way we're living in this country in New York. We are forced to live some busy lives and we have no time…. But people need support into it. It is hard to do it by themselves. And they're shy people. These communities are shy to go out and walk into Bikram. And it is nothing against the support they get at Bikram[137], that they get where we are or any of the other, if you get a coach, a yoga coach, which is very expensive.

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[137] Bikram Yoga is a sequence of twenty-six poses derived from *hatha* yoga which is performed in a hot studio. The sequence was developed by Bikram Choudhury, an Indian man from Calcutta. Developed in 1972 in the United States, it is now practiced globally. By copyrighting poses and franchising studios, Bikram Yoga is a multi-million dollar business that is less concerned with cultivating self through bodily practices and more with profits (Farrell 2009). In short, you must pay to do Bikram Yoga.

Alluding to the mass-commercialization of yoga in the past decades which render yoga studios into white, middle-classed spaces that might intimidate communities of color, Mary is committed to creating a supportive space that all have access to.[138]

Usha too sees yoga as a resource against the demands of living in New York, but her approach is more fervent in its religious nature. Mary understands yoga and the Vedic self it may cultivate as non-religious, a practice open to all. Meera views yoga as a religious practice, but she does not proselytize in her classes to educate her students on the nature of the self they may come to cultivate in their practice. Usha's class is different.

In her email blast, Usha promoted the class as an opportunity to get in shape and relax, labeling the subject line "yoga to tone & relax the body & quiet the mind." This intention matched the goals of the women attending, who wanted to find relief from the bodily aches originating from their work and hoping to shed some pounds around their bellies to have beautiful, fit bodies. However, as the months passed by, yoga practice shifted from a bodily practice to an ideological undertaking, seemingly geared towards Indianizing the class and reclaiming yoga as an Indian and Hindu practice. Counting shifted from English to Hindi. She chastised her students for not concentrating on poses, calling for us to be more like a local, all Indo-Guyanese Hindu RSS group that approached their practice in an almost military manner.[139] She even pointed out their

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[138] Her class can be viewed as part of the current movements (*i.e.* Yoga for the People, fat yoga) emerging in the U.S. that strive to counter the effect of corporate yoga which has limited accessibility of yoga by class, race, and body ideals (Schaefer 2015).

[139] A small group of Usha's class attended a local RSS group's class in order to practice for a joint outing to perform *Surya Namaskar* at a massive public yoga class at Times Squares. The visiting students were asked to wear a uniform of a white shirt and black pants. The RSS class started promptly at 6pm with all students, Indo-Guyanese males and females ranging from 6 to 24 years of age, wearing the uniform and saluting a saffron *jhandi*, the flag of Hindu nationalism. The various activities, which include yoga practices, physical

collective lack of yoga knowledge as shameful since white people know the culture and are becoming *yogis* while they are not. She even transformed the space of yoga practice into a site for an almost Hindu nationalist indoctrination, offering mini lectures of *Vedantic* philosophy complimented with commentary of how it is important that Hindus reclaim and practice yoga from the West.

However, this goal of realizing a religiously nationalistic Hindu self is resented or not acknowledged by her students. Giving me a ride back to my place, a *yogi* lady in her mid-fifties, a former co-worker of Usha, offered the following critique: "She is doing a great thing teaching the classes, but I don't understand why she makes it religious like that. All this talk about eating food that won't raise the spirits. I like my *baigan* (eggplant) and onions. I can't give it up. I don't like when she preaches like that." This student didn't return to Usha's class. While her work schedule may have prevented her from attending class anymore, this frustration with Usha's ideological position probably factored in as well.

The remaining students offered no critique of Usha's increasing pontifications in practice. Commenting on each other's progress, they do not engage Usha's commentary, choosing to discuss their busy schedules of transporting their children all over Queens for activities and how they are noticing the effect of yoga, unfortunately not in regards to a connection between mind and body, but in relation to how their clothes fit better. Usha is aware that her real goal is not being realized. In one of our numerous conversations following class, she explains her students are not ready to hear and understand the

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games, a lesson on Hinduism, and marching practice, all had a focus on order with the Indo-Guyanese instructors, a man and woman in their late fifties, reminding the participants to be in structured lines and be quiet.

Vedanta material she is learning. "They're all about the *deotas* and the rituals. They don't understand true religion." Their inability to move beyond the material aspect of ritual observance, prevents them from approaching practice with the right intention of realizing the body and self as one. They're missing the real benefit of yoga. Usha's remarks indicate the failure of most temples in effectively cultivating self through bodily practices. While official temple practices of Indian clothes, chanting, *bhajans*, and food introduce the four *bhas* as mechanisms to cultivate an ethnic and Hindu self to better navigate the demands and problems of living in the city, they are not a *habitus*. Since these practices are limited to the confines of the temple or events such as *Diwali* and are performed without intention, the potential for internal transformation is not possible.

Conclusion

As I have discussed in this chapter, the body can communicate one's religious, ethnic, and cultural identity, both to the observing world and to one's self. In arriving in New York, Indo-Guyanese Hindus find themselves perceived as a racialized other because of their brown body. How the American public perceives their brown body, especially post 9/11, educates this community about their vulnerability and their non-belonging to the United States, which is then internalized.

The community utilizes the same body which serves as the instrument of their marginalization to overcome this feeling by sculpting it into an ethnic body and/or a religious body. Through the four *bhas*—language, clothing, food, and song—temples promote the transformation of the brown body into an ethnic body for display. In consuming Indian food, wearing Indian clothing, and singing Hindi songs, Indo-Guyanese Hindus perform their bodies as Indo-Guyanese/Indian bodies. Viewing their

brown bodies as Indo-Guyanese/Indian bodies offers the possibility to counter the negative perceptions in school, at work, and in the street, but only on the surface.

The fashioning of a religious body to achieve a religious, *Vedic,* or Hindu self, in contrast to the four *bhas*, presents the option of transcending the superficial-level of the brown body to cultivate a new *habitus* to learn and know one's past. Through repeated ritual gestures, Indo-Guyanese Hindus move their bodies the same way their ancestors did to worship *Bhagwan* (God), and, in the process, prepare their bodies to know or feel the Divine. Classical Indo-Guyanese Hindu artists best illustrate this potential in the learning of their art, a process that requires retraining the body in its unconscious, habitual actions like breathing and posture to achieve the desired effect in performance. Much of this process includes yoga practices that aid in uniting the mind and body to know one's self and to find spirituality beyond temple services. This spirituality is not experienced only during worship, but can be experienced every action of the body as Mary explains:

> Spirituality is the way of life, the way of your thinking especially. And that thinking needs to link to the things that you do in your life…. a walk in the park, every single day at the same time. A mindful walk in the park uses the body, mind, and spirit. It is a spiritual practice….It permeates everything.

The reasons why few Indo-Guyanese Hindus appreciate spirituality in this manner is linked to the crisis of Caribbean Hinduism in the city, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

SEARCHING FOR *SATSANG*: A NEW MODEL OF CARIBBEAN HINDUISM

<u>Introduction</u>

After my hour and a half commute on the subway from Queens to the Bronx,

Mary and Laura picked me up from the station to drive me to the park where our yoga

class was being held. Since the temple where the class is normally held was under

construction, one of the yoga ladies suggested this park as an alternative. Although the

city is notoriously hot in July, the cool breeze from the Bronx River and the large, old

willow trees that lined the perimeter of the park made it an ideal site for our evening yoga

class. On an open piece of grass, our class of six Indo-Guyanese women, one Indian

woman, and a Spanish woman laid out yoga mats and towels to do yoga in the park. The

sounds of close-by Dominicans playing baseball and having picnics faded away during

our opening meditation as we began our practice. Over the course of the next couple of

hours, the ladies took turns leading the class, instructing each other in poses and

explaining the benefits of each pose to the body. For those like me who struggled to

achieve and maintain certain poses, both teacher and students offered suggestions and

encouragement to assure us, "you're only competing with yourself." As the sunset and

the temperature cooled, we laid on our backs, breathing slowly as our teacher chanted us

out of practice with a closing mantra.

This scene from a yoga class in the Bronx captures the experience and feeling of

belonging and community pursued by parts of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community in

New York City. Through these classes as well as other organizations, the Indo-Guyanese

Hindu community is searching for a new form of belonging that is no longer present in

temples in the city. As discussed in chapter one, Caribbean Hinduism in New York City is different from other forms of American Hinduism in its practice of *satsang* (Hawley 2004). *Satsang*, a form of congregational worship originating in Guyana during the late nineteenth century, defines Caribbean Hinduism. This model of worship emerged in the context of the colonial Caribbean to thwart the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries while fostering a sense of social identity for indentured Hindus (Younger 2010). While such adaptations might position Caribbean Hinduism for a quick transition and acceptance into the American religious landscape, this model is in crisis. As I will discuss in this chapter, the formalizing of *satsang* worship in the context of New York City produces problems that places the very community that *satsang* inspires in crisis. However, these problems inspire a new notion of *satsang* to better serve the needs of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community. This new model of *satsang* or alternative *satsang*, as I describe it, emerges out of informal gatherings that attempt to address the needs of Indo-Guyanese while building a more supportive community that inspires engagement with the city.

To appreciate the potential of this alternative *satsang* as well as the novelty of such gatherings, I will first discuss the Caribbean invention of *satsang*. The emergence of *satsang* in the Caribbean context occurred at a critical moment of Hinduism(s)' migration to the New World when indentured Indians needed to develop a cohesive social identity. I will then discuss how *satsang* changed when the community moved to New York City and the associated problems which emerge as a result. The subsequent crisis results in the questioning of the meaning and purpose of such gatherings by devotees and some *pandits*. I will conclude the chapter by examining this questioning of existing forms of

satsang and the alternative *satsangs* that emerge from it. As I will argue these informal communities are becoming increasingly salient as *mandirs* fracture and fall apart.

<u>*Satsang*: a Caribbean Invention</u>

The practice of *satsang* is a recent invention in contemporary Hinduisms. A Sanskrit term which translates to community in truth, *satsang* refers to a multitude of devotional meetings, but most commonly to a gathering of individuals to receive religious or spiritual training from a teacher (Babb 1986; Juergensmeyer 1991; Flood 1996; Tiwari 2001).[140] *Satsang* is the defining feature of Caribbean Hinduism, as Sheila, an Indo-Guyanese Hindu lawyer and community activist in her twenties, explained:

> Indo-Caribbean Hindus…are different in some ways because there is this congregational worship that is a bit different than Indian temples, at least in New York City, which are the only ones I have been able to attend. Whereas when you go to the Ganesh temple[141] for instance….you go in with your offering for however long that you want and then you leave. On big holidays there is some congregational worship but those are only big holidays. It is not like every Sunday.

The major difference between Caribbean Hindu and Indian Hindu worship in the city is *satsang*. Indian Hindu worship is individualistic with the devotee attending temple to make offerings and leave (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2003; Joshi 2006a). There is no religious training, but rather just the devotee's individual encounter with the divine through *darshan* (vision of the divine).[142] Caribbean Hindu worship is centered on congregational worship or *satsang*.

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[140] "The word *satsang* is formed by linking the Sanskrit words *sangha*, meaning group, community, or fellowship; and *sat*, meaning true" (Juergensmeyer 1991, 113).

[141] The Ganesh temple refers to the Hindu Temple Society of North America located in Flushing, Queens, NY. The temple, built in 1977, is a South Indian temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Ganesh. To learn more about the founding of this temple see (Hawley 2004).

[142] *Darshan* is the act of seeing a deity and being seen by the deity in worship. The act may happen at a temple or at home alter. As Hindu scholar Vasudha Narayanan explains, "to the devotee, the most

Sheila explained that *satsang* developed in response to colonialism with Indo-Guyanese "mirror[ing] [their] way of worship with the Christian worship." Religious scholar Paul Younger explained why this "mirror[ing]" adaptation occurred. In studying how Indian indentured laborers practiced Hinduism around the world, he found that *satsang* "is a creative invention unique to Guyana" (Younger 2010, 78). Arriving in the new context of the Caribbean, indentured Indian laborers brought a diversity of Hindu practices. As I discussed in chapter one, indentured laborers from South India, who constitute only six percent of the almost 240,000 Indian indentured laborers to British Guiana, brought village practices that today's *Kalimai* temples in New York City descend from. Indentured laborers from North India brought *bhakti* (devotional) practices that focused on the Hindu deities of Rama and Krishna (Younger 2004). These North Indian *bhakti* practices, which were practiced by the majority of Indian indentured laborers, eventually were standardized into a *satsang* form of worship by a Brahman minority as a response to Christian missionaries and to coalesce Indians into a unified community.[143] The *satsang* mode of worship was adopted as Indian indentured laborers left plantation housing during the1920s (Younger 2004).[144] With no central location to gather, "individual Brahmans started their own *mandir* or worship hall (often called 'church') and brought together a congregation on Sunday morning, mainly to sing *Kṛṣṇa bhajans*

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meaningful part of temple worship is the experience of seeing the deity (in the form of an image) and being in his or her presence" (Narayanan 2004, 82).

[143] Again, not all indentured Indians who arrived in British Guiana were Hindus. Colonial records indicate that Muslims also arrived in the West Indies as indentured laborers.

[144] Prior to the development of *satsang* worship, indentured Indians who practiced Hinduism in British Guiana, according to Rev. H.V.P Bronkhurst in 1883, "'[would] stand outside in an area opposite the door belonging to the [temple] building' and only the priest can enter within 'to perform the duties of his office in the presence of the idol'" (Vertovec 2000, 50).

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or song and to listen to the Brahman give a 'sermon' or *katha*" (Younger 2010, 78). As Younger demonstrates, this version of worship adopts aspects of the Christian congregational worship the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community at the time was attempting to overcome.

As *satsang* forms of worship started to formalize in the Indian communities of British Guiana, the figure of the *pandit* emerged as a social, cultural, and political leader. A *pandit*, again, is a Hindu priest who is knowledgeable about theology and religious practice. At the time when Indians migrated to the West Indies as indentured laborers, *pandits* were limited to the Brahman caste. These Brahmans not only established the practice of *satsang*, but laid the groundwork for *pandits* to occupy a leadership position in the Indian community. The process began by creating the role and status of the *pandit*. Prior to this period, the Brahmans just led and performed religious rituals. But, by developing *satsang* services, they altered their roles and responsibilities. The incorporation of a *katha* or sermon into *satsang* practice elevated the status of the Brahman from a ritual practitioner to a *pandit* or learned person. Through the *katha* the Brahman as *pandit* drew parallels between Hindu sacred texts and the experiences of Indians in British Guiana. Also, *pandit* work now included pastoral care, a feature adapted from Christian missionaries and congregational worship. *Pandits* became available outside these places of worship to counsel devotees at home and to perform ritual worship at home for special occasions such as the raising of a protective flag known as a *jhandi*. Dhiraj's grandfather was one of these *pandits*. Dhiraj, a fifty-something Indo-Guyanese Hindu community leader in New York City with a doctorate from the United Kingdom explained his grandfather's work in Guyana:

My grandfather was a *pandit* in Guyana. He was a priest. So I went with him on many of his visits to homes, into people's homes and I [saw] the respect he had in the community and how he worked selflessly. He didn't take a penny from nobody and stuff like that [*sic*]. We grew up in that tradition of giving of yourself.

Accompanying his grandfather in his pastoral work, Dhiraj saw how the *pandit* could serve his congregation outside the confines of the physical temple by offering counsel and performing rituals in their homes. Dhiraj even notes the respect his grandfather earned through this work, which he received no monetary remuneration for, an interesting detail to bring up but a significant one as I will discuss later.

With their new roles and responsibilities accepted by Indo-Guyanese Hindus, *pandits* sought official recognition from the colonial government in Guyana (Younger 2010). In 1927, the Council of *Pandits* was formed with the colonial government giving them the right to perform marriages and eventually the right to perform cremation, an important part of Hindu death rites. But as they achieved religious recognition and rights for the Hindu community in British Guiana, they also achieved social and political leadership. The colonial government began consulting with the Council on matters of Indian affairs in the colony. This political power however would not survive past the colonial government into independence as the new nation of Guyana pursued a secular path. Instead, *pandits* still enjoy a considerable amount of social influence, especially in migration as I will discuss in a later section.

Satsang in Migration

The form of *satsang* practiced in New York City is derived from the *satsang* worship pursued by Indian indentured laborers in the Caribbean during the late nineteenth century (Hawley 2004; Younger 2004). Every Sunday in the numerous Caribbean Hindu temples all over the city, devotees come together to sit in *satsang*. As explained in

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chapter one, the structure of Sunday *satsang* service includes group recitations of

Sanskrit mantras, *Vedic* rituals, singing of *bhajans* (devotional songs), *pravachan/katha*

or the reading and interpretation of a religious text by a *pandit* or *pujari* (priest), *aarti*

(the offering of light) and *darshan* (vision of the deity). In most temples, the *satsang*

service is completed with sharing a meal together. The length and format of Sunday

satsang varies with each temple. Certain temples observe a short *satsang* program lasting

two hours, while others are a full-day affair requiring a devotee to arrive early in the

morning only to leave early in the evening. For example, Vikram, a *Samajist pandit* who

circulates between two temples in Queens, remarked about the different timings of the

temples where he leads *satsang* worships:

> So when I go to the *mandir* [close by] here, you know, they start at 10am. I have
> them once a month. And they finish at 12:30 [pm] and they provide lunch. They
> feel bad if you don't eat lunch. And by then you finish lunch by 1 [pm] so it is like
> almost half of your day is gone there. I mean you don't mind, but, you know, with
> my kind of schedule […] it is difficult….. But our [*Samajist* temple] we start at 9
> [am]. 11:30 [am] we're done.

In addition to being a *pandit* which occupies most of his time on Saturday with pastoral

care, Vikram works a full-time job at the airport during the week and has a family. With

Sunday being his only day to spend with his wife and two young daughters, the length

and timing of *satsang* service matters.

Besides remarking about the time commitment of *satsang* worship, Vikram also

hints at another important feature to *satsang* in migration. While the Sunday *satsang*

services in New York offer religious instruction in some form, the more significant

byproduct of such gatherings is *satsang* fellowship, the camaraderie or sense of

belonging which develops between devotees who sit in *satsang* together. Although

Vikram would prefer to hurry away from temple to spend time with his family and run

errands before the demands of the work week, he knows the importance of being in community and the fellowship that emerges from worship that is then reinforced by eating lunch with devotees following the *satsang* services.

This *satsang* fellowship is what some Indo-Guyanese Hindus search for in temples and why they keep attending. For Sheila, this is what her family and friends look for in a temple: "Yeah, you're looking for a space where you're feeling comfortable, where you can find a sense of home, where you find a clique." Monica, a *pandita* (female priest) also notes how fellowship is an important feature of *satsang*.[145] When asked what she thinks draws Indo-Guyanese to *mandirs* on Sunday mornings, she answered, "I think it is more socializing. I think a lot of people they go for socializing because they can meet a friend on Saturday or Sunday morning. Or they go, some of us, for […] a little break." Although the practice of *satsang* emerged at the time of colonial rule in Guyana to prevent conversion to Christianity, it moved and adapted in New York City to help foster community and a sense of belonging in the United States. "[T]he warm congregational atmosphere and the *pandit*-led community building they had known in Guyana" (Younger 2010, 85) helps many Indo-Guyanese overcome feelings of isolation and discrimination experienced in the city, but, as I will discuss in the next section, *satsang* in New York City results in an ironic crisis of fellowship.

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[145] Female priests are a recent development in Hindu traditions. Traditionally, women occupied marginalized roles and positions within Hindu ritual and worship (Leslie 1991; Tyagi 2014). However reform movements, such as the *Arya Samaj*, discuss the importance of women in Hinduism and their right to be part of the clergy (Mazumdar 1995). In my research I met five Indo-Guyanese Hindu women who have trained, are qualified, and accepted as *panditas* in their respective mandirs and temples. For more information about the process of becoming a *pandita* and the role of *panditas* in Caribbean Hinduism see Rampersad 1999 and Verma 2010.

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Satsang in Crisis

As the Caribbean Hindu community grew in New York City and the demand for *satsang* increased, so did the number of temples in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. More temples emerged in Queens to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the growing Indo-Guyanese community, who grew tired of commuting long distances to the first temples established in the Bronx and Brooklyn. For instance, Sheila and her family "temple hopped" for a few years after moving to Queens to find a new local temple. They attended a temple in the Bronx when the family first moved to the city in 1986. Although "there was a sense of home" in the Bronx, the lengthy commute each Sunday on public transportation after they moved to Queens inspired her family to seek a new temple closer by. But as distance inspired the founding of an increasing number of temples in Queens, particularly in Little Guyana, and close by neighborhoods in Brooklyn, another feature of Caribbean Hinduism emerged in New York City: the cult of the *pandit*.

In Little Guyana, the quality of a temple is judged not only by location and its *satsang* fellowship, but also by the quality of the *pandit* who sets the tone and direction of the temple where he officiates. Sheila's own family selected their current temple based on the *pandit*:

> …we started going there because the *pandit*, I guess, compared to other *pandits* at the time, was modern. He didn't focus too much on speaking Hindi, but spoke in English and we could understand him. He was socially accessible and good for young people, according to my parents. They decided we were going to go there. I started to go there regularly since I was nine.

Sheila's *pandit*, like his predecessors in Guyana during its colonial period, modified his approach to better serve the needs of the devotees at his temple and the larger Indo-Guyanese Hindu community in the city. While Hindi and Sanskrit are a common feature

of his *satsang* service, the *pravachan* and *katha* are delivered in English and relevant to his devotees' experiences, particularly the youth (individuals twenty-five years old and less).

Likewise, Gina, an Indo-Guyanese woman in her mid-forties who moved from Guyana's capital city of Georgetown to Brooklyn in 1979 at the age of seven, attended one temple in her youth because of the *pandit*:

> …what I liked about [the *pandit*] was that he explained stuff. It wasn't just in Hindi, which I didn't understand. He explained stuff. And there are some people that have that personality that you just want to listen and you know they don't make you feel overwhelmed and it was a welcoming feeling and that is how he was.

Like Sheila's *pandit*, Gina's *pandit* focused less on the recitation and learning of Hindi and more on delivering insightful, relevant *pravachans* and *katha*s to his New York congregation.[146]

While distance and *satsang* fellowship attract devotees to certain temples, *pandits* appear to be the significant factor in attendance. Sachin, an Indo-Guyanese Hindu man in his late twenties who is also a Hindu activist in the city pointed out this phenomenon in the summer of 2012 when I first met him through his father Dhiraj. Sachin, then a real estate broker in Manhattan, had become more religious because of his work. Not personally fulfilled by his job that was high-paced and materialistic, he organized meditation classes and became more active at his temple, which inspired him to pursue a graduate degree in public affairs and policy work at the state level. As he explained the

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[146] Both Sheila and Gina indicate the speaking of Hindi during *satsang* to be a common feature of *satsang* services in the early Indo-Caribbean temples in the city. I was unable to verify this in my research. During the almost fifty *satsang* services I attended during this research only one performed the entire *satsang* in Hindi. This *satsang* service was performed by an Indo-Guyanese *Samajist* priest for a congregation of devotees who immigrated straight for India. For these devotees, Hindi is their first language, not English.

growing Indo-Caribbean community in the city and the importance of Hinduism to it, he remarked, "There is a God-like belief in *pandits*. You will find that people worship the *pandit* more….that the *pandit* brings the people." Most Indo-Guyanese Hindus as well as other Indo-Caribbean Hindus often remark and brag about their *pandits* to establish the quality of their temples. Also, larger community and religious events advertise which *pandits* will be present to help improve attendance and to legitimate the event.

This rise of the *pandit* in New York City mirrors that of their predecessors in Guyana, but also exceeds them in an interesting way. Because most Indo-Guyanese *pandits* explain rituals and deliver *pravachans* and *katha*s in English, their services and religious knowledge are sought by Hindus beyond the Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Caribbean community. For instance, *Pandit* Yudi, a *Sanatanist pandit* in his mid-forties has performed rituals for *desi* (Indians from India) people:

> I have done *puja* for a lot of Indian people and the reason they like us West Indian *pandits* is because we take time to explain…..Most of their kids have lost the language and when the Indian *pandits* come they are lost, you know? And they like when we do their *puja* because we break it down in English, you know?

Their use of English and explanations is sought beyond the city, with *Samajist* and *Sanatanist pandits* acquiring a global following beyond the Caribbean in South Africa and Australia to name a couple of places.[147] However, this new importance and power of the *pandit* brings *satsang* to a crisis point in two ways: 1) a new structure surrounding *satsang,* and 2) the proliferation of *pandits* in the community.

As I discussed in chapter one, most Caribbean temples in the city began as informal *satsang* gatherings where Indo-Guyanese and other Indo-Caribbeans would

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[147] In my fieldwork, a few temples broadcast part of their *satsang* service on local radio stations or stream their *satsang* service on YouTube to a global audience in South Africa, Australia, Fiji, and India.

meet, often with a *pandit*, in a basement, garage, or living room of a devotee. As *pandits*

began performing their pastoral care in the city, the need to formalize their work to access

certain privileges emerged. For instance, Chacha realized the need for *pandits* to be

registered as clergy when he took his *pandit* to visit a sick friend in the early 1980s:

> …I went to the hospital [when] someone was sick. And I took my *pandit* to give
> prayers….we were waiting [for] seven hours to offer prayers for someone who
> was ill.…There is a pastor. He had his collar. He went to the reception and he was
> allowed to go. So when I took my *pandit* [another time] I told him to [wear his]
> full costume. His *mala* (necklace of beads). His *kurta* (Indian style shirt) and
> *dhoti* (cloth wrapped around the waist). So we went. The [girl] said he can't
> go….I said, "how come this pastor went up?" "Well," she said, "he has a clergy
> pass." I said, "Oh." I tried to convince her that this is a Hindu priest. "He is called
> [a] *pandit*." She said, "I don't know that. He has to have a clergy pass." I left
> there with a passion…

During these two hospital visits, Chacha learned that certain privileges are gained by

registering as a clergy member with the New York City government. For instance,

registering with the city authenticates and legitimizes a *pandit* as a priest by providing

them with paperwork to gain clergy visiting passes at hospitals, which give clergy special

access to the intensive care unit and visiting privileges outside visiting hours. Also,

registering with the city is necessary if the *pandit* wants to officiate marriages.

In addition to gaining individual privileges for *pandits*, informal *satsang*

gatherings, after growing beyond the capacity of their meeting sites, began the process of

incorporation to be officially registered as religious organizations. By incorporating

informal *satsangs* became religious corporations that could collect and manage money

for renting, buying, or constructing a building for a temple that devotees may meet in for

divine worship. All temples in my research went through this process of transition from

informal *satsang* to recognized religious organization.

Consider the founding story of the Great Kali Church of New York, which has been in existence since 1996. Although its head *pujari* (priest) had no desire to start a church, (he hoped to leave the demanding labor of Mother's work (*Kalimai* worship) he had done for almost forty years in Guyana), he found the New York community in dire need of Maha Kali's guidance when he arrived in the city at the age of 53. Because of this need, he began performing a weekly service in the garage of a devotee's house. After a couple of years of worshipping illegally in this space and amassing a large group of followers, the head *pujari* and his devotees began the process to be formally recognized as a religious organization by the New York City government. Relying upon the knowledge of a devotee who was a paralegal, the Great Kali Church of New York filed the necessary documents to incorporate and be registered as religious organization in the city. The head *pujari* even submitted letters from scholars and government officials in Guyana to attest to his knowledge and legitimacy as a priest and to the validity of the *Kalimai* tradition as a religion. In addition to completing the necessary paperwork, the Church purchased a former warehouse. The warehouse was transformed into the current Church, which has operated as a state-recognized religious organization with not-for profit status since 1998.

The process of incorporation brings with it a new structural feature to Caribbean Hindu temples: an executive board. To maintain a temple's status as a recognized place of worship in the city and state of New York with the ability to collect donations and manage money an executive board is required. The setup of the board varies from temple to temple, but the responsibilities of that operating body are the same. The board must meet regularly, maintain records of their meetings, maintain accurate bookkeeping,

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maintain a record of their members, and hold elections every year. The running and

control of the executive board contributes to *satsang*, particularly *satsang* fellowship,

being in crisis in the Indo-Guyanese and larger Indo-Caribbean Hindu community in the

city.

Throughout the course of my research many temples in Little Guyana were

embroiled in conflicts that originated over control of the executive board and/or the

temple's funds. Stories circulated around the community in yoga classes, at *roti* and rum

shops on Liberty Avenue, on social media, and in temples themselves about how funds of

certain temples are being mismanaged or how certain boards were not holding elections

so that individuals in office could maintain their position of power. Utthara[148], an Indo-

Guyanese Hindu woman in her thirties who works in property management in Manhattan

explained the current state of temples in Little Guyana:

> Everybody is power drawn. Everybody wants some kind of position that they're
> not capable of handling. That's where the problems come. That's what I observe.
> Like some how they can start out being a humble person and then the minute
> they're given a title or something it somehow gets to their head and they misuse
> it….When you're in a place like a temple you have to put the people before you.
> You have to look out for the people…Take care of the people before you take
> care of yourself.

In her explanation, she notes how these conflicts come at the cost of the community that

is formed through *satsang*, but also offers a reason for these conflicts. She believes the

potential power and social prestige attached with election to the executive board is the

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[148] Utthara, the youngest of nine, grew up in the countryside of Guyana in a somewhat Hindu home. Her
mother was Muslim, but converted and learned the traditions after marrying Utthara's Hindu father.
Although they tried to be Hindu in Guyana, "[they] never really took it seriously until [they] migrated to
America." They immediately started attending a temple lead by an Indo-Trindadian *pandit*. Now a mother
of two teenagers and a wife of an Indo-Guyanese Hindu man, her love for Hinduism grows since her
temple, her *pandit*, and her religion teach her moral values to become a better person and not get stressed
out from the demands of working in the city and being a good mother. She also feels at home and part of a
larger family through her temple and religion.

source of the conflicts. As a member of the board, an individual gains the power to influence and determine how funds are spent and what direction the *mandir* pursues while receiving the praise and respect from the community for their services. Monica, a *pandita* (female priest) who preaches at a different temple every Sunday, characterized Caribbean Hindu temples in a similar manner: "If you notice now in most of the temples in New York, if you have been going, it just is about money making. It is a power struggle going on. There is so much of bitterness, you know?"

This bitterness presents itself in various ways. Devotees yelling at each other or police officers entering temples to serve court orders have disrupted Sunday *satsang* services. Videos of such altercations have been posted on social media. Feuding parties are in the courts to gain control over the executive board. And jilted individuals are reporting the temple's potential violations to the city. For instance, Chacha, who helped to establish one of the first Caribbean Hindu temples in the city, was removed from the board through such bitterness: "There was some politics involved here where I was kicked out and the *pandit* was kicked out and then they changed the name [of the *mandir*]."

Bickering also impacts *satsang* fellowship. Kamala, a fifty-year-old Indo-Guyanese Hindu woman who teaches at a local college used to attend a temple, but stopped when the internal conflicts of the executive board started to negatively affect her teenage daughter:

> So what had started to happen was there was a power struggle there that I did not get involved in. Where I got involved in was that *Pandit* Nara had started a youth group and my daughter was part of that youth group. So whenever now this issue of the higher ups started, when it was time to sing…there was this individual at the temple who was kind of, you know, taking care of the singing there….she speaks in Guyanese, "Ah, you not gonna chorus for *abee* (our) *pandit* [*sic*]." So

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there was a segregation among the kids. And it bothered me because my daughter was being involved in that.

Although Kamala and her daughter were not involved in the actual conflicts of the executive board of that temple follow the death of their spiritual leader the year prior, they were both impacted. Because Kamala's daughter participated in a youth group led by *Pandit* Nara, a *pandit* at the temple, but not the *abee pandit,* the head *pandit* or the *pandit* supported by the board, she was denied the opportunity to sing and to fully participate in the temple's *satsang* fellowship. The temple lady in charge of singing, who supported *abee pandit*, denied the youth who participated in the youth group the opportunity to sing. Their participation in the youth group, to her, was a threat to the leadership of *abee pandit*. So, although singing, a significant part of *satsang* services, is intended to foster community, in this instance it became a site of board conflict that impacted the larger temple community to fracture *satsang* fellowship. Therefore, the problems of the board are not isolated to the board, but have effects on the community of the temple.

The Great Kali Church of New York mentioned earlier recently went through its own temple conflict. In the summer of 2014 when, during the transition of the head *pujari's* son as the new spiritual leader of this organization, the church was reported to the State for not having and maintaining clear fire exits. As Rani, the secretary of the organization explained:

> We're an official organization, but the building itself, we didn't know, needed certain things. When it was under the previous board, nothing was disclosed to us. I don't even think they knew anything about it but basically they wanted a second exit for us. And we have one but that one is not as accessible as it should be. It just takes a lot of money to create that because there is only one side to the road here….So it is just about raising the money to be able to create something that

goes with the law. We have to go with Mother's law but we have to go with the government as well.

In explaining the nature of the Church's violations, the secretary also highlighted the two laws that simultaneously operate in the temple: the law of the land and Mother's law. But to her and the *mandir's* leadership, this law is the same since "God made the law of the State." While the temple met the requirement of an "incorporated church" that is "created to enable its members to meet for divine worship or other religious observances," (NY Religious Corporation Law) it failed to secure the safety of the space. The use of fire in ritual worship, particularly the burning of camphor, produced a substantial amount of smoke that the current structure was not adequately venting. Also, the structure did not maintain enough fire exits.

To correct for these violations, the temple has instituted many changes, both physical and organizationally. Posters about safety procedures were posted in various areas of the temple. The temple will also be remodeling the building soon to allow for clear fire exits and a stronger exhaust system to reduce the smoke from *puja* worship. The temple is also going through a substantial organizational change with the labor of *mandir* operation being formally defined and assigned to committees. The institution of this formal structure has created new bureaucracy with countless forms made to inform devotees of their responsibility to ensure the safety of the community, to record activities happening during ritual worship, and to amass a membership list for their temple.[149]

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[149] Sociologist Prema Kurien, who has written extensively about American Hinduism, also found similar adaptation happening in Hindu temples and organizations operated by Indo-American Hindus in the United States. She too found the increase bureaucracy, requirement of an executive board, and the need to maintain a membership list to secure privileges as a not-for-profit organization resulted in temple feuds (Kurien 2006).

While this new bureaucracy clearly defined the work of the *mandir* and helped it fit the congregational form of governance established by the New York State Religious Corporation Law, it appeared to have the opposite effect in the *mandir*'s devotees. Devotees complained about not knowing the new structures and systems in place or why they are needed. In discussing these organizational changes in the *mandir* with a long-time devotee, she expressed frustration with the new direction the *mandir* is pursuing. Rather than offering transparency to the management of the *mandir*, Lindsey, an Afro-Guyanese woman in her fifties, found these new features of the worship "pointless." Like all members of this congregation, Lindsey signed a two-page document that stated she will adhere to a certain moral standard as established by the *mandir* and release the organization from certain liabilities. In addition to not appreciating the formalization of her relationship with this *mandir* in this manner, she also had issues with not receiving a copy of the form. Further, the creation of new leadership positions such as the Community Affair Officer seemed unnecessary. "Why do we need a community affairs officer? What do they do?" she asked me as we sat in the temple. She did not approve of how these positions are creating hierarchies in their temple community. Also, the forms and offices did not connect to her worship, but rather disconnected her from *satsang*, the community and peace she once found at this temple.

The formalization and new structure that was necessary to pursue for *satsang* to grow in various temples in the city has ironically contributed to the crisis. *Satsang* is either in jeopardy or is destroyed in many temples in Little Guyana because of internal fights of the executive board. But besides these responses to the new structure, the proliferation of *pandits* also places *satsang* in crisis.

The number of *pandits* in the community seems to increase with each year. New *pandits* are arriving from the Caribbean while other *pandits* in New York City are completing their training and receiving their *janeo* (sacred threads). These new *pandits* either join existing temples or start their own temples. This increase in *pandits*, although creating a "*pandit* drain" in Guyana, as *Pandita* Monica describes it, allows many New York temples to operate with a team of *pandits*. With a team, *pandits* can take turns leading Sunday *satsang* service, which enables them to do more pastoral care for their devotees without negatively affecting their personal life. Also, with temples breaking apart which results in new temples, there is a demand for additional *pandits*.

However, the increase number of *pandits* leads to other problems. For instance, the yoga instructor Usha no longer attends her *mandir* regularly because there are too many *pandits* now. As we sat in the *mandir* waiting for the other yoga ladies to arrive I asked her how the *mandir* is doing. She answered, "I don't know. I haven't been for a while. There are too many *pandits*. I don't know them. I started going to a *Gita* study group out in Long Island instead." Although she lived in a room above the *mandir* at the time, Usha would rather drive almost an hour out to Long Island on a Sunday morning for a study group on the *Bhagavad Gita*. While Usha is in transition in terms of her religious practice and engagement, the new *pandits* also contributes to her decision to pursue her faith elsewhere. She has no connection with these *pandits* and is unsure of their training or their intention in taking on the *janeo* (sacred threads of priesthood).

In fact, the questioning of *pandits* is more common. In most of my interviews, individuals warned me to be careful in who I spoke with in my research since some *pandits* are "not true *pandits*" and I might learn inaccurate information. When I asked for

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clarification and for a metric to guide me in my research, none were offered. Instead, through my interactions I discerned the following metric. *Samajist pandits* and *panditas* complete a series of courses in *Samajists* temples in New York, Guyana, or India to be ordained. For instance, *Pandit* Bharat who introduced the concept of the four *bhas* trained in Guyana and India before becoming a *pandit* in New York. For the *Sanatanist* and *Kalimai* traditions, no standardized training exists, thus there is no way to assess the legitimacy of a *pandit* except through lineage and mentorship. A *pandit* descended from *pandits* or mentored by a *pandit* with a relationship with *pandits* and *mandirs* from Guyana and Trinidad is generally viewed as authentic.

This metric guided my engagement with *pandits*, but these cautions illustrate a growing questioning or distrust of certain *pandits* and their work in the city. Part of this questioning emerges from a shift away from delivering relevant *kathas* towards the aesthetics of performance. Increasingly, some Indo-Guyanese Hindus focus on the performance of *pandits*, which results in them being assessed on a superficial level rather than upon the content of the *kathas*. Is the *pandit* handsome? How fashionable are their temple clothes? Do they sing in tune? Do they provide devotees a good show while performing rituals? Do their *kathas* entertain? When Meera the yoga teacher invited me to her temple, she mentioned the following to further persuade me, "My *pandit* sings beautifully." She started attending her current temple because she did not like the singing of her *pandit* at her previous temple. Such comments were made by both the older and younger generations, who are less interested in the content or religious education one could receive and more about being entertained.

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This need to offer a good show in rituals impacts the pastoral care of *pandits*.

While pastoral care includes counseling devotees, it is increasingly shifting away from

this and more towards the performance of rituals at devotees' homes. Indo-Guyanese

Hindus usually host at least one ritual at their homes in a year. Calling family and friends

to attend, this ritual either marks the birth of a new child, commemorates the death

anniversary of a family member or is simply an occasion to bless one's family and home

while demonstrating one's commitment to one's faith. A *pandit* is usually hired to attend

and perform the ritual. The fee is generally $500. Since every weekend in Little Guyana

someone is holding such a ritual at their homes, some *pandits* are booked to perform at

two or three over the span of a weekend. This demand makes it difficult for Indo-

Guyanese Hindus to perform home *yajnas* (rituals). For instance, Bryan, an Indo-

Guyanese radio personality in his late thirties who immigrated from Georgetown when he

was a teen, wanted to host a *puja* for *Diwali* (festival of lights) and to mark his recent

conversion to Hinduism from Christianity. Unfortunately, his *puja* had to be postponed

since his *pandit* would be booked for months prior to and after *Diwali* and, for him, no

other *pandit* will do.[150] He only wants this *pandit*.

The money from these home rituals contributes to questioning of *pandits,* with

some Indo-Guyanese Hindus accusing *pandits* of being interested in the money and

performing in a manner to solicit future bookings. Lalitha, the sixty-something Indo-

Guyanese Hindu woman who is a community organizer is frustrated by this practice:

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[150] Although there are growing numbers of *pandits*, only certain *pandits* are in high demands for home *pujas*, especially *pandits* with reputations of performing a spiritual and entertaining *puja* as well as *pandits* who are the spiritual leaders of temples. The prestige of these *pandits* performing a home *puja* results in many devotees waiting to host *pujas* until these individuals are available. Also, while *pandits* from the *desi* community may be available for these home *pujas*, the option is never considered, at least by the Indo-Guyanese Hindus I encountered, probably because the tone and approach of Caribbean Hindu worship is distinct from American Hindu worship.

…the *pujas* are expensive now. It is like $500, but when we were doing *pujas* here…let's say in the 1970s, right? Not the 70s. Let's say the 90s. Um, for a *puja* you pay $500….$300 for *jhandis* (raising a flag to a *deota*), small thing. And then [the *pandits*] come and they want to do six *pujas*. I said, "I just want Hanuman…." I don't want anything else…. And they come and they want to [do more]….I can't take that, right?

In her experience, a *pandit* will arrive for a ritual, sometimes late, and then try to convince devotees to do additional rituals to receive more money. She is frustrated by the arrogance, greed, and behavior of such *pandits* and the frequency of these rituals at home. For her, the money could be better spent: "But if you think about the amount of money people are spending on *pujas* every year, they could put that into community development."

Pandits are not only negotiating to provide extra services, but also their egos are impacting how individuals perceive them. Kamala holds rituals at least once a year at her home. Before finding her current *pandit* she interacted with other *pandits* who seemed disconnected from the intention of these rituals:

Honestly, in my experience, I have had *pandits* where you cannot ask a question. And if they are doing a *puja*, they have to have all these leaves, which I can never understand. And I have had a *pandit*, if I was out of one of this leaf, he will hold my entire *puja* until somebody goes to Liberty Avenue and get it. I actually told him that you will never come back to do *puja* for me because I'm supposed to be sitting here in a nice mood praying and you spoiled my mood. And I have never taken that *pandit* back….our God is supposed to be whatever we have is what we give.

As Kamala points out, the purpose of these rituals is to give whatever one has to the divine and be in peace. The *pandit's* refusal to continue until everything he required is present demonstrates a disconnection between him and the devotees. Rituals should be performed as accurately as possible, but to not adapt to the situation or at least to explain

why procuring this leaf is necessary illustrates how some *pandits* are caught up in their assumed authority and ego.

While Caribbean Hinduism is flourishing in New York City, the issues I presented in this section illustrates how the migration of these traditions and their resulting adaptation places the practice of *satsang* in crisis. *Satsang*, the act of sitting together in worship which ultimately fosters community, appears to no longer be the focus of certain temples and *pandits.* The act of formalizing *satsang* service by imposing a new structure around it to become a registered Hindu temple in the city creates the environment in which fighting over resources may threaten the *satsang* fellowship of a temple. Also, the proliferation and increasing importance of *pandits* and the shifted focus of some *pandits* towards pastoral care that pays (*pujas* at homes) may result in a disconnection with the other pastoral needs of their devotees.

Some devotees opt out of Sunday *satsang* to avoid this drama and/or because *satsang* services no longer provide them with anything to help them navigate their lives in New York City:

> So I think there is this case of the missing twenties in the temples where once you hit your twenties you don't want to go any more.…You've learned everything you need to learn. You're busying putting your life together.…And going to temple on Sundays is not necessarily you're top priority.…They don't see any benefit to going to the temple because they have already learned everything they need to learn. The *pandit*'s lecture is redundant after a while and there is no mechanism, particularly in Indo-Caribbean worship.…where you can have a conversation with someone about it. Instead you're being told for forty minutes an interpretation that is very subjective about a particular scripture and you have to accept that as your truth.…I'm not benefiting. I should do something else. I think that is part of the problem.

Although Indo-Guyanese have adapted *satsang* for the needs and regulations of New York City, Shelia's comments illustrate the necessity for *satsang* to be reworked again.

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The younger generation no longer finds the initial adaptation of Caribbean *satsang*

worship in the city to be relevant to their existence. The *kathas* are repetitive, offering

little insight into the issues they currently face. The older generation, likewise, questions

the intention behind attending a temple for service and to sit in *satsang*. The support and

community possible through *satsang* seems less of a priority in certain temples that are

not entangled in infighting. However, these issues are inspiring new forms of *satsang*.

Expanding the Idea of *Satsang*

While the new structure surrounding *satsang* seems to threaten the religious

community, it presents the opportunity to create better relationships with the community

outside the *mandir*. In a way, certain temples may use this new structure to redefine what

it means to be an Indo-Caribbean Hindu *mandir* in the city and to expand the idea of

satsang. This approach appears to be pursued by the Great Kali Church of New York

following their violation.

> …we can't just be a Hindu temple the way that we existed before just under the
> radar in a certain way. Even though we were the first ones to register as a not-for-
> profit organization we weren't really active in the community outside….But now
> we're out there and doing a lot of humanitarian service outside of the temple. We
> are offering a lot of other kinds of services that go beyond the religious that we do
> on a Sunday. So, as you know, we do classes on a Saturday…. And also that we
> have connections with outside facilities [and] outside offices within the
> government because we are ruled structurally by the government and that we have
> all of that in place for the future.

As the secretary explains, the violations of the temple have prompted the executive board

to pursue other goals such as religious, cultural, and language classes. Also, *seva* or

volunteer work has become a new priority of the organization. From participating in

beach and park clean ups, the *mandir* not only wants to demonstrate being part of the

Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Caribbean community, but to be recognized as an organization

participating and giving back to the community at large. Such visibility is necessary, as the secretary suggests, to cultivate contacts in the government to call upon if other problems arise in the future.

> We're trying to reach out so that we have our name out there not just as a temple, but as an organization that is willing to give back to the community outside of our doors so that they can recognize us so that if we need something from them that they know who we are…And we're working on sending thank you letters to all the neighbors as well for all of their compliance during our *puja*…We've never had a problem with anyone, but this time we wanted to make sure that they feel like we recognized that...They should be friends.

These services and volunteer projects, which resemble the pastoral approaches adopted by American Protestant churches, illustrate to the larger American public and New York officials that the Great Kali Church of New York is a house of worship that contributes to the larger society. And by adopting such a structure, the *mandir's* leadership believes the State recognizes their form of worship and will intervene on their behalf in future conflicts that might arise in terms of building violations or difficulties in performing the religious rites in public spaces.[151]

Other *mandirs* besides the Great Kali Church are following this type of "structural adaptation" to their organization to better serve their religious community, to rehabilitate their image following an internal temple conflict, and to integrate more into American society (Warner 1998). Earlier studies of immigrant religion in the United States noted how immigrant religious institutions adopted American Protestant congregational models "with emphasis upon voluntary membership rather than ascription or geography, lay

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[151] In September 2016, the former head *pujari* of the Great Kali Church of New York passed away. Because of these adjustments, the church quickly got permits to have a small funeral procession in his behalf in front of the church. The church was also able to successfully invite representatives from the mayor's office to attend the event to pay their respect, an act that served to legitimize the head *pujari's* knowledge, skill, and contribution to the community.

involvement in decision making, a professional clergy, the declining significance of denominationalism, financial support from members, the development of community centers, and the provision of social services" (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, 136). While Caribbean Hinduism has already undergone a version of structural adaptation in the nineteenth century, with the development of the *satsang* model in response to Christian missionaries, this version does not meet the needs and demands of some of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community in New York City. Another version of structural adaptation with an emphasis on classes, social services and volunteerism is happening. It is in these classes, social services and *seva* coordinated through *mandirs* where an alternative *satsang* is emerging.

As I discussed earlier, *satsang* is a Sanskrit term which translates to community in truth. In practice, this community in truth is achieved through the gathering of individuals to receive religious or spiritual training from a teacher in the form of *satsang* services. Such an approach is no longer beneficial for some Indo-Guyanese Hindus because the fighting within temple boards and the approach of *pandits* in certain temples do not serve or speak to them. Instead, these individuals pursue an alternative *satsang* which I define as a community in truth through action.

Through alternative *satsang*, individuals are learning about their faith through action with the intention of eventually pursuing action to realize and/or practice their faith. For instance, instead of sitting in temple for two hours on a Sunday, attend a temple yoga class to learn your faith. Maybe participate in a beach cleanup or volunteer at food pantry to realize the tenets of Hinduism. In short, one knows truth through action. And

through this action that is not ritual worship, one can still achieve *satsang* fellowship, but of a different manner.

For instance, most Caribbean Hindu temples in the city now organize youth camps over the summer. While some temples' youth camps appear to replicate the content and structure of educational camps for *Rashtriya Sevak Sangh* (RSS) children's *shakha* groups (Bhatt 2000), others organize their camps in a different manner. As a member of his temple's executive board, Dhiraj helped to develop his temple's youth camp:

> In our case, we don't only teach Hinduism. We teach other things…health issues[152], religion, of course, community issues, profession, cops come in and talk about law and order, peace and everything. So they get a diverse exposure.

In setting the temple's youth camp to present topics beyond Hinduism, Dhiraj and the organizers create an environment where the Indo-Guyanese youth may "construct [their own] *theologies of change* about how to make the world a better place" (Levitt 2008, 773). A week-long affair, the camp encourages every child to participate and speak.[153] Discipline is not a priority, rather dialogue is.

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[152] In the context of the youth camp Dhiraj's temple organizes, which I participated in in July 2014, health issues were restricted to balanced diet, good hygiene, and blood pressure. Sexual education was not discussed. In my research, I know of only one temple who does provide sexual education to their youth.

[153] Most temples in the community offer youth camps for a week in the summer. The camp is a day camp where children are dropped off in the morning around 7:30a.m. or 8a.m. and then picked up in the evening around 6 p.m. The camps are run by devotees who either volunteer their time as chaperones, teachers, or guest speakers or sponsor meals or snacks to feed the attending the children. Often, the teachers and chaperones are devotees in their late teens or twenties who had attended the camps in their youth. These camps are free of charge to any child who attends the temple. Certain larger temples, like Dhiraj's temple, open the camp to any Hindu child who wants to attend. The programming during the camp varies by temple, but often involves learning about Hinduism, practicing yoga, listening to guest speakers, and playing games and sports.

Sheila, Leela and Sachin spent their summers growing up attending this youth

camp and describe it as a reason why they identify with and continue attending their

temple in their twenties:

> It wasn't the actual services or *satsangs* that made me identify it as a home or a
> sense of community. So back when I was younger Uncle Dhiraj…used to do week
> long, similar to what Sachin is doing now, the youth conventions. And I really
> liked those…it was a chance for me as a young kid…to mingle with kids my age
> outside the temple setting, but in the setting. I wasn't doing rituals or anything
> like that. I was talking with people my age and having the conversation…always
> tempered with some sense of Hinduness...

For Sheila, she enjoyed youth camps because it offered her the opportunity to be in

conversation with other Indo-Guyanese Hindu youth. Sheila, who attended a Catholic

private school as the lone Indo-Caribbean student, valued the opportunity to interact and

engage other Indo-Guyanese and Hindus of her age.

And besides learning about topics beyond Hinduism, the camp at Dhiraj's temple

trains the youth in how to give speeches and tell stories. At the end of camp each year is a

story telling competition in which every camp participant, from the age of five to twenty

is assessed in their ability to tell a story to a panel of judges. As an impromptu judge one

year I witnessed first-hand how the judges of temple elders ultimately assessed a youth's

performance in terms of their confidence. If a youth appeared nervous, the judges made

every attempt to make the individual calm and confident. Such competitions are designed

to help youth become comfortable in expressing themselves as Leela explains:

> …There is definitely the mindset and decision that they're really trying to bolster
> our egos and our reputation but at the same time we have to make sure that we are
> quick to promote *dharma* (duty) and the religion. So we put on youth camps and
> youth concerts.…And the youth are really encouraged to come forward and make
> speeches, give their own interpretation of the scripture.

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By encouraging youth to question and think on their own, this temple creates a space where youth can be in fellowship with each other and the older generation inside and outside of the temple. And because of this supportive base both Sheila and Leela draw upon their Hindu faith to inform their civic engagement and activism in the city. As discussed in the chapter on religious place-making Leela drew upon her Hindu faith and knowledge of the tradition to find a collaborative solution to the environmental impact of beach *pujas*.

From her involvement in this temple, Sheila developed her own *theology of change* to inform her politics and community activism:

> You can say that I am a progressive Hindu because I believe that women should be treated with equality in…the Hindu faith. You can say I am a progressive Hindu because I go do *seva* (service) or that I [help] vulnerable people…I think just being able to fulfill justice and equality and diverge from any hatred or inequity that for me is progressive Hinduism …I would not seek to convert anybody or say that my religion is better than your religion or to say Hinduism is the best religion or that in Hindu scriptures it says that gays can't get married…I think progressive Hindus stand opposite to that.… I always took away from going to the temple is that Hinduism is about love and respecting people and about equality and about just living a good life because then that is how you obtain *moksha* (release from cycle of rebirth).

By situating her politics in Hinduism, Sheila demonstrates how religion can utilized as a positive force.

But such a *satsang* is not restricted to the younger generation. Moving beyond the bodily practices which I discussed the previous chapter, I want to explore how yoga classes such as Mary's create supportive spaces as an alternative *satsang*. Sathi, one of Mary's students, is a fifty something Indo-Guyanese woman who began practicing yoga after an injury. While working in a doctor's office, she slipped and fell on ice. After many surgeries and various medications, Sathi could barely walk and felt pain daily.

Through yoga, Sathi found a way to alleviate her pain and a new way to practice her

faith. She recognized yoga as "devotion" when Mary asked her to start teaching part of

the yoga class:

> Mary says she thinks I have the humility to start, you know, doing part of the
> class.…I didn't want to do it, but she said, "No, we're helping people
> here….You're doing *seva*….whatever you learn you're giving back. You're
> sharing [with] the people." It is helping each other.

While the practice of yoga does help the individual, the class is structured around helping

others. Once Sathi learned the basics, her role expanded to assist her classmates in

learning yoga, which is a step beyond what is expected of her in *satsang* at her temple.

The role of the class in the context of *satsang* is also recognized by Sukshma:

> You don't have that verbal interaction in *mandir* as you would have in class. In
> class you are sharing ideas and learning and stuff. But in *satsang* you [are]
> ingesting whatever the speaker is saying. You're either awake or sleeping or
> you're absorbing some of the stuff he is saying....but with the classes know you
> have people sharing their experiences. They're sharing they're knowledge.
> They're sharing ideas…. you're sharing about your life and I think that is the
> biggest thing.

> Mary's student Sathi is in many ways the model student. In addition to recruiting

many of Mary's students, she is encouraged by Mary to be active in teaching and leading

the class. Why is this? Sathi's life has been transformed by yoga. Like most of Mary's

students, Sathi began practicing yoga after injury. While working in a doctor's office, she

slipped and fell on ice. After many surgeries and various medications, Sathi could barely

walk and felt daily pain.

> The impact of her injury was more than the damage to her body, but to her sense

of self as an Indo-Guyanese woman who not only worked, but cared for her family:

> I mean looking at me at that point of time when I was sick in bed and I couldn't
> even cook and do things for my family I felt depressed so much so and yeah when

you're sick and you have your family coming home from work and from school and you cannot do things for them because you are in so much pain.

Unable to care for her family and suffering daily, Sathi was lost. And then she heard about Mary's yoga class. Consulting with her doctor in addition to doing her own research, Sathi attended a class Mary offered at a local *mandir*. The result transformed her recovery and set her in a new life style as she explains:

> …ever since I have start yoga it has changed my life. I started gradually, very slowly like a real old woman. Really. I couldn't move. I couldn't do much at first, but eventually I started doing more and it started to change my life completely….It helped a lot.

In addition to learning to slow down and to listen to what her body is communicating to her through aches and pains, the actual act of making the time to attend class is an important part of her self-care as Sathi points out:

> I'm so proud that I ever took myself to yoga so now it is a "me" time. When it comes to yoga classes I don't care what happens, but I have to be in yoga class…. when I go to classes and hear that they cancel I say why do they have to do that because I was looking forward to it so much…When you concentrate on doing something for yourself it works for you.

Sathi's friend Reshmi[154] shares the same sentiment. Although she had been practicing yoga at home with her three sons as an alternative treatment to asthma, she was introduced to the class by Sathi. Through Mary's guidance, Reshmi has altered her approach to life, not only practicing yoga weekly, but putting her new knowledge of *Ayurvedic* nutrition to practice by researching the source of her food and consciously buying food in season that is grown locally. Like Sathi, she looks forward to class as a form of self-care:

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[154] Reshmi, who grew up in Guyana and settled in the Bronx, has a busy life. In addition to working at home, she is a mother of three boys. Yoga and *Ayurvedic* classes are a venue for her to escape "the rhythm of everyday—work, home, family" and learn more about *Ayurveda* and her religion.

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For me if I don't go I feel like I have missed something. It is like, I don't know, like I told you it [is] like re-energizing and renewing myself as well. I don't know how else to explain it. I try to go. It has to be something really important to my kids for me to miss it or something like that. But I am there.

For Reshmi and others in the class, the desire to attend class consistently is linked to the connections and relationships that are fostered and sustained in class:

…when you go to the nutrition class it is just for yourself and learning and sharing knowledge. Like if one of us learns something we are going to share it right there in the class. In the *mandir* not everyone has that connection or that conversation the way we do in the class.

As Reshmi articulates, it is the fellowship that is created through attending yoga that inspires her attendance. By sharing knowledge and learning through conversation Reshmi is in community with her fellow yoga ladies. Kareena, another Indo-Guyanese woman in the class expressed the same idea:

In class you are sharing ideas and learning and stuff…. you have people sharing their experiences. They're sharing their knowledge. They're sharing ideas….it really is you're sharing about your life and I think that is the biggest thing. You're just not sitting there and having one person talking….you're able to be part of the conversation…it is sort of a unified group.

While this group of women originally met to practice yoga to heal their bodies or to lose pounds, they are also undertaking a transformation in their lives. Taking time for themselves, they meet to share knowledge and learn together and also to share their concerns and seek advice. Because of their shared experience of being immigrants in the city, they share their cultures and past to find commonalities. In reflection upon the community achieved through yoga, Reshmi compared the yoga fellowship to the fellowship achieved at *satsang* services:

In the *mandir* not everyone has that connection or that conversation the way we do in the class….I think it would be better because you will be more connected with these people that you are spending all these hours with. I think it could make it better for the Sunday service and the *satsang* if you could have that connection.

> But not everyone is open to it. But the classes, the people choose to go there....but at service they're out there in drones...

In recognizing fellowship in both contexts, Reshmi considers the possibility of reworking the approach to *satsang* in *mandirs*. Rather than passively sitting in temple, maybe devotees should engage in conversations to better connect and learn about the people with whom they worship. Maybe an alternative form of *satsang* centered on dialogue and *seva* should be pursued by all *mandirs*?

Conclusion: The ICEman Cometh

The streets of Little Guyana are a bit quieter in 2017 (O'Reilley 2017). Following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) has increased their efforts against illegal immigration through raids and random checks. Rumors of ICE in Little Guyana are circulating through social media. For instance, Singh's, a popular *roti* shop (restaurant) in the community, is less busy following the rumor of it being frequented by ICE agents. As some Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Caribbeans are undocumented, many in the community are hesitant to be in public for fear of meeting an ICEman, as ICE agents are known in the community, and being deported.

In response to this fear and uncertainty, public officials and community activists are reaching out to this community and educating them of their rights. Many of these meetings are held in temples, either following a *satsang* service or as a separate meeting. Other temples, as I discussed in this chapter, realizing their work exceeds the confines of Sunday *satsang*, are exploring additional ways they can better serve the wider community. One such temple is the Peaceful Hindu Temple, an Indo-Caribbean Hindu temple established in 2013. In March 2017, the temple recently declared itself as a

sanctuary. Hindus and non-Hindus who are facing problems may find refuge at this temple since ICE teams have not entered places of worship at this time. Also, the temple will provide resources on current immigration laws and help impacted individuals find legal assistance. As *Pandit* Nara explained during Sunday *satsang*:

> …I hope this gets out to the other Hindu temples, when these places can be established, remember a *mandir* is not just a place we come and pray. It goes beyond that. It is an institution for higher learning. Learning how to allow this institution, this place, to reach out to the public now because the public continues to give to the *mandir*. Without the public, the *mandir* cannot survive. What does the *mandir* do now to repay the public. You give them shelter, a place where they can come and feel secure…

In clarifying how their *mandir* would become a sanctuary, *Pandit* Nara rethinks the meaning of *mandir* and articulates how their *mandir* is an alternative *satsang*, a community of truth in action. Rather than just receiving information on resources, the *mandir* goes beyond to become a sanctuary, highlighting their collective theologies of change.

The Peaceful Hindu Temple and the other version of alternative *satsang* discussed in the previous section are reminiscent of Brinda Mehta's idea of "safe spaces of affirmations." In her book *Diasporic (Dis)locations* (2004), Mehta develops her idea of "safe spaces of affirmation," where Indo-Guyanese women have the agency and ability to redefine culture and the gender script. In this space, female bonding occurs as well as the transmission of knowledge, history, and skills to the next generation. I would like to apply this idea to a larger search for *satsang* currently happening in the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community. By expanding the meaning of *satsang* beyond the fellowship achieved through Sunday *satsang* services, certain temples and Indo-Guyanese are developing alternative *satsangs* through classes and youth programing. Such *satsangs* are "safe

spaces of affirmations" where participations have the agency and ability to redefine the practice and agenda of Caribbean Hinduism in New York City. By sharing experiences and being in conversation Indo-Guyanese Hindus appear to be developing a new, alternative *satsang* which builds upon the innovations of their ancestors in Guyana to create better opportunities for and to expand the community beyond itself.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: WHY RELIGION MATTERS?

What is religion? Religion is not a single thing. It cannot be reduced to Sunday

satsang or restricted to the walls of the *mandir*. It is not simply the act of saying prayers

or making offerings of fruits and flowers to *murtis*. Religion is much more. It provides an

identity for people. It offers compassion and guidance in its beliefs. Through religion,

individuals may find fellowship and community. The actual practice enables the

possibilities to know one's self and to aspire one's future. And religion connects one to

the divine. One understands her experience in relation to a being greater than the material

world and the present who influences one's life.

In my research, the Indo-Guyanese individuals I met helped to elucidate these

complex and often private understandings of religion in their lives. Below I elaborate on

these multiple meanings of religion in the lives of some of the members of the diasporic

Indo-Guyanese community. For instance, Ranjitha, the thirty-something Indo-Guyanese

Hindu singer and vocal teacher I discussed in chapter four, reflected upon the impact of

Caribbean Hinduism in her life:

> Again, I'm just a product of my upbringing. Going to Catholic school. Being in
> the *mandir* setting at such a young, impressionable age, I felt like, whoa, I'm here
> for some purpose. We're all here for some purpose. And I needed to find that
> purpose…. I'm a spiritual person. I do believe we're all here working on our
> *karma*….And you do make your own destiny, but I do feel like there are things to
> go through that turn you into the person you're supposed to be. I can't explain
> how I lived an almost perfect life until the age of 21 and then it all just came
> crashing down….I feel like it is all in preparation for something great.

For her Caribbean Hinduism is more than just a set of beliefs or practices that were

transported from India to Guyana and then New York City. Caribbean Hinduism offers

her a conceptual frame to understand and give meaning to her life in the city as a woman,

an artist, a Hindu, a New Yorker, and an Indo-Guyanese individual. Her faith and spirituality guided her through her mother's death, gave her strength to leave and divorce her abusive husband, and inspires her to continue pursuing her music, to be a stronger and better person, and to be more engaged and political in her community in the future.

For *Pandita* Indrani, as mentioned in chapter two, Caribbean Hinduism offered a path for education and of migration. Receiving a scholarship to study Hindi in India from a *Samajist* organization, her detour to New York City on her return to Guyana resulted in her staying in the city to contribute to the religious education and care of the growing Indo-Guyanese *Samajist* community. As the temple provided her a path to citizenship, she understands the role of temple in the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community in the city:

> It gives them the foundation of their culture. It keeps them together. It helps them feel a sense of security knowing that there are people there who will support them in times of need. It educates them. It leads them forward culturally and religiously. Emotionally and spiritually….They know the temple is there to support them in times of need…. it brings them a chance to work together, to pray together and to stay together.

Through *mandir*, the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community, like other immigrant faith communities, finds a space of support and recuperation to deal with the issues of migration and living in the city.

Because religion "is made up of diverse, complex, and ever-changing mixtures of beliefs and practices, as well as relationships, experiences, and commitments" (McGuire 2008, 185) it matters in general and to the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community specifically. In this dissertation, I argue religion as a mobile concept, what I have termed as 'religion on the move,' gives a theoretical frame to understand how devotees adapt religion to help them navigate their identities in unknown territories. Through my examination of Caribbean Hinduism on the move, I have explored how religion operates in multiples

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ways in the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community of New York City. Each chapter highlighted a different way Caribbean Hinduism is mobilized to address issues that arise from living in the United States as a non-white, non-Christian community. Through Caribbean Hinduism, the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community asserts their ethnicity to become visible, to overcome marginalization and to claim belonging.

In chapter two, I began by discussing the community's indentured past, which I examined through the shifting meaning of coolie, a concept that informs how Indo-Guyanese and the greater Indo-Caribbean community practices Hinduism and negotiates their ethnicity in New York City. Their history of twice-migration results in Hinduism, as well as other aspects of Indian culture, being strategically adapted to overcome feelings of uncertainty and marginalization to elevate their community's status. These ideas of the coolie, both past and present, explain why Caribbean Hinduism is so pervasive in Little Guyana. Through worship, Indo-Guyanese celebrate and prove their Hinduness and Indianness to render their past visible and known to themselves, the *desi* community and the larger U.S. public; this strategy defines them as a community ready to lobby for resources and that may serve as a defense to the external world of bureaucrats, police, and racism.

In chapter three I examined Guyanese Hindu place making to introduce how the community understands space in New York and what makes a space a Hindu place. From small acts of devotion such as removing one's shoes to organizing large scales *pujas*, Hindu places, either temporarily or for an extended period of time, are made from spaces once understood as white, Protestant, and middle-class. In the context of Little Guyana, such place-making is often conflictual. Conflicts, while illustrating experiences of not-

belonging faced by first and second-generation Indo-Guyanese Hindus, ultimately

provide the community an opportunity to educate the larger public about who they are

and to challenge and possibly redefine what constitutes American.

Chapter four explored how the community's experiences of marginalization are

be understood through the body. As non-white individuals, Indo-Guyanese Hindu identity

is reduced to their body, which is used to define them as not American, other, and

potentially dangerous. Through ritual gestures, music and dance, and yogic/*Ayurvedic*

practices, Indo-Guyanese Hindus train their bodies in different ways to overcome such

experiences of marginalization and racism encountered in living and working in the city.

By engaging their bodies through such practices, Indo-Guyanese Hindus may cultivate

and/or know their inner selves.

And finally, in chapter five I discussed the practice of *satsang*. As the defining

feature of Caribbean Hinduism, *satsang* emerged in the context of the Caribbean to

counter experiences of not belonging and to solidify the community both emotionally and

politically. The current iteration of the practice in New York reveals a crisis of religious

leadership and the need to redefine what *satsang* is in America. By exploring alternative

forms of *satsang*, I highlighted how Indo-Guyanese Hindus are reworking the practice

and rethinking the role of Caribbean Hinduism to meet the needs and desires of its

practitioners in the city.

By investigating how Caribbean Hinduism moves and takes shape in New York

City, this dissertation offered an ethnographic study of how belonging is negotiated

through religion. Because the United States was founded on religious pluralism (Kurien

1998, 59; C. L. Cohen and Numbers 2013a), religion became an acceptable and

politically non-threatening means of integrating immigrants into the imagined community of the nation (Kurien 2007; Levitt 2013). Through public displays such as the *Diwali* and *Phagwah* parades, Caribbean Hinduism is simultaneously religion and ethnicity. Although clearly celebrations of Caribbean Hinduism to honor *deotas* and remind devotees of the importance of Hindu values in the face of adversity, the parades are also about bringing the community together as Indo-Guyanese Americans or rather Indo-Caribbean Americans. By inviting officials from the city, India, and the Caribbean, the community seeks recognition as a unique ethnicity with its own separate issues distinct from the larger Indo-American community.

However, by ethnicizing religion, Indo-Guyanese through Caribbean Hinduism do not attend directly to their racialization in the United States. Instead of challenging how they are rendered other, the community accept and adapts to the racial structure of the United States. The focus on gaining resources and preserving their traditions largely prevents the community from challenging their foreignness and how American is defined (Omi and Winant 1986; HoSang and LaBennett 2012). The few exceptions to this limitation are the *mandirs* and with Indo-Guyanese American Hindus who are attempting to find *theologies of change* within Caribbean Hinduism. From beach cleanups or instances of alternative *satsangs*, these occasions become sites to question the laws and structures of the United States and the definitions of being American implicit within them. Such contestations indicate an optimistic, political future for a segment of this community to address issues of common oppression across religion and race in the United States.

The fact that many of my interviewees are educated, middle-class individuals captures how class and religion intersect. In a way, *mandir* is for the middle class in Little Guyana. To have the time to attend Sunday *satsang* and the means to afford appropriate clothing, donations, and cost of travel to the *mandir* appears limited to a segment of the Indo-Guyanese Hindu community. The individuals who have the time to participate in *mandir* boards and shape the direction of the *mandir* is again limited to Indo-Guyanese Hindus of the middle class. This research best captures how middle class Indo-Guyanese Hindus mobilize Caribbean Hinduism in the city, but it does not adequately examine how non-middle class worships. The working-class attends *mandir*, but not in the same volume as the middle class. Working-class worship occurs at home and in other ways that fit their schedule.

Another topic suggested by this research and not explored further is how Caribbean Hinduism is a gendered practice. While I learned about the meaning of Caribbean Hinduism from both men and women, how and what I learned about the practices were gendered. Most of the men interviewed were either *pandits* or members of *mandir* boards while most of the women were devotees. This pattern correlates with the pattern observable at Sunday *satsang* services in *mandirs* around the city: men are in attendance, but women are the majority of the participants. The significance of this gender breakdown, which echoes the composition of most religious communities, is not clear. While culturally, women are responsible for the religious and cultural upbringing of the children, class is also a factor. Most of the women I interviewed had flexible schedules because they were either housewives, retired, or worked from home. The Indo-Guyanese Hindu women I met, but could not interview worked one or more jobs outside

the home full time. They attended *mandir* inconsistently since the evenings and weekends were spent running errands, doing chores, and catching up on rest. These women maintained altars at home and attended *mandir* on special occasions such as religious holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. If they had more time, they would participate in *mandir* more often.

In *mandir*, gender roles are also taught and policed. For instance, in *Samajist* temples, men sit stage left and women sit stage right, a seemingly odd practice for a tradition that encourages women to become *pandits* and have equal power in terms of *mandir* leadership. Also, while men may attend *satsang* in jeans and a polo shirts in all sects examined in this research, women wearing pants or jeans with a shirt that does not cover their posterior are informed of the inappropriateness of their attire and asked to dress differently next time. Such segregation of gender and gender double standards mirror gender inequality outside the *mandir*. Many Indo-Guyanese women work and contribute to the collective family income in addition to their responsibilities of housework and raising of the children. The community also suffers from a high level of gender violence, most commonly in the forms domestic and dating violence. Two murders in Little Guyana sadly demonstrate this. In 2007, Natasha Ramen was slashed to death by her Indo-Guyanese rapist. In 2015, Rajwantie Baldeo was stabbed on the streets of Little Guyana by her Indo-Guyanese husband. Both incidents were met with little public outcry, especially from the *mandirs*. In fact, according to a few community members, *mandirs* may actually exacerbate the issue. The women I interviewed who survived emotionally and physically abusive relationships pointed out the alienation they felt in *mandir* when they spoke about their personal stories of trauma. One woman, who

shared her experience of being in an abusive relationship on a blog was criticized by *pandits* for portraying herself as being weak, almost subtly blaming her for being in such a relationship. She struggled with such comments, which seem so unHindu to her because she relied upon her faith to leave that relationship. There is a need for *mandirs* to address these issues during *satsang* to help educate both men and women on how to pursue healthy, supportive relationships and how to seek help; there is also the need to study how religion enables such gender violence in this community.

Despite the limitations of my research, I approached religion as "on the move." By studying more than devout individuals in places of worship, I have followed Caribbean Hinduism and Indo-Guyanese Hindus in New York City to various sites to appreciate how religion informs their experiences, operates on different scales (spatially, politically, and temporally), and negotiates power structures. Through the insights of the new mobilities paradigm, I discussed how this religious tradition has adapted in its movement from India to Guyana to New York City and how the mobility offered by (twice) migration exposes the community to certain exclusions or immobilities, which religion negotiates. Such an approach enables us to appreciate that religion encompasses many aspects of the social and is still important despite arguments that our global society is secular.

APPENDIX A

ABBREVIATIONS

CARICOM   The Caribbean Community
ICA   Indo-Caribbean Alliance
ICE   Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency
ISKCON   International Society of Krishnan Consciousness
PNC   People's National Congress
PPP   People's Progressive Party
RSS   Rashtriya Sevak Sangh

GLOSSARY

Hindi and Sanskrit terms are italicized.

Aarti	offering of light to *deota* or elder
Abee	Guyanese creole for our
Ashram	monastery-like place for Hindus
Arya Samaj	A reform movement of Hinduism that emerged in North India in 1875. The defining features of *Arya Samaj* are its opposition to idolatry and its commitment to the *Vedas*.
Atman	inner self
Ayurveda	An alternative medical system from India that aims to bring the mind and body into balance through yoga and nutrition.
Ayurvedic	refers to *Ayurveda*
Bai	Guyanese creole for boy
Baigan	eggplant
Bala vihar	a Hindu version of Sunday school for children
Bhagwan	a name for God
Bhajans	devotional songs
Bhangra	upbeat, folk Punjabi music
Bhakti	a type of Hinduism focused on devotion/love
Brahamachari	A virtuous Hindu who lives a simple, celibate life. *Brahmacharis* observe a vegetarian diet and meditate.
Brahmin	Highest caste, traditionally priest who train in sacred texts and rituals
Brahmo Samaj	A reform movement of Hinduism that emerged in Bengal in 1828. Like the *Arya Samaj*, it is opposed to idolatry.

British Guiana	colonial name of Guyana when it was ruled by the British
Caste	In Hinduism, individuals are born into four castes or classes based on their *karma*. These caste structure Hindu/Indian society both socially and economically.
Chamar	*Dalit* or untouchable caste which is outside the caste system, term commonly used in a pejorative manner for anyone who is of low standing
Chutney	A music genre that combines soca beats with Indian instruments and Hindi lyrics. Chutney is popular among Indo-Caribbeans.
Coolie	A term that described individuals, both of Indian and Chinese descent, who did unskilled work. Although derogatory in nature, Indo-Caribbean activists and artists, like Rajkumari Singh, have reappropriated the term.
Cutlass	machete
Da	Guyanese creole for the
Darshan	vision of the deity
Deotas	colloquial term for deity
Desh	Land and, country, or homeland
Desi	A term used to describe an immigrant or a child of an immigrant from India, Pakistan, or Bangladeshi in the post-1965 wave of migration
Devdasis	temple artists
Dharma	moral order, law, and duty
Dis	Guyanese creole for this
Diwali	festival of lights
Diya	A clay pot usually filled with oil. A small piece of cotton is placed in the oil to light as a lamp.
Dhoti	A cloth wrapped around the waist, usually worn by men.

Dougla	A term used describe an Indian-African offspring
Guianese	Refers to nation of Guyana during the time when it was under British colonial rule.
Guru	teacher
Guyana	The only English speaking nation in South America.
Gyal	Guyanese creole for girl
Hatha yoga	A type of yoga that emphasizes physical poses to focuses the mind through mastering the body and withdrawing attention from external objects.
Hawan	fire ritual
Holi	a *Hindu* festival of spring
Jagadesh	A name for God that means lord of the world.
Janeo	sacred threads given to Brahmin boys or individuals who study the *Vedas*
Jhandi	a protective flag known
-ji	A Hindi suffix added to a name to demonstrate respect.
kafi	quite
Kalava	String tied around the wrist of Hindus following a *puja* to invoke the blessing of the deity
Kalimai	Worship of Mother Kali derived from South Indian traditions.
Karma	Past deeds in a previous life that determine the conditions of a person's present life.
Katha	Story or parable told during *satsang* service.
Kathak	type of Indian classical dance
Karagam	Decorated brass pot that contains Mother Kali's power during the big *puja* in the *kalimai* tradition.
Kurta	shirt

Little Guyana	A neighborhood in South Queens that is the epicenter of Indo-Caribbean community. Indo-Guyanese are now the majority residents of this area.
Mala	necklace of beads
Mandir	temple
Mantras	prayers
Marlo	A type of priest in the *Kalimai* tradition who is trained to have Mother Kali manifest in their physical body.
Masjid	Muslim place of worship
Mata	mother
Matikor	An all-women celebration held days prior to the wedding.
Moksha	The goal of Hinduism, which is liberation from *samsara*.
Murti	statue of a deity
Navaratri	Hindu festival dedicated to worshipping goddesses.
Neva	Guyanese creole for never
Pandit	A Hindu priest who is trained in Hindi and Sanskrit. In addition to knowing the Hindu scriptures, he performs Hindu rituals.
Pandita	A female Hindu priest who is trained in Hindi and Sanskrit. In addition to knowing the Hindu scriptures, he performs Hindu rituals.
Phagwah	Another name for *Holi* usually used in the Caribbean.
Prasad	blessed food
Pravachan	religious discourse
Puja	type of ritual

Pujari	A term for a Hindu priest most commonly used in the *kalimai* tradition. In the *Sanatanist* tradition *pujari* refers to an individual trained in performing rituals, but not in the sacred texts
Purohit	related to *pandits*
Salwar kameez	traditional Indian clothing
Samajist	Refers to an individual who follow the reform movement *Arya Samaj's* interpretation of Hinduism.
Sanatan Dharma	Meaning eternal religion, this sect is defined by its ritual worship of *murtis* or statues of Hindu deities.
Sanatanists	followers of *Sanatan Dharma.*
Samsara	the eternal cycle of rebirth
Sari	traditional Indian clothing
Satsang	A group of devotees coming together for religious training and fellowship. It is the defining feature of Caribbean
Satyagraha	A Sanskrit term meaning holding to truth, it is most known as the philosophy of nonviolence advocated by Mahatma Gandhi.
Seva	service or volunteer work
Shakti	cosmic feminine power
Shaktism	A strand of Hinduism where the devotee worships forms of the Goddess as *shakti*
Shanti	peace
Roti	Indian flat bread
Shri	Lord
Soca	a genre of Caribbean music
Tabla	type of Indian drum used in Hindu religious ceremonies.
Taan	old Hindi folk singing

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Vedanta	A philosophical branch based on the *Vedas*. *Vedanta* is promoted by Hindu reformists like Swami Vivekananda.
Vedantic	related to *Vedanta*
Vedas	A collection of Sacred Sanskrit text compiled 750-600 BCE.
Vedic	related to *Vedas*
West Indies	refers to parts of the Caribbean under British colonialism
Yajna	Ceremonial reading combined with rituals

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