Contributions to Indian Sociology

The metamorphosis of caste among Trinidad Hindus

N. Jayaram

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Contributions to Indian Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://cis.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://cis.sagepub.com/content/40/2/143.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Oct 11, 2006

What is This?

The metamorphosis of caste among Trinidad Hindus

N. Jayaram

The discussion on caste among diasporic Hindus is often phrased in terms of a 'retention' versus 'change' hypothesis. Based on a review of literature and field observations in Trinidad, this paper argues that such an antithesis distorts our understanding of caste as a diasporic reality and clouds many of its fascinating nuances. The analysis of change that caste as an integral institution of Hinduism has undergone in Trinidad shows the heuristic significance of the concept of metamorphosis *as an analytical device for the study of the dynamics of social institutions.*

> *The essential character of an institution lies in the manner in which its component parts are combined to form a distinctive pattern. The pattern gets mangled in the process of emigration and resettlement ... [W]hat persists is a thing of shreds and patches and not the seamless web [that existed] in the ancestral society.*
> Chandra Jayawardena 1971: 114–15

N. Jayaram is at the Centre for Research Methodology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, V.N. Purav Marg, Deonar, Mumbai 400 088. Email: njayaram2@rediffmail.com

The intrinsic relationship between caste and Hinduism has been treated as axiomatic (see Dumont 1970; Jayaram 1996; Srinivas 1962: 150). The survival of caste in India for more than three millennia and the extraordinary resilience shown by this institution have even led psychoanalysts to locate its roots in the narcissistic personality of the Hindus (see Spratt 1966). If this were so, one would logically expect caste to survive in the Hindu diaspora. Evidence suggests that it has survived in East Africa (Dotson and Dotson 1968; Nelson 1973), Malaysia (Jain 1989: 62–64) and Sri Lanka (Hollup 1994; Jayaraman 1975), though differing in varying degrees from the ideal type. Elsewhere in the Hindu diaspora (in Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, South Africa, Surinam and Trinidad), it was found to have become moribund by the mid-1960s (see Schwartz 1967a). These differences are explained by the variations in the historical and other circumstances of Hindus in the diaspora.[1]

Scholars have generally sought a categorical answer to the question of whether or not the caste system exists among Hindus in a particular diasporic country. They have invariably posited an ideal type of caste system—such as was supposed to have existed in the past, or as exists in India now. The resulting dialectics of 'retention' *versus* 'change' distorts the understanding of caste as a diasporic reality and obscures many of its fascinating nuances. Based on a review of the literature and field observations during 1994–96, this article, on the contrary, attempts an exploration of the *metamorphosis* of this integral institution of Hinduism in the diaspora.

I
The Hindus in Trinidad

In 1990, there were 267,040 Hindus in the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, forming 23.7 per cent of the country's total population. They constituted 58.9 per cent of the people of Indian origin, the

---

[1] These are cases of the Hindu diaspora originating during the colonial era, and some dating as far back as the 1830s. The case of Hindus who emigrated to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America after India became independent in 1947, and particularly since the 1970s, is definitely different. The variations in their regional–linguistic origin in India and their geographical dispersal in the host country ensure that caste as a hierarchical system is not operationally meaningful to them in their diasporic situation. It nevertheless continues to be significant in their relationship (through joint family membership) with society in India.

single largest ethnic group accounting for 40.3 per cent of the population (Central Statistical Office 1994: xiv–xv).[2] Most of them live on the main island of Trinidad,[3] and an overwhelming majority of them are descendants of indentured labourers brought into Trinidad by the British colonial government between 1845 and 1917.

As a sociocultural laboratory, Trinidadians of Indian origin (or Indo-Trinidadians) in general, and Trinidadian Hindus in particular, have long been under scholarly focus (see Jain 1993: 76–80). Given the centrality of caste in India, it is not surprising that scholars of 'Hindu Trinidad' have been concerned to examine the position of this institution a century or so after the arrival of the first Indians on this island: Barton Morley Schwartz (1967b: 117) reported 'the failure of caste in Trinidad'. Arthur Niehoff (1967: 162) found caste to be 'functionally a matter of little concern in [the] Hindu community'. Colin G. Clarke (1967: 195 see also 1986: 89–97) observed that while 'the caste system has broken down ... some social, marital, and religious implications of caste persist'. While caste has 'dissolved as a functional form', David Lowenthal (1972: 150) noted that it had 'survived as an aspect of prejudice, a matter of style, an ingredient of personality'. It is only as 'a residual aspect of prestige' that we can approach caste in Trinidad, opined Joseph J. Nevadomsky (1980: 41). Based on these and similar conclusions, Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec (1991: 155) aver that 'we have to give caste a much more limited place in our analysis of the ways in which [Caribbean] Hindu discourses and practices are socially organised'.

Such observations are hardly surprising considering the physical isolation of the Hindu community in Trinidad from its ancestral homeland, the lapse of time since its original emigration, and the extent of Western influence to which its social institutions and cultural practices were subjected. That caste *as then known in India* would disappear among the Hindus in Trinidad was, in fact, anticipated more than a century ago, even by the colonial administrators and missionaries. For instance, the Protector of Immigrants in Trinidad was

> confident that were immigration from India to cease now, fifty years from this would find but little trace of caste in the colony, or what

---

[2] According to Census 2000, the population of Hindus in Trinidad and Tobago was 250,760 and they formed 22.49 per cent of the country's population and 56.19 per cent of the people of Indian origin (http://www.cso.gov.tt/census2000).

[3] 'Trinidad' is used here as a socio-geographical label.

might remain so changed that the 'Brahmins' of India would not be able to recognise it. [Caste would be a thing of the past] ... except perhaps among a few 'Brahmins' or 'Chuttrees', who might still cling to it (quoted by Comins 1893a: 38).

From the sociological point of view, however, several questions seem important: how did it happen that an institution which is viewed as integral to Hinduism should get attenuated in the Trinidadian situation? Considering the extraordinary resilience shown by caste in India, what has been its manifestation in Trinidad over the years, during the initial period of emigration (i.e., during the indenture period) and in the later decades (i.e., after the Indians became a settled community)? What aspects of this institution have survived, what aspects have undergone modification, and what aspects have been adapted to the emergent situation of the community? Finally, what has been the nature of the interface between caste and Hinduism in Trinidad?

II
Attenuation of caste in the indenture period

Reliable data on the caste background of Indian immigrants to Trinidad were not maintained by the colonial authorities. Based on the broad categorisation of the background of emigrants to Trinidad between 1876 and 1917, compiled by the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta (see Laurence 1994: 110–16; Ramesar 1994: 19–20; Vertovec 1992: 96), we find the following break-up of religion and caste groups. Of the 91,691 emigrants, 78,772 (85.9 per cent) were Hindus; 12,851 (14.0 per cent) were Muslims; and 68 (0.1 per cent) were Christians. Of the 78,772 Hindu emigrants, 13,242 (16.8 per cent) were of 'Brahman castes'; 5,988 (7.6 per cent) were of 'Artisan castes'; 27,680 (35.1 per cent) were of 'Agricultural castes'; and 31,862 (40.5 per cent) were of 'Low castes'.

Surgeon-Major D.W.D. Comins' list of specific castes of immigrants with their numbers during 1879–80 (1893a: 37 also reproduced in Laurence 1994: 112–14) is apparently more useful than the generalised categories of the Protector of Emigrants. However, since the emigrants held several identities (regional, linguistic, occupational, etc., besides caste and sub-caste), all passing for caste, guessing which particular identity an indentured labourer invoked at the time of his or her recruitment

is difficult. For example, 'Ajoodhabasi' (resident of Ayodhya), 'Halwaye' (maker of sweetmeats), and 'Kessan' (peasant) are mentioned as castes in Comins' list.

The data on the caste background of those who came to Trinidad from Madras are equally scanty (see Wood 1968: 142–43). During the 1859–60 season, two ships brought in all 380 emigrants. The background of the vast majority of these was only recorded as 'Tamils' and 'Telugus', which are linguistic categories, or their occupations were described in English. These emigrants, however, represented 'a modest section of the society of South India', including the members of high castes (like the Marathas and the Vellalas, if not the Brahmans), an intermediate range of agricultural and artisan castes, and the three lowest castes (the Pallans, Paraiyans and Chikkiliyams).

It must be emphasised that castes as ethnographic categories, as reflected in their censuses, gazetteers and surveys of 'races, tribes and castes, (see Cohn 1990: 224–54) were created by colonial officials in their effort to 'order' the society that they were administering. These caste categories are crude and artificial, reflecting more the ideas of the colonial administrators than those of the people themselves. At the existential level, the reality of caste was complex and varied. To view this reality in terms of such artificial categories is to commit the fallacy of reification, and to gloss over the adaptability of caste in a diasporic situation.

Notwithstanding the inevitable distortions and their methodological inadequacies in the colonial official data on caste, it is clear that the Hindu migrants to Trinidad were drawn from a wide range of castes (Laurence 1994: 110, 114). Certainly, they were not drawn exclusively or even predominantly from the lowest caste groups, as is believed by 'many non-Indians in Trinidad' as well as 'some of those actively involved in the immigration proceedings' (Klass 1961: 11; see also Lowenthal 1972: 147–48; Ramesar 1994: 20–22; and Wood 1968: 143), and even by some anthropologists (see Weller 1968: 135).

The first factor which adversely affected caste was the nature of indentured recruitment for Trinidad and other colonies of the West Indies. Unlike the large-scale family migration under the *kangani* system of recruitment for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) (see Jayaraman 1975), in the case of Trinidad, labourers were recruited individually by an agency. The recruits were drawn from different areas and from different villages within a given area (see Laurence 1994: 104–10; Vertovec 1992: 232–43). Each catchment differed in its configuration of castes and sub-castes.

Thus there were variations both in the caste backgrounds of the recruits and in the numbers of recruits belonging to specific caste groups. Obviously, it would have been extremely difficult for immigrants, even if they had wanted to, to recreate in the diaspora the caste order of their places of origin.

Confounding this situation was the possibility of 'caste-passing' at the time of recruitment. Since caste status was important in village India, it was possible 'that quick-thinking men, surrounded by complete strangers and far from their native villages, would have tried to pass themselves off as men of higher castes in the recruiting depots of Calcutta' (Klass 1961: 58). For instance, a Chamar, wanting to hide his low-caste background, could pass for an Ahir or Kissan (peasant). Sometimes, caste-passing by a lower-caste person involved assuming surnames such as Maharaj, Sharma or Tiwari (of a Brahman) or Singh (of a Kshatriya). As Raymond T. Smith and Chandra Jayawardena (1967: 55) noted in the case of British Guiana (now Guyana).

> Those who dared do so, even if their contemporaries disbelieved them, had only to weather some sneering and gossip which decreased with the passage of time. There was no organisation with the authority to sift claims, nor was there a consensus on such matters so that spurious claims could be concertedly ignored.... A high rate of residential mobility among plantation labourers enabled some to establish their claims. Eventually, whatever doubts were entertained in one generation were forgotten in the next.

This, no doubt, undermined the status claims of many, if not most, persons of higher caste, and challenged the legitimacy of caste. The use of such phrases as 'ship Brahman' in British Guiana and 'Red House Brahman' in colonial Trinidad illustrate the underlying scepticism (O'Callaghan 1998: 3).

Even if caste-passing had not taken place, the process of migration did not recognise caste as a status category (see Laurence 1994: 78–103; Ramesar 1994: 25–30). Whatever their caste background, all the indentured labourers were identified and treated as 'coolies'. There was no provision for the practice by members of different castes of ideas associated with purity and pollution, an essential element of the caste system. Both at the emigration depots and on the long ship voyage from Calcutta (now Kolkata) or Madras (now Chennai) to Port of Spain (which on average took 60–100 days), the cramped conditions constrained

the emigrants to mix with people belonging to different caste groups, thereby forcing them to disregard taboos on physical contact (like untouchability). Hugh Tinker (1993: 155) quotes a British officer who reportedly heard that:

> At Negapatam, a Brahman chided a Pariah who barged into him on the quay. To which the Pariah: 'I have taken off my caste and left it with the Port Officer. I won't put it on again till I come back.'

The emigrants on board the ship had to eat with others or eat food cooked or served by others, both of which meant violation of the caste rules governing commensality. This was sometimes ingeniously explained. George A. Grierson quotes a returned emigrant: 'A man can eat anything on board ship. A ship is like the temple of Jagganath, where there are no caste restrictions' (quoted in Tinker 1993: 155).

More important, unlike on the Ceylonese plantations (see Jayaraman 1975), neither was the organisation of work on the plantations in Trinidad on caste lines, nor did it involve *jajmani* relations. Whether in the factory or on the field, job assignments on plantations respected neither the caste specialisations nor the caste taboos of the Indians. With few exceptions, labourers belonging to the different castes did the same jobs, worked in the same gangs, and earned the same wages (see Laurence 1994: 233).

Estate owners had no vested interest in maintaining the caste system. If anything, they tried to subvert it to their own advantage. Knowing the 'reluctance of high caste immigrants to work under drivers of a lower caste' (observed by Comins 1893a: 79), they often appointed the lower-caste labourers as *sirdar*s (drivers) to spite and control the upper-caste workers (see Tinker 1993: 222–23). In fact, the planters perceived the 'coolies of high caste' to be 'worthless' as agricultural labourers.[4] Also, the upper castes, and particularly Brahmans, were viewed as troublemakers on the estates. They were held to make 'pernicious use ... of their influence over other immigrants. As a general rule, in all strikes involving insubordination or threatened disturbances, the instigators are

---

[4] In his Annual Report of 1881, R.W.S. Mitchell, the then Immigration Agent-General of British Guiana, included a list classifying the 'the value of the members of the different castes as labourers' based on 'the results of several years of experience in selecting emigrants at Calcutta'. This list classified six categories of labourers: 'best', 'good', 'fairly good', 'indifferent', and 'worthless'. In the last category were included 'Beneah–Brahmin–Kaet–Sonar–Jogee–Bhat–Jolla–Boyeddo–Gossoye–Autit–Fukeer–Kehtree' (quoted in Comins 1893b: 79).

coolies of high caste who, however, do not appear prominently in the matter, other immigrants being put forward and made to figure as leaders' (Comins 1893b: 79). The planters therefore explicitly discouraged indenturing those belonging to higher castes (see Laurence 1994: 115–16; Wood 1968: 118). Little wonder that, in the later years of indentured emigration, some high-caste persons (including Brahmans) were reported to have falsified their caste identities by changing their names and other distinguishing features such as style of dress and caste marks (see Tinker 1993: 210; Wood 1968: 143). This was also acknowledged by some immigrants after arrival in Trinidad. For instance, a prominent Indo-Trinidadian, L.F. Seukeran, recalled his father's experience in the late 19th century: 'My father got the name "Seukeran" on the boat so that he could be disguised and not known as a Brahmin' (quoted by Seesaran 1994: 187).[5]

There must have been compelling reasons for such reverse caste-passing by the Brahmans desperately seeking emigration:[6] Some of them must have been fugitives who, having participated in the unsuccessful 'Sepoy [native soldiers] Mutiny' of 1857, were escaping the British authorities in India. Others, having lived an extravagant life on borrowed money in the economically hard times that followed the Mutiny might have tried to escape from the clutches of usurers. Still others may have wanted to avoid the particularly harsh penalties and social disgrace incurred by the violation of caste sanctions.

Notwithstanding caste-passing, life in the barracks or work on the field or in the factory hardly permitted the observance of caste segregation

---

[5] In the 1956 general election when L.F. Seukaran was seeking election as an independent candidate, he was charged by his opponents with being against the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha. Seukaran stoutly denied the charge and said, 'I am a Brahmin and son of a Brahmin. Seven generations of Brahmin blood flows in my veins. I know more Sanskrit and Hindi than all the Pandits in Debe' (quoted in Malik 1971: 33–34). Interestingly, L.F. Seukaran had been sent to a Presbyterian School and was later baptised as a Christian.

[6] This is significant considering that the interdictions in the Dharmashastras meant loss of caste status for Brahmans, and to a lesser extent for members of other high castes, undertaking a voyage across the seas. There were, no doubt, doctrinal solutions and ritual prescriptions for regaining the caste status so lost, but they were quite expensive. In the Hindu diaspora, these interdictions are generally believed to extend to all caste groups, though the lowest caste groups had no status to lose. Thus, Brackette F. Williams (1991: 283–84) records Hindus in Guyana arguing 'that because their ancestors had to cross the "kala pani" (black water/ocean) to reach Guyana, they lost their purity and hence their caste identity. Thus, they say, all caste claims are false.'

and untouchability or the ideas associated with purity and pollution (see Laurence 1994: 233–35; see also Ramesar 1994: 98). Furthermore, some caste-associated rites could not be practised; cremation was prohibited until the 1930s and Hindu marriages were not recognised until 1946. No wonder that Comins found that 'caste is not a subject which troubles coolies long after their landing [in Trinidad], and in most cases many of the prejudices disappear or become much modified' (1893b: 37).

The most significant factor that accelerated the weakening of caste consciousness and traditional caste relations was the serious imbalance in the sex ratio. Based on the data compiled by the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta on emigrants to Trinidad between 1876 and 1917 (see Vertovec 1992: 96), we find the male–female ratio to be extremely low among both the Hindus (1:0.46) and the Muslims (1:0.56). Among the Hindu emigrants, the male–female ratio was particularly low among the 'Brahmans' (1:0.37) as compared to the 'Low castes' (1:0.56), with 'Artisan' and 'Agricultural' castes having identical ratios (1:0.40).

This meant that Hindu men could not be choosy about the caste of their mates. Some castes, no doubt, were represented in numbers too small to allow them to persist as endogamous units, but even in terms of broad caste categories, practising endogamy would have been difficult. The alternative to caste-exogamous marriage was to remain spouseless. The situation was grave considering the Indian males' rejection of women of African origin in marriage or cohabitation (see Brereton 1979: 183). Presumably then, caste-exogamous marriages must have been prevalent in the first few decades of the Hindu presence in Trinidad.

Caste-exogamous marriages were, largely, of the *anuloma* (hypergamous) type. About British Guiana, Bronkhurst (1883: 286–87) clarified: 'A woman of a low caste may be taken in a kind of marriage by a high caste Hindu, but a high caste or respectable woman will not be given in marriage to a man who is a Chamar (cobbler) or any other inferior caste.' With reference to Trinidad, Comins (1893a: 79) observed that 'members of the Chettri, Rajput and Thakur class frequently get married to or form connections with women of a lower caste'. The larger proportion of Brahmans and Kshatriyas in the Trinidad population than the colonial immigration policy might allow us to expect, is perhaps explained as a consequence of such *anuloma* marriages: during the period when female partners were scarce, Brahmans and Kshatriyas had a better chance of obtaining wives (though from the lower castes), and since children of such marriages were ascribed to the father's caste, they succeeded in propagating

their kind more than did the lower castes (see Smith and Jayawardena 1967: 55–56). With subsequent generations and an increase in the numbers of locally-born Indians, not only *anuloma* but even *pratiloma* (hypogamous) unions, as also interreligious marriages, must have become frequent. Thus, the severe shortage of women in the initial decades of emigration— 38.79 females per 100 males during 1845–71 (see Laurence 1994: 536)— destroyed the demographic basis of caste in Trinidad.[7]

It is true that the rough social levelling in Trinidad often posed dilemmas for those returning to India. Walton Look Lai (1993: 126) quotes the testimony of Sir Neville Lubbock to the Sanderson Commission in 1909 regarding the case of a woman of higher caste who had been married to a lower-caste man for ten years in the West Indies, turning him adrift after returning to India, with the words, '"You low caste man, I will have nothing more to do with you." She took his money and abandoned him, whereupon he returned to the estate in the West Indies, vowing that he would never marry a high-caste woman again.' Tinker (1993: 175) also cites Surgeon-Major Comins recounting the case of 'An immigrant [living with] ... a woman of another caste brought her back from the colony [British Guiana] and as far as the Howrah Railway Station [Kolkata] where he told her and his child to sit while he got tickets, and heartlessly deserted her.' It is no wonder that inter-caste marriages contracted in Trinidad acted as a deterrent on those wishing to return to India (see Ramesar 1996: 192).

Closely associated with the imbalance in the sex ratio was another demographic factor, namely, the skewed age composition of the emigrants. 'Throughout the period of indentured migration, two-thirds of the Indians shipped to foreign plantations were between the ages of 20 and 30' (Vertovec 1992: 12). This had far-reaching implications as far as caste was concerned: without elderly persons to guide them, the younger people could not reorganise caste with authority under plantation conditions, even had they wished to do so, and had to depend upon their personal memories and briefings by new arrivals.

Within two decades of their arrival in Trinidad, the Indian immigrants became the target of proselytism. From 1868, under the aegis of Reverend

---

[7] The severe shortage of women and the associated jealousy and suspicion of husbands often resulted in acute levels of domestic violence: Sixty-three out of 109 murders committed by Indians in Trinidad between 1872 and 1898 were murders of wives by jealous husbands (Look Lai 1993: 145). No wonder 'wife-murderers' was the stereotype of Indian males in the social history of Trinidad.

John Morton, the Canadian Presbyterian Mission almost exclusively targeted the Indians, particularly the Hindus. While the Mission adopted a Hindu orientation in matters of liturgy, it was explicitly inimical to the idea of caste. Moreover, later developments within Hinduism either ignored caste (as in the case of the Arya Samaj) or underplayed caste ideology (as in the case of the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha).

Most Indian labourers moved out of the plantations after their period of indenture, and the diversified economy outside the plantation affected caste idioms of status and prestige. A wide range of occupations became available to members of castes traditionally confined to specific, caste-defined occupations back in India. In addition, the accumulation of wealth and property after indenture was unrelated to birth and hereditary status. Furthermore, outside the plantations, the Indians were integrated into a system of stratification defined by race and class, rather than by caste.

All this should not be taken to mean that the institution and ideology of caste vanished in Trinidad during the era of indenture. Indeed, it would be a mistake to think that caste had no impact at all on the life of Indians. As Anthony de Verteuil (1989: 135–36) observes: 'If there was no enforcement of caste regulations possible, nevertheless, they were sometimes voluntarily observed. Among the Indians who had completed their indenture, especially those of high caste, the caste regulations were followed.' In 1866, Baptist missionary Reverend W.H. Gamble (1866: 46) found it 'revolting to see the way in which a woman, for instance, will drop down, touch the foot of this holy Brahmin, and then kiss the hand that has been in contact with the priest's foot, giving utterance to some correct formula'.

Despite the general antipathy of colonial administrators and the evangelical missionaries, the Brahman immigrants commanded considerable respect among their Hindu brethren on the estates, and certain privileges accrued to them by virtue of their caste status. The following account by L.F. Seukeran illustrates this:

> My father came out [to Trinidad] at the age of 17 from school and the moment the Indian people in the barracks realised that he was a pundit and a Brahmin they didn't let him move a stroke—the women cooked his food, they washed his feet, they did his job in the daylight, in the nights he had to do their *pujas*, read the Ramayan, christen their children, marry them and he was just a Brahmin in Trinidad as he was in India (quoted in Seesaran 1994: 188).

Similarly, Sumintra Maharaj, who was India-born and whose parents were assigned to the St Lucea estate in the early 20th century, recalled that '"My mother never go to wuck [on the field]. She used to dry cocoa, never go to wuck"' (Seesaran 1994: 188).

Contrary to what some authors want us to believe, E.B. Rosabelle Seesaran (1994: 189–90) adduces evidence to show that

> [t]he preferential treatment of high caste Indians was recognised on the estates, and sometimes in the law courts.... A high caste Indian lady on the Hermitage estate in south Trinidad, who refused to carry cow dung on her head, was taken to court. The decision of the magistrate, H.W. Pritchard to reprimand and discharge her was criticised by the press [*Port of Spain Gazette*, 20 August 1912]. Pritchard responded: 'It was well that discrimination should be exercised, when possible, as to who should be required to head dung. This was work more for the Dows and Chamars than for, say, Brahmins.'

Not surprisingly then, the high-caste male immigrants 'who came into contact with the Canadian Missionaries were regarded as prizes not to be released from their grasp'. Although Christianity did not believe in caste, the missionaries 'never failed to make special mention of a high caste person whom they encountered. Since by tradition high castes were models for the lower castes, the conversion of a high caste Indian impacted favourably on the lower castes.' The priestly vocation was also acceptable to the Brahmans. This is well illustrated by the conversion of Babu Lal Behari, Andrew Gayadeen and Musai Maharaj, who became pioneer Presbyterians of Indian descent. 'By 1891, in south Trinidad, of the two Indian Presbyterian Ministers, one was high-caste and of the eight Presbyterian catechists in the same area, six were high caste' (Seesaran 1994: 191, 202).

What is important to note is that though all the indentured immigrants started their life in the colony as equals—that is, they were all 'coolies'—the Brahmans and other high castes among them used their ascribed caste status and traditional sociocultural resources to achieve economic power in the emergent situation. Capital acquired by them during the indenture period and immediately afterwards enabled many of them to own property and be involved in real estate. Analysing the names published in the *Port of Spain Gazette* from 1885 to 1890, Seesaran (1994: 190)

found that 'Out of a total of 572 Indians who were buying/selling land, 217 were either Brahmans or Kshatriyas, comprising 38 per cent; among the mortgagees totalling 155, they were 34, amounting to 22 per cent. Since in 1891, the total Indian population was 70,218, these Indians represented only a small fraction.'

That high-caste Indians had a comparative advantage in terms of their post-indenture mobility is also pointed out by Look Lai (1993: 126). He cites a report entitled 'Wealthy Coolies' in the *Trinidad Chronicle* in January 1877 which stated:

> We understand the majority, the bulk we may say, of the natives of India who acquire wealth in the colony, carry the stamp of superior caste in bearing, manners, honourable dealing, and generally too in build. No doubt men of the higher castes, being honoured and trusted by the lower caste coolies, have superior opportunities of making money among them. The poorer caste men appear generally to settle down as cultivators, labourers, cowherds, grass sellers, porters, etc.

However, the colonial administrators, whose antipathy to the politically more conscious Brahman and other high-caste emigrants has already been noted, had a different view of the economic achievement of the high caste Indians. Look Lai (1993: 125) found

> numerous examples in the records of high-caste Indians, especially Brahmins, utilising their status to exploit their fellow Indians in the new environment for monetary gain. One official testifying before the Sanderson Commission stated in 1909: 'We do not like them [the Brahman priests] to come amongst the coolies at all. They rather rob them, and they do a little harm now and again, especially in taking money from them that they should not take.'

One could argue, following Tinker (1993: 208), that, contrary to expectations, living and working conditions on the plantations, accompanied by the cultural repression of the Indian emigrants, did not 'obliterate all their "Indianness", leaving them "Creolised"'. In fact, 'the Indians retained more of their own identity than the transported Africans managed to retain in the Caribbean'. In the following section, we consider the extent to which the identity of caste was retained or reconstituted by the Hindus in Trinidad in the post-indenture period.

III

Reconstitution and polarisation of castes in the post-indenture period

By the time indentureship was abolished in 1917, a total of 143,939 Indians had come to Trinidad, of whom only 33,294 (or 23.14 per cent) eventually returned to India (Laurence 1971: 26, 57). The majority who stayed back for a variety of reasons (see Ramesar 1996: 195–96) and their Trinidad-born progeny (which already constituted 26 per cent of the Indian community in 1881, and had grown to 44.8 per cent in 1901) evolved as an Indo-Trinidadian community (see Laurence 1994: 384–431). While they engaged in different economic pursuits—sugarcane growing, rice farming, cocoa cultivation, domestic food production, transport and retail trade—agriculture became their main forte. The fact that most Indians remained in agriculture, either as labourers or as independent cultivators, enabled them to reconstitute themselves within five decades of their arrival in Trinidad as a vigorous rural community. Since no single pristine model of caste ever came to Trinidad, there was no question of any *original* system of caste being reconstituted in the newly emergent village community. What the Hindus did was to draw upon pre-migration sociocultural norms and behaviour patterns and adapt them to the new situation dictated by socioeconomic developments in Trinidad. Thus, we see both continuity and change in caste in Trinidad.

Morton Klass (1961: 34–39), who studied Amity, a predominantly Indian village in central Trinidad in the late 1950s, observed that while there was no social segregation along caste lines on the plantation bar-racks, it had reappeared to some extent during the settlement of this village: the 'Beharri Settlement was inhabited overwhelmingly by people belonging to castes of the three highest Varnas of the Indian caste system. Perhaps a very few Sudra people lived at the very fringes of Beharri Settlement' (Klass 1961: 35). 'Casecu was inhabited primarily by mem-bers of the Camar and Dusad castes—both considered to be of the Sudra Varna—plus representatives of other Sudra castes' (ibid.: 36). A third settlement was called by the inhabitants of Beharri and Casecu settlements as 'Jangli Tola', a term which was much resented by its inhabitants, who mainly belonged to the 'Bori' caste with a smattering of others who belonged to 'Malla' and 'Madrassi' castes. They were re-garded as people derived from the 'jungles' in India, and not from any

'civilised' area.[8] However, as population increased and pressure on the land mounted, the gaps along the roads between the settlements were filled with houses, and physical segregation in caste terms disappeared (ibid.: 61).

In Amity, Klass (1961: 55–64) also found that every Hindu was 'a member from birth of one of a large number of named groups', known in the village as 'a *jat* in Hindi, and as a "nation" in English'—the word 'caste' being known only to the more literate villagers. He identified thirty-nine 'nations' in the village, which 'are Indian "castes"'. These castes 'are grouped in the village according to the Varna structure of the Indian caste system'. While, by and large, the Hindus in Amity accepted the hierarchy of the four *varna*s, the determination of the *varna* of castes other than the 'Maharaj' (the Brahmans) and the 'Chattri' (the Kshatriyas) was problematic. As regards the 'Ves' (the Vaishya) and Sudra *varna*s, the ranking of the caste group in the ideal typical *varna* order was not contested. For example, the Ahir caste *is* Ves, and the Chamar caste *is* Sudra. With reference to others, and in case of dispute, an important criterion was invoked—that is, whether or not the members of the group eschew the practice of rasing and eating swine. If they do, they are Ves; if not they are Sudra:

> Thus, many Bhars in Amity claim to be 'Raj-Bhars', and therefore Ves, but most Amity Bhars raise swine, and so the claim is disallowed. On the other hand, most of the old people are aware that the Dhobi caste is 'low' in India, but the only Dhobi family in Amity is a highly respectable one that does not raise swine and has a teacher in the family. In Amity, this caste is considered Ves (Klass 1961: 59–60).

Brahmans and Chamars

Under changed economic conditions and in the absence of ideological endorsement of or cultural support to the caste system, the traditional

---

[8] Klass (1961: 35) translates 'Jangli Tola' as 'jungle district'. The expression 'Janglee' is still in usage in rural Trinidad. There is very little ethnographic data on the Janglees. Reviewing Harold Sonny Ladoo's novel *Yesterdays*, which probes the psyche of this enclave of Indo-Trinidadian peasantry, Roydon Salick (1991: 75) observes that Janglees 'comprised a community living, as it were, on the fringes of society, for whom profanity, violence, and poverty were a way of life .... They were, in a sense, beyond caste, below the Chamars .... Among the "janglees" were the "bhangees" and "topas", whose social function was the cleaning of latrines and the disposal of faecal waste.'

notions of superiority and inferiority were no more tenable and the idiom of intra- and intercaste relationships considerably modified. An important development in the post-indenture Hindu community in Trinidad has been the simplification of caste identities: a generalised *varna* model substituted the localised *jati* model of village India. The attributional ranking of groups in such a generalised fashion was readily achieved and easily grasped by migrants from a diverse range of caste groups assembled in a single place. While sub-caste identification, even among the Brahmans, almost vanished, and the ranking of intermediary caste groups could not be accomplished, the polarisation between Brahmans and Chamars became entrenched. Pig-rearing and pork-eating became the criteria for the determination of caste respectability, and Klass's observation (1961: 241) that 'a poor but pious Brahman would inevitably rank higher than a pig-raising, wealthy Camar' holds good even today. Not only have these two caste categories or identities continued to bear important status values, the stereotypes associated with them—the pure and arrogant Brahman and the lax and dirty Chamar—have also remained pervasive (see Angrosino 1972: 57; Vertovec 1992: 36).

By the turn of the century, Dale Arlington Bisnauth (1989: 152) emphasises that the question of the ritual status of the Brahman priests had been satisfactorily settled by the Hindus, who both 'respected their status and desired their ministrations'. He quotes Henry J. Gladwin, the Immigration Agent stationed in British Guiana, to the effect that '"The priest ... is in the same position as a Christian Dissenting Minister whose orders are not valid but who derives his office from the people."' The virtual monopoly over priestcraft by a section of the Brahmans (called the 'pundits' in Trinidad), combined with their economic and political prowess, enabled them to seek and be given the highest status in the Hindu society in Trinidad (see Klass 1991: 61).

Among Trinidad Hindus, the pundit is a central authority figure outside family. He performs multiple roles: besides being a routine religious functionary (family priest, temple priest, funerary priest), the pundit also functions as astrologer, teacher, healer, marriage broker, arbitrator, counsellor and often moneylender. These functions, undertaken by specific sub-caste groups of Brahmans in India, are all undertaken by members of what has become 'a generalised Brahman category' (Vertovec 1992: 43). Through their own efforts and the backing of the Pundit Parishad (association of pundits), they have maintained a monopoly over the performance of ritual functions (see van der Veer and Vertovec 1991).

Thus, the semblance of caste solidarity, which hardly exists among other caste groups, is uniquely noticeable among the Brahmans. It is essentially the pundits who advocate the normative ideal of *varna* hierarchy, and it is they who seek to protect their claims to occupational specialisation in the monopoly of priestcraft. One of the keenly contested issues among Trinidad Hindus today is whether or not non-Brahmans can become priests: While the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha endorses the monopoly of the Brahmans, some of the sects and competing Hindu leaders challenge this monopoly (see Klass 1991: 62–63; O'Callaghan 1998: 3–4).

Nevadomsky's (1980: 45) assertion that 'the prestige of the local priests, and of Brahmin priests generally, is on a sharp decline' is not tenable. Some Indians, not necessarily Hindus, are no doubt critical of some pundits, especially the uneducated ones (see Khan 1995: 352–64). However, the resurgence of Hinduism in Trinidad, which has reinforced the place of Hindu rituals in the emerging lifestyles of the community, has in fact bolstered the status of the pundit. As Michael V. Angrosino (1972: 137) noticed in Palmyra, an Indian village near San Fernando city, priestly families were accorded the greatest social deference, and 'they are the only ones who do not necessarily need money to put them at the top of the hierarchy'. Brahmans are called Maharaj, a name now recognised as indicating the highest caste order of the person so named among the Indians. The term 'Baba' is often used (in the sense of 'Reverend') as a deferential title when addressing a Brahman priest.

Critics have commented on the role of the Brahmans in building community solidarity among the Hindus (Bisnauth 1989: 152–53): The Brahmans imposed adherence to religious beliefs and practices and, in the first quarter of this century, they 'mounted a campaign against apostasy from Hinduism'. This is remarkable considering the pressures of Christianity and the Afro-Caribbean forms of religion—both of which occupied (and continue to occupy) a superior place in society—and the political domination of the British, and later the Creole (Afro-Trinidadian) population. As Selwyn Ryan (1972: 141) remarks, the 'pundits were among the principal opinion leaders within the Hindu community', and they have 'always been the source to which politicians turned for help in their political careers'.

At the lower end of the caste pole are the Chamars, a caste group which had occupied 'an utterly degraded position in the village life' in north India, and which was 'regarded with loathing and disgust by the

higher castes' (see Briggs 1975[1920]: 20). In Trinidad, the Mortons
(Morton 1916: 44) were horrified to learn that members of this caste had
eaten the carcass of a sheep found dead in their yard. Even now Chamars
are sometimes socially distanced and scorned. As one woman of Ahir
descent, an informant of Vertovec (1992: 37), said of her Chamar neigh-
bours: '"Dey lives just as we—but dey always [inevitably] does somet'in'
dat shows dey's low."' Traditionally, the role of midwife was performed
by a Chamarin (female of Chamar descent); involving contact with impure
substances, it was regarded as polluting.

   More important is an exclusive religious practice of the Chamars which
is viewed as indicative of their low caste status. In many villages, Chamar
families collectively sacrifice a swine each year to Parmeshwari, while
individual Chamar families do the same on the occasion of a marriage or
birth of a son. According to an informant from Cunupia village, the *puja*,
which is shrouded in secrecy, is conducted by a knowledgeable Chamar
(called a *mahant*) with the assistance of a few castemen. The participants
consume the pork, and whatever is left unconsumed is buried. Non-
Chamars are not allowed to witness this ritual unless they are willing
to partake of it. Incidentally, the Sieunaraini movement in Trinidad, as
elsewhere in the Caribbean, is almost exclusive to the Chamars (Bisnauth
1989: 150).

   The element of caste ideology which consigns the Chamars to the
lowest social position is so embedded in the Hindu psyche that proselyt-
isation does not by itself free a Chamar from the associated ignominy
and derision. As Patricia Mohammed (1993: 229) observes, 'a Chamar
Presbyterian may have achieved higher status among the members of
his or her church group, or his educational status may have increased
his, or her, respectability among the wider village population. S/he re-
mained, none the less, a Chamar ... in the eyes of the Hindu community.'

   The debased caste status of the Chamars is reflected in the fact that,
even now, the word 'Chamar' is used as a general derogatory term: Indo-
Trinidadians who wish to insult and abuse each other will often use the
term as an epithet. Interestingly, this term has entered the vocabulary of
Afro-Trinidadians, too. While the term 'Chamar', used as a term of abuse,
has no reference to the caste of the person abused, the essence of the
insult consists in invoking an ambivalent element of the Indian cultural
heritage, namely, the backward 'tradition' of ascribed status: the term
'Chamar' not only means 'lowly individual', but it also implies a 'remnant
of an undesirable practice' (Khan 1995: 62).

IV
Aspects of caste among Trinidad Hindus

It can hardly be contested that Hindu Trinidadians are a long way from their counterparts in India in terms of both physical distance and social structure. They have become 'Trinidad Hindus' (Klass 1991: 58), significantly different from their seeming co-religionists in India. Among them, the institution of caste has undergone extensive changes: the economic and political aspects of caste could never have been reconstituted; residence clustering by caste was eroded; castes as corporate units have ceased to exist; and untouchability was jettisoned long ago. However, as the generalised *varna* model reveals, the idea of hierarchy is deeply ingrained among Trinidad Hindus and caste codes continue to flavour their life. Let us examine the bearing of the ideology of hierarchy on some socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects in which caste could traditionally be expected to play a decisive role.

Occupation and caste

Indenture on the plantations meant that, irrespective of the caste background of the Indians, they all had the same job. In the post-indenture cash economy, too, there was little scope for occupational specialisation based on caste. Thus, a notable change among the Hindus in Trinidad is the virtual disappearance of the caste–occupation link and the implied economic interdependence of caste groups. As such, caste in Trinidad lacks the element of birth ascription to a job category.

In the post-indenture period, very few groups took up their traditional caste occupations and in succeeding generations, they have been almost given up. According to Seesaran (1994: 223, 247–48, 255), some *lohar*s (blacksmiths), *sonar*s (goldsmiths), *kumhar*s (potters), *sawh*s (businesspeople) have reverted to their caste trade. Specialists engaged in these traditional trades can be found even now. However, these trades are performed as individual family traditions, rather than as conforming to any caste ideal. Rather, the decline of caste tended to facilitate occupational mobility and create new avenues of employment for those whose occupation in rural India had been determined by their caste.

Of the many caste-related occupations of the indentured immigrants, only those few with religious significance have survived in Trinidad. One such occupation, which has been fully reconstituted, is that of the

priesthood of the Brahman. Moreover, obsequies and the *shradda* (death anniversary rite) are performed by the *mahapather*, a Brahman specialising in these rites. Reform movements, such as the one led by the Arya Samaj, have no doubt thrown priestcraft open to non-Brahmans. However, the Brahmans are still generally acknowledged as '*real* pandits' (Klass 1991: 62) and, as noted earlier, command considerable prestige and power.

Among other caste-specific ritual functions carried out by the caste groups with which they were associated, a reference to the Chamarin as the midwife has been made. The other ritual function is that of the Nao (also spelt as Nau or Nawh), the traditional barber. The ritual tonsure and the first cutting of children's hair, as well as some of the preparations for weddings, are done by the Nao. The Nao extends invitations to weddings and builds the wedding altar. 'Because of his familiarity with his client's household ..., the village barber functioned as *agua* (matchmaker), offering information to parents about desirable spouses for their children of marriageable age' (Seesaran 1994: 249). His ministrations are required at funerals too.

While some of these traditional occupations are performed as 'duties' in relation to people in the village, and are considered hereditary, the rural Indian *jajmani* relations have almost disappeared. Clarke (1967: 168) found that 'the term *jajman* (patron) is known to very few Hindus in San Fernando, and almost all of those who recognised it thought that it referred to the relationship between guru and chela'. Currently the term *jajman* is used by the Hindus to refer to the head of the household.

Thus, the integration of the Trinidad Hindus into the wider economy of the country, and the occupational diversification that they have experienced consequent upon the expansion of the modern sector and the acquisition of educational qualifications, have generally freed occupation from the influence of caste. However, in those areas where occupation has cultural moorings and ritual significance, as in the case of the pundit, the Nao and the Chamarin, the bearing of caste is still discernible.

Endogamy

It was observed earlier that the serious imbalance in the sex ratio among the indentured immigrants weakened caste consciousness and attenuated caste relations in Trinidad. The severe competition for scarce women broke the backbone of the caste system, namely, endogamy. It would be interesting, therefore, to know what has happened to this aspect of caste

in the post-indenture era when the localised *jati* model of village India was substituted by a generalised *varna* model in Trinidad.

With reference to Amity, Klass (1961: 62) noticed that

> a low-caste man will not usually object (though some will) to a marriage between his child and the child of a high-caste man—but the latter will object. Marajh and Cattri men are particularly strict about marriage within their own castes. Even a 'low' Ves man will hesitate about allowing his son to marry a Sudra girl, because he feels the latter is accustomed to 'dirty' cooking and to eating 'dirty food' (especially pork). On the other hand, within the Ves Varna, there is little objection to an Ahir marrying a Nao, or a Kurmi a Koeri.

In Boodram, a village inhabited mostly by Hindus, Schwartz (1967b: 127, 139) recorded about 55 per cent inter-caste and 53 per cent intra-*varna* marriages. Interestingly, he found that it was the low-caste Sudra farmers who showed the endogamous tendency. In Palmyra, an Indian village near San Fernando, Angrosino (1972: 133–34) observed that 'a certain ideal of marriage prescriptions typical of the Indian caste system survives in the notion that a man may marry "down" (e.g., to a person ranked relatively lower on the scale of ritual purity) more easily than may a woman'. He cites the case of the Jawab family in which

> one of the sons was free to make a love-match 'down' to a girl from an extremely creolised family; but the eldest daughter was eventually banished to study in Canada for daring to suggest a union with a boy from a family so far down that, as Mother Jawab said, 'I wouldn't keep my fowls in their house.'

Among Hindus in San Fernando city, Clarke (1967: 186–87; 1986: 124–27) found that 73 per cent of all marriages were *varna*-endogamous and 50 per cent still caste-endogamous. Sixty-six per cent of inter-*varna* marriages are hypergamous. The caste-endogamous unions were mostly among the 'twice-born' castes. According to Clarke, the concentration of higher-caste individuals in this urban area may be a facilitating factor in such intra-*varna* unions. More interesting, only 41 of the 94 people who thought that there should be freedom to marry outside the caste had actually done so.

In the absence of corporate identity for caste groups and the fact that marriage decisions are ultimately taken by individuals or families,

Vertovec (1992: 40) doubts whether the patterns such as those cited above 'constitute marital exclusivity comparable to its pre-migration nature'. However, whether in an urban or rural area,[9] it is undeniable that it is at the extremes of *varna* hierarchy that the tendency for endogamy is most pronounced (see Klass 1991: 60–61). This reflects the reality of the generalised *varna* model in Trinidad.

Klass (1991: 61) surmises that the Brahmans' objection to inter-caste marriages has to do with 'a pride of ancestry rather than in a fear of pollution: a feeling that Brahmans were a distinguished group in Trinidad'. The following case, which I came across in Cunupia, sheds some light on this:

A Brahman girl was to be married to a Ves (Vaishya) boy. Though a hypogamous union (the girl losing caste status), her parents approved the match considering the better class position of the boy (a graduate civil servant). As part of the Hindu marital rites, the officiating pundit asked the bride's father to wash the bridegroom's feet, at which the bride's father protested stating that it was demeaning for a Brahman to touch, let alone wash, the feet of a non-Brahman. On the pundit's insistence that the ritual was a part of the Sanatanist marriage rite, the bride's father reluctantly washed the feet of the groom. However, the way the bride's father protested angered the groom and his relatives, who thought it was an uncalled-for affront. The remaining part of the wedding ritual was hurried through mechanically, and the marriage, instead of bringing two families together, created enmity between them.

It could also be argued that, even without caste endogamy, castes can remain as separate groups. This is because the child born of an inter-caste union is recognised as belonging to one caste. In Trinidad, patrilineal affiliation is the norm, though there is the practice of adopting the caste of the mother if it is higher than that of the father.[10] It is this fact which

[9] In the case of arranged marriages (called 'fix-ups' in Trinidad), especially in the rural areas, the information supplied by the *agua* (traditional matchmaker, whose role has been on the decline) helps parents select potential marriage partners from the appropriate *varna,* if not the caste.

[10] From Avocat village I came across an interesting case of claim for Brahman status by a Chattri family on the ground that one of its sons had married the stepdaughter of the pundit in the village. Since the villagers knew this family, this attempted usurpation of higher-caste status came to nothing. However, the family still boasts of being 'Maharaj'!

has allowed the identity of caste to persist, despite the lack of functional significance, as claimed by Nevadomsky and Niehoff (see Section I above). According to Colin Clarke (1967: 172), even in a city like San Fernando, the percentage of people who did not know what caste they belonged to was negligible.

Colour prejudice

P. Spratt's psychoanalysis of the Hindu personality (1966: 174, 175) revealed 'a marked colour-consciousness' among the Hindus in India: 'they almost universally prefer light skins, especially in spouses and children', and they dislike 'the physical presence of the dark-skinned'. According to him, 'it is difficult to distinguish this from the old caste feeling, for in most parts of India skin colour is a good, though by no means infallible, guide to caste status'. This colour feeling, he notes, is 'free from aggressiveness: it is completely satisfied by aloofness or withdrawal'.

Such a colour prejudice is pronounced in the caste-like attitudes and behaviour of Indo-Trinidadians towards Trinidadians of African descent (see Brereton 1974; 1979: 188–90). As Look Lai (1993: 255) observes, the Indo-Trinidadians incorporated the Afro-Trinidadians into

> their traditional worldview at the lowest caste levels, partly out of an inner cultural judgement on the mores and culture of the Black strangers, partly as a result of the racially charged setting into which they had been deliberately placed in the politics and economics of post-Emancipation plantation society.

The persistence in Trinidad of the association of *varna* with the colour of the skin is visible not only among the Hindus, but even among the Muslims (see Clarke 1967: 175).

Indo-Trinidadians literally treat their Afro- counterparts as hopelessly polluted *outcastes*, the lowest social group, with whom marriage relations are proscribed. Earlier it was noted that, despite the great sex disparity during the indenture period, Indian men did not accept African women as wives. Racial endogamy has continued to remain the norm among Indo-Trinidadians: In his 1964 sample survey of households, Clarke (1986: 130) found that, among Indo-Trinidadians in San Fernando, racial exogamy is particularly low for Hindus (3.1 per cent) and for Muslims

(1.8 per cent), as compared to Christians (10.7 per cent), and is conspicuously absent among the Hindus in Debe village. His comparison of two sets of official statistics on marriages (1960 and 1980) showed little change over two decades in these areas in racial endogamy (Clarke 1993: 130–33). In 1985, Klass (1991: 51–52), found that 'marriages between Indians (particularly Indian women) and Afro-Trinidadians still encounter considerable difficulty'. The hostility with which Indo-Trinidadians (not only Hindus) viewed such marriages even in 1994–96 was remark-able, and in several villages visited, I could not come across a single in-stance of such a marriage.

Indo-Trinidadians marrying Afro-Trinidadians, especially if the former is a female, are in a way excommunicated, a process akin to 'outcasting'. Children born out of such interracial wedlock are called *dougla* (a Hindi word literally meaning progeny of mixed *varna,* or bastard).[11] Phenotypically the *dougla*s are seldom distinct from either Indians or Africans. In the same family, different siblings may be superficially Indian or African. Nevertheless, most Trinidadians claim to be able to identify a *dougla* based on various vague criteria. There is not much overt hostility towards the *dougla*s. However, the derogatory epithet remains and, 'for the most part, no respectable Indian, of any caste, would think of social-ising with a *dougla* any more than with a Negro, except under the most exceptional circumstances' (Angrosino 1972: 134). Interestingly, the appellation is not viewed as offensive by the progeny of the interracial marriage. In fact, many a '*dougla*' wants to call himself or herself so, as it marks a distinct identity and is regarded as a 'step-up' compared with the Afro-Trinidadians.

The prejudice associated with colour and rendered in a caste idiom is also found within the community of Indo-Trinidadians, which may be a continuation of the colour-feeling noticed by Spratt (1966: 174) among fair-complexioned north Indians towards the considerably darker-skinned south Indians, even when their 'caste status is just as good as their own'. In Trinidad, such an attitude is found among the descendants of migrants from north India (the Kalkatiyas) towards those from south India (the Madrassis).

[11] It is significant to note that there is no such lexeme to refer to the offspring of mixed marriages involving Indo-Trinidadians and the 'whites' (that is, people of European origin; see Segal 1993: 93). The term 'Creole Indian' used by Marianne Soares Ramesar (1976) to describe this mixture is unconventional and even misleading, for the reason that the term was earlier used to distinguish Trinidad-born Indians from first-generation Indian immigrants (see Brereton 1979: 2).

This attitude is compounded by the fact that the estate owners regarded the indentured labourers from south India as having 'filthy habits', and being lazy and troublesome. So many were their complaints against the Madrassis that migration from Madras to Trinidad was suspended in 1860, never to be resumed on a regular or large-scale basis (see Brereton 1981: 103). To this day, Madrassis bear the stigma of their initial castigation and are treated as a lower caste, or a 'low nation' people.[12] Though there have been intermarriages between the Kalkatiyas and the Madrassis, there have been enclaves of predominantly Madrassi inhabitants, such as Ben Lomond village in the south and El Dorado and Madras Road village in the north. Kali Mai *puja* is a characteristic Hindu form of worship practised by Madrassi-descended Indians in Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean (Vertovec 1992: 218). The fire-walking ceremony, which was brought to Trinidad by their ancestors, was out-lawed by the colonial authorities as a 'degrading practice' carried on by 'gangs of semi-barbarians' (see Brereton 1979: 183).

Commensality and pollution

The complex rules governing commensality and food pollution charac-teristic of the caste system in village India have almost disappeared in Trinidad. In a study of high school students in 1980, Molly Debysingh (1986) found that, while the role of caste in meat avoidance has almost entirely vanished, religion still appears to be an important reason for avoidance of beef and pork. Klass (1961: 56) had observed that 'people who do not raise pigs will not eat with those who do'. Thus, an obvious avenue of social acceptability for the Chamars and other low castes has been to eschew the rearing of pigs. All my non-Chamar informants de-nounced pig sacrifice as being associated with the 'Chamar festival'. Those among the non-Chamar Hindus consuming beef and pork dare not admit to it.

As I gathered from my informants, a vegetarian considers herself/ himself superior to a non-vegetarian; and a non-vegetarian who eschews beef and pork considers herself/himself superior to one who consumes them. In 1985, Klass (1991: 62) found that Indo-Trinidadians perceived

[12] One of Clarke's (1967: 175) Madrassi informants recalled how his mother-in-law, who was a Christian like himself, had scornfully rejected him initially, charging that '*Madrassi* and Nigger is de same ting.'

vegetarianism as 'an inevitable, perhaps necessary, first step for one seek-ing spiritual enlightenment or improvement'. This has to be understood in the light of the revitalisation of Trinidad Hinduism since the 1980s and the vigorous efforts by Trinidad Hindus at maintaining their identity (see Vertovec 1996).

Traditionally, Trinidad Brahmans have not been strict vegetarians. One informant described Brahmans as being only 'socially [i.e., in the eyes of the outsiders] vegetarian', eating meat at home. However, the orthodox among them, and particularly the pundits, observe restrictions on the acceptance of food. Orthodox pundits define the vegetarian norm so rigidly as to exclude all animal products (except milk and its by-products) from their diet. It is common for an orthodox pundit not to eat cake or ice-cream if it contains eggs (see Jayaram 1998: 56). Generally, on ceremonial occasions, the pundits are fed apart from everyone else, and they are the first to eat. The non-Brahmans, who are habitually non-vegetarian, observe the vegetarian norm during festivals (such as Shivarathri and Divali) and various *puja*s. About three months prior to the *yag* (*yagna;* a special *puja*), the *jajman* and other members of the sponsoring family begin the ritual *fasting*, i.e., they abstain from alcohol and non-vegetarian food.

Schwartz (1964: 13) had observed that, in Trinidad, 'commensal, sex-ual, and physical concepts of pollution are insignificant.... [W]here they do exist, it is an individual matter, based upon local concepts of health and not on principles of ritual pollution.' However, as Vertovec (1992: 45) rightly observes, Schwartz 'overstates the case regarding individual notions of pollution: these are importantly maintained not so much in reference to health but to ideals concerning personal states of being, especially *à propos* the three *gunas* (basic substances) and one's "fitness" to conduct certain rituals.'

Among Hindus in India, Spratt (1966: 145) has found an intense 'fear of pollution by others' body secretions, more especially by the saliva'. This idea of pollution, which is in essence derived from the caste system, is denoted by special terms in Indian languages. Focusing on the Hindi term *juthaa*—food and drink that have become 'polluted' by being partially consumed—Aisha Khan (1994: 249) has explored the pollution ideology and its implications for social relations in Trinidad: though caste-derived, the concept of *juthaa*, she argues, 'is indicative of an egalitarian morality at work in concert with hierarchical principles'. I did not, how-ever, come across any ritual among Trinidad Hindus for cleansing the pollution resulting from *juthaa*.

V
Conclusion: Metamorphosis as an analytical device

The question of the existence or otherwise of the phenomenon of caste among Trinidad Hindus is too complex to have a categorical answer. For Trinidad Hindus, to be sure, the survival of Hinduism is much more important than the persistence of the caste system. As Vertovec (1992: 214; 1996: 108) has observed, under the general direction of Brahmans, the one caste group which has been most successfully reconstituted, 'the breadth of Hindu ideas and practices' have been transformed into 'a unitary system'. Low-caste rituals are increasingly viewed as embarrassing to mainstream Hinduism. Anxious to overcome their low-caste background, people have given up the rites associated with lesser deities. Some, however, while publicly adopting mainstream practices, continue with other rituals privately.

In tune with the institutionalisation of a homogenised Hinduism is the evolution of a polarised *varna* model. The structural elements of the original system have been replaced by a set of 'downward cultural attributes and upward economic attributes', which have served to strengthen the 'knowledge of degree', as Angrosino (1972: 120, 128) calls it. The positions of Brahmans and Chamars as the poles remained unchanged, but between these two there is an informal system for determining 'degree' based on values that are relevant and meaningful in the new socioeconomic set-up.

Caste, it must be emphasised, has no relevance to the structure of the wider society in Trinidad, and it has been dissolved as a functional socioeconomic form. However, it will continue to exist so long as the Hindus maintain a systematic method for reckoning ideal rankings within the social hierarchy. Even when the potential for individual mobility is great, family identification remains stable. Thus, what we see among Trinidad Hindus is a transformation from caste as a structural principle to caste as sociocultural idiom.

The change that caste as an integral institution of Hinduism has undergone in Trinidad illustrates the heuristic significance of *metamorphosis* as an analytical tool in the study of the dynamics of social institutions. Any social institution carried as part of the sociocultural baggage in the diaspora inevitably encounters forces of change. These forces are generated by the very nature of the diaspora and the changing politico-economic and sociocultural contexts within which the diasporic community finds itself. If the bearing of the institution on the social organisation of the

diasporic community is tenuous, and the forces of change are strong, the institution may become infirm and attenuated. However, if the institution is an integral part of the community, even if the forces of change initially deconstitute it, it will get reconstituted. This reconstitution, however, will not be a return to the past. As the concept of metamorphosis suggests, the institution will undergo changes both in its form and its content. On the one hand, the process of transformation reveals the resilience and mutability of the institution, as well as the nature of adaptation it undergoes; on the other, it will elucidate the nature and operating conditions of the institution.

Thus, in studying a diasporic community it is more advantageous to focus on the metamorphosis of its social institutions than to seek to resolve the 'retention' *versus* 'change' conundrum. The focus on social metamorphosis frees one from the need to synchronically compare the diasporic community with its highly localised counterpart in the ancestral land. It is true that such a comparison may offer some analytical insights. However, one must be careful in making such synchronic comparisons, for the ancestral society itself would have undergone changes over a period of time. Such a comparison can only show how a given social institution has fared in two different situations: the ancestral and the diasporic. It cannot tell how and how far it has changed in the diaspora. Only a study of metamorphosis can shed light on these questions.

REFERENCES

Angrosino, Michael V. 1972. Outside is death: Alcoholism, ideology and community organisation among the East Indians of Trinidad. Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Bisnauth, Dale Arlington. 1989. *A history of religions in the Caribbean*. Kingston, Jamaica: Kingston Publishers.

Brereton, Bridget. 1974. The foundations of prejudice: Indians and Africans in nineteenth century Trinidad. *Caribbean issues* 1, 1: 15–28.

———. 1979. *Race relations in colonial Trinidad, 1870–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1981. *A history of modern Trinidad 1783–1962*. London: Heinemann.

Briggs, Geo W. 1975 [1920]. *The Chamars*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

Bronkhurst, H.V.P., Rev. 1883. *The colony of British Guiana and its labouring population*. London: T. Woolmer.

Central Statistical Office. 1994. *1990 Population and housing census*, vol. 2, *Demographic report*. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Office of the Prime Minister, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

CLARKE, COLIN G. 1967. Caste among Hindus in a town in Trinidad: San Fernando. *In* Barton Morley Schwartz, ed., *Caste in overseas Indian communities*, pp. 165–99. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.

———. 1986. *East Indians in a West Indian town: San Fernando, Trinidad, 1930–70*. London: Allen and Unwin.

———. 1993. Spatial pattern and social interaction among Creoles and Indians in Trinidad and Tobago. *In* Kevin Yelvington, ed., *Trinidad ethnicity*, pp. 116–35. London: Macmillan.

COHN, BERNARD S. 1990. *An anthropologist among the historians and other essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

COMINS, DENNIS WOOD DEANE, Surgeon-Major. 1893a. *Note on emigration from India to Trinidad*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

———. 1893b. *Note on emigration from India to British Guiana*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

DEBYSINGH, MOLLY. 1986. Cultural change and adaptation as reflected in the meat-eating habits of the Trinidad Indian population. *Caribbean quarterly* 32, 3–4: 66–77.

DE VERTEUIL, ANTHONY. 1989. *Eight East Indian immigrants*. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.: Paria Publishing Company.

DOTSON, FLOYD AND LILLIAN O. DOTSON. 1968. *The Indian minority of Zambia, Rhodesia, and Malawi*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

DUMONT, LOUIS. 1970. *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. Delhi: Vikas Publications.

GAMBLE, W.H., Rev. 1866. *Trinidad, historical and descriptive: Being a narrative of nine years' residence in the island (with special reference to Christian missions)*. London: Yates and Alexander.

HOLLUP, ODDVAR. 1994. *Bonded labour: Caste and cultural identity among Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

JAIN, RAVINDRA K. 1989. Race relations, ethnicity, class and culture: A comparison of Indians in Trinidad and Malaysia. *Sociological bulletin* 38, 1: 57–69.

———. 1993. *Indian communities abroad: Themes and literature*. New Delhi: Manohar.

JAYARAM, N. 1996. Caste and Hinduism: Changing protean relationship. *In* M.N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste: Its twentieth century avatar*, pp. 69–86. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

———. 1998. Social construction of the *other* Indian: Encounters between Indian nationals and diasporic Indians. *Journal of social and economic development* 1, 1: 46–63.

JAYARAMAN, R. 1975. *Caste continuities in Ceylon: A study of the social structure of three tea plantations*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

JAYAWARDENA, CHANDRA. 1971. The disintegration of caste in Fiji Indian rural society. *In* L.R. Hiatt and Chandra Jayawardena, eds., *Anthropology in Oceania*, pp. 89–119. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

KHAN, AISHA. 1994. *Juthaa* in Trinidad: Food, pollution, and hierarchy in a Caribbean diaspora community. *American ethnologist* 21, 2: 245–69.

———. 1995. Purity, piety, and power: Culture and identity among Hindus and Muslims in Trinidad. Ph.D. dissertation, The City University of New York.

KLASS, MORTON. 1961. *East Indians in Trinidad: A study of cultural persistence*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

———. 1991. *Singing with Sai Baba: The politics of revitalisation in Trinidad*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Laurence, K.O. 1971. *Chapters in Caribbean history,* no. 3, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19th century.* Aylesbury: Ginn and Co.

———. 1994. *A question of labour: Indentured immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875–1917.* Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers; London: James Currey Publishers.

Look Lai, Walton. 1993. *Indentured labor, Caribbean sugar: Chinese and Indian migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lowenthal, David. 1972. *West Indian societies.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Malik, Yogendra K. 1971. *East Indians in Trinidad: A study in minority politics.* London: Oxford University Press for Institute of Race Relations, London.

Mohammed, Patricia. 1993. Structures of experience: Gender, ethnicity and class in the lives of two East Indian women. *In* Kevin Yelvington, ed., *Trinidad ethnicity*, pp. 208–34. London: Macmillan.

Morton, Sarah E., ed. 1916. *John Morton of Trinidad: Pioneer missionary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to the East Indians in the British West Indies (Journals, letters and papers).* Toronto: Westminster Company.

Nelson, Donna. 1973. Caste hierarchy and competition in an overseas Indian community. *Contributions to Indian sociology* (n.s.) 7: 1–15.

Nevadomsky, Joseph J. 1980. Changes in Hindu institutions in an alien environment. *The eastern anthropologist* 33, 1: 39–53.

Niehoff, Arthur. 1967. The function of caste among the Indians of the Oropuche Lagoon, Trinidad. *In* Barton Morley Schwartz, ed., *Caste in overseas Indian communities*, pp. 149–63. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.

O'Callaghan, Marion. 1998. Hinduism in the Indian diaspora in Trinidad, *Hindu–Christian studies bulletin* 11: 2–10.

Ramesar, Marianne Soares. 1976. The integration of Indian settlers in Trinidad after indenture. *Caribbean issues* 11, 3: 52–69.

———. 1994. *Survivors of another crossing: A history of East Indians in Trinidad 1880–1946.* St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: School of Continuing Studies, The University of the West Indies.

———. 1996. The repatriates. *In* David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, eds, *Across the dark waters: Ethnicity and Indian identity in the Caribbean*, pp. 175–200. London: Macmillan.

Ryan, Selwyn. 1972. *Race and nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago.* St Augustine, Trinidad: Institute for Social and Economic Research, The University of the West Indies.

Salick, Roydon. 1991. The bittersweet comedy of Sonny Ladoo: A reading of *Yesterdays*. *ARIEL: A review of international English literature* 22, 3: 75–85.

Schwartz, Barton Morley. 1964. Ritual aspects of caste in Trinidad. *Anthropological quarterly* 37, 1: 1–15.

———, ed. 1967a. *Caste in overseas Indian communities.* San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.

———. 1967b. The failure of caste in Trinidad. *In* Barton Morley Schwartz, ed., *Caste in overseas Indian communities*, pp. 117–47. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.

Segal, Daniel A. 1993. 'Race' and 'colour' in pre-independence Trinidad and Tobago. *In* Kevin Yelvington, ed., *Trinidad ethnicity*, pp. 81–115. London: Macmillan.

SEESARAN, E.B. ROSABELLE. 1994. Social mobility in the Indo-Trinidadian community 1870–1917. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad.

SMITH, RAYMOND T. and CHANDRA JAYAWARDENA. 1967. Caste and social status among the Indians of Guyana. *In* Barton M. Schwartz, ed., *Caste in overseas Indian communities*, pp. 43–92. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.

SPRATT, P. 1966. *Hindu culture and personality: A psycho-analytic study*. Bombay: Manaktalas.

SRINIVAS, M.N. 1962. *Caste in modern India and other essays*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

TINKER, HUGH. 1993. *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920*, 2nd ed. London: Hansib Publishing Limited.

VAN DER VEER, PETER and STEVEN VERTOVEC. 1991. Brahmanism abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an ethnic religion. *Ethnology* 30, 2: 149–66.

VERTOVEC, STEVEN. 1992. *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, ethnicity and socio-economic change*. London: Macmillan.

———. 1996. 'Official' and 'popular' Hinduism in the Caribbean: Historical and contemporary trends in Surinam, Trinidad and Guyana. *In* David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, eds., *Across the dark waters: Ethnicity and Indian identity in the Caribbean*, pp. 108–30. London: Macmillan.

WELLER, JUDITH ANN. 1968. *The East Indian indenture in Trinidad*. Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico.

WILLIAMS, BRACKETTE F. 1991. *Stains on my name, war in my veins: Guyana and the politics of cultural struggle*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

WOOD, DONALD. 1968. *Trinidad in transition: The years after slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.