INDIANS IN NEW WORLDS:
MAURITIUS AND TRINIDAD

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For the 'sons of the soil', there could be liking, even respect: the 'noble savage' aura was sometimes painted around Malays, Burmese, Fijians. With the Creole blacks, there was an acknowledgment of a partially shared language and folk culture, in dance and music. But the Indians were almost always stigmatized as the dregs of their country: lowborn, even criminal. (Tinker 1974, p. 221).

Abstract

There are many intriguing similarities and differences between the Creole island societies of the western Indian Ocean and Caribbean island societies. This paper focuses on the ethnic situation of the Indian "diaspora" of Mauritius and Trinidad, as well as their relationship to nation-building in the two poly-ethnic societies. While the differences in political power are seen as significant in the comparison of the two island democracies, there are also important similarities between the two uprooted groups. Several factors accounting for differences and similarities are discussed, and finally, it is argued that the potential for profound ethnic conflict is at present higher in Trinidad than in Mauritius.

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INTRODUCTION

Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius are poly-ethnic island-states with large population segments of Indian origin. The other major ethnic categories are, in both societies, of African descent. Brought to the islands during the British colonial indentureship scheme from ca. 1840 to ca. 1910, the Indians were in both societies politically marginal until the electoral reforms of the post-war years. There are both similarities and differences in the collective situation of Indians in Trinidad and Mauritius. Both of the societies are, nevertheless, remarkably peaceful at the inter-ethnic level. In this article, I shall compare the respective positions of Indians in the two nation-states, paying especial attention to the relationship between the wider socio-cultural contexts of daily life and national politics.[1]

THREE ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

A fair number of studies dealing with Mauritius and Trinidad describe the ways in which the descendants of Indian immigrants in these societies "preserve their culture" and "reproduce their social institutions". Two well-known anthropological monographs representative of this approach are Morton Klass's study of Trinidad (Klass 1961) and Burton Benedict's study of Mauritius (Benedict 1961), both of which were based on village field work in the late 1950s. Notwithstanding their merits, this type of studies could be justly criticised for being one-sided and misleading in that they tend to neglect the very considerable interaction taking place between the descendants of Indians and members of other ethnic categories in the societies under investigation. This interaction, which has contributed to shaping the total socio-cultural environments in which Indians and non-Indians alike move, is constituted partly by inter-ethnic interfaces, partly by social contexts where ethnicity is irrelevant.

Other researchers, aware of the shortcomings of such mono-ethnic community studies, have emphasized the so-called poly-

ethnic nature of societies such as Trinidad and Mauritius and have at least on the level of programmatic statements called for studies of inter-ethnic relations in such societies. This sociological school, where M.G. Smith and Lloyd Braithwaite are among the more prominent names, has implicitly and sometimes explicitly viewed the East Indians of Caribbean societies as ethnic *minorities* with typical minority problems. Some, among them Braithwaite (1975) define their most serious problem as being one of *adaptation to the host society* (which is, in the Caribbean, dominated by Afro-American and European culture), while Smith and others have taken the view that Indian culture and social organization are in crucial ways incompatible with the dominant culture and that conflict is bound to arise in any plural society, perhaps particularly in those recognizing the rights of minorities and trying to treat its citizens equally (Smith 1965; see also Clarke 1986; Serbin 1987; see Eriksen 1991c, for a brief critique of this perspective).

Such research strategies and theoretical perspectives have serious limitations, provided the aim of analysis is to understand internal social and cultural processes in the societies seen as total systems. Notably, the actual situation in which "diaspora Indians" find themselves, particularly regarding political strategies and identity management, should be examined. What is sometimes referred to, simplistically, as the cultural adaptation of diaspora Indians, is better viewed as the ongoing interaction between Indian and non-Indian social and cultural systems, where values, norms and forms of organization are continuously negotiated and where the cultural differences within a statistically defined "population segment" or an "ethnic group" may be of greater significance than the systematic differences obtaining between the categories. Finally, inter-ethnic contexts can never be reduced simply to either conflict or compromise. While Indian communities of the "diaspora"[2] are conditioned, culturally and socially, by the "host society", the influence exerted by Indians themselves on the societies in question is never negligible, and lines of communication and power are always two-ways, although power may, of course, be

asymmetrically distributed. It is possible to be a West Indian East Indian, as Naipual (1973) once put it.

The outcome of this ongoing process, while not necessarily a melting-pot in every respect, is a socio-cultural environment where members of different ethnic categories share some fields of inter-action, where some fields of interaction are kept closed along ethnic lines (this is what one may, following Barth, 1969, refer to as the maintenance of ethnic boundaries), and where a third vari-able area of interaction belongs to an ambiguous grey zone as far as the reproduction of inter-ethnic shared meaning is concerned. There is nevertheless nothing to suggest that ethnic boundaries in Trinidad or Mauritius will break down absolutely in the near future, although they continuously change, historically, geographically and situationally; in symbolic content and in social relevance. This implies that a great number of inter-ethnic situations are subject to constant negotiation and there is always a large number of societal factors which influence the nature of these encounters. We need, therefore, to take daily, apparently trivial inter-ethnic encounters seriously. If we are able to fully understand why there is, say, a dis-agreement between a Negro and an Indian over a matter relating to, say, a particular government policy, then we may have understood something very profound about the nature of ethnicity and social classification in general, thanks to the indexicality of social action on the one hand and on the dependence of politicians for support in parliamentary democracies such as Trinidad and Mauritius on the other hand. The daily encounters between members of different ethnic groups constitute the fundamentals of ethnicity. Had there not been firm, widely shared perceptions of differences between Indians and blacks in Trinidad or Mauritius, then politicians, em-ployers and opportunists would never have been able to exploit ethnic cleavages in the population simply because there would have been none. It would be foolish to pretend that such differences do not exist, but it would be equally untenable to treat them as givens.

Although public discourse about ethnicity in Mauritius and Trinidad frequently focuses on conflicts between blacks and Indians, conflicts are not an inevitable outcome of the widespread inter-ethnic contacts, whether in Trinidad, in Mauritius or elsewhere. Whether or not a given situation leads to conflict along ethnic lines depends on a number of situational and contextual factors which need not to be intrinsically connected with ethnicity.

ETHNICITY AND THE DEFINITION OF INDIANNESS

Indians in a poly-ethnic society outside of India cannot adequately be viewed simply as Indians. They are Indians embedded in a particular historical and socio-cultural context and this fact is an inextricable part of their life - even those aspects of their life which pertain to their very Indianness. A TV beer commercial popular in Trinidad in the latter half of 1989, which featured a classical Indian song, thus did not only communicate that Indians, too, ought to drink this brand of beer, it also communicated that it is quite legitimate to be Indian, despite the fact, which every Trinidadian knows, that public Trinidad is strongly dominated by cultural symbols and emblems associated with black or Negro New World culture. An identical commercial, if shown in India or Mauritius, would have carried a different meaning because the wider ideological contexts are different. In Mauritius, Indian cultural messages are so widespread and so common, on TV and elsewhere, that nobody would notice such a commercial as being unusual. In Trinidad, as in Mauritius, it is impossible to forget that one finds oneself in a cultural environment where one always has to take the ethnic *others* into account. The implications for ethnicity of, on the one hand, dominant power structures and on the other hand, everyday social contexts, are different in the two societies and a main aim of this article is to explore some of these differences.

When using the term ethnicity, we thereby indicate that somebody demands to be recognized as culturally distinctive. We should also remember, however, that ethnicity also implies that the person in question also claims the right, on behalf of his or her

group, to be *similar* to others in certain respects. For had there not
been a perceived similarity between blacks and Indians, then there
could have been no inter-ethnic relationship, since perceptions of
similarity are a necessary condition for the inter-ethnic contacts
which are presupposed by, and which in an important sense consti-
tute ethnicity. It is this ambiguity which makes ethnicity such a
difficult topic to study: it is an elusive, yet obviously pervasive
aspect of the shared discourse in a self-proclaimed poly-ethnic
society. Apart from noting that ethnicity entails the systematic
communication of cultural differences between members of groups
acknowledging each other's cultural distinctiveness, we cannot list
universal, substantial criteria for ethnicity. Ethnicity may or may
not involve conceptions of differences in "race", religion and/or
language; what matters is whether differences are commonly
agreed upon as being *socially relevant*, not whether or not they
exist "objectively".[3] In a study from northern Norway, Eidheim
(1971) thus showed that although there were virtually no "objec-
tive cultural differences" between the Norwegians and the Saami
("Lapps", indigenous population), ethnicity was important be-
cause people acted according to ethnic stereotypes and thus main-
tained ethnic boundaries. Moreover, the actual content of ethnic
identities change historically, the social importance of ethnicity
need not change accordingly. To this topic, the relationship be-
tween cultural content and ethnic identity, I shall return below.

   Ethnicity is always an aspect of social relationship and it thus
involves interaction and some shared base for communication on
the part of both groups involved. This is an important point to make
in relation to poly-ethnic societies because it suggests that ethnicity
is not in principle incompatible with a shared national identity. The
ethnic identity of a single group viewed in isolation, alas, is like
"the sound from one hand clapping" (Bateson 1980). The Indians
of Trinidad, for example, would not have been Indians in the way
they are unless they had been forced to relate to black, brown, off-
white and white creole culture, and vice versa. This holds for
Mauritius too in situationally similar ways, but in different political

and economic contexts. Now turning to a comparison between the situation of Indians in Mauritius and Trinidad, I shall emphasize the national contexts in which they play a part as *Indians* – at the risk of over-emphasizing the actual importance of ethnicity.

The Mauritian national context is in many respects a more Indian one than the Trinidadian and I now turn to a brief account of its genesis and further development.

THE ADVENT OF THE INDO-MAURITIANS

From the abolition of slavery in 1835 until the end of World War I, millions of Indians were brought to other British colonies, particularly plantation colonies, under the system of indentureship which has been labelled "a new form of slavery" in Hugh Tinker's (1974) oft-quoted phrase and which, whether a form of slavery proper or not, replaced the abandoned system of Negro slavery. The majority of these indentured labourers hailed from the north-eastern provinces of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and were speakers of Bhojpuri (a spoken language related to Hindi); substantial numbers also embarked from Madras, the main port of what is now Tamil Nadu in the south. The majority of the emigrants were Hindus; a large minority were Muslims and a smaller minority Christian. Although the bulk of Indian immigrants to the colonies were field labourers, small proportions were artisans, traders and even Hindu pundits. Some, most of them South Indians, speakers of the Dravidian languages Tamil and Telegu, left India on their own whim in order to further their careers as traders or artisans abroad.[4]

In four of the colonies to which indentured Indian labourers were sent are their numbers sufficiently substantial for them to vie for political power in the post-colonial era.[5] These four societies, all of them independent nation-states since the 1960s, are Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius. Mauritians of Indian origin constitute the only group of Indian emigres who have continuously dominated politics in their new homeland since the electoral reforms introduced in many of these territories after World War II

(see Simmons 1983; Bowman 1990). This is caused by several concurrent processes, not all of them obvious, and I shall consider the causes of the political success of Indo-Mauritians before describing their contemporary political and cultural situation in some detail.

THE POLITICAL SUCCESS OF INDO-MAURITIANS

In any political system with functioning parliamentary institutions, there is strength in numbers. In Mauritius, people of Indian descent have made up more than half the population since the 1870s; today, they comprise approximately 65 per cent of the total population of roughly one million. In other words, by sheer force of numbers it was likely that Indo-Mauritians should play a major part in national politics after the introduction of universal suffrage in 1948. This not only meant that Indians comprised the largest group of voters but it also indicated that the size and diversity of the Indian population enabled them to retain and reproduce forms of local and domestic organization advantageous in politics – in a word, their foci of social organization were the family and extended kinship networks, the village and, to a not negligible extent, caste-based organization (see Benedict 1961).

This leads to a second point, namely that the people of Indian descent in Mauritius were more heterogeneous than those who settled in the New World. Already under French rule, in the late 18th century, there were visible minorities of Indians in the capital Port-Louis; some of them menial labourers or dockers, others conducting business on varying scale (St. Pierre 1983 [1773]). Many of these immigrants, most of whom were Tamils or Indian Muslims, were *creolized* during the 19th century; that is, they converted to Christianity, lost their language and were absorbed into the emergent coloured middle-class. But a substantial proportion of these urban migrants have retained their identity as Indians up to this day, and this indicates that throughout the history of Mauritius, and up to this day, there has been an economically influential group of "respectable" citizens of Indian descent. Some of these families

have exerted an influence comparable to that of the French planters – and like the planters, rich urban Muslims are fiercely endoga- mous and take great pride in their origins.

Thirdly, geography works in the favour of Indians in Mauri- tius, compared to those settled in the New World. In the islands of the western Indian Ocean, which must in many other respects be regarded as similar to those of the Caribbean, a different set of cultural influences are at work. First, virtually all Mauritians, Indians and blacks alike, speak a French-based creole language and they tend to prefer French to English as a literary language (al- though many Indians nowadays prefer English, this preference being an aspect of their ethnic identity as Indians; see Eriksen 1990b). Secondly, Mauritius is too remote from America, geo- graphically and (perhaps especially) culturally, to have taken part in the black self-consciousness movement which was very influen- tial in the Caribbean and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. The society as a whole is, in contrast with Trinidad, more Gallicised than Americanised. Thirdly, the gravitational pull from India is strongly felt in Mauritius; it possesses a much stronger Indian flavour than any society in the New World. India is suffi- ciently close for the reasonably affluent to send their sons there for wives or to become educated and even Mauritians of modest means can afford a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the land of their ancestors. The link between India and Mauritius has long been ac- knowledged: on his way from South Africa to India, Mahatma Gandhi, for example, visited Mauritius. Flights between Bombay and Mauritius are frequent and the island receives, among other things, fresh supplies of the most recent Hindi movies regularly. (A rather sadder aspect of the intimate links between Bombay and Mauritius is the soaring growth of drug abuse in the island during the last decade).

THE CONTENT OF MAURITIAN INDIANNESS

Compared with diaspora communities of Trinidad or Guyana, the Indian community of Mauritius has by and large been less

creolized on the level of cultural notions and daily practices. The *tika* can still be seen on the foreheads of most Mauritian Hindu women, and even in the towns most of the married Hindu women rub henna into the partition of their hair. Half of the many cinemas in Mauritius show exclusively Indian films with no subtitles, and unlike in Trinidad blacks rarely make about jokes about "Hindu movies". Bhojpuri is still spoken fairly widely in the north-eastern villages and is understood by many blacks living in these areas, although only elderly, female, rural Indo-Mauritians now tend to be monolingual in Bhojpuri. The variant of Bhojpuri spoken in Mauritius is closer to that spoken in Bihar than the Bhojpuri spoken in either Fiji, Guyana or Trinidad. The caste system still exists, although not as a hierarchy of corporate groups or occupational groups; rather as a "hierarchy of prestige labels valued at the upper end, devalued at the lower end and largely ignored in the middle" (Benedict 1965, p. 36). Castes tend not to be endogamous.

This is not to say that there has been little or no cultural change since the bulk of the indentured labourers arrived four or more generations ago. An Indian from India (enn lendien dilend in the vernacular, Kreol) of my acquaintance thus lamented the shallowness of the Indo-Mauritian cultural identity. Pointing to what he called their obsession with money and material riches – and surely idealizing conditions in India – he thought the Indo-Mauritians unspiritual and superficial. While more than half of the Indo-Mauritians still have their source of income in the sugar industry, there are by now Indo-Mauritians in virtually every profession. Unlike in Trinidad (and even more unlike Guyana; see LaGuerre 1989), many Indians work in the Mauritian civil service; an increasing number are business managers in the thriving Mauritian industry; there are now Indo-Mauritians in every profession. Interestingly, several Indo-Mauritian authors write fiction in Hindi and publish in India.

However, the "diaspora Indians" were just as underprivileged in Mauritius as anywhere else until after World War II. The bulk of them were undernourished, illiterate, impoverished and were viewed

with suspicion and contempt as primitive pagans by whites, browns, Chinese and blacks alike. The Indians were perceived as being culturally more remote from the colonial and creole ruling classes than the blacks and coloureds and the latter were therefore systematically preferred in virtually all forms of employment except that of field labourers (Allen 1983).

It is not surprising that this situation was to change radically when, following Independence, Mauritius was to be ruled by Indians. Since then (actually, since the political and educational reforms of the late 1940s and early 1950s), their situation has improved very rapidly in politics, education and the economic system. As mentioned, their rapid ascendancy can partly be accounted for by plain statistics: since Indians formed an overwhelming demographic majority, they could never be neglected and since many were not indentured labourers the community could create its indigenous leaders with adequate command of the dominant codes, since the beginning of indentureship. Seewosagur Ramgoolam, the first prime minister of Mauritius, was active in politics from the 30s to the early 80s. In a sense, he holds a position in Mauritian nationalist ideology comparable to the combined positions of the national heroes Arthur Cipriani (a white Fabian socialist politician of the 1930s) and Eric Williams (prime minister 1956-81) in Trinidad. Mauritians are in other words accustomed to being led by Hindus.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF ETHNICITY

The strong position of Indians in many - but not all - fields of Mauritian public life has put the cohesion of the community under strain. Politically, the community has been split since the Indian civil war in the late 40s; that is, the Muslims early formed their own party, the CAM (Comite d'Action Musulman). Cultural differences between Dravidians (Tamils, Telegus) and Aryans (especially Biharis; also Marathis and Bengalis) have also periodically been perceived as important and at least the urban Tamils define

themselves as non-Indians. Further, caste divisions also play a part
in Mauritian social life and caste differences have occasionally
been exploited politically. The caste aspect is also widely believed
to influence policies of employment. For example, a highly quali-
fied Mauritian woman of my acquaintance once lamented that she
would never get a high position in the state bureaucracy because
she was a Brahmin. The latest political fragmentation of the Indo-
Mauritians occurred in August, 1988. In an earlier study of Mauri-
tian ethnicity and nationalism based on fieldwork in 1986 (Eriksen
1990a), I had portrayed one of Mauritius's leading politicians, a
Telegu, as a champion of inter-ethnic co-operation and compro-
mise. Following the elections of 1987, his power base grew consi-
derably – he was appointed Chief Whip of the governing MSM
party – and less than a year later, he broke away from the govern-
ment and formed an organization representing Hindu minorities
(Tamils, Telegus and Marathis, altogether about 12 per cent of the
population).

    The point to be made here is that political ethnicity can, in the
contexts of contemporary Trinidad and Mauritius, be meaningfully
reduced to a power game where all actors follow identical rules and
that it therefore ought to be regarded as a phenomenon relatively
distinctive from individual ethnic identity, which has a strong
element of non-utilitarian symbolic meaning. For the "objective"
cultural differences between a rural Telegu and a rural North Indian
are negligible, particularly when viewed against the wider back-
ground of the Mauritian cultural complexity and intermarriage
between the groups has been, and remains, widespread. "Obser-
vable" cultural differences therefore do not enable us to predict
anything about political alignments. Politics makes strange bedfel-
lows, not least in Mauritius, where the bulk of the Catholic blacks
and the Indian Muslims have been allied politically since the 1960s.
True, the Indians of Mauritius are culturally heterogeneous, but
they tend to share a number of notions about self and others that
effectively set them socially apart from non-Indian Mauritians.
These notions are embedded in cultural stereotypes, which are part

and parcel of Mauritian culture and can be invoked whenever deemed necessary and ignored or underplayed if need be. The Indian standard view of the black is, according to stereotypical perceptions, that he is lazy, sexually immoral, disorganized and essentially stupid. The blacks, or Creoles, on their part, tend to regard the Indians as being too thrifty, sly and cunning, dishonest and boring to the extent that they are unable to enjoy the good things in life.

Stereotypes of this kind, which do lead to a great deal of tension and uneasiness in inter-ethnic encounters, nevertheless serve to fix ethnic relationships in social space, at least at the level of representations or ideology and they thereby create a subjective sense of security and stability as regards cultural identity. They help reproduce ethnic boundaries in an environment where spatial boundaries are impossible - where Indians and blacks may live in the same neighbourhoods.

I have suggested that the cultural differences reproduced between Indo-Mauritians and black Mauritians are more socially effective than those being reproduced between the corresponding groups in Trinidad. Mauritius has been less strongly exposed to American and British cultural influences and has only recently begun its path towards a total integration into the capitalist world economy. Ever since Independence, however, Mauritian authorities have pursued cultural policies aimed at enabling the diverse ethnic groups to preserve their mutual differences. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute, a research and documentation centre, is, despite its name, devoted to research on the Indian, Chinese and African heritages alike, and already a wide array of courses and open lectures at the MGI has taught young Mauritians about their half-forgotten past. Mauritius is politically a Hindu-dominated society, however, and it is doubtless true that the main focus of post-independence historical research has been on indentureship and Indian history and society. The school system has also been adapted to the poly-cultural reality of modern Mauritius. It is now the right of every pupil to be taught his or her ancestral language (although

many Indo-Mauritians understand Hindustani and Bhojpuri, only a tiny minority are literate in Hindi). Among Mauritian Indians, there have been few conversions to Christianity, but many have chosen French as their primary vehicle for writing. The current policies aim to strengthen Hindi *vis-a-vis* French and English.

A final example is the Mauritian Emancipation Day, which is a public holiday where one simultaneously marks the end of slavery and the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers. In Mauritius, it is generally the blacks who claim that they are being discriminated against by the state. The government is in the hands of Indians and many blacks interpret virtually every government policy as being "anti-black". An example is the recent scheme introduced by the state to improve the situation of small planters of sugar cane. Most small planters are of Indian descent and so blacks tend to perceive this policy as being pro-Indian. As I shall indicate below, perceptions of ethnic politics tend to differ strongly in Trinidad.

EAST INDIANS IN THE WEST INDIES

Trinidadian politics has continuously been dominated by blacks since the 1950s, and Trinidadian national identity is closely linked with cultural institutions associated with the blacks. I have met Trinidadians of non-Indian origin who, when describing central aspects of Trinidadian culture, totally ignore the cultural distinctiveness of the citizens of Indian origin and who, if asked, regard the Indo-Trinidadian culture as a "spice"; a subordinate, subservient cultural dependency of the by-and-large black West Indian society of Trinidad. This view has been common since colonial times, when British administrators would write off the substantial Indian community as "troublemakers", full stop (see Brereton 1979). Whatever the case may be, Trinidad, unlike Mauritius, is dominated politically by blacks and coloureds, culturally by North Americans and local blacks identifying with New World (local, Caribbean and/or North American) culture, economically by local whites and off-whites as well as by foreign

interests. Unlike in Mauritius, where a majority are of Indian descent, only slightly over 40 per cent of the Trinidadian population would define themselves as Indo-Trinidadians. A context very different from the Mauritian one, it has led to a very different political situation for the Indians.

The idea of Indianness in Trinidad – as Indo-Trinidadian cultural self-consciousness – evolved largely during the 1940s and 1950s. The part played by Indian cinema (most of the cinemas in Trinidad are owned by Indians) and the dissemination of popular Indian music through mass media have clearly been very important aspects of the emergent self-definition of Trinidadian Indianness confronting Indo-Trinidadians with images of India hitherto unknown. Since the early 1970s, a strong wave of Indian revitalization has spread, particularly among young, well-educated Indo-Trinidadians. With respect to actual notions and practices, however, it is clear that by and large Indians in Trinidad are more creolized than those in Mauritius, notwithstanding current revitalization of Hindu rites (see Vertovec 1990). Many more are Christian than in Mauritius (although the majority are not), and many non-Christian Indians have Christian first names. Food taboos are dealt with in a more relaxed way, the loss of language is more complete; and Indian women are more "independent" (many tend to follow a Western pattern of careering) in Trinidad than in Mauritius. Caste is now of minor, if any, importance. All of these (and other) radical changes in the culture and social organization of the Indians in Trinidad need not imply that the Indian community has been more strongly assimilated in Trinidad than in Mauritius; in fact, if we look at this in a converse way, it is evident that blacks in Mauritius and Trinidad alike have adopted a great deal of Indian practices and notions (to some extent without being aware of it) without assimilating into the Indian ethnic group. At any rate, it is obvious that however creolized the Indo-Trinidadians may be culturally, the group enjoys a higher degree of political cohesiveness than the Indo-Mauritians (see Hintzen 1983 for a more complex picture). Until very recently, there was but one party representing the bulk

of Indo-Trinidadians. The community was, it may seem, never large and powerful enough to split (notwithstanding the periodical Muslim support for the PNM (People's National Movement), which governed Trinidad and Tobago from 1956 to 1986). A different explanation would be that the Indo-Trinidadians are in general less politically active than both their Afro-Trinidadian and their Indo-Mauritian counterparts, largely because politics is seen as a black domain in Trinidad. While many of the Indo-Trinidadians I knew in 1989 would have liked to see the Indian leader Basdeo Panday as Prime Minister, few believed that this would come about in the near future. An investigation of the place of Indo-Trinidadian in the division of labour would support this argument. Whereas most Indo-Trinidadians are still involved in agriculture, an increasing number are independent businessmen and professionals – and even among those working on the land many run their own farms.

A conspicuous difference from Mauritius is the comparative absence of Indians from the public service and politics. In Trinidad, the high-ranking public servant of Indian origin is still the exception and not the rule (LaGuerre 1989); in Mauritius, the situation is certainly different. Despite the massive black political dominance and despite the American cultural onslaught prevailing in Trinidad, and notwithstanding the very significant effects of these influences on the lifestyles of Indo-Trinidadians, it is beyond doubt that most Trinidadians of Indian origins tend to regard themselves *as a kind of Indian*. They are locally labelled *East Indians*, ostensibly in order to distinguish them from Amerindians (of whom there are, incidentally, virtually *none* in Trinidad).

A NEW WORLD BRAND OF INDIANNESS

Their Indianness is, however, increasingly a distinctive New World Indianness; this point was once made by V.S. Naipual when he conceded that his approach to the past of his grandfather has to be the approach of a stranger and it is to some extent documented by Nevadomsky (1980, 1983) in his restudy of the village of

"Amity", first studied by Klass (1961) twenty years earlier. In the late fifties, when Klass carried out his fieldwork, women were not educated; most families were of the extended type and residence was usually patrilocal and there were criteria relating to caste and religious merit defining the rank of an individual. Focusing on changes in shared values and in household structure, Nevadomsky found that social rank was now derived from income earning potential and educational attainments; nuclear families were the norm and in many cases the ideal: patrilocal residence was now of insignificant duration; marriage partners were usually chosen by the young people themselves; girls were educated and their education enhanced their value as potential wives.

In abstract sociological terms, this change can be described as a transition from an ascription-based to an achievement-based form of organization, and it fits very neatly with classical socio-logical theory about the nature of modernization seen as the transition from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (soci-ety). However, such a transition is never as unambiguous as Nevadomsky seems to suggest and this is particularly so in socie-ties where there are several literate cultural traditions. For as many scholars have noted (for example, Epstein 1978), the main point to be made about so-called ethnic melting-pots is that they tend to be non-starters: they fail to occur. Poles in the USA remain fervently Polish several generations after their ancestors left Poland; second-generation Pakistanis in Norwegian cities, fluent speakers of Norwegian, voluntarily go to Pakistan to get married; and the Indians of Trinidad emphatically remain self-professed Indians despite apparently dramatic changes in their culture and social organization. However, their Indianness is a New World Indian-ness; it is a peculiar brand of Indianness which has grown out of the soil of Trinidad, where, for example, a taste for heavy rock music has become an auspicious sign of modern youthful Indianness. Ad-ditionally, it should be emphasized that the ethnicity displayed by Indo-Trinidadians in the context of modern national society is not necessarily incompatible with the requirements of the modern

nation-state and commodity market. Seen as an aspect of a total societal formation, therefore, contemporary Indian ethnicity in Trinidad is of diminishing relevance for the organization of national society. On the other hand, the cultural creolization of Indo-Trinidadians need not mean the disappearance of Indians as an ethnic category. On the contrary, it may lead to a greater ethnic self-consciousness since processes of creolization can be perceived as threats against Indianness. The emphatic refusal of the bulk of Indo-Trinidadians to join forces with blacks during the Black Power uprisings of the early 1970s could be indicative of the strength of their collective identity. The leaders of the Black Power movement claimed that Indians, as non-whites, were black; the Indians retorted that they were certainly not. In other words, they preferred not to define themselves as blacks, notwithstanding the fact that most Indo-Trinidadians are at least as dark-skinned as many of the leaders of the U.S. civil rights movement. "Black", of course, is in this context an ethnic label with connotations to local Negro culture, not a description of skin colour.

CREOLIZATION, REVITALIZATION AND DOMINATION

Contemporary analytical perspectives on the Indo-Trinidadians differ strongly. Whereas, for example, Nevadomsky (1980, 1983) has emphasized processes of creolization, and Vertovec (1990) has focused on ethnic revitalization, Baksh (1979) has documented an essential similarity in representations and practices among blacks and Indians. In distinguishing between the cultural and social aspects of ethnicity, as I have done, all three perspectives may be relevant and need not contradict each other. The ethnic categories, black and (East) Indian, may become more similar and yet more strongly committed to communicate their mutual differences. In the Trinidadian context, this takes on the form of Indian revitalization because the dominant cultural idioms are associated with blacks and because Trinidadian nationalist symbolism, unlike the Mauritian "pluralist" nationalism, is associated with blacks (see Eriksen 1991a, 1991b). National symbols in Trinidad include the

calypso, the steelband and the carnival, all of which are perceived as urban black institutions.

I have mentioned a number of aspects documenting changes in Indian culture and society since their arrival in the West Indies; some, perhaps less immediately visible aspects of Trinidadian Indianness, also show the impact of greater cultural systems on Indian culture. For instance, the swastika, a very common religious symbol in India and Mauritius alike, is almost entirely absent from Trinidadian mandirs. This, I venture to guess, must be so because the swastika is associated with Nazism in this particular cultural context. The local variety of Hosay celebrations (an annual Muslim feast) has obviously been shaped by Carnival influence; it is a rhythmic, colourful and strongly sensual festival, which would surely be considered a blasphemous feast by Arab fundamentalists. The popularity of rock music among Indo-Trinidadian youths, further, is inexplicable unless we look at the local cultural context. Since locally popular music such as reggae and soca are regarded as black musical forms and since Indian music is frowned upon or laughed at as inherently silly, Indian youths have to look elsewhere for a youth culture which is simultaneously non-African and modern. The cult around rock music enables young Indians to communicate modernity and non-blackness (their taste generally goes in the direction of heavy rock which is emphatically non-black within the wider Anglo-American reference system); it is a phenomenon generated from a variety of sources. Further, there is an obvious tendency that Indo-Trinidadians prefer cricket to football (this parallels preferences in India itself), while wrestling was, in the 1970s, singularly popular among Indians – not among blacks; and it would be easy to find other examples showing the ongoing negotiation of the content of Indianness, seen as systems of contrasts against local non-Indianness (that is, usually, black culture).

INDO-TRINIDADIAN MINORITY STRATEGIES

Self-conscious members of dominated minorities in self-proclaimed poly-ethnic societies may communicate their differences

to their surroundings through an array of ethnic markers; symbols eclectically chosen from their acknowledged heritage and tailored to the task of communicating, say, Saami identity in a Scandinavian cultural context. Apart from appearance, which can scarcely be chosen, the form of dress is clearly the most visible and most common such marker, and it is probably the most universally important one. Religious practices are also powerful ethnic mark-ers. This does not imply that religion is not a symbolic system with important meanings in its own right; the point is that it is also a very efficient way for a community to set itself apart, socially, politically and culturally. Some of these techniques are virtually absent in Trinidad – it is indeed rare to see an urban Indo-Trinidadian, regardless of gender, dressed in anything but Western clothes. The reason is partly that the obvious phenotypical differences are sufficient to communicate ethnic distance. Yet, both in religion and in various cultural practices visible to the surroundings do Indo-Trinidadians consciously communicate that they are different. There are also other, less conspicious techniques employed to communicate cultural difference, for instance, when the Indo-Trinidadian community newspaper *Sandesh* ("News") in an edito-rial (1 Sept, 1989) spoke of Independence Day and chose to focus its concern on the work ethic, only those readers who are familiar with the public discourse of Trinidad would realise that the edito-rial was an implicit attack on what is conceived of as black culture. The point to be made here is that Indians in Trinidad to a greater extent than Indians in Mauritius tend to be *self-conscious about their Indianness*: it doesn't come naturally, as it were; one has to decide for oneself that one wants to be a real, non-creolised Indian and one must lay strategies in order to ensure this. Such ethnic revitalization is often presumed to follow the spread of capitalism and bureaucratic institutions and, particularly, the growth of mass education. As regards the Indo-Trinidadians as well as the Indo-Mauritians, there is a clear correlation to this effect. The increased availability of new forms of knowledge about their own history and their ancestral land have made reflection about their identity

possible. It has also, incidentally, inhibited the development of a widespread nostalgia for India; for most Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Mauritians are well aware that their great-grandparents left India because of utter poverty and that their own lot has improved since. The form of Indianness developed in the currents of ethnic revitalization now prevalent in Trinidad, therefore, is not intended to replicate the Indianness of India entirely, for example, there is little interest in reviving the *jatis* (caste-based occupational groups) and *panchayats* (caste councils), although other aspects of Hindu religious revival are strong. In the case of the Afro-Trinidadians, a comparable tendency of ethnic revitalization is present, perhaps most strongly articulated among intellectuals: they realise having their roots and have consciously taken measures to re-invent them.

In the less thoroughly modernized, and less exposed, society of Mauritius, by contrast, self-conscious ethnic-identity movements of "Indo-Mauritianness" and "Afro-Mauritianness" have a more limited appeal. At least in the case of the Indo-Mauritians, this is because it is still possible for a large number of people to live in an acknowledged Indian way without having to articulate and justify and protect it vis-a-vis the surroundings.[6] Ethnic stereotypes in Trinidad are also slightly different from those prevalent in Mauritius, although the similarities are more striking. It is true that Indo-Trinidadians tend to regard blacks as disorganized, immoral and essentially lazy ("the African wants the government to do everything for him" is a common kind of statement), but the great emphasis placed on physical appearance in the West Indies has inspired a widespread Indian contempt for the "ugliness" of the blacks; this notion is virtually unknown in Mauritius.

The thriftiness of Indians is regarded with suspicion by blacks in Mauritius and Trinidad alike, but in Trinidad there is a tendency among some young, urban blacks to regard young urban Indians as a kind of jet-set of conspicuous consumers. This view, of course, does not conform to any widespread view held by Indians. It has been documented, however, that the average income of Indians, traditionally lower than that of the blacks, is now officially identi-

cal to the average income of blacks (Henry 1989). Economically, Indians are collectively ascending, although more slowly than many urban blacks believe.

Despite the emergence of growing fields of cross-ethnically shared meaning in both societies, ethnic differences remain strong, both at the level of representations and that of certain practices. There is a Mauritian saying that if a black has ten rupees, he will spend fifteen; but if an Indian has ten rupees, he will spend seven and hoard the rest. Similar notions are also widespread in Trinidad and may indeed be quoted by members of both of the groups in question as an indication of their cultural superiority. Statistically, there are systematic differences between the groups in some respects (although not nearly as strong as commonly believed). Black households in Trinidad, particularly in the working class, tend to be unstable; lives of many working class blacks are correspondingly loosely organized and prone to sudden changes with regards to marital status, jobs and place of residence. This contrasts with the typical Indian household, which is a stabler social unit. In this respect, Trinidadian AIDS figures must be regarded as relevant as an indication of systematic differences in behaviour: they reveal that Indians represented, in September, 1989, only 40 of a total of 489 recorded Aids cases. It has also been documented that "visiting relationships", that is, loose sexual relationships, are statistically much less common among Indians than among blacks (Roberts 1975, p. 163).

THE POWER AND POWERLESSNESS OF CREOLIZED INDIANS

From the moment that the immigrant entered the immigration depot in Calcutta, he was thrown together with peoples of different castes, and he found it impossible to follow caste guidelines governing people of lower caste. On board ship caste rules and regulations were further weakened. On the plantation the breakdown of caste as a principle of social organization was accelerated. (Brereton 1979, p. 185).

The current interest in recreating and reviving Indian tradi-
tions on Trinidadian˙soil (see LaGuerre 1974; Dabydeen and
Samaroo 1987; Vertovec 1990) has led to the widespread aware-
ness and articulation of issues that go to the naked core of nation-
alism; namely, questions concerning the content of nationalism
and its justification; why should the calypso be considered as
intrinsically more nationally Trinidadian than the chutney (Indian
popular music); who is a *true-true Trini* and what are his discrimin-
ating qualities, and why should this necessarily be so? Through
raising these issues, the Indian revitalization movement has con-
verted issues which were formerly not on the political agenda to
questions of open critical discourse. This has not happened in
Mauritius, which has chosen a course of more consistent cultural
pluralism in its official national symbolism and its development of
national institutions. For example, Mauritian school children are
offered courses in a wide variety of Asian languages, and Indian
languages are granted air time on national radio (Eriksen 1990b);
this would be unthinkable in Trinidad.

The form of the Indo-Trinidadian revitalization movement is
typical. Half-forgotten rites have been revived; pilgrimages to
India are offered by travel agencies and, indeed, sometimes the
exchange is mutual through the import of Indian pundits; Indo-
Trinidadian participants in public discourse complain about dis-
crimination. As the Indo-Trinidadian John Gaffar LaGuerre puts
it, somewhat ironically:

> The *kurta* and the *pajama*, the readings of the *Bhagavad
> Gita*, the retreat into Islam or Hinduism, the appeals for
> purity and the calls for more holidays – these constitute
> the euphoria of the movement. (LaGuerre 1974).

Yet, as is evident in idiosyncratic identities of young Indians, their
Indianness is emphatically local in character. As the educational
and professional levels of Indo-Trinidadians have improved, In-
dian ethnicity has become more visible although its representatives
are evidently more strongly creolised than ever as regards their

actual representations and practices; the social and cultural refer-
ences of Indianness have, in other words, changed.

Being creolised does not, it should be stressed, necessarily
imply losing one's Indianness; to think so would be an essentialist
error. Ethnically self-conscious Indians in both societies, but par-
ticularly in Trinidad, nevertheless see the foundations of their
tradition turning from stone to clay. As young Indians begin to
violate food taboos (they eat eggs and sometimes even beefburgers),
intermarriage becomes a very real possibility and the source of
profound worries in the parental generation. Perhaps the genera-
tions of Indo-Mauritians and Indo-Trinidadians reaching puberty
at the turn of the century will know nothing about holy cows, or
perhaps such knowledge will be purely emblematic, with no pro-
found bearing on their life-worlds. This does not necessarily imply
that Indianness disappears as a form of social identity in either of
the societies, but that its content changes. Thus, a focus on creoli-
zation or adaptation need not be incompatible with a focus on
revitalization. It is theoretically conceivable, although I have
argued that it has not come about yet, that all systematic cultural
differences except the very notions of differences between blacks
and Indians will gradually disappear through the culturally homo-
genising agencies of nationalism and capitalism and that the groups
yet remain distinctive to the extent of not intermarrying systemati-
cally. This would imply what a leading Trinidadian intellectual,
Lloyd Best, has called *cultural douglarisation* (Best, personal
communication). The *dougla*, in Trinidadian discourse, is a person
with one black and one Indian parent; the cultural dougla would
thus be a person whose identity encompasses aspects of cultural
Indianness as well as cultural blackness.

SOME RELEVANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SOCIETIES

The similarities between the two societies should not be exagger-
ated. Trinidad is locally perceived as a largely black society (for
better or for worse, as the case may be), and unlike in Mauritius

several self-proclaimed spokesmen for the Indians argue that they suffer cultural domination. Policies acknowledging that Trinidad is truly a poly-cultural society and thus something different from a modern cultural melting-pot are conspicuously absent. National cultural symbols include the calypso, the carnival and the steel-band, all of which are associated with the blacks. The Indian presence is all but ignored in national cultural life and in tourism propaganda materials. The aforementioned beer commercial featuring an Indian classical singer is so exceptional that it may serve as a reminder of the paucity of Indian cultural messages in the shared Trinidadian public space. Most of the creolization of Trinidadians of Indian origin occurs without their being discursively aware of it happening; in aesthetic taste, dress, body language and the perceptions of relevant paths for professional or matrimonial careers. This kind of process has also been evident in Mauritius; for instance, the common form of greeting is universally the hand-shake between Mauritian men – this is not so in India. Nevertheless, the Indo-Mauritians still seem to stand a better chance of retaining important aspects of their cultural distinctiveness, than do the Indo-Trinidadians. This is due partly to their force in numbers, partly to their firm position in the state agencies, partly to the consciously poly-cultural policies of the nation-state, and partly to their geographic proximity to India. All this does not, however, necessarily matter as regards the political importance of ethnicity.

Writing about the Trinidad of the turn of the century, Bridget Brereton notes that

> [t]here were those [press correspondents] who argued that it was important to bring into the open the existence of race feeling and discrimination, in order to destroy it; they were nearly always coloured or black. (Brereton 1979, p. 199).

The Indo-Trinidadians were muted then; they may no longer be politically silent, but unlike in Mauritius, they may never be in a position sufficiently strong for them to vie for cultural hegemony.

The situation in the New World, where Indianness is frowned upon
in the national context, encourages Trinidadians of Indian origin to
relinquish their cultural heritage and become thoroughly creolized.
Indo-Trinidadians featured on TV, radio, in the press and other
cultural contexts of national society rarely display any of their
Indian heritage. In other words, Indians are accepted as long as they
overtly identify themselves with the majority; they are accepted as
Trinidadians but not as *Indians*. This form of cultural hegemony
presents many Indo-Trinidadians with a very real predicament: if
they strive to preserve their traditions, some avenues of careering
will be closed to them; and if they wish to be successful, say, in the
media, then they must relinquish their cultural identity and may be
regarded as traitors by the more militant members of their commu-
nity. Discontent following these lines, widespread in Trinidad
since Independence, has lead to a certain exodus of Indians – some
even tried to achieve political refugee status in Canada in 1988 – but
by and large, the outcome will probably be an ever increasing
cultural creolization of the dominated Indian population, which
may or may not influence the social importance of ethnicity.

From a slightly different perspective, we may arrive at a
theoretically more interesting conclusion in this comparative exer-
cise. Although I have stressed the differences, there are fundamen-
tal similarities, culturally and socially, between the blacks of
Trinidad and Mauritius as well as between the Indians of Trinidad
and Mauritius. In many respects, the similarities are more striking
than the differences, and they include important aspects of social
organization and cultural values. Yet, the respective structural po-
sitions of these four categories of people in their national societies
are different from what one might be inclined to expect. It is true
that in both societies, Indians are more successful petty capitalists
than are blacks and it is also true that more blacks and coloureds
than Indians work in the media. But if we look at national politics,
and more importantly, at the monitoring of public discourse through
the legal system, through the mass media, the forging of interna-
tional links and through various state cultural policies, it appears

that the role of Indians in Mauritius is the *opposite* of that in Trinidad, and by the same token, the respective roles of blacks in the two societies are opposite. Indeed, the culturally defensive position of Trinidadian Indians, possessing many of the character-istics of minority groups, is similar to the position of blacks in Mauritius. Recall now the example of the governmental small planter support scheme in Mauritius and the negative reactions of the non-Indian population. A similar government policy in Trinidad in 1989 led to remarkably similar reactions from the Indians: the policy intended to support small businessmen, and Indians claimed that it was tailored to suit the interests of urban blacks. This similarity in collective reactions to governmental policies has something to do with statistical majority-minority relationships but it is also intrinsically connected with the wider international con-texts in which the two societies are set; Trinidad being, geographi-cally and historically, a part of the New World, while Mauritius has always been located *en route* from Europe to India. In Mauritius, blacks are rarely accused of being communalists (ethnicist); this could be interpreted as an indication of their lack of leadership, or their lack of political power, or both. In Trinidad, blacks are often accused of "racism"; it is frequently alleged, by non-blacks, that the PNM took over an important principle of recruitment to high bureaucratic positions from the British, namely that of "providing jobs for the boys". This crucial difference between the two socie-ties shows the importance of distinguishing between what we may call the cultural and political contexts of ethnicity. At the level of social classification and ethnic stereotyping, Trinidad and Mauri-tius are very similar. At the level of ethnic politics, they are very dif-ferent; both in the sense that the Indians have a variable relationship to the state and in the sense that state policies tend to discourage, or at least ignore, cultural plurality in Trinidad. It is not too bold to conclude, therefore, that the potential for serious ethnic conflict involving discontented Indians is presently higher in Trinidad than in Mauritius.

Notes

[1]For sociological and historical descriptions of the societies, see Braithwaite (1975); Brereton (1979, 1981); Oxaal (1968); Ryan (1972) for Trinidad; see Bowman (1990); Arno and Orian (1986); Eriksen (1990a); Allen (1983) for Mauritius.

[2]The notion of the "Indian diaspora" is in itself a controversial one. In defining themselves as diaspora Indians, some Indo-Trinidadian activists have implicitly defined themselves as something different from Trinidadians, namely as Indians, and have been criticized by Trinidadian nationalists for this.

[3]There is some academic discussion regarding whether phenotypical ("racial") differences are likely to lead to a more "profound" kind of ethnicity or more systematic ethnic discrimination than other differences, and whether race should be distinguished analytically from ethnicity. This topic falls outside of the scope of this paper where I do not distinguish between race and ethnicity; see the discussion in Rex and Mason (1986).

[4]In other areas such as East Africa and Britain, large proportions of Indian tradesmen are of Gujerati origins. See Allen (1983) for an analysis of Mauritius during indentureship; see Weller (1968) for an account of indentureship in Trinidad.

[5]In several other countries which received Indian minorities during colonial rule such as Kenya, Tanzania, Malaysia and South Africa do these minorities wield considerable economic power.

[6]This does not mean that culturally self-conscious Indian movements are non-existent in Mauritius but that their proponents have little impact on public discourse. At the main Mauritian academic research institution, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, one will encounter a larger proportion of young women in saris than virtually anywhere else in Mauritius.

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