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Linda S. Stone

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EAST INDIAN ADAPTATIONS ON ST. VINCENT: RICHLAND PARK

Linda S. Stone

Introduction

Following the emancipation of slaves in 1834, over 416,000 East Indians were brought to the British West Indies as indentured laborers to work on the sugar estates (Burns 1954: 663). Their descendants form sizeable populations in portions of the West Indies today. In these areas Indian culture has been greatly modified as a result of migration and the experience of indenture in an alien setting.

In the rural village of Richland Park, the East Indians account for roughly a quarter of the 1,817 inhabitants. The majority of these are Black, with a few "mixed" racial types and even fewer White Vincentians in the area. Most of Richland Park's people engage in agricultural work, as small landholders or day laborers.

There are two notable features of the East Indian adaptation on St. Vincent, as revealed through a study of Richland Park. First, the Indians have lost all major aspects of their Indian culture. This contrasts with the East Indian communities of Trinidad, Guyana and elsewhere, where traditional patterns of social organization and religion remain.¹ Second, the Richland Park Indians have nevertheless maintained themselves as a distinct group. The reasons for this combination of cultural loss and social unity may be illuminated through comparing Richland Park with its counterparts in nearby Trinidad.

The Loss of Tradition: Richland Park at Present

To the East Indians of Richland Park, traditional India is a vague recollection of a grandparent, a legend of their ancestors. The people are fond of Indian foods and spices; but except for cooking, the loss of Indian culture is apparent in many contexts. First, only English is spoken in their community. Some of the older Indians can, at best, recall 20 or so Hindi words, most of which refer to food items. By contrast, Hindi and Urdu are the primary languages found in rural Indian villages of Trinidad, although younger people speak English to their peers (Nichoff 1960: 85). English kinship terminology is also used in Richland Park. This contrasts with the Indian kinship terminology used in an East Indian community ("Amity") studied by Klass (1961: 94-99).

But the most dramatic change in the context of kinship has been in the marriage rules. In Richland Park, a man is permitted to marry his father's sibling's daughter, which is not sanctioned in either northern India or Amity. In the former case, the exogamous unit is a patrilineal clan (*gotra*) (Lewis 1958: 23); in the latter it has become a "circle of kin," covering all the people to whom Ego is related (Klass 1961: 99). Genealogies of Richland Park East Indians indicate that marriages between a man and his patrilineal cousin occurred even at a time when Indian kinship terminology was still in use on St. Vincent

Conversion to Christianity has been universal among the East Indians of St. Vincent, whereas on Trinidad only about 15 percent of the Indians are Christian. The majority, roughly 70 percent, are Hindu and another 15 percent are Muslim (Crowley 1957: 817).

Two other institutions strongly associated with traditional India -- the joint family and the caste system -- do not exist in Richland Park. The joint family marks a household type consisting of a set of parents, their children and the married sons with their nuclear families. The arrangement stresses the importance of the male line in terms of continued participation in the household economy and inheritance of family property. In Richland Park, land and movable property are ideally divided equally among all children, male or female. Furthermore, the East Indians live in nuclear family units, which are for the most part economically independent. In some cases, however, brothers will share in the work and produce of one another's land; or a person will farm the land of absent relatives, saving a part of the income from it for them.

Klass (1961: 44) and Niehoff (1960: 186) note the persistence, with modifications, of the East Indian joint family in Trinidad. Such a system has implications for the position of women. For Amity brides Klass writes:

She is leaving her home and family to take up residence with a strange family in a distant village. She has heard stories about the girls who have been starved, overworked, badly beaten, and even killed by unfeeling mothers-in-law. (1961: 127)

Not only are Richland Park women independent of the direct rule of their mothers-in-law, they also have considerable social and economic power. One reason for this, apart from their privilege of inheriting family resources, may be their equal educational opportunities. For an Amity girl, "the menarche usually marks the end of her schooling. From now until her marriage, she will stay close to the house. . ." (Klass 1961: 120-121). In Richland Park girls attend both primary and secondary school. A girl who passes her exams (General Certificate of Education) is qualified to teach or may even seek employment in town or abroad.

Caste has in no sense persisted among the Indians of Richland Park; the people explicitly deny the existence of caste statuses or caste groups. A few, in speaking of Trinidad, mentioned their disapproval of caste, particularly as it regulates marriage.

But the question of the significance of caste for the East Indians of Trinidad is a controversial one. Schwartz (1967) and Niehoff (1960, 1967) stress that although caste groups and ideas of caste remain, caste is not an important principle by which East Indian society is structured in Trinidad. Morton Klass, while his description of caste is similar to that of Schwartz and Niehoff, emphasizes its retention: "the institution of caste threads its way through all aspects of life in Amity" (1961: 63).

At first glance it might appear that the East Indians of Richland Park have adapted to West Indian life along lines entirely different from that of Trinidad's immigrant population. Yet in both cases, the Indians form separate, identifiable groups within the broader island societies. The difference between them is in the content, not in the structure, of their cultural adaptations.

On Trinidad the East Indians maintain their identity by reasserting symbols derived from mainland India. The manner by which the Indians of Richland Park have remained a distinct group despite their Creolization can be understood in terms of Barth's suggestion that it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1970: 15).

The St. Vincent Indians form a separate group in two obvious ways. First, they tend to reside together, Richland Park being among the largest of their settlements. Within Richland Park there are sections in which no definite correlation exists between race, residence, or wealth. But in one notable case a distinct pattern is observable. To one side of Richland Park's main road, a path leads to an all-Black settlement called "Shanty Town." Here the people live in small frame houses; they have no running water or electricity and are for the most part landless. By contrast, most of the houses lining the main road are larger, often of stone or with at least a stone foundation, and commonly equipped with running water and electricity. Many of the inhabitants here own land and the majority are Indian.

Secondly, the East Indians tend to marry each other. One explanation offered was that Indian-Black marriages are undesirable because they tend to "mash up." I knew of at least four Indian-Black unions in Richland Park. Of these I was told that two "mash up," one was "live good" and only one "live loving." Some people shun these couples. A few East Indians expressed stereotyped attitudes towards Blacks, holding that they were by nature violent, troublesome, or did not know how to save money. Many Indians settled along the main road of Richland Park regard Shanty Town as a place marked by a high incidence of illegitimate births, drunkenness and general dbauchery.

Another area in which the Richland Park Indians reveal themselves as a distinct group is in religion. A large portion of them are Seventh Day Adventists. This does not hold for all of the island's settlements; for example, in a village near Richland Park, most of the Indians are of the Brethren Church. Also, roughly 25 percent of the Seventh Day Adventist members of Richland Park are Black. Nevertheless, the association between East Indian origin and Seventh Day Adventist membership is strong, at least in this community, and involves behaviors and attitudes which set the Indians apart.

For one thing, the Church prescribes a life-style which contrasts with general West Indian patterns. Drinking, smoking, dancing and going to movies are not permitted. Women are not to wear jewelry or make-up. The people are not to eat pork. The Adventist life is to be a cheerful one, but members are not to "go all about" as many non-Adventists do.

Secondly, a few Indian members stressed that the Church and its message had helped the Indian people "clean up their lives" and begin to "live right," referring to conditions among the poorer Blacks as a former undesirable way of life. This suggests to me that their economic advancement has been given a religious expression, all of which serves to distinguish them from the poor Blacks of the area.

The poor Blacks of Shanty Town and elsewhere are commonly Spiritual Baptists or "Jumpers." This last designation refers to the "shaking" and possession states involved in their rituals (see Henney 1967). Several Seventh Day Adventist members believe that the "Jumpers" become possessed by evil spirits, a view which ties in with the social and cultural split between these groups.

Factors in the Loss of Tradition: A Look at the Past

There are at least four major factors generally mentioned in discussions of the modification of East Indian culture in the West Indies:

- 1) In general, the Indians were recruited as individuals, not in kinship units, and from different provinces in India. Not only were they strangers in a new culture but also strangers to one another. And because they did not know of one another in India, attempts to pass for a higher caste could be made (Schwartz 1967: 119).
- 2) Considerably more males than females were recruited.² This had two important repercussions. First, the lower number of female immigrants made it difficult to maintain a strict caste endogamy (Schwartz 1967: 121). Second, these sex ratios, plus the roughly equal economic status of women to men on the estates, encouraged a sexual equality unknown in India (see Davids 1964: 392).
- 3) Rules governing pollution and commensality were extremely difficult to maintain, particularly on the voyages to the West Indies where the Indians' quarters were not separated according to caste position.
- 4) The broader social and economic system in the West Indies did not give recognition or support to the major features of Indian culture.

The question arises as to what additional factors might have encouraged a greater loss of Indian culture among the East Indians of St. Vincent as compared with those on Trinidad. There are no obvious differences in the socio-economic position and history of these people which could readily account for the contrast in adaptations. As with St. Vincent, the Trinidad Indians engage in a variety of occupations but the majority are rural agricultural laborers or small landholders (Niehoff 1960: 37). In both islands Indians are represented in various social classes.³ And in each case the Indians have experienced a rise in their economic position over the last century, which is met with some resentment by Black groups.

Nor is it reasonable to account for their differences in adaptation by suggesting that the immigrants to St. Vincent and Trinidad were largely drawn from different areas within India. Niehoff (1960: 17), using the Indian Emigration reports, writes that 80-90 percent of the Indians in Trinidad were from the provinces of north central India. It is quite likely that immigrants to nearby St. Vincent were also drawn largely from this area. Informants did not know the area within India from which their ancestors came, with the exception of one man who declared for north India.

There are, however, two demographic factors which may be significant:

1) Considerably fewer Indian laborers were brought to St. Vincent than to other islands. This is the explanation most often given by the Richland Park Indians themselves when discussing the rapid loss of Indian ways among their ancestors. Only 2,700 East Indians came to St. Vincent, compared to 134,000 for Trinidad (Burns 1954: 663). Further, a decline in the population is indicated by the 1960 census which lists only 2,444 East Indian people, or roughly 2.5 percent of the total population of St. Vincent, approximately 85,000 (West Indies and Caribbean Yearbook 1966). Census reports suggest that the majority of the indentured laborers either died without leaving children or returned to India.⁴ As late as 1921 there were only 265 East Indians reported; of these only 60 had been born in India (St. Vincent Census 1921 in Kuczynski 1953: 433).⁵ In Trinidad, out of 827,958 people in 1960, about 36.5 percent were East Indian (Trinidad Population Census 1960 in Niehoff 1967: 149). And the number of arriving immigrants exceeded the number of departures and deaths until 1911; after this time the number of East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago continued to increase steadily although the number of Indians born in India decreased (Kuczynski 1953: 338).

On St. Vincent, patterns of gôtra exogamy and caste endogamy would be less easy to maintain with a small population. The smaller the total immigrant population, the more difficult it might be for a man to find a woman outside his clan and within his caste. An occasional lack of available women in another clan could at certain times have encouraged a man to marry a woman of his own clan. Marrying a woman of another racial group was evidently infrequent and would in any case have been a greater violation of religious restrictions. This may help to explain why the rules restricting the marriage of certain kin were disregarded even before the Hindi kinship terms were abandoned.

2) Indians migrated to Trinidad over a longer span of time. They came to Trinidad from 1845 to 1917 -- certain years being closed to emigration due to reports to Parliament and the Government of India of the deplorable conditions suffered by the laborers (Carmichael 1961). Further, Klass (1961: 9) found older people in Amity who themselves came to Trinidad from India. Indians did not arrive in St. Vincent until 1862 and none of the Richland Park Indians alive today were born in India. The oldest Indian man, who is 80, reported that both his grandfather and his father came from India, his father being only two years old at the time. This suggests that the Indian migration to St. Vincent ceased

far earlier than migration to Trinidad and that the Trinidad Indians received a continuing influence from the homeland whereas those on St. Vincent did not.

The importance of this factor in the history of St. Vincent may be seen in relation to the early adoption of Christianity. Niehoff (1960: 149) points out that conversion to Christianity among Trinidad Indians was more frequent in the early days of proselytization, the late 1860's. At that time the Indians were socially and economically at the bottom of society and adopting Christianity was a means of raising one's status. But in the 20th century, and especially after the 1930's, he reports, "As the social and economic position of Indians improved, due for the most part to their steadily improving economic status, they became more active in organizing their traditional religious faiths" (1960: 150). If a large-scale migration of Hindus and Muslims to Trinidad had not continued in the interim, this might not have been the case.

The Seventh Day Adventist message was brought to St. Vincent in the 1930's. The first converts formerly belonged to other Christian sects; and in most cases their parents, the second generation of Indians, had been baptized into these churches. Thus conversion was an early and widespread process among this group.

I suggest that the trend toward conversion to Christianity was encouraged by the absence of new Hindu immigrants. And by the time of their economic advance, very little trace of Hinduism was left among them. Thus when the Indians of Trinidad were experiencing a revival of Indian culture, those in Richland Park were defining themselves through a new Christian doctrine.

As a result of these factors, the retention or revival of traditional Indian patterns was a cultural avenue open to the Trinidad Indians and blocked off to those in St. Vincent. But that the immigrants to both islands were encouraged to remain distinct in their new settings may be related to the social order of the West Indies. As Braithwaite (1953: 49) suggests for Trinidad, "ethnic affiliation and ethnic purity were the values upon which the social stratification system was erected and, therefore, this served as a positive encouragement to non-Negro groups to try to retain their ethnic identity."

The Maintenance of Social Distance

What has been said here of Richland Park may be related to the problem of interpreting the adaptations of immigrant groups in general. This is best seen in relation to a controversy over East Indian experiences in Trinidad.

Klass (1961: xvi) stresses that the Trinidad Indians have effectively "reconstituted" Indian culture. Among rural groups, the modifications "do not necessarily make the East Indian any more of a West Indian" (1960: 859). He also emphasizes that "integration and assimilation, whether cultural or biological, are processes the East Indian tends both to fear and resist" (1960: 860).

Crowley, on the other hand, suggests that "East Indians are using Indian culture and often mythical caste for 'making style' and as a club with which to beat contemptuous Creoles" (1960: 833) and adds that Indian culture "has been so drastically reinterpreted that even the most nationalistically-minded East Indian is culturally a Creole, as he realizes if he has an opportunity to visit India"(1960: 854). Crowley maintains that rather than implying a loss of identity for the East Indian group, acculturation may proceed along with the maintenance of subcultural identity in Trinidadian society:

Trinidadians of each racial or national group learn some of the ways of each other group, a process we term plural acculturation. Each member of each group accepts or rejects these alien ways in varying degrees to suit particular needs and situations, which we may call differential acculturation . . . without losing identity, groups exchange and share members. . . . (1957: 824-25).

An understanding of the manner in which the East Indians of Trinidad maintain themselves as a distinct group may be complicated by their expression of Indian culture: there is some confusion as to whether they are distinct because they have retained Indian patterns or simply because they use Indian symbols as a means by which to assert their identity. On St. Vincent the issue is clear: the Indians have become culturally Creole, while retaining the identification of a social group called "Indian." Their case suggests that the distinctiveness of a group within a larger society need not depend on the retention of traditional cultural patterns.

The St. Vincent Indians also demonstrate that individuals of one group may interact with other groups on a daily basis and participate in a broader social and economic system, while maintaining boundaries between themselves and outsiders. Indian-Black interaction is frequent and without conflict in the streets, shops, churches and schools of Richland Park. Yet this condition need not imply the absence of a social boundary. Murphy (1964: 848) emphasizes that a group's exclusiveness is "best maintained by interaction and not isolation." Relationships with outsiders can enhance the common identity of members within a group. In Richland Park, the Indians privately and disapprovingly discuss the behavior of their Black associates, even fellow church members, in terms of the latter's racial identity.

For an immigrant group to lose its traditional language and culture and at the same time remain socially distinct is not an unusual phenomenon. The American "melting pot," according to Glazer and Moynihan, is an inaccurate metaphor. As many ethnic groups lost their traditional culture in the United States "they were recreated as something new, but still as identifiable groups" (1963: 13).

NOTES

- ¹Other areas, such as St. Lucia and Grenada, share the pattern of St. Vincent in the loss of East Indian culture (Crowley 1960: 851).
- ²For Trinidad, even in the 20th century after the Government of India insisted that a greater number of women be sent, the men formed more than 70 percent of the emigrants (from Emigration Reports for 1905, 1907, and 1908 in Niehoff 1960: 100).
- ³In speaking for Trinidad, Crowley (1957: 817) points out that within each racial or national group "there is a wide spread in class, with at least a few individuals in each group near the top of the social scale." In Richland Park, the Indians, although perceiving wealth and status differences among themselves, generally reserve the term "upper class" to apply only to the small circle of wealthy White people who economically control the island.
- ⁴At the end of their period of indenture the East Indians were allowed to return to India, sign up for another indenture, or find another means of support in the West Indies.
- ⁵The 1931 Census reports 652 Indians, 25 born in India. But as Kuczynski notes, "it is hard to see how persons born in St. Vincent of East Indian parents could have possibly increased within ten years from 205 to 628" (1953: 433).