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Interview with Patricia Mohammed: The Status of Indo-Caribbean Women: From Indenture to the Contemporary Period¹

By Lomarsh Roopnarine²

Abstract

The following interview with Patricia Mohammed discusses the status of Indo-Caribbean women from indenture to the contemporary period. The interview seeks to understand why Indo-Caribbean women have been marginalized in the general historiography of the Caribbean and how the status of Indo-Caribbean has evolved in a predominantly patriarchal Caribbean plantation system. Some central questions in the interview are as follows: Are women better off in the Caribbean than their ancestral home in India. Are they still subjected to patriarchal trends in the home and at the work place, or any other place in the Caribbean? If they are, what sort of strategies Indo-Caribbean women have used to improve their situation? How are Indo-Caribbean perceived by other ethnic groups in the Caribbean. The interview reveals that while an unknown segment of Indo-Caribbean are trapped in a male dominated Caribbean, some they have turned adverse circumstances to their advantage, some have participated in all sectors of society and have made significant social, economic and political contributions to their respective communities. Some have become role models for the young Indo-Caribbean women to emulate.

Keywords: Indo-Caribbean women, status of women, evolution of roles, challenges to patriarchy, contributions to society



Patricia Mohamed

¹ This interview is dedicated to Dr. Roopnarine's six year-old daughter Priya C. Roopnarine who was born on the Caribbean island, St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands.

² Lomarsh Roopnarine, from Guyana, is Professor of Caribbean and Latin American History at Jackson State University. He has published over three dozen articles on Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean. Dr. Roopnarine is the author of *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press (2007); *Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies*. Palgrave Macmillan (2016). He is currently completing a book on Indian Migration and Identity in the Caribbean. University of Mississippi Press.

Patricia Mohammed – Bio 2015

Patricia Mohammed is currently Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies and Campus Chair, School for Graduate Studies and Research at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, and Trinidad. She previously served as the Head of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies and as Campus Chair, School for Graduate Studies and Research at between 2007-2012, and from 2004 as Deputy Dean, (Graduate Studies and Research) Faculty of Social Sciences. From 1994-2002 she was appointed as first head of the Mona Unit, Centre for Gender and Development Studies, UWI. For the Fall semester 2007 she was Visiting Professor at the State University of New York at Albany and has had visiting fellowships at University of Warwick and Queen's University, Belfast.

She is a pioneer in second wave feminism and the development of gender studies at the Tertiary level in the Caribbean and has been involved in feminist activism and scholarship for over two decades and increasingly over the last decade in Cultural Studies. She has been the architect of four national gender policies in the Caribbean³. Her academic publications include *Gender in Caribbean Development (Ed)*, 1988, *Rethinking Caribbean Difference*, Special Issue *Feminist Review*, Routledge Journals, 1998, *Caribbean Women at the Crossroads*, UWI Press, 1999, *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917-1947*, Palgrave UK and The Hague, 2001, and *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, (ed) University of the West Indies Press, Kingston, 2002, and *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*, Macmillan UK, 2009, along with over 100 essays in journals and books, magazines and newspapers. She is founder and Executive Editor of the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, the first open access online peer reviewed journal of the University of the West Indies in publication since 2006.

Her main areas of interest are gender and development studies, history and the study of aesthetics and visual intelligence. She has directed and produced 13 documentary films among *Engendering Change: Caribbean Configurations* (40) minutes, a six part series entitled "A Different Imagination" of which "Coolie Pink and Green" is an award winning film and in 2015 co-directed with Michael Mooleedhar another award winning film *City on a Hill: Laventille* (45 mins).

Introduction

In spite of the fact that Indians have been in the Caribbean for over one hundred and seventy-five years, they have not received adequate attention like other ethnic groups, in particular, Africans. Within the literature of Indians, women have received even lesser attention. The result is that there is poor, if not limited, understanding of the general welfare of Indian women in the Caribbean. The purpose of the interview is to bring the narrative of – exploitation, resistance, reconstruction and development – Indian women in the Caribbean from the margin to the mainstream of cultural historiography. The interview coincides with one hundred years of indentured emancipation (2017) in the Caribbean. The interview was conducted, written and revised for over one year from February 2015 to April 2016 via email and telephone.

³ National Policies for Gender Equality and Equity for Cayman Islands (2002) <http://www.genderequality.gov.ky/sites/default/files/CIG-National-Policy-on-Gender-Equity-and-Equality-2004.pdf>; Commonwealth of Dominica (2006) Draft National Gender Policies for Trinidad and Tobago (2005 and 2012) <https://sta.uwi.edu/igds/documents/DraftGenderDevelopment1.pdf>; and National Gender Policy for the British Virgin Islands (2011), <http://www.bvi.gov.vg/sites/default/files/additionalfiles/National%20Gender%20Policy%20Virgin%20Islands%20Final%20version%20PDF.pdf>.

Between 1838 and 1917, the British, Dutch, French and Danish governments brought over 500,000 Indians from India to the Caribbean region as indentured laborers. Of this population, an estimated 150,000 went back to their homeland while 350,000 decided to settle in the Caribbean. Interestingly, an estimated 30,000 of the returnees went back to the Caribbean for the second time in light of better life opportunities in the Caribbean as well as their exposure to a different way of life from their enclosed villages. Women comprised an estimated 25 percent of the immigrants, which was significantly below the expected 40 percent required by the overall indentured contract labor system. A majority of the immigrants arrived in the Caribbean as single males in the prime age group of between 20 and 30 years old. Fewer families, children and single women came to the Caribbean. They were recruited principally from North and South India, and varied remarkably in caste and religion with the passing of time. The caste composition of immigrants was: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaishya (business and agricultural caste), and Sudras (menial caste), which interestingly matched the caste composition of the area where Indians came from, which meant that more Indians from the low caste than the high caste came to the Caribbean. Similarly, the religious composition of Indians in the Caribbean mirrored the religious composition of India: 80 percent being Hindus and 15 percent being Muslims and others.

Why these immigrants left their homeland for a distant working environment were as diverse as India. They were pushed out of India because of bad socio-economic living conditions and pulled by the belief that they could earn and save from their labor service and return to India and live fairly comfortably. Some were duped and deceived by the wiles of unscrupulous recruiters (mainly Indian males) into signing terms of contracts of which they had little knowledge. Their labor contracts required that they work for five years with an employer in exchange for basic wages, housing and health care. When their contracts expired they were expected to return home with free passage from the colonial government. However, by 1860s, the immigrants were given an option to re-indenture for another five years and receive a bounty of fifty dollars. By the 1870s, they were given another option to exchange their return passage for small parcels of land to settle. By the 1880s, the immigrants were required to contribute to their return passage. These unexpected challenges in the indenture system occurred because the planter class wanted to reduce cost and maximize profit. When the indenture system was finally abolished in 1920 more than two-thirds of the immigrants chose to settle in the Caribbean (Roopnarine 2007).

After indentured emancipation, Indian women began to break out of their insular plantation domains and enter into the private and public spheres as teachers, nurses, civil service employees and leaders. They also balanced the double burden of taking care of families and working outside of the home. Nonetheless, a large percent of Indian women, especially in Guyana, remain on the margins of many Caribbean societies. Their struggles and contributions have been marginalized not only within their own household and community but also in the wider Caribbean. Within this context, I asked the scholar Pat Mohammed to discuss the commonality and complexity of Indian women in the Caribbean.

Lomarsh Roopnarine (hereafter LR): Did indenture create a new liberating space for Indo-Caribbean women, or did they simply exchange one oppressed environment for another. Do you think Indo-Caribbean **women are** better off in the Caribbean than in India?

Patricia Mohammed (hereafter PM): Indian women benefitted from migration in different ways. Many were leaving lives of destitution or were fearful of violent husbands, many worked as unpaid and undervalued helpers in households and perhaps lived under conditions that offered them little

hope of advancement for themselves and their offspring within their lifetimes. They were brought into a system that offered advantages of being wage earners in their own right, and were more valued as a sex because they were in much shorter supply than men. For the entire period of indentureship to the Caribbean, the female population constituted between 25 to at most 40 percent of the male population. The rules pertaining to arranged marriages, provision of dowries by the girl's family and female virginity in India rapidly underwent change as femininity was a more prized commodity and they were able to bargain for greater power in many spheres.

LR: So Indian women were leaving socio-economic conditions and entering better spheres of opportunity in the Caribbean, despite that indentureship was a contract labor system that followed on the heels of slavery?

PM: Agreed, a contract labor system bound both men and women to the rules of indentureship, to serve as menial laborers on a plantation or estate, and at the mercy of those who had direct power over the routines of their daily lives. The rules of the estate applied to all and for Indian women who were unmarried this meant living in accommodation provided by the estate owner for this category of women. In some unfortunate cases the *Sirdar (Indian male leaders on the plantations)* were exploitative but we also have stories of some who were kind and supportive to women. During the indenture period as circumstances began to change once the systems of control like religion and the family were reconstituted, their Indian male compatriots began to re-impose the value systems and traditions that were brought from India.

LR: How so?

PM: One has to see this in historical and cultural context. Patriarchy is not willing to give up privilege, no one is. If Indian women had been able to use their scarcity and the weakening of rules during the earliest and more disruptive periods of indenture, then once men could regain their former control over women and children they of course assumed that this was their rightful due. Nonetheless, Indian women were able to challenge the violence and abuse in gender relations to an extent by selecting their own partners, or moving from one relationship to another. Sometimes this shift was not just based on abuse within the relationship but if one partner could offer more either as a sexual partner or was better off economically than another.

LR: How come these events and actions were not open to nineteenth century Indian women?

PM: This flexibility of choice and of leaving a relationship would not have been possible in India given the low and dependent status of majority of women there at the time, especially poor women from which the class of migrants were drawn. For instance, if your husband had died you became the household drudge and in some cases at risk of being killed by your in-laws. It has become well-known that incidents of bride-burning were about ridding families of such women. The laws of Manu that informed all Indian women and the organization of religion along with a tightly structured caste system that had not undergone major changes had kept the position of women in India fairly intact. At the same time, we cannot assume that all women were silent and complicit partners and history has rendered up individuals in India who were constantly pushing the boundaries of what was allowed femininity. This and only this can explain the rise of a strong feminist voice and agenda of Indian women from India by the 20th century.

LR: I agree that Indian women were punished for the slightest infraction and suffered from the Laws of Manu (female fundamental duty was to obey and serve their father first, their husbands second and the eldest son third if the father and husband were not around), Sati (the practice of

widows' suicide and isolation from all nonfamily males), and domestication not only from their spouses and in-laws but also by the entire village. But what role did caste – the enclosed social structure – play in providing more “freedoms” for Indian women during indenture in the Caribbean?

PM: The caste system was at the core of Indian social structure that revolved around ascription at birth, endogamy, hierarchy, work specialization, religion restrictions and social interaction, among other factors. This social system did not survive the Kala Pani (sea voyage from India to the Caribbean) in the same way that it was practiced in India because of the western concept of work that functioned on production, skills and ingenuity of the individual rather than on caste principles that limited occupational choice. Specifically, the breakdown of caste endogamy in the new society offered women greater opportunities to change their fortunes as well, albeit to be replaced with another set of hierarchies in the new society based on class, ethnicity and color, but this also gave women more options for marriage.

LR: Would you say that women entered into a new caste/class system in the Caribbean?

PM: Migration offered Indians the possibility of challenging the fixed caste system from which they were drawn although there emerged another caste hierarchy mediated by a parallel class system that the migrants would be fitted into in the new society. Women perhaps had greater flexibility with the caste system as, being in short supply, caste endogamy could no longer be binding. At the same time women were also vulnerable as a result of their sex. We are not sure how many women were at risk of unwanted attentions on plantations from Sirdar but this would have been one of the new threats they faced in the Caribbean, although I am sure there was no shortage of this in India itself. The difference in the new society was that the family and village network that provided protection was not available in the earliest days of indenture and both men and women were more vulnerable as migrants always are. But as soon as communities and institutions such as marriage and religion were re-organized, some of the attitudes and practices towards women were quickly reintroduced by the pundits and panchayats (the latter a Council of Five men) so that freedoms won were again lost, although not entirely. The gender system had already undergone a major change. In doing so caste boundaries became more blurred. With the reclaiming of names and traditions, invented or otherwise, a new caste system replaced the old, although still less constraining. For example, the idea of the unscheduled or *chamar* (low) caste did not have the compelling notion of pollution in Trinidad that would have been observed in India. What emerged in Trinidad was a parallel caste and class system. For example, surnames began to signify caste and in general the *varna* structure was recreated. At the same time, class mobility and education could trump caste except for ritual occasions when caste positions demanded certain observances. Women belonged to the caste of their men and families. I can still recall evidence of the different treatment and expectations of families who were deemed to be “higher caste” in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, if a Kshatriya male married into a Brahmin family, he was considered the one marrying upwards even where he was the wealthier or came from a more advanced professional status than the bride.

LR: It appears that Indian women had an elastic relationship with freedom; that is, they made some inroads into the male dominated world in terms of asserting themselves but they had to deal with re/emerging forms of male dominance such as the Panchayats. In spite of these obstacles, Indian women still migrated to the Caribbean. What inspired them to come to the Caribbean?

PM: All migrants, move because the options available appear to be more attractive. Some were coerced or misled about the expectations. It is more likely true that many came on their own volition. The numbers of returnees and stories of those who begged to be returned to the Caribbean also indicate that it was difficult for those who returned to readjust to India, having left behind the rules that guided social expectations in this society. The migrants then comprised a proportion who were fooled or allowed themselves to be fooled, some who had no choice but to change their karma by moving, others who were adventurous and wanted to see what a new life would offer and did not have the kind of ties that kept them bound to India and those who fled atrocious conditions of one kind or another. We have no real idea what these categories were in percentages but we might hazard a guess that since the majority of migrants were younger men and men looking for work to support families, that the large proportion of migrants moved in order to find work and send remunerations back to India. The remunerations were sent back via ship mail to Post Offices in India where relatives were informed to receive them. Returnees from the Caribbean also took back remunerations or savings with them, which they had to declare to the immigration officers. But some returnees concealed their remunerations because they distrusted the entire indenture system, including the immigration process and procedure. Women were hardly in this category as they were not supposed to be leaving at all and if they did run away, then it is unlikely that they would be sending back money to those they ran from. In retrospect and with some distance from this period of history now, 170 years after indenture, I am beginning to question why our examination of migration from India should be premised by an implicit set of assumptions about the sending and receiving countries. Unless they are fleeing from religious or political persecution, do migrants consider freedoms from oppression and discrimination as the key factor in their decisions? Left to their own devices, I think the majority of people in any society would not choose to migrate as they leave the cultural familiarity of homes and environments that can never be replicated in another society. Such systems of forced or indentured labour migration have generally drawn on populations whose living and earning conditions ensure that there is a critical mass of persons willing to migrate.

LR: I gather then that people, like Indian women, migrate because of compelling reasons, some beyond their control.

PM: The Indian women and men who left had one primary goal, to be able to feed, house and clothe themselves better because the economic conditions they left were difficult. If we consider the fortunes of India by decade of the 40s in the build up to its independence from the Crown and the utter violence that happened between Hindus and Muslims, it would seem to me that this was one of the most important things that we can say those who migrated did not have to undergo in the Caribbean, the violent separation between religious groups whose lifestyle and customs had been more alike than different and who were forced to hate each other. This never happened in the Caribbean even when religion became re-organized. Hindus and Muslims, Hinduism and Islam were not set in opposition on this new terrain and have continued to survive and co-exist in this supportive environment.

LR: From the dialogue, it appears that women were freer in the Caribbean than in India. Do you agree?

PM: Am returning to this issue again, differently. We in the Caribbean were and are guilty of framing the question of more or less freedoms in a way that creates a false dichotomy and is unfair to India itself, not because of sentimentalism, but because our reasons for doing so are influenced

by and is an extension of the colonial script that justified colonialism. The colonials argued that they were on a civilizing mission and freeing peoples from pagan religions that relied on caste and gender practices that were in their view harmful to populations who could not look after themselves. The very effeminizing of the Indian male population is testimony to how such ideas of weak and strong were used to control how we think about nations who were denuded of their populations, like children being wrested away from the parental home because their parents were not fit to support them. I think the premise of more freedom and possibilities in Trinidad or the Caribbean is a limited way to place this discussion of examining this particular migration stream, although it may apply to contemporary migrations where people flee political persecution. What we do if we buy into the greater or lesser freedom argument is to continue the binary discourses of developed against under-developed. This not only diminishes aspects of culture and continuity that are important to people's lives, whether they migrate or not but forgets that in the act of migration, culture is itself changed and in some cases rejuvenated. We have tended to focus on culture as some fossilized ritual that must retain authenticity, when culture by definition is a growing, living and constantly expanding thing.

LR: Your views here are excellently articulated and they might very well move the debate on the status of indenture women into new modes and models of thought, one away from the binary opposite of whether or not women during indenture were freer in the Caribbean than in India. I would like to move forward and discuss the status of Indian women in early post-indenture from 1920 to 1940. As you know, Indians were breaking out of their insular plantation environment and staking claims to other opportunities like in civil service, education, nursing, etc. What were some of challenges women faced in transition?

PM: The different choices made available during the indenture period were somewhat retracted during in the aftermath of indenture with a notional idea if not a lived reality of controlling both the labor and movement of women in order to reconstitute the Indian family. One of the imperatives behind this reconstitution came from the British colonial conception of family as nuclear rather than the Indian construct of the extended family as Morton Klass observed in his anthropological classic *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study of Cultural Persistence* in the 1960s. Ironically, despite the popular notion that it was men who created this shift to rebuilding homes and villages and community, women were central if not pivotal at this phase and faced a different kind of challenge, another kind of adjustment

LR: What were these challenges that women faced?

PM: The estate offered a safety net for men, the known environment where housing, work and life were regulated. Women were the ones who saved extensively. Sometimes without the knowledge or approval of their husbands they purchased land and houses outside of the estates from savings, following the example of African women, they joined *Susu* and *boxhand* or collective informal money saving arrangements and forced men to move to freehold lands and leases of private property away from the estate. In order to do this, they had to earn extra wages through selling market garden products, milk and milk products and engage in other occupations that might increase sources of revenue. This occupational shift is recorded in numerous postcards from circa 1920s that show women as market or milk sellers.

LR: Actually, my research on women's work after indenture, especially after 1920, reveals that they worked in the wet rice fields in British Guiana, and in some cases, in the advanced stage of

pregnancy. They were also seen with baskets steadied on their heads and cans slung around their shoulders selling vegetables and milk from door to door in Port of Spain, Georgetown, Paramaribo, and Kingston, all capital cities in the Caribbean. But were women involved in education?

PM: By the 1920s there would have also emerged a group of Indians who began to educate their daughters. Education of sons was understood and accepted but for daughters, this needed some convincing of both parents, not only men. The ex-indentured thought that education of girls was a wasted investment as the girls would be married and there was no obvious value to the parents. They were not among the populations who were engaged in the debates as in India about the effects of early child marriage and the impact of young unschooled mothers in bringing up a new generation. The primary changes in regard to the education of girls were largely brought about at first through the efforts of the Presbyterian ministries whose goals were to conversion and the training of young women to be wives to the male Indian lay preachers and educated young men. The Naparima Girls High School was opened in 1911 by the Presbyterians to allow Indian girls a secondary education. Schooling had the obvious effect of preparing girls for other occupations. By 1945, in the commemorative booklet of Indian presence in Trinidad for one century, although in limited numbers, Indian women were to be found as teachers, opticians, dancers, nurses and by this time at least one female doctor (Mohammed 2012).

LR: How were these achievements perceived by their own community as well as other communities?

PM: Within the community and to the other ethnic groups, Indian women were perceived primarily as homemakers and domesticated. The colonized views of the Indian females who migrated as possessing loose morals persisted in to the new century. This was a carryover of the colonial conception of female migrants as prostitutes. The anti-Nautch movement of the British in India had tainted all Indian women as potential devadasis or temple dancers who supported their lifestyle through liaisons with rich men from the village or community, and worse yet who had corrupted and infected men in the British army. At the same time the oppositional stereotype emerged, the religiously suffused elderly matriarch, the mother-in-law figure who controlled other women both in the family and in the village. Migration and disruption had meant that reputations needed to be redeemed as a collective whole for Indian femininity and some women were the overseers of this tradition of womanhood. An interview I carried out with Mrs. Drobotia Naipaul (mother of V.S. Naipaul) in 1988 in fact confirmed this strong sense of morality that was imposed on women who felt that they must disassociate themselves from others who lowered this morality ladder, either due to their caste status or sexual reputation. To the other ethnic groups, Indian women were viewed as controlled, submissive, passive and subservient to their families and men folk. My PhD thesis challenged this superficial understanding of Indian femininity, one that I might add it was convenient to hold in place, as this diminishment would ensure that Indian women remained lower in the hierarchy of accomplishments and could not be viewed as competitors for jobs or positions in the occupational marketplace. I argued that within the confines of a reconstituted Indian community, possibilities for mobility or economic independence gained as a result of indentureship, as discussed above, were not relinquished and while women colluded with some aspects of culture to rebuild community, at the same time they negotiated within families and villages, and inside the cultural construct of Indianness in ways that were not obvious to those outside of the culture.

LR: What are some newly emerging trends and thoughts of Indo-Caribbean women?

PM: Even as we speak, there are new groups of Indians entering, under different migration schemes, changing the landscape of what is constituted as Indo-Caribbean. Hajima Degia, a scholar at Cave Hill Barbados, has for instance written about the new migration of Gujarat populations into this society, while in Trinidad, groups of commercial and professional Indians are settling into the society. So the first thing is that we cannot constitute Indians as a homogeneous group who travelled on the same ships around the same time. The second trend might be the real class differences, between and among the very wealthy and entrepreneurial class. The professional classes who comprise part of the expanded middle class especially in Trinidad and those who still survive barely above the poverty line. These exhibit vast differences in values, cuisine choices, vacation destinations and so on.

Since the first migrations of the 19th century Indians have not remained as a homogeneous group in the society, and like all other migrant groups, some have moved into different occupations, especially the professions of teaching, medicine and the law and many have become entrepreneurs of small, medium and large businesses. In addition, many converted to Christianity which they combine with aspects of Indian lifestyles and patterns of consumption, as for instance in cuisine or destination sites for travel.

The third trend might be the antagonism again between two ideological groups within the Indian communities, those who feel that they have remained and should remain “authentic” to received values and religious traditions from India that have not been tainted by western mores and those who view their birth and presence in a multicultural western society as allowing them to combine the best of both worlds, the home as a safe culturally defined Indo-Caribbean space, the world as the mixture of many cultures that they contend with on an everyday basis.

LR: Are these reinstatements of another binary?

PM: These are not reinstatements of another binary. That binary exists as much as the east and west exist as a binary in the construction of the global geopolitics, the west versus the rest. The Caribbean is still perceived as a demographically “black” area in which brown folk, as Vijay Prashad notes in *The Karma of Brown Folk* that Indians and Asians in the United States represent model minorities. While virtual technologies and social networking might challenge these publically, there is a private and domestic life of ritual culture and socialization that persists precisely because Indians and Indianness, both men and women, are still understood as “minorities” in the wider region. For instance, the society does not perceive Indian women as having children out of wedlock, as young Indian men as being drug users, underachievers in education or part of criminal gangs, nor is that there is poverty among the Indo-Trinidadian population, although none of this true. I don’t think these are easily resolvable differences or ideologies to change between cultural groups especially when media images and government policies are constructed on the basis of popular notions of social structure and family organization. But it is the tension between the two that is important for further cultural adaptation. This tension will continue even with younger populations while the mythologies of what is constituted as authentic and received from the ancients feed continuity and tradition.

LR: What can you say about the future of Indo-Caribbean women?

PM: In 1988 I concluded the essay “The Creolization of Indian Women in Trinidad” a much reprinted and quoted one, with the following statement:

“One can only be optimistic about change which creates possibilities for developing the potential of a group or sex. I think that the qualities traditionally ascribed to Indian women are being turned in the direction of becoming virtues. Indian women have not become embittered by their history, thus subservience becomes discipline, submissiveness becomes passion, and sacrifice becomes discipline. Wedded with intelligence, these virtues have only served to propel those Indian women who are prepared to challenge the imposed limits fast forward into a rewarding future.”

In my view, the future is already here. While there will always be differences and gaps between Indian women based on religious belief systems, access to resources and varied intellectual capacities, Indian women have emerged at the forefront of many professions including law and business and increasingly in medicine in Trinidad society and well respected for this. Conceptions of female sexuality and beauty for all ethnic groups have undergone change. The future of how women’s availability and potential as lovers or marriage partners might be perceived is more unpredictable as the society continues to challenge the hetero-normative assumptions on which social reproduction is built. The transient notions of popularity, power and fame reaped through social media networking and a multiplicity of rampant communication devices makes it difficult to be prognostic about how younger women see themselves and what new values have emerged. There is need for caution in the way in which all women, not only Indian women, manage the perceptions of femininity and guard the still uneasy terrain of their gender and sexual relations in the future.

LR: To what extent were Indian women influenced by the narrative of colonialism in their own choices? Can we necessarily say that if they were influenced by this discourse that they were duped by it? Perhaps they gave it meaning through their own philosophical agency?

PM: Populations who were affected by immigration schemes and policies up until the early twentieth century cannot be viewed with the same lens as those who migrations began in the mid to later twentieth century to the present. Technologies of communication and levels of human consciousness about worker’s rights, competing ideologies of political regimes, and ideas of nationhood developed in the twentieth century. All of these engendered new awareness and sensibilities among peoples who travelled and those who stayed at home, among the governments of sending and receiving countries. The Indian women who migrated from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, the foremothers of those who are now fourth, fifth and sixth generation populations, travelled with optimism that they were doing this for something better. Confronted with reality, as with most migrants, they made use of their talents whatever these were. To say they had philosophical agency is to both state the obvious and to overwrite the possibilities of any time – people are bound by conventions and traditions even when they do not agree with these and they generally conform to fit it. That the women who travelled would be amongst those who were already predisposed to grasp new options we can only surmise, although some of the historical references to the few women who emerged through the pens of various missionaries, newspaper and government official reports demonstrates that there were forthright women. I do not see the value of a discourse that positions women situation in India against those in Trinidad being fruitful as a 21st century narrative of migrations simply because it continues to keep the idea of nations as either more or less advanced, more or less developed as a fixed one. Social organization of neighborhoods, family and community involvement, rich cultural

expressions in which people participate are valuable to human beings along with sufficient wages to buy food and clothe themselves and their families. When people migrate, they do so largely and primarily for pragmatic reasons (unless they are fleeing repressive situations) and they are constantly trading off one set of resources over the next. This was the case of Indian women who migrated many years ago as it continues to be the situation of migrants today.

Conclusion

The interview revolved around four fundamental questions. First, why have Indian women been marginalized in the historiography of the Caribbean? Second, were they better off in the Caribbean than in India? Third, how have they really evolved since they arrived in the Caribbean? Fourth, are they trapped in patriarchal trends? If they are, what are they doing about it?

One fundamental reason why the literature of Indian women has been limited is that researchers have used archival records to write history, narrative, and memory that reflect their own interpretation of events and evidence, and not to purvey accuracy. These individuals were the supporters of the colonizers or individuals who have used the records of the colonizers to write the history of the colonized. Specifically, this approach has reflected imperial domination and exploitation and a poor representation of the colonized and has resulted in a negative history of the colonized with isolated glimpses of positivity. The weakness of this approach is that the archival records were written by individuals from their own perspectives, reflecting anecdotal rather than analytical evidence.

Since the early 1970s, discourse on Indian indenture has shifted from Eurocentric to Indo-centric. Indian writers, predominantly male, wished a radical, not a gradual, improvement on the understanding of Indians from the perspectives of not only the indentured servants but also the descendants of indentured servants. This is essentially a revisionist approach from a position of the subaltern. What has emerged from this approach is a gospel of “us versus them” in the understanding of Indians rather than a finding of useful knowledge to analyze and reconstruct the narrative and memory of indenture and beyond. This approach is also noticeable in the study of Indian women whereby Indian women write on female issues and men write on male issues with little crossing over.

Although Indo-Caribbean women have evolved from the position of peasants to be productive citizens in almost everyone domain of Caribbean life, this evolution has not been uniform nor has it been recognized and treated equally by Indians themselves and the wider Caribbean society. Sure enough, Indo-Caribbean women have achieved enormous success in Trinidad compared to Guyana and Suriname mainly because of better economic opportunities in the former country. Indian women in Trinidad can be seen in politics, education, law and medicine but the same achievements cannot be documented about Indian women in Guyana and Suriname. In these countries, Indian women have made some strides from their plantation base but in combating daily financial and social difficulties they have turned to working harder in and out of their homes, which has placed additional pressure on themselves and their families.

Generally speaking, Indo-Caribbean women have made significant breakthroughs in a predominantly male-oriented society. This is possible because Indian families have started to place more emphasis and importance on developing female children coupled with access to education and opportunity to previously male-dominated occupations such as in the politics, law, medicine and even in the disciplined forces. Unfortunately, opportunities for development have also led to class divisions within the Indian population. Like the wider Caribbean, there is a class difference

between rural and urban, educated and uneducated, married and unmarried, career and family-oriented among the Indian population. An estimated half of the female Indian population is located on the lower end of this class division, (Roopnarine forthcoming) although this is gradually changing due to migration, transnationalism and globalization. Through these processes, as Professor Mohammed explains, the Indo-Caribbean woman is not bogged down in the home, is not subservient to patriarchal expectations of plying the mother role and is not forced to follow conservative family values and expectations. Rather, Indo-Caribbean women have taken advantage of opportunities available to them and have turned adverse circumstances to their benefit even though they have not yet been sufficiently recognized and rewarded in and out their homes for their astute strengths and resourcefulness.

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