Chapter 6

East Indian/West Indian: Racial Stereotype, Hosay, and the Politics of National Space

The African and the Asiatic will not mix.
—James Anthony Froude, 
The English in the West Indies

Why is Indo-Caribbean belonging in the Caribbean even an issue today? The answer lies in the particular circumstances of Indian arrival in the Caribbean. After the abolition of slavery in Trinidad in 1834, Indian and subsequently Chinese indentured labor was recruited from 1845 to 1917 to replace slave labor so as to keep the plantations functional. But indentured labor differed from slave labor in two crucial regards. First, indentured laborers were never considered property; their humanity was never in question. Second, at least in theory, their servitude was limited and contractual; the contract of indentureship lasted five to seven years, after which the colonial government was to pay for the laborers’ return passage to India. However, the working and living conditions of indentured labor were often comparable to those of slaves. Moreover, several features of the indentured contract system combined to make the Indians captive labor: the legal obligation to work, the promotion of indebtedness through unmeetable workloads, and the requirement that they fulfill the purposes of the employer during the period of indentureship in order to secure their freedom. In fact, less than a quarter of the 144,000 Indian indentured laborers returned “home.” Yet in their original contract of transience lie the seeds of several subsequent colonial and postcolonial discourses about Indians, their “place” and “placelessness,” their relationship to India, their relationship to the Trinidadian nation, and whether they were natives or usurpers.

S. Puri, The Caribbean Postcolonial
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Moreover, the historical specificities of indentured servitude have shaped the forms of Indo-Caribbean resistance, forms which if better understood could undo the mistaken perception of an Indo-Caribbean quiescence that contrasted with Afro-Caribbean militant opposition to colonialism. In short, when Indians first made the passage across the *kala pani* in 1845, they were inserted into a colonial society that was already racially stratified and polarized; that the racialization of difference was extended to them was thus hardly surprising.

But it is one of the great ironies of decolonization in Trinidad that racial tensions have taken the form of lateral hostility between blacks and Indians (the two largest ethnic groups, with their own different but overlapping histories of exploitation), rather than vertical hostility directed by blacks and Indians together against the French Creole elite, the white ex-plantocracy, or transnational capital. Popular and party discourses alike have understated the ways in which domestic and transnational neocolonial forces continue to structure black/Indian relations. Both colonial “divide and rule” policies and the lowering of sugar wages that resulted from the increased supply of labor exacerbated race relations between these two poorest segments of Trinidadian society. Moreover, the colonial government’s brief policy of granting Indians land and credit in place of a return passage to India led to a lasting perception of Indians as an affluent group. For all these reasons, despite the presence of a long oppositional tradition that has attempted to unite Africans and Indians along class lines, most political discourses have consistently posed African and Indian economic advancement in mutually exclusive terms. The logic of this competition has demanded the discursive production of clearly distinguishable races, and with it, a vocabulary of “us” and “them.” In terms of political parties, this logic has led to the domination through most of Trinidad’s postcolonial history of competing “black” and “Indian” political parties.

**Colonial Discourse: Enforcing the Stereotype**

A striking feature of this antagonism between a racialized “us” and “them” is that it draws heavily upon the terms of colonial racial discourse, which provides a resonant vocabulary through which post-colonial Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians structure and express their relational antagonisms today. In 1888, the British colonialist James Anthony Froude declared: “The negro does not regard the coolie as a competitor and interloper who has come to lower his wages. The coolie comes to work. The negro does not want to work, and both are satisfied” (67). Today, we continue to hear the series of