A Conference jointly hosted by 
The Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha of Trinidad and Tobago 
and 
The History Department of The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

RECONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY: 
HINDU ORGANIZATION IN TRINIDAD 
DURING THEIR FIRST CENTURY

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The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine
25-27 October 2002
ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to trace the gradual efforts made by Hindus as they sought to negotiate their way through a maze of uncertainties during the period 1845 to 1945. This was a long journey for the bonded labourers who arrived here in batches over a period of some seventy-two years. Thus the period of adaptation was staggered, with the earlier groups assisting those who came afterwards. Most of those who came were from the rural areas of the Bihari heartland and were agriculturalists without much formal education. To assist themselves in adjusting to the new society they attempted to create a slice of India here in the Caribbean, reconstructing the physical as well as the cultural landscape in places where they settled. In this way, they built temples, created branches of religious organisations in India, refashioned religious festivals, built Hindu schools, formed welfare organisations and then moved to organize sabhas to cater for the needs of the larger community.

The first such organisation was the Hindu Sanatan Dharam Association founded in 1880 and the second the Sanatan Dharam Board of Control, incorporated in 1932. In 1940 the Trinidad Hindu Maha Sabha was started under the leadership of Ranjit Kumar, an Indian-born engineer who had settled here. These various groups were finally brought into an umbrella organisation the Sanatan Dharam Maha Sabha under the leadership of Bhadase Sagan Maraj in 1952. The paper argues that the long period of organization at many levels created a situation which needed centralized, strong leadership. This was provided by Maraj who as “Badesh Sagan Maharaj” had actively participated in the Hindu Maha Sabha during the Forties of the last century.
RECONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY: HINDU ORGANIZATION IN TRINIDAD DURING THEIR FIRST CENTURY

The Hindu is naturally religious. It is impossible for him to be without religion. He travels, in his own country, thousands of miles to obtain salvation. He, to obtain freedom from his sins, undergoes great austerities.

_The Venerable Archdeacon Josa “The Hindus in the West Indies”. Timehri, Vol. II. Third Series. 1912._

Beginning with the Fath Al Razak which docked off Port of Spain in May 1845 and ending with the S.S. Ganges which brought the last load of Indians in April 1917, approximately 144,000 girmityas (agreement signers) came to Trinidad and Tobago. This diaspora was of course, part of a larger exodus of some 1.3 million Indians who were transported as “bound coolies” to British, French and Dutch colonies worldwide. Perhaps the most striking feature of this influx of South Asians was their enormous diversity. There were Aryans from the North, Dravidians from the South, tribals from Chota Nagpur in Bihar, Muslims of Bengali, Afghani and Middle Eastern ancestry, Nepalese and hill-people from the Indo-Chinese borderlands. There were high caste persons now disinherited for political reasons; many had taken part in the Great Revolt of 1857 and were now fleeing British vengeance. There were middle and lower castes whose agricultural or handicraft cultures had been seriously damaged by the influx of British machinery or fabrics, there were the victims of drought and famine, widowed women seeking escape from a life of drudgery and many young men seeking adventure or the promise of prosperity which the _arkatiyas_ (recruiters) promised as they accosted these youths in the crowded bazaars of Fyzabad or Patna or Murshidabad.

This conglomeration of peoples, coming from so many backgrounds brought with them fragments from all of these traditions to their new Caribbean homelands and during their first century sought to carve out their own space in a place where other immigrant peoples (Spanish, French, English and African) had already claimed most of the turf. This challenge of reconstructing their identities,
based on the ancestral tradition, whilst at the same time negotiating their way through bonded labour was as traumatic as had been the three-month journey from India to the Caribbean. Nevertheless at the end of their first century here, new and lasting adaptations had been made, merging many of the Indian traditions and societies into reformed sampradayas which were religious communities basing their theology on that of an ancestral guru. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of these groups derived their inspiration from the major geographical area of recruitment in India namely the Bhojpuri cultural area centering on the modern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh but including areas as far north west as the Punjab and as far north-east as Bengal. It was from these areas of North India that the predominant religious influences came; a small proportion of Caribbean labourers were picked up in Madras and the deep South (about 10%). These too, brought their South Indian traditions centering on Kali Mai the mother goddess which also contested for a place in the New World. But it was the Northern Hindu tradition which predominated in the Caribbean. The strength of that tradition came from the ancientness of its literary and theological heritage. It was in the Indo-Gangetic plain that the Vedas were first written. It was in this very region of greatest labour outflow that one of the world’s earliest universities – Nalanda University – was founded by Gautama Buddha in the state of Bihar. By the second century AD this university had become a leading center of learning attracting scholars from China, Japan and Central Asia. When the Chinese Scholar Huien Tang visited in AD 635 he reported that there were about 3000 students. Nalanda flourished up to the 12th century as a center for the study of medicine, logic, philosophy and alchemy. Caribbean Hindus came from a heartland which had produced the Jaina theologian Mahavir who in the 5th century AD had established himself and his sampradaya at Vaisali, capital of Videha (modern Bihar). Kasi, the most sacred site of Hinduism from the ancient period, lies next to Varanasi (Banaras) in modern Uttar Pradesh and the story of Tulsidas’ Ramayana centers on Ayodhya, ancient capital of the state of Oudh (modern Lucknow) once ruled by the Solar Kings including Ram.
It was in this focal founding center of Hinduism that the concept of Sanatan Dharma was devised. Loosely translated the term means “eternal law”. It is derived from Sanatva which signifies ancientness and the sacredness with which that antiquity has endowed the values and traditions of the faith from its early beginnings.¹ That basic, eternal law has, in the Hindu view, divine sanction and cannot be changed. In India and in the Indian Diaspora, Sanatan Dharma has been the Orthodoxy of the vast majority of Hindus. But Sanatan Dharma has not been a rigid orthodoxy. There were periods when it allowed a measure of reform to cope with new situations which had developed over time. Indeed, it was in the allowance of such reform that the dynamism of the faith was ensured. One such reform movement which has a direct bearing on later (Caribbean) Hinduism was that initiated by Ramanuja (?1017—1137?) in South India. This Brahmin mystic of the Vaishnava sect sought to make Sanatan Dharma more acceptable by advocating social equality of men and women in what was a highly patriarchal society; he accepted Sudras and outcastes in his order and proclaimed that the sacred texts of the faith should be made available to all and not to the upper castes only. Ramanuja stressed that the means of moksha (salvation) lay not in intellectual discourse but in faith and love of God (Bhakti).² One chela who seriously took up the reforming agenda of Ramanuja was Ramananda (?1360-1470?) a native of Allahabad who was fifth in succession to Ramanuja. After some years, he became influential enough in his own right to found his own sect: the Ramanandis. Concentrating his efforts between Banaras and Agra (heavy recruiting areas for Caribbean labour) he spread his message in vernacular Hindi so that all could understand. He emphasized the importance of Bhakti, that is, devotion to a personal God who was omniscient and omnipresent but could be realized through love and devotion. Ramanandi’s God was Rama through whom moksha could be obtained. He impressed in his yagnas the equality of all people in God’s sight, preached against caste and admitted all castes to his sampradaya.³
The influence of Ramanand has persisted from the 15th century to the present time in many ways. He was one of the major inspirations to the divinely inspired bhajans of Mirabai (?1450-1547?) the former Rajput princess who abandoned palatial life to wander through the forests of Brindaban singing songs of adoration to Krishna becoming a legend even during her own lifetime. Sant Tulsidas who died in 1623 drew deeply from the lore of Ramanand as he wrote his epic the Ramayana which became the major spiritual companion to hundreds of thousands of diasporic Hindus. Equally important and from a Caribbean perspective, was the fact that Ramanand chose 12 disciples to promote his version of a reformed Sanatan Dharma. One of these was Sant Kabir (1440-1518) a jilaha (weaver) who was born in Banaras and died near Gorakhpur, again, a source of considerable migration to the Caribbean. Because of the importance of the Kabir Panth to Caribbean Hinduism, a very brief summation of this sect will be attempted.

Kabir’s personal situation impelled him to take Ramanand’s reformism to the point of unorthodoxy. Born of a Hindu mother but adopted from infancy by Muslim parents, he took on the mission of bringing Hindu and Muslim together at a time when the leaders of these faiths were in constant conflict:

Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram; He is my Guru, He is my Pir.4

He combined his anti-communal message with his anti-caste vehemence. In the beginning, he sang, there was no Turk nor Hindu, no race and no caste:

Neither the Brahmin is high caste, nor is the Shudra low. Why hate one another. Hatred is folly.

Kabir preached fearlessly against alcoholism and meat-eating, against ostentatiousness and the honouring of parents only after they were dead. His bhajans and poems (kavitas) were later
collected as the Kabir Bijak which became the major text of the Kabir Panth. The Sikhs later added some of Kabir’s couplets (dohas) and sayings to their sacred text the Adi Granth. Kabir took up the concept of Bhakti and refined it into an ecstasy. For him bhakti was the true searching for God in the highest form:

The Bhakta performs this bhakti, not for the sake of gaining heaven or for any reward but for the love of God...Kabir, Nanak, Tulsi Das, Sur Das all preached this bhakti: there is no thought of reward; trust in God, love of God with no thought of anyone or anything besides. This is all.5

As the Guru of the Kabir Panth put it himself “Kabir says, the Lord is the ocean of bliss: who gains Rama, he finds happiness”.6 The Indians who came to the Caribbean were predominantly rural folk neither with learning nor scholarly experience, hence this devotional school of Hinduism became the most pronounced aspect of their religion in this new world. The general belief system of the majority of the religious groups which came here was Sanatanist; the main form of expression was bhaktic, avoiding the intellectual discourse which so heavily characterizes Vedantic philosophy.

How did these North Indian Sanatanist influences manifest themselves on this side of the water? The earliest record of Hindu groups resuscitating themselves in Trinidad comes from a report by Dr. D. Comins, Surgeon-Major of the British army who had seen extensive service in the East and was, up to the time of his visit to Trinidad in 1891, Protector of Immigrants at Calcutta. His Note on Emigration from India to Trinidad published in Calcutta in 1893 is a useful compendium of information on the settlement of the Indians since they came here in 1845. During that last decade of the 19th century, the Hindu sector comprised 86% of the (non-Christian) Indian population with about 14% being Muslim; the rest being Buddhists, Christians and others. These percentages were to remain fairly constant until the end of indentureship in 1921. At the time of Comins visit, the East Indian population stood at 70,218 or 35.10% of the total population. Of this number there were
about 6,000 Christian Indians and the rest Hindu or Muslim. The report observed that there were four major panths (Hindu societies) operating in the colony. All of these were strong in that very heartland – the Bhojpuri area – from whence the girmityas came. The Ramanand panth was introduced in the 19th century by Kundoudass, a Brahmin who had come from India; he had died just a few years before 1891 and was succeeded by Ghooradass, another Brahmin who lived in St. James. The group had established branches in several Indian settlements and Ramanandis distinguished themselves by wearing a bhaik, that is, a round piece of Tulsi wood suspended around the neck by a string which passed through the top of the emblem. The Kabir panthis also wore a bhaik. Perhaps the most outstanding symbol of Ramanandi progress was the construction of the Moose Bhagat Kutia in Tableland in 1916. The absorption of the Ramanandis into the larger, more dominant Maha Sabha will be discussed shortly.

The Kabir Panth was also very present when Comins visited in 1891. This sect was introduced in 1880 by Meethoodas, a chamar who had come from India via Demerara. He distributed bhaiks to seven men and four women and returned to India, again through Demerara. Six months after the departure of Meethodass another free Indian from Demerara, Gobindass came to Trinidad and distributed additional bhaiks to a number of persons. He also tried to establish an organized leadership with a leader (mahant) who was a high priest and a diwan (an apprentice who acted as secretary). Their major centers of meeting were in St. James and Arima. Comins was highly impressed by the upward mobility of the island’s leading Kabir panthi, Kowlessar who had come as an indentured labourer in 1856. By 1891, at around 50 years of age, he had become a wealthy contractor and landowner in Sangre Grande. Comins reported that he was now contractor “for all the public roads in the island…owner of several cocoa estates, several houses and other small property”. He was in 1891 desirous of selling out and returning to India to visit his ailing mother. Kowlessar recounted that he had now become a Sadhu and had declined the office of Mahant of the
Kabir Panth. There were, he said, about 150 members of the panth in Trinidad, including seven Muslims and 20 Brahmins. No one in the panth obtained special recognition because of caste but was respected according to merit obtained through observance of the panth’s rules. Some of these rules were vegetarianism, abstention from alcohol, helping those in distress, never quarreling, cheating or gambling. In Comin’s view these were very extraordinary sentiments to hear particularly as they were being expressed by a man who was a chamar.

The other two panths mentioned by Comins were the “Siewnarain” and “Owghur”. In present-day Trinidad this small group call themselves “Aughar” and researchers into this panth have traced its origin to the “Aghor” panth whose members are called “Aghori”. Unlike the other early panths which were Vaishnavite, the Aghoris were Shaivite. The Aghoris were mainly low caste adherents drawn to the faith by its founder Brahma Giri. They were omnivores and imbibed alcohol as part of their ritual. In India the group was particularly numerous in Bihar although the Trinidad founder came from Banaras in Uttar Pradesh. His name was “Sunphoolram alias “Sunphooldass” and he created the Trinidad branch around 1871. After a few years, he returned to India, leaving the panth under the leadership of followers such as Soondardass, Jamnadass, Pargandass and Lalbeharrydass. Perhaps the most memorable legacy of the Augharias is the popular dish “geera pork” which emerged out of the sacrificing of a pig by this sect at their annual Shiv puja or on other special religious occasions. The Siewnarini panth was introduced around 1856 by Toolaram a lohar (blacksmith) who had come as an indentured labourer. After his death the panth was taken over by Choniram, a Brahmin, from Cunupia. There were also mahants in various parts of the island. This sect is said to have been started by an early 19th century Rajput named Shiva Narayana who lived in Uttar Pradesh. He preached that there was only one (formless) God and the panth’s worship is heavily dependent on readings from their guru’s sacred pronouncements. They are anti-Brahmanical and in India their devotees were drawn mainly from the agricultural castes.
In the complex slice of India which was brought here by the indentureds during the 19th century there were other forms of beliefs besides the four which Comins mentioned, that is, Ramanandi Kabir Panth, Sienarini and Aghor. These must now be mentioned: Sikhism as well as Arya Samaj. Sikhism was the faith started by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in the Punjab. Like Kabir, Nanak was strongly influenced by the geo-politics of his time. Lying as it does, at the northwestern entrance to the sub-continent, it has always been a meeting point for Hinduism and Islam, a place of bitter contestation in religion as in politics and has hardly been out of the limelight in the affairs of the sub-continent. Among the influences on the thought of Nanak was Kabir. Indeed Nanak is believed to have met Shaik Kamal, the sufı son of Kabir when Nanak was 27 years old. In fact many of Kabir’s poems appear in the Adi Granth. Very briefly Sikhism emphasized monotheism concentrated on a formless (nirankar) god. The religion stands against idolatry and caste and like Kabir, declared that there was no Hindu, no Mussulman. All the faithful were, in the view of this new order of purity (Khalsa) equally children of God;

Whom should I despise, since the one Lord made us all.

Nanak was particularly concerned with uplifting the position of women:

Woman webefriend, by woman is the civilization continued.
It is by woman that order is maintained.
Then why call her evil from whom great men are born?

Nanak was a contemporary of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) who in their different European locations changed the history of Christianity by fearlessly attacking contemporary religious decadence. Nanak in India sought to cull the best in the prevailing beliefs and to craft these ideas into a new, more appropriate faith which would unite two faction-driven religious communities. The idea of the langar that is, the community kitchen, where people cooked,
served and ate together was initiated among various religions and caste groups. As a means of distinguishing its adherents from the crowd, the Khalsa insisted on the 5K’s, each one pregnant with symbolism: kesh (long hair), kanga (comb), kara (steel wristband), kachh (short breeches) and kirpan (sword). This sword was for example, a symbol of the Khalsa’s readiness to defend itself and the steel wristband protected the wrist which wielded the sword; it also symbolized the dharma—that circular wheel of Indian thought without an end. As a final stamp of distinction, Guru Gobind Singh gave each Sikh the surname Singh or Lion symbolizing a people prepared to stoutly fight for their belief. And in the manner of all great religions, the Sikhs compiled their theology in the Granth (sacred collection) Sahib (a term of respect) sometimes called the Adi Granth (original edition). Under the astute leadership of the 9th guru, Tegh Bahadur, the faith was spread outside of its Punjabi birthplace to cities such as Mathura, Agra, Allahabad, Banaras and Patna where in 1666 he started a gurdwara which was destined to become one of the major centers of Sikhism on the sub-continent as it was to become a major recruiting center for girmityas some 200 years later. In the slice of India which came to the Caribbean, the Sikhs were certainly present. As early as the 1800’s, Sikhs had started coming to the region. The first recorded arrival was that of Hem Raj Singh a former soldier in the British army who came as an indentured labourer shortly after the Great Revolt of 1857. He was later joined by other Sikh retirees such as Bhuta Singh, Sarwan Singh, Lal Singh and Jogie Singh. Hem Raj rented land from the Orange Grove estate on the Eastern Main Tunapuna and during the 1880’s he built a gurdwara on the Eastern side of his house. He continued as a leader of the Sikh community until his death at 102 in September 1947. The Tunapuna gurdwara was for more than a century a meeting place for Sikhs from as far as Princes Town where another former soldier Khaku Singh had settled and had opened up a liquor and ganja outlet. Khaku had arrived in Trinidad on the SS Jura in December 1883. In 1879 he had fought for the British army during the invasion of Kabul.
During the 1940's Sikhism was quite active. In November 1940 for example, the gurdwara joined hands with the El Dorado Hindu Sabha to celebrate the birthday of the faith's founder (Nanak Jayanti) Bawa Hem Raj led the readings from the Granth Sahib. These were followed by illuminations and musical performances.\textsuperscript{18} Again from October 1940 Bawa Hem Raj conducted a six-month reading which ended in March 1941. In this reading he had been joined by Babu Dalip Singh, Pannalal Mahabir, Hardit Singh, Lal Singh, Hari Singh, Ranjit Kumar and Pope Lalla.\textsuperscript{19} The Tunapuna gurdwara was rebuilt in 1929 and at the present time the small Sikh community has embarked on a campaign to erect a permanent structure befitting the long and glorious history of one of the major syncretic religions in Hindu history.

There remain two other religious panths which came to the Caribbean region during the first century of the Indian presence; these are the Kali Mai and the Arya Samaj. Kali Mai was brought to the Caribbean mainly by the Madrasi immigrants who comprised about 10% of the total of the Indian labourers who came. In British Guiana it became more widespread than in Trinidad but its presence on the Trinidad estates was clearly visible from the 1860's. In February 1868 the recently-arrived Presbyterian missionary John Morton recorded the sacrifice of a goat by labourers just outside of San Fernando who would have clearly been devotees of Kali Mai:

February 6\textsuperscript{th} 1868. Saw a place where the Hindus sacrifice. There was a pole with a small flag flying, a small altar of mud and near to it two stakes a few inches apart driven firmly into the ground. Two small bars passed through these stakes, one near the ground the other a few inches up, forming a sort of yoke into which the neck of a goat to be sacrificed is placed and its head severed with one blow. The blood is burned on the altar and the body made a feast of. On the altar lay a little heap of ashes.\textsuperscript{20}

At first Kali Mai puja was performed for whole villages, to ward off evil and to bring good fortune to the community. Such prayers took place in open spaces, covered for the occasion. Later in the century small Kali temples were built or shrines constructed as an extension of devotees' homes
where statues of the divine mother (Kali Mai) were set up, sometimes alongside other female deities such as Parmeshwarie or Di (protector of the earth) to whom devotees gave obeisance. Over time, many people visited these temples seeking out the *pujari* (temple priest) who would assist in seeking divine intervention for a wide variety of personal problems. Spirit possession (today called charismatic worship) was a major part of the ritual. During such séances devotees felt that they were making direct contact with the Mother, which they considered to be a major part of the healing process. But the worship of Kali Mai and the lesser deities which, for identification clustered around the larger god-head, were almost snuffed out of existence through the joint action of the colonial authorities and the Orthodox, Sanatanist Hindus. The colonial ruling class found animal sacrifice and spirit possession expressions of evil and Satanic practices. Additionally they associated the Kali worshippers with the fire-pass ceremony which involved walking over glowing coals with bare feet to the continuous thumping of drums. This custom was of course, introduced by the Madrasis hence its erroneous association with Kali Mai. Orthodox Hindus on their part found these practices as those of a “low nation” and therefore unacceptable as part of mainstream Hinduism. It was not until the 1970’s and with considerable missionary input from Guyana where this decline did not take place, that Kali Mai worship was revived in Trinidad. From that time it has seen increased popularity particularly among descendants of Madrasi immigrants. Even so, it is hardly considered part of mainstream Hinduism.

The major challenge to Sanatan Dharam Orthodoxy in Trinidad came in the form of the Arya Samaj and its Trinidad offspring the Arya Prathinidhi Sabha which was formed in 1934. The founder of the Aryan mission in Trinidad is believed to have been Pandit Bhai Parmanand M.A. an Aryan missionary who had visited South Africa in 1904 and had come to the Americas in 1910. Having made initial contacts, Parmanand arranged for the extension of the Arya Samaj work both in British Guiana and Trinidad through the missionary work of Pandit Kunj Beharry Tiwari who came to the
Caribbean from India in 1914. The Caribbean Arya Samajists took the unorthodox lead of their Indian founder Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) who had founded the Samaj in 1875. In India, the Swami believed that Sanatan Dharma had become polluted by post-Vedic influences: idol worship, the determination of caste by jati (birth) rather than by guna (merit), the denial of education to women, restrictions on widow re-marriage and the ban on crossing the Kala Pani or dark waters. The Arya Samajists were appalled by the inroads which Christian missionaries were making into Indian society with the full support of the British raj. The Samaj in India met the Christians head-on in a determined campaign of Ved prachar (prophecyism and preaching) and shuddhi which was a re-conversion exercise to reclaim many who had strayed. The Trinidad followers of the Arya Samaj believed that here too Hindus had strayed from the dharmic path and were becoming Christianized too rapidly. Perhaps the best delineation of the torpor into which Hinduism had been fallen can be obtained from the writings of Seepersad and Vidia Naipaul whose life spanned the Thirties and Forties of the 20th century. Both these writers lived in the midst of the discourse and both have left accurate if hilarious, accounts of the situation. Seepersad Naipaul recounts the hypocrisy of some who claimed to be Brahmins:

The Jaimungal lot never drank openly, for Jaimungal proudly regarded himself a Brahmin, a member of the priestly caste, who should not take intoxicating drinks, nor yet flesh or fish food. Nevertheless, Jaimungal drank, and ate meat, and fish too – quietly and clandestinely – at home. So did the ‘boys’ whom everybody called ‘Maraj’, an epithet that only Brahmins could wear, be they priests or be they peasants; be they literate or illiterate.23

Vidia Naipaul in A House for Mr. Biswas recounts the manner in which Hindu had been reduced to ritualistic performance without any understanding of significance or meaning:

The of the puja was shared by many of the men and the boys. Sometimes even Anand had to do it. Untutored in the prayers, he could only go through the motions of the ritual...[He] blew at the conch shell, emitting a sound like that of a heavy wardrobe scraping on a wooden floor; then his cheeks aching from the effort of blowing the round shell, he hurried out to eat, first making the round of the house to
offer the milk and tulsi leaves which, unbelievably, he had consecrated. When he dressed for school he brushed the caked sandalwood marks from his forehead.  

Seeking to rescue Sanatan Dharma from these perceived evils, the Arya Samajists in Trinidad took on their responsibility with seriousness. Armed with their guru’s testament Satyarth Prakash (the light of truth) they embarked on a range of interesting initiatives. For example they started Trinidad’s first Hindu school without any state assistance in the Marabella/Gasparillo area in 1929 and two years later they joined with others to form the Hindu/Muslim School in Chaguanas. They opened Youth Camps (Vir Dals) to spread the Vedic word and when in 1949 the State began to provide aid for non-Christian schools the Arya Prathinidhi Sabha took advantage of this niche to open two schools in 1952. This number was increased by seven over the next two decades. The Aryans brought a breath of fresh air to the Hindu society by inviting a number of learned Indian missionaries who brought the local community up-to-date on happenings in India and gave lucid explanations of Verdic thought. Among these were Pandit Jaimini Mehta B.A., LLB, MRAS who spent three very productive months in 1928. In 1934 Pandit Ayodha Prasad B.A. passed through after he attended the Parliament of Religious Conference in Chicago as the representative of the International Aryan League based in Delhi. Pandit Satya Charan Shastri followed in 1935/36 and Pandit Bhaskaranand in 1936 and again in 1942/43.

Not surprisingly the Aryans stirred an enormous controversy in Trinidad because of their very unorthodox views. Again the Naipauls were present to accurately record some of the debate. Seepersad Naipaul records the report which Dinoo gives on a missionary’s lecture:

I hear him last night. He condemning what he call idol worship. He saying Rama was a rishi or prophet, not God; he saying a woman who married already could be married again. And he saying there is nobody like Brahma and Vishnu and Shiva. He saying a lot of things. He saying anybody who is educated is a Brahmin and anybody who is not educated is not a Brahmin.  

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In a *House for Mr. Biswas* we are told that these “protestant Hindu missionaries” were preaching that “caste was un-important, that Hinduism should accept converts, that idols should be abolished, that women should be educated”. All of these doctrines were an anathema to the orthodox Tulis.  

The Arya Samajists took Muslims and an Afro-Trinidadian into its fold. Such actions were particularly galling to many Hindus who wished to maintain the purity of the religion and of the race. In the contestation for the larger Hindu space the Arya Prathinidhi Sabha lost out to the Maha Sabha by the 1940’s but they have continued as a small but potent force in the Hindu community. In 1943 they were formally incorporated by Act No. 43 of 1943, a decade after they had declared the start of the Arya Prathinidhi Sabha. Their ordination of the first female non-Christian pandita in September 1993 was opposed by the orthodox Sanatanists but this example has been followed by other small groups.

*The Establishment Of Temples*

Of all the agencies which are of major importance in the reconstruction of the identity, the temple stands supreme. The Hindu temple, mandira meaning “gladdening” is designed as a dwelling place for the gods.  

Central to the temple is the vimana or shrine within which there is the garba-griha the womb-house or holy of holies; here the deity is duly consecrated and installed. Over time various additions were made to the temple such as, the tapering summit or sikhara, the mandapa or pillared hall to provide a covered space for worship and the bhog mandir or hall of offerings where food is prepared or mantras recited. In the Indian diaspora temples took on a very special significance as meeting and bonding spaces were a sense of cultural self could be maintained, the deities praised, material and business arrangements sealed and schools started. The temples or kooties continued the jahagi relationship which had started on the ships in the long, three months which that journey normally took. Naturally, therefore one of the first actions which the Indians undertook was the
building of these places of worship. In 1860 Reverend Edward Underhill, emissary of the London Missionary Society found a Hindu temple on an estate just outside modern-day Princes Town. In 1860 the place was called Savanna Grande:

There are a few Gurus and Brahmins among the Coolies; on one estate a rude temple has been set up...I did not find that any of the pure Hindu holidays, such as the durgah poojah, are kept. The Christian Sabbath is observed on the estates.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1887 James Anthony Froude observed that “Like Rachel, the coolies had brought their gods to their new home”. In that year he visited a sugar estate just outside of Port of Spain, possibly Coolie Settlement (modern St. James):

In the center of the village was a Hindoo temple, made up rudely out of boards with a verandah running round it. There were gods and goddesses in various attitudes; Vishnu fighting with the monkey god, Vishnu with cutlass and shield, the monkey with his tail round one tree, while he brandished two others, one in each hand, as clubs. I suppose that we smiled, for our curiosity was resented, and we found it prudent to withdraw.\textsuperscript{29}

In June 1891, Dr. Comins, on a visit to the St. Augustine estate (site of the present U.W.I. and Curepe) found that there was no temple such as he had seen in India. Instead the Indians here gathered on a platform around a “toolsi gatch” which was their version of a vimana housing their deity. Among the deities found by Comins were Durga, Hanooman, Kali and Parmeshwarie. Apart from these descriptions from visiting Englishmen, there were other efforts to establish temples. By the mid-1880’s Indians felt sufficiently confident to go public in declaring their intention to build a mandir for the entire community. The Trinidad Chronicle, no admirer of Indians, put its own spin to the project by claiming that the Indians had had their “troubles” last year (1884) – a clear reference to the Hosea Riots – “because of the neglect of their religious duties”. Accordingly, “they have resolved to build a temple in which to worship some Being to them invisible, but which their ancestors have adored”. Towards this end they had started a subscription list. The paper then went
on to praise the Canadian Mission for their conversion work and the Anglicans who had even brought a Christian missionary from India who could gain the attention of the Indians. “But the conservatism of Hinduism and Mahomedanism retains its hold yet of thousands. Is it not so in India?” In neighbouring British Guiana the Indians were as vigorous in the building of their mandirs. In 1912 Archdeacon Josa of Georgetown recalled his experience of temple worship after years of travel in that colony. He wrote that “there are several places of worship called Temples all over the colony”. Whereas in India there were large temples which cost millions to build, in British Guiana the temple was ‘very tawdry but clean. The places a very dark and awe-inspiring’. The main deities were Ganesh and Hanooman but there was a third, a female, Kali by name. She had four arms “with one she held a sword, with another a bleeding head and on her neck she wore a necklace of skulls”. It was this same type of general temple building which had started in Trinidad from the 1860’s and has never ceased since that time, reaching its zenith during the 1950’s.

The exception to this generalization has, of course, been the Kabir Panth which does not build temples since God is everywhere. Their chowka, artee and jhanda ceremonies as well as celebrations such as Kabir Jayantee (appearance of Kabir) or Kabir Antardhaan (disappearance) are held in homes or convenient public places. For the other groups temple building has always been a high priority. From the early 20th century mandirs were built at Arima, Chaguanas, Tunapuna, at Sant Nagar in Sangre Grande and at St. James. From the 1930’s, the St. James Kootie became a familiar place for roving singers who came from as far as South as Rousilliac. Under the patient care of Heta Singh the caretaker, they would spend days in St. James, singing and telling stories (kheesas) before returning home. During the last two days of October 1940 there was a colourful Divali celebration in St. James, attended by over 1,000 persons. Thirty persons were re-converted to Hinduism during this mela. Many persons expressed the hope that a permanent Hindu center would
be established in St. James. This dream was of course realized in 1962 with the establishment of Paschim Kashi Mandir on Ethel Street, St. James.

The Formation Of Non-Religious Organizations.

So far we have been discussing the reconstruction of the heritage through religious channels, that is, the re-formation of groups here which reminded them of the ancestral place; they also constructed temples as meeting places where familiar sounds, smells, food and leelas (joyful play acting) re-created a comforting ambiance. The many new experiences which accompanied recruitment and placement on the estates had created a sense of uncertainty and bewilderment. Their world was shaken but in this new place it could be re-made in a “significantly familiar” fashion because of the physical similarity of the new environment, including the flora and fauna transferred from Calcutta to Caroni. We shall now look at the manner in which this re-creation took place in the secular sphere, bearing in mind that the holistic Hindu view of the world there is little separation between the secular and the religious. Hindu society in Trinidad organized itself at two levels. Whilst community leaders organized at the local level, many of them also operated at the national level forming organizations aimed at assisting immigrants in adjusting to the new society by creating a familiar environment to that which they had left behind. These groups also sought to deal with the many problems affecting the entire Indian community: chronic alcoholism, the non recognition of Hindu (and Muslim) marriages with its serious attendant problems, the governments’ persistent refusal to recognize and assist non-Christian educational institutions, its refusal to allow for the cremation of the dead, the painfully slow inclusion of Indians into the public service, the poor infrastructure in the swampy areas where Indians lived and the state’s dependence, despite protests, on the Canadian missionaries as spokespersons for the Indian community. Many of the community
groups chose Hindu names, often the names of similar organizations in India. In this way, welfare
groups arose over the island from the 1930’s.34

Southern Trinidad was a virtual beehive of activity. In Debe Pandit Gangadhar Uppadhya formed
the Saraswattee Pathshala an educational institution named after the goddess of learning and in Penal
Teah Ramnarine Mahabirsingh founded the Indian Welfare Association. Down the road in Siparia,
Pandit Goberdhan pioneered the Nirdhan Daya Upkar (Society to uplift the poor) and Ahamad
Charles started the Hindusthani Sevak Sangh (Indian Service organization). In nearby Fyzabad,
Sirju Latchman founded a parallel organization to Charles’ Siparia group, with the same name. In
San Fernando Lalchan Jaggernath and associates worked through the Dharam Siksha Dal (Religious
education association) and in San Juan in the North, Chanka Maharaj, Lakshmi Narayn Parray and
others energized the Hindu community through the Sanatan Dharam Sudha Sabha (Reforming
society). In St. James the Trinidad Seva Samiti (selfless service group) conducted regular training in
the martial arts under the tutorship of Ranjit Kumar, a former Indian army officer. In Sangre
Grande, Sam Juteram and James Ramdass led the Bharat Sumati Sabha (benevolent Indian society).
A wealthy Port of Spain businessman Budhbir Singh sponsored a dramatic group Balak Sahaita
(children’s welfare) Dramatic group which in 1940 invited a similar fraternity from British Guiana
to perform in Port of Spain. Hundreds from all over the colony attended the performance of this
group: Sab Rang Ki Bahar (a kaleidoscope of entertainment) at the St. James theatre.35 This event,
in its turn stimulated a rush of activity: singing and dancing competitions, the composition of Hindu
songs which were published and increased temple music activity such as satsangs (in the company
of truth) where the Ramayan was chanted. From the 1930’s, Hindu Sabhas were quite active in
Piarco which trained its youth at its Hindu Seva Samiti and in places like Cumuto, Biche, Poole,
Arima and Sant Nagar (town of saints) in Sangre Grande. From that third decade too, Trinidad
Indians started visiting Maha Bharat, subsequently reporting back to enthusiastic audiences on their
eventful trips. In this way Ganga Bissoo Maharaj met Gandhi on his 1935 trip and he performed tirath (pilgrimage) at Banaras, Gaya Mathura, Hardwar and Ayodhya. Similarly, Dr. Ramhit Persad studied at Calcutta and Bombay Universities, met Gandhi and Nehru and traveled extensively in India. Arnold Seeram, formerly of British Guiana visited India in 1930 where he spent a weekend at Gandhi’s Wardha ashram and another with Tagore at Santiniketan. The trend, started then, has increased over time with students, religious leaders and tourists seeking to see India and to search for roots, Purkhon ka desh. The survival needs of the self seem to impel Caribbean Indians to keep building bridges with the ancestral place. From the thirties too, there were frequent comings and goings between Trinidad and British Guiana the other substantial Caribbean Indian settlement. Indian films shown in Trinidad were immediately dispatched to Georgetown, there were regular mutual visits by cricket teams, inter-colonial marriages followed and there has always been regular exchanges of pandits, mahants and pujaris.

Side by side with this flurry of micro-activity all over the colony, Hindu (and non-Hindu) leaders were trying to create omnibus organizations to serve the larger “national” interests. The first colony-wide Hindu organization to be formed in Trinidad was the Hindu Sanatan Dharma Association (HSDA). Its letterhead in 1940 indicated that it was established in 1881 and later, incorporated by Act of Legislative Council: Paper No. 26 of 1932. Its patron was the Hon. Saran Teelucksingh, its Dharmachar (religious head) was Pandit Ramjattan, its President Pandit Goberdhan and its Secretary, Barl Maharaj of Col Da Tinda Avenue, San Juan. The objectives of the HSDA were the propagation of Sanatanist Hinduism through the teaching of Dharma, morality and temperance. They also pledged to build schools, promote harmony and goodwill, settle disputes, seek greater recognition from the State and to raise funds to carry out these objectives. Little is known about the activities of the HSDA before its incorporation in 1932. It appears that whilst the Association did not assume a highly visible role as a group, its members led in a number of particular activities. As
we have just noted, India-born Pandit Ramjattan of Claxton Bay served as Dharmachar during the Forties; preceding him was Pandit Jankie Prashad Sharma of Debe. After its revival in 1932 the HSDA embarked on a number of activities. In 1933 for example Goberdhan Pandit was elected President and held this position well into the Forties. There was also a succession of secretaries. From the Thirties, too they held regular vagnas and serviced the Hindu community at their various samskars (rites of passage), they opened Hindi schools and agitated for the recognition of Hinduism on equal footing with Christianity. A member of the management board Pandit Uppadhyya of Debe was also leader of the aforementioned Debe Saraswattee Pathshala and Secretary of the Debe Agricultural and Credit Society. Goberdhan Pandit himself was a community activist: leader of the Nirdan Daya Upkar, Vice President of the multi-religious East Indian National Congress and from 1937 a member of the Indian Advisory Board, a State sponsored body which counseled the colonial government regarding that community.

By the Thirties, however, an increasingly articulate Hindu community began to feel that the HSDA had exhausted its mandate. It was a Southern-based organization which did not cater to the needs of the Hindus of the North and East. These people had by this time organized a number of sabhas and kooties in their towns and villages and these were clamoring for greater recognition. Secondly, as Hindus began to feel more self-assured they resented the fact that a Christian Indian, Saran Teelucksingh remained as Patron of the HSDA and had indeed played a major role in the resuscitation of that body in 1932. Teelucksingh (1889-1952) had by the Thirties become a wealthy cinema owner, member of the legislature for Caroni, a leading member of the Trinidad Labour Party and a member of a number of State Boards. Whereas the executive of the HSDA considered him an asset (as Patron) many others felt that he was using the Hindu community to further his political ends. These differences led to the formation of a rival Hindu organization namely the Sanatan Dharam Board of Control (SDBC) headquartered at the Tunapuna Shivalla. In 1932 the SDBC was
registered as a benevolent society and in 1935 it obtained affiliation with the Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha of Lahore in the Punjab. During a period when it was prestigious to have Indian missionaries visiting diasporic communities to spread Hindu, Islamic and Christian doctrine, the SDBC sent its President Pandit Dinanath Tiwari of Cunupia to Lahore in 1937 to request a missionary who would assist in the Caribbean Sanatanist work. This mission was so successful that Dr. Parashuram Sharma, Secretary of the Foreign Propaganda Department of the parent group in the Punjab, accompanied Pandit Tiwari on his return trip in January 1938. Dr. Sharma stayed in Trinidad for nine and a half months, he also visited British Guiana for one and a half months and Dutch Guiana for one month.

The visit by Dr. Sharma gave a considerable boost to Hinduism in the Caribbean. Sharma was learned, highly articulate both in Hindi and English and very pro-active in promoting Dharma. Being the first Sanatanist missionary to the Caribbean he undertook a wide range of activities and although he returned to Lahore in 1939, he persisted in follow-up action regarding matters which he had raised in the Caribbean colonies. His personal prestige and his easy acquaintance with eminent persons in India gave the Trinidad Hindu leaders a much-needed boost in their local agitation for concessions. In arguing for the allowance of cremation by the pyre system Pandit Tiwari, President of the SDBC publicly outlined the support which he had received from prominent Indians for this manner of disposal of the dead. In the company of Dr. Sharma, he recounted, he had discussed this matter with “the Hon. Sir Jagdish Prasad, the Government of India Minister in charge of Immigration Education, Health and Lands” as well as “the Hon. Rai Bahadur Lala Ram Saran Das CIE, MCS and Sir C.S. Bajpai.” Ram Saran Das was no less than the President of the Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha of the Punjab. Dr. Sharma also joined the demand for the recognition of Hindu marriages, state aid for non-Christian schools, the establishment of a Hindu college and the creation of a Sanatan Dharma Federation of the West Indies. All of these except the last item was
achieved during the Forties and Fifties (with the establishment of the Hindu College in Sangre Grande in 1954). Sharma and members of the SDBC traveled extensively throughout Trinidad, forming branches in many rural and urban centers: St. James, Curepe, Arima, Brazil, Caparo, Rio Claro, Penal, Rousillac and Cedros to name a few.

There was one issue, however, on which Sharma failed despite his best efforts. This was the unification of the two major umbrella Hindu organizations, namely the Association and the Board of Control. Acting as a mediator who commanded the respect of both groups, he tried to arrange meetings of both sets of leaders. Pandit Goberdhan of Siparia, President of the SDA was initially very receptive. In early September 1938 he invited the President, Secretary and officers of both organizations to a meeting scheduled for 18th September 1938 at the SDA’s headquarters so that the matter could be “settled very easily.” Goberdhan had also invited all the Pandits and members and he felt that a prior meeting including himself, Pandit Tiwari and C.H. Buddh (Secretary of the SDBC) would be useful in planning for the big meeting. A number of letters subsequently passed between Buddh and Goberdhan, each inviting the other to meetings (one scheduled at the Marabella Indian school) but the evasive tone of the letters indicated a mutual cooling off of enthusiasm on both sides. Finally Goberdhan informed Buddh that the next unity meeting would take place on 2nd October 1938 at Teelucksingh’s theatre in Couva. That meeting was duly convened and the attendance was overflowing. Many people “had to stand on the sides and here and there for want of space.” On the platform was a veritable who’s who of the Hindu community. Delegates had arrived from distant places such as Rio Claro, Cedros, Sangre Grande and Princes Town. However, there was the marked absence of leaders from the HSDA despite that fact that the meeting was being held in their headquarters. What further soured the meeting was that in the weeks leading up to it, there was much public bickering between the two factions and this appears to have caused the HSDA to boycott the gathering. It was therefore controlled by the SBDC which had
properly mobilized its forces. Sixteen resolutions were passed but the tone of many of them foreclosed any chance of reconciliation between the groups. Dr. Sharma was a competent Chair but he seemed powerless to stem the rift. One resolution deplored “the attitude and behavior of the responsible officers and supporters of the Hindu Sanatan Dharma Association and especially of its Secretary” who had publicly criticized the attitude of the SDBC. Another resolution affirmed that the Hindu community of Trinidad had full confidence in the SDBC which had more than twenty affiliated Sabhas and must be the body to make representation to state boards as well as the Moyne Commission, then in the Caribbean. A third resolution disapproved of “the conduct of Saran Teelucksingh and other Christian gentlemen who have nothing in common in the religious faith and in the religion of a Sanatan Dharma body”, warning them to refrain from such a wrong course. Another resolution named the now “merged” Hindu body as “The Trinidad Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha incorporated” with headquarters at the Amalgamation Settlement Committee, Freeling Street, Tunapuna. This committee was made up of eleven persons who would finalize the settlement. HSDA members, not present, were named on this committee subject to their consent. The meeting also recorded its appreciation of the work of Dr. Sharma: “This meeting would have liked him to prolong his stay but as urgent home affairs do not allow him to do so, the Hindu community wishes him God-speed and safe voyage.” With his departure from the colony, the amalgamation committee suffered a rapid decline as the old rivalries re-surfaced and the two groups continued in their separate ways, each claiming that it was the major representative body each making separate representations regarding the same problems being faced by the Hindu community. Quite often delay in obtaining redress was not because of the unwillingness of the State but rather because of contrary, often conflicting advise tendered by these separate entities.

The final coming together of these separate Hindu groupings was affected in 1952 under the leadership of Bhadase Sagan Maraj (1920-1971). This last section of the essay will seek to trace that
movement from the late Thirties. Towering above all other leaders during the Thirties and Forties of the last century was Ranjit Kumar who laboured with great energy to provide a firm basis for later unity. In fact, as we shall presently see, it was under the umbrella of Kumar’s leadership that young men of the period entered public life: Bhadase Maraj, Chanka Maharaj (aka Pandit Chandrica Persad) Pandit Satnarayan and many others. Kumar (1912-1982) was born in the Punjab, India, the son of wealthy parents who sent him to England at the age of six for his education. At the age of eighteen he graduated as a Civil Engineer from London University and one year later he passed the Indian Civil Service exams whereupon he was dispatched to the Punjab Police Service. By 1932 he had attained the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police in the Punjab. In 1935 he came to Trinidad in search of employment as an engineer in the colonial service, he also brought with him a cache of the first Indian films to be shown here. He was eminently successful in both pursuits since he obtained employment as an engineer (who designed and oversaw the construction of Wrightson Road and the Morvant Housing Scheme) and he also discovered that there was a great eagerness among Caribbean Indians for Indian films. This was another one of those cultural lifelines to which diasporic Indians held tenaciously. Form the first showing of Bala Joban in 1935 the stream of Indian films has not stopped. Indeed it has been continuously growing.

In 1939 Kumar undertook the task of bringing about the unification of the Hindu community. Being the meticulous and disciplined engineer that he was, he planned his moves with great care. For example, he kept in touch with Dr. Sharma through whom he gained access to highly placed sources of information and other assistance from India. Sharma was able to highlight Trinidad Hindu activity in India and to agitate with colonial authorities in India and in England. Secondly Kumar, with Sharma’s help affiliated his group here with the All India Maha Sabha founded in 1915 and not with the provincial Punjab Sanatan Dharam Prathinidhi Sabha as the earlier SDBC had done. Thirdly as Kumar formed the Trinidad Hindu Maha Sabha and sought to expand its influence he
started an informative paper “The Hindu Maha Sabha Bulletin” in March 1940. This paper, which
appears to have had a two-year life, did much to create consciousness among a whole generation of
young Hindus. Such awareness was put into action in the subsequent years of vigorous activity
undertaken by many of these Kumar-inspired activists. With considerable astuteness, Kumar started
dialogue with both the SDBC and the HSDA, often meeting the respective leaders separately since
they refused to meet together. Taking his lead with the All-India Hindu Maha Sabha with which he
forged a close association, he made every effort to include all non-Muslim Indian groups into his
Maha Sabha. The very first issue of the Bulletin stressed the fact that Pandit Madan Mohan
Malaviya had brought together Sanatanists, Kabir Panthis, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Arya
Samajists and that Trinidad should follow suit.40 To this early Hindu leader, the assertion of an
over-arching Hindu identity was more important than the underlining of local separateness. For both
groups – in India and in Trinidad – Hindu unity across the board was essential. In India it was
essential as a foil against both the British and the Muslims.41 In Trinidad unity was essential
because of the late arrival of the Indians and the serious disadvantages which they suffered. In
India, the Maha Sabha declared that it was not a rival of the Indian Nation Congress, the political
arm of the anti-imperialist struggle but was concerned, rather with spiritual regeneration. The
Trinidad affiliate took exactly the same position. They were formed, the Bulletin wrote, not to
provide physical help but to give spiritual aid. In India, particularly in the Punjab, there developed a
militant form of Hinduism to combat British and Muslim dominance. In Trinidad the former officer
of the Punjab constabulary instituted Seva Samitis in places like St. James and St. Helena-Piarco,
summoning youths thus trained to military-style exercises and street parades.42 Both in India and in
Trinidad every effort was made to portray Hindu civilization as a high culture of great achievement.
One article, for example, claimed that Hindus had in fact discovered America and another recounted
that there was an age when India ruled the waves.43
The last months of 1939 were busily spent in preparing a constitution and getting the groups to talk to each other. In December 1939, a working committee for the proposed merger met at Harrack Singh’s residence in Curepe; the group was made up of Arya Samajists and the SDBC. Kumar was elected temporary Chair and both groups agreed to pass identical resolutions on the 7th of January 1940 supporting the merger. Another meeting, pledging further support was held on the 21st January 1940 when the working committee met at the Arya Samaj mandir in Chaguanas.

The Trinidad Hindu Maha Sabha was inaugurated at two meetings held firstly in Chaguanas on the 21st of January 1940 and then at the Tunapuna Shivalla on the 11th of February 1940. Its first officers were:

President, Ranjit Kumar
General Secretary, C.H. Buddhu
Joint Secretary, Toolsi Das
Treasurer, Pandit Satnarine
Auditor, Dr. Palit

The next stage in the organisation of the Sabha was the careful division of the colony into five districts namely:

1. N.W. District comprising the wards of Diego Martin, St. Anns and Tacarigua.
2. N.E. District consisting of the wards of Arima and Blanchisseuse, Counties of St. David and St. Andrew including San Rafael.
3. Central District meaning the County of Caroni extending from Caroni to Claxton Bay.
4. S.W. District: County of St. Patrick and village of Debe.
5. S.E. District: Countries of Victoria, Nariva and Mayaro.

Over the next few months meetings were held all over the island and district elections took place. These were regularly reported in the Bulletin. Leaders of the Maha Sabha made frequent visits to urban as well as rural centers of Hindu habitation to organize and enlighten. At one of these
meetings, Kundan Pandit brought together the leading Hindu men from Charieville and Felicity at the Bejucal Shivalla. At this meeting the President, Ranjit Kumar informed the group that the Hindus, with a population of 800 million, constituted the largest religious community in the world; that Lord Buddha was the ninth incarnation of God and that Sanatan Dharma, Arya Dharma, Buddhism and Hinduism were for all practical purposes the names of the same religion. At another similar meeting held in Cumuto, there was much enthusiasm and Babu Ramprahalad offered a piece of land for the building of a temple and a school. The Trinidad Maha Sabha undertook a campaign of conversion. The Bulletin reported that persons of African descent had been converted at Tacarigua and at St. James there were many conversions. In one instance Ralph Francis became Ranjit Surajbally. The Hindu Maha Sabha opened a number of private schools which functioned mainly in the evenings, teaching Hindi and Indian studies generally. In the case of the St. James sabha, they were able to make an arrangement with the Canadian Mission school for its use after the normal school hours. On Monday 27th of May 1940 the Arima Maha Sabha school was opened under the joint principalship of Doon Pundit and Bhola Pundit. The hours of operation were 7 pm to 9 pm and the school taught Hindi, English and Sanskrit. In December of 1940 the Maha Sabha advertised its plan to hold Grand Anniversary celebrations in January 1941. Part of the celebration was to be a children’s sammelan (similar to today’s Baal Vikas). In the same issue of the Bulletin there was an announcement of a concert to be staged by the Hindu school there. Regional inspectors were also appointed for the schools on a regional basis. Lal Rampersad, for example was inspector for the North West District. The Hindu Maha Sabha gave ample publicity to the celebrations of religious festivals all over the island: Divali, Shiv Ratri, singing competitions, Hindu marriages, Janam Ashtami (Sri Krishna’s birthday) and satsangs. The paper singled out promising young Hindus in the various areas and brought their activities to the forefront. Two of these were Chanka Maharaj whose organisational and wrestling, prowess was highlighted. Another was “Badesh Sagan Maharaj” of Caroni. There are many references to this youthful leader then in his
twenties, in the Maha Sabha paper. In December 1940 for example the said Badesh led in the organisation of a Satya Narayan Katha in Caroni at which over two hundred persons were fed.48 Even before that in August 1940 the residents at La Paille organised a meeting on their land problems and invited Kumar and other officers of the Maha Sabha to assist them. After the meeting a local contingent of the Hindu Seva Samiti was formed with the first entrant being the said Badesh Sagan Maharaj, followed by Sahadeo Maharaj, Lal Bahadur Singh and others. “Members of the local ‘secret’ police kept order at the meeting and joined the Seva Samiti.”49 One more (humourous) incident involving the youthful leader will be mentioned. It appears that Chandra Bahadur Mathura a supporter of the rival HSDA wanted to sully the name of the Mahasabha joint secretary Toolsie Dass by concocting a false letter so as to cause Dass to lose his job. Mathura invited Badesh for a drink at the New Harbour Hotel on St. Vincent Street, Port of Spain and after a few drinks, Mathura produced the letter and requested Badesh’s signature. When the latter refused, Mathura threatened to “fix him up.” The young wrestler slapped Mathura who fell down and the police then intervened. Maharaj was fined two dollars with two dollars costs but the magistrate warned Mathura about making threats to other people. Should he do so again “I will send you straight to jail. And you know I would do it.” The magistrate also refused to put Maharaj on a bond as requested by the prosecutor.50 The Bulletin used the manner of the reporting of this incident to highlight a major problem of the Indians. It criticized the “national” newspaper for always pointing out the race of Indians when they were before the court but never did so for the other ethnic groups. The newspaper had reported the trial of “Badesh Sagan Maharaj an Indian man”:

By stressing the Indian motif wherever possible, it is intended to impress on the minds of the readers that more Indians figure in criminal cases than people of other races; or, in other words that the Indian community is a more criminal community.51
When Bhadase Maraj finally brought the separate entities together in 1952, he was not starting from scratch. His major contribution lies in the fact that he provided much-needed strong central leadership which brought together diverse small groups and persons, most of whom had been involved in different Hindu activities in diverse places over a long period of time. Such groups and persons had been providing social and spiritual guidance by recreating as much as possible of the cultural and physical ancestral ambiance as they could. Here caste, in an attenuated form was a re-built, every effort was made to re-fashion the large fields of rice and sugar cane which even today, covers the rural Bihari landscape. After indentureship many people reverted to their ancient caste occupations, recreating slices of the work spectrum of Maha Bharat. From the last decade of the 19th century, Indian missionaries started visiting, bringing the “locals” up-to-date on religious and political developments in India. Despite the problems which the Indians had to face as they adjusted to the Caribbean, they did not lose sight of the tremendous opportunities which a place like Trinidad offered and many of them took advantage. The independent spirit which, in the first place had led them to make the awesome decision to cross the Kala Pani, now asserted itself in the new place. This perhaps was the major underlying reason for the rise of so many groups and leaders, none willing to surrender that hard-won self-assertion forged from the many experiences of bondage, the long journey from Calcutta, a period of servitude and now, a chance to carve a new individual space. In this regard, they not only formed their many groupings but equally, they were always willing to join other groups which included Muslims and Christians to fight for the common good. Thus, they were quite active in the East Indian National Congress as well as in the East Indian National Association. Hindus joined other non-Hindus in sitting on the East Indian Advisory Board from 1937 and in giving evidence before the Moyne Commission in 1938. Simultaneously, they were building their mandirs, re-creating their festivities and rituals and establishing their own schools whilst clamoring (successfully) for state recognition of such schools. In their penultimate unification effort under Ranjit Kumar a cadre of young leaders was encouraged, with Bhadase Maraj
emerging as prime mover. Form the mid-Forties Kumar moved away from religious organisation to political involvement, thereby creating space for this young cadre.

The Hindu story therefore, for their first century, is one of continuous organization at many layers of life and work, co-operation with other groups (Presbyterians, Anglicans or the Trade Union Movement) when this served their purpose and regular discourse with the ancestral place. The Fifties of the last century, therefore, represented a continuance of that journey, which will go on for yet another century, assisted no doubt, by the revolution in communications technology which has now enveloped the globe.
FOOTNOTES

2. Ibid. p.285f.
3. Ibid. p.284.
6. Ibid. p.105.
10. Ibid. p.11.
16. Ibid. p.27.
34. The groups named here have been culled from the Review (1945) pp.131-169. Also Bulletin 1940 to 1942.

39. Goberdhan to Buddhu 7th September 1938 in Proceedings. The rest of this account is based on this source.


51. Ibid.