

[Festive Hindus of Trinidad Foresee Positive Future](#)

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Today, over 40,000 Hindus live in Trinidad, the southernmost island in the Caribbean Archipelago nearly touching the northern coast of South America. From India, their ancestors arrived on the once-Spanish island over a hundred and fifty years ago, to work on tea, sugar and cocoa plantations. This immigration, being haphazard, failed to bring a significant number of qualified priests to officiate in new temples in Trinidad or teach the religion to the young. But miraculously, after so long a break with India and the heartbeat of Hinduism, the Hindus of Trinidad are positive, and foresee a bright future ahead. Their confidence and strength seems based on a deep, inner faith and dedication and a naturally buoyant spirit. Here, Hindu religious practice is comprised of joyous and unflagging performance of deity festivals, observance of the basic samskaras and some temple worship. But, Hindus here also share that there is much room for improvement in several areas.

In November, Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, visited Trinidad with one of his disciples, Siva Murugaswami, at the invitation of Kumar Sivananda and the Harrypersad family. Daniram Harrypersad and his wife Phulvasi spoke about Hindu life on the island: "Every Hindu feels India is his homeland and has it in his heart to visit it one day when he can afford it." The per-capita income, though high for the Caribbean, is modest by international standards. Cars, T.V.'s electronic equipment, stereos, and modern company buildings stand in contrast to the island's agricultural landscape of sugar cane and modest home dwellings. "Blacks are the majority of the population and run the government, but we Indians have most of the businesses."

Daniram and Atmaram Harrypersad explained that whereas the Christian community has hundreds of private schools which teach religion and receive government subsidies, Hindus have only a handful, and they'd are not subsidized. Asked about the possibility of generating a more proportionate number of Hindu schools, and acquiring government help, they were uncertain: "Probably no one has really tried."

The Vice Principal of the newest government school in Trinidad, which accommodates 1,800 high school students, lamented: "We are raising educated criminals. Twenty-five years ago children were taught religion at school, or at least ethics. Not today. Now they can be lawyers, doctors and businessmen and nobody has told them they have to be fair and ethical in their practices." He told Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, who spoke to the student body, "We wish more religious leaders like you would come here and take an interest in these children. The religious leaders on this island are failing their youth. They have forgotten about the children here at the schools. We are all to blame."

Daniram explained, "About three years ago we really hit our low ebb as Hindus. Now we are gaining new strength, mostly due to the many bhajan groups springing up all over the island. Everyone likes to sing songs to God." Many attend these large satsangs just to listen. "But," he lamented, "We are not united as Hindus, so we do nothing grand. Everything we do is small and village-oriented and associated with a few families. What we need is the unity to build big beautiful temples like in India."

There are over 200 temples on the small island, but none is larger than a large home dwelling or built according to strict Hindu temple architecture. Each temple is run usually by a family group or group of friends. A single priest may be associated with a half-dozen temples, conducting pujas and needed rituals, often not according to definite schedule. Daniram added, "Most of the Pundits have regular professions or stores of their own and act as priests secondarily. They usually learned Vedic chants from their father and continue in this way."

Phulvasi gleefully shared a colorful picture of a year of festivals in Trinidad. "At Sivaratri time, we fast all night and stay up and chant offering the Lingam bilva leaves, black till grain and cane water. We do a lot of charity on this day, giving to beggars and gifts to the temples...Divali," she continued, "is a National holiday. Everybody celebrates on Divali. It is a time of giving gifts, lighting lamps; and Lakshmi [Goddess of Wealth] pujas are performed in homes and in the temples. Families gather for reunions and friendship. On Kartik Nahan, we go to the seashore to worship Mother Ganga. We bathe in the ocean and do arati right there, throwing rice and flowers also. Ekadasi and Holi are also big days for us."

Every Trinidadian Hindu knows the Ramayana, and Lord Rama, Sita and Lord Hanuman, are the most popular Deities there. 'Sita Ram' is often offered in place of

'Namaste' as a religious greeting. During the week-long Ram Leela festival, theater groups all over the island perform the epic play of Sita's abduction and rescue, one chapter a day.

In front of every Hindu home stands a cluster of bamboo flag poles with colored flags, each of which represents one of the Gods. The blue one is for Lord Shiva, the red one is for Lord Hanuman, white is for Lord Vishnu, yellow for Goddess Durga and pink for Goddess Lakshmi. Sectarianism is uncommon, but Lord Shiva is generally honored as the Supreme. Temple and shrine altars often have dozens of plastic or papier-mache Deities, and many pictures of holy men. Stone murthis from India are rare.

In interviews with Trinidad families, apparent was a collective vision of the need to unite and offer their children clear education in the essentials of the religion, more impressive temples, a grihastra ministry, ordained to counsel and guide the everyday religious problems, and closer ties with orthodoxy as found in India.