



Religious Divergence and Ethnic Syncretism: Transitions in Kali Mai Worship in Postcolonial Trinidad

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Abstract

Religion is a dynamic identity that goes through ethnic and religious negotiation in a society. The indigenous religious traditions of the girmitya community in Caribbean colonies are the results of decades of cultural mutation. The Kali Mai tradition of Trinidad is one such religious practice of migrated Hindus that went through years of questioning by the European missionary as they considered it a practice of paganism. The Kali Mai worship in the Hindu colony of Trinidad is an amalgamation of varied indigenous folk and religious cultures. The colonial practice of creating the hegemonic order has pushed Mother Kali to fall from grace as her worship became embarrassing and fearful for the respectable Indians. This paper emphasises on permutations in traditional paraphernalia, variation in the practice of ecstatic manifestation, re-identification and re-definition of deities, and reformulation of older practices of Kali Mai worship that raises the question of religious syncretism.

Keywords: religion; Trinidad; Kali Mai; tradition

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Religion, for any individual, is neither a primordial and static identity nor an extremely flexible one which can be adopted or shed as per people's will. It is an identity acquired through social practice that is constantly negotiated in changing contexts. Trinidad is well known in social scientific literature as a classic case of racial and ethnic contestation and religious syncretism. Mutability is one of the most important aspects of many rites, concepts, social forms and phenomena considered under the rubric of Hinduism in the diaspora. The religious traditions of Hindus in Trinidad are likewise the products of more than one hundred and fifty years of inadvertent modifications, alterations and permutations.

The Caribbean has been an area of religious concern in the European imagination since the beginning of European colonization. The indigenous population of the Caribbean was portrayed either as barbaric individuals who could be enslaved or as savages who needed the colonizers for their redemption. Although an institutionalized orthodoxy dominated the religious lives of Hindus in Trinidad, "highly parochial, non-Brahmanic/non-Sanskritic beliefs and practices" that Steven Vertovec calls the "Little Tradition" occurred on local levels (Vertovec 39). Like the enslaved Africans deemed as practitioners of black magic and witchcraft, indigenous rituals like that Kali Mai tradition practised by the Indian population working as indentured labourers provided new opportunities to the missionaries to question what they thought was paganism coming up from the Orient.

Trinidad is a relatively small participant on the world's stage. The country had been colonized by Spanish, French and British masters and as a result, has no surviving indigenous population. As Trinidad itself has been "neither centre nor periphery", the Hindu Trinidad is located at the margins of two global centre points (Trouillot 21). It is a small diasporic backwater for the indentured Indians and yet it is largely embedded in the West. The country is inescapably historically heterogeneous where social traditions grew directly out of colonial order. Trinidad evolved as a society highly differentiated and stratified by race, ethnicity and religion from the mid-nineteenth century till the present day. The non-orthodox forms of religions and beliefs are on the respective margin of both Christianity and Hinduism in the country. This peripheral



emergence has always encouraged participants to go through a convergence of distinct ethnic and religious traditions giving rise to a creolized form of tradition reinforced by their belief system.

It is understood that the Kali Mai puja in contemporary Trinidad is hybridization and amalgamation of various *Shakti*-oriented folk traditions that do not necessarily involve Goddess Kali. The deity has become metonymic for any form of ecstatic Hindu ritual in the country. The particular development of worship of Kali in Trinidad is what calls the attention of the researchers the most. It is surprising to observe that Kali was not considered a marginalized deity among Hindus in Trinidad during the early period of Indian indentureship. It is seen that she was one of the most common Indian deities mentioned in many textual references. Charles Kingsley in, *At Last, a Christmas in the West Indies* (1871) talks in detail about an old Hindu temple that has Shiva and Kali as major deities. Seepersad Naipaul offers a similar description of Goddess Kali in his collection of stories titled *The Adventures of Gurudeva* (1976). He talks about the efforts of a would-be pundit at constructing a proper temple or shrine in rural Trinidad. As mentioned earlier, the old-style Kali Mai puja was organized on behalf of the whole community. Everyone in the village did not have to participate directly in the worship but they were a part of the prior preparations and contributed rice, money and other things required for the rituals to receive spiritual benefits. Kali Mai tradition became a thing of morally suspect, lower-class Indian religiosity by the late 1950s. Morton Klass in *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Cultural Persistence* (1961) talks about two forms – *panchayat-Kali-ki-puja* and *Ghar-ki-puja* of Kali puja celebrations where even the high-caste devotees participated while showing distaste for animal sacrifice at the same time.

The colonial practice of creating the hegemonic order has pushed Mother Kali to fall from grace as her worship became embarrassing and fearful for the respectable Indians. Following this, Kali Mai worship and other forms of *Shakti puja* underwent a noteworthy resurgence and became a subaltern practice performed in the margins of the late-twentieth century mainstream Caribbean Hinduism. Kali Mai is the deity, Kali, from the northern part of India. She is known to be very harsh and is feared by many. She looks frightening in most of her



pictorial representations, with long hair and tongue and a necklace made of human skulls symbolizing the devil. Animal sacrifice and a red flag held on a long bamboo stick during the puja are some of the most peculiar features of Kali Mai worship. The religious tradition of Kali Mai was brought to Trinidad in the 1860s. Initially, puja was performed as a community ritual in open spaces to ward off evil and invite good fortune. Small temples and shrines were built in the later nineteenth century where statues of Mother Kali were set up alongside other female deities like Parmeshwarie or Di (creator of Earth). With the advent and domination of the “Great Tradition” of Hinduism that included “mainly the beliefs and practices found in Sanskrit texts and maintained by Brahmanic authority” in the postcolonial period, Kali started becoming stigmatized and her worship was looked upon with mixed degrees of contempt, ambivalence and fear (Vertovec 40).

Kali is considered a sinister and capricious demon goddess who entices people into her worship and punishes them if they do not keep up the rituals. Kali Mai *puja* in Trinidad is usually conducted every week in temples that range anywhere from makeshift shacks to large compounds holding places for other deities. The statues or pictures of other deities in Kali Mai temples range from mainstream gods like Ganesh, Surujnarayan, Hanuman, Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi to the local deities like Maduraviran, Dee Baba, Muni Spiren and Nagura Baba. Kali Mai tradition is therefore a rich amalgamation of the creole culture developed in Trinidad as a result of colonization. There is a certain set of methods employed by the locals for Kali Mai worship. The weekly service of the deity begins with devotees arriving early in the morning even before the official service begins with offerings like milk, fruits and flowers for all the deities present in the temples. The *pujari* or the attendants move around all the pictures or statues of the *deotas* (deities) with the offerings, incense sticks, lit flame, dry coconuts, et cetera while singing devotional songs in differing combinations of Hindi, Bhojpuri, Tamil and English. The ritual then moves to Kali Mai where the temple conducts animal sacrifice as an offering to the divine goddess. The grand affair of the annual *puja* of Kali Mai goes on for three intense days. The structure of worship during the annual ceremony is the same as that of the weekly service, but the rituals and offerings are more grand and elaborate. The annual Kali Mai puja is the time for



the devotees to show the authenticity and purity of their devotion by either getting lashes from a whip without getting injured or by walking over a fire pit without getting burned.

Animal sacrifice by the *Culcuttyas* or North Indians and fire walking by the *Madrassis* or South Indians have been some of the prominent practices of Kali worship along with the ecstatic manifestation of Kali Mai and other deities through human mediums. There is the notion in Kali Mai *puja* that there is a divine or cosmic energy called *Shakti* underlying all of creation. Different forms of *Shakti*, it is believed, manifest in different deities and “one or another of which may enter a devotee and take control of behaviour; or during the course of worship, *shakti* itself may imbue a devotee, also significantly modifying the control of behaviours” (Vertovec 257). The spiritual manifestation of the goddess through human possession is what attracts the devotees and the critics the most after it emerged in its contemporary form in the mid-1970s and has experienced significant growth since then. This ritual has attracted a large population from the Indo-Trinidadian rural and urban lower class. The number of devotees that visit the Kali Mai temple with the hope of a solution to their problems reaches several thousand. Several devotees visit the temple only to interact with *de Mudda* (the Mother) to talk about several problems like illness, unemployment, domestic conflicts, infertility, sexual dysfunction, et cetera. The possession and manifestation of *Shakti* among humans also call for the practice of *jharayi* – spiritual purification and blessing during spiritual manifestation. These ecstatic healing ceremonies have recruited people of African and mixed-African descent along with many upwardly mobile spiritual seekers. Another strand of development of Kali worship in Trinidad was the *Madrassi* ritual of fire-walking. This ceremony includes many variations in the rituals of fasting and purification disciplines, male participation, preparatory river or sea baths before the ceremony, use of drums, et cetera. Like the ritual of animal sacrifice, this fire-walking ceremony also goes around many experiences and ambivalences of devotees. All these traditions are questioned by the mainstream, class-inflicted population that views this form of *puja* as dealing in *Obeah* (West Indian colloquial term for black magic).

Centres for Kali Mai ceremonial services are established and managed by devotees who situate all the rituals, symbols and beliefs of their shrines primarily as per their visions and



understandings following the knowledge they have acquired from their *gurus*. In addition to these, innovation in ceremonies by way of incorporating other traditions has given rise to a dynamic variety, flexibility and embellishment of tradition at each shrine or temple. The emphasis on permutations in traditional paraphernalia, variation in the practice of ecstatic manifestation, re-identification and re-definition of deities, and reformulation of older practices raises the question of syncretism. James Houk describes syncretism as "a compromise between the need to retain those things that give meaning to everyday life and the desire to embellish and broaden that meaning in the context of an ever-changing socio-historical and ecological matrix" that has been a notoriously problematic concept in Caribbean Studies (170). The continuing non-orthodoxy and individualized evolution of the tradition are the results of the absence of any ritual or doctrinal texts, yet this inconsistency, as Melville and Francis Herskovits opine, "in no way invalidates their significance for believers" (303).

The officially standardized Brahminic ritual practices in the Caribbean are associated with the great Sanskrit-based tradition in India that talks about deities like Shiva, Ganesha, Rama and Sita, Hanuman, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Goddess Kali has become beyond the pale even though she is an important Sanskritic goddess in India. This is partly because the "Great Tradition" of Hindus in the Caribbean has largely been influenced by various forms of dominant Christian ideology (Vertovec 40). Other reasons behind side-lining the deity in the mainstream religious practices are animal sacrifice, a practice considered despicable by Christianity; ecstatic possession rituals common in folk religious traditions; and *Madrassi* fire-walking rituals considered dangerous and backward by the colonial masters. However, the most important reason behind Kali Mai being a target of moral backlash was the deity's dark iconographic colour that is given the demonic associations with Christianity and colonial racism. This also explains the production of an ideology that attributes the Kali Mai rituals to dark-skinned and low-caste Indians. Similar diasporic transgression and conservatism can also be seen in several recent religious trends. The increasing anti-sacrificial commitments and changing the black colour of the deity into pink in several temples have resulted in the continuing echo of the ambivalent legacy of colonialism in the dynamic postcolonial religious landscape of Trinidad.



The transformation of Kali worship into an alternative construction has had a significant impact. The worship of Mother Kali developed over time as it drew strength from its focus on personal salvation through an unmediated relationship with the Mother and other divine aspects. Hindu practitioners believe that their acceptance of others' ethnic and religious beliefs does not cause their identity to disappear as Indians. Hindus are not the only people who are required to mix and purify themselves to devote themselves to Mother Kali. The preservation of cultural purity is equally important for a status generation or regeneration of the non-Hindu celebrants of the Mother. The discovery of the Hindu Mother's purported healing power is motivating non-Hindus to somehow complete their devotion without any detriment to the purity of their professed origins. Likewise, the temporary or regular motherhood of the embodiment of Hindu-Trinidadian culture across postcolonial cultural boundaries does not dilute their identity as African or however ethnically and religiously identify them. Practitioners, whether Hindu or non-Hindu, mixing in Kali temples represents hyphenation, and brings different racialized cultural essences at the same time integrating them into an inclusive Trinidad Culture - a culture that some religious authorities do not affirm. Being separated within an integrative whole, the practitioners have formed a "micro-community with a nascent religion, that is, in a real sense, its own" (Mintz and Price 23–24), on which their sense of belonging to this community depends assuming they are ethnically and religiously different, with little homogeneous cultural values and norms. This is where others take on a new implication: for devotion to the mother Kali, the constant presence of others is the essential source of both Hindu and Trinidadian identities, all of which are authentic. A dialectical reading of racial or cultural purity and admixture presents the metaphors of creolization at odds with contemporary cults of Mother Kali, which have historically evolved to induce and reinforce both of these contradictions in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts in Trinidad.



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