**REFLECTIONS ON THE INDIAN DIASPORA,**

**IN THE CARIBBEAN AND ELSEWHERE**

by Vinay Lal\*

***I: What is the Indian Diaspora, and What Makes it Indian?***

Earlier this year, President Shankar Dayal Sharma paid an official visit to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and later in August the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad, hosted a major, nearly ten-days long, conference on the worldwide Indian Diaspora. President Sharma's trip coincided with the unprecedented decision by the Government of Trinidad to have May 30 proclaimed, through the institution of a permanent national holiday, "Indian Arrival Day". One hundred and fifty years ago, a ship carrying 217 Indians set anchor on May 30 in Port of Spain, thereby inaugurating a new chapter in the history of Trinidad, the Caribbean, and indeed the Indian Diaspora.

So unusual a holiday, and one which concerns Indians, should have received prominent attention in Indian newspapers and the media. Had such a holiday been proclaimed in the United States, the event would have been celebrated in India as an acknowledgment, howsoever belated, of the achievement of Indians, and of the 'arrival' of India upon the world stage as a not inconsiderable economic and military power. But Trinidad, and indeed a greater part of the non-Western world, is of little interest to middle-class Indians, and few people in India are aware that Indians have been settled in Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Mauritius, Fiji, Malaysia, and a host of other countries for a much longer period than they have been in the West. There is a worldwide community of Indians, but the world-view of middle-class Indians extends no farther than the culture of middle America, the wholly unappetizing America of *Reader's* Digest, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and polka dot dresses.

Though Indians are not reputed to be a very mobile people, and despite the strictures against traveling overseas that are said to be found in the ancient *shastras*, the presence of Indians abroad can be attested to from the days of remote antiquity. Early Indian migration, such as to Ceylon and South-east Asia, owed its origins to the impulse of Buddhist missionaries, and the well-known Hindu kingdoms of South-east Asia in the medieval period continued to attract labor and craftsmen from India. Long before the Mediterranean trading routes were established in the early modern period, the Indian Ocean trading system facilitated the migration of Indians to the east coast of Africa, South-east Asia, and the area that is now encompassed under the term Middle East. In the nineteenth century, a large number of Indians were taken, under conditions of savage exploitation, to various British colonies as indentured labor to work on sugar, tea, and rubber plantations, and the Indian populations of Fiji, Surinam, Guyana, Mauritius, Malaysia, Trinidad, South Africa and numerous other places owe their presence in these countries to this particular circumstance. Diverse streams of the Indian population have fed into the Indian diaspora in the twentieth century: while a professional elite found its way to the United States, Australia, and other nations of the 'developed' West, the laboring poor were recruited to build the shattered economies of Britain, Holland and Germany in the aftermath of World War II, and another strand of this working class has been providing for some years its muscle power and much more to the Sheikdoms of the middle East.

There might still remain questions about whether there is an Indian diaspora. It is with respect to the Jewish people that the word 'diaspora' was first employed, as it suggests the idea of dispersal and fragmentation; and in much of the literature there is a presumed relationship between the diasporic community and the land which they left and to which the possibility of return always subsists, or what we are apt to term 'motherland' or 'home'. The conditions that make for a diasporic community are admittedly complex, but this presumed link between the diasporic community and the motherland is easily questioned, nor is there any reason why we must be held hostage to any form of linguistic and epistemological tyranny. No substantive issue can be decided on the issue of 'origins'. It thus appears perfectly reasonable to speak of an Indian Diaspora, as it does of the Chinese Diaspora, the African Diaspora, the Palestinian Diaspora, and of course the Jewish Diaspora.

If there is, then, an Indian Diaspora, we must logically inquire what makes it 'Indian'. What is common to Hong Kong South Asian Muslims, Indo-Trinidadians, Punjabi Mexican Americans, Canadian Sikhs (or Sikh Canadians), Hindi-speaking Mauritians, Tamilian Guadeloupeans, and the twice- or thrice-migrants, such as Indians from East Africa who moved to Britain, then from there making their way to Canada, Australia, or the U.S.? This question can reasonably be asked of the myriad number of people residing in India itself, but the question of the 'Indianness' of Indians acquires a particular poignancy overseas, as Indians abroad are presumed to shed their regional, linguistic, and ethnic identities in deference to the more general identity of being an Indian. It is arguable that one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India; the category of 'Indian' is not contested abroad as it is in India. This is perhaps all the more remarkable, when one considers that the 'Indianness' of the Indian diaspora is not as evidently conceptualizable, or even visible, as the distinctly Chinese characteristics of the Chinese diaspora or the Islamic features of the Arab diaspora. Hindi does not bind together diasporic Indians in the manner in which Chinese holds together the Chinese diaspora; nor does Hinduism play in the Indian diaspora a role comparable to that of Islam within, if one could speak of such a thing, the Islamic Diaspora. Thus, in Mauritius, the national language remains a French creole, though Hindi is the language of the preponderant portion of the numerically dominant Indian community.

Nevertheless, if one unequivocally speaks of an Indian Diaspora, it is because other forces have emerged to cement the widely disparate elements from the Indian sub-continent into an 'Indian' community. One can point, for example, to Indian cinema, Hinduism, and food. The popular Hindi film provides a considerable element of commonalty to Indian communities, even among those where Hindi is not spoken, a profound homage to the Hindi film's rootedness in the deep mythic structures of Indian civilization. Across the globe, the popular Hindi film commands an extraordinary allegiance from Indians. Indian communities everywhere are also showing evidence of an alarming susceptibility to a resurgent Hinduism; and if Hindus in India are willing to accept the idea of a pluralistic Hinduism, diasporic Hindus appear to know the meaning and contours of Hinduism better than Hindus in India. Likewise, Indians overseas routinely invoke Indian civilization with a self-assurance that in India would be both mocked and contested, and though a Dalit woman has risen to the Chief Ministership of the Uttar Pradesh, a position only second to that of the Prime Minister as far as political fortunes are concerned, in the Vedic Diaspora of Hindus such an outcome is well beyond contemplation. Finally, in the matter of food, one beholds with amazement how Mughlai food has become *the* cuisine of India, entirely synonymous with Indian food. The same surely cannot be said of the cuisines of Gujarat, Andhra, and Kerala, or even of the popular snack food,idlis and *dosas*, of South India. In the Indian Diaspora, the plurality of India is condemned to disappear, even as the most esoteric traditions are given a fresh burst of life, and a unitary vision of 'Indianness', of Indian civilization and of Hinduism, appears poised to dominate.