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BOOK EXCERPT

In his new book, Suraj Yengde writes about local manifestations of caste among Indians in Trinidad

An excerpt from 'Caste: A Global Story'.

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Early East Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad. Owing to the intermixture of Indian indentured labourers with other caste groups and racial ethnicities, caste now operates as a distinct element of observable belief in host society. | [SMU Central University Libraries](#)

When we speak of caste and its presence worldwide, the conversation is often confined to the contemporary rise of migration and caste in the West. Most often the dialogue is restricted to the diasporic Dalits resident in the West. One can hardly find a comprehensive study of castes in locations outside the Western episteme. When I went to South Africa, one of the urgent projects that I had intended to study was caste among Indians and non-Indians in Africa. I was advised instead to focus on contemporary Indian migrant labour.

During my research, I found out that major studies of the history of indentured labour, the sociology of political movements, and the economics of social classes in India did not feature caste as one of the subjects of analysis. There are various reasons for this. But the three most important are that caste was forgotten during the era of the indentured system; people gave up caste owing to pressure from the colonial

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reasons partly explain why, they do not give a complete picture.

In my research, I found out how both Hindus and Muslims, the South Indians and Gujaratis, had retained their own cultural practice of caste through the recounting of memories of their ancestry. This was reflected in the way the socialisation of families took place and the remembrance of their heritage. Though the current generation does not adhere to caste norms and beliefs, there is a recognition and also a disowning of castes among the older diasporas. Caste has evolved and accommodated itself to local practices and state norms. We cannot speak of caste as a common ancestral practice that originates in one country and replicates similarly elsewhere. To do so is to ignore the ability of caste to reproduce itself as a system that accommodates itself to local customs and introduces its hierarchical logic as a justifiable practice of old. Thus, caste develops in different forms and takes on localised manifestations embedded in the practice of tradition and faith. Even though it faces opposition, it nevertheless assumes a position of importance as a recognised element of the spiritual order.



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In this chapter, we will take a look at Trinidad and see what caste has meant to this island nation whose population is nearly 40 per cent Indian. Most Trinidadian

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Trinidad be regarded as a satellite Hindu society without Dalits? As my research explored the archival history of Trinidad, it also engaged in deep empiricism. My fieldnotes from my first trip in 2022 were lost but then miraculously reappeared in late 2024 in a trunk I had left in Europe. However, it was the data I had collected in the summer of 2024 that became the source of much of my analysis. I had written down broader summaries of the 2022 visit. What changed in these years was the confidence I acquired from my informants who had taken a bold and critical political stand on the caste question. This encouraged me to produce a proud and complex story of the Trinidadian Hindu community.

Trinidadian Hindus, like many in the diaspora, live in the complex conditions of a post-independent, racialised democratic country while also being a prominent, indeed dominant, player in its economic affairs. This has brought them closer to Western modernity. Nevertheless, their faith in their ancestral heritage takes precedence over their transnational outlook. For many of the elites whom I met and interviewed in Trinidad, their ancestral land is but a figment of their imagination. Some are nostalgic and hope to visit India, but many are content with what their home country of Trinidad offers them. Their Hindu and caste identity was and continues to be primarily shaped by brahman-centric forms of ritual. There is some opposition to this brahman centrality by non-brahman Hindus and some progressive brahmans. These, however, do not take account of the changing landscape of caste.

The important historical role of Brahmanism in defining Hindu identity as an

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promoted to create one ethnic community, especially after independence and the establishment of a democratic republic. Subaltern cultures and traditions were subsumed into the dominant brahman caste rituals, sidelining lower-caste gods and their cultures. This was evident in practices such as kathas, yagnas, mandir havans, bhajans, marriages, funerals, and night-long recitations of the Ramayana. The stereotype of the brahman as a learned pandit persists in religious circles, where he is expected to be a brahman “religious specialist”. This confers legitimacy on rituals and authority on religious functions. Brahman dominance became a part of Hindu life, though not without opposition. Nevertheless, brahmans have succeeded in maintaining their control.

After taking over Hindu institutions, brahmans began to manage the affairs of temples and religious organisations, and broker deals on behalf of Hindus to secure political alliances. Hindu ethnicity as a religious category is recognised in the constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. Van der Veer and Vertovec, like other scholars, argue that brahmans were instrumental in making Hinduism an ethnic identity. Hindu practices in the Caribbean provide an interesting study of the future development of castes in the diaspora. Many who left their homes as indentured labourers envisioned a new future for themselves, and what we find today offers a glimpse of potential developments in the evolution of caste and identity. Hindu practice in the Caribbean society makes for an interesting case study of the afterlife of castes in the diasporic imagination.

Caste has achieved its purpose of segregating and further dividing various cultural groups into subcategories and groups as jatis. Though jatis do not exist in their innate forms, they operate in interpersonal relationships and reproduction. One of the prominent routes proposed by Dr Ambedkar to escape caste was by intermarrying and by destroying the beliefs of caste promoted in the Hindu shastras (scriptures). In addition to reformation, Ambedkar also proposed conversion out of the religion that maintained caste. Given the violence in the rural

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voluntary exodus.

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Have there been attempts to test the migration-out-of-caste proposition in the context of transoceanic mobility? Studies of the Indian diaspora do not pay much attention to caste, for two major reasons. The first is the non-availability of easily accessible data on caste as opposed to the noticeable ethnology of Indian religions in the diaspora. The second is the paucity of information in the colonial archive about caste and academic studies of caste experience are far too scant.

To investigate caste in the diaspora, we need to look not only at the peculiarities of caste institutions. We cannot, for example, expect caste to exist in the same form as we find in India. Although the practices of Dalits and their cultural artefacts have continued in one way or other in the diaspora, caste has not migrated unchanged. Over the years, it has moved away from being a strictly cultural institution to becoming an assimilated part of life in which outcastes exercise agency. Caste has undergone a creolization of sorts. It might even have become an institution that is reborn in a new shape with every generation

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and racial ethnicities, caste now operates as a distinct element of observable belief in host society. The question remains whether caste exists as a system in diasporic societies or whether, simply, castes exist. In Trinidad, my research shows that caste does not exist as a system of strict rules enforced by public support and institutional sanction. However, caste does exist as a personal or associational feeling bound up with identity, prestige, ritual and endogamy. For a caste system to exist, a ritual background is necessary, while castes can exist outside the purview of religion in a secular society.

Trinidad has retained an attraction for anthropologists and sociologists since the 1950s. Various researchers have visited the island nation to understand rituals, endogamous practices, creolization the West Indian and East Indian grouping of its African and Indian population ethnic castes and cultural practices. There are also various sociological studies of Trinidadian Hinduism, which through social acculturation became stabilised in the regular practices of diverse castes. This is what also took me to Trinidad. The existing research studies came to my attention when studying the Indian diaspora in South Africa. The rapt attention they paid to caste and ritualism among Indians in Trinidad made a strong impression on me. It was because of this that I returned to the region and its practices.

After the abolition of slavery in all British territories by the British Parliament in 1838, the Empire looked at the indentured system as a way of providing bonded labour in the plantation colonies. To give indentures a separate status from slavery, contracts and records were kept and formal processes of recruitment were observed. As a result, many lower-caste Indians and a few from the dominant castes took the route of the much-dreaded kaala paani – black waters – a metaphor for the dangerous oceans. Ritually, it meant that one would lose one's birthright to one's caste. All the same, 143,939 indentured Indians landed in Trinidad, with 90 per cent returning to India after the completion of their contracts (the actual numbers of returnees vary). Of these, 88 per cent practised Hinduism.

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As the General Register of Indian Immigrants makes clear, the Indian indentured labourers who were recruited for the plantations of Trinidad left their villages and travelled abroad in batches. Naturally, their social relationships and social circles were based on their caste, village, and language similarities.

This made it possible and likely for them to reproduce caste in Trinidad. Over the years, however, the material conditions in their newly adopted land did not prove conducive to the maintenance of the caste system as they had known it in India. Moreover, because their work was secular in nature, requiring hard labour in the canefields, the economic and occupational basis of caste was “eliminated almost completely” in Trinidad.¹⁵ Yet despite the argument that caste dissolved after two or so generations, the power and authority of ritual and the hold of a brahman-centric theology continued to shape people’s lives. Caste became part of people’s Hindu identity, being revealed in their practice of religion and their reverence for the hierarchical order.

Many of those considered lower or outcaste Indians who arrived on the shores of Trinidad aspired to a superior status and adopted a new identity in the hope of climbing up the ladder of the caste hierarchy. Reinventing themselves and their

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society of indentured labourers. Some people touched their feet as a mark of greeting. brahmans were also served food first and they were assigned the title of “panditji” (educated priest). This public practice of recognising brahmans and their position of superiority was indicative of the widespread acceptance and prevalence of caste among the Indian community in Trinidad. People also usually preferred a brahman over a non-brahman for conducting religious ceremonies. Given the ceremonial authority that brahmans wielded, temples became a space for exercising power and demonstrating status in the community. Caste is, after all, a ritualised, ceremonial practice in the Indian Hindu caste order, which receives social sanction as a result of the influence of the shastras (holy texts), mainly the smritis.

The caste origins of the many orthodox brahmans in Trinidad thus remain suspect. Though many claim that they can trace their ancestry through memories passed down from their grandfathers (aaja), their authenticity is not quite on a par with that of the brahman sramanas. Today those who claim a brahman identity in Trinidad face some hurdles in asserting a superior identity.

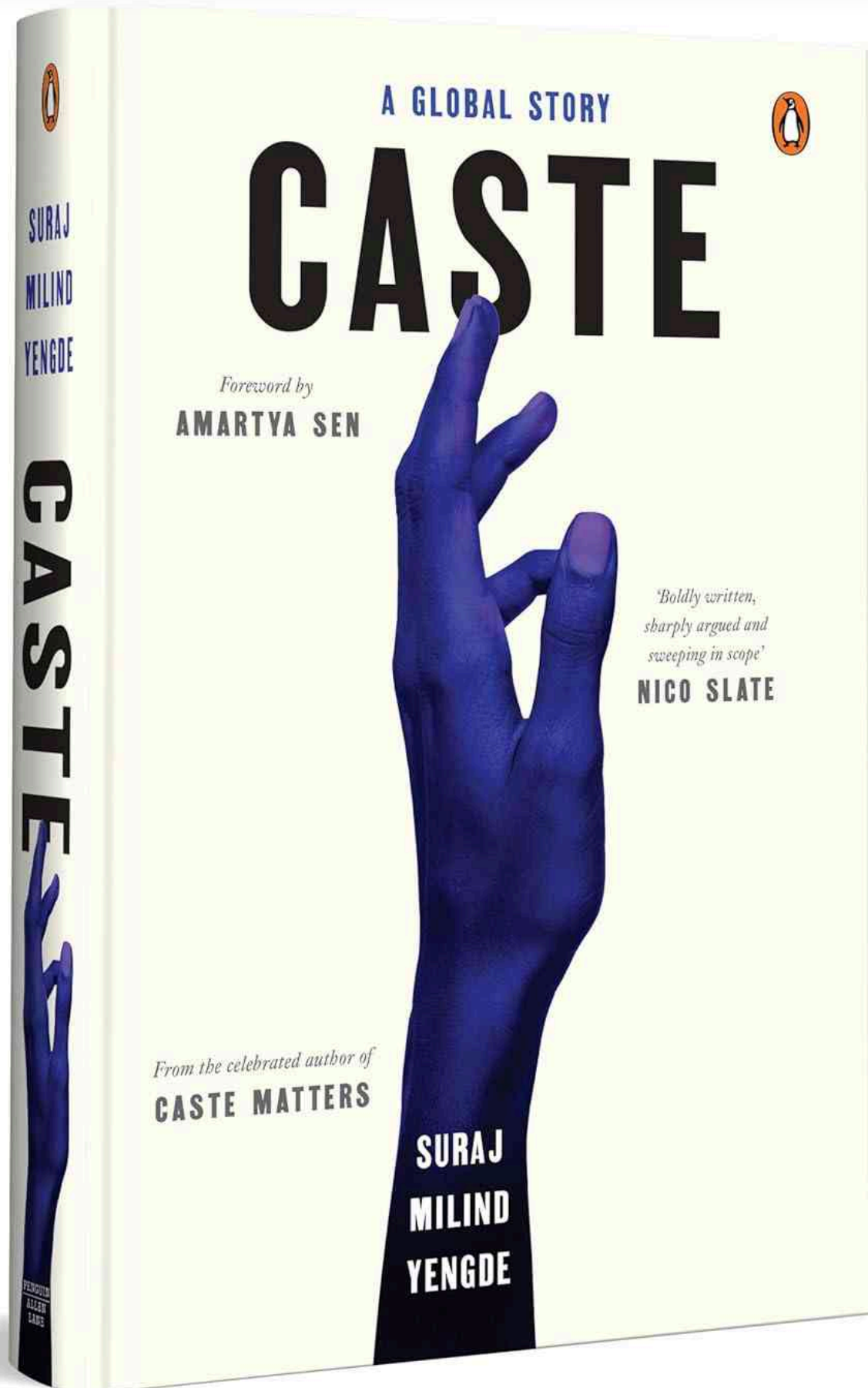
In his pioneering study of Trinidadian caste formations, Colin Clarke noted that two prominent castes of brahmans were recorded on the island: Gosain brahmans and Maharaj brahmans. It was commonly accepted among brahmans that the former, who were considered hermits or ascetics, formed the highest caste. The Maharaj brahmans were dominant in the town of San Fernando, the most populous city on the island. Part of the reason for this is that Maharaj is not a subcaste of brahmans but a title that refers to royalty or the ruling class. Many socially mobile and aspirant Indians took this name in the hope of enhancing their status, and thereby ascended from non-brahman castes to brahman. That is why one could find a pork-eating Maharaj in Trinidad. A second reason for the number of brahmans in the biggest town of Trinidad could be related to the salience of class over caste in a modernising multiracial society. Clarke reports that families who graduated to the

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An important part was played in the reproduction of caste in Trinidad by the Ramayana and other Puranic stories, which acquired a heightened value and significance among all believers. Ram became the Ram of everyone. As soon as the lower castes – the East Indian Trinidadians – started claiming positions of leadership by virtue of Ram – the lord of displaced nations – they became respected representative figures. Their understanding of Ram was informed by the writings and teachings of the accessible and egalitarian 15th-century mystic Kabir. One of the earliest Indian organisations to be formed in Trinidad was the Kabir Das Kendra, which represented Ram as a virtuous figure.

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