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## *Guyanese Madrasis in New York City: 'it's all about progress!'*

Mathieu Claveyrolas<sup>1</sup>

**/p. 49/** Halfway through its eight-mile-long route through Brooklyn and Queens, Liberty Avenue is the main thoroughfare of a New York City neighborhood known as Little Guyana, concentrating most of the local commercial activity.<sup>2</sup> The terminal stop to the open-air A-train line heading from Manhattan, Little Guyana has been presented to New Yorkers as the place to go to experience the exoticism of clothes, religion, and food<sup>3</sup>. Hosting many mosques, churches, and Hindu temples (most being frequented by **/p.50/** Guyanese), Little Guyana's Liberty Avenue has become since 2017 the central place for the annual Madrasa parade, a display of religious identity and political mobilisation whereby Madrasis protest the discrimination experienced in Guyana even as they challenge hegemonic identity politics among Hindu diasporic communities.

Guyana was the only British, English-speaking colony in South America. After its independence in 1966, ethnic violence<sup>4</sup> broke out between "Afro-Guyanese" slave descendants and "Indo-Guyanese" descendants from the 230,000 indentured labourers brought from India between 1838 and 1917. From the 1980s onwards, this led to the migration of a large number of Guyanese to North America, mostly to New York City where they number 140,000 today.<sup>5</sup> I will mainly focus on the Madrasa community. Coined after the small minority of indentured labourers coming from Madras<sup>6</sup>, the derogatory term Madrasa refers to a (geographical) Tamil origin but also to an (ideological) popular version of Hinduism, practiced in Guyana.

The most prevalent identity categories in Guyana separate Afro- and Indo-Guyanese communities. However, such categories are, on the one hand, unstable social constructions in a historical context of both metissage and communalism. On the other hand, the 'Afro-Indo' dichotomy overshadows the

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<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/2014/10/02/38ec1260-4998-11e4-a046-120a8a855cca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/2014/10/02/38ec1260-4998-11e4-a046-120a8a855cca_story.html); <https://culinarybackstreets.com/cities-category/queens/2019/indo-caribbean-little-guyana/>; <https://fr.nycgo.com/articles/guide-to-little-guyana-richmond-hill-queens>.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of ethnic conflictual issues in post-independent Guyana, and their entanglement in class, political and economic issues, see Shibata (2002) and Williams (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Meaning roughly one-fifth of the population of Guyana (720.000 inhabitants). Statistics from the 2010 Census and the 2011 American Community Survey indicate that the Guyanese would be the second-largest migrant community in Queens and the fifth in New York.

<sup>6</sup> Approximately 20% of indentured Indians in Guyana came from Madras (Viswanathan, 1995, p. 127).

fact that the Indo-Guyanese community is far from being homogeneous. It counts a minority of Muslims, and the various sectarian affiliations within the Hindu majority play a crucial role in political mobilisations, along with the Tamil / North-Indian divide. Moreover, as prototypical twice-migrants, New York Indo-Guyanese constantly circulate between three different spaces and identity references (India and Indianness, Guyana and Creoleness, and the contemporary diaspora in New York), far from any stable or exclusive sense of belonging.

My paper reflects on identity activism sponsored by Madrasi temples and associations in New York City. Those mobilisations relate to the Guyanese context, most of all to the anti-Madrasi stigma, but one could hardly /p.51/ miss the key role of the contemporary NYC context (visibility in a multicultural neighborhood; need to upgrade popular rituals; promotion of a “progressive” tradition) in framing the Madrasis’ identity politics. How do Madrasi identity entrepreneurs<sup>7</sup> and local devotees articulate their politico-religious activism by mobilising a multi-layered history? More than discussing an exclusive root-tracing process (to India or Guyana), I investigate the many ways through which the mobilisations build on the very New York context to engage in new identity politics freed from the ostracism suffered in Guyana. Such a focus prompts me to start with a discussion of the larger, Hindu, diasporic context before introducing my ethnographic data on the New York City Madrasi parade and other mobilisations.

## The Hindu diaspora in the US

### The Hindu “diaspora turn”

Whatever the migrant community, diasporic identity stakes usually draw on complex relations to both the homeland and the host country. In this context, religion has often stood as one of the privileged ways both to perpetuate cultural roots and to negotiate with the new environment (Bava & Capone, 2010). Hindu migrants, moreover, are often regarded as enjoying a specifically compelling ritual bond with India. The ideological debates around the taboos of leaving dharmabhumi (the “land of dharma,” the Hindu socio-cosmic order), crossing kalapani (the “dark sea”), and settling overseas for Hindus have logically burst around major episodes of migration from India at the end of the nineteenth century – whether it was elite Bengali intellectuals needing to reach Britain for their education, or candidates for indenture. Arguably, such taboos first concerned high caste orthodox Hindus (Clémentin-Ojha, 2016), or Brahmin priests (Trouillet, 2020). But Indian communities born from indenture (counting few orthodox Hindus and few Brahmins) also regularly resort to the issues of overcoming taboos when debating their history and identity (Claveyrolas, 2018). Indeed, political mobilisations among migrant Hindu communities must also be understood in the light of their specific religious apprehension of what migration implies.

/p.52/ For many decades now, major publications have made it clear that Hinduism should not be restricted to its (already diverse) realities within the territorial frame of India (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2007; Trouillet, 2020; Van der Veer & Vertovec, 1991, p. 164). It has become undeniable that Hinduism is perfectly able to account for overseas migration (uprooting and circulation outside India) and diasporic contexts (rooting abroad). But not only that: it has become arguable that studying Hinduism outside India usefully helps shift perspectives (Claveyrolas & Trouillet, 2021). The ways through which

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<sup>7</sup> By identity entrepreneurs, I mean those individuals engaged in representing and promoting the community. They often have a precise agenda regarding identity politics, even when it does not necessarily match the views of ordinary devotees and members of the community.

diasporic Hindu communities have dealt with their unprecedented minority status, with non-Indian – and non-Hindu– territories, and with new political institutions (the colonial plantation in Creole societies, Western nation-states in contemporary diasporas), for instance, quickly prevailed as inevitable issues in the academic literature as well as among local community leaders. Such focuses in diaspora studies of course relate to long-standing debates in South Asian research itself, around the relations between religion, politics, and secularism (Jaffrelot & Mohammad-Arif, 2012) or around the conflicts when the Indian secular state took over the management of Tamil temples, for instance (Presler, 1987). But the focus on overseas communities sheds a specific light on these debates; it also helps break with common misconceptions about Hinduism. Far from supporting the idea of a pure, homogeneous, and eternal religion, researching Hinduism in Guyana or NYC inevitably underlines the necessity to consider Hinduism within the contexts of both its historical evolution and its internal diversity.

The “diaspora” terminology now prevails among researchers on Indian communities outside India (Bates, 2001; Van der Veer, 1995), including the notion of a “Hindu diaspora” referring to its constitution as an “ethnic religion” (Rukmani, 2001; Vertovec, 2000). However, before this “diaspora turn” strengthened by India’s soft power strategies (Carsignol, 2011; Varrel, 2020), the more neutral and less artificially homogeneous “overseas communities” denomination was once preferred (Clarke et al., 1990; Schwartz, 1967). Fisher never mentions “diaspora” in her 1980 book on “immigrants from India” in NYC. At any rate, it is accepted that the “diaspora” idea and terminology should not hide the immense diversity among Hindu communities outside India (in terms of historical contexts of migration, geographical origin, and social classes [Clothey, 2006]). It then comes as no surprise that identity and political mobilisations widely differ /p.53/ whether one considers Hindu indentured labourers brought to Guyanese sugarcane plantations in the nineteenth century or Indian professionals who migrated to the US in the 1960s.

### The Indian diaspora in the US: from individuals to lobbies

Even within the US context, various phases of South Asian migration must be differentiated, along with varying mobilisation trends. If Hinduism in the US was virtually absent before the 1960s<sup>8</sup>, it soon became a subject of interest when the 1965 immigration laws<sup>9</sup> paved the way for South Asians to settle in numbers in the US. Contrary to the large cross-section of the Indian rural society who reached the Creole lands as indentured labourers under the incentive and control of the British empire (Bates, 2001), post-1965 South Asian immigrants to the US were mainly high class, high caste, educated individuals. Again unlike the nineteenth-century indentured labourers<sup>10</sup>, they are generally described as freely maximising their professional careers and life options (Agarwal, 1991; Saran, 1988; Khandelwal, 2002). Whether their initial intention was to return to India or not, such migrants settled as individuals, poorly concerned with, or related to, a Hindu community for at least two reasons. First,

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<sup>8</sup> Paralleling the ban on all Asian immigration in the US from 1913 to 1946.

<sup>9</sup> The 1965 US Immigration Act abolished immigration quotas according to nationality and race that severely restricted Indians from migrating to the US and promulgated selection according to education, profession and family grouping. The number of Indian immigrants in the US grew from 500 in 1965 to 15.000 annually in the 1970s (Fisher, 1980, p. 12sq).

<sup>10</sup> Among the indentured, free choice of migrating was largely limited by the necessities to flee extremely harsh life conditions in India, and by the recruiters’ deceitful strategies (Tinker, 1974), even though historians like Carter (1995) convincingly argued in favour of a more balanced image of indenture’s push and pull factors, at least after the first two decades.

they were highly successful individuals, rapidly considered a “model minority” both from the overall US society standpoint and from their own (Mohammad-Arif, 2000, p. 69). Such a profile of first-generation, individual migrants, exemplifying the opportunities for socioeconomic upward mobility the US context likes to be praised for, did not fit well into political mobilisation dynamics.

But other, more concrete criteria have to be underscored. Indian professionals rapidly settled in middle-upper class suburbs in private houses, with a topographic dispersal preventing Indian neighborhoods from developing. Eventually, two “Little Indias” did grow in Queens (in Flushing and Jackson Heights) in the 1980s but, unlike /p.54/ other ethnic enclaves, and unlike Little Guyana, they were –and still are– organised around businesses offering Indian products (food, clothes, travel agencies) while Indian migrants tend to reside elsewhere in New York City (ibid., p. 54).

As early as the 1970s, Fisher (1980, p. 59) quotes Indian professionals lamenting their social isolation resulting from the individual mode of migration and from topographic dispersal, an issue which eventually made them found various associations to institutionalise a community network. Academic research followed the path, with Fisher (1980) and Williams (1988) and, later, Khandelwal (1995) and Lessinger (1995), taking their distance from previous scholarship based on individual life stories and devoting substantial portions of their studies to Indian migrants’ organisational patterns in the US. Eventually, authors like Kurien (2007a) specifically focused on the political organisation and lobbying commitment of US Indians.

Such a shift from individuals to community institutions foregrounds the dialectical articulation of intra-Indian ecumenism in the US (a much-needed reaction by a minority to stand united in order to gain as much visibility and demographic weight as possible) and split dynamics (mostly replicating dividing lines existing in India, according to religion, language, and state of origin). The shift also focused on religion, its role in Indian migrants’ organisations, and in building or transmitting Indian identities and boundaries within the migrant community, and with the surrounding American context. It has been argued that such a shift generally corresponded with the coming of age of the first generation’s children (Mohammad-Arif, 2000, p. 120sq). Post-1965 migrants were first busy settling, adapting, and striving as individuals brought up in South Asia. But with children growing up, migrants were faced with the issues of long-term Americanisation, and the perceived risk of losing an “Indianness” never experienced first-hand. One of the main *raison d’être* for setting up migrants’ associations was to cope with the absence in the US of the traditional mediums of transmission and authority such as religious specialists<sup>11</sup> and elders.

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### Migration to New York: being Hindu in the “land of religious freedom”

On the one hand, the US context shows patterns of religious evolution comparable to those that have been studied in other diasporic contexts. Suffice it to mention here the “templeization” process (Baumann, 2009) characterising the gradual foundation of sacred places (from private altars/shelves at home to monumental temples) and the gradual search for display and visibility in the public space, through processions for instance (Jacobsen, 2008). Such processes insist on the links between the political issues of recognition and pride (Jackson, 2016; Lang, 2021), and the religious stakes of sacralising a foreign territory defined as non-Hindu, whether it is shared by other religions or secular (Claveyrolas, 2010; Goreau-Ponceaud, 2014).

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<sup>11</sup> Even among the many Brahmin migrants, few were ritually trained specialists (Fisher, 1980, p. 66).

On the other hand, the US, and NYC in particular, constitute specific contexts in at least two major ways. First, unlike European contexts where migration is often perceived as a new, potentially disruptive input in local society, migration and cosmopolitanism are praised for being the very DNA of NYC identity and citizenship. This ideology matches emic representations of US migrants. Saran (1988, p. 50), for instance, quotes a post-1965 Indian migrant naming the US a “nation of migrants” where Indians are only the last wave and the newest community coming. A 35-year-old Madrasite devotee, and ex-worker in the sugar industry, decided to leave Guyana because of local “racism” and social pressure. He recalls how he was welcomed at JFK airport by his uncle when he migrated in 2005: “We were not in the car that he already briefed me: all you have to do is work to earn your living.” “Apart from that,” the uncle said, “no one cares about you in America. No matter your race, color, religion, when you get the money, you can dress like the president: no one cares!” Indeed, the US mythology of a paradise full of equal opportunities for migrants is still very much central to the Guyanese migrants’ representations. As to the perception of a, sometimes, over-individualistic context, it certainly urges migrants to rely on organisations uniting the community.

Then, the US and NYC contexts are also specific, again in contradistinction to Europe, because displaying one’s religious affiliation, campaigning for its maintenance, visibility and specificities are traditionally welcome (Mohammad-Arif, 2007, p. 6). One could even say that the US /p.56/ lobbying logics or its system of tax exemptions encourage communities to put their religion forward to integrate and gain access to local economic and political resources. In Kurien’s words, “Multiculturalism permits, even demands, the construction of a public ethnic identity [...] immigrants become American by becoming ethnic” (2007a, p. 763-4). When it comes to NY Hindu Guyanese, the “Political Opportunity Structure” model focusing on the host country’s context to analyse migrant communities’ strategies and achievements is definitely congruent with the Madrasis’ own perceptions of their ability to take advantage of the local setting. It should be complemented by transnational patterns of identity policies (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003): getting in touch with India (through local migrant communities and Internet) is definitely easier in NY than was the case for their indentured ancestors. Indeed, local multiculturalism and transnational networks are two major dimensions framing the NY Hindu Guyanese identity politics.

Queens, the largest borough of NYC (approximately 2.2 million inhabitants), stands as a prototypical example of a highly ethnically and religiously diverse context. The cliché of a cosmopolitan city and borough matches the historical mixing of migrants and their religions. Bowne Street, for instance, is a major artery in Northern Queens Flushing, a neighborhood hosting a majority of Asians (Chinese, Koreans and South-Asians). It is named after the quaker John Bowne, renowned for the petition (Flushing remonstrance, 1657) considered the first step ever towards religious diversity in the US (Hanson, 2016). Not only does John Bowne perfectly embody the local history of mobilisation for religious freedom, but the actual street named after him hosts, among other sacred places, one of the biggest Hindu temples in the US, the Ganesh mandir, built on a Russian orthodox church, itself built on a Baptist church (Hanson, 2001). Beyond erecting temples on the very grounds of previous migrants’ sacred places, new communities can also be inspired by others. Jewish mobilisations, for instance, are praised by Hindus for having allowed the community to upgrade classwise without renouncing its roots and specificity (Agarwal, 1991, p. 67-8). Indeed, US Hindus explicitly refer to Jewish lobbying strategies (Kurien, 2007a), sometimes even yearning for collusion with them (in the case of aggressive anti-Muslim hindutva– Therwath, 2012).

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## A “model” and diverse minority

The specifically US ideological and institutional context is crucial to the ways migrant communities deal with transplanting their culture (Célestine, 2018), and eventually fit into their new setting. Williams' study (1988) of the religions of South Asians in the US is subtitled *New threads in the American tapestry*. Complementing the US point of view (South Asians as a thread in the US tapestry), we can compare their identities to a palimpsest, whose various layers keep in touch with each other in a permanent intertextual dialogue. From thread to palimpsest, though, one must be cautious not to overlook competitive and conflictual dimensions of identity politics in the US, including among migrant communities.

To ensure a “place at the multicultural table,” as Kurien (2007b) puts it, the Indian, and Hindu, Americans constantly negotiate with other communities. Due to their specific socio-professional profile, post-1965 South Asian migrants were quickly turned into a “model minority” (Mohammad-Arif, 2000). Interestingly, English-speaking Caribbeans also match this “model minority” myth (Loza, 2009, p. 322). In this sense, Indo-Guyanese in New York City could well be designated as a “double-model minority.” The myth is often incorporated by South Asians and Hindus, but their relative success is especially exploited, at the national level, to contrast with other, less successful, communities, most of all African-Americans, arguing about the latter's responsibility in not being able, or dedicated enough, to seize US opportunities (Carsignol, 2014).

But diversity, competition, and conflict in identity politics also refer to processes within a specific migrant community. In the US Indian case, many dividing lines have been studied, each being decisive when it comes to defining the frontiers of the community, and when it comes to subsequent political mobilisations. First are contrasted those networks promoting a “South Asian” identity (around secular, leftist, and religiously and nationally inclusive principles) with the promoters of the Hindutva ideology (focusing on a right-wing, exclusively Hindu and Indian identity)—Kurien, 2007a; Carsignol, 2014.

Then, in the Hindu American case, the second wave of migrants (those typically engaged in political mobilisations—Kurien, 2007a, p. 759) has made the overall picture of the community more and more complex. Indeed, post-1965 professionals are no longer the majority in the New York **/p.58/** South Asian community: they have been joined by other, less privileged, individuals, whether they were Indians sponsored by the first generation who settled in lower-class occupations (service or commercial activities) or Indo-Caribbeans and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees.

Third, within the Indian Hindu migrant community itself, major dividing lines prevail. As in most Hindu diasporic contexts, North-Indian Hinduism differs from its Tamil counterpart, through specific temples, religious specialists, and rituals. In the US, some temples have indeed grown on an ecumenic, cross-sectarian and cross-regional basis (Williams, 1988, p. 264sq) out of the necessity to maximise numbers and to gather all the funding available. But North-Indian Hindus are often tagged “Sanatan Dharma” and associated with orthodox Hinduism, as opposed to reformists of the Arya Samaj, to sectarian traditions such as Swaminarayan (Williams, 1988, p. 152-186), and to popular, non-Brahmanic forms of Hinduism. Diversity also pervades Tamil diasporic communities. Indeed, despite its flourishing urban middle-class building modern, Dravidian style, temples all over the diaspora (Punzo-Waghorne, 2004), and despite the many networks of religious specialists travelling from Tamil Nadu to the diaspora (Trouillet, 2020), Tamil Hinduism is often considered as hosting the most resilient forms of popular practice including trance, animal sacrifice and non-Brahmanic priesthood. Such arguably overgeneralisation is reinforced by other socio-racial prejudices linking Tamils with dark-skin, lower-caste individuals. To understand the local identity politics of the Guyanese Madrasis, a community



defined by a religious tradition marginalised even among Tamil Hinduism, I will now discuss their increasingly organised mobilisations, the debates and struggles they focus on, and the resulting unusual blurring of regular identity categories.

### Madrasis' unorthodox mobilisations

Ethnography stresses the crucial role of the US context in framing the NY Madrasi community mobilisations vis-à-vis other local communities, of course, but most of all in contrast with the “original,” Guyanese and Hindu, settings both perceived as discriminatory. I focus here on local temples<sup>12</sup> and on the United Madrasi Association (UMA– after the name of **/p.59/** the goddess' fierce representations). The association was founded in 2017 to promote the Madrasi tradition, and to conscientise and organise the NY community. The founder and president is Vijah Ramjattan, a field director in psychiatry at Columbia University in his early forties, who migrated from Trinidad to NYC as a child with his parents.

### Parading to de-ostracise shakti devotion and unify the community

One night in 2017, Vijah dreamt of the goddess<sup>13</sup> on a chariot walking down Liberty Avenue amidst the crowd of her worshippers. He first found the dream odd, convinced that no one would ever engage in the public display of shakti devotion, a Hindu tradition that does not fit in the orthodox agenda because of its outward displays of emotions and its scandalous reputation owing to the central role of trance and sacrifice. But Vijah eventually decided to organise a parade in Little Guyana, and convinced enough Madrasi temple managers to participate. Organising such an event, Vijah insists, was a double challenge in keeping with the two major goals of UMA. First, it was a matter of having devotees overstep their “shame” to publicly display their “love to the Mother.” Then, it was a matter of unifying a very loosely related and individualistic community.

Madrasis only recently caught up with NYC's fondness for parades (Slyomovics, 1995). Vijah stressed how Madrasis are not used to going out in the street in processions –which he considers linked to the stigma attached to shakti devotion. Such stigma has been prevalent in Guyana (Harms, 2010; Kloß, 2016) where shakti devotion suffers from an association with both backward superstition and dangerous black magic (Williams, 1991, p. 211-214). Vijah insists that the absence of Madrasi processions is all the more conspicuous in the Guyanese context where many processions are organised by other religious (and Hindu) traditions, and for national festivities such as Pagwah (Holi) or Diwali. The ostracisation of Madrasis in Guyana is often related first to the rejection of their religious practices by orthodox **/p.60/** Hindus. But in a sermon addressed to devotees during the Sunday service in a Madrasi temple, Vijah traced the stigma back to colonial times: “Long ago, the British [...] taught our ancestors to be ashamed of themselves. Of their culture.” In any case, whether it is the British or the orthodox Hindus who are made responsible for oppression, the NY context is considered an opportunity to help break a “Guyanese” stigma. In the same sermon, Vijah exposed how the stigma

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<sup>12</sup> This article draws on two fieldworks in Queens (September/October 2018; June 2019). The participant observation of rituals and discussions with priests and devotees mostly took place in three temples (the Sri Shakti Mariamma temple in Ozone Park, the Maha Kali temple in South-Jamaica, and the Adi shakti Maha Kali temple in Jamaica).

<sup>13</sup> Generally associated with the Tamil village-goddess Mariamman, she is referred to as “Mother” (“Mudda” in Guyanese creole).



effectively endured after migration: “[In Guyana] we worshipped our Mother in the backyards, and bottom-house, you know? And see: here again, in New York, we hide in basements, all down the driveways. We remained, for a very long time, in this slave mentality. We leave the temple and we get rid of our dhoti<sup>14</sup> and we wipe away quickly, really quickly, the trace of sindur<sup>15</sup> on our forehead!” It first crossed my mind that the last part of the quotation could refer to the dotbusters, these racist groups targeting Indians (and women wearing the bindi-dot) in the NY area in the 1980s –an interpretation that would designate the US as a threatening setting. But two regular devotees in their thirties proved me wrong: one of them had never heard about the dotbusters; and the other one firmly denied any issue with the NY context: “It is not like that,” he explained. “Madrasis, they are rejected back in Guyana and they carried the stigma with them here in America.”

Parading is shared by many Hindu diasporic communities: a major way to gain visibility in the public space (Jacobsen, 2008), it is also the opportunity to negotiate the community’s image given to “others.” Religiosity in diaspora indeed grows with strong reflexivity (Mohammad-Arif, 2007, p. 3), fostered by a context where immigrants encounter other forms of religiosity, and where others specifically look at the immigrants’ religiosity as strange. As for NY Madrasis, it indeed appears that mobilisations first originate in the devotees’ growing self-awareness: “they have to do it [be proud of their tradition] for themselves,” says a Madrasi priest speaking about the devotees of his temple. The whole move towards mobilising stems from taking advantage of having left Guyana to break with hindrances considered to be properly Guyanese. In this sense, Madrasis praise and enjoy the American ideology: “all religions are the same, here.<sup>14</sup> Piece of cotton wrapped around the legs, associated with Hindu ritual contexts in NYC. /p.61/ No big and small, nothing like that.” Even the way others look at them seems to facilitate a positive self-image. NY is not lived as an adverse context, as another devotee argues: “People like the parade very much! They really enjoy. With my wife we looked at the views on YouTube, you can’t believe it!” Temple authorities never fail to thank local authorities for their diligence in facilitating tax exemptions, granting permits or guaranteeing police supervision during special events. “My father always tells me this is so good! Here, we ask and the police comes, we only must be very careful with the time schedule. That is why I ask devotees to hurry. Because we cannot overstep.” Enjoying the US benevolence contrasts with a dimmer perception of the Guyanese setting: “In Guyana, my father tells me it is a very different story for Madrasis, you know.”

In addition to taking advantage of the new setting for openly displaying shakti devotion, the parade’s other challenge was to bring together a community supposedly weakened by a “typically Madrasi ego” and the absence of structures. Most of the 40 or so Madrasi temples in NYC are private and un-official structures in private backyards that were founded by an individual who acts as head-priest. Beyond a network of only loosely linked individual temples, the very nature of shakti devotion may also account for devotees being reluctant to visit several temples. Indeed, as the head-priest and his assistants define their role as mediums for the gods, they transmit personal messages to devotees concerning their most intimate life, often developing a very close and moving relationship. A priest assistant insists that medium-priests know devotees “far better than [their] best friend” –a point he contrasts with the more technical relation experienced with an orthodox Brahmin specialist. In any case, although several individual devotees (most of the time priest assistants) do visit other Madrasi temples, Vijah laments

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<sup>14</sup> Piece of cotton wrapped around the legs, associated with Hindu ritual contexts in NYC.

<sup>15</sup> Vermilion powder symbolising marriage (in women’s hair) and the ritual bond with the deity (on the devotees’ forehead).

the poor cooperation and rare friendly visits between individual temples overall. Despite the networks linking NYC temples with “mother-temples” in Guyana<sup>16</sup>, and even though most specialists were trained by a handful of Guyanese gurus, several devotees blamed the diversity of Guyanese village traditions to explain the loose cooperation between NYC temples, once more rooting the controversial issue back in Guyana.

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However diverse and individualised, Madrasi temples should also be seen as major actors in the conscientisation process of the community. Sunday services, for instance, articulate both individual and community functions through two distinct key-moments. On the one hand, most of the afternoon is devoted to what is identified as the core identity of Madrasi devotion: trance and mediumship. The mood is then mostly turned towards individual matters each devotee submits to mediums and deities. On the other hand, though, after ordinary pujas (“prayers”) have been performed in the morning, one or two hours are devoted to a “sermon” (the Christian terminology being used locally). The head-priest and other devotees or guests share a reading desk and a microphone. They speak about their personal life and devotional experience through edifying anecdotes with a mix of humour and rhetorical prompts, urging the audience to agree through loud interjections in an atmosphere not unlike charismatic Christian sermons. Such sessions are the opportunity to recall the collective history, reiterate the Madrasi specificity and current stakes and consequently build a shared identity.

The Madrasi parade was a major opportunity to strengthen these unifying rhetorics and processes. UMA had to organise rehearsal sessions for various temples’ tappu<sup>17</sup> players to agree on a common music score. **/p.63/** Not surprisingly, this was also an opportunity to uniformise the verses (from the Mariammen Thalattu<sup>18</sup>) to be chanted and the tappu hands to be played through a leaflet of extracts printed out by UMA and handed out to all participants. The consensus finally settled on the most devotional, uncontroversial verses and “soft” tappu hands, setting aside those associated with sacrifice and trance. Indeed, varying degrees of emotion and shakti are allowed during Madrasi regular Sunday services in NY, depending on the individual temples and headpriests (George, 2018). In this sense, if going out in the streets implied an orthodoxisation of the Madrasi devotion resulting from surrounding communities’ pressure, the issue and options were settled through intra-community debates.

The parade as a one-time event, and the loose network of temples, constantly negotiate between a traditionally poorly organised community and the opportunities promised by the local context. A Little Guyana Sanatan Dharma pujashop keeper found in the NY setting reasons to hope that the Madrasi’s ability to organise will grow, introducing the idea that this is part of a more global game ruling all communities in NYC: “When you see Indians, Jackson Heights, the Punjabis in Richmond Hills, they just **/p.64/** followed what others did before them, other religions, other communities, they organised, they built temples, they got the money and now their associations are so powerful!” When I asked if Madrasis will do the same, he hesitated: “Madrasis, I don’t know,” but eventually concluded: “but

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<sup>16</sup> More generally, many individual networks link NYC and Guyana: not only do NY temples and individuals donate money to temples in Guyana, but Guyanese family and friends (not necessarily affiliated to the Madrasi community) can contribute to NYC Madrasi festivities (annual puja) through donations via Walmart’s on-line vouchers, for instance.

<sup>17</sup> The tappu is a drum used for Hindu ritual invocations. Traditionally made out of animal skin, it is therefore polluting: tappu players and associated ceremonies (funerals, for instance) are linked to Untouchable castes both in India and in the diaspora (Clark-Décès, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> “Lullaby for Mariamman,” the major devotional text dedicated to the goddess, in Tamil. Kloß (2016, p. 104) stressed the role of emphasising scripture on the orthodoxisation of the Madrasi tradition in Guyana.

what other choice do you have? They too must get organised.” No doubt Vijah agrees with the necessity to institutionalise further the promotion of the Madrasi community.

### Towards a progressive devotion: ecology and gender issues

But if New York is sweeter than Guyana to Madrasis, to what extent does it influence the content of their mobilisation? As James, an ex-American GI in his thirties, clearly stated in his speech addressed to the South-Jamaica Maha Kali devotees during the Sunday service: “With me, it is all about progress!” Indeed, the progressive orientation of Madrasis’ mobilisations cannot go unnoticed. It is first a matter of civic gesture, a political positioning barely linked to their religious specificities. Gender equality, eco-friendly worship, and social programs are central in leaflets and posters displayed in the temples’ billing boards. But the urge to mobilise also relates to a reflexive look insisting that discrimination resulted from dominant groups being wellorganised when Madrasis were not. Uniting the community is considered a priority because those groups considered responsible for the stigmatisation of Madrasis in Guyana, whether they are Catholic or Arya Samaj, are renowned for having based their conversion strategies on social activism (Kloß, 2016). Madrasis should then follow a similar path.

Collective action is promoted, organised, and advertised through UMA, and passed through Facebook and other social media, crucial to the maintenance of a core membership in the community. Beyond the parade, UMA key activities often focus on social engagement, such as Annapurna day, when devotees prepare and distribute food and clothes to the homeless, “whatever their race and religion.” Ecological awareness can also be promoted, when devotees gather to clean the beaches from rubbish and other Hindu devotion leftovers by the seaside. UMA also freely collects statues (murtis) that are broken or not used anymore to stop devotees, who cannot throw them away, from immersing them in the sea. Including wildlife is taken into account: Jamaica Bay being a protected area, Vijah fights /p.65/ for a better awareness that leaving even biodegradable leftovers of devotion such as flowers and fruits could affect the local ecosystem, with a growing population of rats endangering the bird sanctuary.

But the main progressive dimension displayed by the Madrasi tradition concerns gender equality. Not all temple priests agree, but half of them, according to Vijah, chose to give equal status to women in all ritual matters. Several women are head-priests (pujarin), and many are priest-assistants and mediums. They can beat the tappu –a blatant move away from Hindu traditions, including in Guyana, that was eventually approved for the parade. Indeed, tappu playing is supposed to rely on secret knowledge, transmitted through the initiation of the male heir by his father or uncle. If the focus on the devotion to goddesses could help back such progressive mobilisation towards gender equality (Jackson, 2016), the connection is rarely central to local discourses, where plain social arguments are more often put forward. “If women work all night to prepare the food we will share [after the service], or the new clothes for the deities [for the annual puja],” argues a male devotee in his sixties who migrated to NY in 2001, “they can also take part in the puja and the temple administration, don’t you think?” Celebrating Fathers’ Day on June 21st, a priest paid tribute to “all men, husbands, fathers,” but he also took advantage of his sermon to extend his tribute to “all women who have to be both mothers and fathers” in the modern world, a precision duly applauded by men and women devotees alike.

Women’s role is perceived as specifically crucial in /p.66/ the migration context, not only because of the usual argument presenting mothers as the ones transmitting traditions to the other generation but because migration is said to foreground their public visibility, which is both a challenge and an opportunity: “This is America: you have to speak for yourself,” explains a woman acting as priest

assistant when she shows a flyer presenting a discussion meeting, hosted in her temple under her supervision, giving the floor to “[Indo-Caribbean] migrant women.” Gender studies and feminist empowerment movements were indeed central well before migration: they account for an important share of the literature on Indo-Caribbean communities (Hosein, 2012; Kanhai 1999 & 2011; Khan, 2016). Socially, the poor ratio of women among indentured labourers resulted in new gender roles with cases of polyandry and major involvement of women in strikes, for instance (Parsard, 2016). As for religion, Sita has been a rallying but ambivalent character among Hindu diasporic communities. A model for the (endangered) female purity on which Hinduness lies in faraway lands, Sita also contests paternalistic norms and narratives. Interestingly, the ‘feminist’ version of Sita is more often linked to empowerment among indentured, Creole, communities (Kini, 2014).

Far from being restricted to the realm of political mobilisation, or to punctual religious events such as the parade, gender issues also pervade the temples’ daily life. Depending on the temples, the prototypical separation of women and men is diversely enforced, and always in a poorly dogmatic way. Physical contact between men and women is omnipresent. Devotees and ritual specialists greet each other with hugs and kisses; and entranced individuals can be cared for (through physical help and contact) by those of the other sex. Non-ritual activities such as caring for children (or the ethnographer), preparing the temple space, or cleaning it after the service, are definitely shared by both sexes. The menstrual taboo forbidding women from entering the temples during their periods is respected and enforced: it is the only prohibition Madrasis, otherwise openly welcoming, ask others (including foreigners) to respect when invited to share a service. Some women devotees, however, mentioned their discomfort with the heavy constraints consequently suffered by women. When I told them about seven-day fasting periods in Mauritius, often several times a year (compared with 2 or 3 day-fasting preceding Madrasi weekly rituals), they enquired with perplexity how Mauritian women could concretely participate in a state of ritual purity to all these ceremonies.

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Madrasi Facebook accounts fight injustice within their community, for instance sexual harassment by Hindu priests. But the care for gender equality issues extends outside the Madrasi, and Hindu, sphere, when Guyanese women firmly protested through social media against the Alabama restrictive laws on abortion, for instance. The Jahajee sisters group, whose name firstly relates to the Indo-Caribbean experience (jahaji bhai and bahen are the “brothers and sisters of the ship,” meaning the Indentured), published the drawing of a nude and sexualised woman silhouette with the words “this is not government property!”

Gender mobilisation even goes one step further in the more liberal context of New York City. Madrasi organisations (temples and UMA) actively promote LGBTQI struggles. Several temples display pro-LGBTQI stickers next to the ritual schedule, and LGBTQI individuals are regularly invited on stage during Madrasi cultural performances. More openly supportive still, several devotees insisted that a Queer individual was chosen to embody the goddess during one of the Madrasi parades. Such an example was even more put forward by a woman devotee and her husband who insisted on the “most welcome move towards tolerance when you talk about sexual orientation.” Specifically referring to the June 2019 NY Pride March (taking place at the time of the interview), they proudly implied that Madrasis stood at the avant-garde of local progressive social struggles<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Such move towards “reconciling religion with progressive ideas and alternative lifestyles” (including “a contingent of Ismaili queers” at the Toronto Pride 2011) is witnessed in all religions when mobilised by “South Asian” [anti-Hindutva] activists (Carsignol, 2014, p. 13).

## Blurring identities

The Madrasis' civic involvement is not only about grasping the compulsory dimensions of political mobilisations in contemporary NYC such as environment and gender issues. It builds on a representation of Madrasi tradition and worship as articulating popular devotion and progressive ideology. This stems from an explicit and valorised blurring of identities, against the essentialist ethno-religious "Indian" or "Hindu" categories mobilised by more orthodox communities. In fact, for the Madrasis, not only are the identity categories and frontiers promoted by these Hindu orthodox considered discriminatory towards their own, popular, and unorthodox traditions, but they are criticised as **/p.68/** opportunistic and unauthentic. Informal discourses but also the successive speakers stirring up the crowd of devotees during the Sunday service's sermon assimilate the Hindu reformist Arya Samaj and orthodox Sanatan Dharma to reactionary traditions. They dismiss their so-called "modernity" as collusion with the British colonisers' morality: Hindu reformists would in fact fight blood sacrifice and overt emotional expression (and trance) in the name of class, caste or gender prejudices. Down-to-earth arguments are also deployed to further dismiss the superiority of Hindu orthodox groups. Brahmins, back in Guyana, are accused of having fought first for the survival of their monopoly of ritual knowledge and power, as well as for its attendant business niche (Thomases & Reich, 2019). Conversely, the Madrasi tradition accepts individual foundations of temples no matter the caste or institutionalised training or management of the founder, standing as a major challenge to the Brahmins' monopoly. Once more, however, it is the NY context that is put forward to explain the Madrasis' conscientisation: "[in Guyana], they keep on telling you're backward. Stop doing this and that. This is backward, they say. Now [in NY], it all comes clear. They just wanted to keep us under control. But you see we're no fools."

With the Madrasi community starting to organise in NY, a series of evolutions and compromises are being negotiated. Most progressive circles, in NY, would hardly be supportive of the key features of popular Hinduism such as animal sacrifice and cigarette smoking or alcohol offering. Vijah proudly evokes sacrifice together with subsequent communal meat-eating practices. But several NY Madrasi temples opted for sada (non-sacrificial) worship, favouring softer trance episodes, and banning animal sacrifices. And in any case, no temple officially accepts or openly displays such practice (which would be illegal). As for alcohol and cigarettes offered to most deities, and drunk and smoked by devotees in a trance embodying them, Vijah admits that alcoholism is a major health issue back in Guyana and Trinidad and that, consequently, such devotional practices may become an issue worth discussing among the community in the near future: "How can I tell my children cigarette smoking is bad for them if the Mother herself is smoking?"

Together with such adaptations aiming at promoting their "popular-yet-progressive" community, Madrasis negotiate their relations with other Hindu groups, along with these moving (national, ethnic and intra-Hindu) frontiers that have been analysed as central to identity politics (Barth, **/p.69/** 1970). Doing so, Madrasis comfortably evolve between various geographic and historical references, from India to Guyana and NY or the diaspora. If popular Hinduisms have been criticised and heavily "reformed" by Hindu elites all over the world, Creole Hinduisms have proved rather resilient, with animal sacrifice (in the Caribbean or La Réunion) or "violent" rituals (body-piercing, and fire-walking ceremonies) remaining central to local practices (Benoist, 1998; Claveyrolas, 2017). The Guyanese Madrasi shakti devotion should be counted among such popular/Creole Hindu traditions –and we saw how orthodox Hindus frowned at it. Interestingly, this locally stigmatised tradition (without exact equivalent in other countries) has also successfully spread outside Guyana. Many Madrasi shakti (or

Kali puja) temples were founded in Trinidad during the past half-century on the Guyanese model –a fact often cited by devotees. If this no doubt boosts the Madrasi self-esteem in NY, it also focuses on a definitely Indo-Caribbean identity, as opposed to the Indian Hindu component: “[Guyanese] Sanatan, Arya Samaj, them they want to do it just like India. But we [Madrasi] have our own tradition, this is our Mother playing,” explains a priest to teenage devotees once the sermon finished.

As often, unstable frontiers between groups are where negotiations take place (Agier, 2013). Among the Hindu Guyanese, Sanatan Dharma, North-Indian, Brahmins are often invited to perform the most orthodox rituals (jhandi, yajna). Madrasi devotees praise their mastering of sanskrit and ritualism, and strictly follow the Brahmins’ instructions during such rituals, even if some of them laughingly remarked: “see how he [the Brahmin priest] left before the manifestations [possession rituals in the afternoon]!” As for NY Indian Hindus, they sometimes inspire the kind of respectful reverence due to their “genuine” Indianness. Vijah was very happy for the Madrasis to have been allowed to run a chariot during the NY Indian Parade. Most of all, he was delighted (and somewhat surprised) when Uma Mysorekar, the prominent president of the Hindu Temple Society of North-America managing the Flushing Ganesh temple, accepted his invitation to be Little Guyana Madrasi parade’s guest of honour. Despite intra-NY collaboration, contacts with Tamils (in India or Mauritius) through social networks (learning the Tamil language and devotional songs on YouTube, watching Tamil rituals as performed throughout India and the diaspora) stand as a more pervasive move, participating in the renewal, and transnationalisation, of local Madrasi devotion (George, 2018).

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Notwithstanding the move towards transnational Hindu inclusiveness, the Madrasi tradition first promotes Guyanese-ness. Its appeal within the Indo-Guyanese migrant community may well be linked to its definition as the most creole (syncretic) and uniquely Guyanese religious tradition (Williams, 1991, p. 212), which is coherent with the focus on Guyanese identity before Hindu-ness. The most overtly promoted token of the Madrasis’ openness lies indeed in the participation of Afro-Guyanese. Though proudly praised as distinctive, such openness is not devoid of ambiguities: the Madrasis’ most controversial characteristics (music, trance, sacrifice –and including the devotees’ darker skin and curly hair) have often made observers and detractors compare Madrasi devotion to Afro-Guyanese sorcery traditions (obeah - Kloß, 2016, p. 96). If this parallel strengthens discrimination logics, the pragmatic, non-ethnicised, focus also stands as a major appeal of the Madrasi tradition. As a matter of fact, many non-Tamils, non-Hindus and non-“Indians” also participate in Madrasi devotion<sup>20</sup>, claiming to find there the emotional drive more and more banned from other sacred places. The rather recent success of Madrasi devotion, in Guyana<sup>21</sup> and NY must be related to a kind of backfire against the overall move towards orthodox Hindu practices and ideologies (ibid.). A NY devotee explained how more and more Guyanese are “fed up with turning the music down and all this. If you love your mother, you should be shouting it loud, very loud.” Others insist on the growing inability of orthodox rituals to answer the devotees’ pragmatic needs: “what if I’m sick? If my children are sick? No way Ganesh can help me! We Madrasi we have our Mother: she can help!” It is also worth noting that Madrasi devotion implies a very compelling bond with the deity –one you cannot break easily, indeed one even your descendants are not supposed to break. Such cross-generation bonding, forbidding only punctual recourse to the

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<sup>20</sup> Some Guyanese devotees in NY Madrasi temples indeed claim African descent, some of them Rastafari, some of them becoming entranced and one of them actually a priest-assistant. But this should not hide the overwhelming “Indian” majority. It would probably be deceiving to mistake the asserted openness to the participation of others for a tradition un-bounded by ethnic categories.

<sup>21</sup> The tradition was first revitalised during the 1920s, but, most of all, since the 1970s with the prominent role of Jamsie Naidoo.

Madrasi deities, is often given as a major reason for community mixing.

Finally, NY Madrasis are embedded in highly unstable and contextual identity politics. Besides the multidimensional identities of immigrant “Indians,” with regional, caste, and religious affiliations (Williams, 1988, /p.71/ p. 23), the Guyanese can shift from one ethnic identity (Afro, Creole, Indo-Guyanese) to the other depending on individual preferences, or the political climate (Shibata, 2002). Vijah himself exemplifies how the Madrasi community transcends classic ethnic categories: though first identifying himself as “Madrasi,” he is a Trinidadian from a North-Indian, Sanatan Dharma family. The identity blurring processes are strengthened by the US context that promotes inclusive categories, such as “Caribbean,” “Indo-Caribbean” or “South Asian”. Such inclusive and US-made categories constantly interact with the Madrasi religious affiliation, just as “Hispanic” or “Latino” interact with the national specificities (Dominican, Costa Rican, etc) of NY Catholic congregations, powerfully framing the migrant communities’ reflexivity, identity politics and political mobilisations (Carsignol, 2014; Tobias Pérez, 2015).

Besides inter-ethnic inclusiveness in ritual matters, Madrasi mobilisations also relate to others’ identity struggles. Encouraging Madrasis to take pride in their devotion indeed relates to the Black power movements in Guyana (Shibata, 2002, p. 223). Vijah explicitly stressed that “Madrasi” was originally derogatory “just like Negro and Coolie” and needed to be reappropriated in the same way the “Black is Beautiful” movement successfully did (see Carsignol, 2014). The conflation of Hindu mobilisations with African/Black references comes as highly disruptive in the American context where Indians once fought for being classified as Aryans and Whites (Mohammad-Arif, 2007) and still resent being confused with other communities (Latinos, most of all). All the more so since such accepted blurring of traditional racial or ethnic identities meets the other disruptive factor of promoting low-caste, low-class practice as Hindu. If you add female-shakti devotion, Madrasis stand as a thorough challenge to “the conservative idea of Indianness, defined by Madhavi Mallapragada [2000] as ‘traditionally upper-caste, middle-class male Hindu (oftentimes North-Indian Hindu) version of cultural tradition and practices’” (ibid., p. 7).

## Conclusion

In 2002, Khandelwal entitled her study of NYC Indians *Becoming American, Being Indian*. Despite what could be read as a kind of essentialist paradigm, Khandelwal effectively depicts the many shifting ways of “being /p.72/ Indian” in NY, including when differences seem to exceed commonalities. She rightfully quotes the everyday interactions between Indo-Guyanese and nearby Richmond Hill’s Punjabis who have a hard time categorising the former –a notion easily confirmed, as with this 30-year-old Punjabi woman shopping in Little Guyana explaining: “They’re not Indians! [...] These people, they only look like Indians.”

Forty years ago, Fisher wrote one of the first monographs on the Indian immigrants in NYC (1980), starting with the quotation of a census official complaining: “People are impossible. They can’t be trusted to remember their correct ethnic background from one year to the next!” The anecdote concerned twice-migrant Indian descendants heading from East Africa, and opens onto the palimpsest construction of identity, with individuals shifting from one layer (Africa) to the other (India) –a process that perfectly applies to Indo-Guyanese dynamics. If the ability of individuals to escape exclusive, assigned identities has been amply investigated (when “the individual [stands] against identity,” says Agier, 2013), the Guyanese Madrasis’ mobilisations in New York convey the image of a community “against identity” or, rather, against traditional, hegemonic and assigned identity markers and



boundaries. They certainly contest mainstream, orthodox Hindu identity politics. To be sure, their ability to blur and challenge usual categories should be related to their Creoleness. But their historical record as a force of resistance to a uniform, orthodox Hinduism may also have prepared them to deal successfully with identity dilemmas and opportunities in the contemporary NYC context. More than contentious politics, Madrasi mobilisation in NYC is about recognition and pride, which builds on opportunities afforded to them in the US to counter a Guyanese history of both colonial and Hindu orthodox domination. Assessing the impact of such recognition back in the Madrasi community in Guyana needs further research. However, many among the NY Madrasis found it unlikely, one priest assistant even claiming: “[in Guyana], shakti devotion only means one temple, and another temple, and another temple: this is no community!”

Ultimately, the Madrasis illustrate the classical role of religious leaders in mobilising Indian diasporic communities (Claveyrolas, 2017; Mohammad-Arif, 2007), articulating transnational (NY – Guyana – India) and multilevel (individual, association, institution) contexts, as well as the **/p.73/** twofold perspective of relating with others in NY and relating with Guyana from NY. Vijah himself is acting as an entranced medium of the goddess during certain Sunday services. But the Madrasi case also reverses the usual identity dynamics in the US where religion is ethnicised. Here the core identity is religion, and a pragmatic devotion that facilitates and, indeed, builds on welcoming individuals regardless of their ethnic background.

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## Abstract

My paper is based on a recent fieldwork among the Indo-Guyanese community of New York City. After its independence in 1966, Guyana witnessed ethnic violence between "Afro-Guyanese" slave descendants and "Indo-Guyanese" descendants from the 230.000 indentured labourers who were brought from India between 1838 and 1917. Following such violence, a large number of Guyanese have migrated to North America since the 1990s, mainly in New York City where they number 140.000 today. I focus on the "Madrasi" community, a term referring to a (geographical) Tamil origin but also to an (ideological) popular version of Hinduism. /p.77/ The Indo-Guyanese community is far from being homogeneous: even within the Hindu majority, the various sectarian affiliations play a crucial role in political mobilisations, along with the Tamil / North Indian divide. As prototypical "twice-migrants," Indo-Guyanese in New York City constantly mobilise and circulate between three major historical and cultural frames: India and Indianness, Guyana and Creoleness, and the contemporary diaspora in New York City.

My paper reflects on identity activism sponsored by Hindu religious associations in New York City, focusing on the interconnection between political mobilisations relating to the Guyanese context (anti-Madrasi stigma among the non-Hindu and orthodox Hindu communities) and contemporary New York stakes (visibility in the highly multicultural local context; need to both de-ostracise and upgrade popular rituals; promotion of a "progressive" tradition engaged in "ecological devotion" and gender equality, for example). I argue that it is precisely through constantly mobilising the connections and ruptures between the various "spaces" and historical strata (India, Guyana, NYC) that the Madrasi tradition has been successfully taking root in the New York City context.

**Keywords :** Hinduism, Creoleness, Guyana, New York, Madrasi, Activism.

## Résumé

Mon article est basé sur un terrain récent au sein de la communauté indo-guyanienne de New York. Après son indépendance en 1966, le Guyana a été le théâtre de violences ethniques entre les descendants d'esclaves « afro-guyaniens » et les descendants « indo-guyaniens » des 230 000 travailleurs sous contrat qui ont été amenés d'Inde entre 1838 et 1917. Suite à ces violences, un grand nombre de Guyaniens ont émigré en Amérique du Nord depuis les années 1990, surtout à New York où ils sont aujourd'hui 140 000. Je me concentre sur la communauté « Madrasi », un terme qui fait référence à une origine (géographique) tamoule mais aussi à une version populaire de l'hindouisme. La communauté indo-guyanienne est loin d'être homogène : même au sein de la majorité hindoue, les différentes appartenances sectaires jouent un rôle crucial dans les mobilisations politiques, de même que la fracture entre Tamouls et Hindous d'Inde du Nord. En tant que « double-migrants » prototypiques, les Indo-Guyaniens de New York se mobilisent et circulent constamment entre trois

grands cadres historiques et culturels : l'Inde et l'indianité, le Guyana et la créolité, et la diaspora contemporaine de New York.

Mon article se penche sur l'activisme social sponsorisé par les associations religieuses hindoues à New York City, en se concentrant sur l'interconnexion entre les mobilisations politiques fondées sur le contexte guyanien (stigmatisation anti-Madrasi parmi les communautés non-hindoues et hindoues orthodoxes) et les enjeux contemporains de New York (visibilité dans le contexte local hautement multiculturel ; nécessité de dés-ostraciser et de revaloriser les rituels populaires ; promotion d'une tradition « progressiste » engagée dans la « dévotion écologique » et l'égalité des sexes, par exemple). Je soutiens que c'est précisément en mobilisant constamment les connexions et les ruptures entre les différents « espaces » et strates historiques (Inde, Guyana, New York) que la tradition madrasi a réussi à s'enraciner dans le contexte new-yorkais.

**Mots-clés :** Hindouisme, créolité, Guyana, New York, « Madrasi », activisme.