Girmitya antecedents

Professor Brinsley Samaroo

Professor Brinsley Samaroo was Emerita Professor in History at the University of the West Indies and the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

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ABSTRACT
Brinsley Samaroo had a long career in academia and in politics during the last five decades. After secondary education at Naparima College in southern Trinidad, he went on scholarships to Delhi University (1961 to 1965) after which he obtained his PhD at London University in 1969. He researched and taught at the University of the West Indies (UWI) and at the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). His major research interest was on the Indian Diaspora which was informed by his sojourn as a student in India and by his subsequent visits there as researcher and lecturer. As a politician he served as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate (1982–1986) and as the elected member and minister of government in the House of Representatives (1986–1991), Trinidad and Tobago.

KEYWORDS
Brinsley Samaroo, life story, indentureship, Indian Diaspora, national politics of Trinidad and Tobago

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THE GIRMIT NARRATIVE

The narrative of Indian indentureship and settlement in the Caribbean has focused mainly on their work on the sugar estates where they transformed the economies of the southern Caribbean from the mid-nineteenth century. Less emphasis has been placed on the non-sugar dimension of Indian labour as in cocoa, coffee, bananas and coconut as well as in the rearing of animals. Many Indians were indentured on these non-sugar enterprises, and many left the sun-baked sugar plantations after bondage for the shadier cocoa estates where life was less strenuous. As the Indians settled around the cocoa estates, they cultivated their own gardens drawing in indigenous flora as well as herbs, fruits and vegetables brought from India as part of their jahaji bandals (ship’s belongings) allowed from Calcutta or Madras.

For transport from field to home or to market they utilized animals brought from India such as zebu cattle and water buffalo (bhaisa) transported from India as part of the cargo. Aja and agie, my paternal grandparents served their indentureship on the cane fields of the Naparimas in southern Trinidad after which they moved to the cocoa estates of Nariva in eastern Trinidad. These estates bordered on the Nariva swamp, a vast freshwater enclave which they converted into a rice-producing food-basket, based on seedlings originally brought from India.

By the early twentieth century, the ancestral village, Ecclesville, became a habitation not only for Indians but also for the former enslaved Africans who now wished to create their own spaces. As the cocoa plantations flourished, Venezuelan ‘cocoa panyols’, experts in cocoa production, added their skills to the plantations. Equally present were the Chinese shopkeepers who emigrated from British Guiana where they were pushed out by the more favoured Portuguese traders. By these means, the community grew as a cosmopolitan society where bonding became the norm, motivated by the commitment to survive. Because of the remoteness of Ecclesville,
neither the state nor the denominational boards were willing to invest in education. The village elders, including my father, then approached the various Christian groups in the larger centres requesting the setting up of a primary school. The only group which responded was the Canadian Presbyterian Mission to the Caribbean and the missionaries joined the villagers during the First World War (1914–1918). The Canadians provided the management and some funding whilst the villagers provided the land, labour and wood for the structure. This was a time when non-Christians could not build schools. State policy dictated patronage for Christian schools. Non-Christians were allowed many years later, from the mid-twentieth century.

As a recognized state agency, the Presbyterians obtained state funds for the payment of teachers and for school maintenance. Whilst they accepted Hindus, Muslims and Roman Catholics, they actively encouraged conversion from Oriental religions and those who accepted conversion became the ‘chosen ones’ who received special favours. They were made elders and community leaders, and their children became the teachers in mission schools. My parents, as many other Hindus, chose conversion which enabled them to become village leaders. However, they continued to observe their Oriental customs whilst they urged the Canadians to incorporate some of their Hindu rituals into Presbyterian worship. The Canadians accepted this suggestion and as a result there emerged a group of ‘presbyndus’ or ‘Presbyterian Hindus’ who lived in both worlds. Under this influence the Presbyterians gave Hindu names to their churches thereby providing a bridge from Hinduism to Christianity. Their main church was called Su-samachar (glad tidings) or Aram alya (a haven up ahead). This acceptance of Presbyndu advice led to their success in Trinidad and British Guiana where the children of these converts were especially favoured. Those who showed promise were sent from the village schools to Presbyterian secondary schools in distant San Fernando where dormitories were built for rural boys and girls. These schools, Naparima Boys College
and Naparima Girls’ High School attracted talented Canadians and West Indians who provided quality education enabling easy acceptance by foreign universities and, from 1948, the University College of the West Indies.

At Naparima College we had a talented history teacher from British Guiana, Benjamin Yisudas (devotee of Jesus), who taught British History. He was particularly offended by the fulsome praise that our textbook gave to Robert Clive, prominent British plunderer of India, for his heroism in defeating barbarian Indians and for his cleansing India of the rampant ‘corruption’ which existed there. Yisudas ordered his students to cross out those pages. Although he had never been to India, he painted a positive picture of Indian civilization, encouraging his students to go there. The marked presence of India in my village increased that desire. When, therefore, the opportunity presented itself, I applied for a scholarship to study in India, in 1960. My application was successful, and I was assigned to Hindu College, Delhi University, which I entered in July 1961.

Being a student in India was a glorious experience. One studied the civilization whilst being a part of it. Our lecturers took us to many significant sites such as the Taj Mahal, Emperor Akbar’s multi-religious village of Fatehepur Sikri, near Agra, where he encouraged inter-faith dialogue and the old city of Lucknow, venue of the Muharram commemoration since 1793. From here, the observance was taken to the Caribbean since 1845. Travelling overnight on an Indian train was an unforgettable experience with the sights, sounds and tasty delicacies at different stations. One passed through towns whose names had been transferred to the Caribbean: Faizabad, Meerut, Calcutta, Piparo, Kanpur and Bombay. On trains and buses, we travelled through villages from whence Indian flora and fauna were transported to the Caribbean. One travelled through villages where the houses were built on stilts to avoid flood waters. Such houses were replicated in my village in rural Trinidad.
At that time there was little interest in the Indian Diaspora. Nehru was Prime Minister, and he emphasized the need for diasporic Indians to identify with their places of settlement rather than with India. Those who had gone abroad during the initial Diaspora (1834–1920) were *tapuha* (island people) and NRI at that time meant Not Really Indian. This was to change in the post-Nehru era when diasporic Indians could afford to travel to India to trace their *girmitya* beginnings and continental Indians sought their long-lost kith and kin. Since that time contacts have expanded considerably through increased diplomatic contacts and expanded educational facilitation. Diasporic studies are now being undertaken in Indian universities. The Trinidad scholar Inderjit Bahadoorsingh (1912–1988) who studied at Oxford alongside Pandit Nehru played an important role in this. He was elected President of the Oxford *majlis* which was at the forefront of the freedom struggle. Bahadoorsingh joined the struggle alongside Nehru, after which he served as Indian ambassador to a host of African and Asian countries. He returned to Trinidad as chief guest at two diasporic conferences in the evening of his life, producing two books of the papers at these conferences.

For me the Indian experience was an awakening. As a student and later, as a lecturer and researcher in India, I took every opportunity to leave Delhi and spend time in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the two provinces from whence the majority of the bonded labourers came. In order to appreciate the origins of the first diasporic connections one must visit the ancestral villages to savour the sights, sounds and practices which were taken abroad. These cannot be found in Delhi, Mumbai or Chennai. One has to visit the villages around Lucknow or *nagars* (towns) like Almora, Nainital, Bahraich or Kathgodam to discover the sources of the Caribbean *gharana* (a particular tradition of Indian music), to savour food such as *dhal-puri*, *sada roti* and the many vegetable dishes (*talkaries* and *chokhas*) which are commonplace in Guyana, Suriname, Mauritius or Fiji. In these villages in Northern India, a major language is *Bhojpuri* which
was also brought as part of the cultural inheritance. In these villages there are cultivations which provided a model for the Diaspora and vegetables whose seeds, leaves and cuttings thrive in the new environments: mango, tamarind, ochro, melongene, melons, *dhals* (lentils) and *bhagis* (spinach). Returning to Delhi became a boring necessity but one had to complete one’s study.

I returned to Trinidad in 1965 and taught at Naparima College for an academic year and left for London in 1966 on a Commonwealth Scholarship. I was admitted to Birkbeck College, London University, to do research on Indian immigration to the Caribbean. Upon arrival, however, I was told that someone else had selected that topic and advised me to select another. My new topic was Trinidad’s constitutional development. My dissertation was successfully defended in 1969. The years in London had been intellectually stimulating. The United Kingdom was, after all, the headquarters of the British Empire, upon which, we were taught, the sun never sets. Here one had easy access to the actual records, often hand-written, of British exploration and exploitation of the tropical world. Colonial records from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean are located at venues such as the British National Archives, the British Library, the Rhodes House collection at Oxford and church offices in London. Equally, the UK had been the place where colonials studied and organized political pressure groups as they prepared to return home, seeking Independence. Here, several politicians returned after political disillusionment in the colonies. The British accommodated such persons, keeping a close watch on their activities.

In this regard, we were lucky to have C.L.R. James, former mentor and close ally of Eric Williams, now expelled from the politics. A brilliant Marxist scholar, he lectured to West Indian students in his North London flat on weekends. There were also lectures by visiting West Indian politicians such as Eric Williams, Forbes Burnham, Cheddi Jagan and Norman Manley. Those were the years when the Caribbean Artists’ Movement was very active,
organizing regular sessions on Caribbean literature, history and the creative arts. This movement was the cradle for a generation of Caribbean novelists, poets, actors and politicians. It was from this hub of intellectual activity that I returned to a lectureship in history at the new Trinidad campus of the University of the West Indies, in 1969.

This was a time of significant change in the Caribbean. From late 1969, the university became the focus of the Black Power uprising which soon swept to the rest of the region. Our students, eager learners in the classroom, now became agitators on the streets, leading marches up and down the country and they demanded real control of the economy, rather than that of the local agents of foreign enterprises. Our students pulled their social sciences lecturers from the classrooms and into the communities to talk about the struggles of the Caribbean working class. History became a major tool for change! In Jamaica, my erstwhile London colleague, Walter Rodney was a prominent leader. The Black Power Movement changed the history of the Caribbean for all time.

That tentative stepping out led to a bolder entry into national politics when I joined forces with A.N.R. Robinson, a former high-ranking member of Dr Eric Williams’ People National Movement (PNM) who left the party in the wake of the Black Power Movement. A group of young people came together to form the Democratic Action Congress (DAC) to agitate for change. Eric Williams took umbrage at Robinson’s defection and, in the manner of politicians, did his best to block Robinson’s path. As the DAC prepared for the 1976 general elections, a team of four campaigners, led by Robinson, was arrested in Scarborough, Tobago, as we addressed a meeting at the Market Square. We were charged for ‘illegally’ holding a public meeting. As the policeman grabbed me at the podium, he quietly assured me that he was a supporter, so I need have no fear. The four of us were jailed for the night and out on bail, we were put on trial for the next three days. All four were exonerated and a year later, compensated by the Court for
wrongful arrest. After this, our movement gained strength as it combined with other political groups. After a strong performance in the 1981 elections, I was nominated as a Senator in the Upper House and stayed as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate (from 1982 to 1986). During that period, I served both as Lecturer at the University of the West Indies and as Senator. I resigned from the university in 1986 to contest a seat in the House of Representatives. I was elected to represent Nariva, my original home district for five years. Being a minister was particularly helpful since it gave me the clout to provide water and electricity to remote villages, to build new schools and renovate dilapidated ones and to encourage cultural cohesion in a diverse community. As Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, I was able to represent my country at various international fora, enhancing the Caribbean image and seeking new markets.

It was whilst I was on one of these trips (to London) in July 1990 that the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen, a Libyan-sponsored group attempted a coup against the elected government. My colleagues in the Parliament were held hostage for six days from 27 July to 1 August 1990. In the midst of the coup, I hastily returned to be part of a depleted government ensuring that the state did not collapse. The traumatic experience included the fire-bombing of my residence which was saved by the timely intervention of my neighbours. That experience put paid to any further political ambition. At the next election in 1991, I returned to the University of the West Indies where I stayed until 2005. That retirement coincided with the opening of a new university, namely the University of Trinidad and Tobago where I was offered a Senior Research Fellowship to teach Caribbean History and to organize a Sugar Museum and Archive at Brechin Castle, site of the old sugar factory. On that site, our committee organized the museum and archive, preserving the artefacts and records of the sugar industry which was closed in 2003 after some two centuries of existence. Equally important was the work of encouraging studies on the Indian Diaspora.
Up to the 1970s, there had been little interest either in India or in the Caribbean. From around 1975, a group of academics from the St Augustine campus banded together to create that interest and since that time there have been conferences in Trinidad in 1975, 1979, 1984, 1995, 2002, 2011 and 2017. Similar conferences have been held in Toronto, London, India and Suriname and out of these meetings, a wide range of publications have emerged. In Trinidad, an Indian heritage village ‘Divali Nagar’ has been created where festivals and teaching sessions complement the Heritage Library which is now a research centre, encouraging local as well as international scholars. This Caribbean exploration has been recently complemented by the establishment, in London, in 2020, of the Ameena Gafoor Institute for the Study of Indentureship and its Legacies, which, in 2021, started the publication of the *Journal of Indentureship Studies*. In a post-pandemic revival, the Divali Nagar in Trinidad was re-opened in May 2022 for a month-long commemoration of the Indian presence. This consisted of book launches, cultural events and displays celebrating the industrial arts brought from India to the Caribbean.

In these various ways, the establishment of studies in indentureship and its aftermath has been firmly rooted as a legitimate area of inquiry. It takes us one step further towards the understanding of the complexity of diasporic societies in the Caribbean, South Africa and the Pacific archipelagos. Based on the initial studies of the first Diaspora, new research has explored the second migrations from the plantation societies to urban centres in North America and Europe and their continuing contacts with their original *girmitya* location. Indians have always been a travelling people from the ancient Vedic period when the civilization was carried to Southeast Asia, through Mughal travels and European-led itineraries. That trend continues today on an expanded basis as Indian technology and philosophy continue to enrich a world which, in the Indian view, encompasses all peoples: *Vasudaivam Kutumbakam* (the world is one family).
HIGHLIGHTS

Brinsley Samaroo had a long career in academia and in politics during the last five decades. After secondary education at Naparima College in southern Trinidad, he went on scholarships to Delhi University (1961 to 1965) after which he obtained his PhD at London University in 1969. He researched and taught at the University of the West Indies (UWI) and at the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). His major research interest was on the Indian Diaspora which was informed by his sojourn as a student in India and by his subsequent visits there as researcher and lecturer. As a politician he served as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate (1982–1986) and as the elected member and minister of government in the House of Representatives (1986–1991), Trinidad and Tobago.

Highlights of his career include:

- The Chaconia Gold Medal for services to education (2014)
- Chairing the Sugar Heritage Village Committee (2005–2015) which established the Sugar Museum and Archive at Brechin Castle, site of the old sugar factory in central Trinidad.

NOTE

1. The abstract and highlights were written by Dr Lynne Macedo.