

The Guadeloupean Model by Jean S. Sahai

Guadeloupe, an archipelagic outpost of France in the Caribbean, is, like her sister island of Martinique, a kaleidoscope of skin colors, facial features and ethnic praxes in the paradisiacal French West Indies. Most of the 500,000 or so inhabitants descend from freed African slaves. Some eight percent, 70,000 or so, are of Indian origin, and many thousands are mixed along all possible lines.

In 1854, after slavery abolition, the French and British brought Indian indentured workers from the Malabar coast, Pondicherry, or Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, via Calcutta. They have since imbibed French culture and all education levels, but also kept rituals with strong remnants of Indian folk and religious traditions. In contrast to diasporic places like Trinidad & Tobago where the Hindu culture has been maintained, and politics have separated the people along ethnic lines, more and more Guadeloupeans of any origin will wear Indian clothes, enjoy Indian food, listen to Indian music, or take trips to India.

Just as the *Colombo*, a Creole variation of Indian curry, called *Kolbu* in Martinique, from a Tamil word, is the favourite food of every family on both islands, called the ‘national dish’ by all, people of Indian origin can be found among leaders of all persuasions, political parties, trade-unions, press and television people, popular singers and musicians, etc.

The distant Creole islands of Mauritius and Reunion in the Indian Ocean have similar situations, with much higher Indian percentage. In Martinique, Indians number much fewer than in Guadeloupe and they are, astonishingly enough, still called *kouli* (coolies), a word considered a slur in Guadeloupe. But just as in Guadeloupe, their work in Indian dance is well-respected and officially acknowledged and supported in the field of the Arts. Consuelo Marlin-Bernard, a *chabine* (mixed of white and black ancestry) is a full-fledged Bharat Natyam dancer and teacher, trained at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, and in Chennai. The renowned Negritude writer and poet Aimé Césaire had chosen Mr Serge Letchimy as his successor as the mayor of Fort-de-France, the main town of Martinique. Such examples abound in the French West Indies, so much so that they are rarely noted as special.

Most people of Indian descent in the French West Indies are Catholics, or belong to Christian groups, i.e. Jehovah’s Witnesses or Seventh Day Adventist. In a coup d’état of devout ecumenicism, the Virgin Mary has been for long worshiped with Hindu rituals. In the last thirty years or so, many cultural groups for the promotion of Indian culture have developed. Leaders like Jacques Sidambarom have been networking with GOPIO International and other Indian cultural societies, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, Réunion Island, Mauritius, Pondicherry... or Paris.

Groups that have coalesced over the years are over 30-year old “Les Amis de l’Inde” (Friends of India), presided by Mr Eliézère Sitcharn, ACECI, GOPIO, various Hindu religion or yoga groups, classical or Bollywood dance companies, or devotees of Transcendental or Siddha Yoga Meditation, not necessarily Indian-headed.

The CGPLI, Center for Guadeloupe Promotion of Languages from India, led by Mr Fred Negrit, a dedicated high school teacher whose grandmother was Indian, has taught Hindi and Tamil to hundreds of students of all origins, and has been inviting renowned Professors from India and other countries, like Pr Appassamy Murugaiyan of Paris University, to teach and lecture on the island.

In 2013, Jean S. Sahai, a professor of English, published a well-acclaimed 266-page book in French called “Adagio pour la Da, les Indiens des Antilles, de Henry Sidambarom à Aimé Césaire”. Diaspora readers are yearning to see the English version out, as the opus contains a whole chapter on the life and work of Henry Sidambarom (see below). Another interesting feature of the book is an analysis of the “indianity” of Martinican Negritude Poet Aimé Césaire. Raised as a baby by a Tamil maid, Césaire gifted the author with his own Paris-bought Tamil-English Dictionary, signed with a comment mentioning Tamil as being a part of the French West Indies linguistic heritage.

In 1997, J. S. Sahai had taken the helm as host of then Guadeloupe’s FM popular two-hour radio program called *Musique à l’Inde* that lasted over two years. The program would feature classical and modern Indian music, as well as discussions on Indian philosophy, history and culture.

Back in 1996, public radio had announced that Diwali would be celebrated for the first time, earning the festival a place on the Guadeloupean calendar as a requisite popular holiday. The news delighted locals and tourists attracted to Hindu philosophy, yoga, music, fashion, food and temples in Europe, the USA or India, and they turned out in large numbers for the 1997 festival held at Le Moule. Let there be light ! Besides

private observances, only very few small groups like the one led by *pusali* (priest) Jocelyn Nagapin had been celebrating Diwali. His grandfather from India had passed onto him his knowledge of Indian scriptures, inspiring him to hold on to his heritage. Another *pusali*, Marguerite Périán, wanted to participate in the revival of Diwali rituals. He had to learn some Tamil, as his ancestors had forgotten it, due to the French acculturation.

The real impetus came from a Kerala engineer, Mr. Mohanan Vaddakekara, sent to Guadeloupe in 1992 by the European construction company he works for. In 1996, Vaddakekara issued a directive to Guadeloupe Indians, unequivocally declaring, “This is the year we *must* celebrate Diwali!” And Diwali was celebrated in Saint-François, a seaside resort town whose then mayor was Mr. Ernest Moutoussamy, and home to a significant Indian population. Some 400 people gathered for the festival. There was a hitch, though. They had no *diyas*, the small clay lamps that are critical to any festival of lights. Like a Hindu Olympic torch, *diyas* darted over from Trinidad via Federal Express, just in time. Enthusiasm and wherewithal fructified in 1997, and Diwali was celebrated in the city of Le Moule, where a great number of Indian Guadeloupeans live. The Mayor, Madame Gabrielle Louis-Carabin, assisted in securing the use of an attractive open-air venue by the sea.

With guidance from apt builder Vaddakekara, a small Kerala-style wooden temple was built by volunteers working till 2:00 am. Eighteen bamboo poles were raised with multicolored OM flags, along with a special flying Lakshmi flag, delivered from Trinidad. Lakshmi *puja* was performed. Many bought *diyas* to illuminate the arena and a cultural *fête* followed the religious act. The Mayor, Madame Gabrielle Carabin, performed the lighting of the *kuttuvilaku* oil lamp. She gave an insightful talk on the value of Diwali for all Guadeloupeans, as an occasion for rejoicing and celebrating the virtues of tolerance and cooperation. She commended the Indian community for their high values and active role in society, and was presented with many gifts, including a CD of Indian music, Mahatma Gandhi’s Autobiography and an Indian scarf, by two too-cute, sari-clad girls. She thrilled the audience when she revealed that her daughter’s fiancé was Indian, and that she was contemplating a visit to India.

The sea breeze blowing out the *diyas* could not darken the mood. Instead, people had fun running and relighting them. Over 1,000 people of all origins and religions came. The press and television, gave substantial coverage. There was lavish food - *laddus* and other Indian sweets by Mohanan’s wife and volunteers, vegetarian meals by Maharajah Monty restaurants, *rotis* by an Indian family following their great grandmother’s recipe. A successful table of books on Indian culture and Indian music gave attendees a chance to learn more... and there were fireworks for the biggest Diwali ever on the island. Vaddakekara then saw this as the fledgling beginnings of the recently awakened community. He related, “Last year, we built a simple altar with banana trees. This year, the Deities were housed in wood. In ten years, we’ll have gold - how can this not come true ?”

Indian culture has indeed now grown as a well-acknowledged commodity in the French West Indies. With official money and support, Celebrations of 150 years of Indian Presence and Contribution were held with enthusiasm in 2003 in Martinique, and 2004 in Guadeloupe.

In 2013, we commemorated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry Sidambarom. This Indo-Guadeloupean fighter, the son of Tamil workers, was the champion who secured French citizenship and civil rights for the descendants of indentured workers of Guadeloupe in 1923, after a non-violent legal battle of nine years with the French Government. A year later, these privileges were to be extended to the Indian inhabitants of all French Overseas Territories.

With time, patience, heart and hard work, the winds of annoyance and timidity have relented and vanished. Being Indian or having Indian family has become just another respected hallmark at all levels of the proud Guadeloupean Model.

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