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INST FÖR KOST- OCH IDROTTSVETENSKAP

# **Turmeric:**

**– Not just a spice, but a way of life**

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## Abstract

East-Indian people have moved from India to the Caribbean about 150 years ago. While keeping a close community, they have preserved their culture, including cultural practice associated with spices.

In this thesis, I explore cultural aspects associated with the spice turmeric. I show how it has affected the daily life of many East-Indians in the diaspora. I also demonstrate the route the spice has taken to get to places like the Caribbean. Finally I illustrate the significance the spice holds within cultural aspects and rituals.

My research interviews were conducted on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad in March of 2012. Interviews were conducted with three individuals. The findings demonstrate how turmeric is used, both as a spice and as an ingredient in rituals.

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## Foreword

I wish to extend my gratitude to the people who helped in one way or the other. Thanks to my mentors Natalie Barker-Ruchti and Dean Barker for all their wisdom and knowledge during this process-with whom this paper would not be possible. Thanks to my Sister Rachael Daniel who aided me during the data collection process and who was a great help in discussing ideas. Thanks to Kunal Mukhopadhyay for the initial research idea and for gladly answering the countless questions I have had along the way. Thanks to my brother Joshua, Mom-Savi and Dad-James, Eva for gladly helping with practical things. Ola and our children Amanda and Adam for much needed support.

Special thanks to Stiftelsen för Praktiska Hushållsskolans Donations fond from which I was granted a fund that made it possible to travel to the Caribbean during my second internship to do the interviews.

*“In India I know I am a stranger; but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past.”*  
V.S. Naipaul (Nobel Prize winner 2001)



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## 1. Introduction

The influence the Indian Diaspora has on world cuisine and culture has a prominent place where primary migration took place. Some of these countries are, and are not limited to, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, Malaysia, Belize, South Africa, Fiji and Sri-Lanka. A wave of secondary migration from these countries to places like UK, Canada USA and The Netherlands further influenced their food and religious culture. Immigration to the primary countries (see appendix for a map of the then British Rule) was forced on the Indians because of heavy taxes, imposed by the British rulers in India. Many lost their land, wealth and were brought to financial ruin and heartbreak by the then government (Hall, 1985).

A new world had opened up by the British, in the form of the Caribbean sugar trade specifically and they used slave labor initially, but human rights groups deemed the slave trade barbaric and it was abolished. There was now a labour shortage in commonwealth nations, and Indians were offered indentureship contracts. (A contract made for a period of 5/7 years it is further explained in History section under heading contracts). This new world was painted as a fairytale, and touted as a new life in paradise, and many accepted contracts, and packed up all their belongings and set sail to this new life across the Kala Pani<sup>1</sup> - the name given to the Cape of Good Hope, that they would cross to get to the Caribbean (John, 1974).

The East Indians brought with them their vast cultural knowledge which has formed and even preserved their culture in the new world even up to this day. The immigrants traveled for months on long perilous ship voyages; from the mainland India to the new world to work as indentured laborers and make a new life for themselves. In this paper I would explore, world culture and how it was made possible. In doing so I would try to give a bit of meaning to the culture/people that brought them to the new world (Honeychurch, 1981).

Many authors for example (Morton, 1961) have studied cultural persistence, (Yoggendra, 1971) have studied music, as well as (Mayers, 1998) who studied art, hindu-dance and sport (John, 1974). Few however, have written about cuisine in the diaspora<sup>2</sup> and the use of spices as a cultural tool. This significance in spice use holds the culture together in a way that is not obvious and needs to make mention of (Krishnaswamy, 2008). This spice (food) culture has survived in ritual and culinary uses and they are used the same way now as they had been hundreds, even thousands of years ago (Ghurye, 1961).

To some the spices signify the great land they had left behind and it was the glue that would hold them together as a people and bring sustenance and a way of life. Discussion of these spices triggered memory and has strong, intimate association for those that I interviewed during my research. It was one familiar element that brought comfort and peace to them in this

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix. Kala Pani or black waters – Cape of Good Hope.

<sup>2</sup> Diaspora - a dispersion or scattering of people from their original home land.



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new land (Jayaram, 2004). Food/nutritional ingredients and culinary practices from grandparents and great-grandparents are handed down and have a strong connection to who they are today. Indian tradition is an entity which is strongly embedded into the culture and has changed little through generations (for further readings see Norman, 1985).

Use of spices as medicine or herbs is an integral part to the culture and is taught to new generations. The East-Indian cuisine is even divided into three (3) different categories; (1) it affects our temperament and is different from caste to caste. (2) It has been preserved by handing down from mother/father to son/daughter to grandson/granddaughter. (3) Spices have a central place within the East-Indian culture and many seasonings are used as medicine (Morton, 1961).

Turmeric as a research topic has been explored in many different fields of study: as a culinary spice in East Indian culture; as a medicine in the medical field as a functional food in treating cancer and inflammation see Schaffer,( 2011) and Hatcher, (2008). Turmeric in culinary uses has a long tradition within eastern culture and has given rise to many research and studies, in their role of traditional medicine and health significance and its role and uses in dentistry as explained in Krishnaswamy, (2008) and for further information in its role in dentistry see Chaturvedi,( 2009).

## **Research Aims**

The aim of this study is to highlight the significance of the use of turmeric within the Indian diaspora.

## **Research Questions**

1. How is the turmeric embedded in the cultural rituals?
2. How is the spice used as a nutritional item?
3. How is the culture handed down?

## **Research Purpose**

The purpose of the research is to examine the cultural practices and meaning surrounding the spice turmeric within the East-Indian community; the changes that may have occurred within the Indian food culture and the use of turmeric as explained by Misir (2004).

## **Thesis Overview**

In this thesis, I have in Chapter 1- provided a background of the social status of the citizens who were present on the island at the time the indenture workers arrived. An account of the state of the East-Indian caste system and their beliefs; regarding different foods and food practices and what it all meant culturally.



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Chapter 2 - gives an account of the historical and social situation in both the emigrating and immigrating country. I give an explanation of the historical aspects and reasons of their move and how they lived/worked. A brief account is given of where/why they came to the new country. I even tell about the conditions of their contracts as well as the conditions they lived under in the early days and present. I have briefly explained how the spice turmeric is used traditionally as well as its' culinary uses.

Chapter 3 - gives an explanation of my study and that I used a semi-structured qualitative study to gather my information. A sample of three older persons was used, who all had similar backgrounds in one way or the other.

Chapter 4 - gives an answer for the use of turmeric within the East-Indian cultural sphere; how the turmeric is used for labour pains, birth rites, wedding rituals and culinary uses.

Chapter 5 - entails a brief discussion, how the immigrant's culture has survived transition yet maintains the essence of its background.



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## 2. Background

The East-Indians in the Caribbean make up a large percentage of the population; in Trinidad there are 45 per cent and like the rest of the Caribbean they control the majority of the private sector. The children of the indentured labourers are highly successful today and many enjoy comfortable lifestyles unlike their ancestors who came 150 years before. Many of the Indians in the Caribbean countries have maintained a connection to the motherland India through visits to India, Bollywood cinema, music, fashion, and the cultural heritage, and most importantly the cuisine (Morton, 1961).

### 2.1 History

In Trinidad history; discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498 with an already established population of Caribs and Arawaks the indigenous people and was under Spanish rule for the next 300 years. A policy was made to increase the population from about 2000 to a greater number to ensure economic stability in the region. This encouraged the French planters and to inhabit the island with their slaves to settle in the now growing Trinidad. The French, Spaniards and British all ruled the island in its plantocracy<sup>3</sup> era and French was the language spoken due to them being larger in number (Hall, 1985).

The British wanted to challenge the Spanish rule and arrived by ship a fleet of 18 warships under Sir Ralph Abercromby to capture the island. On seeing the ships invading, the Spanish Governor Don José Maria Chacón did not want to have his people slaughtered and gave up to the British in 1797. So we now had an island with Spanish laws, but with a population that spoke French and British governance (Angel, 1995).

The Africans in 1834 were now free people and had begun building a life for themselves. This was the mix of people and culture that the Indians met on arrival in about 1844/45 with the arrival of the first ship the Fatel Rozak.to Trinidad. The Roman Catholic religion dominated the island at that time, and other religions were suppressed, unofficially and officially. Marriages that were not Roman Catholic were illegal, hence the Hindu wedding and children that was born, were illegitimate. (Greenwood, 1981).

Many sugar plantations in the Caribbean and South-America (Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica) were without a workforce that the African slaves provided. The plantation owners lost income and were therefore in need of a work force, quickly. The easiest way to fix this problem was to relocate people within the British Empire. Many other people came to work on the sugar plantations from China and Europe. They found it hard to work in the hot sun and soon found alternative livelihoods. The Chinese soon opened grocery shops and the Europeans started other businesses (Angel, 1995).

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<sup>3</sup> A ruling class formed by the planters, in this situation the French and English cane and coffee/cocoa



### **2.1.1 Historical development of immigration/emigration**

Indentureship started in 1845 with a shipment of workers to the then British Guyana, later to Trinidad and Jamaica but some of the Jamaican workers were later transferred to Trinidad. The indentured labourers embarked on their journey from Calcutta port West-Bengal (see map in appendix) traveling to the Caribbean to embark on their five/seven year contract and sometimes ten year contract. The influx of the new labourers was a form of tactic from the slave masters. The Indians were to be used as token in the bargaining game, against the free African slaves. They were promised a trip back to the motherland India on completion of the Indentureship period and their primary aim was to work off a five year contract and then to return to India. On completion of this initial period many were tricked into another five year period, many went back to India but later returned to Trinidad which meant a new five year contract that they had to serve (Hall, 1985).

The East-Indians were forced to live where the former slaves lived in what you would call "logie" (according to Misir 2004). The newcomers lived on Sugar Estates that were previously vacated by the African slaves, institutions that were constructed almost like a prison or encagement, they were more or less kept in isolation to just work, eat and sleep. Many were re-patronized but they were shunned in the villages and were seen as outcasts therefore they made the journey back to the West-Indies where they could make a life for themselves. Hall (1985).

They were uprooted from their home land due to the heavy taxes imposed by the British. The British government who took ruler ship from the Maharajas of India which occurred in the loss of property for the Indian citizens and were forced to find alternative ways of providing for themselves (Jensen, 1988). The East Indians moved from India in the early 1800s to many countries; Canada, The Netherlands and The Caribbean - many due to their own choice and others due to forced circumstances. They took with them many necessities and provisions many seeds and plants, including the turmeric plant, were brought from India. The cultivation of a new type of food and the style slowly integrated and permeated the Trinidadian culture (Angel, 1995).

### **2.1.2 Religion**

Hinduism as we know it today has no founder and came to being probably around 1500 BC. It is a religion/tradition that dates back to several thousand years into the Indus Valley. When an ethnic group called the Aryan moved to northern India. The belief within the Hindu community is - one is born a Hindu and therefore unable to convert from another religion to Hinduism. Hindu was a term used to describe all people of India but has gradually turned into the term to describe a particular religion and fate (Krishnaswamy, 2008). In Hinduism, there are several main directions. Brahmanism is dominant in Hinduism and is spread throughout India. They are primarily vegetarians, as it is not permissible to take a life even in an animal. There are many branches of Hinduism and even groups that do not eat certain vegetables (LaGuerre, 1974).



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### 2.1.3 Society

Society was divided up into a three stage structure in creole society of colour, ethnicity and wealth. With the East-Indians coming last of everyone else and making them the lowest ranked in society. It mattered not which caste they came from in their own society, what mattered now was how they were looked upon here. The Indians faced many challenges and were treated as badly as the slaves were, life was hard and many returned to India. The returning Indians to India came back to Trinidad after their Indian visit because they were not accepted into their villages back in India. They were now committed to making a life in Trinidad, one way or another (John, 1974). The East Indians were to replace the African slaves after the abolition of slavery. They were recruited in large numbers from mainly Northern India and were promised ownership of land/money for little work (LaGuerre, 1974).

Many of the indentured workers thought they would be given a plot of land in exchange for work completed on the plantations, but this was only until 1860 and those who had served a full term. Some Indians were given land in exchange for their trip back to India. In some cases the 'offer' was made mandatory and the lands were poor and water logged, basically swamp land, but they persevered and found ways to make a living. Those who saved from the pittance they received; later bought their way out of Indentureship and received no land. Those before 1860 were left to fend for themselves and many became beggars and worked as porters carrying bundles of soiled clothes from the middle class and upper class to be washed. The indentured workers worked under deplorable conditions to supply the labour for the sugar cane factories. (John, 1974).

### 2.1.4 The Indian caste system

It is a way of life but one of the most important structures in Indian society is the caste system. We are born into a caste and cannot switch to a higher caste. Quite similar to class society that was present in Sweden before; noble, priest, burghers, peasants - but the Indian caste system is linked to the religion and more steadfast. Maintaining its purity; by marrying within his/her own caste is a very important part of society hence marrying outside of ones caste may arise in being out casted out of family and/or society (Ghurye, 1961).

The caste system can be described as a body where the Brahmins are to be described as the head, the Kshatriya as the shoulders and arms the Vaishya as the stomach and the Sudras as the feet. They work together according in an entity to support the entire society. This is a people who are believed to have moved into northern India around 3000-1700 BC. Aryans were not accepted, but they fought against the local population, the Dravidians, as they drove southward. How it happened is controversial but Hinduism is considered to have started in connection with these events (Ghurye, 1961).

The top three Indian castes are: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors, royalty) and Vaishyas (merchants) would, according to this theory originated from the Aryans, while the lowest caste Shudra (artisans, core services), derived from the conquered peoples. Within



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these castes are many sub castes. Then you have those who are called Chamars those who tan leather; sub caste to the Dalits, who live outside the village and take care of the deceased animals, these are allowed to eat meat. The Caste does extend it-self to other religions and can also be seen as tradition. For a further explanation of the caste system see diagram in appendix, Ghurye (1961).

## 2.2 Food and Spices

While culturally popular and touted by media and fitness experts as healthy; seemingly underutilized and little know foods have remained unchanged in their usage and popularity among those who they represent. It may have been argued that adding herbs and spices to food may improve flavour, visual appeal, and may even lessen the need for as much salt in food to give the optimal flavour (Krishnaswamy 2008).

### 2.2.1 Food categories

Within the Indian culture and Natural medicine, there are three types of food:

1. Rajsik - Royal food which contains many different spices, garlic, onions and chilli as well as a bit more salt than the satvik foods; contains attributes that causes passion, negative feelings and restlessness. Rajsik would generally be eaten by Royalty who are also from the caste Kshatriya.
2. Tamsik - Food which aggravates you; stale food, any meat, eggs, fish or alcohol. This type of food is believed to cause ignorance, dullness and makes us tired and sleepy. Other castes eat this as well.
3. Satvik - Normal simple vegetarian foods; grain, cereals; milk, clarified butter (ghee) honey and unrefined flour. This type of food is believed to make us intelligent, happy and have longevity in life. This type of food is "usually" eaten by the Brahmins.

The general belief within Indian natural medicine - food forms your attitude and nurtures ones' behaviours. Stress is given to Satvik food meaning truthful (that which does not aggravate). It is believed that one becomes passionate and aggressive by eating spicy foods and meat. Even if meat is eaten, the general belief is that one should fast from meat or heavy food three times a week to remain healthy. The Tamsik and Rajsik diet alone is not good for health but should only be eaten in moderation. It is however not forbidden to eat meat or follow the basic recommendations but a balance is to strive after; this mind set would be similar to normal healthy eating in European culture. (Aggarwal, 2012).

### 2.2.2 Vegetarianism

Being vegetarian is one of the most important aspects of being a Hindu because of the belief in reincarnation. The belief in reincarnation means that when people die they will be reborn again and again until they are to live pure lives and reach moksha, which is the ultimate aim, and is the highest state of all. The soul is reborn in the form of various living creatures; the risk exists that, by killing and eating an animal the fear of the animal will be transferred to the



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person eating the meat; one can also transfer someone's soul and stop their journey to moksha the ultimate goal as Krishnaswamy (2008) explained. Hindus believe that by eating a vegetarian diet they will be mentally suitable to meditate so that the individual can think and worship the gods better. Vegetarianism is even important when one has converted to Christianity due to tradition and not mainly because of religion. (Ghurye 1961).

### 2.2.3 Food in modern society

In modern society, diet and food choices have become very popular in the media and culture, and the promotion of healthy food choices has become important to our success and our personal image. We have seen many different trends and following of different food groups and types. Sweet and carbonated beverages have been replaced by water in many cases, carbohydrates have been outlawed and more vegetables, lean meats and salad have become the image of healthy living, conscientious choices and a mark of success (Krishnaswamy, 2008).

### 2.2.4 The Spice Turmeric/Historical use

The rhizome *curcuma longa* grows wild in the South-Asian forest, and have been used and cultivated for more than seven thousand years in India, Indonesia and many other countries where there is an Indian community. Turmeric is an additive to mustard, cheese, masalas or what is commonly called curry powder. The cultural aspects of the spice turmeric are wide spread in India and have a widespread use; Turmeric (*curcuma longa*) genus *curcuma* and *species longa* is an herb that belongs to the ginger family (*Zingiberaceae*). Turmeric is a rhizome and looks similar to the ginger plant and is propagated in the same manner as ginger. It is not as tough as the ginger root and much easier to chew than ginger is; the fresh juicy root has a sweet pungent taste with a bit of crunch and smells like mustard but with a slight tart aftertaste. Curcumin is the active ingredient in the turmeric plant; curcuminoids gives the yellow colour to turmeric. In many western cultures it is used in many different grocery products and has the E number E-100. The spice has medicinal values and has shown to help with dyspepsia and reflux, chrons disease, ulcers and rheumatoid arteritis, cystic fibrosis, cancer and alzheimers. This active ingredient is used in Indian folk medicine for treatments in various disorders (Ravindran, 2007).

### 2.2.5 Cultural practices

The kitchen is an auspicious place and everything to do with food is taken with utmost seriousness. It comes to a level of its own- where the kitchen is considered a shrine and everything associated with the kitchen holy. As a culture, the Indian food culture surpasses the status of food culture but almost to a religion. One is not allowed to enter the kitchen with shoes or even without being invited into the kitchen. When food is cooked one is not allowed to use it until it stand a while; this is also done to improve flavour and all ingredients come together. Many also offer some of the food to the fire and say a pray before it is served (Aggarwal, 2012).



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There are many strict rules pertaining to the handling of utensils in the kitchen environment. Pots and cooking articles are not expected to leave the kitchen, because they belong in the kitchen. The food is however allowed to leave the kitchen in plates or bowls used for that purpose. It is not expected to be tasted while cooking. It is forbidden to taste from the same spoon you are stirring the food with. If the food is tasted while cooking then it is considered to be “contaminated” if this done a special word is even assigned. Saliva should never come in contact with any food while being cooked according to the Indian Tradition. Food is not expected to be eaten from another person’s plate or if someone else has tasted it. When the food is contaminated by tasting, it is called jootha (Ghurye, 1961).

A street food that arose from a combination of two separate dishes into one; much like the sandwich has due of necessity. It was sold as single round bread with a topping of cooked chickpeas and hot sauce. The fact that students bought this street food and wanted it to go; asking the vendor if he could double it for a slightly higher price which was never a problem, he gladly did. The original name of one bara (bread) and channa (chickpeas sauce) became doubles after the term to double it up; both of the single components consisting of turmeric in varying amounts.



### 3 Materials and Method

The interviews were gathered together with all questions and answers together on a spread sheet, they were looked collectively and broken down into similar/different information was put together collectively and was broken down into smaller codes, remaining with three main factual headings. For the table I removed the differences and placed it in the written section.

#### 3.1. Purposeful sampling

A purposeful sampling is making an active choice in a given group or a population, for example East-Indian people in the age group 65 to 90 or women over the age of 65. Purposeful sampling has many advantages; being able to choose your focus group and to eliminate those who are deemed unsuitable leaving the more suitable candidates. The data was collected by my-self and an assistant, who took notes while I recorded and ask the questions. The study was done using a semi-structured qualitative study with an interview schedule as a guide line. The interviewees were allowed to express themselves freely. This openness gave room for free expression about the topic at hand, but also to elaborate and bring up other topics directly connected to the main subject. (Bryman, 2011)

A qualitative study is described as follows: a study that is built not on figures and statistical data but on data where words are taken into consideration. There are basically four traditions within qualitative research I explain two.

1. Naturalistic - a study of a situation in its own environment; as it really is without outer interference.
2. Ethn methodology - understanding their surroundings through interaction, participating and getting involved in situations to understand them.

#### 3.2 Method for data collection

*Data was collected on a trip to the Caribbean in March 2012 in connection with my second internship within the Kostekonomprogramet.*

A literature study of the migration and double migration and how the spice is connected directly with cultural ties combined with the use of open interviews. The study has been conducted with the use of semi-structured interviews of two (2) older women and one (1) older man in the East Indian community. The two women were born in Trinidad and the man in India. They all live in Trinidad at present and live within the same geographical location. The older women have never traveled to India but have both traveled to Canada and the USA on many occasions.

Protocol was kept for every interview and included information about; the length of the interview, atmosphere, comfort, temperature in room. I had an interview schedule of ten (10) questions where I started always with the first question. The ten questions were always answered when asked the first without them being formally asked any of the other questions. Certain other questions that were not formally present in the questionnaire were asked as follow up questions during the interviews. Interview one was about one hour long and has been record-



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ed and, saved as files on the computer and then transcribed and analyzed - interviews two and three were recorded on paper with two (2) people doing the interviews - one asking the questions and the other taking notes and recording gestures.

Reasons for not recording electronically are: Older people in this particular setting are a bit nervous about having their voices recorded which I noticed in the first interview. The first interviewee was very flustered after a while; it may have been the atmospheric temperature of it could have been the recording. I got a distinct impression it was the recording, because the way she looked at me and looked at the cellular telephone I used to record. She had agreed verbally to record but at the time I was thinking like a person in the culture I normally lived in. If one agrees to do something it is an agreement and if they change their minds they would say so. In this particular situation I could see on her expressions that she had change her mind and I asked many times if it was still ok- her answer was yes.

The reality to this situation is: An old East-Indian woman of 90 years would expect someone talking to them to read there looks and gestures, to understand that she was uncomfortable with recording. I later did another interview to complement the first without manual recording. If an East-Indian disagree with something they may not say it directly but one would pick it up in there tone of voice or in there gestures which I chose to ignore. After halfway through the interview it was obvious that she was upset of relating her story so we took a pause and continued after she drank some water and ate something as the weather was warm 35 degrees that day.

I tested the interview questions in the first interview and found that they did not work well in a manner that was satisfactory. I then proceeded by asking the first question and complemented with questions that seemed relevant as follow up question. Doing this change allowed the interviews to flow naturally. I used the interview schedule as a guide but used question pertaining to every situation as the people and interview situation were unique. I questioned here and allowed them to tell me there story and had a free conversation about many other aspects in their lives pertaining to turmeric and the role it played. They also told me of the importance it had to them

### **3.3 Methods for data analysis**

A semi-structured interview style is a tool used to have a fairly open discussion. In this type of interview, one also has a set of open questions - also called an interview-schedule. The predetermined style of questioning gives room for valuable discussion. This style gives the interviewee to opportunity answer outside of a given frame. This type of interviewing gives opportunity in getting valuable information that the researcher hasn't thought of; on the other hand it could be very time consuming. These types of research are carried out by recording interviews, taking notes and late transcribing them (Bryman, 2011).



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An analysis of the data entailed a closer look into different situations within the cultural aspects of turmeric. The interviews were broken down into smaller sections; a common denominator similar topics/information (Thuren, 2007). The method of choice for the interview comprised of semi-structured interview type using a purposeful sampling. I have analysed according to relevance to the topic in a thematic overview. Data has been arranged with every interview separate and a question answer review. I precede to breakdown the data as codes in a table format, where I have taken out similarities in all three situations as opposed to differences with the varying interviews. Through segmenting the data I have been able to see the meaningful parts of the factsheet codes (Backman, 2008). I then made groupings of similar themes grouping them together. The differences were also looked at in a similar way; this is explained in words lower down under interviews instead of including it in the table (Bryman, 2011).

A table below (analysis table) shows how I went about analyzing the data which I had collected in the previous mentioned interviews. I worked from the right hand side of the table. Information was put in that looked similar in all three interviews and later grouped together with similar topics. They were finally broken down into three main ideas that I have used as results headings (Backman,1996).

### 3.3.1 Interview protocol

1. Tell me about turmeric.
2. What does turmeric mean to you?
3. What memories do you attach with turmeric?
4. Are your associations with turmeric different now that you are grown up?
5. How do you use turmeric?
6. Has it changed over time?
7. How did you learn to use turmeric?
8. Do you use it in any special way?
9. In what form do you use the turmeric?
10. Have you ever grown turmeric during your time?



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### 3.4 Ethical considerations

Permission for my first interview was given orally. Where I had asked the interviewees´ if it was ok to record the interview and they were given information on how I was going to use the information, they were further informed that the interview was going to be used in my proposed essay and further what I was writing about. It was deemed ok and I proceeded to record on tape and written notes done by a helper (Bryman, 2011).

The second interviewee on the other hand was recorded on paper was not given. The subject was informed about how the interview was going to be used and for what purpose. Here too it was ok to use the interview for my research paper, they were more than willing to speak with me. She is a Hindu woman who is a second generation Indian who was on that particular day using the spices in a post birth ritual for bath and food for her granddaughter-in-law.

The third interviewee was also informed on how the interview would be used and for what purpose, here it was not possible to record the interview but it was recorded using a person other than myself to take notes and record on paper what was said. This individual was an India born Indian and who still resides in New Delhi India, on occasion but was interviewed at a trade show in Trinidad. He made special note that he was not an agriculturist, but a merchant, but had knowledge of turmeric, when asked if he ever grew the turmeric. All interviews were conducted in English with a mixture of broken English and some Hindi words.

#### 3.4.1 Limitations in study

The study of the Indian diaspora has through the years been subject of much research; investigation in the field of spice culture has looked at culture through the use of spices. According to my findings the occurrence of this type of research, named in the previous sentence is not very common. In retrospect to the inability of recording two of the interviews; this may have limited the results - although the body language was noted. Time constraints of six days including a weekend, may have been a factor in gathering the information. A point to note, I also suffered a hairline crack on my wrist and a concussion due to a fall during my internship as well as the conditions of one of the interviews which was not ideal but here I did a second interview. There have been other factors involving logistics that were key factors in getting the interviews that also worked to my disadvantage.



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### 3. Analysis table

Main headings	General headings	CODES	Similarities
Turmeric's embeddedness in cultural rituals	Rituals	WEDDINGS	Wedding ceremonies: both ceremonial ritual and as a skin care. The haldi (raw turmeric) is used fresh. The fresh haldi is mixed with different oils to form a paste.
		AFTER CHILD BIRTH	Ritual at birth for both mother and baby, to help production of milk
		SKIN PURIFIER	For wedding ritual, as a general skin lightener
		PUJAS	Used in the hindu prays ceremony.
Turmeric's use as a traditional food item	Food/flavour enhancer	IN COOKING FOR FESTIVALS AND EVERYDAY	Daily/Festival cooking: dahl, halwa, curries.
			Cooking it together with other vegetables as a main dish: cauliflower and peas.
Cultural practice	General hygiene/skin care  Analgesic	PERSONAL HYGEIN	using with kitchen cloth and disinfectant
		ANTISEPTIC	Used as an antibacterial measure for kitchen, as a mouth-wash and tooth paste for teeth health.
		DURING CHILD BIRTH	Labour pains, baby birth ritual, to help production of milk
		ANALGESIC	Used as a pain killer to reduce labour pains
		BRUISES	Menstralcramps Dog bites/bruises.
	Dye	DYE	Dye clothes for one of the many wedding ceremony, usually the clothes of the bride and groom.



## 4 Results and Discussion

### Interviewee 1 I choose to call Lata

A woman of 90 years old ( at the time of the interview) of first generation East-Indian descent who as a worker left her post as a worker in the cane field because she was forced to work in the first months of pregnancy while being ill. She spoke Hindi unlike many of the other inhabitants of Trinidad who spoke Bhojpuri. Her father ran away from India together with his nephew (brothers' son) and came with one of the last boats that brought workers to the island. He did work as an indentured worker and later worked for a prominent lawyer and politician who took part in the advocating and rights of the Indo-Trinidadian. She is a strong willed character with lovely blue eyes like her father. This person was a first generation Indo-Trinidadian, whose father was Rajput and immigrated to Trinidad on a ship to be an indentured labourer when he was 21.

### Interviewee 2 I am calling Tara

The intricate uses of the spice turmeric was told to me by Tara, a woman in her seventy-fifth year she still uses the spice today and even in many rituals. She is a knowledgeable woman from a prominent family also Kshatriyas caste who still practices many rituals that she was thought by her parents in Trinidad. At the time of the interview she was taking part in the ritual of a great-grandsons birth. She is from Indenture parents and third generation born on the Island of Trinidad. She taught her children how to use the spices and they have thought the younger generation. An immediate account was given on the birth of a child and how the rituals are done. We were given a taste of the halva that was made for the day and explained how it was done. She too had planted and still plant the rhizome turmeric for own use because in today's Trinidad market the green turmeric is not found.

### Interviewee 3 I choose to call Gura

Gura a merchant from Delhi, India whom I was buying traditional Indian wear from- he was very inquisitive and interested to know a lot about myself and my sister and specifically if I was "Indian" because I did not look local in his eyes. I then chose the opportunity to interview him because of his willingness to talk. He asked a lot of questions so I decided he was a perfect candidate, as it was a market place I thought it inappropriate to record so I took the decision to record on paper using two interviewees to conduct the interview. I complimented the initial interview with a second the day after. I asked the questions and I had someone who noted them for me. One of the first questions he asked was my caste therefore it was very easy to ask the same back, like all the others I interviewed, he was of Kyastria caste. His next question was he needed a wife for his son and if I was interested or if my sister was interested, I replied that I was already married and proceeded with the interview. After this interview I realized that my information was missing vital information

The interviews gave individual insight into their experiences and knowledge of turmeric. It also gave an Idea what it meant to them. Many similarities were stated as well as some slight differences. Some main areas where all shared common knowledge of turmeric were clearly



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reiterated in all the interviews: rituals, skincare/hygiene, antiseptic, painkiller, food flavour enhancer and textile dye. The similarities could have been an outcome due to them all coming from the same caste, even though they were both city dwellers and rural settlers. Although none of these particular people have ever met each other, they all gave an account of turmeric in a similar fashion (Davidsson, 2003).

Initial introduction of the first question (Tell me about turmeric?) gave many similar answers: they all touched on the other questions of my interview schedule without any prompting or influence from the interviewer. All interviewees started to explain how turmeric is used within nuptials, then went on to an in-depth explanation of how/when consumption in culinary/medicinal purposes takes place and further how they themselves learnt of its benefits. As I noticed after the interviews that information was not satisfactory a second interview was done. All of the interviews that was given first started in the same fashion, questioning what they could tell me about Turmeric them assuming that I knew nothing about it as I was asking questions. In all the interviews they started out to explain what the turmeric was and how it grew-the type of soil, how it looked and how to prepare it for use.

There were however some differences in the interviews; they all had a unique story to share surrounding their experience with turmeric. The first interviewee remembered her early life and shares her life's history with me. She explained of the many plants that she had planted and where/how she worked. The other interviews were much shorter because of time constraint. They all gave a story about their life's history and the villages/town they came from. Many other areas that the turmeric aided and had capacity to do was bringing together of family members for religious gatherings as it is used in all rituals involving everyday life. Late planted it on a larger scale for commercial purpose, Tara planted for her own use, Guar did not plant at all. They all pointed out that it was good for bruises but the third interview mentioned that it was good for dog bites (Davidsson, 2003).

Practices involving turmeric has a vital function within the East-Indian culture and has been present for many decades. The use of this particular spice turmeric in its role of cultural identity has survived the many generations and many immigration/emigrations in many different countries. Its cultural has been passed down from one generation to the next mainly because of its strong cultural beliefs and a culinary tradition which can be compared to a spiritual state of being, almost a religion; this is passed down from generation to generation.

#### **4.1 Turmeric's embeddedness in cultural rituals**

It is represented in many rituals such as birth rituals where it serves as a pain killer and as a medium to ensure milk production; as an ingredient in wedding ritual-used in powder form as well as the fresh form in various rituals directly from the first wedding day ceremony to the seventh. The East-Indian Hindu wedding is a complex ceremony which takes a week to be completed, many pre-wedding ceremonies the actual ceremony and post-wedding ceremonies as mentioned by Gallant, (2005).



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We have used turmeric for a lot of different purposes in my family - well I was married at (12) twelve years old, because of a certain ceremony that my father had to perform and it required me to be pre-menstrual. This turmeric was used in this ceremony. In the wedding ceremony the turmeric is very important, it is used first for colouring the wedding sari and then the grooms clothes; it is also used in the ceremony called saffron ceremony.

Lata explained of her early marriage where she moved only to the husbands' home only when she was of age. Turmeric is used in all stages of ceremonial acts during the entire wedding process. One such ceremony is where the turmeric is used for a ritual offering to all elements - earth, water, fire, air and ether; the turmeric is mixed with water and poured on the earth, dry powder is thrown into the fire and a bit left to be blown in the wind. Before the actual procedure of the panchabuta<sup>4</sup> the couple takes a bath for the ceremony. Turmeric is used to cleanse the skin of both the bride and the groom, before the actual nuptial and for colouring the clothes that is used for the first ritual. Lata explanations of why the wedding colour is yellow.

In the wedding ceremony the turmeric is very important, it is used first for colouring the wedding sari and the grooms clothes with the dye; it is also used in the ceremony called saffron ceremony (turmeric is called Indian saffron, because it is the same colour as real saffron so the names can be misleading. The turmeric paste is first used by the groom and then sent to the brides' home for her use. It is announced on arrival with the blowing of a conch shell.

Throughout the interviewing process they all moved from telling about wedding rituals, directly to explaining about morning sickness and nausea relief. They all continued the interview in explaining uses during wedding ceremonies and proceeded to its use with new-born babies and new mother. They all then proceeded to tell about how it is used for weddings and the procedures connected with this. Lata and Tara gives an account on wedding practices.

The saffron ceremony is an act where the turmeric paste is first rubbed on the grooms' body and then sent to the brides' home to be done - with the arrival of the turmeric paste an announcement is made by blowing a conch shell (a trumpet sound). Then it is the brides turn to bath with the turmeric paste - it is rubbed on her body and left on until the wedding ceremony during which time she fast. The day of the wedding ceremony, that would be two days after the turmeric is washed off with yoghurt... For weddings - white wedding clothes is dipped in a water bath consisting of ground turmeric and hot water. The bride and the groom gets rubbed down with a paste of ground turmeric all over their skin. This is a cleansing ritual and a skin refiner, for bleaching the skin too. Women with this yellow glow looks more beautiful that without.

As explained by Tara and Lata the turmeric is used to relieve many various ailments; for morning sickness, menstrual cramps, labour pain relief, aid in milk production, after-birth relief, inducing of milk-production. The turmeric is used as a mixture and drank before one gets out of bed to help with the problems of morning sickness. Turmeric is used as an analgesic in

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<sup>4</sup> A word used to describe the five different elements comprising of - earth, water, fire, air, and ether.



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the process of childbirth where a drink is made here as well with milk and the powdered turmeric and sugar that is given during labour pains to relieve the many discomfort associated with childbearing and giving some relief to one of the most excruciating pain known to mankind. The spice is used according to Lata to sterilize surfaces and material used in the process of birthing very prevalent in early days but not common today, as babies are normally born in hospitals.

#### 4.1.1 Turmeric's use as a traditional food item

The use of the turmeric as a nutrition item is found in everyday life and uses; it is used in many homes as a spice in the daily main vegetarian dish; used as the main ingredient in masala - to make meat dishes. The turmeric is even used in some of the many street foods that was taken with the immigrants from India e.g., poulorie, sahinās, and the more famous one the doubles. This dish doubles is even taken with them to North America and can be found in Brampton and Queens to name a few places. The types of foods that are eaten also have a central place within the culture in adhering to the old frugal ways.

One also almost never refer to someone by their correct name out of respect mainly in the older generation, so in this quote Tara refers to her granddaughter-in-law as the baby's mother and not by her name. She looks at me with slightly bowed eyes and slightly bowing her head to the side laughing about he referring to her granddaughter-in-law in that manner because she was not sure if she should look at me as an outsider or one who understands the culture. Tara gives an explanation of further use here.

It is used in dhal, curry, we use turmeric every-day in some way or the other, I use it when I make bara. We used it in the halwa for the twelve (12) days, and it is used in a drink for the new mother-it would help her heal better after the birth of the baby which reminds me that we should be making that drink now for the baby's mother.

The spice turmeric is used within the culinary arts as a fresh rhizome and as a powder, the latter being more common today than before. The fresh spice is not very common due to the fact that it is not commonly grown commercially. This means that the use of fresh turmeric requires the user to grow it himself/herself. Gura tells me about how he use it.

It is used as a paste or a powder in curries to give it a smooth consistency and rich golden colour. I use it in most things when cooking; making bara, kachori, channa, cook it as a vegetable with other things...for me In Delhi it is not just a spice but it is a part of life, my mother took me to the market to buy it. Everything we do and eat has haldi<sup>5</sup> in. I cannot think of anything without haldi.

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<sup>5</sup> Haldi the hindi for turmeric.



#### 4.1.2 Handing down of cultural practices

The culture is emulated by the next generation because of the strict conditions in the kitchen. It is handed down from one generation to the other due to many rituals and ideas that holds a strict belief of the role nutrition has on culture. While interviewing Lata she told me about how turmeric led her into doing agriculture even though her dad's caste did not allow it.

Well my mother and grandmother thought me to plant the haldi, my father was not so interested in doing that, so he made sweets to sell in ever different size and shape. He made labaney<sup>6</sup> and took it on his back around the village to sell it. Everyone bought from him... Well labaney is a sweet, you boil sugar and pour it out. You pull the sugar and it gets white, a little red colour and you know the sweet you all have at Christmas on the tree, well like that but thicker and longer.

She had just given an account of the sweet made in the Swedish town of Gränna which her father had taught her to make as a child.

Tara had explained to me the religious symbolisms of the turmeric and thought it was very important to continue the tradition and explained to me carefully how it was used, it was even used in a recent wedding of her grandson who came from Canada (secondary Indian immigration site) to be married in Trinidad in the traditional way as Tara pointed out below the significance of the religious and then Lata the way it helped her to make a livelihood.

The turmeric is seen as a symbol of purity, prosperity fertility and it is used to colour rice which is also a symbolism for fertility; used for decorating the alter where the wedding ceremony takes place. The turmeric is mixed with water and poured onto earth during the ceremony... The turmeric is also used to colour the hand of the bride; the rice that is thrown on the bride and used to colour the cotton thread that is tied around the brides neck which contains a pendent of gold on it and is called mangal-s utra...// It was a way of life and livelihood for her and her family. She used to cultivate a moderate parcel of land to supplement the family's income with crops such as ginger, wild coffee, sesame seeds and turmeric. This cultivated turmeric was an integral part of the family's other main means of income which was selling Indian street food and confectionary.

They were all coincidently from the same caste and they all had roots in the same region in India. They now all lived within a 20 kilometres radius in Trinidad and one had blue eyes and two of them hazel eyes. This information of eye colour may sound trivial to the western ear; the significance is this - having blue eyes, speaking hindi and being of the caste Khastria and coming from Rajastan. A small group of people have these common denominator. It is not very common because most people have brown eyes.

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<sup>6</sup> The exact same sweet that is called polkagris in Sweden.



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In a closer look at the data collected gives an overview that whether one comes from Metropolitan India or from a rural setting in an Indian diaspora- the relationship one has to certain spices is quite similar.

This interview take me back to when I was a little girl. In the midst of my struggles in making a living, this spice made me remember bringing up my children and what we did to survive, times together with my parents. Working with my mother and how she thought me to grow it. I worked on the sugar cane plantation in Usine St. Madeline- it was one of the main plantations .it brought in a sizeable income to the GNP of Trinidad. The sugar there was similar to the sugar that was produced in Guyana (Demerara), but that sugar was of a darker brown- the sugar produced here was nice and gold in colour.

Explanations and recipe for the various drinks were given. Turmeric would help with menstrual cramps, with labour pains according to Lata and Tara, these were remedies that they have tried that worked. Milk flow for the new mother was assisted with the help of a special concoction made of milk, sugar, butter, turmeric plus some other spices. I even had the opportunity to meet a new mother with a 12 day old baby, at one of the interview location. While at the second interview where there was a recent birth of the baby boy, we were treated to a dish that is normally made when babies are born. This dish is not to be refused when at a newborns home; the family would be insulted otherwise. The procedure is just to accept the dish and eat it gladly according to Lata..

We have used it in various ways : as medicine; a pain killer when menstruating, as a drink for helping with morning sickness, as a medium to reduce pain during/after childbirth and to provide the proper flow of mothers milk ...

Taras account of the drink used just after childbirth.

A mixture called karda prepared by Tara of milk, sugar, butter, sugar, turmeric is prepared for a mother a few days after giving birth. This potion is intended for cleansing of the body after having a baby and to stimulate milk production. It is also a good antiseptic.

The very few differences that I could see amongst the three interviews were that Lata had actually grown and produced the turmeric rhizome- the discussion was interesting in that she explained that when production yield a high quota they had to reduce the prices; and on the other hand the if it was low the price went up - that it all depended on a bit of a supply and demand, how much they the years' produce would be and therefore how much money they were going to earn. Lata tells me further of how she produced and sold the crop.

It is grown in different sizes, they are buried in the ground and they grow like ginger. The process for making it usable followed the sequence of digging it up from the ground, wash dirt off, boiling it comes next, then it is dried in the sun, it reduces in size and is now in a form that is usable. Now we would adjust the price according to the yield- if we produce a lot we



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would sell it cheaper and if we produce a little we would fetch a higher price...so those years we got bad crop we <sup>7</sup>batie we had to make the money stretch. We had more more people wanting to buy and less to sell and we had to make a living.

Lata had even continued to explain of her life as a child and growing up in a Trinidad where one spoke just Hindi in her case- the language had disappeared amount the general population. She even planted many different crops, two of which were coffee, sesame seeds and everything was done with the utmost care and respect for nature. She still had many plants she cared for including many roses and other spices; the turmeric she had passed unto her son who grew it just for having a plant.

...back then it was for survival and was at the center of my life, but now it is a scaled down version because of the changes in society, and it was a way to make some money to send children to school and do other things with ... a chance to interact with my family. In those days we all worked together. I am 90 years now so I can't do as much garden ing as I did before when I was a young girl.

Another difference I could point out in Tara's' discussion of the turmeric was she knew all the details of the use of the rituals; she could explain them in details, she often practiced them and was taught it directly from her parents who were born in Trinidad. She had in her turn taught her own children the uses of this very pungent spice. Gura also had fond memories of going to the market with his mother.

Memories that are attached are of childhood and going to the market in New Delhi with his mother to buy the spice...it is simply a way of life! You use it in everything. Almost everything I do in the kitchen involves use of turmeric. It is used for dog bites and cuts and such things.

A point to note was Gura's point of view; being the only one who was born in India and lived in a large metropolis Delhi. Gura started answering the questions in a similar fashion as Lata and Tara, although he grew up in Asia and these women grew up in the Caribbean. Gura made a point that he was no agriculturist, he felt degraded by the question about if he ever planted a crop; I could read this from his gesture and body language. He also learnt from his ancestors how the turmeric was used. It was also taught to him that it was good as a medicine. He was the only one who mentioned that it could be used as a poultice for dog bites.

Many new street foods have evolved from East-Indian cuisine. They are a new creation, endemic to Trinidad and they do not exist in the India of today. One of the most distinct and most identifiable of these is called Doubles; a circular fried bread made with a mixture of ordinary flour and/or peas flour blended together with different spices, turmeric and water to form dough. The sauce is made of whole chickpeas and spices. A chutney of mango/and or

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<sup>7</sup> Batie meaning daughter, never refering to their names but a handle.



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coriander is served. It is a fusion of a type of bread from India and a side dish that is served as a main dish to other foods; the bread is deep fried and called “bara” (approximately the size and shape of a chapatti or a tortilla). Turmeric is added to the bread mixture, giving it a beautiful golden yellow tint. It is served with chickpeas that are boiled, drained then warmed through, seasonings and turmeric is added. About two tablespoons of chickpeas is sandwiched between two ‘baras’ and dressed with a condiment of a spicy chutney. (see appendix for further explanation).

## 4.2 Discussion of results

The East-Indian Society in the Caribbean namely Trinidad has survived mainly due to a steadfast adherence to its culinary arts and food culture. The Indians do approach food with utmost seriousness. One is normally trained at an early age to appreciate the cuisine and have respect for food culture. The ability to cook is handed down from generation to generation from mother to daughter. No shortcuts are made especially when it comes to cooking techniques.

The aim of the study was to highlight the use of turmeric and its significance - I have been able to highlight how turmeric is used. Turmeric is used in different rituals it also used as an analgesic and is a large part of the culinary culture. The spice is highlighted in the different rituals like wedding ceremonies, baby christening and in the use of countless dishes. There are new dishes that have come about using the turmeric in the diaspora which is not at present available in India.

There was one notable difference in the sample I took and it was the fact that the only person not coming from a rural setting had never planted the turmeric; the other two who did come from a rural setting had planted and even made a living from growing this rhizome turmeric. They had even passed it on to the next generation to grow and take care of. All three candidates I interviewed could explain about the turmeric, they all started with wedding procedures and then continued to baby and mother care.

I have found that the spice turmeric has made its way from India with the indentured labourers and has remained with the culture and was passed on from one generation to the other in order to keep the culture and link to India alive. Even though it is grown on a small scale in the Caribbean - and mostly in private gardens which help to keep the turmeric alive. Due to the use of the turmeric as a cultural ingredient in numerous wedding rituals, birth and a host of culinary uses it has survived and passed the test of time. The spice has also been a contributor in bringing forth new ideas and new dishes that have arisen within the East-Indian culture and one that they can call their own. The culture has remained steadfast in its traditions and every generation has gained knowledge from the previous one. So much like a baton in a relay event is passed from one team member to another, so too is culture passed from one generation to another.



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In my findings I have discovered that the East-Indian spice turmeric is used frequently and in many areas within the culture. The areas that it is most frequently used are in everyday cooking; for making different vegetable dishes, many different pulses as well as in use of masala blend and curries. It is used daily in many homes and has survived since its introduction 150 years earlier. The spice is used in many different areas of life today in much the same way it was used in earlier days.

It is clearly embedded in the culture as many rituals that are many roles which entails the use of this spice. Turmeric is a symbol for purity, prosperity and fertility and because it is seen this way; it is widely used for many rituals at wedding for the purposes of dying the bridal clothes, births and otherwise. The turmeric is used as an antiseptic in the kitchen for the disinfectant of surfaces. It is still grown in many private gardens and very rarely found at markets for sale. In today's market there is not such a great demand as the powder version is bought in the supermarkets across the Caribbean.



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## 5 Conclusion

The East-Indian culture is a very complex institution and has survived movement from mother land to daughter land. The steadfast ways and strong beliefs of the people in the Indian diaspora have caused the survival of the culture. Food is a very important aspect of the everyday life within the culture and holds a high position. Due to the preservation of links to the mother land many areas of culture have remained similar and have changed little over the 150 years of the Indian presence in the Caribbean.

The main aim of this project was to get an insight into the use of turmeric within the East-Indian diaspora and in some way - reasons for its survival. I can clearly state that turmeric plays a great role in culinary art in the diaspora, maintaining many original dishes with a slight twist. Turmeric plays an even greater role in the survival of this very old culture due to its use within the home setting and in the cultural realm.

Survival of the Indian culture in the conditions they met in the Caribbean is a feat well accomplished. Being able to influence and break through the culture they met in this already established plantocracy society while maintaining their own identity. They were the last of the immigrants to occupy space and land on the Caribbean soil also became one of the most influential when it came to cuisine and culinary art.

This project and journey has been very intense and very personal with saying that; it has cause many stumbles along the way. The perspectives that was set up in the beginning of this project has changed along the course of writing but has maintained its focus on the main idea and subject matter turmeric.

A point to note is that the East-Indian culture has incorporated and integrated itself into the many cultures present in the Caribbean while still maintaining a flavour all its own. It may be symbolised the way a tossed salad is comprised of many components that work in harmony with each other, while still maintaining the integrity and flavour of each individual ingredient. The food culture that the Indians took with them is represented largely in the culinary length and breadth of the islands. India added a new dimension to food, culture and economic development to this melting pot of Trinidad and the wider Caribbean.



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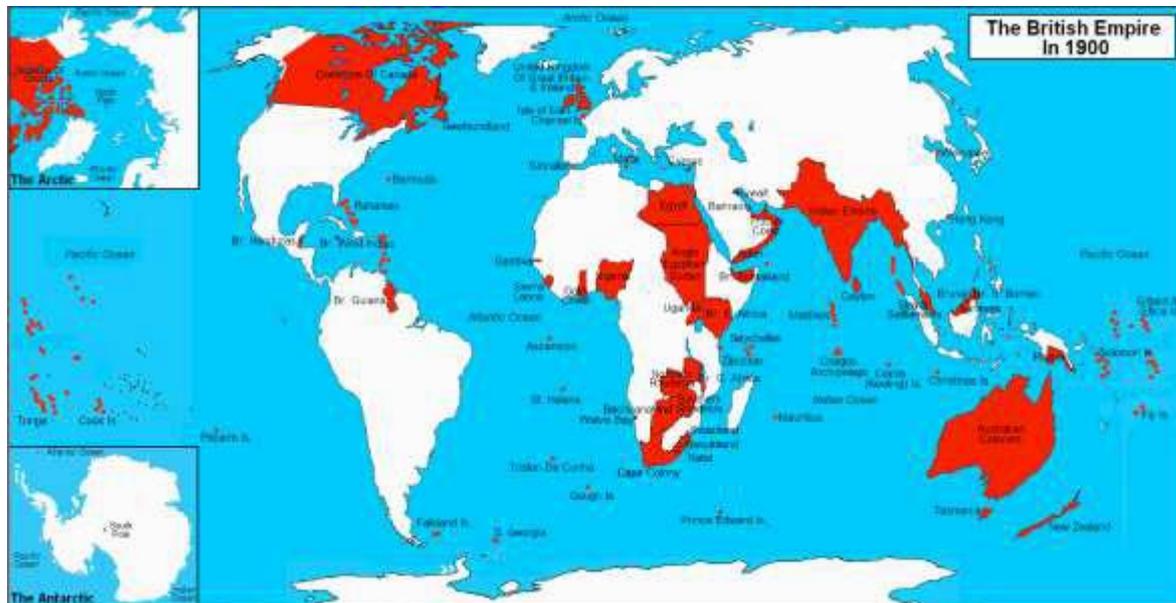
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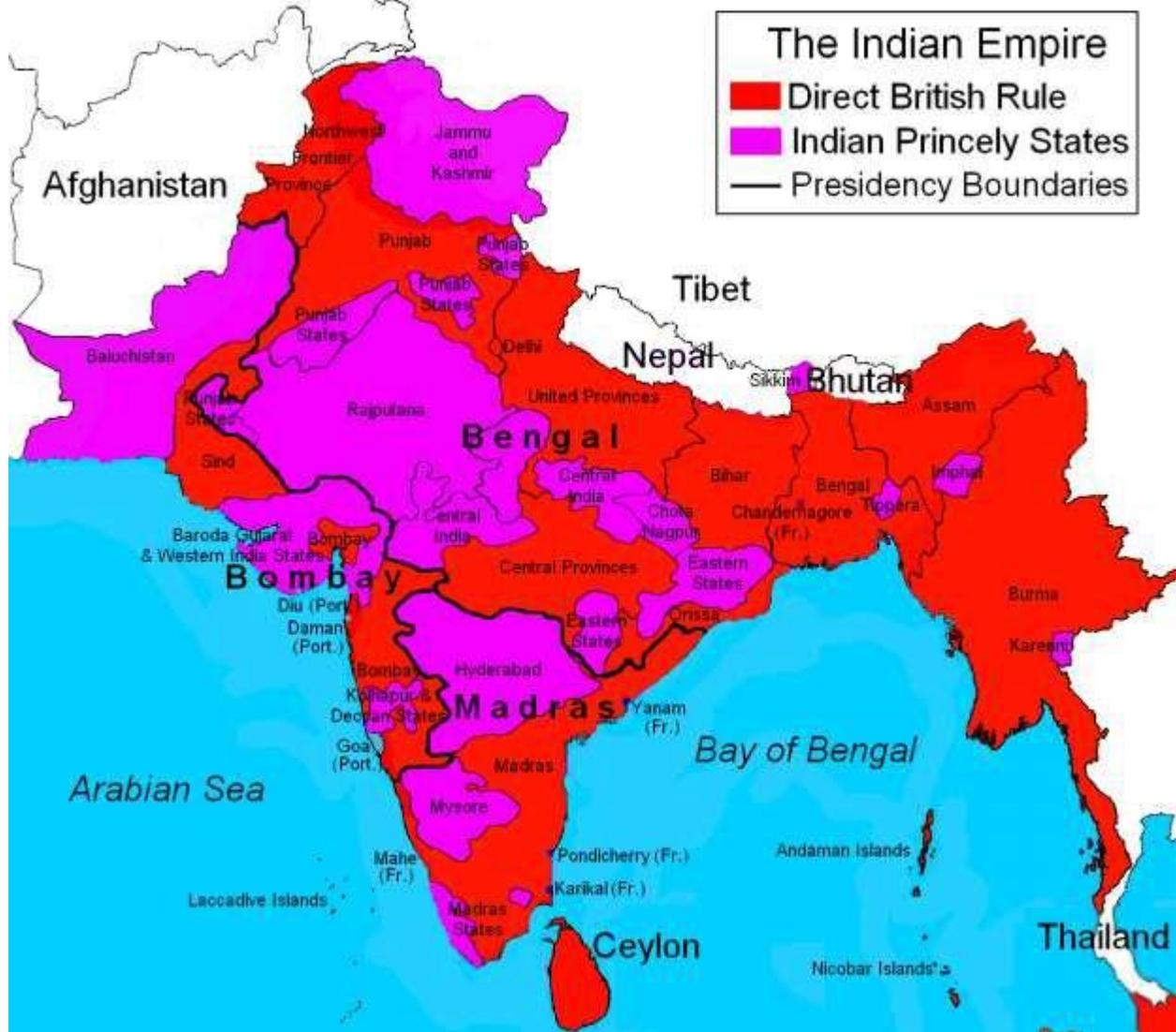
## Appendix



This is a map of the British Empire at the beginning of the 1900 where the darker country markings represent the British Empire.



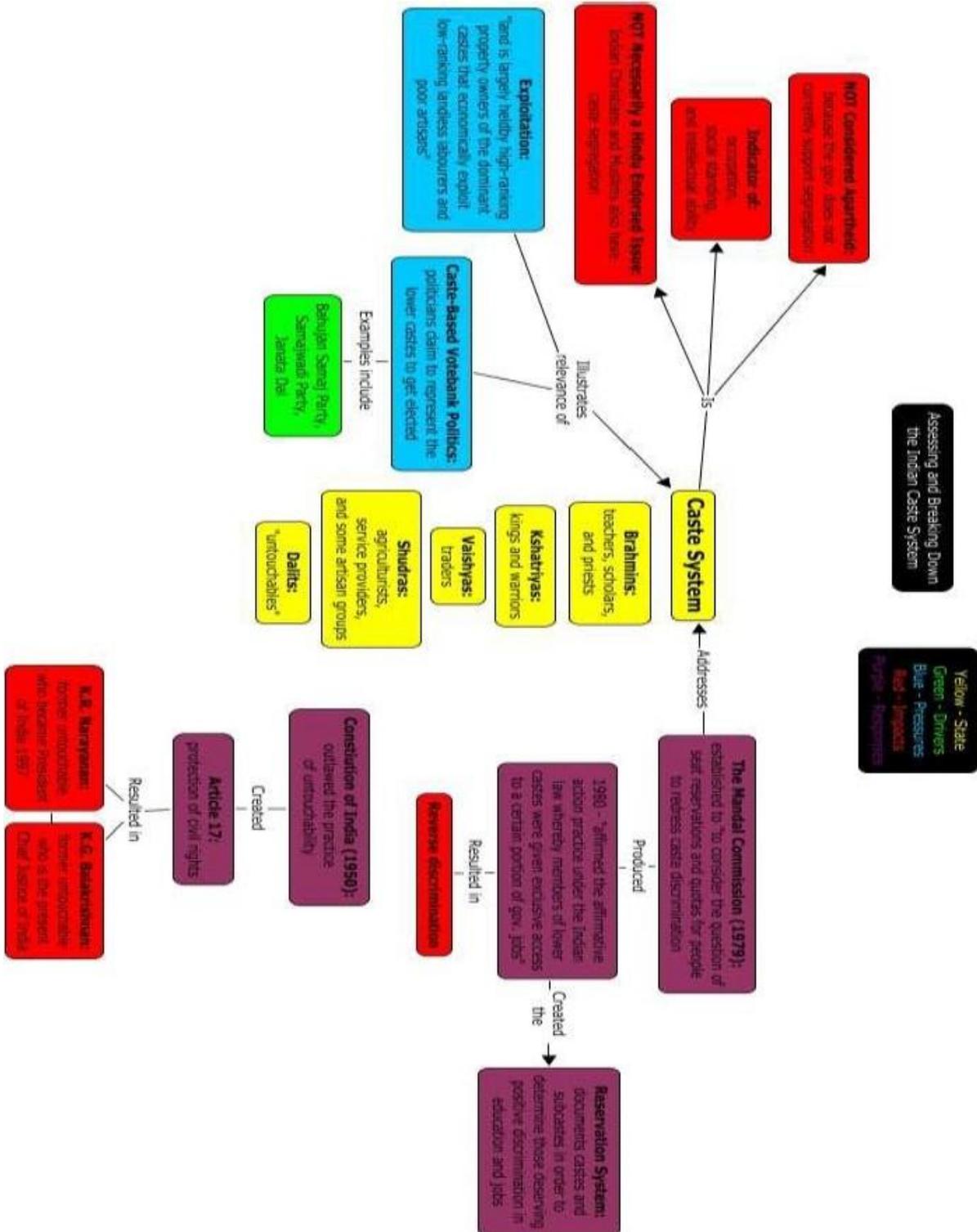
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This map shows the British Empire at the time of Indentureship – workers were relocated from mainly the red areas in the north and madras to the Caribbean. (Caribbean being the English speaking countries in the West-Indies this includes Belize and Guyana and Suriname)



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