

## Marital Discord and Dissolution Among the Hindu East Indians in Rural Trinidad

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### Introduction

One of the more striking differences between marriage in north India and in East India communities in rural Trinidad is to be found in marital instability. Although some of the conditions creating domestic disharmony may be similar in the two settings, marital dissolution is not common in north India, particularly among the higher castes, because exceptionally strong values support the sanctity of marriage and severe disapproval meet those who violate them. Because sentiments regarding divorce are intertwined with the proscription against remarriage, especially for woman, rejected wives and widows are by custom barred from remarriage, which is looked upon as a scandalous act. The right and proper activity of such women is a state of chastity. Although the 1955 Hindu Marriage Act makes divorce legal, on very limited grounds, the opportunity for divorce is viewed even today as a last resort to escape an intolerable situation rather than as a chance to establish a new life through remarriage. Divorce, then, in both the legal and customary senses, is negatively sanctioned.

Among the rural East Indian in Trinidad the situation is quite different. As descendants of indentured laborers brought from the South Asian mainland in the second half of the 19th

century to work on the island's sugar plantations, East Indians have abandoned traditional proscriptions against the indissolubility of marriage. They accept with equanimity keeper and common-law unions, the prevalent conjugal pattern in the Caribbean. Although divorce in the legal sense is extremely rare, as it is for all but the upper status groups which are the only ones that can afford it, marriages are easily terminated and either the estranged husband or wife may take up with another spouse. Second unions for women are uneventful and cause virtually no social disapproval.

This paper examines contemporary patterns of marital discord and dissolution among the East Indians in rural Trinidad, including the duration of marriage, the incidence of separation, causes of separation, and remarriage, as part of a larger effort to describe changes in East Indian family organization. By and large, much of the ethnographic research on the East Indians in Trinidad has not been concerned with change but has instead focused on cultural persistence (for a critique of this research see Nevadomsky 1981 a). This has led to the conclusion that a great deal of East Indian family life can be better understood by reference to the sociocultural system of India, from which it initially derived, than by reference to the local setting, in which it is presently found. By contrast, the crucial issues in the present paper are the extent to which social change has affected the stability of East Indian marriages and the kinds of conflicts and patterns of resolution that have emerged in this particular environment.

Data for the paper derive from four sources: field research in a rural East Indian community that included a random sample survey of households; personal marriage histories; case histories and numerical data provided by the probation

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