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Abstract

Indo-Caribbean women have been historically misrepresented through patriarchal views. Unlike other female folklore figures, the Churile and Saapin have not been interpreted through a feminist lense, but are mainly demonized. Similarly, Indian women have been presented as submissive and under the control of their Indian male relatives or spouses. A comparative analysis of three feminist traits—negotiation of circumstance, autonomy of sexuality and decision making in seeking one’s interest—in the Churile and Saapin and contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman proves that these traditional ideas can be dismissed as they show evidence of these traits. Major documentary sources on the Churile and Saapin included the book *Indian Caribbean Folklore Spirits* by Dr. Kumar Mahabir, website articles and facebook posts, and Vashti Bowlah’s online video recordings of stories from *Sugarcane Valley - Stories of East Indian Folklore & Superstition*. Journal articles by Reddock, Hosein, Mohammed, Roopnarine, Mehta and Pragg were also significant in putting the Indo-Trinidadian woman into historical context. Telephone interviews and an online questionnaire allowed for data collection from modern-day East Indian women in Trinidad.

Keywords: Indo-Caribbean feminism, Indo-Caribbean folklore, Indo-Trinidadian women, contemporary, Churile, Saapin, comparison, negotiation, decision making, sexual autonomy

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
List of Figures	4
Introduction	5
Literature Review.....	10
Summary of Findings	21
Negotiation of Circumstance	22
Autonomy of Sexuality	27
Decision Making in Seeking one's Interest	32
Conclusion	38
Appendix.....	39
Endnotes	43
Works Cited	45

List of Figures

Figure 1: Illustration of Churile by Aneesa Khan.....	11
Figure 2: Illustration of Saapin by Aneesa Khan.....	14
Figure 3, Table 1: Table showing numerical disparity.....	15
Figure 4: Women indentured labourers - Trinidad.....	16
Figure 5, Table 2: Table showing wage differences.....	17
Figure 6: Percentage of participants that notice feminist traits.....	21
Figure 7: Percentage of participants that recognize negotiation of circumstance.....	22
Figure 8: Illustration of Saapin by Aneesa Khan.....	25
Figure 9: Percentage of participants that notice sexual autonomy.....	27
Figure 10: “Rendition of a Choorile - Deviant Art.”.....	28
Figure 11: Percentage of participants who identify decision making for one’s interest.....	32
Figure 12: “Choorile Representing the Women Who Died from Domestic Violence in 2019- 2020.”.....	36

Introduction

Equal rights and opportunities for all genders is the core meaning of feminism (“What Is Feminism?”). Feminist traits can thus be understood as the presence of qualities which support and advance equality. The indentureship system brought more than 140,000 Indians to Trinidad and Tobago during 1845-1917. The majority of immigrants came from the regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in North India (“The Experience”), and not only brought with them their religions, but also their superstitious beliefs. As a result, Indo-Caribbean folklore has found its place among the more abundant and commonly recognized tales of African origin. Five Indian Caribbean folklore spirits are known—the Raakhas, pronounced Rha-Khas, the Churile (Chooryle), Saapin (Sah-pin), Dee Baba (Dee Bha-bah) and the Jinn, Sheik Sadiq (Jin Shake Sah-dik) (“Indian”).¹

The Churile and Saapin will be of focus. The Churile is seen in both Trinidadian and Guyanese folklore.² In Trinidad, a Churile is the spirit of a pregnant woman who committed suicide or died while giving birth (Mahabir 7). She is dressed in white with long hair scattered over her face (7). In Guyana, her name has a spelling of “Churail” or “Choorile”.³ She is generally known as an evil “vampire-like creature of East Indian origin” (LyttleTwoTwo). The Saapin or Snake Woman is a rather beautiful woman who attracts many men and has the mark of a cobra along the spine of her back, or on her thigh in the form of a varicose vein (Mahabir 12).⁴

Rationale

The Churile and Saapin appear to be among the least analysed in Caribbean folklore. Their stories are told from a cultural and demonized perspective leaving them misunderstood and without the same feminist re-interpretation granted to other female folklore figures. As such, it is worthwhile to highlight their feminist characteristics. Similarly, the Indo-Trinidadian woman has

been historically misrepresented. Although she has faced much turbulence since the time of indentureship, she “did not willingly and easily submit” (Reddock 79). However, more can be learnt about the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman and the extent to which she still holds feminist beliefs and practices. The aforementioned all show evidence of the same feminist traits and thus analyzing them can help dispel traditional myths about Indian women. It can be argued that the Churile and Saapin can be compared to the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman as it relates to their negotiation of circumstance, autonomy of sexuality and decision making in seeking their interest.

Parameters

Due to the focus on feminism, two female spirits (the Churile and Saapin) were chosen instead of any other Indian Caribbean folklore spirits. Additionally, the rich historical information available on the East Indian woman in Trinidad influenced the decision to focus on the contemporary. As the study began in the later half of 2021 with less than a year to complete it, the scope was limited to Trinidad. Tobago would not have been easily accessible and thus would have presented challenges in gaining data from persons during the covid-19 pandemic. In order to keep the data manageable given the allotted time frame, only three feminist traits were defined and data was gathered from 20 women in total—15 filled out a questionnaire and 5 others were interviewed.

Objectives

The goal is that by conducting a comparative analysis through highlighting feminist traits, conventional beliefs about Indian women can be dismissed. This not only fills a gap where the feminist qualities of the Churile and Saapin have not been academically explored and carves a space for them to exist within conversations on feminism in Caribbean folklore, but to show that

these traits also exist in modern Trinidadian East Indian women. The study aims to continue the credibility of research on Indo-Caribbean feminism by showing that Indian women continue to defy their historical stereotypes. Furthermore, it will generate a fresh way of thinking among persons who believe that patriarchal oppression has kept Indian women in submissive roles without any action taken by them to fight for their autonomy.

Methodology

The main source of primary documentary data was the book *Indian Caribbean Folklore Spirits* by Dr. Kumar Mahabir accessed at the Heritage section of the National Library. Although website articles and facebook posts were very informative, this book was the core source for information on the Churle and Saapin. Vashti Bowlah's online video recordings of stories from *Sugarcane Valley - Stories of East Indian Folklore & Superstition* were also quite helpful for putting their myths into perspective. The most important secondary documentary sources included journal articles by Reddock, Hosein, Mohammed, Roopnarine, Mehta and Pragg on the history and evolution of the East Indian woman in Trinidad.

This study was cultural in nature as it examined local Indo-Caribbean folklore and the modern East Indian woman in Trinidad. It also involved looking at literature surrounding the local history of Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago. Based on the methodology of requesting short essays used by Mohammed and the survey mentioned, it was determined that a qualitative approach would be best to gain data about the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman. The research therefore gained new knowledge to add to existing scholarship by means of primary oral sources (interviews and a questionnaire) which provided in-depth scribal data. This allowed for specific and personal experiences of Indian women to be captured which are not easily gained through quantitative approaches.

Non-probability sampling was used via a combination of approaches—purposive, voluntary, convenience and snowball sampling. Contemporary Trinidadian women between the ages of 18-75 of predominantly East-Indian descent and varying marital status were identified which created a snowball effect in some cases. The questionnaire was also openly shared which added voluntary responses from persons who fit the criteria. Using combined sampling methods allowed for all criteria to be met and thus valid conclusions could be drawn about the general female East Indian population in Trinidad.

Data was collected via a google form questionnaire gaining 15 responses and 5 telephone interviews, creating a total of 20 responses. Questions were formulated based on the three feminist traits (refer to Appendix). The same questions were used in both methods. Section 1—a total of 13 questions—consisted of demographic questions in which participants would state their age, marital status, presence of children and religion, along with general open-ended questions about the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman. Questions were also asked about the presence of feminist traits. Participants who were married/in a relationship were asked to proceed to Section 2 in which they were asked 13 more open-ended questions. These were more personal as they asked about the participants' experiences within their relationship. However, due to a lack of responses in Section 2 of the online questionnaire, Indian women within this category were sought for a telephone interview as it was determined they would be more comfortable sharing personal information through conversation. Both methods were done anonymously to ensure that all participants were comfortable. Responses from both methods were grouped together and sorted thematically by looking for patterns and interpreting responses aligned with the three feminist traits.

Chapter Outline

Five chapters are included within the study. Chapter one, entitled “Literature Review”, consists of the historical and cultural context for the study by reviewing literature on the Churile and Saapin and the history and evolution of the Indian woman in Trinidad. Chapter two, “Summary of Findings”, presents the general findings of the study. Lastly, chapters three, four and five, entitled “Negotiation of Circumstance”, “Autonomy of Sexuality” and “Decision Making in Seeking one’s Interest” respectively, compare the ways in which the Churile and Saapin and the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman possess each of these feminist characteristics.

Literature Review

While recent studies have looked at Caribbean folklore figures through a feminist lense, this has not been done for Indo-Caribbean folklore spirits like the Churile and Saapin. In exploring their feminist traits, similarities can be seen in Indo-Trinidadian women historically. Thus, like literature aimed at dispelling traditional myths, this study will add credibility to why Indian women in general deserve to be praised for their feminist attributes not only seen in their folklore, but also in contemporary generations. However, before data collection and comparison can be done, a review of the existing literature is first necessary in order to understand why the feminist discourse about the Churile and Saapin and Indo-Trinidadian woman can arise. Additionally, any methodologies used in the research will be highlighted.

The Churile

The Churile (Fig. 1) is the spirit of a pregnant woman who died during childbirth or as a result of suicide (Mahabir 7). She roams late at night weeping with her unborn fetus crying in her arms (7). Others say she died while her child survived (LyttleTwoTwo; Deebrah). She is driven through immense sadness to attack her victims which are pregnant women, newborns and children who are quite young—resulting in miscarriages or neonatal death (Deebrah). The Churile also causes her previous husband to become ill as she would take revenge on him if he had abused her while they were married (Mahabir 7). If he failed to care for their children she bore while alive, she would seek vengeance (7).



Fig. 1. Illustration of Churile by Aneesa Khan (Mahabir 7).

According to “Myth”, she is unable to be at peace due to being separated from her child. She roams through the place where she died looking for her baby on the night of a new moon as she wails in sadness.⁵ When the spirit is able to find her living baby or one similar in age or resemblance, she kills the child either by suffocation or other means and takes it with her, leaving a dead but otherwise normal-looking baby behind (“Myth”).⁶ Alam shares a similar understanding as they state that over hundreds of years, the Churile has become known for one thing in particular—“taking the blame for the high rate of infant, maternal and neonatal mortality and stillbirths”—as the reason for her existence (qtd. in Mahabir 11). However, her determination is not being considered and her story can be reinterpreted.

Tujay Macey's Photography states that “a churile is in eternal grief since she lost her child and her life due to domestic violence or committed suicide to escape from domestic

violence.” (“Choorile (Churile)”). In Trinidad, the legend of the Churile has been passed down over generations partially for the reason of preventing women from taking their own lives (Mahabir 11). However, this shows an under-exploration and lack of understanding for why the Churile committed suicide and can be looked at from a feminist angle. Furthermore, due to the wrongdoings of her husband, a conclusion can be drawn to justify her attack on him.

Along with the apparent thread of belief that the Churile takes revenge on those who mistreated her, Bowlah also highlights the Churile’s act of vengeance. After Raj—a man dreaded by women in the village for his mistreatment of females—impregnates Miss Neela, she gives birth but neither her nor her child survives. Her spirit would then roam through the village at night carrying her unborn child in her arms until she sought her revenge on Raj. It would be soon after that his body would be pulled out of the rice lagoon (“The Churile” 0:25-6:18). Here, her revenge can also be justified as proof of her feminist qualities.

Although she has backwards feet and some features “upside down” at times, the Churile appears to look like a regular woman (LyttleTwoTwo). Her ability to change her appearance at her will allows her to take the form of a beautiful or normal-looking woman in order to “lure young men to their deaths”. If a man becomes captivated with her, she is believed to kill him (LyttleTwoTwo). It appears, however, that these statements place emphasis on the “wrong” the Churile has done without considering a possible reason, while ignoring the powerful way she uses her beauty. As such, while the strong feminist qualities of the Churile shine through in the writings, they are not highlighted as the direct focus or studied in depth. Instead, there mainly appears to be a sense of blame towards her. Thus, this research aims to analyze the Churile through a feminist lense.

The Saapin

The Saapin or Snake Woman (Fig. 2) is a quite gorgeous woman who has the mark of a cobra along her back and attracts many men (Mahabir 12).⁷ Deebrah mentions that she is unaware that she harbours a “serpentine jumbie” as the spirit of a snake lives within the image on her back. During midnight on a full moon at a certain time of year, the mark of the cobra turns into a real snake (Mahabir 12; Deebrah). When the Saapin is in bed with her partner, it bites him on the tip of his tongue before returning to its original place (Mahabir 12). Both the man and woman are oblivious to the act as the snake is not seen and the husband does not feel its bite (12). Deebrah further explains that the bite itself, though it is not fatal, imparts on the man a deadly spell; and he dies the following day from an accident, unexpected sickness or suicide (Deebrah; Mahabir 12). Neither the woman nor man is aware of the root cause of these deaths (Mahabir 12).

Mahabir specifies that she has about seven partners (12). However, despite her ability to easily gain a spouse, she is quite unhappy because she is not able to have a husband for very long due to his untimely death (Mahabir 12; Deebrah). Further, Bowlah, in “The Saapin’s”, tells the story of Miss Chantal who villagers suspect to be a Saapin. Men found it hard to resist her lure but ever since she was first married at nineteen, Miss Chantal would lose all three of her husbands either from mysterious and sudden illness or an accident. She was filled with grief and confusion as to why this was happening to her as “no one dared to tell her that being born a Saapin meant that she could never keep a husband.” (0:25-6:07). These stories express a dangerous, yet sorrowful experience associated with the Saapin but her resilience and sexual independence are not considered.

Some versions of the legend tell that the Saapin will bite her husband if he abuses her (16). This action can also be viewed through a feminist lense as the Saapin's revenge instead of being condemned. Like the Churile, a feminist view of the Saapin is not seen or directly explored in the literature surrounding her. She is mostly seen in a negative light due to the misfortune she causes. Thus, there is room to take a closer look at the Saapin.



Fig. 2. Illustration of Saapin by Aneesa Khan (Mahabir 14).

The History and Evolution of the East Indian Woman in Trinidad

According to Reddock, when it came to recruitment of labour for indentureship, there was a “numerical disparity between the sexes.” (Fig. 3, Table 1) (80). The female proportion of the indentured labourers consisted of less than 40% (Fig. 4) (Hosein 63).

Table 1

TABLE 2: SEX RATIOS (MALES PER 1,000 FEMALES) AMONG ESTIMATED NET IMMIGRANTS TO TRINIDAD, 1871-1911

Period	Sex Ratio	
	East Indian	Other
1871-1881	2,143	1,101
1881-1891	2,117	1,246
1891-1901	1,748	1,147
1901-1911	3,037	744

Source: Jack Harewood, "The Population of Trinidad and Tobago", CICRED Series, 1975.

Fig. 3. Table showing numerical disparity (Reddock 84).

It is noteworthy that, as mentioned by Ramnarine, during the early period of indentureship the planters saw female labour as a liability (qtd. in Reddock 80). For this reason, women or family migration was hardly encouraged (Reddock 80). Furthermore, the wishes of the plantocracy and the demands of recruitment set by the colonial authorities included the need to have local reproduction of the labour force, the necessity to "stabilise" the male labour force and to secure the "right kind of women" when seeking female immigrants (Reddock 80). Reddock adds that by the mid-nineteenth century, there was great concern over the type of women recruited (81). Here, it is important to note one of the historical myths associated with Indian women who migrated to Trinidad and Tobago—they came with their families "under the power, authority and control of their male relatives and were of docile and tractable character." (79). However, as suggested, this was not the truth; hence the concern about the "right kind of women".



Fig. 4. Women indentured labourers - Trinidad (*Caribbean Muslims*).

Mohammed highlights that Indian women benefited from migration in various ways (qtd. in Roopnarine 6). Many of them were leaving behind difficult situations (6). Hence, as Reddock emphasises, “the majority of Indian women came to the Caribbean not as wives or daughters but as individual women.”—predominantly widows (81).⁸ This shows that many Indian women had a strong sense of making their own decisions as they left all they knew in India and sought a better life. Nevertheless, female indentured immigrants found themselves in a contradictory situation when arriving in Trinidad and Tobago—they were now “more free yet less free” (Mohammed 191). Despite being able to challenge their original societal position in India and being a “scarce and valuable” resource, their ability to maintain autonomy and a less submissive role was not an easy feat (191). It can be said that this occurred for a number of reasons. For one, when it came to ‘stabilising’ the male labour force, women were used to ensure experienced workers remained and could work on the estates (Reddock 82). The length of indenture for women was thus limited to three years in the mid-1890s according to Tikasingh (qtd. in Reddock

83).⁹ This was done to encourage many “respectable” females (83). However, besides the few “well-off” Indian men who could afford to keep their wives at home, the greater majority of women kept working on the estates (83). This shows that Indian women were willing to work and better themselves. However, throughout indentureship, women’s wages were significantly lower than men’s (Fig. 5, Table 2) (83).¹⁰

Table 2

TABLE 1: BRECHIN CASTLE ESTATE APRIL 1, 1907-MARCH 31, 1908			
Number of Immigrants		Average Actual Days Worked Per Head	Total Wages Earned (\$)
			Average Wage Per Day Per Head
Average Wage Per Day Actually Worked			
Males	461	195.44	22,830.44
Females	181	94.02	3,512.85
Average Wage Earned Per Legal Working Day			
Males	461	280	22,830.44
Females	181		3,512.85
Average Wage Earned Per Day at 365 Days Per Annum			
Males	461	365	22,830.44
Females	181		3,512.85

Source: Sanderson Report: 1910, 139-40.

Fig. 5. Table showing wage differences (Reddock 83).

According to Hosein, in the 1920s when Indian village settlements began to be integrated in Trinidad, arranged marriages for young rural Indian children was common (71). The sexuality of the young Indian female was of grave concern to Indian males and the wider community and thus having her marry before puberty was important in controlling her sexuality (64). While it appears that arranged marriage meant that the young Indian girl had no control over her fate, she understood that it was essential and a necessity in her life (65). It was not only practical, but a social responsibility (66).

However, this did not mean that she didn't challenge the system (Hosein 63). It was the wife who encouraged her husband to break away from the extended family after their first child and would stand up for herself and her spouse, especially in instances where the mother-in-law was difficult to live with (67). At this time in Trinidad, marriage was considered a lifelong commitment for Indians and thus divorce or leaving was attached to a "stigma of shame", especially for women (67). She therefore created her change through a sense of individualism by negotiating her own space (67). Since she was an equal to her husband on becoming married, she could "shift the balance of power in her favour", particularly when her husband did not perform his duties as head of the home (68). She knew her worth and made decisions for the welfare of herself and her children (68). Therefore, the rural Indian woman not only created her change as she was able to have a voice, but showed her independence. Just as in the beginning where her sexuality was managed for her, she essentially reclaimed it through negotiation.

Mohammed highlights that because Indian men in Trinidad no longer had the patriarchal rules of India to their advantage, they "violently coerced their women into submission" (191). Nevertheless, as Mohammed states, Indian women fought back by challenging the abuse they faced to an extent (qtd. in Roopnarine 7). Though some found a way to negotiate, Hosein highlights that Indian women did not fear leaving their husbands if they needed to despite the consequence (72). Her ability to choose for her benefit can be clearly discerned.

Mohammed writes that Indian men rationalised their watchfulness over Indian girls and women through the concept of an unrestrained female sexuality (193). Consequently, the freedom of the Indian female was restricted; yet, on the contrary, it gave them a "vibrant women's culture based on the freedom of female libido" (193). Hence, regardless of their "subservient and passive role", this perhaps certainly gave them a stronger sense of self-

confidence as females (193). Mehta draws attention to “matikor”, a ceremony and “woman-dominated space” of sexual initiation for a bride to be which takes place the day before her wedding (3). Pragg states that these women destabilise the “impositions” placed on the female body by the patriarchy through an expression of their sexuality and sensuality (qtd. in Mehta 3). Further, in looking at discourses surrounding “matikor” and the sexuality of the Indo-Caribbean female, Pragg examines this women-only ceremony through a queer perspective and sees it as an entrance to “queered conversation” (3). This ceremony can be seen as an act of sexual autonomy by Indian women as they essentially found a way to reclaim their sexual freedom in a restrictive atmosphere.

In 1957, a survey was done among secondary school students on their goals for the future in Trinidad and Tobago (Mohammed 196). For Indian girls, a university education was seen as the stepping stone to a job and “personal independence” (196). In an attempt to understand the extent to which Indian women have changed, young women of Indian descent born in post-independence times were asked by Mohammed to write short essays (198). One girl states... “I think having a career is important because then I would be less dependent on a man.” (199). Evidently, the mindset of young Indian girls was changing. They were making a decision which would propel them into an independent future.

In Trinidad, Indian women have been greatly successful according to Mohammed (qtd. in Roopnarine 14). Law, business and medicine are some of the many professions in which they have succeeded in (13). These women have used the opportunities available to them to their advantage and have made the best of difficult situations (15). Over the decades, they generally “made significant breakthroughs in a predominantly male-oriented society” (Roopnarine 14). It is clear that they have been determined to be as independent as possible.

Based on the literature, it is clear that the Churile and Saapin have not been sufficiently examined as their feminist traits are not highlighted. Their myths appear to be solely told for cultural purposes and mainly carry an air of blame or misfortune. Furthermore, the historical context of the Indian woman can be used to infer that contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women have also evolved in their feminist qualities. By comparing the three feminist traits—negotiation of circumstance, autonomy of sexuality and decision making in seeing one's interest in the Churile and Saapin and contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman, this research adds to previous scholarship which aims to reshape the traditional patriarchal views of Indian women. Additionally, Mohammed's methodology of short essays and the survey mentioned gives insight into how data can be collected for this study.

Summary of Findings

On analyzing the literature, it was clear that the three feminist characteristics could be seen in the Churile and Saapin. In order to compare them in the modern day East Indian woman, telephone interviews and an online questionnaire were conducted. The results showed that of the 20 participants, 70% noticed more feminist traits in contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women compared to past generations, with 25% stating “somewhat” and 5% stating that they have not noticed traits (Fig. 6).

Furthermore, the majority of participants showed evidence of having the three traits. Thus, a comparison of the traits could be made between the Churile and Saapin and contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women. The results were combined and examined in relation to the Churile and Saapin by referring to the literature. Additionally, the historical context of the East Indian woman was considered.

20 Participants

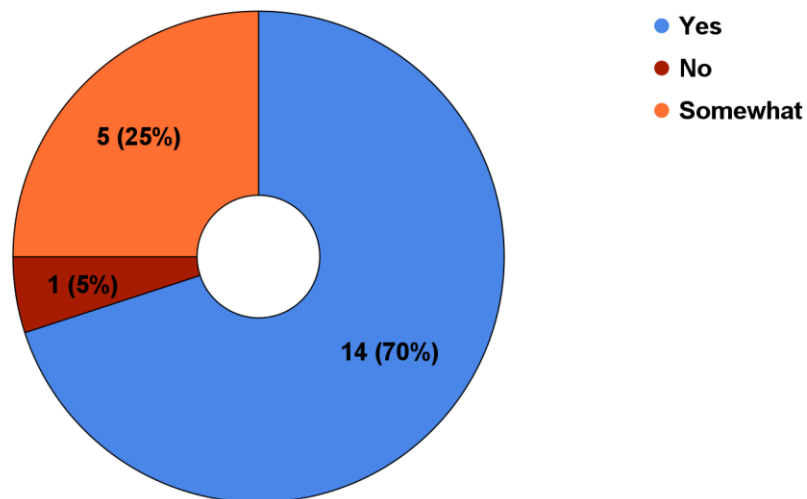


Fig. 6. Percentage of participants that notice feminist traits.

Negotiation of Circumstance

Negotiation of circumstance can be explained as the overcoming/navigation of any difficult situation and/or the ability to turn it around in one's favour. The Churile and Saapin have proven to negotiate their difficult circumstances. This is also evident in the results where 60% of respondents have recognized negotiation of circumstance in contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women (Fig. 7), with this feminist characteristic also being highlighted in the responses of the participants themselves.

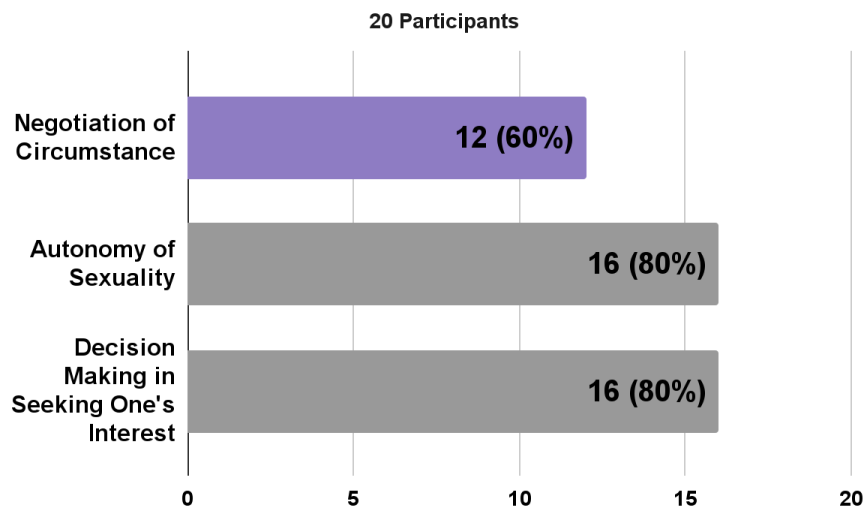


Fig. 7. Percentage of participants that recognize negotiation of circumstance.

When it comes to themselves and their children, Indian women show a great deal of determination in order to overcome their negative situations. As Hosein has stated, the Indian women of past generations put the welfare of themselves and their children first (68). Their children empowered them as they were “a factor in their negotiations” (68). It can be said that the Churile was seeking her welfare and that of her unborn child when she committed suicide. Tujay Macey’s Photography suggests that she may have done this to escape domestic violence (“Choorile (Churile)”). Other than to free herself and her baby, there seems to be no other

evidence of why she would commit suicide during her pregnancy. She negotiated by making a decision that she may have felt was her last resort to prevail and save herself and her child. To commit to what must have been a rather difficult decision where she would be leaving the living world shows that Indian women are strong-willed, contrary to how Indian men would have seen them in the past—i.e. as weak.

Similarly, contemporary East Indian women generally negotiate for their children's best interest. For example, interviewee E who got married at 19 (arranged marriage) had to make changes for her child's benefit. Her husband often went out with friends and did not handle his responsibilities so she did everything. Though she felt neglected and at times wanted to leave, she decided to stick it out as she worried about what her "mom and villagers would say". She quit her job and stayed at home to care for their child and let her husband continue to work. While marriage was strongly seen as a commitment at that time just as in the past, like earlier generations of Indian women, she found a way to negotiate for her child's sake (Hosein 67, 68).

There is an apparent trend where respondents who are married or in a relationship tend to manage the household when their partners do not or are unable to. For example, interviewee A mentioned that many times she took up both roles in the household as her husband's job required him to travel often. Thus, she took responsibility for everything as though she was a single mom. She stated that times like these gave her a sense of independence and said "I don't depend on him". Even with the current pandemic she has chosen to be a working mother as work is limited for her spouse and the family needs financial support. Earlier generations of East Indian women also negotiated challenging circumstances by taking over duties when their husbands did not (Hosein 68). They were able to shift the power balance as they were now equals through marriage (68).

Indian women also prevail over their troublesome or sorrowful circumstances through their resilience. The Churile's difficult search for her child after her death is an example of this as Deebrah mentions that according to some stories, the Churile wanders the earth at night looking for her child to take with her to the spirit realm as it remained alive. Alam highlights that she is blamed for taking the lives of infants (qtd. in Mahabir 11). However, it can be said that this is her way of negotiating her circumstance of being separated from her child. When she sees a child that resembles or that she believes to be her own, "that is when she mourns greatest as she knows that in order for her to find peace, she must take him with her, in the process killing him." ("Myth"). Thus, this shows that the Churile may in fact be filled with sadness over having to kill the child but she does what she perceives is needed in order to be reunited with her baby. If she was successful and the baby happened to be her child, she would be able to find peace and cross over into the next life; but if she does realise that it isn't her child, she begins looking again in sorrow ("Myth"). The Churile, like other Indian women, uses her child as a driving force in her negotiations.

Likewise, the Saapin (Fig. 8) is able to negotiate her misery through her resilient nature. Bowlah, Deebrah and Mahabir mention the Saapin's sorrow due to losing all her partners ("The Saapin's" 0:25-6:07; 12). However, she changes her sorrowful circumstance whenever her partner dies by getting married to another. Despite the fact that she is sad, confused and oblivious to the fact that she is the cause of their deaths, the Saapin is so compelling that her happiness can be renewed, though for a short while, when she attracts another man.

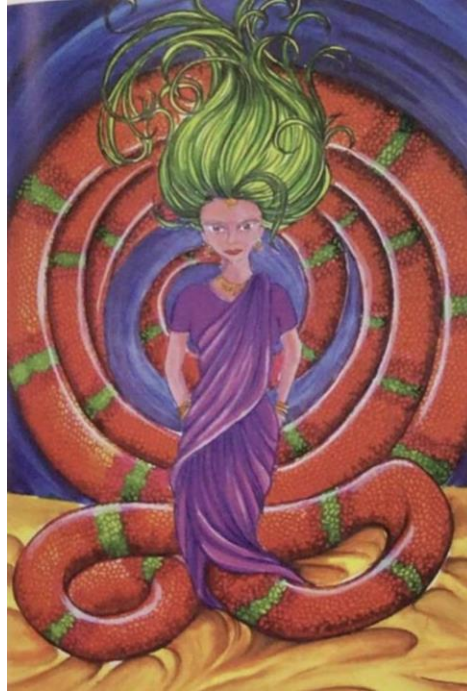


Fig. 8. Illustration of Saapin by Aneesa Khan (Mahabir 12).

When dealing with negative situations involving their partner or spouse, East Indian women believe in negotiation through communication by expressing one's feelings or distancing for a while in order to overcome it. One respondent added having a mother-in-law for example to communicate with the spouse. This is an interesting difference compared to what is seen with East Indian women historically. Difficult in-laws were usually the reason why they found ways to negotiate with their husbands (Hosein 67). However, the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman shows resilience and determination in her decision to work through relationship issues, contradictory to the traditional view of Indian women as subordinate.

In the same thread of Indian women taking a less passive role, the Saapin also negotiates her circumstance by using a convenient situation to attack her abusive husband.¹¹ By saying that the snake bites the man on the tip of his tongue while he is in bed with her, Mahabir may be implying a moment of intimacy (12).¹² It is then possible that the serpentine spirit may have used this moment of weakness where the Saapin's husband would have been distracted by her beauty

to its advantage to attack him. Perhaps this is why he does not feel the bite (Mahabir 12). Her subtlety and deceptiveness is evidence of how she is able to negotiate her space and escape abuse. This is reminiscent of Hosein's explanation of Indian women who used their in-laws to purposefully create a negative situation in order to get out of arranged marriages (68). They also used their cunning nature to get what they wanted.

On analysing how the Churile and Saapin and contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women negotiate their circumstances, one can see why it is necessary to cancel traditional ideas of Indian women as passive and unable to create their change.

Autonomy of Sexuality

To possess sexual autonomy is to take control of one's sexuality, whether it be showing freedom and ownership with one's body and sexual relations or deciding to what extent one wishes to conform to gender roles. The Churile and Saapin show sexual autonomy through their actions. Additionally, not only do the results show that 80% of participants notice this feminist trait in contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women (Fig. 9), but it is also clearly seen in their responses.

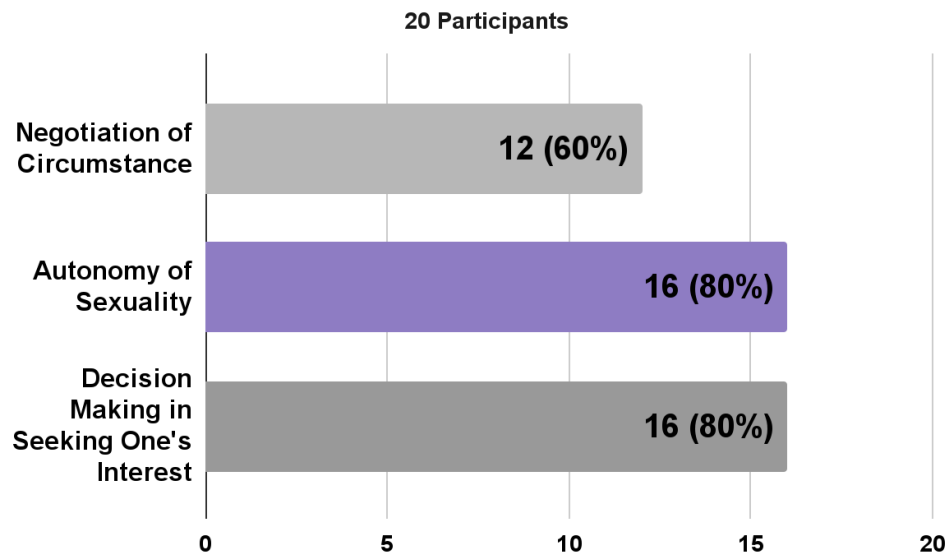


Fig. 9. Percentage of participants that notice sexual autonomy.

Mohammed suggests that Indian men saw Indian women as having an “unrestrained female sexuality” (193). However, Indian women generally go against the patriarchal limitations that have been imposed on their sexuality. For example, Alam states that in North India the term “churail” is popularly used and has become a metaphor “for the woman who dares to deviate from the patriarchal norm.” (qtd. in Mahabir 11). The Churile’s ability to shapeshift from a “vampire-like creature” into a beautiful woman to control men as LyttleTwoTwo states is a testament to the power she has over her sexuality (Fig. 10). She has full control of her beauty and

uses it to her advantage. They highlight that she does this to lure them to their deaths as if a man falls for her, she will kill him (LyttleTwoTwo). Her deceit and seduction are chastised and possibly seen as her use of an “unrestrained sexuality” but her deviation from the expectations and perceived limits of the female body are left unrecognised. Likewise, the responses also show evidence that contemporary Indian women defy limitations imposed by their husband/partner and claim ownership of their bodies. In an explanation by one young woman, she stated that she listens to her partner’s perspective in terms of how she may choose to dress but if she believes he’s going too far, she lays down her boundaries. Interviewee D added that long ago, typical Indian women like her grandmother had long, black, straight hair and no skin exposed, whereas the contemporary are “more expressive with their hair and clothing”.



Fig. 10. “Rendition of a Choorile - Deviant Art.” (*Exemple*).

Although she may be negatively perceived as deceitfully seductive, the Saapin’s control of her sexuality is evidence of her power. Mahabir mentions the snake in the Garden of Eden that deceived the naked Eve and that the growth of “male-dominated religions” had strengthened the pessimistic image of the Saapin as a woman (16). Further, in societies that are “gender-biased”,

“women are often blamed for the misfortunes of their husbands” (16).¹³ However, although the Saapin may not purposefully use her beauty to her advantage to cause death, her ability to attract many partners shows the power of her beauty. Her lure is irresistible to unsuspecting men, regardless of the numerous deaths of those she has previously married (Bowlah, “The Saapin’s” 0:25-6:07). This adds to the idea of her advantageous beauty.

It can also be said that the Saapin’s unions with seven men during her lifetime is a testament of her disregard for society’s hypocritical gender roles and impositions on the sexuality of Indian women. Her decision to have consecutive husbands regardless of their deaths was not a result of the perceived “tractable” mentality of Indian women. Reddock highlights that during Indentureship there were less indentured females than males in the new society and as per the views of the institutions (predominantly male) of the time, Indian women who had affairs were seen as immoral or seduced into such actions (84). However, her marriages were not only her choice but were as a result of the Saapin’s alluring nature and quite possibly lacked the influence of men. Further, in terms of courtship among contemporary Indo-trinidadian women, one participant stated “women date men openly, they engage in common-law relationships and have children outside of marriage”. This might imply that some contemporary Indian women may not be monogamous when dating which further shows their sexual autonomy—just as Reddock states that affairs/the “break from monogamy” in the past was an example of this (84)¹⁴.

Like the Saapin, who may be perceived as having an “unrestricted” female libido, Mohammed states that Matikor, based on “the freedom of female libido”, was a result of male restrictions on Indian female sexuality (193). Just as Pragg writes that in this ceremony Indian women dismantle the limitations placed on their bodies by men, a similar reality is seen for contemporary Indian women who express their sexuality outside the realm of heteronormative

relationships (qtd. in Mehta 3). Thus, Pragg's decision to look at Matikor through a queer lens and seeing it as a means to raise "queered conversation" is justified as the results prove Indian women today do choose to be with other women (3). For example, one participant stated that Indian women are "more openly queer". Similar to Indian women who reclaimed their sexual freedom through Matikor as Pragg describes, contemporary East Indian women today are doing the same (qtd. in Mehta 3).

Parallel to the Churile and Saapin who do not allow societal expectations to dictate their sexuality, contemporary East Indian women are neither submissive to this. The tradition of arranged marriages generally appears to be less accepted. One participant stated that they insisted on finding someone of their choice with another commenting, "whether I get married will be an entirely autonomous decision". This is contrary to Hosein's explanation of the experience of young East Indian women in 1920s Trinidad where their sexuality was severely managed through forced arranged marriages (64, 71). Mohammed states that if she crossed the age of 18 and was still unmarried, she became a disgrace and an economic liability to the family (193). Nonetheless, though some believe Indo-Trinidadian women may wish to work and become independent instead of relying on a spouse, the majority of respondents still believe marriage is important. One person said "a complete family unit is of high value in East Indian tradition". Like Indian women in earlier years, they understand marriage to be their social responsibility (Hosein 65, 66).

In general, like the Churile and Saapin, contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women do not conform to gender roles. For example, Interviewee D stated that having a career and being financially stable is her main focus at the moment. She has been married three years and although she is pressured by her family and in-laws, she does not want children yet—"It doesn't

have to be as soon as you're married". Furthermore, according to one participant, "it is becoming more common to be openly LGBTQ+, 30 unmarried and childfree, a mother out of wedlock".

It is clear that male stereotypical ideas about Indian female sexuality as immoral or "unrestrained" are unjustified. The analysis proves that the Churile and Saapin and Indo-Trinidadian woman should instead be recognized for their sexual autonomy.

Decision Making in Seeking one's Interest

The act of decision making in seeking one's interest simply means deciding to act for one's own benefit or the benefit of their loved ones. The capacity of the Churile and Saapin to make decisions within their interest can be highlighted from their legends. Similarly, contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women show evidence of this characteristic as 80% of participants notice it (Fig. 11) and it is implied in the responses.

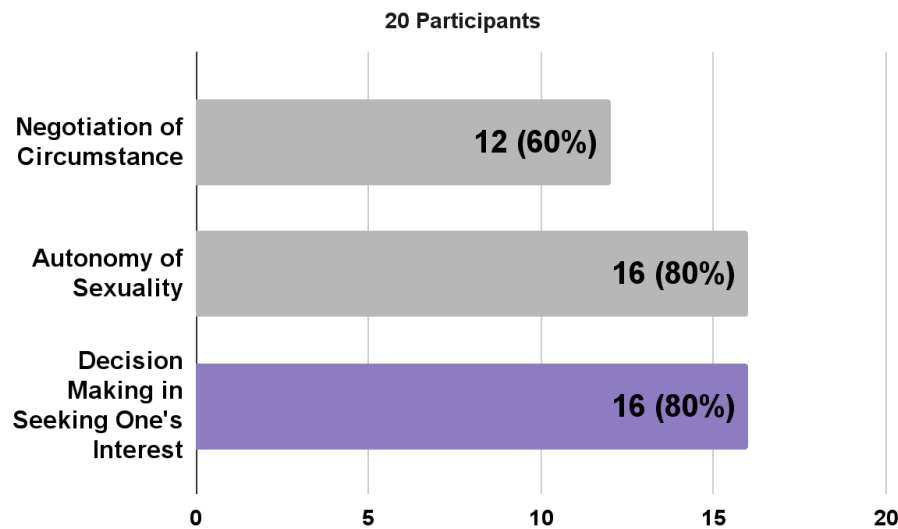


Fig. 11. Percentage of participants who identify decision making for one's interest.

Reddock emphasises that the “imposition of Western European middle-class housewife ideology taught in all ‘Indian schools’: when combined with a strengthened Indian patriarchal family system re-established partly through violence”, was responsible for the archetype of the “submissive, subordinate, docile Indian housewife” who seemingly migrated with her husband from India (86). This view of the Indian woman coincided with the plantocracy and colonial authorities’ desire for the “right kind of women” as immigrants during indentureship (80). However, Indian women have not remained obedient to their perceived inferiority and subservience. Tujay Macey’s *Photography* suggests that the Churile may have been abused by

her husband while she was alive which was potentially a reason for her suicide during pregnancy (“Choorile (Churile”). Although this can be seen as an act done to save herself and her child from violence, her sacrifice and ultimate resistance is not honoured. For example, Mahabir states “It is considered that women can resolve their problems by choosing one or more of the several forms of mediation.” (11). This appears to be a trivialization of the violence she faced and a disregard for her strength of decision making.

Like the Churile who made a decision to escape violence, contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women also make “personal choices to put themselves in a better position” according to one participant. She gave the example of herself by saying... “owning my own home and car is two of my biggest achievements in my life that I did on my own”. Historically, Indian women have also made decisions to give themselves a better life. During indentureship, the majority of Indian women migrated to the Caribbean as widows (Reddock 81). They were trying to leave hardships behind as Mohammed states (qtd. in Roopnarine 6). Reddock adds that their decision to emigrate and to do so on their own was a sign of their independent character and strength and thus this is a greatly different perspective of the Indian woman who is normally seen in her husband’s shadow (81). However, her “independent intelligence or decision-making capacity” was disregarded and seen as a “source of shame” by Indian men (85).

In the same vein of their independence of thought, modern-day East Indian women are passionate about their dreams and futures. One young woman stated “I wish to pursue my dreams and seek out my passions and accomplish my goals. I can’t do that if I’m at home taking care of kids so that will have to wait.”. As Mohammed has stated, this was also the mentality of the young Indian girl in Trinidad during the 1950s who believed that a university education was the way to a job and “personal independence” (196). Additionally, according to one Indian girl—

born post-independence—in Mohammed’s research, “I think having a career is important because then I would be less dependent on a man.” (199).

Furthermore, some of the participants stated they were working wives/moms and it was their choice to take that role. Like most of the respondents, they generally make decisions for themselves without needing the approval of their partner. Interviewee A for example mentioned that even after 18 years without schooling, she made the decision to go back and get her degree—though it caused conflict as it showed her husband that she was going to be something more. Similarly, although Interviewee D is also married, she decided to do courses and eventually opened her own business. Further, Interviewee B who is in a common-law relationship stated “I feel women should work and help themselves” ... “I not depending on “husband” to get what I want.”. Such was the case with Indian women who migrated to Trinidad and were determined to have personal independence. Although Reddock emphasises that the majority of them migrated to the Caribbean as workers, their independent nature was not a desirable trait to the Indian men and the planters (84, 81).¹⁵ They were needed to “stabilise” the male workers (82); and as Tikasingh states, their indenture period was thus limited to three years (qtd. in Reddock 83). However, most women (except those whose husbands could afford to keep them at home) continued to work for wages on the estates even after the three years (Reddock 83).

Indian women also seek their own interest by making decisions for their personal happiness. For example, Mahabir states that the Saapin has seven partners (12). However, Bowlah explains that all three of the Saapin’s (Miss Chantal’s) husbands die leaving her grieving and confused (“The Saapin’s” 0:25-6:07). It can be determined that her decision to still get married many times even though all her husbands die consecutively can be seen as a testament to

her unwillingness to remain unhappy and alone regardless of any “bad luck” of which she may not understand the cause.

Similarly, contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women take control of their personal happiness in their marriage/relationship. For example, Interviewee A stated that if she wants to “lime” with friends or go out alone, she will. Interviewee C, on the other hand, mentioned that after she turned 40 she decided that she was losing herself in her relationships and she was getting tired. Therefore, she chose to “see about” herself a little bit. Also, another respondent stated that she takes control of her personal happiness by putting herself and her happiness first “instead of just being totally understanding” as she has in the past.

Mohammed mentions the history of abuse inflicted on Indian women by their male partners (191).¹⁶ However, one participant stated “the idea of having to withstand abuse in a relationship as a woman is more or less archaic.”. Indian women generally fight back, leave or free themselves from it. For the Churile (Fig. 12), if it so happened that her suicide was not a means of escape from her husband’s violence and she was instead killed from it during her pregnancy as Tujay Macey’s Photography also suggests in “Choorile (Churile)”, her acts of revenge are proof of her intolerance. It is understandable why her attacks would be targeted towards her husband as Mahabir states (7). Bowlah’s telling of the Churile’s attack on Raj in “The Churile” is another example. After the misogynistic Raj gets her pregnant (formerly Miss Neela), neither her nor her child survive and she eventually kills him (0:25-6:18). This shows that she took revenge on him for using her as he did to other women, possibly by shapeshifting into a beautiful woman to entice him. This may have been her way of condemning Raj’s behaviour and others like him. Hence, her choice to take revenge for the emotional abuse she faced is justified. Additionally, it is therefore possible that when the Churile lures men to their

deaths as LyttleTwoTwo writes, it is due to their negative actions towards women or because of the wrongdoings of men towards women in general.



Fig. 12. “Choorile Representing the Women Who Died from Domestic Violence in 2019-2020.” (Tujay Macey's Photography).

As for the Saapin, Mahabir implies that she may have also been abused as he states that some versions of the story tell of her biting her husband if he abuses her (16). Although the snake's bite is rather elusive and goes unnoticed by the woman and her husband while they are in bed, the fact that it results in his imminent death via an accident, illness or suicide is evidence of the Saapin's revenge towards her husband—a means of escape from the abuse she faced (12). Regardless of her mystical attack imparted through a deadly spell or her grief and ignorance of why all her husbands die, it can be concluded that the Saapin evidently, yet unknowingly, makes decisions for her benefit by choosing not to tolerate the abuse (Deebrah; Bowlah, “The Saapin's” 0:25-6:07).

Likewise, by choosing to leave abusive relationships or get a divorce, modern-day Indo-Trinidadian women show their unwillingness to be submissive or passive. For example, one participant stated that she ended an engagement after deliberating for months. She added “I was

willing to marry someone abusive, manipulative and generally miserable”. This was the same even in 1920s Trinidad where although divorce or leaving was thought to bring shame to Indian women, they chose to leave relationships or get a divorce if they needed to—regardless of the “threat of ostracism, public censure and stigmatisation.” (Hosein 67, 72). Mohammed states that choosing their own partners or changing relationships was also a form of their retaliation against abuse (qtd. in Roopnarine 7).¹⁷

Evidently, the traditional beliefs of Indian women as passive, dependent housewives are misrepresentative as the Churile and Saapin and Indo-Trinidadian women generally make decisions in the interest of themselves and/or their loved ones.

Conclusion

On analyzing the Churile and Saapin in relation to the contemporary Indo-Trinidadian woman, it can be concluded that Indian women in general possess the three feminist qualities. While few participants believed that modern-day Indian women somewhat or do not possess more feminist traits, the majority believe they do. Like the Churile and Saapin, they display sexual autonomy, negotiate their difficult circumstances, and make decisions for their interest. As expected, there is proof that the East Indian woman has continued to evolve in her feminist qualities thus further validating research on her history in Trinidad aimed at cancelling conventional stereotypes.

This work is helpful to researchers in the field of Indo-Caribbean feminism as it adds to the necessary dialogue which has been growing as a result of the generalised historical views about Indo-Caribbean women. It not only confirms that Indian women are generally independent and continue to forge a way for themselves, but that there is more to the Churile and Saapin than their stories tell. Looking at their myths and the results as a whole proves that Indian women in general are not to be viewed from a submissive, patriarchal perspective, but an empowered feminist reinterpretation. They should not be portrayed as under the control of men, but as powerful and having the ability to decide their own destiny.

While there were limitations with the amount of information available on the Churile and Saapin and the limited time to conduct fieldwork individually, the information and results gained were nonetheless valid for representing Indo-Trinidadian women in general and for the comparative purpose of the study. However, further research involving a larger sample size can be done to understand the greater extent to which contemporary Indo-Trinidadian women possess these feminist traits.

Appendix

Questions from Interviews and Questionnaire

Section 1

- 1) Age:
- 2) Religion:
- 3) Marital Status:
- 4) Do you have children?
- 5) Do you believe the contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian woman is more independent compared to earlier generations?
- 6) In your opinion, how does the contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian woman progress in society?
- 7) In your opinion, to what extent is a traditional marriage or relationship important to the contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian woman and why?
- 8) How important do you think an education and job is to the contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian woman and why?

9) Do you believe it is important for the contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian woman to have an education and job to provide for themselves and/or their children regardless of the presence or absence of a husband/partner?

10) Compared to past generations, have you noticed more feminist traits in contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian women? (Feminism, in its simplest definition, is the establishment of equality of the sexes through equal rights and opportunities. Feminist traits are therefore the existence of qualities or beliefs which show movement towards equality. For example, many women today believe that like men, they have the right to equal education and employment.)

(Yes, No, Somewhat)

11) If so, which of these traits do you recognize? Select all that apply.

Negotiation of Circumstance (To turn a difficult situation around in one's own favour)

Sexual Autonomy (Taking control of one's sexuality in the context of gender roles)

Decision Making in Seeking one's own Interest (Making decisions for one's own benefit)

12) If you selected any of the above traits, in what ways have you noticed them in contemporary Trinidadian East-Indian women?

- 13) If applicable, how do you or how have you displayed any of the above traits? You may give examples of your experiences.

Section 2

- 14) How would you say you have negotiated (turned in your favour) any difficult situation in your relationship or in your married life? You may give examples of your experiences.
(If applicable)

- 15) Do you possess sexual autonomy within your marriage/relationship or is it determined within boundaries defined by your husband/partner? You may give examples of your experiences. (Within the context of gender roles for example - Gender roles are society's traditional expectations of the roles/behaviours of men and women.)

- 16) Do you make any decisions within the marriage/relationship on your own or does your husband/partner have the final say? You may give examples of your experiences.

- 17) Have you ever had to make your own decisions for the benefit of yourself and/or your children without the knowledge or approval of your husband/partner? You may give examples of your experiences.

- 18) In your marriage or relationship, do you make decisions together? Explain.

- 19) Do you or have you ever taken up the role of managing the household when your husband/partner could not or did not do so? If yes, how so? (If applicable) (You may also answer this question if you normally take on this role yourself.)
- 20) Would you say that your husband/partner sees you as his equal? Explain.
- 21) Have you ever defied any limitations imposed by your husband/partner? Explain. (If applicable)
- 22) In the past, how have you chosen to deal with any negative, unhealthy or unsafe situation created by your husband/partner? (If applicable)
- 23) Have you ever engaged in an extramarital affair or the equivalent? You can give reason(s) if you wish.
- 24) What decisions have you made to take control of your personal happiness in your marriage/relationship?
- 25) To what extent are you dependent on your husband/partner and why?
- 26) Do you consider yourself a stay-at-home or working wife/partner/mom? And has it been your choice to take that role? Explain. (If applicable)

Endnotes

¹ See Mahabir, Kumar. *Indian Caribbean Folklore Spirits*. Chakra Pub. House, 2010.

² Mahabir notes that both Trinidad and Guyana have a large Indian population, thus this is understandable (9).

³ The pronunciation remains the same.

⁴ Varicose veins are swollen veins that are seen under the skin and can be found on the inside of the leg and on the rear of the calf—"They can be dark purple or blue, vary in size, and can become twisted and gnarled like snakes." (Mahabir 15).

⁵ Her sorrow-filled cries sound like "a loud pitched scream" that are perhaps due to her reliving the pain of childbirth, though it is sometimes reminiscent of a dog's howl or may sound like "a whimpering followed by human-like cries that disappear into the night." ("Myth").

⁶ In earlier days, when Sudden Infant Death Syndrome occurred or babies would die in their sleep from rolling over and stifling, the Churile was thought to be the cause ("Myth").

⁷ Mahabir states that the word Saapin stems from the Hindi word "saap" which means "snake" (qtd. in Trinidad and Tobago Tales of Trepidation).

⁸ In India, in the past as well as now, widows held a loathsome status—especially Brahmin widows and widows of other "twice-born castes" who were faced with the stigma of being impure, banned from remarrying and had to live with their in-laws, despite possibly escaping certain situations (Reddock 81).

⁹ See Reddock 82-83.

¹⁰ McNeill and Lal found that "women normally earned 'about one-half to two-thirds the wages of male immigrants'" (qtd. in Reddock 83); with Comins finding that women sometimes

did not earn wages for months or years due to debts acquired because of pregnancy (qtd. in Reddock 83).

¹¹ Mahabir mentions abuse (16).

¹² A Saapin was believed to have a snake set in her spine that would rouse while she was intimate (Bowlah, “The Saapin’s” 0:25-6:07).

¹³ If he dies unexpectedly, whether she has any relation to the death or not, she may be marked as a Saapin (Mahabir 16).

¹⁴ Geographic mobility for marriage also resulted in Indian women having extra-marital affairs with Indian men or those of another race (Hosein 70).

¹⁵ Indian male labourers desired a “docile, secluded and controllable” woman to improve their caste status (Reddock 81). Having a restricted wife was/is a signifier of belonging to a high caste (85).

¹⁶ Brereton states that “87 murders of Indian women occurred, of which 65 were wife murders” between 1872 and 1900 (qtd. in Mohammed 191).

¹⁷ Mohammed explains that switching was sometimes also due to the economic standing of the men or if one was considered a better sexual partner (qtd. in Roopnarine 7).

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