

Murder during Muharram: The Hosay Massacre of 1884

Kerry-Ann Abdool
University of the West
Indies, Trinidad & Tobago

*The author presented her paper
at ISFC 2024, and developed it
further for publication.*

Keywords
Hosay
Muharram
India
Trinidad
Festival
Massacre
Muslim
Colonial

Abstract

Before the festival of Muharram reached the shores of Trinidad with the arrival of indentured workers from 1845 onwards, it had maintained a long history in India where it carries both religious and cultural significance to this day. It is an annual 10-day festival which dramatises key events in the history of Islam. Between the initial phase of East Indian indentureship in the 1840s and the eventual 1884 Hosay Massacre, Trinidad experienced at least three full decades during which Muharram or 'Hosay' was observed fundamentally peacefully by celebrants, who regarded it as an opportunity to perform 'Indianness' as a unified cultural identity, in response to the perils of life on the sugar estates. In the normal course of its social evolution, the Muharram celebration would probably have emerged as a national festival serving, like the carnival, as a major integrative social mechanism in a pluralistic society. This was not to be. A series of events that began to unfold in the early 1880s culminated in what we now know as the Muharram (or Hosay) Massacre of 1884. It resulted in a kind of cultural slaughter, evidenced in the fact that, today, the festival of Muharram is an unfamiliar practice and the massacre is largely forgotten. This essay therefore assumes the important and rarely undertaken task of presenting the history of Hosay in Trinidad and its dysphoria atmosphere. It traces the lived experiences of the celebrants, from their homeland in India to the fateful day of the massacre. Both the festival and the massacre are material and corporeal, but they also hold great significance culturally and historically. In this historical, political and cultural context, the massacre is a definitive marker of colonial oppression and a people's resistance to it. In the end, a picture emerges of a calculated attempt by the colonial authorities to stifle the festival of Muharram in Trinidad.

Introduction

The Muharram Massacre of 1884, also known as 'The Hosay Riot' or 'The Hosay Massacre', marks Trinidadian history, bringing together the combination of senseless murder, British exploitation, the suffocation of cultural expression, and overall angst towards Indian identity in a colonial space. This historical event can be seen as a dystopian event, which culminated in the death of at least 17 East Indians and approximately 100 injuries, caused by 43 shots fired by colonial police who were located at two separate entrances to the city of San Fernando. These figures are those of the official records. However, those most familiar with the events of 30 October 1884 believe the actual number of casualties was greater than was recorded by the state and its related institution, the Colonial Hospital of San Fernando. For one thing, the days which followed the massacre saw the deaths of several Indians who had incurred injuries during the tumult and who simply never made it to the hospital because they were taken to their respective estates instead.

As this essay makes clear, these killings were deliberate and calculated. The essay is divided into several sections. The first, 'From India to Trinidad: Muharram up to the 1870s' delineates the religious and conceptual origins of the festival and its transmission from the motherland, India, to Trinidad through the traumatic experience of indentureship. The second, 'Hosay in the early 1880s' charts the progression of the festival in the pre-independence period, and the concurrent demographic changes, particularly in terms of participants in the festival. It also chronicles the events leading up to the massacre. Following that, the essay then looks closely at the massacre itself, in the section titled 'The Hosay Massacre: Thursday 30 October 1884', which provides a chronological account of the embodied embattlement of the celebrants on that fateful day. The concluding section, 'Responses to the massacre', describes two competing responses: that of the colonial authorities and more, importantly, that of the traumatised, oppressed masses. The essay is supported theoretically and methodologically by the works of expert historians in the field. The massacre has not garnered a great deal of scholarly attention to date; however, what has been published is sound and provides a valuable foundation for future work on this important dystopian historical event.

In *Bloodstained Tombs: The Muharram Massacre 1884*, Kelvin Singh contextualises the massacre best:

In the normal course of its social evolution, the Muharram celebration would probably have emerged as a national festival serving, like the carnival, as a major integrative social mechanism in what was conspicuously a plural society. This was not to be. A series of events began to unfold in the early 1880s that were to culminate in the repression, though not complete elimination of the celebration. (Singh 1988: 8)

The dystopian effects of the massacre have been far-reaching. The tragedy resulted in both the embodied and corporeal loss of life, as well as a kind of cultural slaughter, evidenced in the fact that, today, the festival of Muharram is not celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago in nearly the same way as it once was in the pre-1880 period of Indian indentureship in the country. No doubt for many people in Trinidad and Tobago today, Muharram is a largely unfamiliar practice, and the massacre is entirely forgotten. Moreover, some of the historical accounts of the massacre which exist are plagued with inconsistencies, ambiguities and blatant untruths. This essay therefore assumes the important task of reading this understudied and underreported account of Hosay in Trinidad in the context of history, culture and politics as a definitive marker of colonial oppression and a people's resistance to it. Ultimately, the intent is to insist that the massacre ought to be inserted into the national narrative as a necessary but all too neglected detail of the historical trauma experienced by the Trinidadian people. The essay takes a largely linear approach, beginning with the origins of Muharram in India, the early decades of Hosay in Trinidad, and the climatic, dystopian tragedy in 1884. In the end, a picture emerges of a calculated, intentional attempt made by the colonial authorities to stifle Muharram in Trinidad.

From India to Trinidad: Muharram up to the 1870s

Before the festival of Muharram reached the shores of Trinidad with the arrival of indentured workers from 1845 onwards, it had had a long history in the motherland, India, where it carries both religious and cultural significance to this day. Thus, our account must begin there. As the first month of the Muslim calendar, Muharram is a holy month. The tenth day of Muharram is called 'Ashura'. What we now know as Muharram is therefore an annual 10-day festival which culminates on Ashura and dramatises key events in the history of Islam. Most notably for Shia Muslims,¹ this includes the martyrdom of the two brothers Hassan and Hussain, grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed, after his death. Hassan was poisoned and Hussain was killed in combat at Kerbala. In fact, it is from the name 'Hussain' that the colloquial Trinidadian term 'Hosay' originates. The festival provides an occasion for Shia Muslims to mourn these deaths by conducting *Majlis*² and *julus*,³ while on Ashura *tadjas*⁴ are paraded through the streets and buried or submerged in water, a symbolic acknowledgement of the thirst Hussain experienced prior to his death. Furthermore, commemorative stick fighting references the combat in which he died. Both euphoric rituals form climatic parts of the street parade which concludes the festival.

Despite its Islamic origins, Muharram in India, both then and now, attracts an extremely large Hindu following as well. The festival has therefore long transcended its original religious parameters and it has entered the cultural sphere. It is this well-established observance of Muharram in India which crossed the 'kala pani' and found itself in Trinidad, where it was to undergo 'a fairly lengthy process of indigenization' (Korom 2003: 6). Here it would creolise, persist steadily for a period of time and eventually suffer the violence of the 1884 massacre, from which it never fully recovered.

1 *Shia Muslims are also called 'Shi'ites'. They are an Islamic sect who recognise the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed and are guided by them. They are contrasted with Sunni Muslims, who are often described as orthodox and who recognise the Prophet Mohammed as the final prophet.*

2 *Sermons.*
3 *Public processions.*

4 *Shia model mausoleums, which are also called 'tazias'.*

Between the initial phase of East Indian indentureship in the 1840s and the eventual 1884 attack, Trinidad experienced at least three full decades of Muharram or 'Hosay', which was experienced fundamentally euphorically by the celebrants. The first public procession in San Fernando occurred as early as 1847. At that time only around 3,000 Indians had been brought to Trinidad from India, on 10 ships. Though their numbers were few, they bravely performed the first Hosay in the colony, which was at that point a largely Christian society. As in India, Hindus and Muslims alike participated in the festival, though with a larger proportion of the former group (Balkaransingh 2016: 254). Notwithstanding the Islamic origins of the festival, both groups regarded it as an opportunity to perform 'Indianness' as a unified cultural identity, in response to the perils of life on the estates. In other words, Hosay took on a pan-Indian identity and became a means of symbolic resistance to the plantation system. As Lommarsh Roopnarine puts it, 'When policed or pushed into conformity, indentured servants came to rely on their own symbolic resistance and primordial aspects of community and religion, which the dominant classes neither understood nor sympathized with' (Roopnarine 2007: 55).

It was not long before Africans were also seduced by the opportunity to participate in the euphoric atmosphere of the festival, as well as to take on its counter-colonial identity: by the 1850s they too joined the Hosay celebrations. They were no doubt seduced, too, by the tassa drums and commemorative stick fighting, which featured so prominently during the festival. As Roopnarine relates, 'The festival was celebrated by Muslims, Hindus and Africans because it was a flexible arena for interracial, interethnic and interreligious participation. The festival proved to be a fertile ground for cultural and national integration' (2007: 55). With this growing popularity, came initial attacks on Hosay in the press, which, by 1857, was particularly peeved about African involvement and the noisy crowds of coolies disturbing the peace (Singh 1988: 7). There would be much more of this to come in the years that followed. Nevertheless, by the 1860s, Hosay had expanded to other areas beyond San Fernando, notably Chaguanas and St. James, with the latter still attracting celebrants today.

However, by the 1870s signs of dysphoria and impending tragedy began to loom. As discontent amongst ethnic groups on the estates multiplied, these plantations became inevitable sites for Indian resistance. What began as the aforementioned symbolic resistance morphed into primary resistance or 'direct defiance' (Roopnarine 2007: 49). An incident on Jordan Hill, Princes Town, in 1872 is notable: 'nine Indians [were] indicted and jailed for assaulting three Negroes' (Singh 1988: 10). While this had no direct bearing on the Hosay festival at that time, the incident sparked a wave of criticism of indentured labourers in the press. This aggravated distrust of Indians, on the part of both Africans and colonialists, was to prove detrimental in the decade which followed.

Hosay in the early 1880s

In order to adequately grasp the events of Thursday 30 October 1884, a note on the first few years of the decade is necessary. At least in the initial years of indentureship, Indians, though perceived as peculiar and alien, were not regarded by the plantocracy as violent or particularly dangerous. 'In short, apart from the economic value as a labourer in Trinidad society, the Indian was at best a social enigma; at worst a negative social entitle to be contained and perhaps assimilated through Christian evangelization' (Singh 1988: 4). In other words, from the perspective of the plantocracy, their religious and cultural peculiarities were not anything 'a little Christia-nisation' couldn't alter. Kelvin Singh continues:

Until the early 1880s the plantocracy viewed Indians as a docile and manageable labour force. It is significant that the *Port of Spain Gazette* [a publication which evokes a colonial perspective], could make the following comment in 1860: *By obtaining a people who were at once docile, manageable, and free from the influence of those associations which have, unfortunately for all, made the descendants of Africa in these colonies impracticable for sustained and combined labour, we have been enabled to do much towards solving the most difficult problem of modern civilization—the equilibrium between land and labour. What the paper omitted to say was that it was the penal and other restrictive features of the indentureship regulations that made the Indians docile and manageable.* (Singh 1988: 9)

There are at least three things to note here. The first is the political agenda of the publication, which sought to undermine Indian-African relations in the colony by characterising Africans as uncooperative and unwilling to work, while simultaneously depicting Indians as the solution to that conundrum. The second is the self-congratulatory approach of the *Gazette* in naming the colonialists as the heroes of the modern age. The third, and most important in the context of this essay, is the misrepresentation of Indian workers as a weak herd of 'coolies', who were easy to control and eager to please a colonial agenda. The plantocracy would soon learn that this was a gross underestimation of the Indian people.

In the early 1880s various indicators suggested that dysphoria and discontent were brewing amongst the indentured and free Indians alike. Between 1882 and 1884, there were at least 25 strikes on the estates. Seven of these happened in 1882, six in 1883 and 12 in 1884, the year of the mas-sacre (Tikasingh 1973: 139).

The confrontation on Cedar Hill in 1882 was a prime example of discontent. The overseer of the Cedar Hill estate was physically attacked by some Indians and a trial ensued which brought forth little evidence of serious violence. The 'instigator' of the confrontation was thus acquitted and the other Indian participants incurred minor penalties. The case of Cedar Hill was therefore made famous not because of the nature of the incident itself, but because of the press's response to it. 'In short, the [news]paper's

position was simple: to avoid bloody repression in the future, the courts must always imprison Indians whenever they showed signs of insubordination' (Singh 1988: 12). With a burgeoning economic crisis in the industrial sugar market, a liberated, conscientious labour force was the last thing the colonial government needed. The media therefore stigmatised mass gatherings such as the annual Hosay as lawless, dangerous and riotous. Several publications, such as the aforementioned *Port of Spain Gazette*, as well as the *San Fernando Gazette*, committed themselves to inciting panic over the indentured workers.

At the same time, the Canboulay Riot occurred in 1881, revealing tensions between Africans and the colonial government. Under the direction of Captain Arthur Baker, officers attempted 'to suppress the "Canboulay" or nocturnal torchlight processions that preceded the two-day masquerade [and] they succeeded only in provoking a violent confrontation between themselves and the Negro masqueraders' (Singh 1988: 15). They attempted to impose this prohibition again in the years leading up to 1884 and were met each time with protests by Africans.

What carnival was to the Africans, Hosay was to the Indians. The ricochet effect of the Canboulay prohibition was therefore inevitable and in the eyes of the plantocracy, it became even more necessary to impose similar prohibitions on the Muharram festival, both to make an example out of the Indians in order to teach a lesson on the dangers of nonconformity as well as to prevent Indians and Africans meeting in the largely unified cultural space of Hosay.

A defining moment came in July of 1882 when an ordinance was passed which granted the state the power to prohibit key aspects of the processions. As Kenneth Parmasad outlines, this ordinance limited the participation of the Indians to six or fewer headmen per estate or village of celebrants. Famously, it also prohibited processions from entering Port of Spain, San Fernando, high roads and public roads without special legislative permission. 'The obvious purpose here was to isolate the celebrations on the estates, to contain any act of resistance by the Indians and of course to isolate the Indians of one estate from those of other estates' (Parmasad 1983: 33). To prevent the co-mingling of Africans and Indians in a unified cultural space, the ordinance insisted that only immigrants and/or their descendants were to participate in the festival. Estate residents and non-estate residents were no longer allowed to promenade together and *tadjas* from outside were therefore not allowed to enter the respective estates. The ordinance also banned the use of sticks and torches during the celebration, a clear suffocation of the traditional mock combat practised during Hosay. To the celebrants, this measure was accurately interpreted as an attack on their cultural identity and a ridiculous, unwarranted assertion of British colonial power over them. It was well understood by the government at this point that these street processions were the climax of Hosay, where the *tadjas* were paraded, and that to impose all of these restrictions would mean to instigate a reaction from the celebrants in one form or another.

The Indians' initial response to the ordinance was fundamentally peaceful and lawful. After the massacre, in 1885, a report by colonialist General Henry Wiley Norman⁵ referenced a petition now known as the 'Sookoo's petition':

Subsequent to the issue of the rules [the ordinance], the petition of Sookoo, an Indian immigrant, with 21 other Hindoos, and 11 Mahomedans [...] was presented to the Administrator. In this petition Hindoos as well as Mahomedans ask to be allowed to celebrate their annual religious festival of the Hosea, as in former years. The reply pointed out that the regulations do not in any way interfere with the religious rites connected with the festival. (Report of Coolie Disturbance 1885: 42)

The point of citing this petition is to emphasise that the first course of action by the Indians was not at all violent. The approach of the state was to insist that the festival was religious and they defended the ordinance by arguing that religious rights were not being infringed upon. This response purposefully and conveniently ignored the well understood *cultural* significance of the festival at that point. We know this because elsewhere in this same report, General Norman himself admitted that; [T]he whole celebration has in Trinidad long ceased to have religious significance and has come to be regarded as a sort of national Indian demonstration of a rather turbulent character, and common to both Hindoos and Mahomedans' (Report of Coolie Disturbance 1885: 42). Notwithstanding the Eurocentric bias in Norman's sentiment that the festival possessed a 'turbulent character', he made it abundantly clear that colonial authorities understood this celebration to be less religious and to suppress it was therefore to suppress the expression of Indian cultural identity. By ignoring Sookoo's petition, 'it soon became clear that the government was bent on provoking a confrontation between the forces of 'law and order' and the Indians, with a view to inflicting a bloody lesson in obedience on the latter' (Singh 1988: 17). This dysphoric lesson in obedience culminated on 30 Thursday October 1884.

The Hosay Massacre: Thursday 30 October 1884

As early as 26 October 1884, unknown to the Indians, preparations were being made by the state to stamp out Hosay with a heavy fist. Leading the charge were the Inspector Commandant of Police, Captain Arthur Baker (the same Captain Baker who had occupied such a central role in the Canboulay Riot) and the Acting Colonial Secretary, Mr. Pyne. In the days leading up to Thursday 30 October they armed themselves, in multiple ways. They were armed with the Ordinance of 1882 and with the Riot Act. With a full cohort of police and marines, they were armed with manpower that was trained in combat. They were also armed with weapons and warships. They were even armed with the English language, which they weaponised to confound the migrants, many of whom did not speak the language. Ultimately, they were armed with the malevolent intent of ensuring there was a confrontation. Indeed, despite what the press and other colonial authorities would later report, there was nothing arbitrary

⁵ This report is included in 'Correspondence Respecting the Recent Coolie Disturbances in Trinidad at the Mohurram Festival, with the Report thereon by Sir H.W. Norman, K.C.B., C.I.E' (1885). It will henceforth be cited as 'Report of Coolie Disturbances' as it appears in K. Paramasad's MA thesis.

about the events which unfolded that Thursday afternoon. This was embodied murder: calculated and cold blooded.

For the celebrants, at first nothing seemed to be seriously or abnormally amiss. They were sure they would face some opposition. Although the vast majority of the participants did not fully understand what made this Hosay different, there were some celebrants who did understand that there would be consequences for violating the terms of the ordinance. However, they expected that these consequences would take the form of arrests and fines and they were defiant and prepared to face these sanctions. What they were not prepared for was butchery. They could not have foreseen the full intensity of the government's conspiracy against them:

In the meantime, the Indians were preparing to celebrate the Muharram in the traditional manner. That meant that they would attempt to enter the towns as before, and it was towards San Fernando that most Indians resident in the Naparimas, were planning to go. [...] The Indians had heard rumors of police preparations, but few believed that the police and military were really being deployed to shoot them. [...] Perhaps if the majority of Indians had been literate in the English language, they would have understood the message that the *Port of Spain Gazette*, like other sections of the press had put to the Government since 1882. *The Government must be prepared to act with vigour ... Asiatics are easily cowed. They are cruel and treacherous, but a real force, at San Fernando and in town (Port of Spain) will settle the matter once and forever.* (Singh 1988: 18)

No pre-emptive measures were taken by the colonial authorities to protect the Indians; at least, not enough to prepare them for the bloodshed that was to come. Despite some attempts made by Captain Baker earlier that week to simply arrest Indians who were considered to be trespassing, Secretary Pyne was insistent on taking even more drastic measures. It seems clear now that, according to the colonial scheme, the Indians were deliberately lulled into a false sense of security. They were led to believe they could parade the streets with their *tadjas* without serious problems. For the authorities, the celebrants needed to be encouraged to present themselves as lawless rioters, deserving of any punishment (no matter how bloody) the authorities felt was suitable for pacifying a mob. This plan was put into effect.

In the afternoon hours, with their *tadjas* in hand and performing their traditional mock combat despite the ordinance, the Hosay processions ventured from their respective estates and moved towards San Fernando from three separate points: Ciperio Street, Mon Repos junction and the Pointe-a-Pierre/St Joseph Village road junction. At approximately 2:30 pm at the Ciperio Street entrance, the first murder took place, under the command of Major Bowles. As the celebrants approached, the Riot Act was read, defining the procession as a riot so as to legitimise the inevitable attack. Yet there is no doubt the reading was drowned out by the sounds of *tassa*, stick fighting and cheers from the crowd. Not even when the two rounds of bullets hit their bodies, did the Indians fully comprehend what was happening:

It obviously took some time, despite the later testimony by Bowles, for the celebrants in the middle and rear of the procession to realize that their comrades to the front were being mowed down by a hail of bullets. Once, however, the fallen tazias, the dead, the wounded and the blood on the street had registered their significance, panic naturally set in among the crowd to the center and rear and there was a scrambled retreat [...] for safety to the canefields and elsewhere. (Singh 1988: 21)

It is incredible that General Norman reported that there had been 'no excessive firing', even though five carbines were discharged *after* the sergeant had ordered the fire to cease at Ciperó (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 43).

This was only the beginning of the dysphoria. The Ciperó Street massacre was the one that caused the largest number of casualties. However, although this procession was stopped, the remaining Hosay celebrants defied the police. By 3:30 pm, less than an hour after the massacre at Ciperó, the second procession approached the Mon Repos entrance, manned by Captain Baker, who divided his 40 men in half and positioned them on both sides of the road. Twenty officers took the front of the procession and the remaining 20 officers took the back. According to General Norman, Baker 'personally shouted to the Coolies to stop [but they] pressed on with apparent determination' (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 43). Once more, the Riot Act was read by the presiding magistrate and the order was given to fire. One round was fired and the celebrants at the front again were hit, but this time those left standing did not run or cower. They stayed rooted to the spot for more than an hour, standing off against the police, who were armed in almost every way possible. They stood in the middle of a war they did not even know they were fighting and they refused to submit to a colonial order that was, quite literally, policing them in an 'attempt to deter them from practicing their culture and custom openly' (Roopnarine 2007: 55).

The third procession was due to arrive at the Pointe-a-Pierre/St Joseph Village entrance, which was under the guard of Sergeant Superintendent Giblan, but for reasons which remain unclear to this day they were spared the bloodshed. The casualties from the first two processions, however, were 'heavier than in any previous encounter between armed forces and the people in the post-emancipation history of the island' (Singh 1988: 22). Of those admitted to the San Fernando General Hospital, 107 casualties were reported. It is now clear that this record is an underestimation of the embodied impact of the violence because in the days which followed, the list of casualties continued to increase.

Conclusion: responses to the massacre

Before concluding this exploration of the Hosay Massacre, it is important to consider the two contrasting responses to the events of Thursday 30 October 1884. The first response came from the colonialists. To protect their own interests, the colonial office pursued a commission of inquiry to investigate and assess the dysphoria events. General H. W. Norman was appointed the only commissioner in this capacity. I have already cited various aspects of his 1885 report in the foregoing account and these citations have made it uncompromisingly clear that Norman's mission was to justify and at times even congratulate the state's actions in antagonising the Hosay celebrants. As Kelvin Singh puts it, Norman was primed for this investigation and the conclusion was evidently determined from the onset. Norman writes, 'I have no doubt that the great bulk of the Coolies perfectly understood the regulations, and that, with possibly few exceptions, all who persisted in going forward were determined to disobey them' (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 44). Among other things, his report goes on to conclude that the Indians were aptly warned by the respective estate owners about the consequences of disobeying the state's restrictions. Norman posits that their numbers were so great that the police had to take 'active measures' to avoid becoming overwhelmed (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 44). On this point, he further congratulates them for their response. Norman is certain in his report that a bayonet charge would not have been adequate to pacify the large crowd: gunfire was necessary.

He tops this off by stating that the Indians were becoming too large a collective group in the colony to handle peaceably and with this increase in population size and ratio, they were becoming more 'prone to complaints' than before (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 47). The report goes as far as saying that the Indians were at times 'much indulged by an amount of consideration which could not permanently be extended to them' (Report of Coolie Disturbances 1885: 48). In other words, the colonial government had been far too lenient with the Indians in the past, to the extent that the labourers became spoilt, and the only way to reverse the damage was to persist with the restrictions and to continue to govern with the kind of militancy demonstrated in the massacre. It is not an exaggeration to state that Norman's report salivates eurocentrism.

With the sole exception of *New Era*, the local press were complicit in the massacre. They pushed the rhetoric that the Indians operated as an angry, reckless mob, which left the police no choice but to resort to violent suppression of the anarchy. This is unsurprising when we consider, as mentioned throughout this essay, the condemnation of the immigrants that appeared in the press in the years leading up to the climatic massacre. Blame was ascribed not to the state, but to the Protector of Immigrants, for not doing due service to the Indians. Their denouncement of Indian defiance of the Hosay restrictions was consistent both before the inquiry was ordered and after Norman's report was published. The voice of the colonial agenda had spoken.

Yet, even though they had no inquiries or reports, or the support of the mainstream press, it was the Indians whose statement was loudest in the end. Theirs is the second response we ought to consider and it was simply that they stayed. As Brereton puts it:

Increasingly, Indians began to regard Trinidad as their homeland. The majority, after all, chose to remain rather than to return to India, despite their strong attachment to the land of their birth. And the growth of the locally born Indian community reinforced the commitment to Trinidad ... By the 1890s Indians had come to resent the word 'immigrant' when applied to Indians who had been in the island for ten years, and especially when applied to Trinidad-born Indians. In the same way they began to object to their designation, in all the official documents and in the Press, as 'coolies'. (Brereton 1981: 109)

To use Kenneth Parmasad's terminology, the Indians were experiencing a 'change in self-perception' and a changing atmosphere. Their defiance during the massacre suggested this. One does not stand in such a manner and fight for the right to one's identity, culture and community if one's presence is merely fleeting and temporary. By 1884, Trinidad was already, for all intents and purposes, the Indians' home. It is true that the colonial agenda was to murder them, restrict them and attempt to suffocate their cultural footprint, but it could not remove them from a space that now belonged to them as much as to anybody else. In this way at least, the Hosay Massacre of 1884 can be read as a proverbial case of a battle that was lost, but a war that would go on to be won. The names of those who have been martyred for this cause therefore ought not to be forgotten.

I will end with an addendum to the note on which I began. Surely the Hosay Massacre of 1884 was marked by a dystopian atmosphere and the ills of this event were simultaneously a fundamental part of Trinidad and Tobago's national narrative and a neglected detail of the nation's historical trauma. However, at the same time, it stands as a powerful example of resilience and fortitude in the face of colonial oppression. It is therefore a great error to forget this.

References

Balkaransingh, Satnarine, The Shaping of a Culture: Rituals and Festivals in Trinidad Compared with Selected Counterparts in India, 1990-2014, (Hertfordshire, UK: Hansib, 2016)

Brereton, Bridget, A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1963, (Kingston, Jamaica; Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann, 1981)

Korom, Frank J, Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003)

London, Great Britain, 'Correspondence Respecting the Recent Coolie Disturbances' in *Trinidad at the Mohurram Festival, with the Report thereon* by Sir H.W. Norman, K.C.B., C.I.E. (1885)

Parmasad, Kenneth, The Hosea Riots of 1884 ((MA Thesis, Saint Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: The University of the West Indies, 1983)

Roopnarine, Lomارش, Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920 (Kingston, JamaicaUniversity of the West Indies Press, 2007)

Singh, Kelvin, Bloodstained Tombs: The Muharram Massacre 1884 (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1988)

Tikasingh, Gerad I.M, *The Establishment of the Indians in Trinidad, 1870-1900* (The University of the West Indies, PhD Dissertation, 1973)

Open Access © 2025 by Kerry-Ann Abdool. A copy of this article may be downloaded for free from the Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)