

# FROM BEYOND KALA PANI IN HONOUR AND GLORY SHE RETURNS

The Unfinished Saga of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and Distinguished Daughter of the Indian Diaspora

By Richard Wm. Thomas

Born into a strict Hindu home on April 22nd 1952, in the vicinity of the rustic Trinbago village of Siparia, the baby Kamla Persad grew up in an era where the Indo-Trinbagonian female was expected to remain submissive to her male counterpart (in the sense that she was strictly to follow the long-established Indian customs). Thus, when the time was right, despite her educational and professional prowess or accomplishments, she was expected to become the dutiful wife of a *dulaha* chosen by her *bap* (father), Lilraj Persad. It had taken almost one hundred and seventy-two years to the day for the crystal dome finally to be shattered by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, hence, in describing the historic event, one needs to backtrack a bit over her own lifetime to allow for its fascinating tale to be told.

*“I want to make it clear that I want no political gifts from anyone. I have the greatest gift from you the people and I say here today, let not my will, but yours be done. Kamla is the servant of the people... She will do their bidding. The people are her leaders... Their voice is the voice of God.”*

## DON'T CRY FOR ME, TRINBAGO!

When Kamla Persad-Bissessar, as outgoing Member of Parliament for Siparia, stood on the stage at the Mid Centre Mall in Chaguanas, Trinidad on Sunday 7th October, with less than a month to go till the 2007 general election, by those words she hushed the world amassed before her and bristled a few seated who'd upstaged her—for all were eager on the day to hear everything she would utter as, just a few days before, the promised leadership of the united political effort to oust the People's National Movement (PNM) from government had been wrested from her. The speech has since been dubbed “The No Woman No Cry Speech”, for she had prearranged with the in-house *deejay* to rock the venue with the immortal Bob Marley classic as she made her way to the podium to deliver it.

By the time she was done speaking, the lotus that really took root in the swamplands of a south Trinidad village called Penal, had parted the waters of the muddy lagoon into which Trinidad and Tobago's partisan politics had by then descended and laid the foundations on which, within three years, karma would shape into a firm island from which a better future of her native land might be forged.



Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar

## KALA PANI AND INDENTURESHIP

In every religion, somehow the perennial habit of mankind worldwide has been to ascribe material form to the attributes of The Divine. Perhaps so it is as the human mind, being earthly-bound, though utterly unable completely to come to grasp with the reality of who or what God is, never ceases in trying so to do. Therefore, in order not to choke, it dismembers the whole into bite-sized morsels.

The same practice essentially is what produced the first and only female national leader of the Indian Diaspora—The Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who is the chief guest at this year's Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD)—for, bit by bit, during her lifetime, she charted the course which actually began long before the May 24th 2010 event which catapulted her into the Prime Ministership of Trinidad and Tobago (Trinbago). Kamla's ances-

tors left the tiny village of Bhelupur, Ithari, India in the 19th century, bound for work on Trinidad's sugar estates as Girmityas (Indentureds). The first set of Girmityas to arrive in the West Indies were those on two British ships, the Whitby and the Hesperus which disgorged their human cargo of three hundred and ninety-six 396 Indians from India on May 5, 1838, at Port Georgetown, British Guiana (Guyana).

To the uninitiated, the word "Penal" invokes strict proscription, for penal institutions are places where the convicted are confined, till their sentence is fulfilled. Most unfairly, colloquialism has punished the name of the village which played a significant role in shaping the mindset of the current Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, for the quaint rural district of Penal was originally called "Peñal (pronounced "Painial"), which is Spanish for "an island in the lagoon", for that's how the Jahaji Bhai described the area when the first set of them arrived, having served their time as Indentureds on the estates in neighbouring Fyzabad and Barrackpore.

On the upside, one may easily agree "Penal" is apt, for in choosing to confine themselves at the peñal, Penal's first settlers in reality were displaying a conviction that, out of a waterlogged crucible of harsh and sparse resources, once as a community side-by-side they strove, a solid future for their offspring and community would be had. So it was that, in Boodoo Trace, Penal, south Trinidad, under the same roof with her uncle and aunt, Kamla, her parents and siblings came to live for most of her pre-adolescent life.

## FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADVENTURISM

The extended Persad family earned its livelihood planting rice in the surrounding family-owned, five-acre plot. The lessons she there learnt remain with her to this day:

- discipline –a passion for putting in long hours to accomplish worthwhile results
- altruism –a deep commitment to community, especially the underprivileged
- resilience –an ability easily to withstand ups-and-downs generated by things beyond her control
- equanimity –steady clarity of focus when things all around are swirling
- timing –executing plans in due season, even when the rest of the world clamours, "Do it now!"

Her mai (mother), though a housewife, was a deeply perceptive woman who'd understood early o'clock how vital a role an excellent education could play in the upward mobility of an individual and, by extension, the wider community to which the individual belonged. It is an argument her Mai must have never let Lilraj forget, since, indeed, sound education had allowed him access to envied employment –he was an accountant with the Texaco Trinidad Oil Company, based not far from home at the Forest Reserve office– and for them eventually to establish their own business –a modest restaurant and bar downstairs their own home when they moved to High Street, Siparia.

Like most children, young Kamla fantasized of careers she'd pursue as an adult... politics was not one of them. So, though she

had the gift of the gab and was an assertive and though she honed her teamworking skills on the sporting field –she was an avid excellent netball player who was played centre on her secondary school first team– she didn't decide finally till she hit her mid-teens.

Now, Hinduism proclaims that the instant a woman becomes the perfect mother, she becomes the very gate of Heaven. By the time she turned sixteen, Heaven, as far as Kamla was concerned, was London, England, for it was there she was deadest on going to continue her studies beyond G.C.E. Ordinary Level thence to reading for her law degree. But, there was a romantic pull too—her heartthrob, Gregory Bissessar, whom she met while both were students at the Iere Secondary School, Trinidad, was already in England, pursuing studies which would eventually take him on to his medical degree.

Perhaps that's why Bap and uncles at first frowned on Kamla's idea of Heaven. They refused to let her go, insisting that she could study to her heart's content in Trinbago. They soon ran into a brick wall –they didn't reckon for Mai's tenacity –with cascading argument she stood like a resolute gatekeeper in their way. But, being devout Hindus, Mai never allowed her resolve to get the better of her, so she made her points in such ways that must have quickly brought the menfolk to the remembrance of what Manu, the first law-giver, prescribed:

"Women must be honoured and adorned by their male relatives who desire their own welfare, for where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards; and where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where the women are happy will always prosper. Therefore, the household which maltreats its females to the extent that such ill-treated are driven to pronounce a curse on them, shall perish completely, as if destroyed by magic." (Manu Smriti 3: 55-58).

Thus it was that, in 1968, in the south Trinidad town of Siparia, a demure Indo-Trinbagonian woman called Sita Persad hurled the first pebble against the ancient, giant glass ceiling which was threatening to keep her very talented daughter, Kamla, shuttered the same way it had kept nearly every Indo-Trinbagonian woman since Friday May 30th 1845, the day the intrepid Fath al Razzak arrived at Cedros from beyond the Kala Pani with the first Indian Indentureds for the British colony called Trinidad. Bap and uncles relented and, soon enough, the studious and quietly assertive teenager from Siparia was on her way to England, to Norwood Technical College in London. Not surprisingly, to this day she holds her mother in the highest esteem of all the persons who influenced her life.

The rest of the Kamla Persad saga needs no regurgitating, for it's a story already well-told –Kamla completed her studies with distinction and married her Gregory then went on to a brilliant career in law and politics; the couple has one child, a son named Kris. Gregory fondly calls her "Kam", which is poignant, for, in Hindi, "kam" means "work".

That's why her full story cannot yet be detailed –indeed one cannot recount the outcome of a kam adhura (Hindi for "a work in progress"). Nonetheless, even a most cursory review of the

first twenty months of her five-year term would lead one to conclude, concerning the way the Trinidad and Tobago government conducts its business, the tectonic plates have been shifted.

### IN CHARGE

Since assuming Prime Ministerial office, Kamla has placed heavy emphasis on repairing and reconstructing Trinbago's physical and social fabric. She has attempted this through major reorienting and restructuring of taxpayer-funded infrastructure development and maintenance programmes as well as a complete revamping of national welfare programmes. To these ends,

- the Ministry of Works and Transport was found to be too unwieldy effectively to undertake its mandate, given the gravely decrepit condition which the former administration had allowed Trinbago's natural and built physical infrastructure to descend. So she convinced her stellar right hand, the logjam-buster, Jack Austin Warner, who was the Minister in charge, to concentrate on the mega-billion-dollar task of rebuilding, literally from the ground up, the country's roadway and drainage systems, a task as Herculean as they come. The divisions of government which dealt with transport she placed under a new Ministry—the Ministry of Transport. Almost simultaneously,

- she personally took control of the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) which provides employment to persons temporarily on the breadline. She then divvied URP among three Ministries, significantly and for the first time ever, allowing the Ministries of Food Production, Land and Marine Resources (MFPLMA) and of the People and Social Development (MPSD) to assist in directing and overseeing its operations.

MFPLMA is led by the brilliant and quietly assiduous Vasant Bharath, himself no stranger to the Indo sub-continent—his wife, Arvinder, hails from New Delhi and is the daughter of HS Arora, a onetime diplomat in India's Defence Force. MPSD is headed by the indefatigable Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh and comprises a brand new component—The Ministry of The People—which, as the name implies, is geared towards having the people of Trinbago derive an equitable share of the nation's abundant natural resources, principally hydrocarbon.

### Concurrently with the revamping of URP

- she intervened in long-standing public sector wage negotiations and got the relevant trade unions to agree to accept what her administration was offering—previously, the unions were adamant that the administration's offer of a five percent (5%) increase simply did not cut it. In an attempt to force their point—and the government's hand—the unions had resorted to open street protests which, as time dragged on, had begun to take a negative toll on production and the nation's image.

### Then

- she ventured where her predecessors had feared to tread—on October 5th, with the country reeling from a murderous onslaught by the criminal element, she declared a three-month State of Emergency (SoE) that quickly brought the wanton bloodletting to a halt—in the period just before the SoE began, persons were being violently murdered by the handful each day.

Since the SoE ended, the daily murder rate has been increasing, though nowhere near the pre-SoE level.

Based on the above, if one were to rate her performance since taking over as Prime Minister, she would pass with flying colours, for, given the state of Trinbago on May 26th 2010, the day she took her oath, no wiggle room was left in which to enjoy the honeymoon typically accorded a newly-incoming head of government. Indeed, on Day One, mere minutes after being sworn in as the seventh Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, she hurriedly left the distinguished gathering, donned jeans and rubber boots and went touring districts inundated by unseasonal torrential downpours.

The rains were still pouring when, in August 2010, she established the Children's Life Fund, whose objectives she articulately adumbrated in her address to the UN General Assembly of the same year, as follows: "It is our belief that children must not die in the dawn of life in my country—or in any other country—because they cannot afford health care. There must be new arrangements and relationships between countries that have advanced medical technology and those without so that children and vulnerable groups of the poorest nations can grow as healthy human beings and achieve their full potential. It is only when this is done that the world will progress. We have a duty to the future. It will be measured by how we fulfil our responsibilities today."

### THE FUTURE

By such simple gestures, Kamla Persad-Bissessar has set the tone for her tenure in charge—her style and actions at once evidenced not only womanly grace and charm, but, moreso, the tangible exhibitions of genuine care for the downtrodden she has brought to the Office of The Prime Minister of Trinbago and which has spread to most of her Cabinet colleagues who never before provided proof of the sort.

Furthermore, it is the establishment of the CLF which has convinced many no other is better-suited at this time to lead the government of Trinbago and that the proverb "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world!" is not lost on her and, in the Trinbago context, is ample proof how correct past UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan was when he pronounced,

"Where women thrive, all of society benefits and succeeding generations are given a better start in life!"

In the author's mind, those virtues are what most sets her and her entire administration apart from anything before seen. By displaying such qualities, she made amends for what she'd described back in October 2007 in her Mid Centre Mall No Woman No Cry speech as one of the two regrets she'd had about her political life: "That I never came to you and admitted that I am just a woman, only human!"

When the saga is finally ended, history will pronounce whether her other No Woman No Cry regret has also been put to rest. "And that I believed that my hard work and dedication would get the due recognition!" □

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