

DR. RUDRANATH CAPILDEO LECTURE

Theme: “DECISIONS AND DESTINY, The Life of Pundit Capildeo Maharaj”

Guest Speaker: Father Anthony de Verteuil

Venue: Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain

Date: Friday, May 20th, 2016

Time: 7:30 p.m.

In this short talk, I will examine the relationship, and the sometimes apparent opposition, between human decisions and divine destiny, and we will see this played out in my interpretation of the life of Capildeo Maharaj. This should be of interest, of course, to each one of us, as we may have to face in our own lives the contrast between our decisions and how our destiny evolves.

It is philosophically, rationally, impossible to reconcile an omnipotent God with man’s freedom and ability to control his destiny.

The Christian viewpoint is summed up in a jingle:

*God is all-powerful, Yet Man is truly free.
How can that possibly be? Man knows not; ‘tis a mystery.*

In practice, many Christians will agree with Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”:

There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will.

In the case of Materialists, they theorize that man is not really free but is a complicated machine completely controlled by his genes, biological chemistry, environment and upbringing. Yet in practice, materialists are forced to accept that a man is responsible for his actions -- otherwise how can you blame a murderer for his murders or delinquent children for their aberrant behaviour, or reward the brilliant with prizes they earned?

The ancient religions of the East incline to divine determinism.

The sacred poem the Bhagavadgita puts it beautifully concerning God:

*I am the strength of the strong.
I am the intelligence of the intelligent.
I am the splendour of the splendid.*

And even more emphatically of the proud man:

He whose soul is bewildered by the self-sense thinks “I am the doer”.

Thus, harmony between a man's freedom and God's power can come only when man is become -- in Western terms -- so spiritual that in everything he accords willingly to God's mind. Presumably this was the view of Capildeo.

Capildeo Maharaj was born in 1873 into the caste of Brahmins in the little village of Mahadewadubey, in the county of Gorakpur, in the state of Uttar Pradesh in east central India. From generation unto generation his ancestors had presided as pundits over the spiritual destiny of the surrounding Hindu people, for following the caste system in India, the sacred office of pundit was open only to Brahmins.

The caste system in most of the nineteenth century was based on an unchangeable group rather than on a class system, and founded in and modified by birth, occupation, colour and social status. Born into a particular caste, for example a middle-level occupational caste like a carpenter, one was trapped in it and could not change caste in the present life.

The Brahmins were the highest caste; for centuries the repository of civilization and culture (somewhat like the monks of medieval Europe) and were above the ruling warrior class. Thus Capildeo was as firmly fixed in his caste as in his race. It was his destiny. His religious duty, "Karma Marga" was to accept it.

In his youth, in the village, his father Raghunath, and perhaps other Brahmins, had taught him Hindi and Sanskrit, and as befitted a future Pundit, he became familiar with the great Hindu religious works. But the young man had a strong yearning for the acquisition of further knowledge and to progress beyond the confines of the remote village. In 1894 when he was twenty-one years of age he made a fateful decision, left his father and his home and journeyed on foot, the hundred miles south to Varanasi.

The ancient city of Varanasi, on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, is the Holy City of the Hindus. One thousand temples rise, tier by tier, from the water's edge (the most famous being the beautiful golden roofed Visvanaha, dedicated to Shiva). In the city dwelt large numbers of Brahmins greatly reputed for sanctity and learning, and who made Varanasi the most famous centre in India for Sanskrit studies. Here then, the young Capildeo hoped to progress in learning and in holiness.

Capildeo could not live on fresh air or meet easily the cost of his education. Moreover, he was a very inexperienced and trusting young man. This need of money and his excessive credulity made him an easy prey for the "Arkati" or Recruiters for emigrants to the West Indies, who frequented the city. He was soon approached by one who spun him elaborate and enticing tales of the West Indies: how in the West Indies there were huge mounds, yea veritable mountains of sugar and how the immigrants' work -- his work -- both easy and well paid, would be simply to

sift the sugar; how he should make and carry with him a broad canvas belt because in this he would be able to store the gold coins which he would earn.

We may take it for granted that Capildeo, praising Mother Lakshmi, asked her to help him in a decision and to bring him wealth. It is not necessary to believe that the intelligent young man was so naïve as to swallow the whole story, of the Arkati, but the recruiter romanced so voluminously that Capildeo may have judged that there was sufficient reality mixed with the romance to make emigration worthwhile. So he decided to emigrate -- from the rational viewpoint, a horribly stupid decision. However, if there is a divinity that rules our lives, then, an incredibly bad decision taken in good faith is not the end of life, but a new beginning.

Capildeo concealed his caste as a Brahmin lest he be rejected as an emigrant, and so he was registered on the 7th August, 1894 as a member of the “Johhatti” caste, porters of Bengal, and gave his occupation as labourer. Within days he left for the main depot at Calcutta, and in late September departed from his beloved homeland for Trinidad, on board the sailing ship *Hereford* with 526 other immigrants. The mortality rate among the voyagers was frightfully high, 40 persons dying on board ship and being consigned without ceremony to the deep.

In spite of serious hardships Capildeo survived the voyage and the ship put into the beautiful harbour of Port of Spain on the 27th December, after a three-month voyage. The immigrants were then brought in open rowboats to the tiny island of Nelson, one of the Five Islands, which had been set up as a clearance station for the Indian immigrants in 1875. For the exhausted and religious Capildeo the short time spent on the island was a peaceful interlude before the disastrous days to come.

Within a few days of his arrival he was legally indentured and along with twelve other immigrants began his five years of contracted labour at Woodford Lodge Estate Chaguanas.

Almost all the work at Woodford Lodge was task work, designed for strong, efficient workers, which encouraged many of the indentured immigrants to remain a full ten years on the estate, as by hard work they could make good money. But life was extremely hard for the weaker workers.

On arrival at the estate Capildeo was first assigned to work with the shovel gang, but was not accustomed to such labour and unable to accomplish it. His physical inability was obvious to the “Sirdar” or supervisor, who though directly under the white overseer was in fact in charge of the workers. This man acknowledged and respected Capildeo’s high caste and possessed a fund of human sympathy. He transferred the young man to the weeding gang, composed of the weaker men and the women and children, which undertook the weeding and other multifarious duties besides. However, the Indian immigrant supervising this gang, for reasons best known to

himself, assigned Capildeo to the work of cleaning the dung from the animal pens. How long he was engaged in this unpleasant occupation we are not sure. So unbearable was his lot that it seemed he would soon become one of the faceless multitudes who died in Trinidad far from their home. But for this he was not destined.

One day Gobin, the Sirdar in charge of him, saw Capildeo in the dung gang in great distress and called him over and spoke to him. "If I buy your freedom from indenture," he asked the young Brahmin, "will you marry my daughter and settle in Trinidad?" Whatever lay in his heart, circumstances clearly dictated his decision.

Gobin immediately paid back the passage money of ten pounds five shillings to the Government, plus the annual tax due on the immigrants for the five years of indenture, for which the estates were liable. Capildeo's indenture was terminated or "cut" as the saying went, and he was a free man. As it was, his father-in-law settled him with his young wife in a small wooden house on the main road passing through the small village of Chaguanas, on the site of the present Lion House. Capildeo began a new period in his life, no longer a student but as a householder.

Why did Gobin decide to offer his daughter in marriage to Capildeo? Surely it was a union destined from above? But we may hazard some very human reasons for his decision. Gobin wanted to open a provision shop. He had been seeking for his fifteen-year-old daughter a suitable husband to run it -- that is, someone of high caste -- for the children acquired the husband's caste -- an educated man, and above all absolutely worthy of trust. Capildeo fitted the bill perfectly.

In front of their home on the main street was the shop from which he would sell the necessities of life and little luxuries to the time-expired Indian immigrants who had settled in Chaguanas. His wife Soogee, who turned out to be a tower of strength, would take care of the shop when she was not child-bearing, which occurred quite frequently. Indeed, Capildeo took his role as a husband very seriously and his prayers for fertility were abundantly answered, for over the years his wife bore him fourteen children, of whom three died young, nine girls and two boys surviving. *But man proposes and God disposes*, for Capildeo had seven daughters before Soogee bore the son, whom he hoped would succeed him as a pundit.

For Capildeo was above all a pundit. He had originally a small patch of land on which he cultivated short crops, such as rice, peas and eddoes, but as he became more and more widely known among the large Indian community of Chaguanas and also the surrounding districts, his religious functions became altogether dominant.

Eventually as the years passed, he would go out to the neighbouring villages and spend a week at each of them in turn, returning to his home only on Sundays, and leaving on the Monday to begin

his religious work all over again. To all who came, he enunciated the great religious truths found in the sacred books or ancient spiritual works like the Sri Ramacharitamansa:

Sensuous enjoyment is not the be all and end all of human existence... The fools who devote their minds to the pleasures of sense take poison in exchange for nectar... The Lord is won only by sincere devotion and is a fountain of joy and an abode of compassion.

At Divali the Pundit's home was lit up with deyas, and on the feast of Kartik, Capildeo led his fellow Hindus from Chaguanas, the four miles to the west to Perseverance Bay to purify themselves by immersion in the sea.

Only the pundit could perform special religious rites, and so, on the occasion of births, marriages or deaths or as requested on special occasions Capildeo presided at private pujas in honour of the various gods. The contributions received on these occasions helped to support him comfortably.

Etymologically "Decision means cut off" or "put to an end". But for the modern psychologist it results from a comparison and a resultant choice. The greatest choice from every point of view that Capildeo made in Trinidad was choosing to listen to his wonderful wife and not to his own mind. The shop and any business affairs were left to Soogee. Under her supervision and direction the shop thrived and enough money was made to support the growing family, all of whom took their turns in working in the shop. During her husband's absence she was the head of the family, investing in land for agriculture, organizing, instructing, disciplining, consoling, caring, loving.

She it was who convinced her husband that the children should all attend the Canadian Mission Indian School till they were nine or ten. There they learned the elements of arithmetic and how to read and write in English. Once they attained that age, they worked in the shop and took care of the house. Capildeo was not at all pleased that the boys, Simboonath, (or failing him Rudranath) should go to a Christian school, for he had set his mind on one of them becoming a pundit, but when both sons showed no inclination for this they were successfully backed up by their mother. Simboonath was sent for three years to Naparima College San Fernando and then spent another three at Queen's Royal College. The younger brother had all his secondary schooling at the latter.

But it was Capildeo who decided on the names for the children, all taken from the old family traditions and he arranged his daughters' marriages when they were young, with carefully selected suitors, all of Brahminical descent, so that interestingly enough the bridegrooms came from all over Trinidad: Aknath Ramcharan and his brother Dianath from Fyzabad; Ramnarine Permanand and his brother Ramnarace from Claxton Bay; Hargovind Deepan and his brother Ramjattan from Carapichaima; Sahadeo Maharaj from Siparia.

The pundit had his time for relaxation. He was an interesting conversationalist, in the days when conversation was one of the few recreations among the Indians who were exhausted from their work on their properties or in the fields. A favourite gathering place was in the gallery of the shop where having purchased ganja (then legal) and tobacco, the customers would put the mixture in their clay pipes or chillums, light up and puff away happily. Capildeo was a good mixer with all classes, from the lowest labourer to the District Medical Officer, a social grace inherited by his descendants. When Baba (Father) was at home the children noticed that more people frequented the shop and the sales increased!

What undoubtedly was a relaxation as well as a vocation for the pundit was his construction of the Lion House (beautifully depicted by Adrian Camps-Campins). It was built in front of the old shop-house which it replaced, and which became a single-purpose dwelling house so that the old was completely concealed from the street by the new. Capildeo made the bricks himself and constructed this creation with his own hands. It was his very own.

Its brutally stark white pillars formed an arcade in front of its plain walls and flat roof. The first floor housed the store; the second floor, the living area, was divided by wooden partitions into four small rooms. Steep narrow steps led from this section to the prayer room on the third floor. The fourth floor served no specific purpose but afforded a spectacular panorama and was open to the heavens. The two lions at either end of the front balcony give the house its name. Capildeo spent about three years in its building and significantly, died soon after its completion in 1926.

At this stage we retrace our steps a little. With the end of the First World War in 1918 prices of basic foods in Trinidad rose 145 percent. The return of the demobilized black Trinidadians who had been badly treated in the War, the revival of the Trinidad Workingmen's Association and racial feeling, resulted in a number of strikes. The unrest reached Woodford Lodge Estate Chaguanas. There was a melee in which Beharry Lal was severely beaten by the overseer and died because -- it was claimed -- the blows were rendered fatal due entirely to his having an enlarged spleen.

Pundits from all over Trinidad were urgently requested to attend a meeting in Chaguanas, Capildeo's home base. They decided, probably with his agreement, to pay for a Doctor -- Doctor Sharma -- to perform a new post-mortem examination, and also they would pay for legal advice about instituting a case for manslaughter. This crowd-controlled decision was destined to fail -- as indeed it did, when Doctor Sharma suddenly and unexpectedly died. One may well ask whether this brief foray of Capildeo into what some refer to as "politics" influenced his son Simboonath to, much later, enter the political field.

Capildeo was a short man, five foot two inches in height, and in his later years inclined to stoutness. His wife was also short but firm-bodied and she and her husband were always dressed

in the garb typical of the United Provinces from which Capildeo had emigrated. Though his wife, born in Trinidad, had a good command of English, Capildeo never spoke English very well but only his native Hindustani. He had a firm attachment to Mother India and had paid three visits to his homeland to renew himself spiritually, to acquire a substantial library of the sacred Sanskrit texts and to bring back goods for sale in the shop, which financed his trip.

At age fifty-three, in 1926, he decided to pay a fourth visit to India -- perhaps a spiritual urge propelled him to renew his faith in the way of asceticism and knowledge, or maybe he was elaborating plans for a family visit. But once in India, he contracted a severe stomach ailment. Death smiled on him and he answered her smile. It was his destiny.

After the death of her husband Soogee expanded her role as head of the family and was able to cope with every eventuality. She arranged the marriage of her daughter Droopatie to Seepersad Naipaul. In 1940 she moved the entire family to Port of Spain, and during the last two decades of her life she was a true matriarch surrounded by her numerous children, grand-children and later great-grandchildren.

We may well imagine that during his lifetime Capildeo may often have said in the secret of his heart, "Thank God for Soogee, thank God for Trinidad!"