

Constructions of the 'Rich-Men-Bridge': The Berbice Bridge and its Influence on a Hindu Community in Guyana

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Abstract

The Berbice Bridge is a pontoon bridge across the river Berbice, connecting the Guyanese regions of East and West Coast Berbice. The two-lane bridge links these predominantly rural areas, is 1.57 kilometers in length and may only be accessed by motorized vehicles. Opened in December 2008 for commercial operation, it has always been part of a highly politicized discourse in the ethnically tense environment of multi-ethnic and multi-religious Guyana, a country located on the mainland of South America but considered part of the wider Caribbean. Since its construction the Berbice Bridge has served as a space for negotiations of power among the different ethnic groups. Although run by the privately owned Berbice Bridge Company Inc., the 'Indian' political party, which ruled the country between 1992 and 2015, has claimed the bridge as a symbol of its and generally Indian capacity to 'develop' the nation and facilitate 'progress'. Consequently, most Guyanese Africans consider the bridge's specific location as largely benefiting the Guyanese Indian ethnic group.

Promising easier and faster access to the rest of the country—including its capital and urban center Georgetown—the bridge, however, is viewed ambiguously at best within the rural Indian Hindu community. Calling it a 'rich-men-bridge', the tolled bridge may not be accessed by pedestrians and cyclists. Working-class Guyanese struggle to pay the costly toll, cross the bridge and hence nostalgically remember the 'days of the ferry'. Focusing on a particular Hindu religious group, this presentation discusses how the construction of the Berbice Bridge has influenced local ethnic relations and how it is regarded as an indicator for the unequal distribution of national resources and the structural recreation of (in)justice.