I’ve been called a “douga” so many times throughout my life because of my hair. My hair gets a lot of attention – it is a massive fluff of soft curls.

When relatives and friends used to refer to me as “douga,” I thought that the term was synonymous with being of half-Indian, half-African descent. In Guyana, where my parents are from, “douga” is a term used to describe those who appear to be bi-racial. However, like the word “mulatto,” “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, even to this day, racial tensions exist among the two primary ethnicities of the nation. These tensions have run high for decades, in part due to political turmoil and in part due to competing migrant experiences; Africans migrated as slaves in the late 1800s and Indians as indentured servants in the early 1800s. Many Indo-Guyanese harbor deep seated resentment towards Afro-Guyanese and vice versa, stemming as far back as British colonialization. Calling someone a “douga” therefore, can be akin to using profanity.

A “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is considered a “dougla” therefore, can be akin to using profanity. Calling someone derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory. In Guyana, “douga” is often considered derogatory.

I am told that my maternal family is of the Kshatriya (warrior) caste, and that my paternal family is in part “Madrassi,” to be distinguished from those hailing from Madras, India. Thus, the “mixed caste” definition of douga might be more fitting to my identity. The term “Madrassi” is associated with those who worship the Goddess Kali. David Lowenthal explains in his 1972 work “West Indian Societies,” that most Madrassis were treated as low caste in the Caribbean.

In some localities in Guyana and Trinidad, the term “Madrassi” refers to dark-skinned people. Dr. Moses Seenarine, a former professor at CUNY Hunter College who has written on caste in the Caribbean, stated that “varna [color] has replaced caste, and although there is no strict correlation between occupation and caste [in Guyana], Brahmins are an important exception. Hindus in the diaspora real” and thereafter “educate our people.” He stated that he has been “ridiculed and laughed at by many” who felt he “was not Indian, and therefore a lead-er.” However, he never let this deter him.

Pandit Manoj continues on his quest. He came to the realization that if a person leads “with hum-ility, grace, honor, and self-respect” people notice that and ultimately support the person. Pandit Manoj himself has a large following, heavily populated with kind-hearted youth who are committed to seva (selfless service). A vibrant reader of the Ramayana, Pandit Manoj cited a chowpea (metered poetry) from Aranya Kand (the forest episode) to substantiate his view that caste is obsolete and impedes upon equality.

The verse states:

Despite caste, kinship, lineage, piety, reputation, wealth, physical strength, familial numerical strength, accomplishments, and ability, a man lacking in devotion is of no more worth than a cloud without water.

Caste flies in the face of justice. Though still present, the caste system should remain just a relic of Indo-Caribbean history. While many hold on to caste as non-negotiable tradition, even an unverifiable birthright, today it functions only to promote a sense of superiority in the minds of select few. In my view, the caste system was a social construct, not a religious one. It may have been created to further a society in need of order, but now it keeps society from moving forward. The world would be more peaceful and loving without it.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.

A Relic of Indo-Caribbean History or Ever Present?

The men and crew of an indenture vessel recently arrived in Georgetown, Demerara, circa 1890.