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Beyond Historical Origins: Negotiating Tamilness in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper attempts to locate the contemporary processes, issues and dilemmas around being Indian, Hindu and Tamil in South Africa in the context of that country's demography and politics, of diasporic constructions of Indianness along with its internal dialectics of region, language, caste and religion and of the contemporary transnational impulses of globalization. The underlying premise is that ethnic affiliations have both an objective definition and, in the context of group identities, subjective and changing meaning and self-conscious deployment. History, social structure and group and individual agency are all part of the expression and interplay of identities. Tamils in present day South Africa have moved beyond the compulsions of their history as indentured immigrants as well as exclusive anchoring within the dynamics of the South African polity and are exploring transnational linkages with India as well as the Tamil diaspora.