

Beyond Historical Origins: Negotiating Tamilness in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Tamil Diaspora. Diasporic Hinduism. South Africa. Ethnic Identity. Indianness

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.

It is a truism that when categories of ethnic affiliation like language, religion, caste and nation function as group identities, they are being continuously recreated in response to the dynamics of the particular historical moment with its politico-economic and socio-cultural cross currents, while drawing selectively upon the lineages and layers of existing meanings. Contemporary structure, cultural memory and agency of actors are brought to bear in this deployment. The various categories of affiliations and identity also interact and shape each other. Tamilness, Hinduness and Indianness are all asserted as identities by the majority of the people of Tamil origin in present-day South Africa. The negotiated play is part of a minority's self-perceived rightful assertion of its South African citizenship in the rainbow nation. In so doing, Tamils are not only going beyond the compulsions of their origin as indentured immigrants in the nineteenth century, but also beyond the specific circumstances and political trajectory of the South African state from colonial to apartheid and post apartheid regimes. They are simultaneously part of the new transnational dynamics between India and its diasporas and mutually between the various Indian diasporas.

South African Indians (reasons for preferring this term over others are explained later on) constitute around 1.2 million, or 2.6 % of that country's population (Bhan and Vahed 2006: 242) but they are an economically significant minority

with a history of participating in the anti colonial and anti apartheid struggles. Excellent accounts of this history are available (See for instance Bhana and Brain 1990; Bhana and Vahed 2006; Desai and Vahed 2010; Metcalf 2002; and Palmer 1957; to name a few). The indentured labour which continued to arrive from 1860 for about 50 years, was made up predominantly of Tamil and Telugu immigrants and a smaller group from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and other places¹. They were from various caste backgrounds and included Muslims and a few Christians. Unlike indentured labourers in East Africa, who mostly returned to India after their contracts, most immigrants continued to remain in South Africa. Over 90% of today's South African Indians are their descendants. The second major immigration was by 'passenger' Indians from 1870 onwards. They came to explore business opportunities, paid their own fares and were not bound by any labour contract. They were mainly from Gujarat, both Hindu and Muslim, and Muslims were in the majority. Indian immigration largely stopped after 1911, due to campaign and pressure from Indian reformers and political activists to end indentured labour.¹ In the last decade and a half, there has been some relocation among young professionals of Indian origin to the English speaking countries, notably to Australia, for better economic opportunities and to escape what is being perceived as discrimination against Indians in the post apartheid regime (Singh 2008: 7), although its size is not

estimated and may not be significant at present. More than 98% of today's South African Indians were born in South Africa (GOI 2001: 85). Thus the demographic and cultural profile of the South African Indians - with a mosaic of linguistic, regional and religious backgrounds - stabilized and remained grounded within the South African context. In contrast, in the new diasporas, as for instance in North America, fresh waves of immigration have brought in greater differentiation within the Indian diasporic population and new equations with respect to the host and home societies.

DIASPORIC DILEMMAS OF SOUTH AFRICAN INDIANS

In this essay, I have attempted to place 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 transnational impulses of globalization. The 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first shipload of indentured labour, being commemorated this year, has triggered, apart from much celebration and grand spectacle, some soul searching on the eternal question of 'who are we' which was evident on public occasions, in popular media and in private conversations. Using broad brush strokes, based on existing literature, tracking of the popular discourse combined with brief ethnographic observations in Durban, I have sketched the outline of a theme which is underexplored in research on South African Indians. I have also suggested some questions which can fruitfully be explored with greater ethnographic nuancing by future research.

There has been extensive and detailed documentation of the history and role of indentured labour in South Africa, from recruitment to passage to arrival and dispersal in South Africa, and the subsequent trajectories of release from indenture and transformation into free labour or reindenture or return to India, sometimes re-returning too; as also about the arrival and growth of 'passenger Indians' and their role in the economy and society. The history of the political struggle of South African Indians against colonial and apartheid regimes, for establishing citizenship rights for themselves, is also much written about. This is not surprising, given the significance of

Gandhi in mobilizing Indians for equal citizenship, but also in leaving a legacy for the South African movement for justice and democracy, and the intimate involvement of some sections of South African Indians in the anti apartheid struggle. There is rather less writing on South African Indians from the perspective of diaspora studies and the theme of identity, its articulations vis a vis 'home' and 'host', and its configurations in terms of religion, language, region and caste. Rastogi (2005: 539) points out that this gap is perhaps due to their own resistance to such an identity. There has been a complex process at work here. For immigrants from India, the long struggle for recognition as South Africans became successful only a century after the first arrivals in 1860. Till then, they were seen as Indian citizens and with the gathering hostility generated by their competitive role as traders, they were urged to return to India. Throughout the colonial period, South African Indians were in close interaction with Indian reformers and nationalists, and the notion of Indianness had some connection with political India.³ Having achieved political and civic recognition as South African citizens, the desire to proclaim Indianness was muted, although Indianness with all its regional, linguistic and religious affiliations was part of everyday reality. This sense of distancing was further compounded by Nehru's famous exhortation to the overseas Indians in 1948 to throw in their lot with their host countries that reflected a certain disengagement of India with her overseas migrants (Kudaisya 2006: 86 – 87). During the period of apartheid, South Africa became politically isolated and cut off from substantial segments of international interactions, and this too diluted the diasporic disposition of South African Indians. The post apartheid rule, inaugurated in 1994, created some uncertainties for South African Indians and has resulted in a reclaiming of Indianness as part of minority rights. Meanwhile worldwide, globalization processes have replaced the notion of an exclusive identity derived from citizenship in a single nation state with the reality and validity of multiple layers of identity, not necessarily incompatible with each other. Emotional linkages with country and culture of origin are no longer seen as failing the test of loyalty to the new country. A greater sense of identification with India at the level of sentiment is seen among South African Indians, although there is no real desire to return to it (Singh 2008: 1)

With the rise of transnationalism as an idea and a fact, the growing clout of India as a geo political power, and the pro-active policy of the Indian government towards its diasporas, the canvas and content for the play of identities have expanded in scale and variety. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas ('Emigrant Indian Day') initiated by Govt. of India has provided a platform and networking forum for diasporas mutually and with India. At the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrations in Delhi in 2003, the well known activist of ANC Fatima Meer categorically rejected the term 'Indian diasporic' as a prefix to a South African national identity. Since Indian immigrants in South Africa had struggled hard and long for acceptance, South African should be their primary identity, she said (Waldman 2003). In the polarised racial climate of South Africa, this may have been politically expedient, necessary and even inevitable, but it is not compatible with hyphenated identities, hybridity and multiculturalism that have not just won popular acceptability but also form part of the conceptual and critical apparatus of Diaspora Studies. In an intriguing reversal of conventional and popular expressions of hybrid identity (Asian-American, for instance denoting US citizenship with Asian origins, with 'Asian' functioning as a qualifying adjective for a primarily US identity⁴, and terms like Indo-Fijian, Indo-Caribbean, etc, being widely acceptable) the current consensus in South Africa favours the term 'South African Indian' over 'Indian South African', since the former foregrounds South African identity by mentioning it first.

'Indian' as an ethnic identity has existed as a category throughout the last 150 years, but the compulsions and inner dynamics of this has been closely responsive to the changing politics through colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid democratic regimes (see for e. g., Maharaj 2009: 87). In the contemporary scenario, the perceived economic, social and political marginalization of South African Indians has led to their leveraging their Indianness for asserting their rights as a minority (Radhakrishnan 2005: 263-264; Bhana and Vahed 2006: 252). The state imposed category that was associated with restrictive practices and discriminatory laws also found an echo in 'Indian' as a form of resistance. Thus while historical origins have had some role in creating 'Indianness', in contemporary expressions and negotiations of identity, various other factors are implicated. Underneath this umbrella term, the various

ethnic affiliations existed and continue to thrive. Beyond the label, Indians were Hindus or Muslims or Gujaratis or 'Madrasis' (Bhana 2000: 20-21).

Ela Gandhi's words "I am a South African, a very proud South African. The Indianness comes in at the level of culture, the way we eat, the kind of things we eat, the kind of things we appreciate – like music, drama, the language we speak....that is where the Indianness stops" (GOI 2000: 84), capture the political and cultural dialectic in a way different from Fatima Meer. They foreground South African over Indian politically but assert cultural Indianness through particularities - the food, arts, language being specific rather than generalized Indian.

The composition and internal differentiation of the South African Indian population on the basis of region, language and religion, and the negotiation of these as identities - the articulation of these distinct axes along with convergence into a common Indianness, set against the background of a racially polarized society and country - is an important theme for comprehending the diasporic location of South African Indians. A closer look at Tamils who form a substantial segment, about 50% of the Indian population (Laxmi Narayan 1995: 11), can generate insights on larger questions in the field such as the developments in diasporic Hinduism, the global organization and push of the Tamil diaspora and the validity of the distinctions between the new and old diasporas under contemporary processes of globalization.

INDIA AND ITS DIASPORAS

Responding to the current scenario, some new formulations are emerging in the field of Indian Diaspora Studies. The bulk of earlier research focused on reconstruction of cultural memories of India while integrating economically and politically with the host country; this was followed by a phase when focus was on adaptation to the host society (Jain 2009: 6-7). The underlying premise that Indian diaspora can only be understood by referring back to India has been critiqued (Vertovec 2000: 2 and others). Of late, attention is being drawn to the two-way rather than unidirectional flow of ideas, people and networks, goods, services between diasporas and home. Mutual linkages between India and its diasporas have existed before, but they have been intensified as well as transformed in recent

decades. Furthermore, diasporas are increasingly operating as transnational communities, whose members belong to two or more societies simultaneously, lending weight to the arguments of Benedict Anderson, Anthony Cohen and others that community is less a socially and spatially constructed unit and more a symbolically constructed identity.

Till recently, the impact of the diasporas on India itself was fragmentary, localized and affecting individual family clusters rather than entire communities or regions, with a few exceptions. This started changing from the 1970s onwards, with the phenomenon of sending children abroad, especially North America for higher education followed by employment. This continues to have considerable impact on the budgetary planning of families and matrimonial landscape of middle class India. In the 80s the emigration to the Gulf became significant and repatriation of money had an effect on entire regional economies, notably in states like Kerala and Goa. However, it was from the early 1990s impact of the diaspora back home reached a new phase, with state recognition, support and facilities (Lal 2007: 11). Following the 1990 balance of payment crisis of the economy, the supportive role of US based Indians, a high level committee was set up by Government of India and its report became the basis for official policy initiated by the subsequent NDA government to mobilize the diaspora for not just financial but political ideological support as well. India-Diaspora relations got transformed. It has been pointed out that the old diasporas, comprising of the colonial period emigrants get less attention in India than the more recent emigrants to the developed countries, but as Jain (2009: 3) points out, the distinction between the two is not tenable since the old diasporas show considerable continuity from colonial to post colonial times and are caught up in the same contemporary currents of post coloniality, globalization and transnationality.

TAMIL DIASPORA AND DIASPORIC HINDUISM

The Tamil diaspora is a large one, and has strong internal bonds of language and culture. Of the more than 70 million Tamils spread in 50 countries of the world, 61 million are in the homeland of India, and 5 million in Sri Lanka (Sivasupramaniam 2010). The Tamil population of Sri Lanka has two distinct segments: plantation

labour immigrants who migrated from India during the colonial period, and the Jaffna Tamils who have a much older presence. The latter who held professional positions during the colonial regime, also migrated in large numbers to Malaysia and formed part of its professional elite. During the years of civil strife in Sri Lanka, especially in the 80s, a large number of Tamils sought refuge and asylum in Europe and In Canada. Toronto city is slotted as the city with the largest number of Sri Lankan Tamils in the world. From the Tamil regions in India, merchant communities notably the Chettiar emigrated from pre-colonial times onwards and formed small settlements in Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The colonial labour migration - much larger in volume - was mainly to Mauritius and Reunion islands in the Indian Ocean, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore and to South Africa. The post world war migration of middle class professionals has been to USA, UK, Canada and Australia, and also to Singapore (which is thus both an old and new diasporic location). With the IT boom, the continuing migration from India to locations in the new diaspora has widened its caste and class base.

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora carries a strong notion of Tamilness honed by exile and refugeehood which is not dependent on religion. To some extent, Malaysian Tamils have sharpened their own identity amidst hostile political climate by drawing upon Dravidian political ideology and more recently upon a Hindu-ness propogated by HINDRAF. In contrast, South African Tamils have used the political label of Indianness, and drawn from Tamil religiosity. The construction of Tamilness in South Africa is interwoven with the Dravidian Hindu ethos which has both continuities and disjunctures with canonical or sanskritic Hinduism. There are an estimated 9 million diasporic Hindus, and as is the case in India itself, this term covers a range of regional and sectarian beliefs and practices. Despite the fact that the term 'diaspora' itself is derived from the historical experience of dispersal of the Jews, religion is not usually considered a valid basis for naming diasporas, simply because people belonging to different ethnic communities, geo-graphically and historically distinct, can be followers of the same religion (Cohen 1997). However, as Vertovec (2000: 2-4) argues, Hinduism can be treated as an exception, not only because in general it has not been a proselytizing religion in the past, but also

because the sacred geography of India and its territorial mythology is central to the beliefs and practices of the diasporic Hindus as well.

Given that the diasporic condition generically produces increased religious consciousness, a search for fundamentals, practical religious adaptations to new situations and an assimilation of religious elements into the domain of culture, diasporic religion does not merely implement in the outposts, the dictates of the 'core', but actually creates afresh with a broad reference to the putative origins. The Hindu diaspora has cumulatively created considerable cultural and symbolic capital in the form of temples, associations, trusts, ashrams, bhajan groups, magazines, and has also contributed financially for religious and religio-political activities in India. Moreover, Hinduism in the diaspora is sustained without the underlying political and economic structures obtaining in India. In some senses therefore, 'Diasporic Hinduism' is a distinct entity, with clout and shaping power back in India.

Kim Knott has identified features of diasporic Hinduism like organizational acumen, substantial participation of lay persons from various castes in building and running temples and sometimes in conducting worship. The diasporic setting encourages debate on the nature of Hinduism.

Tension between the need for a strong unified Hindu identity on par with other world religions and the need to preserve traditional diversity as well as the openness characteristic of guru based cults and sects is to be found in many Indian diasporas (Knott 1998 : 101-7). However, in my estimation, the challenges to broad spectrum Hinduism from right wing definitions as well as Dalit critiques have not been posed or addressed in the diaspora in the way they have been in India.

While Hinduism as a subject of inquiry is vast and diffuse, spanning textual dimensions and living practice and encompassing social, political, ritual, philosophical and spiritual realms, my own focus is largely on practice: i. e. day to day activities as well as special festivals, ceremonies and public occasions. In the contemporary scenario, both in India and diasporas, one can broadly distinguish between four major overlapping categories – brahmanical /sanskritic, regionally rooted devotional, local/folk and popular Hinduisms.

The equation of Hinduism with brahmanical Hinduism is a construct with limited historical verity and even less correlation in the present

day. If one were to scrutinize the major arenas of Hinduism - temples, mathas, pilgrimage sites, shrines of saints, sects, gurus and their ashrams, the everyday domestic practice of various regions and castes, and finally, politics, in the form of Hindutva, Brahmanical Hinduism occupies a small, fairly prestigious but not central or influential position in this spectrum. It provides the canonical and liturgical structure for the temples of the 'Great Tradition' but often they have a strong regional orientation as well. Some have become popular pilgrimage sites with a pan Indian devotee base, from a wide range of castes and communities, for e. g. Tirupati. The vibrant tradition of shrines to village gods, mother goddesses and so on includes practices like animal sacrifice, fire walking, etc. These local temples pay only nominal deference to the sanskritic temple tradition. They are considered to have great powers for good and ill and are patronized by all local castes. Some have acquired regional popularity and become pilgrimage sites. Several hugely popular deities like Ayyappa combine local (folk) roots with an acquired sanskritic patina.

Among the mathas and ashramas of the various sects - Saiva, Vaishnava, Sakta and others - the Sankara mathas may be seen as upholding unequivocal Brahmanism in conjunction with advaita philosophy, while the other traditional ascetic sects and mathas, headed variously by members of Brahmin and non-Brahmin regionally rooted castes, espouse various strands of theistic and bhakti oriented forms of Hinduism, some giving only a nominal deference to Brahmanism. This is even truer for the pilgrimage sites and shrines of saints too which as part of traditional popular culture, reflect both eclecticism and syncretism.

In tandem with the above, is the phenomenon of charismatic gurus and sects, who are not part of the canonical structure, even though broadly inspired by Hinduism. They command a mass base cutting across caste and to some extent religion and country. In its scale and reach, this is a 20th century phenomenon, although its roots are in the bhakti movement. The phenomenon encompasses a range of variations, all generally referring back to vedic and upanishadic sources among others, and emphasizing on personal observances in diet, lifestyle, etc. These sects downplay brahmanical ritual, do not operate formally on caste basis and include worshippers from various castes and religions.

ON BEING TAMIL IN THE RAINBOW NATION

Among South African Tamil Hindus, the sense of Tamilness, such as it exists, has evolved through on the one hand dissolving internal caste differences, and on the other, intensifying the distance between 'Hindis' and Tamils. Further, unlike the passenger Indians, most Tamils have not kept contact with their kith and kin back in India. They have also, in general, not been closely involved with the politics of the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, unlike say Malaysian or Sri Lankan Tamils. Tamilness has been created and nurtured almost wholly within the South African context.

Caste and Region

There is by now a fair amount of documentation that ties of language, region, and caste operate variously in the Indian diaspora and that these affiliations and loyalties are not all-encompassing, nor fixed forever but coexist with each other and with larger identities, shaped by the fluid dynamics of host, home and community (see for instance the papers in Jayaram 2010). Caste, to the extent that it exists in the diaspora, is usually not pan-Indian, but gets refracted through region and language, and this is generally true even for pan-Indian castes like Brahmins and ex-untouchables. Before discussing the specifics of caste in South Africa, I shall briefly rehearse from another article (Ganesh 2010), my own understanding and arguments about caste in the Indian diaspora. In general, caste itself is not prominent in the diasporic experience, though often present as a category. Caste society in India gets its form and substance through a conjunction of external socio-political and economic factors and subjective consciousness. In the initial phases of emigration out of the country, caste distinctions get erased or downplayed, due to the absence of a structural context, and due to heightened consciousness as an Indian. The latter is reinforced by the perceptions of the host land as well. There are also the pressures of surviving and succeeding in an alien, often hostile environment which precipitates a 'we Indians' feeling.

That caste in India has several dimensions, not necessarily nor always reinforcing each other, has been argued by an influential stream in sociology, Dipankar Gupta's work on the

coexistence of the principles of caste as hierarchy and as identity (2004: x, xiv) being a recent example. It is necessary to unpack the category and investigate whether and to what extent caste in the diaspora operates at the three levels of structure, culture and identity.⁸ The answer will also have to be qualified with respect to the time and circumstances of migration and the location, demographics and situation of the particular diaspora, the context in which this question is asked, and the nature of caste dynamics and debate in India at that point in time. Thus the old and new diasporas present different pictures with regard to caste.

The consensus view is that in the old diaspora – of which South Africa is an example - where immigration took place in the 19th and early 20th centuries, although migrants came from a range of castes - low, middle and high - , caste was not prominent; it was a fluid ethnic marker. The conditions of indentured labour made it difficult to observe rules of ritual purity and there were no caste-maintaining authorities. Endogamy was not maintained rigorously in practice, though the idea was recognized. Women indentured labourers were fewer, with relatively equal wages, and often chose to marry men with stable incomes, which was not always within the caste. According to Seenarine (2006), though caste was not important, people did identify themselves by castes, albeit most claimed middle-caste status. There was considerable fabrication of caste identities enabled by the unusual situation. Jain (2004: 182) describes the institution of caste among Indians in Malaysia and Trinidad as a cultural variable rather than as part of social stratification. Caste system has almost disappeared, and even in communities where the semblances of its elements are noticeable, it is neither a "structural principle" nor is it "functionally relevant" (Jayaram 2004: 26). How far this general argument is true for Dalits in the old diaspora is not easy to infer from the earlier research.⁹

Among contemporary South African Tamil Hindus, a broad convergence around language/region¹⁰ as the basis for ethnic identity has evolved, and within this framework, caste as a normative category is not visible. In practice, what is popularly seen as the culture of the upper and middle non Brahmin Tamil Hindu castes of India has got stabilized as the standard here, with a fairly eclectic intermix of orthodox, reformist, folk and newly created and adapted ritual and

customary practices of the every day domestic sphere, public and private worship, and rites of passage. This is the emerging picture from secondary literature, my own observations of and interactions with Tamils in Durban and cumulative anecdotal material. I am not able to assert this point with confidence about the other Indian groups since I have not paid sufficient attention to them. There is some indication that in the past Telugus who constituted a smaller proportion were assimilated into Tamil culture (Kumar 2009: 55) but now there are growing expressions of a separate - though not antagonistic - identity, a phenomenon that needs further probing. Surnames which denote caste of origin are to be found aplenty among Tamils, obviously harking back to the recruitment and arrival registers which recorded biographical and anthropomorphic data of every indentured immigrant, including what was declared as his or her caste. The spellings still in use reflect the colonial intervention. Popular South African Tamil surnames like Chetty, Naidoo, Padayachee, Moodley, Naicker, Gounden, Moopen, Pillai, etc are prominent caste names in contemporary Tamilnadu, virtually all of them castes with a relationship to land and to agriculture. But among Durban Tamils at any rate, the surnames do not evoke memory of the caste and caste does not come to the fore in interactions including intermarriage. In a meticulous piece of research, Metcalf documents the process of recruitment in India. Brahmins and Muslims were not preferred by the recruiting authorities, the former because they were considered to be troublesome. The clear mandate from Durban planters was to recruit lower agricultural and artisanal castes, with skills and physique suitable for manual labour (Metcalf 2002: 9, 23). But, the demand from the planters and the supply by the recruiters were not perfectly matched since the latter had to recruit under competitive conditions, and so it was a mix of castes that ultimately emigrated. Desai and Vahed (2010: 21, 175-77) make several telling points with regard to caste. Citing analyses of ship lists, they find that majority were from low to middle castes, though a good number from higher castes as well. Sometimes Brahmins gave lower caste names in order to be found fit to migrate, while some others sometimes gave higher caste names to improve their social standing in Natal; furthermore conditions on the journey were not conducive to upholding caste rules, and shared travails of the

passage resulted in 'kappal karai' ('ship-bonds') across caste. Single women including widows migrated, though in smaller numbers than men, and they had much more freedom in Durban than in India to cohabit, marry and divorce and there is evidence that they chose partners from other castes. The breaking of caste rules became grounds for returning labour to be denied reintegration in Indian society, and this led to some getting re-indentured and returning to South Africa. The ex untouchable castes were also part of the migration, although it is very difficult to identify them in the current social set up. As a Durban management consultant, who sees himself as a cultural activist for the cause of Tamil put it in the course of an interview, "among Tamils there are differences of class, of life style, of language usage from which one can infer some caste differences, but we do not consider or discuss them in terms of caste." There are glimpses of an awareness of caste in the early phase of migration, although it did not dominate social interaction, and was often transgressed. This was due not necessarily to deliberate opposition to caste, but rather due to the circumstances in which people found themselves. Over the decades awareness of caste got fuzzier.

At present, many younger people do not know what their caste is, and do not relate to it except as a system that prevailed in India. It was not as though there was no internal differentiation among the Indian migrants. In fact, one could argue that the relative homogeneity among Hindu Tamils was the obverse of the differentiation and distancing from the indentured migrants from North India as well as from the passenger Indians from Gujarat. Region/language became, in some aspects, the functional equivalent of caste. "As caste was being deconstructed, so it was being reconstructed into regional identities" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 179).

Passenger Indians who came from Gujarat kept themselves apart (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 242, Maharaj 2009 : 72-73) and their own division into Muslim and Hindu became blurred vis a vis the indentured labour. So here the factors of region and class acted together. Among the indentured labourers themselves, from the time of arrival itself, those who came from UP, Bihar, Agra and Oudh via the port of Calcutta (known as the 'Kalkatiyas') and those who came from the districts of Madras Presidency via the port of Madras (known as 'Madrasis') sharpened their

mutual differences. The Protector's files have many examples of labourers of the two regions refusing to work with each other (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 242). It is true that the hard struggle of the immigrants against discrimination also forged a bond of Indianness which at some level papered over the internal differences. This point is powerfully evident in the documentation on the political struggle of South African Indians. The fluid and dynamic intersections of Indianness with various other affiliations and identities and their trajectories in tandem with the course of South African political developments is an intricate and complex phenomenon that I will not attempt to describe here. Whatever the bridges that were built between various segments, it can be said that the broad distinction between 'North' and 'South', represented respectively by the Hindis and the Tamils has persisted beneath the call for and claim of Indianness. This divide at several levels has been prominent in India too. The Dravidian movement was predicated on the resistance to the perceived dominance of the 'Aryan northerners' over South India and the political parties the movement spawned in Tamilnadu continue to bring up this theme periodically, even though politics has changed in India with regard to the North as Centre vs regions as periphery. In South Africa however, the cultural repertoire and intermarriage circles of the Hindis and Tamils are still largely separate and there is an assumption of cultural superiority on the part of the Hindis based on assumed Aryan lineage combined with a disdain for the generally dark complexion of Tamils (Desai and Vahed 2010: 181-1822). Periodically, skirmishes continue to erupt beneath the surface of joint activities, about unfair representation and weightage during Indian public events.

The two regions – North and South India - speak languages that belong to different linguistic families. So closely are the languages linked to the respective regional cultures that even the loss of fluency in the mother tongue, which has happened in the current generation of youth does not quite erase the Hindi - Tamil divide. In the early part of the 20th century, as second and third generation migrants, free from indentured labour, went in for higher education, there was considerable emphasis on learning Tamil, studying in Tamil schools, celebrating its literature and poetry . Since the 1970s, the salience of mother tongue among South African Indians has diminished sharply (Singh

2008: 9) and this is directly linked to upward social and economic mobility of a wide swathe of Indians and the emergence of a professional English speaking elite (Bhana 2002: 22-23), with the educated and upwardly mobile families using English as home language as well. In the 1991 census almost 95% declared English to be their mother tongue (GOI 2000: 85). Fluency in English has also given Indians an edge over Africans, and to that extent is encouraged by South African Indians. But religious and cultural activities continue to be salient even if language of communication is English. For example, at the Edgcombe Mariamman festival in early April this year, there was a very big turn out of Tamils from various class backgrounds. The announcements and proceedings were in English, the songs being played at the temple venue as well as the live performances of bhajans were in Tamil, and the entertainment programme in the huge grounds adjoining the temple where the crowds congregated after worship in the temple, several performances inspired by Bollywood were set to Tamil film music.

However insignificant caste may become away from the Indian context, marriage alliances are preferably made within the caste and endogamy is the last rule to be broken. In South Africa, endogamy as a principle did operate, but caste was not the central concern. Religious endogamy did exist. But it was the region that constituted the functional endogamous circle. Among present day Tamils, class endogamy seems to be operating rather than caste endogamy. Most marriages, note Desai and Vahed, were in fact not between members of the same caste group, but inter regional marriages were not common, and cite the example of an influential early 20th century community leader Charlie Nulliah, a Hindu Naidoo , who in his will explicitly disinherits those of his children “ who marry outside the Tamil or Telugu caste and by other than Hindu rites.” (Desai and Vahed 2010: 182, 174). Inter caste marriages between Tamils are commonplace today, and perhaps it is not even appropriate to use the term 'inter caste' in the absence of formal emphasis on the category. The current generation of young South African Indians do occasionally opt for spouses across the regional/linguistic divide, but not often (Singh 2008: 9); marriages between South African Indians and Africans continue to be extremely rare.

A Distinct Tamil Hinduism?

There are an estimated 250,000 Tamils in South Africa, and of these nearly 50% are Hindus. In the following brief account, I have considered the links and impact of organizations and practices of Hinduism only on Tamils, even though some of these organizations are not of Tamil origin and have followers and devotees from different Indian communities. For that matter, in Tamil temple festivals, there is some participation from non Tamils too. Quite soon after the arrival of indentured labour from India in Durban, temple building started in the form of small kuccha sheds. As indenture contracts got over, and the Indians started building their own businesses and farms, bigger and more formal temples were built (Desai and Vahed 2010: 242-244). The temples built through patronage of Tamils followed the pattern in South India of agamic worship to Siva and Murugan, as also temples to mother goddess as Mariamman and Draupadi amman (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 245).

Mariamman and Thaipposam festivals are major public events in South Africa and for Tamils, apart from personal devotion, they are part of the process of mobilizing identity. Mariamman worship is popular among Tamils in India and in the diaspora, and even though embedded in powerful folk-devotional belief and practice, it is accommodated by the sanskritized, canonical streams of worship as well. It is associated with sacrifice of chicken and goats, possession and trances, austerities like making vows, fasting, piercing of tongue, cheeks with needles or spears, piercing of chest and back with hooks which pull heavy objects like chariots, and fire walking. The 'thai poosam' or 'kavadi' festival, performed at Murugan temples, is also a mass based festival in Tamilnadu and, to some extent in Kerala, as also in the Tamil diaspora, notably Malaysia, Singapore, Jaffna in Srilanka, Mauritius and South Africa. While not associated with blood sacrifice, most of the other austerities and mortification of the body observed for Mariamman are also part of kavadi, in which the main event consists of devotees ceremonially carrying a kavadi or 'burden' (of various kinds, the simplest of which is a pot of milk carried on the head or a decorated semi circular canopy supported by a wooden rod carried on the shoulder) and walking on a set route around the temple and making the offering at the temple. They have also been adapted to

the local conditions. For example, the major Mariamman festival which is held in the month of Adi (July 15 – Aug 15) in Tamilnadu has been shifted in South Africa to the Easter weekend, because that was when the plantation owners would shut down all activities and give the labourers three days off. 'Thimidhi' or firewalking, traditionally associated with Draupadi Amman temples is also held here in Mariamman temples and even in Siva temples such as Chatsworth Sivalayam.

Traditional Hinduism, among Tamil immigrants, as among others, was rooted in diverse, regional, folk and devotional traditions. Major reformist impulses emanating from Indian Hinduism fueled by Indian nationalism have been impacting on South African Hinduism. There are three major phases - Arya Samaj from the turn of the 20th century, neo-vedantic movements from the 1940s and charismatic guru based sects and movements from the 1970s onwards. At one level, indeed there has been homogenization, as pointed out by Hofmeyr (1983: 139) and a trend towards standardization, especially among the western educated, English speaking middle class. Elaborate and complicated domestic rituals have been given up, reduced or adapted. But ceremonial in the public sphere which, in contrast to private worship, functions as a forum for asserting identities, has in fact got strengthened, as is evident from the increased participation in the Mariamman and Thaipposam festivals. These two temple traditions are rooted in a distinct Dravidian ethos, even though within the broader framework of 'folk' Hinduism.

To elaborate, as in India, where the battle for a reformed Hinduism, purged of puranic and folk deities, rituals and worship branded as superstitions was taken up prominently by the Arya Samaj and other organizations in the late 19th and early 20th century, in South Africa too, with the visit of Bhai Paramanand in 1905 followed by a longer stay by Swami Shankaranand, there was an attempt to reform such 'lower forms of Hinduism', supported by the local authorities who feared the law and order issues that the public festivals would create, detested the noise and had disdain for heathen practices. The growing numbers of western educated middle class Indians too joined in this campaign, as seen in newspapers like *Indian Opinion* and *African Chronicle*. The Arya Samaj which attacked rituals and the power of Brahmins, and advocated a

return to the Vedas, was most influential among the Hindus. But it did not leave Tamils completely untouched. Prof. Paramanand catalyzed the formation of the Hindu Young Men's Society in 1906. It was popular among Tamil youth, encouraged members to study Tamil, visit India to understand Hindu culture and build Tamil schools (Desai and Vahed 2010: 239, 247-248). These are the interstitial zones blurring the regional divides that need probing. Arya Samaj reformist activity also catalyzed a defensive reaction among followers of traditional Hinduism with its variety of beliefs and practices and there was an attempt to standardize and unify under the umbrella of Hindu Mahasabha set up in 1912.

In 1942, the Ramakrishna Mission was set up in Durban, and this marked the inauguration of a neo-vedantic Hinduism in South Africa. It was a spiritual renaissance of sorts, which opened up a new, universalistic ecumenical approach, free from the constricting canvas of the older sectarian or regional traditions of sanatanism as well as the fundamentalist stance of Arya Samaj. It was the first major institution to have had a broad appeal to all the subgroups – castes, languages and cultures – among Hindus (Spiritual Heritage 2000: 249-250). Ramakrishna Mission and the Divine Life Society, set up soon afterwards, made some impact on elite Tamils as well, triggering a relook at their own inherited beliefs and practices through a new lens.

The rise of charismatic gurus and sects, or what has been called 'new age' Hinduism, from the 70s onwards, has been characterized by a further loosening of ritual and dogma, an opening up to various religions and nationalities, an emphasis on individual guru and congregational devotion, minimal ritual and life style inspired by Hinduism but coexisting with and indeed embracing modernity and technology. In South Africa, the most prominent presence in this genre has been that of the Satya Sai Baba Foundation, followed by ISKCON. Art of Living and Brahma Kumaris also have a presence. Starting with small bhajan groups in 1969, the Sai Baba movement became formalized into a Foundation in 1973 and has, since then consolidated itself into a huge institution with a massive following drawn from all castes, regions, linguistic denominations and non Hindu religions as well (Spiritual Heritage 2000: 245-249). One reason for its tremendous popularity is that it does not forbid the worship of other deities, and can comfortably co-exist with

the devotee's native religious allegiances. ISKCON, which took root in the 1980s, has followers white, Indian and Africans as well, and the tremendous popularity of its annual rath yatra has something to do with its ability to reconcile spiritual activities and fun, food and entertainment (Kumar 2009: 59). Membership in these movements is on an individual basis and devotees may also be participating with their families in their traditional modes of worship. Both these two phases of Hinduism have blurred the edge of regional divide between Tamils and Hindus.

BLURRED EDGES OF TAMILNESS

Tamilness as felt sentiment and practice is perceived as resting in the overlapping domains of language, religion and culture. After an initial phase of vigorous inculcation of knowledge of Tamil language and literature, South African Tamils appear to have accepted the current situation of its steep decline among young people. There are some efforts at revival through language classes and magazines, but too little to stem the tide of English which is replacing Tamil as home language. In the domain of religion, some interesting developments can be seen: on the one hand, trends of eclecticism, ecumenism and syncretism have loosened the boundaries between Hindus and Tamils within the overall frameworks of neo Vedanta and guru based sects. Yet the Tamil public festivals of Mariamman and Thaippoosam have become more large scale with increased participation from young people. A small number of non-Tamils also participate. In general, in the last decade and a half, all the four streams of Hinduism – Sanatanism, Arya Samaj, neo Vedanta and charismatic guru based sects have seen a revival and there has been a resurgence in participation in public festivals, due to, among other things, feelings of insecurity connected to high rate of crime and violence and feelings of being discriminated against in post apartheid South Africa (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 253). The worship of Mariamman by South African Tamils, for instance, has been seen as bringing some sense of self expression and power to women from poor disempowered communities (Diesel 1998: 85). One could posit that Tamilness is a recognized and claimed identity, but its edges are not sharp. Like the colours of the rainbow, it is part of a spectrum.

Some recent examples of tensions within the community on matters of worship indicate an

acceptance of multiple solutions to issues. In the Mariamman temples, there has been a move to remove the Kurukkal (traditional Brahmin priests) and go back to using the service of local devotees who know the procedures of worship. The Edgcombe Mariamman temple, where this shift has actually been implemented, found, according to a functionary of the temple, that some Kurukkal families who had immigrated from Sri Lanka were monopolizing the priesthood in various temples, forming a tight circle, and manipulating religious sentiment for personal commercial gain. This move is an assertion of the value of customary rituals performed with faith and piety by devotees rather than intervention through mantras by learned specialists. However, in the South Indian style canonical temples for Siva and Vishnu, that attract both Tamil and non Tamil devotees, the traditional Kurukkal do officiate as priests. Here is a coexistence of the canonical and local.

Another type of coexistence is that of sanskritic with 'folk'. Most Tamil Hindus are non-vegetarian, although among the religiously inclined, there are days of the week and special periods which are vegetarian. Mariamman worship – both at domestic and temple settings - includes chicken sacrifice. Among those influenced by vedantic Hinduism, this is a tension point. One such reformist Tamil narrated to me the tussle he had in his own home when he argued that amman worship need not include such sacrifices. They modified the worship procedure accordingly for some years, but when a string of health and financial calamities struck the family, relatives were quick to point out that the suspension of the sacrifice had angered the goddess. They urged him to go back, but when he set up his own family, he insisted on having only vegetarian offerings to amman. His own father continues the chicken offerings as do his wife's mother and sister in their respective homes.

Tamils have been open to the impulses of reformist Hinduism without necessarily renouncing traditional worship. Sri Vaithianatha Easvarar Aalayam in Durban, the largest South Indian temple in the southern hemisphere, built in 1883, is a representative institution of canonical Hinduism. Its premises has served as the location for the founding of important Hindu movements including the Ramakrishna Centre, Divine Life Society, Saiva Sathantha Sangam and so on (Spiritual Heritage 2000: 245).

Conversion to Christianity is a noticeable

phenomenon among Tamils especially. In 1996, 18% of South African Indians were Christians, and in 2001, this had risen to 24.4%. 90% of the indentured immigrants, among whom Tamils were the largest group, were Hindus. In 2001, only 47.3 % of Indians were Hindus (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 253). Inter-marriage between Tamil Christians and Hindus does not usually disrupt the fabric of domestic and family relations, or at least Religion with a capital R is not the salient factor in domestic disharmony. Patrilineal norms are followed with regard to religion of the offspring. Christian terms like 'prayer' (rather than 'worship') and 'service' rather than 'ceremony' are part of the vocabulary of Hindu Tamils as well.

In recent years, the public domain has been permeated with images and elements that bind Tamils into a larger Hindu-Indian identity but the impulses for this are different from those during the anti colonial and anti apartheid struggles. The Lotus radio channel with its 24 hour broadcasts on Indian culture, the impact of Bollywood on the imagination and sense of aesthetics, design, costume, music, dance of youth, are integrative factors. The congregational religious ambience of the ashrams of gurus attracts South African Indians, including a substantial number of youth, from across regional divides. The easy availability of cable TV network provides one link of Tamils with a regional culture, such as emanates from networks like Sun TV, although the content of such programmes in India is spliced with pan Indian elements. Re-locations to Australia, and elsewhere trigger interaction with a new set of diasporic Indians. As Indian diasporas come together in a wide range of formal interactions including events like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Miss India World wide, and organizations like GOPIO, the South African Indian Tamil continues to live in an ambience of intermingled cultures where 'Tamilness' is part of everyday, matter of fact reality rather than a consciously deployed political identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Anand Singh, Ajaya Sahoo, Ajita Bhatia, Ashish Upadhyay Kanchana Mahadevan, Nirmala Gopal and Solly Pillai.

NOTES

1 According to one estimate (GOI Report 2001: 76),

two thirds of the indentured labour were Tamil and Telugu speakers. Between 1860 and 1911 just under 200,000 entered South Africa. 75% of them stayed on. In 1911, the total no. of Indians in South Africa was 14,9791. Of this, 133031 were in Durban made up of 43,888 indentured labour, 69304 free labour (formerly indentured) and 19839 passenger Indians (Bhana and Brain 1990: 194).

- 2 Post 1911, a small number of professionals entered, mostly from Gujarat, under a clause permitting entry to educated Indian immigrants only.
- 3 During critical moments of resistance, South African Indians would look for help and support from India. During the famine in 1900 in India, considerable mobilization of funds was done in South Africa. (Bhana and Vahed 2006: 245-6).
- 4 Of course, this term, appropriating as it does, 'American' for 'USA' is not devoid of its own irony.
- 5 The colloquial usage among Tamils for people from North India and Gujarat (personal communication from Nirmala Gopal)
- 6 There is a small minority of Tamil Muslims in South Africa, but I have not researched them specifically and therefore am not offering any comments.
- 7 Passenger Indians mainly came from a few towns and villages in Kathiawad, Surat and Valsad, from closely knit communities with whom the emigrants continued to keep links (Bhana and Brain 1990: 191).
- 8 By structure, the reference is to the intercaste interdependence undergirded by hierarchy. Culture refers to those norms and practices internal to a caste that are considered to be distinct to it. Identity comes into play when the above are deployed self-consciously in a public context.
- 9 Ajay Kumar Sahoo (2005: 6) argues that Dalits in the diaspora have shown considerable upward mobility and are not discriminated against and do not form a separate diaspora. There are, however, some indications of nascent diasporic mobilization around dalit identity (see van der Gaag 2005; Seenarine 2006) which may, in the future, acquire a political charge. Recent conflicts in the Sikh diaspora in Europe suggest this possibility
- 10 To an extent, ethnicity was based even on sub region, because labour was recruited mainly from North and South Arcot districts (Metcalf 2002: 19)
- 11 as for instance the stand off during the World Hindu Conference in Durban in 1995, when Tamil members of the Executive Committee threatened to boycott the event since the cultural programmes had no representation from South India. Ultimately, the well-known Tamil devotional singer Pithukuli Murugadas was brought in to give a performance and the crisis was staved off.
- 12 There are several other instances of religious adaptation: inclusion of shrines of different deities in the temple has happened in an eclectic adaptive manner; the custom of breaking coconuts at public religious places was not done in view of municipal regulations; a Brahmin title is given to one who knows how to perform rituals and may not be a Brahmin. (Kumar 2009: 57)

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