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Temple Worship, Hinduism and the Making of South African Indian Identity

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ABSTRACT This article argues that a key part of the religious identity of South African Indians is derived from their ancestral origins in India with their subsequent effect on their consciousness. A prevalent theme here is the way in which India has been perceived as the ultimate source of authority for Hindu religious practice – which is viewed as the most authentic when modelled on India. Linked to this is the notion of space – the closer one is geographically to India, the more likely one is to engage in “real” Hindu practice and, for those who are distant from the subcontinent – such as South African Indians – certain measures are used to “import” this “authenticity”. Temple worship is used here to highlight the relationship between the Indian diaspora on the subcontinent in terms of the practice of Hinduism through temple building, the use of priests or *Brahmins* and religious rituals. The temple thus functions as a microcosm of South African Indian identity in relation to Hinduism and can be used as a means of understanding the religious and ethnic identity of a diasporic population. The Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam in Umgeni Road, Durban will be used as a case study to investigate this relationship between Hinduism and South African Indian identity.