

HISTORY, LEGACY, HERITAGE

SOME GUIDES TO UNDERSTANDING INDIAN IDENTITY IN AN INSULAR CONTEXT

Indian immigration, Hindu rites and Tamil culture in Reunion Island

This paper sets out to present briefly :

- the different phases of the migration of Indian populations to this Indian Ocean island
- the major currents of Hinduism conveyed by these populations
- the hoped-for cultural benefits of a projected partnership between the Hindus of Fidji and those of Reunion Island.

SUMMARY

Recurrent History

Space

Time

A Complex Legacy

A blend of ancestral tradition and Creole identity

A great tradition which goes back to its Indian roots

A Heritage at Stake

Tamil language and literature

The experience of exile, finding new roots.

"The crowning of Darmel"

RECURRENT HISTORY

SPACE

There is evidence that the Indian immigration to the Mascarenhas islands dates from the 17th century, and it was brought about by the European colonisation. The need for contract workers led to an influx of coolies to continental and island areas : Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Reunion (Indian Ocean), Australia, Fiji, (Pacific), Malaysia, Singapore (South East Asia), Kwazulu- Natal (South Africa), Guadeloupe, Martinique (Caribbean) and Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad (America). The Indian diaspora throughout the world is estimated to total several million people.

TIME

In Reunion Island, the Indian presence is the result of the massive transfer of Indian workers to compensate for the consequences of the abolition of slavery in the colony in 1848. As a prelude to this immigration, the Portuguese enclave of Goa – in the early stages of its population by Indian women - received slaves from Kerala and artisans from the Coramandel. The island of Reunion received a mainly Dravidian population : Anglo-Indian recruitments from Madras, Pondicherry and Karikal , of whom the majority were Tamils. The termination of the Franco-British agreement in 1861 followed by the halt of Indian immigration in 1882, the acquisition of French nationality in 1889, then the creation of the French department of Reunion in 1946 were all decisive stages in the integration of Indians in Creole society - and indeed their integration within the French republic, a permanent process that requires a threefold development of the citizen : cultural, social and economic. The Indians have had a profound influence on the society of Reunion and their presence is firmly rooted in this French – now European - island. The descendants of the contract workers make up a large minority – a quarter - of the population as a whole: that is to say almost one hundred and twenty five thousand people of Indian, Hindu, or predominantly Tamil origins.

A COMPLEX LEGACY

The practice of the Hindu religion constituted an unalienable right for the Indian workers in the colonies, and was negotiated with the Indian emigration companies as part of the contract of hire. Coming as they did from a highly structured society, many , when they found themselves suddenly plunged into a de-structured , insular society were confronted by traditional colonial ills : alcoholism, prostitution, interbreeding. One of the survival strategies of the Indians was an insular symbiosis within which Telinga, Malealon, Kalkutta and Tamil brought about an Indo-Indian fusion. The practice of their religion remained the bedrock of their identity and consolidated an “Indian-ness” which continually permeates society at a global level. Hinduism in Reunion is characterised by several strata, and we will deal here principally with two aspects.

A BLEND OF ANCESTRAL TRADITION AND CREOLE IDENTITY

Ancestral and village tradition lies at the very heart of the places of worship adjoining the sugar plantations. Hindu sanctuaries were built on land provided by the sugar producers, who in turn imposed a rhythm of worship compatible with the agricultural production of sugar cane. Workers from the lower Tamil castes, as well as tribal groups from the Bihar perpetuated village religious practices characterised by blood sacrifices dedicated to the minor divinities (Mini / Pavaderayan) and to the goddesses Petiay and Karli. Worship in these 'plantation' temples was based upon a mixed literary tradition. The Pousaris and the public in general is unaware of Sanscrit literature and the classical Tamil texts. The epic of Mahabharata, the Barldon and more particularly the Pandjapandavar Vanavarson – a popular version – is the only text that is still used for fire-walking ceremonies to the goddess Panjale. Episodes of the story, sung or mimed, are transmitted orally to the penitents who possess a residual knowledge of Tamil. The narrative of the Pandjepandavels is a popular myth which transcends the frontiers of the koilous and exerts an influence on Creole society. The Mariamem Talattu – which came to us from India via Mauritius - is also a book of popular prayer. The literature of the Kadaï is also widely found, through the legend of Madurai Viran or – in the festivities of the Karmon - through the mimed narrative of Manmadan and Iradi. The Pousaris also use books of magic and the Pandjangon, a kind of almanac used to determine auspicious dates.

A GREAT TRADITION WHICH GOES BACK TO ITS INDIAN ROOTS

The urban koils, financed and maintained by Tamil tradesmen and better-off former contract workers, serve as a vehicle for a prescriptive image of Hinduism. The major Gods are worshipped there : Siven, Sakti and Vishnu. Tamil Brahmins magnify the Gods in the Vedic language and do not hesitate to use the Sanscrit of the Agama, as well as classic Tamil literature. The penitents chant bhajans and one can hear arnatic music. These temples of the great Hindu tradition are characterised by the practice of the Brahminic ritual dedicated to the vegetarian gods. However the feast of Kavadi, or the worship of Mourouguen, is the most popular celebration.

A HERITAGE AT STAKE

TAMIL LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.

The founding texts of the Tamil identity in Reunion are the great epics of Mahabharata and of Ramayana in their vernacular form, the literature of the Kadaï and the Nardegons, and the booklets sold by peddlers and dedicated to the minor divinities. There is a variety of genre. Vartials and Pousaris use narrative, poetic and dramatic narratives. Nevertheless, Tamil literary tradition also relies on the oral transmission of texts, both sacred and profane. Thus hardly any written texts exist for numerous supernatural figures such as Nargoulan, and other heroes of the Barldon such as Alvan. But the contract workers did not simply transmit and perpetuate written and oral folk traditions by praising the heroism of their male protectors and by seeking the protection of the goddesses of the soil.

Through the chants they sang in their huts (sinnappattus), they also expressed their fears, their complaints, their poor working and living conditions, but also their hopes, their struggles and their future in the "Birboon" country. This folk corpus has been reshaped by the insular imagination, and it is essential for us to research, classify and reformulate it in a bilingual Creole / Tamil edition.

THE EXPERIENCE OF EXILE; FINDING NEW ROOTS.

After more than one hundred and fifty years of presence in the Mascarenhas islands, the descendants of the Indians have become island dwellers, and, as they did with their mother tongue, they have substituted the Creole language for Tamil : a fossilised, ancestral language whose sole function was the communication, during the Narlegons, of the Pousaris with the Gods, and the Vartials with their anaemic faithful. And yet the festivities in honour of the goddess Mariamen, and of Mourouguen have greatly developed, and present the modern face of Hinduism in Reunion. They represent a novel consensus between the two levels of Hinduism; but fire-walking, widespread and highly popular, contributes to binding the men to the host society by associating Hindu practices with Creole society. Like the Hindu temple at Portail, Saint-Leu, Hinduism in Reunion has managed to reconcile the apparent contradiction between village worship and the refined Hinduism of the cities and ashrams. Hitherto unknown syntheses are taking place here between the West, Africa and Asia : syntheses which prefigure tolerant pluralist societies which were nevertheless built upon the colonial remnants of slavery and contract work. Rather than allowing ourselves to fall into the trap of a new alienation and dispossession of our ancestral heritage, we refuse to substitute a new culture and belief, but work harder to achieve real partnership. We glorify the one hundred and fifty year-old Indian experience on the Pacific and the island. We will enter into a cultural fellowship which has been brought into being in equal measure by the federation of temples, and by the work of associations ; our ambition is to bring together Tamils and Hindus – the descendants of the Indian contract workers - on both sides of the ocean, by establishing sincere and fruitful exchanges.

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