

[L'Hindouisme, l'Île Mauricien](#)

Category : [August 1995](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1995

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Out There in the Big, Wide Hindu Diaspora, a Prosperous Little Island Nation is Forging New Standards of Harmony

The Hindus of Mauritius are a devoted people. It's a depth of devotion that encompasses all professions and religions. Whether for scientist, politician, or professor, Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, religion is a compelling matter.

Each year as part of the extended celebration of Mahasivaratri, 400,000 persons-fully two-thirds of the entire Hindu population of 600,000-pilgrimage to Grand Bassin, the "Ganga" of Mauritius. There they collect a pot of water and carry it home on foot to bathe their Siva Lingam on Sivaratri night, observed with ceremony, song, prayer, fasting and penance. It would be as if 500 million Hindus went to the Kumbha Mela in India, instead of a mere 50 million to that month-long event.

Consider the country's army and police forces, comprising Hindus, Muslims and Christians. They have no wars to fight, and external threats to the island are minimal. So among the many public service projects they have undertaken was the 1989 construction of a Siva Lingam temple, the inspiration of the commander, Colonel J.R. Dayal. Other projects have included repairs to Christian convents and Muslim minarets, and even playing Roman soldiers in a Christian theatre production. The island is certainly not without its internal strife, and both inter and intra-religious tensions and conflicts occasionally arise. But there is definitely something unique here.

Hindus first came to Mauritius in the mid-18th century when the French ruled the

previously uninhabited 788-square-mile island 500 miles due east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The French administrator, MahÃ©, crafted a unique plan: he imported an entire society-priests, merchants, artisans and farmers to populate Mauritius. These Hindus came from South India, and once in Mauritius were encouraged to continue their religion. Few attempts were made to convert this mostly Tamil group, or even to interfere with their spiritual life. As a result, Hinduism continued on in Mauritius in purity and devotion, unimpacted by the following two centuries of first Christian domination and later secular, socialist and Marxist influence through which India has passed.

Mauritius passed formally into British hands in 1814, and immigration from India expanded to include all areas of undivided India, plus significant numbers of Chinese. Today those of Indian descent make up 80% of the country. Hindus constitute a 53% majority. Approximately 20% are Muslim, 22% are Christian (mostly of Black African descent) and 5% are Buddhist, almost all Chinese.

Mauritius gained independence from Britain in 1968. In significant part due to the influence of Swami Krishnanand of the Human Service Trust, the changeover was mostly peaceful. Today Mauritius is the third country in the world with a Hindu majority, after India and Nepal. Since the 1970s, successive Hindu-led governments have implemented astute plans for the island's economic development. It now attracts increasing foreign investment and boasts near-zero unemployment.

This is not to say Hinduism is without its challenges here. The centuries of vibrant rural village/temple culture, of colorful festivals, Ramayanadramas and bhajans now meets head on with Beverly Hills 90210, the teen superhit TV soap about free-wheeling California youngsters. Hindu doomsdayers and Christian missionaries predict the demise of Hinduism, deeming it too arcane, archaic and old-fashioned to adjust to a fast-paced, cosmopolitan world. The spirited devotion of the people has attracted religious groups from all over the world, both Hindu organizations-nearly all of which, it seems, have a branch here-Christian evangelists and proponents of Islam.

Though recognizing the problem, Hindu leaders are not pessimistic. Swami Pranavananda of Chinmaya Mission said, "How can that which is unborn, earthless, immutable, changeless, deathless and endless be in decline? If ever there is a decadence, it is with the individual." Swamiji is a key Mauritius representative to July's World Hindu Conference in South Africa.

Acharya Virakta Chaitanya of the Vedanta Education Centre observes, "Hinduism is not in decline. The problem is that we do not have the people to propagate it. I have seen the willpower of youth to help in propagating Hinduism. We should motivate the youngsters." The acharya spent ten years in India training at Chinmaya Mission in Bombay and the Himalayas and served at the Vivekananda Kendra, South India. He organizes youth camps.

Attend any festival to see the island's dynamic Hindu heart. Four lakhs attend Maha Sivaratri, donned in white attire and carrying pots of milk or holy water over distances of up to 100 kms. to a sacred lake in the central highlands. This year cyclonic rains tested pilgrims. Its winds reached to 120 kms/hr., but failed to more than delay the march to Siva's mountain abode. In a beautiful display of the government's policy to assist all religious events, the police force drove many devotees back home in their jeeps because roads were blocked by fallen trees.

But there are fears, especially for the next generation. "Everyone blames the youth for what appears to be a decline in Hinduism here in Mauritius," shares a local businessman. "But at closer look, blanket pessimism in the youth is unfounded. Yes, the boys and girls want to relate more freely, but to say they are unreligious is really wrong." A simmering religious force hides beneath their sporty western tee-shirts and erupts regularly. You'll hardly find a Hindu girl in Mauritius who misses the twice-annual Durga pujas specially organized for them. And on Sunday mornings from 8:30-10:00 am, the boys and girls of village youth groups gather together and perform their own homafire rite in halls more often than not constructed by themselves. No adult compels them to attend. They each take turns bringing ghee, rice, flowers and prashadam and learn the Vedic chants from parents and pundits. At 9:30 am when Agni's flames flutter down, all sing bhajans for 30 minutes. It's a uniquely Mauritian phenomenon-and a single sight of them conclave in bright attire in a colorless concrete hall off in a sugarcane field chanting resounding slokas confounds and amazes the most diehard cynic. Of course, afterwards they run off to football matches, tuitions and social affairs, but their weekly date with the Divine is genuinely by their desire and design.

Conversion to Christianity and Islam is a recent phenomenon in Mauritius. The Christians pursue aggressive, well-funded programs. For example, most Hindus dread the Jehovah Witnesses like villagers fear tigers. Even Western conservative Christians label the Witnesses as a "dangerous cult." These Christians consider the Witnesses heretics for their unconventional teachings. This aggressive sect has grown in Mauritius from zero to 50,000 in only 20 years. Nearly all were once Hindus-not one from the Muslim community. They go door-to-door in groups of

ten-girls in front-and indict Hindus for worshipping too many Gods and claim that Jesus will bring them miracles.

"The Jehovahs are getting our youth because they have good youth programs and they let the boys and girls mix freely-on beach trips, hiking trips, sports and cultural events," a mother said. "They are chaperoned, of course, but the youth are not forced to stay apart. Our Hindu societies have very few youth programs like they do. We have many things to learn from them-like giving our religion 10% of our income!"

The Muslim community takes a personal approach, befriending potential converts over a long period of time, and eventually convincing them to change their name and religion. Though slower and less dramatic in the short term, conversion to Islam takes a greater toll on Hindus, for those who convert to Christianity often lapse and return to Hinduism, while those who convert to Islam do not. They are much better educated in their new religion, and warmly embraced by the existing community, provided financial help and other assistance.

Strenuous efforts are underway now by Hindu organizations to "conversion proof" the community through better education so that Hinduism can carry on in Mauritius in its journey from eternity to eternity. Neither hostility, worldliness nor apathy are likely to conquer the innate Hindu spirituality. But, like every generation which faced changing times, Hindus are working hard to keep each succeeding generation sufficiently educated and disciplined to meet every challenge.

With reports by Anil Dewkrun, Port Louis

Sidebar: Course 9014: Hinduism

Text:

For nearly a decade, an optional course in Hinduism has been available at the high

school level. Increasingly popular, about 50% of Hindu students are taking the course, #9014, "so we learn more about our religion than we learn at home," one youth shared. The syllabus was created by the University of Cambridge, England, and cover the Vedas, four castes, four stages of life, the Hindu pantheon, Hindu epics, Hindu reformers and major philosophical schools. Mauritian teachers are expected to develop their own presentation of the syllabus subjects from the outline, and the exam questions come from Cambridge University. Typical questions in the exam paper for 1993: 1) "The Ramakrishna Mission has done Hinduism more harm than good.' Discuss." 2) "The Arya Samaj depended too heavily on the personality of its founder, and this led to its downfall.' Is this a fair comment in your opinion?" 3) "Bhakti provides an easy, lazy way for people to reach the Supreme.' Do you agree?" 4) "Concern for others had no place in Sankara's thought; for him, the perfect lifestyle consisted of a solitary search for jnana.'Discuss."

The syllabus includes the brahmacharya shukta, a for-boys-only passage from the Atharva Ved that exalts the virtues of celibacy and learning with a teacher in a forest setting-girls not allowed. As one teacher at a large girls college shared, "The girls in my class argued about it and said, 'That's not fair!'"

One challenge is that Cambridge's recommended study texts-for instance Dr. Radhakrishnan's Outline of Indian Philosophy-are both not available in Mauritius and not affordable for students here. The alternative is abridged texts that contain occasional bizarre typographic errors. Here is an example from a 20-page text in wide circulation given to Hinduism Today by a college student: "MacDonell says the word Purush[Supreme, Universal Soul] has been used in two senses. First the prime-evilPurush..." Prime-evil! The word intended was surely "primeval," meaning first. Hinduism Today inquired both with a teacher of the course and with the student who loaned the text. Neither had noticed the error.

The course's biggest difficulty is that local teachers have to create their own course presentations from the bare-bones, two-page syllabus. Super-qualified teachers of the course like Miss Kiran Baldeo-who attended a university in Delhi and took a degree in Indian philosophy-manage, but there are not so many like her. "Yes, the challenge is finding qualified teachers," she confirms. The introduction of a Hinduism course in the school system was the inspiration of highly regarded educationist, youth enthusiast and director of Presidency College, Yogi Raman. Its acceptance and increasing popularity is a major accomplishment in advancing Hinduism here among the youth. Despite some shortcomings, it remains a real asset.

Sidebar: Bhakti

Text:

The spirit of the Hindu Mauritian is bhakti, devotion, and it pivots around festivals, temples and home ceremonies. As in all Hindu immigrant lands, Mauritian Hindus have succeeded in erecting several magnificent large homes for the Gods-Meenakshi Amman temple in Port Louis, the newer bristling pink, Venkateswara Temple in St. Pierre and a new Saivite temple with towering gopuram in Grand Baie built by the Chetty families. The larger temples are major organs. But the nerve ganglia that keeps Hinduism flowing island wide-from bus stop to bus stop on byways, back roads and outways-are hundreds of small priestless shrines. Some are quaintly niched into a solitary shady tree, others are but bare concrete block and mortar rooms. Inside are the brightly painted deities arrayed in unhemmed cloths. Wilting flowers and the lingering smell of incense leave daily testament of an abiding spirit of Hindu devotion and definite heartbeat very much alive in 1995.

Sidebar: Orphan Priestesses

Text:

Swami Dayanand Saraswati would be proud. The 19th century founder of the Arya Samaj believed in women-in their spirituality, moral strength and social equality. In Port Louis, once every two weeks in a lovely, circular open-air gazebo, the residents of the Gayasingh Ashram (an orphanage for women) do a Vedic-styled homa. The girls all memorize the Sanskrit chants and, led by an older woman, offer ghee, grains of rice and devotion into the leaping flames of Agni as their soft, but full sonorous voices fill their garden abode with a magical feeling.

The "ashram" is a happy home for 108 women-from infant to infirm-and though it receives its operating money from the government, the management and extraordinary loving, spiritual atmosphere are the selfless gift for over 50 years from Arya Samaj members who practice Dayanand Saraswati's

help-your-fellow-man-as-your-worship-of-God teaching.

The younger residents attend public school and when they reach marriageable age, the beloved father-like manager for many years, Mr. Deorishi Boolell, finds a partner for them and arranges a big, splashy wedding that also weds them back into society. The occasion is so filled with emotion, happiness and thankfulness, tears of joy rain down many cheeks.

Sidebar: Arise, Awake!

Text:

Bemoaning Mauritian Hindus' problems-caste prejudices, sectarian communalism, declining teenage morals due to Western TV, conversions, materialism and apathy-is common daily street-and-porch talk. It's easy. Solving the problems is not. But taking up the challenge, undaunted and armed with spiritual mettle, is a band of souls who move small mountains day and night helping Sanatana Dharmastand strong. They inspire with talks on acts of spiritual heroism from the Bhagavad Gita, delight with moving episodes on the selfless and dutiful deeds of Rama in story/music format and perform puja and homas. But most powerfully they are themselves reflections of the Light that pervades all life. Though we share quotes [see below] from just three, there are many others equally deserving recognition.

Determined to use the power of words to protect the dharma in Mauritius are several publications. ISKCON World Review is perhaps the oldest tabloid that struggles admirably to regularly carry their organizational message of Krishna the Supreme Godhead along with interesting articles on the spread of their Vedic message into non-Vedic lands such as Russia. Other organizations have for years had their own in-house publications, but only in the last few years has a new species of Hindu publication sprouted that pledged its pages to non-sectarian, pan-Hindu news, knowledge and information. One of these is Hinduism Today, its Mauritius edition in publication since 1987.

Two other papers with analogous formats and purposes are Maha Shakti and Force

One. Both are edited by Anil Dewkurun (right), an intelligent, gentle-natured computer marketer with a preoccupation for religion usually found only in grandparents. Youth really like him. They sell his papers and join his Natarajah Sewak Sangh. He helps them organize their soccer games, social activities and then arranges for pundits and yogis to instruct them in meditation and philosophy. He loves Hinduism and hates to see its billowing sails flattened by anything-especially apathy and factionalism.

Only 3-years old, Force One identifies itself as "The Complete Hindu Family Magazine." A recent issue included articles about Hindus of South Africa, an editorial on the nitty-gritty of Hindu politics in Mauritius and an inspirational testimony by a lady who had a vision of Hanuman and Sai Baba. Quotes from the Gita and Vivekananda, Vedic prayers and religious counsel flow in a homey way amidst recipes, movie star tidbits, global religious news briefs. It even has a "Laugh" page and a "Love-Birds" letters/advice section that abounds with all the heart-pounding emotions of teen romancers, jealous husbands and worried wives.

Maha Shakti is a bigger, more adventuresome, tabloid-size paper that features a dazzling, full-color fold-out picture of a deity each issue. Born just three months ago, it is the healthy baby of the Rashtra Swayam Sewak Dal (no affiliation with the RSS of India). The paper's ambitious goal is to foster island-wide Hindu unity, teach youth that caste, sect, language and regional custom should never overshadow their common Hindu identity and overwhelming familial bond of brotherhood/sisterhood. Maha Shakti is progressive and youthful in tone and carries a smorgasbord of editorial content from fun to downright fuming-as in an editorial that castigated Hindus who refuse to identify themselves publically as Hindus. Recent issues carried an engaging two-part series, "The Position of Women in Ancient India." Here is a quote from that article: "The Rig Veda is emphatic in its support of female education. The maiden enjoyed singular freedom; she could move anywhere she liked. She could go and speak at sabhas and was not a meek, weak creature like her modern counterpart. The maiden who was seeking a husband for herself would find her task easier if her intellectual attainments were added to her physical charms. Music and dancing also made her an accomplished woman. The Atharva Veda says: 'The success of women in married life depends on the proper training given during brahmacharya.' "But the article emphasizes that a woman's femininity was also prized: "The best part of a girl's breeding consisted in her training to be modest, to conduct herself with grace and form excellent habits. Married women were treated as useful members of the society and walked around freely, involved in all activities from agriculture and crafts to scholarship and were termed grihalakshmis. They were also prominent in the teaching profession."

Though none of these humble publication efforts are radically transforming the island-some Hindus have never even heard of them!-their very presence is a telltale sign of the fecundity of the Hindu mind even in these changing times.