

Negotiating Identity Hindu Diaspora: Sectarian Practices of Hindu Community in Seychelles

Ankit

Research scholar, Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Studies,
School of Social Science, Central University of Gujarat, Kundhela,
Email: ankit.bu10@gmail.com

The Hindu diaspora in Seychelles, particularly the Indo-Seychellois of Tamil lineage, has grown significantly from 2.4% of the total population in 2010 to 5.4% in 2022. They have become the second largest religious group after Roman Catholicism. The community is deeply rooted in Tamil Shaivite heritage and worship of Muruga and Vinayagar. On the one hand, they have maintained their culture tightly, and on the other hand, they have merged their Creole culture through important cultural institutions like the Hindu Kovil Sangam and major festivals like Thaipoosam Kavadi. Here are the events of the community's life from their original migration as indentured laborers to their present-day significant economic status. Further, through a focus on census data, temples, festivals, and literature, the paper deals with how religious centers of worship enhance the ethnic loyalty of the Hindu Diaspora and how they preserve their cultural roots, linking homeland to holy land.

Keywords: Hindu Diaspora, Sects, Cultural identities, Migration, Traditional rituals etc.

Introduction

The term “diaspora” is derived from the Greek word which means “dispersion”. From time to time, the term evolved and now it commonly implies any individual who belongs to a particular country with a common origin or culture but residing outside their homeland for various reasons. Diaspora is a heterogeneous process as immigration involves human mobility over multiple time periods surrounding a whole spectrum and types of movements (Singh, 2019). The Indian example of migration began in large numbers during the British rule as indentured labourers to former colonies like Fiji, Kenya and Malaysia (Singh, 2019). It continued in the post-independence period with Indians from different social strata moving to countries like the United Kingdom, the United States and Gulf countries. Today as there are numerous, heterogeneous diaspora, they have different demands of the Indian Government. The Indian communities in countries such as Fiji and Mauritius meanwhile desire to reconnect with the

country on cultural grounds. Generally speaking for the Indian government, the diaspora includes a group of people who can either trace their origin to India or who are Indian citizens living abroad, either temporarily or permanently (Vertovec, 2000).

“The high-level committee on the Indian diaspora, used 'diaspora' to refer to Indians who migrated to different parts of the world and have generally maintained their Indian identity” (Singh, 2019). Lata Varadarajan explained the “Understanding of diaspora as capturing the essence of a link between mobile populations perceived by themselves and others as living outside the territories of their homeland” (Varadarajan, 2010). After independence, the trend of overseas migration of Indians did not stop, but the pattern and composition have changed. A large portion of migrant workers abroad were unskilled labourers who were brought mainly as indentured labour. After independence particularly in the last few decades a number of high-skilled professionals have joined semi-skilled and unskilled workers overseas (Sinha, 2019).

Seychelles is an island republic in the western Indian Ocean, comprising about 115 islands, with lush tropical vegetation, beautiful beaches, and a wide variety of marine life. The country has a population of approximately 98,500 and is known for its cultural diversity, with a large diaspora living in different parts of the world. The Indian diaspora in Seychelles has made significant contributions to the country's cultural landscape, with about 6% of the local population consisting of Indo-Seychellois inhabitants (Sinha, 2019). India's relationship with Seychelles has grown from our long-standing historical interactions and our ongoing help for Seychelles' security, although our bilateral trade is still small. Currently, India, Seychelles relations reflect a close friendship, understanding and cooperation between the two countries.

Diplomatic relations were set up between Seychelles and India after the former gained independence in 1976. A reunion of five people among the Indians who were sent to the plantation in Seychelles, after they were the first to settle in the Islands, was recorded in 1770. Under British rule Seychelles was administered from the Bombay presidency, with regular shipping links and flow of good and essential commodities from India (Vertovec, 2000). With a very sizable Indian diaspora in Seychelles, the cultural interactions between the two countries have been mainly at the community level with assistance from the two governments. Almost a hundred years later after 1770 the next batch of Indians reached Seychelles soil. There was a steady influx of Indians mainly from Tamil Nadu/Puducherry and later from Gujarat. Who

came in as traders, labourers, construction workers and more recently as professionals (Maharana, 2018).

Sect is a subgroup within a religion that is set apart by its different beliefs, rituals, or focus on a deity, while they still share the core doctrines. There exist in Hinduism four major sects, namely: Shaivism which is the devotion of Shiva, Vaishnavism which is worship of Vishnu, Shaktism that mainly focuses on Goddess/Shakti and Smartism which emphasizes the five, deity panentheism, all of them are sources of Vedas/Agamas but they highlight various supreme gods however they are all united in the concept of karma, dharma.

The Indian diaspora in Seychelles has contributed significantly to the country's cultural diversity. The Indian diaspora has introduced Indian cuisine, spices, and cooking techniques, which have become an integral part of Seychellois cuisine, reflecting the influence of Indian cuisine on the local food. The Indian diaspora has contributed to the introduction of dishes such as curry, rice-based preparations, and other flavorful creations that have become integral parts of the Seychellois culinary landscape. The Indian diaspora has also organized various cultural events to celebrate their heritage and share their culture with the local population, such as Indian Diaspora Day, which recognizes the significant contributions made by the Indian diaspora to cultural engagement and historic people-to-people engagement in the country. Several Indian cultural troupes regularly visit Seychelles for performances, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of India. The Indian diaspora's contributions to Seychelles' cultural diversity have enriched the country's cultural landscape, fostering stronger ties between India and Seychelles. Among the Hindu diaspora of Seychelles, Tamil Shaivism is the predominant religious practice of the Indo, Seychellois community. The core of their faith is the worship of Muruga, Vinayagar, and there are no rival sects to disrupt the unity. The Hindu Kovil Sangam plays a vital role in nurturing this sectarian harmony and ethnic loyalty through various temple festivals which act as living bridges connecting the Tamil homeland to Creole, hybrid lives.

The Diaspora can provide a requisite strategic implication, which makes it all the more important to unlock their potential. The present government is right in their focus on the diaspora as they are a strategic asset to India (Singh, 2019). The diaspora linkages between India and Seychelles are among the strongest and the presence of the Indian Ocean has actually connected them (Sinha, 2019). The two nations are characterized by historical ties, cultural linkages, friendship and understanding with a view to moving forward together, Seychelles enjoys the unbound love, affection and unconditional support of India (Sinha, 2019).

Hindu Diaspora Seychelles: Historical Evolution

Early Colonial Arrivals (1770–1900) An Indian presence in the Seychelles began with a few individuals, one being a Tamil, around 1770, when French colonists from Île de France (now Mauritius) brought over five Indians from Puducherry along with a mixture of Malagasy slaves and African laborers. It signifies the planting of the first Indian/Hindu seeds in Seychelles, which later on grew with the plantation and spice culture of the island. After the 1870s the indenture system brought workers from Tamil Nadu to the Seychelles to fill the plantation worker shortage in Mauritius. Records reveal that 135 workers arrived in the year 1905 alone.

They labored under contracts for five years and worked in plantations of cinnamon, coconuts, and patchouli, and their hard work was the colony's source of wealth during that time. 237 families were counted in 1901; there were 332 Hindu households, mostly speaking Tamil, with the use of Creole dialects emerging alongside. Almost all of them went back to India after their labor term, but a few stayed and, through marriages, blended in with the society, which had become more Anglicized under British rule since 1810 (Dominique, 2018).

They were a determined community; *Tamil-Shaivites*, for instance, had to use a room in a house to conduct their Vinayagar pujas when they did not have their own temple. Without having a white partner to gain racial privileges, they managed to establish themselves economically, first through small trading and later through fishing as well. Creoles and the lowest ethnic groups saw this winning of the locals by the whites even before the independence.

This act of survival gradually saw Indians and Creoles joining forces, which came out later as one of the main political powers; simple ritual acts such as oil lamps and Thevaram hymn singing nurtured their happiness and faith in times of segregation, and this also enabled the building of the infrastructure for the future temples. The harshness of the colonial rulers and the hard work that the tenants had to undergo gave them a business mindset. At the same time, the first few Gujarati Kutchis were already on their way, coming from Bombay ports (Dominique, 2018).

Post-Independence Period (1976–Present)

The independence of Seychelles in 1976 under the socialist banner of France, Albert Ren, the country started to diversify; Indian traders from Kutch and Tamil professionals filled the gaps in retail and services, thus the number of Hindus rose from 506 in 1987 to more than 5,500 by 2022 through family reunifications and entrepreneur visas (*Indian Diaspora- Largest in the*

World at 17.5 Million UN Reports 2019, n.d.). Most of the growth was absorbed by Mahe with Praslin and La Digue being the outposts; Victoria's markets are alive with their spice shops and fabric stores, which are the symbol of their adaptive trade. The census showed impressive changes in 2010 it was 2.4% but by 2010 it had increased to 5.4% due to natural growth, inflows, and Hindu Kovil Sangam's cultural reclamation since 1984, which brought back the youth through Tamil classes and festivals. New Delhi estimates that 82% of the Seychellois are of Indian descent, this is made difficult to distinguish because of the numerous Creole intermarriages that produce mixed, race children. The institutional landmarks of this period include the instalment of the 1992 Navasakti Vinayagar Temple, the Sangam's Tamil primers and calendars opposing anglicization, and the signing of state treaties that provide crematoria for the land. Economic liberalization of the post 1990s era attracted professionals and thus the continuation of business chains from Chennai to Mahe were fortified, meanwhile, remittances from emigrants in Australia are funding the expansions. This upsurge firmly establishes Hindus as a visible minority, their ceremonies attracting both tourists and local officials, it's changing the image of near poverty workers to the "pillars of the society" (*India-Seychelles Bilateral Relations*, 2019).

Religious Sects and Theological Practices

Dominant Shaivite Traditions

Tamil Shaivism rules the domain, praising Muruga as the protective deity and Vinayagar as the remover of obstacles, quite indifferent to Vaishnava Rama cults or the widespread Advaita philosophizing in metropolitan India. The Hindu Kovil Sangam, which came into existence in 1984, is the main instrument of unity: Sunday gatherings are marked by *Abhishekam*, milk anointings, aradhana, flame circumambulations, and Natarajar, cosmic dances, all happening to chanting by Tamil priests of the Thevaram hymns. Sacred figures carved in India occupy the altars, and the primacy of orthopraxy over theology means no splits arise from Tamils and Kutchis, as the Sangam rules ensure that the collective rites are maintained. Gujarati contributions have brought a little bit of Swaminarayan, like trade piety, but the processional fervor is primarily Tamil, with vel (lance) processions calling on the courage of Muruga, and there is no doctrinal strife. Pujas every day, application of sacred ash tilaks, and vegetarian feasts bind the members; their praxis is a living archive of South Indian piety brought over to the granite isles.

Syncretic Elements

Creole undercurrents permeate Shaivism: *bonoms di bwa* tree shamans offer charms for a pre-kovil visit, thus merging animist pragmatic with Dravidian devotionism in a seamless vernacular theology. Formal sects resist fraying; Tamil almanacs and booklets of Sangam keep secular erosion, prioritizing ritual over creed. There are numerous hybrid scenes where kavadi performers call on *bwa* spirits for their strength, vegetarianism makes way for fish curries yet the main orthopraxis is preserved: yellow threads, turmeric baths, chanting of mantras are the means to keep the tradition alive. This syncretism, instead of being a dilution, is a source of strength, as the priests allow the folk mixture to continue so that they can keep the flock of mainly Creole couples (80%), thus reflecting the same fusion of Hindu, African in the Caribbean where practice is more important than purity (*Seychelles Population and Housing Census 2022*, 2024).

Institutional Frameworks and Temples

Victoria's Arulmigu Navasakti Vinayagar Temple is an outstanding example of a 1992 building with a 100, foot rainbow gopuram where Vinayagar is enshrined together with Muruga and Amman in the temple. Its pillared mandapam is full of the sound of weddings, bhajans, and youth Tamil dances. Before that, the prayer lofts at home became places for Sangam to invite Mauritian and UK performers to rejuvenate the spirits of the people. The Sangam manages five kovils across the island, provides Shaivite lore primers, lobbies for crematoria, and prints calendars that mark Thai Poosam according to the Gregorian dates (Amla, 2015). Governmental secularism provides support in the form of: tax exemption, Deepavali being a gazetted holiday since the 1990s, land donations for expansions. The Indo-Seychelles Friendship Association which highlights 1770 pioneers and via their biennial galas blending Bharatanatyam with sega is another one of the supporting pillars. These pivots are against intermarriages and 80% unions yielding Creole progeny by way of endogamy drives and cultural bootcamps, their walls resounding with arati bells as the only light in a sea of Catholics (Amla, 2015).

Festivals, Rituals, and Cultural Expressions

Thaipooosam Kavadi

Thaipooosam Kavadi gets the liturgical year off to the most spectacular start every January/February. It generally mobilizes over 500 devotees to Victoria Market and onward in a Navasakti procession: hooks pierce cheeks, milk pots wobble on shoulders, all these are symbols of the sacrifices that Muruga made in slaying the demons, the "kavadi" means "a burden gradually and arduously borne step by step". Presently a 40 year tradition has the authority to claim public holidays, with foreign tourists very much entranced by the pierced ascetics anointed with honey, their trance, chants mixing Tamil with applause in Creole. Women carry water pots without any piercings, the youth are in charge of the logistics, which is a ritual that links generations in the midst of the national gaze (Amla, 2015).

Deepavali, Navratri and other festivals

Deepavali ignites October night with chariot parades carrying floral deities along Victoria, while the state media broadcasts *Diya-lit* celebrations. During Navaratri, grapples twirl saris in temple courtyards, Pongal sunrises commemorate rice sheafs with idli feasts intermixed with Creole rougaille; the dress dazzles zari silks amongst sega skirts music combines carnatic veenas with *Moutya drums* (traditional dance). The culinary crossroads are bright: samosas go with laddu, processions sell incense and kolam powders, these spectacles projecting Tamilia while inviting Creoles, their hybrid vigor etching Hindu imprints on the national calendars. (*Thaipooosam Kavadi Celebrated With Fervour by Hindus of Seychelles*, 2017).

Cultural Identity Preservation

Seychellois Creole, Tamil bilingualism has a deep impact on people's lives: the bazaars are mainly the places where the people's language is kreyol, homes are the Tamil lullabies that children go to sleep with; and the youth at the Sangam academies are trained to resist the anglicized drift in their language. Religious festivals reflect the community's pride, both Thaipooosam virility and Deepavali luminosity. At the same time, Satya Naidu's membership in the National Assembly demonstrates the great level of racial integration (Dominique, 2018). Gender roles are changing: the lively old patriarchy with its repressive chauvinistic values is being replaced by new scenes which draw on the female power and creativity of fashion mavens and shop owners. The matrilocal character of these scenes nourishes the growing

hybrid children. Hybridity is alive. Creoles refer to the ensemble of bwa, pre-puja, and kizi, a culinary conjugation that marries dosa to the local fare. However, religious orthodoxy remains firmly rooted through the continuing practice of endogamous marriages (Rayaprol, 1997). and the commemorations of the 248th arrival anniversary combining fireworks with bhajans. Community associations play a crucial role in binding the community fabric and thus they help to keep the community strong. Youth are attracted to secular music through Spotify and thus they are losing the practice of singing religious songs in Tamil. The compromise of their youth is a good example of diasporic elasticity with Tamil hearts beating under Creole styles (Dominique, 2018).

Integration and Challenges

Hindus in Seychelles live in an environment of the greatest freedom of the constitution, with the scenes of temples and mosques on the landscape of Mah being the most vivid symbols of religious tolerance in the pluralistic island archipelago. Their dominance in the economic niches of trade, construction, and retail gives them a lot of societal influence, so the historical labourers have been turned into quite influential entrepreneurs. However, being a 5.4% minority, this position of theirs inevitably leads to a unity against sectarian divisions, so there is a giving up of dividing into mainly Vaishnava and Shakta groups, and the promotion of collective Shaivite orthopraxy takes place instead. The population exceeding 2022 by a significant number shows up more visibly through the larger festivals, but the witchcraft syncretic practices, the combination of *bonoms di bwa*, *charms and temple pujas*, bring the worries of the purist clergy who are afraid of your Tamil Shaivism being watered down. Hindus through their participation in the bureaucracy and in community life become "one of the locals", and the local people easily accept this through the Creole intermarriages. Threats of disappearance due to globalization, the youth decision to emigrate to Australia, and cultural assimilation call for very strong youth activities to be run through the Hindu Kovil Sangam, divisions within the sects serve as a unifying factor rather than a dividing one, resulting in the fact that the Hindu identity is very much a part and parcel of the duplex culture of Seychelles, it is a question of both keeping and reshaping (*Seychelles Culture, Customs, and Traditions | GPI Translation Blog*, 2024).

Conclusion

Seychelles' Hindu diaspora, largely Indo, Seychellois of Tamil heritage, practices Shaivism tradition through the institutional strength of Hindu Kovil Sangam and the devotional fire of Thaipoosam Kavadi. Built around Muruga and Vinayagar worship, this brings sectarian harmony while identity hybrids within the Creole fold, keeping high cultural fidelity along the path of national integration. Theirs is a story from indentured laborers to economic leaders, which has enriched Seychelles' pluralism, with temples serving as a link between the Tamil homeland and the island's sacred land. The next ethnographies have to bring out the unheard voices, young people, women, those following a mix of traditions, from this Indian Ocean melting pot, thus assuring the continuity of Shaivism in the face of globalization.

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