

Mauritian Hinduisms and Post-Colonial Religious Pluralism in Mauritius

Project Outline

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The African island of Mauritius, located in the Indian Ocean, was uninhabited before Dutch settlement in the 17th Century. Mauritius became a colony of France in 1721 and then Britain in 1810, remaining under British rule until independence in 1968. During the colonial era, slaves, indentured laborers and other immigrants came to the island from Madagascar, mainland Africa, India, China and Europe. Contemporary Mauritius has a population of 1.2 million that reflects this rich history and heritage. The Hindu community comprises between fifty and sixty percent of the population, but the preservation of distinct linguistic and ethnic heritages within the Mauritian Hindu community provide for a diversity of Hinduisms. My research documents each Hindu group, and their leadership structure. Along with the established distinct Hindu communities (such as the Telegus that trace their heritage to the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India), the project also recorded the existence of numerous organized modern Hindu movements that are usually centered around a charismatic religious leader or spiritual teacher. These movements have often established monastic orders that build temples and monasteries. The diversity of Hindu groups on the island is a reflection of the diversity of India herself, however, in Mauritius the smallness of the island makes for much more encounter, and struggles for co-existence involve all aspects of life including politics, business, and education.

The Mauritian Hindu community, as the religious and ethnic majority group on the island, has maintained its variety of religious traditions over multiple generations and built a complex religious landscape of pilgrimages, festivals and temples. My study of Mauritian Hinduisms examined how these religious traditions have been preserved through education, cultural centers and temple practice in the unique Mauritian context. My research also used the Hindu festival of Mahashivaratri, the festival of the Hindu god Shiva, and its unique expression in Mauritius to examine paradigms of pan-Hindu religious celebration and participation in the largest Hindu pilgrimage outside of India. This festival demonstrated the intricacies of the powerful rhetoric of some Hindu groups on the need for Hindu unity and how the Hindu communities of Mauritius interact in a religious context. The project also examined other religious festivals, focusing in these cases on the inter-religious participation. The Hindu festival of Kavadee and the Christian holiday of Pere Laval's feast day were the two largest festivals, but the Hindu celebration of Theemithi or Fire-Walking also provided great insight into the inter-religious relations during festivals. In all Mauritian villages, a Kalimai shrine is a place where villagers of multiple faiths come for offerings and prayers to the goddess in return for her protection. These shrines are another religious sphere where inter-religious interactions transpire. The project looked closely at the specifics, the depth of the participation and the religious experiences of these inter-religious journeys, and questioned their significance in terms of inter-religious relations, especially on the national level.

My research looked at the rising Hindu nationalism among Mauritian Hinduism and the new movement for 'Hindu unity.' The project explored the reasons for and history of the

emergence of these ideas in Mauritius, as well as their implications for the stability of inter-religious relations on the island. Although for many years Mauritius was seen as an example of an incredibly diverse nation that remained free from conflict, rioting in 1999 between the minority Creole Catholic and the majority Indo-Mauritian community has left Mauritius more fragile and torn along ethnic and religious lines. In light of these events, the project also specifically explored any ways that Mauritian government and religious leaders negotiate issue surrounding religious pluralism and foster a shared sense of national identity, while embracing the cultural and religious diversity of the island. My research in Mauritius examined the religious aspects of issues of diversity, identity, and peace that are part of the landscape of Mauritian life, by outlining both the diversity of Hinduisms alive on the island and a specifically Mauritian model for inter-religious encounter that differs greatly from the Western notion of inter-faith dialogue.