

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.

INTRODUCTION

“I have a bond with India because my ancestors originated from there. It’s a country rich with culture and tradition and many of our practices were adopted from India” (Reddy 1999).

With the initial arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa, religious practice was an informal and fluid affair with the construction of simple shrines; most Hindu worship occurred in the home. The arrival of Brahmins led to the formation of a more institutionalised form of Hinduism which was further entrenched by the completion of contracts of indenture leading to Indians congregating in communities where, often, one of the first constructions was a temple. Coinciding with the growth of a new South African Indian intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century, was the building of temples in brick and stone – suggesting permanence and the acceptance on the part of these people of South Africa as their home.

However, co-existing uneasily with this growing sense of identification as South Africans,

was a looking to India as a source of religious authority. This was evident in the temple architecture which was closely modelled on South Indian temples and builders trained in India were brought to South Africa to construct these new permanent temples. Furthermore, requests were made for the immigration of Hindu priests from India and Sri Lanka to officiate at these temples – a practice which continues today.

It would, however, be a great simplification to see Hinduism as merely being imported from India. Local economic, social and political conditions affected the extent to which Hinduism could be modelled on India – this is evident in the modifications made to South African temples. In addition, the use of Sri Lankan priests in temples over the past three decades have provoked criticism from South African Indians due to the exclusion of local priests from temples and the conflict over religious practice which has changed and been adapted to the South African context.

Beginnings

Indians arriving in South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century did so either as indentured labourers or as “passenger” or “free” Indians. Despite the class differences and the different circumstances under which they arrived, the greater number of these Indian arrivals experienced a tremendous sense of isolation and alien-

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ation brought about by their loss of connection with traditional networks in India. This was particularly true of the indentured labourers who had come from largely rural backgrounds and had thus been uprooted from their ancestral villages, hence losing their kinship ties. This situation was exacerbated by their different linguistic and caste backgrounds as well as their isolation from Indians on other plantations, making it difficult to communicate and enhancing their sense of isolation – which has been cited as one of the key factors leading to the high incidence of suicide among indentured labourers (Bhana and Bhana 1990: 159-160). The harsh conditions of indentured labour were another contributing factor and it is within this context that religion was utilised to provide a sense of familiarity and stability: “In considering the religious practices among the Hindus it is apparent that family worship and community festivals would, from the earliest times, have provided support, a sense of solidarity and thus of insecurity in an uncertain world” (Brain 1990: 214).

Although much of the Hinduism practised by the early indentured labourers was of an informal nature, the arrival of *Brahmins* – Hindu priests – in Natal changed this. They had to claim a lower caste status in order to be allowed to enter the colony and were then able to travel to different plantations giving indentured labourers an understanding of the Hindu scriptures (Brain 1990: 211). Two repercussions were evident – indentured labourers now had a sense of continuity with a religious past as well as a sense of belonging to a wider Hindu community. This served to counter their isolation and alienation.

The *Brahmins* brought with them a more institutionalised or “official” form of Hinduism, leading to the establishment of temples and religious organisations. This was significant in two respects – the early temples were often constructed from wattle and daub which were later replaced by more permanent structures in brick and concrete, implying a growing acceptance on the part of the ex-indentured labourers of Natal as their permanent home. In addition, Indians who had completed their indenture congregated in areas in which temples had been constructed, leading to the development of communities and, with that, an extension of community consciousness (Brain 1990: 212). Furthermore, the temple construction itself required

a co-operative effort on the part of these Indians in terms of raising funds as well as the actual building process itself.

It is thus likely that Hinduism was a key feature in fostering a sense of group identity on the part of the immigrant Hindu population in Natal – an identity based on their common experiences in South Africa as well as their origins on the subcontinent. The temple played an important role in fostering this identity by being an arena where dispersed groups could meet as well as a focal point for the development of communities. In addition, the temple was prominent in the development of an identity based on the notion of the diaspora.

Edward Said wrote of the notion of a territorially bounded space as providing a sense of identity whereby it sets up a distinction between “us” and “them” – those who lie outside its borders. He wrote that ‘space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here’ (Said 1978: 54). This can be adapted to the context of the diaspora where India becomes the space in the consciousness of the Indian diaspora according to which they create a sense of identity. The questions posed by Salman Rushdie are the ones which most individuals of a diaspora have to consider, even if their responses may vary:

What does it mean to be ‘Indian’ outside India? How can culture be preserved without being ossified?...What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us?...How are we to live in the world? (Rushdie 1992: 17-18)

HINDU TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

“In any Hindu Temple there invariably lurks the Divine in the background, the spirit of reverence in which it was built by artisans, the inescapable feeling that there indeed is a place of worship, the eternal and spiritual domain of God” (Padayachee 1999: 63).

Temple building is associated with the actual act of worship itself, hence the gradual fixing of particular architectural styles:

The design of temple buildings, as indeed all other forms of building, become clearly de-

finer rituals, the very action of building temples becomes Bhakti¹ worship in itself ((Mikula et al. 1982: 5). *The rules are laid down in a series of manuals...[which] remain a vague guide to present-day temple builders* (Mikula et al. 1982: 6).

The caste of the builder and the most auspicious days for construction to commence were important (Mikula et al. 1982: 16). It is with this complexity behind the actual building processes in mind that I consider the master builders associated with the Umgeni Road Temple.

My choice of this temple, the Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam, as representative of Hindu temples in KwaZulu-Natal is due to it being one of the largest in the southern hemisphere as well as its advanced age. The initial structure, built in 1889, was a wood and iron building constructed on land donated by two prominent Tamil goldsmiths in Durban (Naidoo 1989: 7). Initially envisioned as a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva, the temple finally housed the three main sects of Hinduism – Saivism (Shiva), Vaishnavism (Vishnu) and Sakthism (the female deity Marieamman) (Umgeni Road Temple 1994). The three temples underwent subsequent renovations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the first being the rebuilding of the Shiva temple in 1889 and the addition of two domes and an enclosed hall between 1917 and 1926. The building of the Vishnu temple commenced in 1911 and was only completed in 1950 when funds were raised to complete its hall (Umgeni Road Temple 1994). Sakti worship had initially been conducted in a tent until the building of the brick structure which commenced in 1920. Additional structures built include a boundary wall in 1934, the priests' living area, a front wall and arch and the Krishna Kalyana Mandabam – the money for the latter being donated by an affluent Hindu family (Naidoo 1989: 7).

In addition to its religious functions the temple plays a wider social role for Indians in Durban such as serving as a venue for weddings. It is also responsible for the propagation of Hinduism, particularly in relation to the Tamil ethnic group. Furthermore, Hindu movements such as the local chapters of the Ramakrishna Centre, the Divine Life Society and others were founded at the temple (Umgeni Road Temple 1994). Throughout its history, therefore, the Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam – popularly

known as the Umgeni Road Temple – has played a prominent role in the lives of Hindus living in Durban and its surrounding environs – particularly those of South Indian descent.

The oldest temple in the Umgeni Road complex is the Shiva Temple built by Kothanar Ramsamy Pillay who had learned skills in temple building in India before serving as an indentured labourer in Mauritius. Upon completion of his term of indenture he arrived in South Africa in 1885 and was commissioned to build a number of temples ranging from the Subramanya Temple in Port Elizabeth to the Railway Barracks Temple in Durban (Naidoo 1986: 137). The Vishnu Temple in the Umgeni Road complex was built by Alaga Pillay in 1911 who had been brought to Durban by the Umgeni Road Temple Committee for that purpose. He had learned the art of temple building in Madurai in India and his brief was to model the Vishnu Temple it on those in South India. Like Ramsamy Pillay, Alaga Pillay was also involved in other temple building projects in South Africa, including Ladysmith and Umzinto. Key here with regards to these master builders is the conscious attempt by the Umgeni Road Temple Committee to model their temple on their counterparts on the subcontinent. A provocative notion developed by Mikula, Kearney and Harber is that, "Many temple committees would like it to be known that the building was designed and built by someone from India for the task. In most cases, however, this was not the case" ((Mikula et al. 1982: 13). This suggests that a certain legitimacy was conferred on temple builders who had either originated from or had been trained in India.

However, despite the attempt to model South African Hindu temples on those in India, certain local constraints at almost every step in the building process made this impossible. The first obstacle occurred with the actual location of a site for the temple. The *Silpa Sastras* – a 1,500-year-old manual used by temple builders – states that a temple must be built in a beautiful location suited for the housing of God. The lack of available land and the restrictions placed on ownership of land in South Africa made this an almost impossible criterion ((Mikula et al. 1982: 11). As noted earlier, the land for the Umgeni Road Temple had been donated by a pair of affluent Indian jewellers and its location in Umgeni Road adjacent to the railway tracks and

a highway, as well as being amidst factories and autobody workshops, mean that, from the outset, it was a compromise between Indian standards of building and local conditions in South Africa.

The restriction on land is further evident in terms of the three sects represented in the temple complex *viz.* Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism and their corresponding temples. In conventional Hindu temples only one major deity is generally represented with the others confined to more marginal roles; however, in South Africa, it was often necessary to represent Saivish and Vaishnavism in one compound (Mikula et al. 1982: 11) and the Umgeni Road Temple took this a step further by representing all three sects:

It [the Umgeni Road Temple] is unique in the sense that it is maybe one of the few temples whereby the three sects, namely you find Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism, being reflected in one temple – on one temple precinct. Now, very often you find in all the temples in South Africa, they have Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism in the same temple because of finances...(Padayachee 1989)

In conjunction with the lack of finances, were the architectural compromises – the temple representative of each sect has to be laid out in a particular manner unique to each, as do the temple halls used for social functions and the priests' quarters. The incorporation of all these elements on a single site where space was at a premium added a greater complexity to the temple construction than would have been the case in South India (Mikula et al. 1982: 11).

Regardless of the necessary compromises, temples employing the South Indian Dravidian style of temple architecture had to adhere to basic design criteria, that is, an east-west orientation, the square form of the shrine known as the *cella* and the construction and orientation of an external altar and flagpole known as the *kodi* pole. As communities around temples became wealthier and more funds were raised, renovations were carried out to incorporate more design elements reminiscent of South Indian temples (Mikula et al. 1982: 10). However two elements which are a distinguishing feature of temples in South India are rarely, if ever, present in South African Hindu temples. The lack of water tanks is attributed to the building of temples in areas where communities of ex-indentured labourers had settled which were usu-

ally near an available water supply such as rivers and streams, in order to carry out market gardening. Thus water tanks would have been redundant, particularly in their traditional village role as reservoirs (Mikula et al. 1982: 11). Although the water tank is not a key criterion for temple construction, its absence in South Africa suggests that even environmental factors such as an abundance of water impacted on the construction of temples, despite the attempts to be faithful to a South Indian model.

The elimination of the entrance tower or *gopurum* is far more significant (Mikula et al. 1982: 11)² as a *gopurum* is considered a requirement in South Indian temples due to its religious significance as a gateway to the house of God: "Inevitably, an entrance to the house of 'God' had to be a massive form towering into the sky and visible for miles around" (Grover 1980: 199). The *gopurum* was often elaborately carved and sculpted and temples – particularly those situated near densely populated urban areas – could have many *gopurum*. This marked the growing significance of the temple to the community in terms of its social and cultural functions as well as the administrative co-operation required to preserve the structure (Grover 1980: 200).

The lack of *gopurum* in South African temples – particularly the Umgeni Road Temple which fulfills the criteria of being located in a densely populated urban settlement – indicates a departure from the South Indian model which can, once again, be attributed in part to the financial constraints experienced by an Indian population drawn largely from an indentured background. There is thus a clear break between the desire to emulate the Hindu temples of India as is evident in the bringing of Indian master builders to South Africa and the political, environmental and economic constraints which necessitated a departure from this ideal.

However, despite not adhering completely to South Indian architectural styles, South African temples have managed to provide a space – often in stark contrast to their surroundings – of tranquility and religious worship as is evident in this extended poetic description of the Umgeni Road Temple:

One enters the group of temples through a low brick arch on a wide, paved walkway flanked by a low, natural stone retaining wall. On each side, for forty metres or so, stretches a forest of

beautiful old, coconut palms interspersed with low mango and bread-fruit trees. Through time, the trees have branched over the walkway, creating a tropical tunnel which frames the crisp, white Shiva temple in the distance...The buildings are best seen in the late afternoon, when the low sun strikes the heavily-modulated structures, and when devotees in their colourful saris come to pay their respects. The peacocks are always there to add a further exotic touch of colour to this urban oasis (Mikula et al. 1982: 61).

In this respect, very little separates the Umgeni Road Temple from its forebears in South India.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Hand in hand with attempts to have South African Hindu temples emulate as closely as possible those on the subcontinent, came the desire for religious practice, itself, to do the same. As mentioned earlier, soon after the first Indians arrived as indentured labourers in the nineteenth century, *Brahmins* entered the colony of Natal, bringing with them the knowledge of Hindu customs and practices derived from the scriptures. This served to add an “official” element to the rituals practised by indentured labourers, and gave them a sense of maintaining a connection with their “homeland” (Brain 1990: 211-212). From the early part of the twentieth century priests from India and Sri Lanka were brought to South African temples in the belief that they were more knowledgeable about Hinduism and “authentic” practice, being closer to the source in South India (Umgeni Road Temple 1994).

This suggests a perception of Hinduism as timeless and unchanging – unaffected by social, political, economic, historical and geographical contexts. However this is not the case. From its inception Hinduism did not exist as a single dogmatic religion, as a wide variety of religious beliefs fall under the umbrella of Hinduism. The historical development of the religion is best summed up by Romila Thapar:

[The evolution of Hinduism was] not a linear progression from a founder through an organizational system with sects branching off...[It was instead] the mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the adjusting, juxtaposing and distancing of these to existing

ones, the placement drawing not only on beliefs and ideas but also on the socio-economic reality (Bose and Jalal 1998: 20).

Over its 5,000-year history Hinduism survived social, economic and political upheavals on the Indian subcontinent such as the Mughal conquest and the effects of British imperialism, due to its ability to incorporate and adapt – a far cry from the notion of a rigid, timeless and unchanging religion. One of the key transformations undergone by Hinduism occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century and is significant as it coincided with the period of indenture. The growing interference of the colonial state in matters of religion, particularly its placing of the categories of Hindu and Muslim in rigid opposition,³ led to the initiation of religious reform. Reform could be based on either rationalist or nationalist grounds but it did not simply involve a disregarding of everything “western” and a veneration for all that was “traditional”:

We are to have what the West can give us, because what the West can give us is just the thing and the only thing that will rescue us from our appalling condition of intellectual and moral decay...we shall find it expedient to select the very best that is thought and known in Europe, and to import even that with the change and reservations which our diverse conditions may be found to dictate (Bose and Jalal 1998: 113).

Rationalist reform was thus at least partly an attempt to incorporate the best of Western thought – or that considered most suitable – into Hinduism. This suggests that the myth of a timeless and unchanging Hinduism was just that – a myth. The religion could not be unaffected by its context and had to adapt accordingly. However the importation of priests from the subcontinent into South Africa is due to the internalisation of an “authentic” or “true” perception of Hinduism. The practice of Hinduism in India and its adoption in South Africa, like temple worship, served the function of linking Hindus in South Africa to a spiritual home in India.

Although priests have been brought to South Africa since the early twentieth century, the past three decades saw the arrival of an increasing number of Sri Lankan priests. A reason for this was the political situation in Sri Lanka. Conflict between the Sinhalese – a largely Buddhist

group – and the largely Hindu Tamils led to a constant state of emergency resulting in a number of Tamil seeking sanctuary all over the world (Isaacs, et al. 1991: 680). These Sri Lankan priests in South Africa also formed a network, as most of the priests here originated from Gurrukul family – including the Umgeni Road Temple's resident priest, Muthu Iyer Radhakrishna Gurrukul (Padayachee 1999). A final reason is that these priests have historically been considered by South African Hindus as being more knowledgeable about Hindu practices (Padayachee 1999).

Muthu Iyer Radhakrishna Gurrukul revealed that certain cultural events and religious festivals at the Umgeni Road Temple did occur in a similar manner to those in Sri Lanka; however certain constraints were present in the South African context: "...they take the whole day in our country their preparation and everything because they can get easily holiday from the government or institutions. Here it is not like that so here time is limited... We divided them [the religious days into sessions] so in between people get a chance to go to their work..." (Gurrukul 1999) Furthermore, to enhance the notion of authenticity, the idols utilised in temple worship at the Umgeni Road Temple were themselves imported from South India (Mikula et al. 1982: 61).

In the 1990s, however, there appeared to be an adverse reaction to the importation of Sri Lankan priests as their arrival resulted in an increasing marginalisation of local priests, leading to resentment on the part of the latter (Padayachee 1999). This suggests a deeper significance in terms of the relationship between the South African and Sri Lankan priests – a counter-reaction to the perception of priests from the subcontinent embodying the ultimate authority in religious practice. This tension is indicative of a clash between two spaces that is, the diaspora and the "homeland" where the values of the latter are not simply inscribed onto the former. The divergent history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa from that of the Indian subcontinent has led to the formation of different cultural emphases which are not necessarily in harmony with each other. The temple, too, can become a space where South African Indians can assert a sense of ethnic identity, distinguishing themselves from other groups.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

This section focuses solely on the ethnic groups of South Indian origin – Tamils and Telugus. My reason for this is that, although other ethno-linguistic groups engage in temple worship and there is much interaction across groups, temple worship on the whole has historically been associated largely with South India. In addition, the Umgeni Road Temple has a distinctive Tamil identity in terms of the festivals it holds, the ethnic constitution of the Temple Board and the priests at the temple.

Historically, the great majority of indentured Indian labourers arriving in Natal were of South Indian, particularly Tamil, origin. The Tamils originated from Tamil Nadu and the minority of Telugus came from present-day Andhra Pradesh. In India vast geographical boundaries separate the various linguistic groups, particularly in the case of North and South India. However, in South Africa, the various Indian linguistic groups had to live in close proximity, leading to a blurring of distinctions. This was particularly evident in the case of Tamils and Telugus who, during the period of indenture, were viewed by other racial groups as well as other ethnic groups of Indian origin, as constituting one group, the "Madrassis" (Nowbath 1960: 18). This misnomer is due to their geographical origin in India – the Telugu state of Andhra Pradesh was only created after India's independence from the 11 Telugu-speaking districts in Madras (Bose and Jalal 1998: 209). There are also linguistic similarities between Tamils and Telugus. However, despite the perception by "outsiders" of the lack of distinction between the two groups, both maintained clear distinctions between each other: "...the Madrassis consisted of two linguistic groups who were conscious of their separate identities, who had different customs, practices and rites and who in their domestic lives lived apart" (Nowbath 1960: 18). Nonetheless, the interaction between the two was close.

Since the early twentieth century in South Africa, however, these two groups have made a conscious decision to actively distinguish themselves from each other. This is evident in the formation of cultural institutions and organisations based on ethnicity (Nowbath 1960: 18) such as the South African Tamil Federation and the Natal Tamil Vedic Society Trust as well as

their Telugu counterparts. This occurred within the context of the emergence of the new intelligentsia, termed the “new elite” who, although asserting their identity as South Africans, were promoting their ethnic identity through associations such as the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) formed in 1908 where meetings were conducted in Tamil (Swan 1985: 192). This is also the period when requests were made for priests from Sri Lanka to officiate at the numerous temples which were now being built in concrete and brick by temple builders trained in India. It was perhaps the government’s grouping together of all South Africans of Indian descent into one racial category regardless of the ethnic and linguistic differences within the category “Indian” that led to attempts to assert their respective ethnic identities. By 1960 and the centennial anniversary of the Indians’ arrival in South Africa, the Tamils and Telugus had successfully portrayed their distinctiveness (Nowbath 1960: 18). This is not to say that no interaction occurred between these groups – intermarriage was and continues to be a common practice. In addition, although Tamil members have always been in the majority on the board of the Umgeni Road Temple, Telugu members have been evident as well.

The same can be claimed for the devotees worshipping at the temple. The overall form of worship at the temple, however, remains strongly Tamil and this is apparent in a number of ways. For instance, the largest festival held at the temple is the *Kavady* festival which is Tamil in origin – although large numbers of Telugus do participate (Nowbath 1960: 20). The temple also issues a Tamil calendar every year which can be distinguished from a Telugu calendar as the former is based on a lunar reckoning, whereas the latter is based on the solar calculation. The calendar contains information about Tamil festivals and religious events as well as annual events in which all Hindus participate. The temple’s formation of a Tamil ethnic identity is emphasised by the establishment of a Tamil school to teach the Tamil language on the temple premises. A common language is particularly important in determining a sense of identity based on ethnicity; however the situation is different in South Africa where the majority of South African Indians speak English as a first language. However, learning to speak Tamil and engaging in specifically Tamil prac-

tices is particularly important in the formation of a sense of “Tamilness” across geographical boundaries.

The Umgeni Road Temple’s utilisation of Sri Lankan priests in carrying out its religious practices is an indication of a sense of global identity which was reinforced by the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In an interview conducted with a former temple committee member, Sarres Padayachee, she placed the context of the arrival of these priests within the unrest in Sri Lanka: “You do know we’ve had what is known as the genocide...in Sri Lanka” (Padayachee 1999). The use of the word “genocide” is not neutral but indicates a particular stance and a sense of empathy with the Tamils in Sri Lanka. This, and similar expressions, suggest a feeling of “Tamilness” which transcends geographical boundaries. The civil war in Sri Lanka was related to oppression in South Africa under apartheid as well: “...in our most recent history indigenous people were relegated to the barren homelands and stripped of their citizenship in their motherland. This is the tragedy shared by the Tamil counterparts in Sri Lanka. If fellow South Africans search their souls, they will know...they cannot support this fascist regime” (Moodley 1998). A decade ago the conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka over the former’s desire for an independent state foregrounded the issue of Tamil identity which was further emphasised by the exodus of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who formed communities all around the world (Padayachee 1999).

The use of Sri Lankan priests in Tamil temples, which has occurred all over South Africa, the establishment of a Tamil school and the holding of largely Tamil festivals suggest an identity based on the notion of being Tamil which is located within a larger global framework. Simultaneously, the resident priest at the Umgeni Road Temple privileges a more inclusive Hindu identity: “...we must forget the differences – this man Telugu, this man Tamil, this man Gujarati, this man Hindi...We must get together – we must try to educate the people. We must try and teach the people. We must...educate all in Hinduism” (Gurrukul 1999).

CONCLUSION

It is evident in my discussion of the Indian diaspora in Durban, particularly in relation to

the Umgeni Road Temple, that India is perceived to be the source from which South African Indian identity is derived. The subcontinent provides the blueprint for Hindu religious practice as evident in the temple's construction with the use of builders trained in India as well as the utilisation of Sri Lankan priests to lend an air of "authenticity" to religious practices. A key reason for the Indian diaspora deriving its sense of identity from India is South Africa's apartheid past where groups were segregated and isolated, making it all but impossible to develop a sense of shared nationhood. This was built on the earlier alienation felt by the Indian indentured labourers, whose arrival in a strange land after being uprooted from their familiar settings and kinship networks, compounded by their harsh living and working conditions, led to a feeling of nostalgia for an idealised past. However, the idea of the diaspora as a displaced group belonging neither to their adopted home nor to their place of origin is not just a South African phenomenon – it is a condition that seems to pertain to the diaspora as a whole.

It would be a great simplification to assume that Hindu religious practice in India could be simply transported to South Africa and that the Indian diaspora here was a *tabula rasa* on which this form of Hinduism could simply be inscribed. If one considers the construction of Hindu temples in South Africa, local social, economic and political conditions prevented the modelling of these temples as exact replicas of their counterparts on the subcontinent. Furthermore, South Africans of Indian descent while, to an extent, perceiving India as a source of authority for religious practice and constructing a sense of ethnic identity that transcends geographical boundaries, still have a strong sense of being South African and having a unique history that is different from any other populations of Indian origin.

NOTES

¹ *Bhakti* refers to a means of attaining *moksha* (salvation) through love and devotion to God and has led to the development of various sects, each dedicated to a particular Hindu deity.

² The only Hindu temple in South Africa employing both the high boundary wall and the *gopuram* is the temple in Pretoria.

³ A particular influential notion has it that the British, in a sense, constructed the notion of communal strife between Hindu and Muslim by portraying isolated incidents solely in terms of communalism, which was seen by the British as the only relationship between Hindu and Muslim. Cf. Gyandra Pandey (1989), "The Colonial Construction of 'Communalism': British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century" in *Subaltern Studies IV – Writings on South Asian History and Society*. R. Guha, ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press)

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