

## **Mauritian Hinduisms**

The island of Mauritius brims with diversity at every seam. In every village, multiple languages are heard, a wide variety of foods are eaten, numerous religious traditions are practiced, and arrays of smiling faces are seen. Although the population of Indo-Mauritians have been the majority ethnic group on the island since long before independence, this group itself consists of multiple and complex subgroups, adding to the diversity of the nation. Indo-Mauritians are those Mauritians whose ancestors came to the island from India, mostly in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as indentured laborers for the sugar estates of Mauritius. These laborers left the Indian subcontinent from a variety of ports, and so reflected the diversity of India itself. A significant number of these early immigrants were Muslim, and their descendents, the Muslim Indo-Mauritians, make up around 20% of the country's current population. The Indo-Mauritians that are not Muslim are considered to be Hindu, although the variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds offers little to suggest any cohesion within this large group. The majority of Indian immigrants came from the state of Bihar, or the surrounding area of Northern India, where Bhojpuri, a regional dialect of Hindi, is spoken. The descendents of the Hindus from this area are the most powerful and largest in Mauritius today, but even they are subdivided into two groups.

### **Hindi-Speaking Hindus - Sanatanists**

The early Hindu immigrants that came from Bihar often traveled in groups from the same village or region. Therefore, they were more easily able to set up the social structures and religious practices familiar to them at home. Since most of the laborers intended only to serve out their contracts and then return home, they adapted their lives to their new environment by re-creating only their basic cultural and religious frameworks in their new context. The most important element of this continuation was the reciting of the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas, stories and songs about the god Ram and his consort Sita. The chanting of this scripture laid the foundation for ritual and community that

enabled the preservation of the rich Hindu traditions of these Bhiari Hindus despite their lack of formal education in religious matters. The early immigrants brought with them small statues or images of their deities, which they used for prayers and offerings, often installing them into small shrines. As immigration increased and the contracts of the laborers were renewed or abused, the sugar estate owners began to take measures to encourage the laborers to stay. The most significant part of this effort was the purposeful increase in the number of female immigrants. As weddings and childbirths became more plentiful, the community of workers became more settled and established more of their traditions within the sugar estate villages. The first organized step was the establishment of Bhatikas or religio-cultural groups that offered classes for children in language and the Ramcharitmanas, as well as providing a feeling of unity and strength for the rest of the community. In addition, most villages or estates had already set up Kalimai shrines to make offerings and prayers for protection to the mother goddess believed to watch over the village. Since the early arrival of Indian laborers to their sugar estates, many Franco-Mauritian estate owners, with pressure from the Church in France, allowed local priests to attempt to convert the new Indian workers. The threat of conversion was widely felt in the sugar estate villages, and the establishment of the Bhatikas offered a sense of belonging away from the Catholic Church.

As the younger generation of laborers and estate owners established better relations, the estates often granted small plots of land for religious use. The price of sugar on the world market was also losing value, and a number of estate managers began to sell off small plots of land, especially to their most trusted foremen. With some land in the hands of Hindu families, some of it was used for the construction of small shrines or temples. This was the real beginning of temple life in Mauritius, as new temples began to arise locally, providing accessibility to all. Several priests, those born into the Brahmin caste in India, were able to secure passage to Mauritius, usually to accompany a large group from their village to which they relied on for support. These priests or pundits provided the leadership for the early temples, and developed a schedule and structure surrounding ritual prayer offerings or *pujas* and festivals. The descendents of these priests, along with other Brahmin immigrants and priests brought in to work from India, comprise the priests of the contemporary Mauritian temples for the

Hindi-speaking community. A majority of this community are primarily devotees of the Hindu god Lord Shiva, and is known as Shaivites and their temples are known in Mauritius as Shivalas, meaning Shiva temples.

In 1910, a Hindu reform movement called the Arya Samaj was established in Mauritius, attracting large numbers of Hindi-speaking devotees into the movement and away from their more traditional forms of the rituals of *puja* and temple worship. Partly in response to the work of Christian missionaries and to the popularity of the Arya Samaj movement, some leaders among the Hindu priests felt their religious practices and traditions were threatened in their role as the predominant form of religious culture among the Hindi-speaking Hindus of Mauritius. In 1921, these priests and some community leaders formed the Sanatan Dharma Pracharini Sabha, an organization that attempted to unify the leadership and temple administration. This group of Hindus, (those of North Indian descent, Hindi-speaking, and not members of the reform movement of the Arya Samaj), became known through the island as the Sanatanists coming from the term Sanatana Dharma, indicating their adherence to the traditional and more orthodox practices of North Indian Hinduism.

The organization lost some of its leaders to the concerns of politics and generally lacked cohesion. In 1925, several prominent leaders established the Hindu Maha Sabha (not affiliated with the group of the same name in India) in reaction to the strong organizational presence of other Hindu groups, especially the Arya Samaj. The group launched itself in Port Louis and remains there today. The group's early objectives were to promote the religious rituals and practices of the Sanatanist Hindus, encourage further participation in religious life from them, and to organize and host large scale events such as religious festivals. The group operated on a small scale until 1965, when under the leadership of Basant Rai, the group obtained the land lease on the area around the lake of Grand Bassin, the pilgrimage site of the Maha Shivaratri festival. Since then the group's main function has been to oversee the building and administering of temples and other facilities at that site.

In 1956, a parliamentary debate took place over government funding for non-Christian religious groups. This topic was of great importance to non-Christian Mauritians as Christian groups, most notably the powerful Catholic Church, continued to

receive government subsidies as part of an agreement at the transfer of colonial power from France to Britain. After several years, the Hindu representatives managed to obtain their desired goal of more equal allocation of government subsidies to all recognized religious groups. The Hindu Maha Sabha collected leaders and representatives from various temples to establish the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation, to administer the new government funds. Most of these funds continue to be divided between the member temples of the organization, which oversees their leadership and ensures their adherence to the government's outline requirements for continued funding. The group also uses some funding for organizing and facilities for festivals and events around the country, in line with their objectives to serve the Sanatanist Hindi-speaking Hindus of Mauritius. Today the Federation wields a significant amount of power within politics, as they provide both the influence of religious leadership over their constituencies but also forums at their religious functions for politicians to campaign. These Sanatanist Hindus are still the largest of the Hindu sub-groups on the island, and still hold a disproportionate number of political and economic positions of power.

#### Hindi-Speaking - Arya Samajists

The followers of the Arya Samaj movement are also almost entirely descendents of the North Indian Hindu immigrants and Hindi-speaking. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mauritians began to question their living conditions, their rights, and the authority of their colonial rulers. This awakening was instigated in large part by the visit of Mohandas K. Gandhi to Mauritius on his way from South Africa to India by ship. Gandhi was troubled by both the treatment of the Indian laborers and of their lack of organization in demanding their rights as citizens of the British Empire. In response to his visit, he sent a young Indian lawyer named Manilal Doctor to Mauritius to assist the laborers in improving their social and political situation. Manilal Doctor was a follower of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and his reform movement known as the Arya Samaj. Swami Dayanand founded the movement in 1857 in Bombay, India, in what he calls an attempt to get back to the Vedas or the original teachings of Hinduism. His movement rejected many social ills of the time such as the oppression of the caste system, child marriages, and lack of education. The movement also rejected many of the forms of local

worship and tradition, saying that these had degenerated into idol worship and were not the 'true' spirit of the Vedas or sacred texts of Hinduism. Some scholars indicate that his movement also developed in response to the supposed threats of conversions (especially of the uneducated classes), to the increasing secularism of the educated elite of India, and to the politicization of religion in the early stages of the nationalism movement.

In 1898 a Bengali worker arrived in Mauritius from India with a copy of Swami Dayanand's most famous work, *Satyartha Prakash*, which outlines the teaching of the Arya Samaj movement. Several local community leaders were drawn to the book and its teachings, especially Khemlall Lallah, who subsequently made multiple attempts to organize an Arya Samaj group in Mauritius. However, Manilal Doctor, the lawyer sent to Mauritius by Gandhi, fully established the movement on the island. Doctor introduced the Arya Samaj as the religious movement to liberate followers from the social inequalities and injustices of their lives. Although he only stayed a short time in Mauritius, he laid the foundations for the Arya Samaj movement and Dr. Chiranjiv Bhardwaj, who was a medical doctor and an outspoken leader of the Arya Samaj in Mauritius, continued his work. Because of the movement's teachings against the caste system, the Arya Samaj movement was extremely popular amongst traditionally lower caste families who were often ostracized or treated as inferior by the more traditional and orthodox Hinduism of the local temple. The Brahmins or priests and the leaders of the temple traditions, felt threatened by the Arya Samaj movement, especially since the speeches and the teachings of the reform movement specifically pinpointed many of their rituals and traditions as 'idol worship' and not 'true' Hinduism. This type of tension continues even today between the two groups despite their shared geographical heritage from North India, and their linguistic ties of Bhojpuri and Hindi.

In contemporary Mauritius, the Mauritius Arya Sabha is the main organization of the Arya Samaj movement, organizing events and festivals specific to the Arya Samaj, as well as administering the funding and leadership of its 450 branches around the country. The Mauritius Arya Sabha continues the social works, especially of education, that were introduced in the early years of the movement. The group also places great emphasis on the propagation of the Hindi language in Mauritius. Splitting from the central organization over issues of caste and representation, two other groups emerged from

within the Arya Samaj movement in Mauritius. The first group, called the Mauritius Arya Ravi Ved Pracharini Sabha, known locally as the Ravi Veds, was founded in 1934 and aimed to promote the interests and well-being of its members, who usually joined on a caste related basis. After the allocation of funding for all recognized religious groups on the island in 1956, the Ravi Veds also took on the administration of funding for their some 130 branches. The second of the other Arya Samaj groups is the Rajput Gahlot Maha Sabha, founded in 1965 when the politics of independence were at the forefront. This group was again formed to protect the interests of a traditionally lower caste group, although they claim to trace their ancestry to the Rajput leaders of the Indian state of Rajasthan despite no records indicating any immigration from that region of India. This group is based today in Port Louis, the capital city, where it maintains a large temple. The group also has about 75 branches around the island, some of them very small. Both these groups, along with the Mauritius Arya Sabha have a great deal of political clout, as they are able to endorse political candidates and provide them with forums for campaigning. In a small democratic nation such as Mauritius, the vote of every person within a constituency is heavily recruited.

### Non Hindi-Speaking Hindus

#### Tamils

The first immigrants from India actually arrived before the mass immigration of indentured laborers. Beginning as early as 1728, Tamil Hindus, Indians from the southern state of Tamil Nadu were brought to Mauritius from the French port of Pondicherry in South Eastern India. These Tamils were brought as skilled crafts men for the construction of the French colonial buildings and port in the city of Port Louis. The Tamil craftsmen remained small in number and influence until the influx of more Tamils during the immigration of indentured laborers beginning in the 1830s. Tamil Hindus share not only a geographic ancestry but also a linguistic and cultural heritage that is intimately linked to their distinct religious practices. Tamil labor immigrants mostly came from the south Indian port city of Madras (known as Chennai in modern India) and although they were sent to work on sugar estates all over the island, they grouped together, which aided in

the preservation of their traditions. Since their early arrival in Mauritius, Tamils practiced their daily religious rituals as well as their intense and unique religious festivals within the sugar estates. Historians of Mauritius often comment on the fervor of the sugar estate practice of the Tamil festivals of Theemidi or Fire-Walking and of Kavadee. With such a visible cultural and religious presence on the sugar estates, Tamils were soon able to secure land for shrines and later temples, known as kovils. Aided in part by the Tamil craftsmen who were already established in Mauritius, the Tamil community built the first Hindu temple on the island in 1850. The early establishment of Tamil kovils was primarily due to the economic independence of a small number of Tamils connected to the merchant class who were able to secure small plots of land. The Tamil laborers were then able to construct early kovils in the evening hours. Due to their lack of formal training in temple architecture, an ancient and sacred art form, many of the early kovils were simple in structure, but provided a resting place for the protecting deities as well as a center for the local Tamil community. Tamils are also primarily Shaivaite, devotees of Shiva and his theological line, and most Mauritian Kovils are dedicated to Murugan, son of Shiva, or a form of the mother goddess such as Mariammen.

With the growth in the number of kovils, Tamil organizations arose to build and administer these religious centers as well as to promote the interests of Tamils in general, especially given their minority status amongst the island's Indian laborers. In light of the new government funding available at the time, the Mauritius Tamil Temples Federation (MTTF) was established in 1960 to oversee the administration of the Mauritian kovils and to attempt to bring together the leadership of the Tamil community. The MTTF continues to provide the leadership for the Tamil Hindu community of Mauritius and the 106 kovils and groups belonging to the organization. The Tamil community in Mauritius has a rich cultural history but has historically been kept out of major positions of economic and political power. The MTTF and other Tamil organizations explicitly work to eliminate the prejudice often inflicted on a minority community and to promote the education and advancement of the Tamil people.

The main festivals of the Tamil calendar and the more prominent kovils continue to thrive in modern Mauritius, however in the last few decades, significant numbers of Tamils have converted to Christianity. According to the leadership of the MTTF, many

Tamils are joining the evangelical Christian movement called the Assembly of God that has established centers all over the island in recent years. The language barriers and lack of creative leadership provided by priests at local kovils are also of great concern to the Tamil community. Many of these priests are brought from India and do not speak the local language of Creole. Since most Mauritian Tamils are no longer able to speak the Tamil language, they are unable to communicate with their religious leaders; the MTTF leadership speculates that this may be one of the reasons for the dwindling numbers of traditional practitioners at kovils. The MTTF recently set up a training program for Mauritian priests, which includes classes on traditional rituals and prayers, pastoral counseling type workshops, and a final training session and graduation in India, giving them the authority associated with their homeland. This is one of the ways that the federations of the various groups serve their community, their interest and utilize their government funding to preserve their religious heritage.

### Telegus

Like the Tamil Hindus, the Mauritian Telegus are descendents from south Indian immigrants. Tracing their linguist, cultural and religious heritage to the state of Andhra Pradesh in south eastern India, the Telegus of modern Mauritius have a strong and tight-knit community, but encounter many of the problems faced by small minority groups the world over. Although the Telegus are Hindu and in a way are part of the Hindu majority, like the Tamils, their traditions, religious practices, and linguistic heritage set them apart as a unique group. The early Telegu immigrants left India through the port of Madras, arriving together and for the most part remaining somewhat grouped together on the sugar estates. The Mon Desert Alma Sugar Estate assisted the Telegus of the village of St. Pierre by donating land for the first Telegu Temple. The temple was built in 1926 in St. Pierre and remains the most important Telegu temple in Mauritius. This temple provided the Telegu community a central place for the practice of their traditions, and for the celebration of the their distinct festivals such as Ugaadi, the Telegu New Year. The Telegus are generally followers of Lord Vishnu and his lineage, and are known as Vaishnavites. As most Mauritian Hindus are Shaivite or followers of Lord Shiva, the

Telegu temples are of special importance within the Telegu community as they provide a place for Vaishnavite worship and for festivals related to Vishnu such as Rambhajan.

In 1930, Telegu leaders created the Mauritius Andhra Sabha to provide cohesive leadership to the Telegu community. This organization was restructured and renamed in 1946 as the Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha. This is the principle authority for administering funds to the Telegu community and oversees 85 branches, including 50 Telegu temples, as well as several active youth groups. The Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha, like the MTTF for the Tamils and the Tamil language, also actively recruits and guides teachers of the Telegu language for local public schools. Language continues to be a marker of identity in Mauritius and both the Tamil and Telegu communities are struggling to keep their traditional languages alive in Mauritius; the president of the Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha estimates that only 25% of Mauritian Telegus can speak the Telegu language. The alignment of the Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha with the World Telegu Organization, has greatly strengthened not only the passion with which the Telegu culture is preserved in Mauritius, but also strengthened a sense of connection both with Telegus in India and other Telegu peoples living around the world.

### Marathis

As Mumbai (formally called Bombay), in the state of Maharashtra, was one of the ports of embarkation for the Indian immigration to Mauritius, many Marathi workers and later their families immigrated to the island. The Marathis who came to the island were mostly from the coastal villages of the state, although some laborers also came from the city of Pune. Small in number compared to other groups, the Marathis that settled in Mauritius formed close ties, especially in terms of celebrating their traditional Marathi festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Shivaji Day, and the Marathi New Year called Guddi Padwa. Because of these festivals, the cultural ties (such as food, marriages, etc), and the linguistic bond of the Marathi language, Mauritian Marathis formed small organizations that kept their traditions alive even as other groups were building more temples. The first Marathi temple was opened in 1906 in the tiny village of Cascavelle on the west coast of the island. Having undergone numerous renovations, this temple remains surrounded by the sugar fields of the local sugar estate and continues to be the most important Marathi

temple on the island. Because of the rural lifestyle of many of the Marathis, the small organizations did not officially come together under one umbrella organization until the founding of the Mauritius Marathi Mandali Federation in 1960. The federation continues to serve as the overseeing Marathi organization for its 30 some branches, and administers the government funding. Like other smaller groups, the Marathis' mother-tongue has been in a steady decline over recent years, as younger generations do not learn to speak the language at home. The Mauritius Marathi Mandali federation, along with other prominent Marathi groups and individuals, has gone to great lengths to provide quality language instruction in Marathi, to organize plays and drama clubs using the language, and to provide tertiary education for the academic study of the Marathi language and literature like the program at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. The federation aims to promote and preserve the language, culture, and religious practices of the Marathi young people in Mauritius, urging them to get involved in conferences such as the Second World Marathi Conference held in Mauritius, or the annual drama festival, as well as just participating in the annual festivities of Ganesh Chaturthi.

#### Other Linguistic and Cultural Groups

Among the Indian immigrants to Mauritius were three other primary groups, along with many other individuals or families, whose religio-linguistic identities no longer have a strong presence in Mauritius. Unlike most immigrants from India, many merchants, both Hindu and Muslim, came from the Indian state of Gujarat. The Hindu Gujaratis were primarily in the jewelry business, catering to the wedding tradition of providing a bride with a jewelry set as she leaves to join her husband's family. Although the businessmen originally came to Mauritius only for their business matters and then returned to their families in India, some of them eventually settled on the island, bringing with them their Gujarati language, culture and religious traditions. Because of their small number, the attempts by the Gujaratis to preserve their culture and traditions through the generations since the first immigrants settled in Mauritius have been relatively unsuccessful. The Gujarati Hindu community set up an organization called the Kathiawad Society in 1923, and then in 1931 established the still prominent Vishnu Chetra Mandir, a Vaishnavite

temple in Port Louis. Despite the successful activities of this temple, the community declined in numbers and the Kathiawad Society closed by the 1960s. Despite a minor revival of attempts to preserve Gujarati culture with the establishment of Mauritius Gujarati Cultural Society in 1978, the community lacks any government funding and has suffered a real decline in Gujarati speakers and Mauritians identifying themselves as Gujarati. In a survey of religions of Mauritius conducted in 1990, none of the 535,000 participants described themselves as Gujarati. Like many of the other smaller groups, many of the Mauritian Gujaratis have married or become absorbed into another group, most likely one of the Hindi-speaking groups, and although they may continue to practice certain rituals or traditions, they have lost their main identity as Gujaratis.

In a similar way, the Bengalis, a prominent and distinctive group from the North Indian state of West Bengal, are no longer considered to be an established religio-cultural group amongst Mauritian Hindus. Although the same survey in 1990, listed 84 out of the 535,000 participants as Bengali, these may be more recent immigrants from India, or workers on a temporary contract for work in Mauritius. Despite significant numbers of Bengalis among the indentured laborers brought from the Indian port city of Calcutta in West Bengal, they have been absorbed into the Hindi-speaking. Because Bhojpuri, a form of Hindi, was the language of the majority, many sugar estates that were predominantly made up of North Indian workers adopted Bhojpuri as the language of the estate and nearby villages. In this way it is easy to understand how the progression of small minority linguistic and cultural groups could assimilate to the majority group over time in a foreign land. A number of small tribal groups in North Eastern India were also represented among the early indentured laborers, and have similarly become part of the mainstream Hindi-speaking groups over the years.

### Modern Hindu Movements

A number of the modern Hindu movements, most of which began in India under the leadership of a renowned guru or spiritual leader, found their way to Mauritius, mostly during the 1970s. Some of the groups have done extremely well, offering Mauritians a way to negotiate their modernizing lives with their spiritual heritage and religious selves.

Although there are many Mauritians that consider themselves primarily as devotees of one of these specific groups, there are also many others that visit any number of these modern Hindu groups for a festival, a lecture, or just to visit the group's temple or religious leader. In this way, they have become an important part of the Mauritian Hindu religious landscape, despite having relatively few 'full-time' devotees. Among these modern Hindu groups are: 1) the Chinmaya Mission, a group founded by Swami Chinmayananda in India, 2) several Satya Sai Baba groups that are dedicated to offering devotion to Sai Baba, a divine guru from Southern India, 3) a center for followers of Ammachi the female guru known for her hugging of devotees who often visits Mauritius and is greeted by thousands of devotees, 4) two temples of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness also known as the Hare Krishnas, and 5) a thriving Brahma Kumari meditation center that focuses on the importance of mind control and meditation.

The Ramakrishna Mission also has a long and significant history in shaping the Hinduism of Mauritius. During the 1930s, there was an increase in the number of conversions to Christianity and some leaders of the Hindu communities felt threatened by a further rise. They decided to seek help by requesting religious leaders from India to come to Mauritius to serve the Hindu population. They sent one of these requests to the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters in Belur, Calcutta, and soon an Indian Swami (or monk) named Swami Ghanananda was on his way to Mauritius. Although some of the Hindu leaders who sent for the monk were disappointed he was not a temple priest, the Swami rose to prominence quickly due to his knowledge of the scriptures, his dedication to teaching the spiritual path of Vedanta, and his interest in community service. By 1942 the Ramakrishna Mission was officially established in Mauritius, and a piece of land for the Ashram was acquired. The organization grew in popularity and set up medical and educational service programs. Various Swamis came from India to take their turn leading the Mission in Mauritius, and in 1976 a large temple was completed in the central town of Vacoas. The new temple attracted more followers and visitors for special occasions, and the following year in 1977, the Mission began its annual celebration of the Durga Puja festival. In Mauritius, this festival attracts the largest number of devotees to the Mission and its celebration there has also greatly contributed to the festival's increasingly widespread popularity and observance all over the island. During the leadership of

Swami Balaramananda (1979-1987), the Mission also held an annual Parliament of Religions, one of the few examples of organized interfaith dialogue in the history of Mauritius.

The diversity of Hinduisms alive in Mauritius reflects the diversity of India's great traditions, however, in the Mauritian context, the proximity of each group to the other, entwined in the same neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools, creates a unique situation. Nowhere else in the world outside of India is the Hindu religion the majority religion of the country and yet so sub-divided and complex. The majority standing of the Hindi-speaking linguistic/cultural group, despite their sub-groupings, firmly places the other groups into the minority status. This effects not only the assumptions about what it means to be a normative 'Hindu' in Mauritius, but also greatly effects the political sphere and the ability of the smaller groups to preserve their identity and traditions in a modernizing society. With the introduction of cheaper travel and the Internet, all Hindu groups are finding it easier to make connections with fellow Hindus outside of the island. They no longer feel isolated in the middle of the ocean and travel to India for conferences or trainings, pilgrimages or shopping trips, and turn to the Internet for new *puja* ideas and prayers. As globalization causes the world to get smaller, many Mauritian Hindus are looking to the rest of the world for solidarity and ideas about what it means to be a Hindu.

## **Maha Shivaratri and Hindu Unity**

### **Description and History of Maha Shivaratri Festival in Mauritius**

Since a majority of the Hindu immigrants to Mauritius came from the North Indian plains of the sacred Ganges river, the river previously played an important role in their religious lives. A prominent aspect of their devotion and purifying rituals, the river was a key part of their understanding of the sacred presence in their lives. Upon arriving in Mauritius,

the early immigrants felt the absence of the Ganges, especially at the festival of Maha Shivaratri, the festival of Lord Shiva and of pilgrimage to the river. In 1897, Shri Jhummon Giri Gosagne, a priest from the village of Terre Rouge in the north of the island, envisioned a sacred lake in the unexplored southern jungles during a dream. He and a group of followers set out to find the lake, which his vision described as springing from the river Ganges. After several days of walking, they came to the lake of Grand Bassin. News of the dream spread throughout the island, linking the lake with sacred river Ganges also known as the goddess Ganga, and that according to Hindu mythology sprung from the head of the god Shiva. Every year since 1897, pilgrims from all over the island walk to the lake of Grand Bassin on the festival of Maha Shivaratri. This twelve night festival originates from the myth that Shiva swallowed a lethal poison created by demons that was threatening to destroy the earth, although he survived the poison his throat turned blue and the devas or minor gods poured blessed water on it to cool the pain. On the festival of Maha Shivaratri, devotees of Shiva make a pilgrimage to collect sacred waters for pouring over the Shiva Linga (the symbolic sculpture of Shiva) at their local temples and in their homes.

The lake of Grand Bassin is known to the Hindu communities of Mauritius as Ganga Talao, or the Lake of the Ganges. This sacred lake is now surrounded by temples and visited throughout the year, although the area remains pretty quiet outside of the festival time. For the festival, pilgrims walk to Ganga Talao from all over the island, a journey that can take several days. Local businesses and temples set up rest areas along the roads for refreshments and relaxation. Images of Shiva appear all over the island during the festival, especially images linking him to the river Ganges, which is often depicted as flowing from the top of his head. Pilgrims walk to the lake to bring back a jar of holy water, which they take to their local Shiva temple for the concluding prayer services of the festival. The water is transported in large and elaborate structures called kanwars. Kanwars are often symbolic representations of a community's temple or of a god or goddess. They are made of plastic, wood, paper, and papier-mâché. The largest ones are pulled on wheels, but pilgrims, part of their demonstration of devotion and their sacrifice, carry most kanwars on their shoulders. The festival exemplifies the Hindu tradition of pilgrimage, an imperative aspect of the Hindu religion connecting the human

world with the sacred through a difficult journey to a sacred place. Once pilgrims arrive at Ganga Talao, they place their kanwar down on the grass and rest, or walk around admiring the creativity of kanwars from other villages, temples or community groups. Many tents are set up for food and sleeping, giving the whole place a sense of a makeshift village. Every year 250 - 300, 000 pilgrims visit the lake over the several days of the festival. Most walk at least part of the way and spend a number of hours in prayers and making offerings at the banks of the lake.

Pilgrims bring with them the offerings they will need for the rituals of the festival. Most families will rest and wait until they can use one of the many small white tables on the banks of the lake. There, each family offers fruit and incense, performing prayers to Lord Shiva. Each family collects holy water from the lake in a small metal jug, praying over the water and then emptying it back into the lake several times before keeping one jug full. Pilgrims carry this water home with them and will later pour over the Linga or sacred symbolic sculpture of Lord Shiva found at the center of the sanctuary of their local temple. The festival of Maha Shivaratri is one of the most important Hindu festivals on the island, and is the largest Hindu Pilgrimage outside of India. In 1972, a ceremony bringing water from the river Ganges in India to the lake in Mauritius was conducted, recognizing the site as an important place of pilgrimage within the Hindu religion and solidifying the connection between the Ganges river and Ganga Talao.

### Hindu Unity

The festival of Maha Shivaratri is the one religious event that is widely recognized and practiced by almost all the different Hindu groups in Mauritius. Religious leaders often cite the festival as a demonstration of the unity of Hindus in Mauritius. Although members of the various groups participate to some degree in the festival, the depth and organization of their participation often differs greatly. The festival remains a largely north Indian, Hindi-speaking festival, dominated by those Hindus following Sananta Dharma. Although the Santana Dharma Temple Federation and the Hindu Maha Sabha, the organizations primarily in charge of the festival, claim to structure the festival in a way that promotes Hindu unity, their programs, speeches, and other events are almost entirely in the Hindi language. The temples surrounding Ganga Talao are also all north

Indian style temples, as are the main temples that offer prayer services to mark the end of the festival in the local towns and villages all over the island. The extensive media programming surrounding the festival is directed towards the Hindi-speaking group of Hindus, emphasizing the dominance of this group in terms of this festival. Although most Hindi-speaking organizations describe the festival as a festival of all the Hindus in Mauritius, there exists a certain monopolization by the Hindus of the Hindi-speaking group of language, temples, organization, media, and even participation. Even within that group, followers of the Arya Samaj movement are often not full participants in the festival, as their beliefs forbid the use of statues, even symbolic ones such as the Shiva Linga, in ritual worship and so cannot fully partake of the traditions of the festival. The leadership of the movement does not emphasize the festival as an important event in the life of the Arya Samaj community.

Tamils and Telegus that I spoke with about the festival said that they only occasionally participated in the festival. They relayed that they often chose to drive or take the bus to Ganga Talao and often at a less crowded time, outside the main auspicious times for the festival, indicating the festival is of secondary importance to these groups compared to their group-specific events such as Kavadee or Ugaudi. Tamil and Telegu leaders of temples and federations also confirmed the inconsistencies of participation amongst their groups, and although the festival is marked on their group-specific calendars, there were few if any events organized around the festival each year. The Marathis participate in the festival fully but in a different way than the majority of Mauritian Hindus of the Hindi-speaking group. On the eve of the last day of the festival processions, people gather for a procession in the area of La Marie and form a procession to the Marathi temple in Vacoas. The Marathi devotees carry kanwars but they are covered in colorful flowers, making them stand out from the other kanwars of the festival. A Marathi band and chanting also accompany the procession. In this way the Marathi participation in the festival is specific to this group and not considered to be the 'norm' by the majority group.

The way the majority group creates the impression of Hindu unity at the festival is reflective of the same rhetoric at the national level. The majority group claims to be concerned about Hindu unity but their version of Hindu unity implies their version of

Hinduism as the norm. Because of the majority status of this group, this approach inevitably leads to the marginalization of the minority Hindu groups. Both the 'need' for Hindu unity and the creation of Hindu unity are concerns primarily of the majority group, and are usually influenced by the same sort of ideas in India, often termed their as Hindu Nationalism. Through the history of Hinduism in Mauritius, the leadership of all Hindu groups has tried to maintain close ties with India. Many of the groups have brought priests and monks from India, and look to India as a place of authority of the questions and issues of the Hindu traditions. Beginning as early as the 1960s, Mauritian Hindus looked to India for guidance and example in their own struggle for Independence from the British colonial powers. Because of the great diversity of Mauritius and the different contenders for political power as independence seemed imminent, many Mauritian Hindus became interested in the Hindu Nationalist movement in India. In 1965, the All Mauritius Hindu Congress was held and the seeds of these ideas were firmly planted in their Mauritian context. Several groups arose out of this meeting and over the next years and with the rise again of Hindu Nationalism in India in the 1990s, many Mauritian Hindus took interest in these ideas. As in India, Hindus in Mauritius live in a diverse, democratic society where politics, religion, and fear of marginalization are prominent social concerns for most citizens. In the 1990s in Mauritius, tensions were growing between the different ethnic and religious groups as the upper-caste Hindi-speaking Hindus continued to monopolize roles of power both economically and politically. These tensions were one of the main causes of the communal riots that broke out in Mauritius in February 1999, after the death in police custody of Kaya, a beloved Creole singer and musician.

The riots not only released displays of violence and hatred of one group for another, they also legitimized the beginnings of such groups as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) of Mauritius that attempts to unify all Hindus and work for their advancement in society even at the expense of those of other traditions. Groups such as this one, which started in 1997 at the Chinmaya Mission of Mauritius, were heavily influenced by the activities of their sister groups in India, and made use of their Indian counterpart's rhetoric that cast Christians and Muslims as the a threat to Hindus. They use this kind of rhetoric in India openly, and the tensions between Hindus and

Muslims have often escalated to violence and fighting in the last twenty years. More of these groups formed in Mauritius in the wake of the 1999 riots, including a newspaper called *Sunday Vani*, demonstrating new trends in communalism on the island.

Although these Mauritian groups are more muted in their open in their use of communalist language than their Indian counterparts, their actions and their instillation of fear and distrust among the Hindu population has done a great deal to create further tensions in Mauritian society. Furthermore, in recent years much of the leadership of the key Mauritian Hindu organizations that receive government funding has become involved with these groups. For example, Mr. Somduth Dulthumun is the current president of the Hindutva Movement in Mauritius, one of the more extreme groups, was also until recently the president of the Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation. One the most prominent extreme groups is the Voice of Hindu, which leaves its graffiti on walls all over the country, and created a large display at Ganga Talao reading “united we stand, divided we fall” accompanied by pictures of bloodied swords. Voice of Hindu also attempts to create for itself a mainstream position in Mauritian politics by becoming involved with labor strikes and other issues effecting large groups of Hindus. This and other groups openly create defensiveness in their target audience of the Hindi-speaking Hindus, despite their strong political and economic hold of power.

Much of the rhetoric plays on the idea that Hinduism is a historically tolerant tradition that has for too long allowed other religious groups to take advantage of its ‘tolerant and accepting’ nature. Although many Hindus did suffer emotionally and psychologically from the aggressive attempts of Christian leaders to convert them, European Christians, not Creole Mauritians, made those attempts several decades ago. In addition, Muslims in Mauritius have no history of attempted conversions of Hindus. The ideals of these groups are explicitly the ideals of Hinduvta (the notion of an ideal Hindu), of the need for the protection of Hindus all over the world, and of Hindu unity. These ideals have greatly marginalized many within the Hindu community, especially non Hindi-speaking groups such as the Tamils and the Telegus who can find no recognition or place for their ancient traditions in the Hinduism being propagated by these groups as the ‘real’ Hinduism. This notion of pan-Hindu unity only creates more of a power base for the majority Hindu group, and does little to create real unity or understanding between

the diverse Hinduisms of Mauritius. Unfortunately, many ordinary Hindi-speaking Hindu citizens of Mauritius have been manipulated into aspiring for this goal of Hindu unity and do not realize the implications for minority groups. The leadership of the minority Hindu groups is now forced to be even more protecting of their traditions and practices. The president of the Mauritius Tamil Temple Federation even discussed in an interview that some members of his leadership team would like to see Tamilism considered as a separate religious tradition in Mauritius, such have the Hindi-speaking Hindus monopolized what the term Hinduism means in Mauritius. The lengths to which these 'Hindu' groups and the influence of Hindu Nationalist ideas from India have damaged inter-religious relations on the island are even more staggering.

## **Inter-Religious Relations**

### **Hindus and Muslims**

Despite their common ancestry in the Indian sub-continent, where, at the time of their departure for Mauritius, the two communities lived relatively peacefully together, Hindus and Muslims in Mauritius have somewhat strained relations. Although most of the leadership lives by the philosophy of live and let live, the animosity of each group for the other can be felt on the street level where both Hindus and Muslims are quick to throw out stereotypes and prejudices about the others. The emergence of the Hindu groups influenced by the Hindu Nationalism of India both instigates and produces these kinds of relations between Hindus and Muslims. Although Hindus both in India and in Mauritius are in the clear majority, Hindu Nationalism depicts Muslims as being foreign to India and therefore Indian Muslims as a threat to Hindus. This type of propaganda has begun to have clear presence in Mauritius and has had drastic effects on the relations between the two groups. An example in which the dominance of the majority group is clearly seen is the national celebration held every year to mark the arrival of immigrants from India. The celebrations held in several locations, televised, and attended by prominent public officials, look to the 1830s as the date of the first immigration, despite the well known fact of Tamil immigration long before then. The celebrations often feature speeches in Hindi, further isolating non Hindi-speaking Hindus, but most importantly the celebrations

feature songs and prayers of Hindu religious devotion and often include *pujas* or Hindu ritual acts of worship. These acts completely leave out the recognition of a large number of Indian immigrants and completely exclude their ancestors from the celebrations; Indian Muslims were a significant part of the Indian immigration, they worked on every sugar estate, and their ancestors live in every Mauritian town and village.

Mauritian Hindus have monopolized India as their homeland leaving Mauritian Muslims excluded from having a strong connection with India. Although some Mauritian Muslims do study or travel in Pakistan, the nature of Pakistani society has little in common with the open and democratic country of Mauritius, and many Mauritian Muslims do not feel comfortable there. They have no strong connection with the country, especially as most Mauritian Muslims came from the eastern Indian region of Bihar and the Partition of India and Pakistan occurred after their immigration to Mauritius. One of the foremost Muslim scholars in Mauritius has documented the Islamization process of Mauritian Muslims, meaning their turn to and the influence of the Arab world and Saudi Arabian Islam in Mauritius. In a country of immigrants, a strong connection to somewhere outside of the small island is considered a necessity for every community and empowers that group economically, politically and culturally. With their ancestral homeland of India monopolized by Hindus, Mauritian Muslims have turned to the homeland of their faith for guidance, and support. The influence of Saudi Arabian Islam can be seen in the increase in popularity of more observant and traditional Islam. Funding from Arab nations and Mauritian Islamization has also built more mosques, made more opportunities for religious education, and made Arabic, as opposed to Urdu (the language of Muslims in India and Pakistan) the language of choice for many young Mauritian Muslims to learn to speak. The monopolization of political power by the majority group as well as the influence of Hindu groups led to the creation in 1992 of an extremist Muslim political party called Hizbullah. Although the views of this party only represent a small number of Muslims in Mauritius and are heavily influenced by fundamentalist movements in the Arab world and Pakistan, its creation is evidence of the continued strain on Hindu-Muslim relations in Mauritius and the trend since the 1970s for both to become more defensive, especially in the political arena.

### Official Inter-Religious Encounters

In speaking with government officials and religious leaders, the lack of official inter-religious encounters becomes immediately apparent. Despite such a diverse society, the leadership of various religious groups hardly ever meet, the government has taken few if any steps to create forums for such dialogues or meetings, and the academy has little interest in becoming involved with religious leadership that is so often linked with politics. Although academic conferences and panel discussion addressing issues of multiculturalism and diversity do take place, they rarely involve religious leadership or religious representatives, and pursue a more theoretical intellectual discussion. The only concrete example of what could be termed an inter-faith dialogue attended by religious leaders from various communities took place in the after-math of the communal riots of 1999. In response to these riots, the government organized an advisory group to provide the government leadership guidance on how to mend the terrible rifts in Mauritian society. Religious leaders of various groups were part of this panel and in response to the violence and chaos of the days of riots, the leaders worked together for better understanding and a more peaceful future in Mauritius. Although, as demonstrated, there are many efforts to organize events for Hindu unity and there are more genuine efforts by the Christians for ecumenical fellowship, Mauritian leadership, both religious and secular lacks an interest in inter-religious dialogue, meetings, or projects that would provide space for better relations between the groups.

### Informal Shared Religious Experience

This does not mean, however, that inter-religious encounters do not take place at all. In fact, Mauritians of different religious groups participate in the same religious event and share religious experience in a meaningful way multiple times a year. That said, the depth of these religious experiences varies, the motivations and understandings of participation changes, and the encounters are limited to specific times and spaces. Most Mauritians feel proud to tell visitors to the island that Mauritians of all backgrounds participate in many of the religious festivals of the island, and in many villages there is true shared religious experience between those of different faiths. However, when looking at accounts from the times of indentured laborers all living together on sugar

estates, there was a great deal more shared participation of religious festivals of those of other traditions than there is currently. Many accounts from this time period discuss the religious festival of Yamse or Ghoon, which is a Shia Muslim festival that was widely practiced by Sunni Muslims and various Hindus during the early estate times. Not only is there no longer any inter-religious participation at this festival, but it is also barely practiced by any Muslims as it is now viewed by many to be deviating from true forms of Islam, another influence of the Arab world on Mauritian Islam. In examining this question of contemporary inter-religious sharing of religious experience, several things become evident:

- 1) There is always one group that dominates the event as their 'own.'
- 2) Those of the 'visiting' tradition are never in an organized group but attend and participate in the event as individuals or families.
- 3) The numbers of 'visiting' participants is also considerably greater in the rural areas, and is almost no longer existent at some urban events.
- 4) 'Visiting' participants are almost never Muslim and Muslim events are almost never attended by non-Muslims any longer.
- 5) The 'visiting' participants are almost never figures of leadership in any religious community unless they attend the event for political reasons.
- 6) The number of 'visiting' participants, especially in more central events such as Kavadee, has decreased over the years, perhaps again influenced by the sentiment of certain Hindu groups that is no longer welcoming to those of other faiths.

The following sections are examples of places where this encounter occurs and offer a description of each event or place, provide insight into the type of experience had and the motivation of the 'visiting' participant.

### **Festivals and Shrines as Places of Inter-Religious Encounter**

#### **Pere Laval's Shrine**

The figure known in Mauritius as Pere or Father Laval was born Jacques Desire Laval in France, where he entered the Catholic priesthood. In the early 1840s, Pere Laval came to

Mauritius to work towards the evangelizing of former slaves. The priest took to the work, but also began establishing routines of caring for the sick and looking out for the education of young Creole children. He also did a great deal to establish the Catholic Church of Creole Mauritians, making the Church a place of community and pride for them. Pere Laval is looked on as a sacred or holy figure in Mauritius and his tomb found in the complex of the Church of Holy Cross in St. Croix, Port Louis. Throughout the year, many Mauritians, especially Catholics, visit the tomb to offer prayers and ask for blessings. It is widely believed that miracles such as the cures of terrible diseases can be asked for and granted at the tomb of Pere Laval, and the area around his tomb is considered sacred and full of the presence of God. After the disappearance and cure of a Mr. Beaubois' horrific ulcer that covered much of his head and neck in 1923, Pere Laval developed a significant following of Mauritians. The growth and intensity of this following led to the eventual beatification of Pere Laval by the Vatican in 1979, allowing for public worship within a fixed territory. Despite the restriction of worship to the tomb and complex of the Holy Cross Church, small road side shrines to Pere Laval can be seen throughout the island, and many devotees also have small shrines in their homes.

Every year on the eve of the anniversary of Pere Laval's death, his followers make a pilgrimage from their homes to the shrine where his remains lie in St. Croix. Many churches and Catholic groups organize group pilgrimages and carry signs detailing their place of residence or group affiliation. However, other pilgrims walk towards the tomb on that evening. Although by far a majority of the pilgrims are Catholic, of various ethnicities, there are also many other individuals and families that walk at least part of the way to the tomb and participate in the festival. When pilgrims arrive at the tomb area, they wait in long lines into the night to gain entrance into the shrine where the tomb of Pere Laval lies. The tomb is covered with a life-like sculpture of the priest, painted to give the impression of a living person. Pilgrims enter the shrine area carrying flowers and small offerings. Once inside the shrine, they begin saying their prayers, light candles, and hand their offerings to the assistants inside the inner tomb area. The pilgrims feel the presence of Pere Laval and a closeness to God that allows them to offer special prayers, and hope for miracles. Non-Christian participants also enter into the shrine area and offer their prayers with little distinction from their Catholic counterparts. The non-Catholics

participating in this pilgrimage are mostly of Hindu or traditional Chinese/Buddhist backgrounds, and mostly participate in the hope of healing and answered prayers, indicating their recognition of the sacred presence. The main differences in the level of participation in the festival, apart from the obvious differences in theological understanding of Pere Laval, are that the 'visiting' participants are not part of an organized group and usually participate on an individual basis. This festival is also not necessarily a focal point of their religious calendar. Despite the lack of organized efforts for participation from non-Catholic groups, several Hindu groups provide refreshments at tented booths and thereby support for the pilgrims along the way to the shrine. This support demonstrates the common Mauritian concept of recognizing and easing the journey and suffering of pilgrims by offering refreshments, and by pouring water on the island's hot roads. Both organized groups and individuals from all religious backgrounds, practice this type of activity during the several pilgrimage festivals throughout the year.

#### Kavadee: Description and Participation

The Kavadee festival is the main festival of the Tamil Hindu community in Mauritius. Kavadee comes from the word to carry, marking the sacrifice of carrying the "kavadee," a large, decorative, wooden replica of a temple or deity. Devotees, who have been fasting for ten days, begin by gathering at a local river, bathing in the water to cleanse themselves of impurities. Each extended family participating in the festival procession, prepares a kavadee at home, bringing it to the river for last minute preparations and blessings. The kavadees vary in size, shape, and style. Families group together with members of their temple along the banks of the river, performing small *pujas* to Lord Murguan, who is pictured somewhere on the kavadee. The priest of each temple visits the kavadee of each participating family, offering blessings and registering them for the procession.

One of the most striking parts of the Kavadee festival is the body piercing that many devotees choose to undertake. This ancient ritual is another form of sacrifice offered to Lord Murgan, a form of devotion and demonstration of commitment to their faith. Many devotees participate every year, while others may participate if they have a family member that is sick and in need of blessing, or if they have a special prayer they

want answered. Each temple group prepares to leave the riverbank in a procession through the streets to the temple, led by a group of traditional musicians. The prayers and chanting of the rest of the family encourage the family member carrying the kavadee, as they all walk in the procession. Some devotees choose to pull a large kavadee on wheels rather than carrying one on their shoulders; these carts are attached to the devotees' body with hooks into their skin. Devotees may also perform other types of sacrifice rituals, for example, walking on shoes made of nails or fixing limes and lemons to their bodies using hooks. Devotees often enter into trances and find the strength to continue their sacrifice thanks to the devotional music and the chants and prayers of their families. When the procession arrives at the temple, a large group greets the devotees, as the procession wraps around the temple and enters through the front door. The devotees put down their kavadees and remove their piercings, before participating in a prayer service. The evening following the festival, the priests remove from the temple the image of Lord Murgan created for the ten days of prayers services associated with the, and take down the flag signifying the festival period.

The Kavadee festival is a public holiday in Mauritius and Mauritians of many backgrounds come out to observe the procession or pour water on the hot road to ease the suffering of the barefoot devotees, including many Muslims living in the predominantly Muslim area of Plaine Verte in Port Louis, through which a major Kavadee procession passes. Although many Tamil leaders and Mauritians in general describe Kavadee as a festival that has many 'visiting' participants, this no longer seems to be the case, especially in urban areas. As the festival is the hallmark of Tamil identity in Mauritius, this festival is embraced and practiced by the educated urban elite along with local villagers, unlike in India. Although even in urban areas there may be a few families of non-Tamil or of mixed Tamil backgrounds that participate in Kavadee, it is more common for non-Tamil participants to be seen at the village celebrations of the festival, where sacrifice and practice of the festival is linked in the minds of some to the protection of the village. In recent years, Mauritians of Chinese and African descent who are usually Christian, have been active participants in Kavadee, but in a study conducted in 1997 and in my own study in 2004, there were very few 'visiting' participants from

these ethnic groups. More commonly, Telegu and even Marathi Hindus are seen participating in Kavadee, but again, not in large numbers.

Because the government recognizes the festival of Kavadee as a public holiday, it has become the central festival and landmark of Tamil religious practice and identity in Mauritius. This has led to an increase in the involvement of the Mauritius Tamil Temple Federation and other such organizing groups. Performers and participants from India are also brought to Mauritius or welcomed if they working in the country, and have provided guidance, leadership and demonstrated new trends in Kavadee rituals in India. This was the case in 2004 with the participation of a group of Tamil construction workers who created futuristic kavadees made out of aluminum foil and performed different spirit-possession rituals before the procession left the riverbed. The influence of educated and urban Tamils and their deeper connection with India as well as their newer concerns with preserving their ethnic and religious identity could all have contributed to the decline in inter-religious participation at Kavadee. This example demonstrates the model of the festival being clearly a Tamil festival under the Tamil administration and leadership with a small number of individual or familial 'visiting' participants who none-the-less perform the rituals of self-sacrifice and prayer offerings to Lord Murgan and maintain a level of sincere religious experience. Another Tamil festival that blurs more of these distinctions and is far more widely attended by 'visiting' participants from a wider variety of backgrounds is the fire-walking festival of Theemithi.

### Theemithi

The festival of Theemithi is an ancient Tamil Hindu tradition from South India. The festival takes place at various temples throughout December and January (and sometimes in March) and is practiced widely at Tamil temples in Mauritius. The festival is in honor of the Mother Goddess who takes the form of Kali, Durga, Draupadi or other goddesses depending on the temple and local tradition. After ten days of fasting and prayers, those participating in the festival gather at the temple with their families to make offerings. They often have to wait in long lines to get into the inner sanctuary of the temple, where the priests can assist them with the rituals. The festival is called the fire-walking festival as devotees walk across a bed of hot coals and embers to demonstrate their devotion to

the goddess. This form of self-sacrifice demonstrates their surrender to the goddess and their desire for the blessings and protection of the goddess. The goddess is said to lay her sari over the pit to ease the pain of the walking devotees. Devotees may also participate in the festival if they have recently received an answered prayer or blessing, or are praying for something special, such as a cure for an illness or a new job.

The priests come to inspect the pit of burning embers that has been preparing for days and offer prayers of blessing over the fire pit and the pool of water and milk at the end of the pit used for cooling the feet. While observers and many family members gather at the temple, most of the devotees enter into the temple area in a procession led by a band from the local riverbed where they have cleansed themselves. The first participant walks over the pit of hot coals to the chanting and roaring of the crowds, which along with the music and drumming, creates an intense atmosphere. Then, one by one, other devotees walk over the pit and into the cooling pool at the end. They receive a blessing from the priest seated at the end of the walk, and they proceed to be reunited with their family, their sacrifice complete. At the largest Theemithi in Mauritius, over four thousand participants (men, women, and children), walked over the pit in dedication to the fierce goddess Kali.

Many Mauritians have a strong belief that the Mother Goddess protects the village and can offer blessings or cause destruction. They feel that a festival like Theemithi is a place where her presence can be felt, offerings can be made to appease her, and prayers can be answered. Many people, especially women, often become possessed with the spirit of the goddess during such festivals and begin wailing and moving around in a trance until they are touched and clamed by a priest. This is seen by the rest of the devotees as a clear sign of the presence of the goddess, and is one of the reasons that many non-Tamils attend and fully participate in Theemithi festivals.

Theemithi festivals are much more localized than a festival like Kavadee because they take place at different times and places, providing villages much more of a sense of belonging at their local Theemithi celebration. The practices and traditions for each celebration also vary considerably based on location, caste, goddess being worshiped etc. For example, at the Kali Theemithi on the Medine sugar estate in Bambous, eight goats are sacrificed each year and male and female participants are not separated in terms of

when they walk over the fire pit. These practices are definitely not seen in higher caste and more urban celebrations and temples. It is at the more rural events, however, that there is a great deal more non-Tamil participation and considerably more open displays of spirit possession, even by ‘visiting’ participants. The atmosphere at rural Theemithi festivals is one of intensity and villagers describe that they can feel the presence of the goddess. For this reasons, many local Creole Mauritians and Sino Mauritians attend and participate by walking over the fire pit, hoping to either appease the goddess or ask her for something special. Some rural Theemithi festivals take place at Kalimai shrines, places that are considered to house the deities of the village and are also places where some villagers practice magic. Despite their apparent ‘westernization’ in terms of secular education and pop-culture influences, many Mauritians have held onto and preserved the superstitious beliefs and practices of their ancestors, and many more continue the practices and rituals surrounding the local superstitions even if they are not fully convinced of their validity. This is clearly evident at Kalimai shrines.

### Kalimai Shrines

Every village in Mauritius has a shrine known as the Kalimai, which is always near the outer limits of the village. The shrine consists of an altar containing seven stones, representing the seven sisters (or planets) of popular Hinduism and some sort of marked stone or small shrine to the goddess Kali, the main goddess of the Kalimai. Around the outskirts of the Kalimai are usually several trees that often house male gods, one of which is usually the protector god of the village, known as Dhi in Bhojpuri. The Kalimai shrines were some of the first sacred places created by the indentured laborers, for the protection of themselves and families in their sugar estate villages. The cult of Kalimai is still very strong today, especially in rural Mauritius and especially among women who perform rituals asking for the protection of Kali and making offerings to appease her. The shrines are used by different people for different rituals that vary based primarily on gender and caste, and although Sanantanist Hindi-speaking Hindus are the primary practitioners, Mauritians from a variety of backgrounds make offerings and prayers at the Kalimai shrine, recognizing the powers of the goddess. The Kalimai shrine is often associated with or close by to the home of the Dhi or village protector god, who is also widely

worshipped and appeased by non-Hindus and some scholars believe may even have a non- Hindu origin.

The most significant event of non-Hindu participation at the Kalimai shrine was previously the annual Bharaiya Puja, that was offered annually for a good sugar can harvest and for the general well being of the village. Because the livelihood of so many villagers, including the Tamil, Telegu, Sino-Mauritian, and Creole communities were dependent on sugar, these *pujas* were widely attended. Because there is no longer any funding provided by the sugar estate owners for such events, and the villagers are becoming less dependent on the sugar industry, some Kalimai shrines are being converted by prominent Sanatanist Hindi-speaking leaders into small temples, partly to get more government funding and partly, perhaps, to try to eliminate some practices they see as superstitious or low caste, such as the practice of magic or animal sacrifice. This trend, especially in larger villages, has begun to eliminate some of the inter-religious participation at some Kalimai shrines, and will only continue to convert these rural goddess shrines into temples controlled by an upper-caste Hindi-speaking authority, and will probably contribute to disappearance of some local rituals and practices.

### **National Identity and Unity in Mauritius**

In any diverse nation, there are questions of what if anything unites that nation's citizens. In the multitude of identities, is there a place for a national identity in a diverse society? What ties people together, binds them to coexist peacefully under one set of laws? In Mauritius, these are questions of great importance for younger generations who are increasingly marrying partners of different ethnic or religious backgrounds, maintaining close and intimate friendships with those of different backgrounds, and are looking for ways to connect with each other as Mauritians. However, these are also questions of immediate significance as the consequences of their answers provide the outline for the viability of Mauritius as a peaceful society. Although many Mauritians continue to describe Mauritius as a rainbow nation, a place where everyone gets along well, under the surface, many Mauritians talk somewhat openly, usually using a number of stereotypes,

about their distrust of those of different backgrounds, revealing a deep sentiment of ethnocentrism on the island. This type of distrust can develop into tension when one group or another feels that they are being overlooked or marginalized on the national level, and can lead to blame and animosity towards other groups. In 1999, these tensions were the underlying causes of riots that shut down the country for several days. As Mauritians look toward their future, there are unifying and dividing factors effecting Mauritian society to take into consideration.

Unifying factors:

1. There are no indigenous peoples of the island, making every Mauritian an immigrant of some kind. This seemingly simple factor allows each immigrant group and each Mauritian to feel as though they have equal claim to the land and therefore to the concept of the nation.
2. In modern Mauritius, the most important and significant unifying factor is the perhaps the smallness of the society, forcing the interaction of the people in the workplace, in schools, in neighborhoods. Throughout the history of Mauritius, the different ethnic groups have had different levels of interaction, but for much of the nation's colonial past the colonial authorities enforced segregation first between the slaves and the planters, and then between the indentured laborers, ex-slaves, planters, and other immigrants. Over the years, however, interactions began to take place more frequently, and now with the break down in predetermined occupations, especially since independence, the interactions between the groups take place every day. This not only results in inter-ethnic and inter-religious friendships, it leads to the even more significant factor of knowledge. Most Mauritians can describe a wedding or death ritual of a religious tradition other than their own. They are knowledgeable about the religious festivals and some of the more important rituals of their neighbor's religious traditions, and are familiar with seeing numerous types of religious centers in their neighborhoods. This type of knowledge eliminates one of the most detrimental and dangerous factors in diverse society, ignorance.
3. Another extremely powerful factor uniting all Mauritians is the language of Mauritian Creole, which has become the mother tongue of most Mauritians,

especially those of younger generations. This not only allows people to have a comfortable common language of interaction but also allows the media and leadership to communicate in a language that does not single out one specific group or eliminate another. Despite the widespread use of Creole as the street language, it is not taught formally in schools, has no official written form, and has no credit given for mastery of the language on the examinations required for high school completion. This has caused communal feuding due to the full recognition of other languages such as Hindi and Chinese that are thought of as languages specific to ethnic groups in Mauritius, yet there is no recognition for Creole that is historically linked to the Mauritians that are descendents of ex-slaves and are of African ancestry. Politicians and other leaders that stand to benefit from fears of marginalization and lack of fair opportunities for children play upon this type of tension, exploiting it for their own gain.

4. Another trend in contemporary Mauritian society is the increasing influence of western pop culture, and the completion of higher education, in many cases in foreign countries. While many young Mauritians study at the University of Mauritius, interacting in social situations at a more mature age, a significant number, either through their parents' finances or through government scholarships, complete some part of their university studies abroad, usually in Europe, Australia, or North America. The young Mauritians that find themselves in foreign countries for study naturally make powerful friendships and bonds with other Mauritians in the same situation, highlighting their commonalities as Mauritians despite their possible ethnic and religious differences. These types of interaction, along with influence of western pop culture, especially French television and American music, has led to both an increase in 'love' marriages (not arranged by parents) and to an increase in inter-group and inter-religious marriages. In a society where most parents still expect their children to marry from within their same ethnic and religious subgroup, this increase is both significant and challenging. Currently a majority of children from a mixed marriage are pushed in the direction of the culture of one parent, and tend to fall into this group; in the case of an Indian and Creole inter-ethnic marriage, most

children assume the Creole identity as it somewhat common within this community to have a certain amount of 'mixed' ancestry. However, as mixed marriages become more common, there is a new level of personal struggles and familial conflict arising. There is also a feeling among religious leadership that culture and identity in younger generations is threatened by these types of relationships and is also one of the possible reasons for an increase in the number of exclusive and fundamentalist groups on the island.

#### Dividing factors:

1. In such a small nation divided into seven electoral districts, every vote is heavily solicited by each of the candidates running in that district. In recent years, especially since 1999, many Mauritians have noticed a trend in political campaigning that plays on the fears of tensions between the different communities. Some politicians manipulate and divide the population to better their chances of gaining votes, usually either with the majority group, or with a collection of minority groups. This not only creates divisions within society, it usually elects someone to power that is seen as only representing one or several groups and their interests, creating further fractionalization. Politicians are also participating more in religious festivals, and using these platforms to give speeches and inadvertently campaign for their party. This also aligns certain politicians with certain religious groups, playing into assumptions that religious and ethnic groups share common political and social concerns that differ from the 'other' groups. Politicians use their creation of a fear of marginalization as a way of soliciting more support for themselves. This can also have the inverse effect, for example, while the Prime Minister paid the customary visit to celebrations of the Tamil festival of Kavadee, he was not invited by the organizing Hindu groups to attend Maha Shivaratri in 2004 because of his non-Hindu background. This was probably done to try to send a clear message to the Hindu masses about the Prime Minister's ability to relate to or care for them, and was no doubt orchestrated by the Hindu religious leaders that traditionally favor the opposition party. This type of act and the practice of entangling religious affairs and politics

- for political gain are becoming more and more common and creating great divisions within Mauritian society.
2. The campaigning of politicians is not the only way that the political arena perpetuates communalism in Mauritian society. The quota system set up by the Mauritian constitution to ensure that minority groups are represented, at least to a certain extent, in parliament is known as the electoral system of 'best loser.' The best loser system, in order to function, requires all politicians to identify themselves as a member of one of the communities laid out in the constitution. However, these communal groups and their allocations under the system are based on the 1972 census, as since the 1980s it has been illegal to ask citizens to place themselves in a certain community in order to protect their privacy rights. This system both institutionalizes the communities themselves, which have and will continue to grow and change since 1972, and the impression that a person needs a communal identity and is inevitably concerned about and represents only the interests of that community. Since politicians are then perceived to only represent one group, they further the divisive nature of politics by negative campaigning, often insinuating stereotypical depictions of other groups. The pervasive use of stereotypes in Mauritius and its detrimental consequences are only perpetuated by the institutionalization of communal identities through the quota system.
  3. Despite the quotas of the best loser system, Mauritian society, in both the political and economic realms, is still primarily dominated by upper caste Hindus and to a lesser extent Franco-Mauritians, Mauritian descendents of French settlers, who continue to own a disproportionate amount of land, a precious commodity on a small island. This monopolization of political and to a certain extent economic power creates resentment and legitimate concerns about the opportunities available to Mauritians outside of these powerful groups and the disadvantage created by this trend. Although many Mauritians of all backgrounds are finding success in the private sector or through advanced education, the political presence of members of certain Hindu groups continues to create the impression of political dominance that contributes to communal tensions.

4. Because of the lack of opportunity for Creole Mauritians, along with their disproportionate representation in the unemployment and poverty figures, many Creole Mauritians have historically felt disengaged with society or become plagued by social ills. This, along with significant racism against Mauritians of African descent, is known under the term “Malaise Creole.” Despite the very real social effects of this ‘syndrome,’ other groups have manipulated attempts by Creole Mauritians to empower themselves by claiming their own groups are also being marginalized. This rhetoric, especially by politicians and often also by religious leaders, creates a sense of communal resentment and a feeling of disempowerment even in the most powerful majority group.
5. Perhaps as a partial consequence of these political and communal antics, many Mauritians have begun looking to their ancestral homelands for support, connection, and a sense of identity. As discussed earlier, the globalization of ideas and desire for strong connections to groups outside of the country has led to the creation of Hindu groups influenced by Hindu Nationalist movements in India and to the Islamization of many Mauritian Muslims. These groups and their tendency toward instigating further communalism in Mauritius continue to threaten Mauritius as a peaceful and prosperous society.

The problem of communalism on the national level in Mauritius, especially since the riots of 1999, continues to spread distrust and prejudice to the neighborhood level. The rhetorical manipulation of communal issues by politicians for their own gain is becoming more apparent, especially at the local level, where the national lines on the value of diversity in Mauritian society do not transform themselves to issue of job discrimination or educational opportunity. However, younger generations of Mauritians are forming relationships and friendships that transcend ethnic and communal boundaries, especially in the upper socio-economic classes. The question remains, however, will these future leaders continue to embrace the diversity of their friends and nation as a valuable asset to their increasingly developed country, or will they become disheartened and disenfranchised with their society and join the tendency towards communalism? In recent years, in reaction to some of the trends mentioned above, a group called l’Organization

pour Unite, or the Organization for Unity, was created to address issues of communalism and ethnocentrism in Mauritius and to try to focus on some of the things Mauritians share and have in common. Perhaps this group is addressing the one thing that Mauritians lack, a sense of belonging to Mauritius as well as to their religious and ethnic heritage, something that can be achieved through a secular constitution, a common set of laws, and equal and free opportunities and rights for all citizens. Despite the fact that all these things are legally in place, under the present political atmosphere, there looks to be little consolidation of Mauritian national identity and instead more communal segregation and tension that could lead to future escalations of violence before a real effort is made by political and religious leaders to heal their fractured society.