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# A Global Hindu Tamil Diaspora? Worldwide Migration, Diversity and Transnational Religion

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**Abstract:** At a time when the ideas of 'global Indian diasporas' and of a 'global Hinduism' are developing, the aim of this chapter is to establish whether it is relevant to speak of a 'global Hindu Tamil diaspora', given the cultural and migration specificities of Hindu Tamils and their involvement in the development overseas Hinduism. To answer this question, this chapter deals with overseas Hindu Tamils as a whole, considering Tamils from India and Sri Lanka jointly. The chapter first examines the history and scope of Tamil migration around the world. Then, it questions the relevance of using the term 'diaspora' to refer to the Tamil émigrés and their descendants, based on the criteria of a diaspora proposed by Rogers Brubaker. The third part shows that many specific religious practices are common among Hindu Tamils living in different parts of the world, and that these practices are increasingly connected through transnational networks and exchanges, especially in temple activities. Thus, although all Hindu emigrants of Tamil origin are far from constituting a homogeneous transnational community, it seems appropriate to speak of a global Hindu Tamil diaspora, given the global scale of Tamil emigration, the increasing homeland-orientation and transnational consciousness among overseas Tamils, and the formation of a transnational Tamil Hinduism.

**Keywords:** Hinduism, Hindu diaspora, Tamil diaspora, Tamil Hinduism, Transnational religion, Transnational Hinduism, Hindu temple, Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils

## A Global Hindu Tamil Diaspora?

### Worldwide Migration, Diversity, and Transnational Religion

*Pierre-Yves Trouillet*

**/p.237/** It is well established today that the Tamil people and their religious practices and institutions are present on all continents. Their emigration started from the Tamils' historic cultural region in South India, which was called *Tamiḷakam* ('Tamil homeland') in the ancient Sangam (*Caṅkam*) literature, and which became the Tamil-speaking State of the Republic of India in 1956, renamed Tamil Nadu ('Tamil country') in 1969. Tamils have been crossing the Indian Ocean since ancient times, but it is especially since the colonial period that their emigration has become massive and global in scope, involving humble workers as well as representatives from higher socio-professional backgrounds.

This worldwide dispersion has also involved Tamils originating from the neighbouring northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, where the first Tamils probably settled in the first century BCE (Clothey 2006: 3). In 1325, Tamils even established the city of Jaffna as a separate kingdom, which flourished as such until the sixteenth century (*ibid.*). Since then, they have formed the 'Jaffna Tamils' ethnic group, which is distinct from the other main group of Sri Lankan Tamils—the 'Hill country' or 'Up-country' Tamils (*Malaiyaga Tamilar*), who were generally low-caste labourers sent from South India by the British in the nineteenth century to work in the plantations in the island's central hills (Bass 2013). The Jaffna Tamils have also been those most exposed to the violence of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009) between the

Sinhalese majority and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), leading many to seek refuge in India and numerous Western countries.

Consequently, speaking of ‘Tamils’ means dealing with populations that are quite diverse, not only in terms of regional origins, castes, and classes, but also in terms of their migratory history. Moreover, while this chapter focuses on Hindu Tamils, it must be kept in mind that not all Tamils are Hindu, which accentuates their socio-cultural diversity. Indeed, according to the 2011 Indian census, 87.5 per cent of the Tamil Nadu population are Hindus, 6 per cent Christians and 6 per cent Muslims. In Sri Lanka, Hindus are also predominant among Tamils, as they **/p.238/** accounted for 58 per cent of Tamil speakers in 2001, while Muslims (Moors) accounted for 32 per cent and Christians 10 per cent (Meyer 2011: 15).

Regarding the ‘Hindu Tamil diaspora’, transnational linkages within overseas Sri Lankan Tamils have already been well studied, particularly in the field of politics (Amarasingham 2015, Chalk 2008, Dequirez 2011, Étiemble 2017, Fuglerud 1999, Guyot 2021, McDowell 1996, Maunaguru and Spencer 2018, Nadarajah 2009, Orjuela 2008, Thiranagama 2014, Wayland 2004, etc.), and more recently with regard to their matrimonial practices (Maunaguru 2019). Numerous academic publications dealing with the ‘Indian diaspora’ have also been published from the 1990s, and several scholars have even used religion as a basis for categorizing it (Vertovec 1997), in particular by using the term ‘Hindu diaspora’ (Jaffrelot 2017, Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007, Kalpana 2018, Rukmani 2001, Vertovec 2000). Yet, despite the trend of considering India’s regional identities, such as the Tamils, and attempts by India’s regional states to connect with their own ‘diasporas’ (Carsignol 2011), relatively little work has so far focused on the Hindu Tamil diaspora on a global scale. Admittedly, there is a vast literature dealing with the religious practices of overseas Hindu Tamil communities settled in specific host countries, be they Indian or Sri Lankan (Baumann 2009, Bradley 2018, Bruland 2012, Clothey 2006, Goreau-Ponceaud 2011, Jacobsen 2009, Lang 2021, Maunaguru 2021,

Sooryamoorthy 1977, Maunaguru and Spencer 2018, Trouillet 2014, Whitaker 2015, etc.), but very little work has yet dealt with the overseas Tamil Hindus and Hinduism as a whole, especially considering Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils jointly (Trouillet 2012, Vethanayagamony 2020), which is precisely the purpose of this chapter. To be more precise, at a time when the ideas of ‘global Indian diasporas’ (Oonk 2007) and of a ‘global Hinduism’ (Kalpana 2018) are developing, the aim of this chapter is to establish whether it is relevant to speak of a ‘global Hindu Tamil diaspora’, given the cultural specificity of Tamils, the scope of their migration, and also the diversity of overseas Tamil communities. To answer this question, it is first necessary to examine the history and extent of Tamil migration around the world, and then to question the relevance of using the term ‘diaspora’ to refer to the Tamil émigrés and their descendants. Finally, the third part of the chapter deals with the transnationalization of Tamil Hinduism.

## **The Global Scope of Tamil Migration**

The first remark about overseas Tamil populations concerns the scale of their emigration, which has become effectively global. Nevertheless, there were hardly any significant examples of emigration of Tamil populations outside their historical region before the colonial period, except in neighbouring regions (Clothey 2006: 2–5, Guilmoto 1991, Vethanayagamony 2020). The main exception is the **p.239** Tamil settlement in northern and eastern Ceylon, as already mentioned. And although the dynastic kingdoms of the Pallavas and the Cholas participated in the Indianization of South East Asia (the Cholas even established an embassy in China) and Tamil guilds traded from Arabia to Indochina, Tamil migration outside South India remained of modest proportions during the pre-colonial period. The movement of Tamil populations outside the Indian subcontinent was more about small groups, which mainly involved military personnel, traders, and missionaries.

## The Colonial Period

The situation changed as Europeans gained ground in India, for the Indian populations progressively constituted an important reservoir of labour for their colonial empires. Europeans first deported thousands of Indian slaves to their colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably to Ceylon, South East Asia, the Mascarene Islands, and South Africa (Stanziani 2020). Historians report that slave exports from Coromandel increased from about 2,000 in 1622 to 8,000–10,000 in 1659–61 (Wink 2003 cited by Stanziani 2020). And between 1670 and the late eighteenth century, a total of 24,000 Indian slaves were exported to Mauritius and Reunion (Allen 2005 cited by Stanziani 2020). The first batch of free Tamils to expatriate beyond Asia in the colonial context were probably those who left for the Mascarenes in the early eighteenth century. In 1729, 1730, and 1735, a few hundred Tamil skilled artisans, labourers, and servants were brought by the French to Mauritius (then called '*Ile de France*') (Sooryamoorthy 1977) and probably to La Reunion ('*Ile Bourbon*') (Singaravélou 1987).

Then, from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, Indian and Tamil migration progressed on an unprecedented scale. This was both in numerical terms, as they became truly massive, and in geographical terms, as they rapidly crossed the three main oceans. Initially, these mass migrations mainly involved indentured workers. This proletarian migration of '*coolies*'<sup>1</sup> developed after the abolition of slavery in the European colonies (1833 in Britain, 1848 in France), in response to the high demand for unskilled labour to replace the emancipated slaves in the countries of the colonial empire. Many Indians, including Tamils, left for the Mascarene Islands, then for the Guianas, the Caribbean, and East and Southern Africa, and finally for Fiji. This type of proletarian migration also developed in areas closer to the sub-continent, such as Ceylon, Burma, and Malaysia.

<sup>1</sup> From the Tamil word *kūli*, 'salary'. By extension, '*coolie*' became the colonial name given to bonded labourers of Indian (or Chinese) origin.

**/p.240/** The Tamil country played a major role in this economic and migratory system due to its strategic geographical location and the importance of its colonial ports. The first Tamil migrant workers arrived in Ceylon in the late 1820s and 10 years later in Malaysia. They were considered as ‘indentured labourers’, but they endured a status of bonded workers. Moreover, unlike indentured labour, which was based on contracts for the recruitment of individual<sup>2</sup> workers, predominantly originating from the north of the subcontinent (and sent mainly to English Guiana, Fiji, Trinidad, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Suriname), the *kangani*<sup>3</sup> system, which prevailed in South India for workers sent to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaysia (*maystri* system), was based on a collective recruitment method extending to the family or village network.<sup>4</sup>

The migration of indentured labourers to Mauritius dates from the same period and quickly attracted several thousand Tamils from the Madras Presidency. Over the next two decades, this migration spread to La Reunion, involving the French trading posts in Pondicherry and Karikal too. The proportion of Tamil indentured labourers going to the West Indies and Fiji was smaller than those remaining in the Indian Ocean, although the French sent significant numbers of Tamils to Martinique and Guadeloupe (Singaravélou 1987). By the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of these migratory flows were more marginal for the Tamil country, apart from those to Ceylon and the Malay Peninsula. Migration to Burma, far from being limited to Tamils, is more recent but, in the end, Ceylon, the Malay Peninsula, and Burma received ‘the vast majority of Tamil emigration’ during this period (Guilmoto 1991: 126). The last

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, middlemen or agents (*kangani*) played a major role in the recruitment and transportation of labour for both recruitment systems (Carter 1995).

<sup>3</sup> From the Tamil word *kaṅkāṇi*, ‘team leader’ or ‘foreman’.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake pointed out, ‘[W]hile many indentured labour immigrants had signed an agreement known as *girmitiya*, that provided limited safeguards to perform contract labor for three to five years in plantations owned and operated by the British Raj, [. . .] the *kangani* along with the *maistry* system, were contrived to circumvent laws of the Government of India and Madras, which did not permit indentured labour to some colonies’ (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020: 74).

destination for Tamil migration in this framework was probably Fiji at the turn of the nineteenth century, and up to around 1915 (ibid., Naidu et al. 2020).

Originally, such migration was temporary, as it was linked to economic circumstances and controlled by restrictive legislation. The Tamil indentured labourers were mainly Hindus from the rural lower castes belonging to the poorest social strata (Clothey 2006, Guilmoto 1991, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020, Vignato 2020). They were often subservient to the landowners in their home villages, both because of their economic dependence and their disadvantaged position in the rigid caste system. Overseas employment opportunities were thus an alternative to their situation, especially as high population growth increased the severity of famines and fed the potential labour pool. Nevertheless, although our **p.241** knowledge of the caste of migrants in this period depends on their registration on certificates and ship lists, it seems that the middle and upper castes also migrated in this context (Stanziani 2020), as several studies on the Caribbean (Singaravélou 1987), Natal (Bhana 1991), and Mauritius (Carter 1995) demonstrate.

Furthermore, despite being in the majority, indentured labourers were not the only Tamils to migrate during the colonial period. Free migration also developed between the final decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This involved a merchant population of bankers, traders, or clerks, often from the upper castes, engaging as imperial auxiliaries in administrative, military, or economic management functions in South Africa, Mauritius, Burma, Malaysia, Fiji, East and Southern African countries, and to a lower extent in Vietnam. The Tamil trading caste of the Nattukkottai Chettiars, in particular, deployed their members throughout much of South East Asia and the Indian Ocean, while developing an international banking network, the centre of which remained in their home region in the Tamil country, the Cheṭṭināṭu (the ‘land of the Chettiars’). They invested their wealth in their temples and maintained caste, economic, and religious ties with their home territory (Ramanathan 2001,



Rudner 1994). In Ceylon, Tamils who possessed the means migrated to other British colonies, like Malaysia. In 1911, Kuala Lumpur was home to an estimated 7,000 Jaffna people, many of whom were employed on the peninsula's railways (Madavan 2011, Meyer 2006).

Early in the twentieth century, an anti-indentured emigration movement grew up in India, demographic crises slowed down in the South, and pan-Indian distress migration faded away. As a result, the emigration of indentured labourers gradually died out on the eve of the First World War and was abolished by the British empire in 1917 (the *kangani* system in 1938), and disappeared completely in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1931, after a century of emigration, more than one and a half million Tamils were counted in (mostly British) colonies outside India (Guilmoto 1991: 149). Having long been temporarily overseas for employment purposes, the Tamils started finally to take root outside their native regions. The expatriate communities then became less fragile, as they were less dependent on the migratory movements that had ensured their renewal for nearly a century (ibid.).

## The Post-Colonial Period

After India's independence in 1947, the migration patterns and countries of destination changed, and targeted mainly the West and the Middle East. Many Indian Tamils migrated first to the former colonial metropolises, largely as a result of Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of integrating Indian emigrant communities into the entities that emerged from the dismemberment of the British Empire rather than **/p.242/** into the Indian Union, and advocating that the descendants of indentured labourers stay behind and be loyal to their host country. In the case of France, these were mainly the families of Tamils born in the French Indian trading posts who chose French nationality when the French possessions were attached to independent India (1954–1962). In Britain, much larger and more diversified waves of South Asian

immigration took place between 1950 and 1970, in response to the demand for labour linked to the economic growth of the time.

Then a new category of South Asian immigrants arrived in the United Kingdom between the late 1960s and 1970s: the ‘twice migrants’ (Bhachu 1985). In addition to the trauma of the displacements linked to Partition, certain post-colonial predicaments led many South Asians, including Tamils, to leave their first country of settlement for the United Kingdom because of the economic and political contexts (economic crisis in Mauritius, inter-ethnic conflicts in Fiji, Africanization in East Africa, apartheid in Natal, anti-Indian nationalism in Sri Lanka and Burma). In this context, Christophe Guilmoto explains that ‘the lack of geographical diversification (ghettos and pockets of concentration) and professional diversification (specialization or lack of qualification), together with the maintenance of their distinct ethnic identity, has given overseas Tamils a specific social profile which, during periods of tension, meant they were ideal targets for abuse or persecution’ (Guilmoto 1991: 138, my translation). Some generations from earlier migration were then forced to flee repression or risk expulsion. This involved all classes of overseas Tamils. Between 1968 and 1984, half of the Sri Lanka Up-country Tamils (459,000 people) were expatriated to India (Meyer 2011:17). Sri Lanka’s English-speaking Tamil elite, who saw employment restricted due to the adoption of Sinhala as the only official language, left for Britain and the Commonwealth countries (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) (ibid., Kandasamy et al. 2020). Indian Nattukkottai Chettiars, whose influence throughout South East Asia was considerable in the 1930s, were driven out of Burma and then Sri Lanka.

During the civil war in Sri Lanka, about one hundred thousand Tamils fled the war zones to Tamil Nadu (Goreau-Ponceaud 2014). The first wave of long-distance migration, which mainly involved Sri Lankan Tamils from upper castes, initially went to countries where the previous generation of expatriates had already settled, in particular Britain and Canada (Meyer

2011: 19). But as these two countries became more difficult to access, due to the closure of borders to unspecified Commonwealth citizens, many had to seek refuge elsewhere in Europe. This was notably the case in Germany (Baumann 2006), France (Dequirez 2011, Étiemble 2017, Goreau-Ponceaud 2011), Italy, the Scandinavian countries (Bruland 2012, Fuglerud 1999, Jacobsen 2009), and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland (Baumann 2010) and the Netherlands.

Since the end of the 1960s, North America and Australia have also offered migratory alternatives to all Hindu Tamils, as have Singapore and Malaysia, /p.243/ although sometimes on a more temporary basis. These migrations mainly concern an intellectual diaspora largely comprising urban people from high socio-professional backgrounds who cannot find sufficient jobs to match their qualifications in India (the famous South Asian ‘brain-drain’).<sup>5</sup> Sri Lankan Tamils especially found asylum in Canada (Amarasingam 2015, Bradley 2018), and particularly in Toronto, which probably hosts the most important Tamil community outside Asia.

Today, the other major destination for Tamil Hindu emigrants, be they Indian or Sri Lankan, is the Persian Gulf countries, where the economic growth since the 1970s has led to a strong demand for labour. This mainly involves a kind of ‘modern coolie trade’ of low-skilled or unskilled workers, who spend a few years in these countries. Although the majority of these Tamil migrants are Muslims, many Hindus are attracted from South India and from Sri Lanka by such an economic opportunity, particularly for work in construction, catering, and services. This labour migration remains temporary, especially since family reunification is often prohibited, but many migrants return after a stay in India or Sri Lanka (Meyer 2011: 20–1).

In demographic terms, there are no reliable and consistent figures on the distribution of all populations of Tamil origin by country. Estimates of the size of the Tamil diaspora vary and

<sup>5</sup> Sundar Pichai, the current CEO of Google, is a native of Chennai.

should only be regarded as approximations.<sup>6</sup> With regard to Sri Lankan Tamils, Éric Paul Meyer (2011) refers to a 1995 official Sri Lankan government estimate that about 500,000 migrants had left their country since 1980. Considering the birth of children abroad, Meyer estimates that Sri Lankan Tamils numbered around one million in the early 2010s, which represents a quarter of the total Sri Lankan Tamil population (ICG 2010 quoted by Guyot 2021). In terms of host countries, the International Crisis Group (ibid.) estimates that the state of Tamil Nadu is home to some 200,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, and that there are large communities in Canada (200,000–300,000), Britain (180,000), Germany (60,000), Australia (40,000), Switzerland (47,000), France (40,000–50,000), the Netherlands (20,000), the United States (25,000), Italy (15,000), Malaysia (20,000), Norway (10,000), Denmark (7,000), New Zealand (3,000) and Sweden (2,000). Smaller communities are also settled in South Africa, the Gulf States, and several South East Asian countries.

Regarding Tamils of Indian origin, in 2015, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated at 28 million what it has called the ‘Indian diaspora’ since 2000 (with the establishment of the ‘High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora’). This /p.244/ Indian diaspora was then composed of 11 million ‘Non-Resident Indians’ (NRI), who are Indian citizens holding an Indian passport and residing abroad for an indefinite period of time (which in practice corresponds to most recent emigrants to the Middle East, North America, Europe, or Australia); and 17 million ‘Persons of Indian Origin’ (PIO), who are citizens of any country other than Bangladesh or Pakistan who once held an Indian passport or whose ancestors (up to the fourth generation) were born or permanently resided in the territory of independent India (most PIOs thus correspond to emigrants from the colonial period and their descendants). As Tamils represent 6 per cent of the Indian national population and have always been very much

<sup>6</sup> Very few governments count the number of Tamils in their national populations. In the few cases where Tamils are counted, no distinction is made as to their country of origin. The governments of Australia, Canada, Norway, and Switzerland are exceptions and have attempted to count and distinguish Tamils from India and Sri Lanka (ICG 2010).

involved in the various emigration movements, it can be legitimately estimated that the Indian Tamils living outside India represent about 6 per cent of the Indian diaspora today, that is, 1.6 million.

## **A Tamil Diaspora?**

From Malaysia to Fiji, passing through South Africa, Canada, the Caribbean, the Mascarenes, and Europe, Tamil migration has clearly reached a global dimension. However, Tamils are not the majority in any nation-state (Rasaratnam 2016). On the contrary, the geography of Tamil settlement, as a whole, is characterized by a dispersion that goes far beyond national borders, which constitutes a first criterion for defining a diaspora (Brubaker 2005, Safran 1991). Yet this is not enough to make all Tamils living outside India and Sri Lanka a diaspora. Indeed, while all diasporas result from migration, all migrations of ethnic groups are not necessarily diasporas. This is why, in addition to dispersion, Rogers Brubaker, in his review of the literature on the use of the concept of 'diaspora', identifies the maintenance of social boundaries and the orientation towards the country of origin as the other two specific criteria of these transnational communities (Brubaker 2005: 5). The debate on the definition and the heuristic capacity of the notion of diaspora remains open but examining the extent to which these criteria identified by Brubaker are effective in the case of Tamils enables us to assess whether or not it is relevant to speak of a Tamil diaspora. In other words, now that we have seen how global the scale of Tamil migration is, let us examine the extent to which the term diaspora is relevant to it.

## **Diversity, Heterogeneity, Hybridity**

One can legitimately question the internal cohesion of overseas Tamils in view of their great diversity in terms of caste, class, region of origin, and migration history. Can such heterogeneity

really constitute a diaspora? For example, while the extremely strong attachment to the millennia-old Tamil language and culture /p.245/ is found among Tamils both of Indian and of Sri Lankan origin (Das 2016, Ramaswami 1997), it should nevertheless be noted that the Tamil spoken in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil spoken in Jaffna are slightly different. As Sonia Das (2016) pointed out in her study of the Tamil language in Montreal, ‘Tamil migrants draw on their multilingual repertoires to navigate longstanding linguistic rivalries by arguing that Indians speak “spoken Tamil” and Sri Lankans speak “written Tamil” as their respective heritage languages’. According to her, ‘Indian Tamils showcase their use of the “cosmopolitan” sounds and scripts of colloquial varieties of Tamil to enhance their geographic and social mobilities, whereas Sri Lankan Tamils, dispossessed of their homes by civil war and restricted in travel, instead emphasize the “primordialist” sounds and scripts of a pure “literary” Tamil to rebuild a homeland’.

Such distinctions have been noticeable in other countries of immigration, as in Malaysia, for instance, where, until World War II, Ceylonese Tamils, who were temporary skilled immigrants belonging to high castes, avoided mixing with Indian Tamils, who were mainly lower-caste coolies (Madavan 2011). Marriages between Ceylonese and Indian Tamils were exceptional, and participation in Hindu Tamil places of worship was often based on regional affiliations (ibid., Ramanathan 2001). This endogamy has softened over the generations and the Malaysian Tamil community is becoming more homogeneous. But there are still many other countries where the two sub-groups prefer not to intermarry. This is particularly the case in France and Canada, where Indian Tamils are in rather higher socio-economic positions than Sri Lankan Tamils.

It must be said that regional differentiations remain relevant also in the countries of origin. In Sri Lanka, a denial of ‘Indian-ness’ has logically emerged from the centuries of insularity experienced by the Jaffna Tamils (Meyer 2006), which explains not only their linguistic

particularity but also their ethnic distinction from the Up-country Tamils. Reciprocally, since their arrival in South India in the 1980s, Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have often suffered from marginalization and exclusion, despite the efforts undertaken to minimize this by the state of Tamil Nadu (Goreau-Ponceaud 2014). Indeed, before the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by an LTTE commando which cooled relations between New Delhi and the Jaffna Tamils, the Tamil Nadu government supported the political demands of the Jaffna Tamils, whom it welcomed on its soil because of their ‘kinship’, which naturally nurtured strong solidarities without erasing mutual distinctions (Racine 2006: 302). At the turn of the twentieth century, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalithaa, even initiated an anti-Tigers policy, supported by an opinion sometimes irritated by the influx of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and shocked by the murders committed in India by the Tigers (ibid.). But today, India is committed to a strong support for the aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for ‘equality, justice, peace and dignity’ (position taken by India at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021).

**/p.246/** Internal differentiations do not concern only regional origins, but also caste and class differences and hierarchies, as well as various migration stories and possible phenomena of hybridization or creolization. For example, among overseas Sri Lankan Tamils, notable differences exist between the expatriates of the 1970s and 1980s, who mostly belonged to Jaffna’s upper castes (Vellalars) and who were able to migrate with their families, and those who had to migrate from the 1990s onwards, who were mainly single male asylum seekers from the lower castes (Karaiyars) (Goreau-Ponceaud 2014, Meyer 2011). Among Indian Tamils too, there are very significant differences in terms of socio-cultural proximity between upper-middle classes settled in Western countries, those who work in the Middle East on a temporary basis, and the descendants of low-caste indentured labourers of the Mascarenes and the West Indies who hardly speak Tamil, for instance.

We must thus agree with Fred Clothey (2006:12) who has identified three broad social categories among the Tamils settled overseas. One can first distinguish the working-class communities. These are mostly descendants of Tamils who migrated as indentured labourers or under the *kangani* system, and who rarely spoke English. Clothey notes that ‘even today, most of them work in relatively low-paid jobs in estates or cities’ (ibid.), such as in Malaysia (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020) or on plantations in central Sri Lanka (Bass 2013, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020), where the majority of the Tamil population continues to live in economically marginal conditions. These overseas Tamils generally are descended from low-caste or Dalit groups, such as Paraiyars, Ambutiyars, or Pallars. Today, it is this same social category of low-caste workers who seek work in the Persian Gulf, but who hardly dare to aspire to emigrate to the United States, Great Britain, or Australia. In contrast, another category of overseas Tamils is made up of those who are professionally and economically well positioned for several generations. This category, which is generally well educated in English, includes the ‘Ceylon Tamils’ (including Vellalars) as well as some South Indian Chettiars, Vellalars, and Brahmans, who emigrated to the Malay Peninsula during the colonial period, and to the recent immigrant countries, such as North America, where they are part of the South Asian elite (Fuller and Narasimha 2014, Punzo-Waghorn 2004). The third category is in an intermediate position. It comprises middle and upper-middle class people, many of whom have achieved social mobility from lower positions. These are descendants of Tamil emigrants who emigrated more or less voluntarily to take up relatively unskilled jobs, and who have become entrepreneurs or employees in the service sector. This is particularly the case for many Mauritians of Tamil origin who now work in towns or who have managed to become landowners (Claveyrolas 2017: 119–51), or for the children of some Sri Lankan political refugees in Canada.



To sum up, overseas Tamils are extremely diverse and, as Fred Clothey (2006: 2) also pointed out, ‘by no means are they unanimous as to what it means to be Tamils or how to juggle their various identities’. This heterogeneity should therefore /p.247/ not allow Tamils who have migrated out of South India and Sri Lanka to be called ‘a diaspora’ because they do not meet the second main criterion of diasporas identified by Brubaker: the ‘boundary-maintenance, involving the preservation of *a* distinct identity’ (Brubaker 2005: 5). We should thus rather speak of Tamil diasporas in the plural and with more descriptive precision, as the overseas Tamil communities are so diverse. One could speak, for instance, of an ‘Indian Tamil diaspora’, a ‘refugee Tamil diaspora’, a ‘proletarian Tamil diaspora’, a ‘Tamil indentured labour diaspora’, a ‘Creole Tamil diaspora’, and so on.

However, the ‘boundary maintenance’ and ‘distinct identity’ underlined by Brubaker raise a major problem that may hinder a proper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics taking place among Tamils living outside India and Sri Lanka: the essentialization of social ‘boundaries’ and of what a ‘distinct identity’ might be. Indeed, such a fixist consideration of community boundaries and collective identities is no longer tenable considering the advances of the constructivist approach to ‘identity’ and ‘ethnic boundaries’ (Barth 1969), and of the anthropological evidence of permanent social and cultural change, especially with regard to Hinduism (Claveyrolas and Trouillet 2021, Lorenzen 2006, Sontheimer and Kulke 1989). Identity boundaries are evolving because identity is always changing, especially in a post-migration context (Claveyrolas and Trouillet 2021, Mohammad-Arif and Moliner 2007). While situations of exile or distance from the country of origin often give rise to a need for a reassuring sense of belonging to a distinct community—as in the case of Tamils of Sri Lankan origin in Toronto, for instance—individuals sometimes interact more intensely with people of other origins (thereby assuming multiple ‘identities’). Acculturation and cultural hybridity occur continuously, but without negating the attachment to the country and community of origin

(Devadoss 2020). For instance, many descendants of Tamil indentured labourers who migrated to Mauritius are loosely connected to the cosmopolitan Tamil elite and much closer to their compatriots without Tamil origins and to the local Creole culture inherited from the plantation society (Claveyrolas 2021a). Nevertheless, this does not prevent them from saying and feeling Tamil on certain occasions, such as during religious festivals and elections, and from praying to Hindu gods in distinct ‘Tamil temples’ (*kōvil*). Admittedly, some Mauritians of Tamil origin are well connected to the transnational Tamil community and to South India or Northern Sri Lanka—especially those involved in international entrepreneurial activity or in the religious activities of the local ‘Tamil community’—yet this elite alone cannot represent the experience of all Tamils living in such lands of Tamil immigration.

Roger Brubaker himself admits that another major strand of the literature on transnationalism, influenced by the work of Stuart Hall (1990), recognizes diversity, heterogeneity, and changing identities as constitutive of contemporary diasporas. Quoting Stuart Hall, he adds that the ‘diaspora experience is defined, not by /p.248/ essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity’ (Hall 1990: 235, quoted by Brubaker 2005: 6). Tamil migratory multiple experiences fit better in such a definition. And they are all the more in line with diasporic situations as they are also characterized by the third criterion of diasporas identified by Brubaker: ‘the orientation to a real or imagined “homeland” as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty’ (Hall 1990: 235, quoted by Brubaker 2005: 6).

## Homeland-Orientation and Transnational Conscientization

The third part of this chapter will show how true is this kind of orientation towards a common homeland in the religious arena. But before dealing with religion, it is worth noting that such

homeland orientation is usually linked to a political (or at least collective) discourse. Indeed, as Brubaker noticed, '[W]e should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim' (Hall 1990: 235, quoted by Brubaker 2005: 12). In the case of overseas Tamils, attachment to their homeland—which includes Tamil Nadu and Tamil Eelam, and which never had the status of a nation-state (Rasaratnam 2016) as expressed on Tamil nationalist websites<sup>7</sup>—owes a great deal to the civil war in Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, to some actions of the Tamil Nadu government.

Indeed, the exile of Sri Lankan Tamils and the abuses they suffered during the civil war have contributed massively to the transnationalization of Tamil solidarity and identity consciousness, beyond Sri Lankans alone (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020). Admittedly, the latter have been the most concerned and engaged in 'long-distance nationalism' (Fuglerud 1999, Thiranagama 2014), especially when the LTTE was securing funds, sometimes under duress, from Sri Lankans abroad by drawing on a strong transnational network (Amarasingam 2015, Chalk 2008, Guyot 2021, Maunaguru 2021, Maunaguru and Spencer 2018, Thinaragama 2014). It is also Sri Lankan Tamils who predominantly commemorate every 27th of November, in more and more cities around the world, the Martyrs' Day (*māvīrar nāl*) which celebrates the Tamil soldiers who died during the civil war. But many Indian Tamils too have been won over by this sense of belonging to an imagined transnational Tamil community, including Indians as well as Sri Lankans. They have been sensitized to the situation of Sri Lankan Tamils through a number of organizations, more or less politicized websites, social media, email exchanges, and other demonstrations around the world, to the point of showing **/p.249/** solidarity with their Sri Lankan 'cousins' in most of the countries of settlement, such as Malaysia (Madavan 2011, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020), Mauritius (Trouillet 2012), the UK, the US, or Canada (Amarasingam 2015).

<sup>7</sup> <https://tamilnation.org/diaspora/index.htm/>.

This transnational awareness of the ‘Tamil cause’ through the Sri Lankans’ predicament also inspires numerous Indian Tamils to assert their identity in their own host countries when they feel marginalized. Delon Madavan explains that in Malaysia, while Tamils of Indian origin may sometimes resent the condescension of older generations of Ceylon Tamils, they have ‘great sympathy’ for Sri Lankan Tamils who fled the war or came to study or work in the country, as ‘the Sinhalese elite’s discriminatory policy against the Tamil minority reminds them of their own marginalisation by the Malays’ (Madavan 2011:134, my translation; see also Rajasingham-Senanayake 2020). In Mauritius, where the Tamil minority of South Indian origin (6 per cent of the total population) sometimes feels aggrieved by the Bhojpuri majority of North Indian origin (40 per cent), Tamil identity entrepreneurs occasionally evoke the predicament of Sri Lankan Tamils in their speeches in order to rally and gain support. This was notably the case when the Tamil Force, a radical protest movement founded at the beginning of 2008, chose a roaring tiger as its emblem in explicit reference to the ‘Tamil Tigers’ of Sri Lanka (Trouillet 2012).

Nevertheless, if solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka has nourished the consciousness of belonging to a transnational community of all Tamils, Tamil Nadu remains the land of reference for Tamils of Indian origin. Indeed, although many overseas Tamils know and respect the major pan-Hindu and pan-Indian holy places, like Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) or Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh), they claim (more or less openly depending on people and situations) a distinct cultural and territorial origin from the rest of India. This is due to their strong attachment to the Tamil language and culture,<sup>8</sup> and to a distinct territory sacralized by numerous regional Hindu holy places and famous temples, which remain known and visited by many overseas Tamils (like Madurai, Palani, Kanchipuram, Rameswaram, Thanjavur, Tiruvannamalai, etc.). Admittedly,

<sup>8</sup> Which is sometimes more of a newly promoted project than a widespread heritage (see for instance Benoist 1998, Das 2016, Lang 2021, Murugaiyan 2003, Trouillet 2014).

not all overseas Hindu Tamils go on trips or pilgrimages to South India, but many do have a great interest in specifically Tamil language, dance and music (the Facebook accounts of Tamil religious and cultural associations are also very popular in the diaspora). These territorial and ethno-linguistic representations owe much to the literary, cultural, political, and social reform movement which has developed since the second half of the nineteenth century in the Tamil-speaking districts of the Madras Presidency<sup>9</sup> around the ethno-linguistic resistance of the /p.250/ non-Brahman Dravidians of South India to the Brahmanical-cultured Indo-Aryans of the North: the ‘Dravidian Movement’ (Hardgrave 1965, Irschick 1969 and 1986). The ‘Tamil revival’, which has been developing since the 1970s in most countries of Tamil immigration through a ‘Dravidianization’ of Hinduism strongly influenced by the Tamil tradition and texts, such as the Śaiva Siddhānta<sup>10</sup> and the canonical *Āgamas*,<sup>11</sup> perfectly illustrates this transnational diffusion of the ideology of a distinct Dravidian cultural identity (Benoist 1998, Ghasarian 1997, Lang 2021, Murugaiyan 2003, Singaravélou 1987, Trouillet 2014). Moreover, the main Hindu deities whom overseas Hindu Tamils worship in their shrines and temples are preferentially specifically Tamil—such as Murukan̄ (the regional god of Tamils),<sup>12</sup> Aiyānār or Muniswara (Tamil village deities) and the multiple forms of the goddess Amman̄ (see p. 253— or worshipped through their Tamil representation—such as Vināyakar (Gaṇeśa), Civaṅ (Śiva), or Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu). When they can, many overseas Tamils also return to their village of origin in Tamil Nadu, where the temple of their family deity (*kula teyvam*) is located. This is almost impossible for the descendants of the colonial indentured labourers who are hardly able to

<sup>9</sup> This ‘Tamil Renaissance’ (or Revival) also developed in Jaffna in the nineteenth century, triggered by Arumuka Navalar (1822–1879).

<sup>10</sup> A school of thought indigenous to Tamil Nadu which propounds a salvation embedded in a dualistic philosophy, the goal being to become an enlightened soul through Śiva’s grace.

<sup>11</sup> Texts prescribing ritual in Śaiva temples.

<sup>12</sup> See Clothey 1978 and Trouillet 2010.

identify their place of origin (*ūr*), but their attachment to the Tamil homeland remains stronger than to the rest of India.<sup>13</sup>

The last element that has contributed to the development of a sense of belonging to a transnational community from the same territory is the proactive policy of the Tamil Nadu government. In 1966, the Tamil Nadu government organized the first World Tamil Conference in Malaysia, aimed at uniting Tamils worldwide and raising awareness of the Tamil cultural and linguistic heritage. The other nine World Tamil Conferences, held in Chennai (in 1968), Paris (1970), Jaffna (1974), Madurai (1981), Kuala Lumpur (1987), Mauritius (1989), Thanjavur (1995), Kuala Lumpur (2015), and Chicago (2019), reflect the multi-polarity of the Tamil diasporic formation (at least among its intellectual elite). In parallel, the first Conference of the World Tamil Cultural Movement was organized in 1992 in Chennai. In 1999, its seventh edition inaugurated the World Tamil Confederation, the objectives of which were to protect ‘the physical welfare, the cultural identity and the civic, political and human rights of the Tamils’.<sup>14</sup> This confederation even uses national symbols (anthem and flag), displaying the desire of its militants to unite Tamils around a ‘transnation’. Also in 1999, Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi funded the Tamil Virtual University<sup>15</sup> so that overseas Tamils could relearn their ancestral language, have access to an online library, and even graduate from the **p.251/** University of Madras (Carsignol 2011: 231). Some higher education institutions in Tamil Nadu have also had seats reserved for overseas students since 2003 (ibid: 32). In the same year, Jayalalithaa inaugurated a website<sup>16</sup> for overseas Tamils to inform them of economic opportunities in Tamil Nadu, encouraging them to invest in their home state (ibid.). More recently, in 2020, during the COVID-19 health crisis, the Tamil Nadu government created a

<sup>13</sup> Such returns are also very difficult for overseas Sri Lankan Tamils whose kindred attachment to a specific locality and temple is as strong and ritually institutionalized as for Indian Tamils.

<sup>14</sup> [www.thenseide.com/ulagathamizhar-eng/varalaru.htm/](http://www.thenseide.com/ulagathamizhar-eng/varalaru.htm/).

<sup>15</sup> [www.tamilvu.org/coresite/html/cwintrodu.htm/](http://www.tamilvu.org/coresite/html/cwintrodu.htm/).

<sup>16</sup> [www.tamilnadunri.com](http://www.tamilnadunri.com)

web portal ([www.nonresidenttamil.org](http://www.nonresidenttamil.org)) specifically for Tamils living abroad (NRIs) to help them repatriate if they needed it.

## Limits Versus Performativity

In view of all these historical, socio-cultural, and political elements, it seems relevant to speak of a 'global Tamil diaspora' bringing together Tamils of Indian and Sri Lankan origin, since it meets Brubaker's three criteria. Nevertheless, some nuances or limitations must be expressed, even if the use of the term is spreading and becoming more and more performative.

First of all, the situation of all Tamil expatriates (Indians and Sri Lankans) who leave their country to work for a few years in the Persian Gulf, in the Malay Peninsula, or in the West, does not really correspond to the concept of diaspora since they, rather, form a group of temporary economic migrants. Moreover, while many overseas Tamils now use the term 'diaspora' to refer to what they consider their transnational community, the sense of belonging to a diaspora is not unanimous among overseas Tamils. Admittedly, the retention of certain cultural traits or of an emotional link with the country of origin allows some Tamils to assert their 'Tamilness', but phenomena of assimilation or a concern for integration into the host society prevents many others from feeling and claiming that they belong to a transnational community. Besides, many overseas Tamils are not involved in any transnational network and have no intention of returning to the country of their ancestors, especially among the foreign-born generations. It is therefore likely that, in the countries of immigration of the Tamil indentured labourers, the term 'diaspora' is not the most relevant to describe and understand local cultural realities, considering three important facts: the frequent ignorance or indifference of many Tamils to this term, the general loss of the Tamil language, and the importance of creolization and of the socio-cultural structures inherited from the 'plantation society', especially in rural areas (Claveyrolas 2017 and 2021a). This type of context corresponds to

margins or ‘blind spots’ of the Tamil diaspora, where its members are scarcely—or not at all—active in transnational networks.

**/p.252/** The situation is of course very different for Sri Lankan Tamils, especially among the first-generation migrants, who not only experienced a forced exile and share nostalgic memories of their homeland, but also often have family members spread over several countries (Maunaguru 2019) and frequently use the term ‘diaspora’ themselves to describe their scattered community (Amarasingam 2015, Étiemble 2017, Guyot 2021). The case of Tamils of Sri Lankan origin thus fits better with restrictive definitions of diasporas because of their exile and their more keenly shared ‘myth of return’ (Meyer 2011: 21).

This sense of belonging to the ‘Tamil diaspora’ has also been well developed among the overseas Tamil elite and identity entrepreneurs, who appropriate and claim this label in order to increase their personal prestige or to revive an ancient and prestigious collective identity.<sup>17</sup> As a result, even in the margins of the Tamil transnational community, many people are progressively made aware of their possible belonging to ‘the Tamil diaspora’ because the expression is increasingly used in different places and circumstances. While more and more academic scholars deal with the ‘Tamil diaspora’ in their publications and conferences, Tamil elite and identity entrepreneurs spread the expression during collective religious or political events. For example, Tamil Mauritians, who are mainly descendants of former Tamil indentured labourers and who can hardly speak Tamil, can see and hear references to the Tamil Sri Lankans’ predicament and to the ‘Tamil diaspora’ displayed by identity entrepreneurs in some Hindu temples during religious festivals. A major consequence of this increasingly widespread use of the term ‘Tamil diaspora’ is that it becomes performative, so much so that one can wonder about the capacity of the blind spots in Tamil transnational space to remain so for so long.

<sup>17</sup> Anouck Carsignol (2011) noticed the same phenomenon among the Indian diaspora.



It is no coincidence that speeches promoting belonging to a transnational community resurface during religious events, for if there is one thing that Hindu Tamils around the world share, it is their religiosity (through its specific variations). Indeed, Hinduism lived and practised in its Tamil versions, with their own specificities, adds a concrete and ritual tone to this sense of belonging for Tamils all over the world. Tamil Hinduism is not only shared, but also connected, as we will now see, which is another strong argument in favour of the use of the expression ‘global Hindu Tamil diaspora’.

## **Shared Religious Practices and Transnational Hinduism**

Two aspects of Hinduism practised by overseas Tamil Hindus justify it being described as ‘global’. First, because many religious practices are common among **/p.253/** Tamils living in different parts of the globe; and secondly, because these practices and places are increasingly (but not always) connected through transnational networks and exchanges, even in the margins of the Tamil diaspora. This increasingly shared and connected Hinduism across the global Tamil migratory space also fuels the diffusion of a sense of belonging to an imagined transnational Tamil community.

### **Shared Specific Practices**

As in South India and Sri Lanka, the kind of Hinduism practised and experienced by overseas Hindu Tamils is mostly a form of Śaivism, which is centred around the figure of Śiva and his associated deities, like Murukaṅ, Vināyakar (Gaṇeśa), and the many forms of the goddess Ammaṅ (especially Māriyammaṅ, Draupadiyammaṅ, Durgaiyammaṅ, Kālīyammaṅ, Angalammaṅ, Gangaiyammaṅ, Kāṭeriyammaṅ, and other local goddesses). As in homelands,

overseas Tamil Śaivism associates ‘folk’ (or ‘popular’<sup>18</sup>) traditions dedicated to specifically Tamil village gods (like Aiyānār, Madurai Vīran, Muniswaran, and the local goddesses), with Brahmanic and *Āgama*-based temple rituals, as well as with the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition. Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) and Ayyappan, the son of Śiva and Mohini (a feminine form of Viṣṇu) are also increasingly worshipped in overseas temples due to the great popularity of their main temples in South India: respectively in Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) and Sabarimala (Kerala).

Some orthodox Tamil Brahmins, especially the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas (or Aiyengars) worship only Viṣṇu. Nevertheless, Brahmins with orthodox practices, such as the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas and the Smārtas, or temple priests, such as the Śivācāryas (‘the priests of Śiva’), are largely in the minority in the diaspora, as is the case in Tamil Nadu (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), and even more so in Sri Lanka, where very few Brahmins have settled, apart from the small caste of Śivācāryas concentrated in the Jaffna region (Derges 2013: 77, McGilvray 2008: 84, Obeyesekere 2015: 2–3). Furthermore, historical and anthropological literature also makes it clear that the majority of Tamils belong to the Śūdra *varṇa*, with Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas having little presence in Tamil country.

In fact, although class and caste distinctions between Tamils are found in more or less brahmanic, agamic, or popular religious practices, overseas Tamil Hinduism is relatively unified around Tamil Śaivism. This is particularly true at the level of the popular practices accomplished at home and in temples (*kōyil* or *kōvil*), which are not only of great importance for individuals but also at the levels of family, clan, and caste (Fuller 2004 [1992]). There are also possible differences in terms of affiliation to a sectarian tradition (*sampradāya*) around a master (*guru*), such as Ramana Maharshi or Sadhguru, for example, but these are generally individual and not very structuring on a large scale.

<sup>18</sup> As Chris Fuller has well explained, ‘popular Hinduism can be distinguished from “textual Hinduism”, the “philosophical” religion set out and elaborated in the sacred texts’ (Fuller 2004 [1992]: 5).

As in the homeland, the main difference within overseas Tamil Hinduism is between folk/popular Hinduism, the rituals of which are conducted by non-Brahman priests (*pucari*), and a more institutionalized and Brahmanical Hinduism, the priests of which are Brahmans recruited from the home country (Baumann 2010, Trouillet 2020). Popular Hinduism with non-Brahman priests is particularly well established in the countries where indentured labourers migrated, such as the Malay peninsula (Ramanathan 2001, Sinha 2005), central Sri Lanka (Bass 2013), the Mascarene Islands (Benoist 1998, Claveyrolas 2017, Ghasarian 1997) or the Caribbean (Benoist 1998, singaravélou 1987, Younger 2010). Tamil Hinduism that is more institutionalized around ‘āgamic’ temples and Brahman priests is more characteristic of recent immigrant countries, like in Europe or in Northern America (Baumann 2009, Kurien 2007, Maunaguru 2021, Maunaguru and Spencer 2018, Punzo-Waghorne 2004, Trouillet 2020), where Tamil émigrés value the recruitment of Śivācārya Brahman priests from South India or Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, this kind of Hinduism is also developing in the colonial-era immigration countries, which are increasingly linked to Tamil transnational networks, especially for the recruitment of priests and temple artisans (see later in the chapter). This is an expression of the global trend towards uniformity in overseas Tamil Hinduism, which is characterized by processes of ‘templeization’ (Baumann 2009, Narayanan 1992) and ‘Brahmanization’ (Singaravélou 1987 [III]:133–5, Trouillet 2020, Van der Veer and Vertovec 1991: 158–61). However, this trend driven by the local Tamil socio-economic elites in search of a Brahmanic and agamic orthodoxy is not unanimous among the descendants of Indian indentured labourers. Some of them prefer, on the contrary, to preserve their popular traditions inherited from their ancestors who arrived from Tamil villages in the nineteenth century, and to reject the ritual authority of the Brahmans. This is the case, for example, among some Tamils in La Réunion (Lang 2021 ) and Mauritius (Trouillet 2014: 184–91), or among the Madrassi twice-migrants of New York whose ancestors had first settled in Guyana (Claveyrolas 2021b).

But despite these different positions, which mainly concern the place to be accorded to Brahmans, animal sacrifice and possession, all overseas Hindu Tamils practise at least one of these two great traditions specific to South India and to the Tamil-speaking provinces of Sri Lanka.

One of the main ritual practices that most overseas Tamils share is religious festivals (*tiruvilā*). Indeed, as in South India and Sri Lanka, religious festivals are dedicated each month and each year to certain gods, in particular Murukaṅ, Vināyakar, and the goddess Ammaṅ. The major annual festivals are the occasion for large processions of devotees to follow the chariots (*tēr*) on which statues of the /p.255/ deities are installed in order to circulate in the public space surrounding their temples (Jacobsen 2008). *Tai Pūcam* is probably the most shared festival in the diaspora. It is found in both colonial-era immigration countries and in the West. It is one of the main festivals dedicated to Murukaṅ, which takes place every year in the Tamil month of *tai* (mid-January to mid-February), when the full moon is close to the *pūcam* constellation. Devotees then perform various devotional practices for Murukaṅ to whom they are vowing, such as carrying wooden burdens (*kāvaṭi*) or piercing their skin with silver spears (*alaku*) or needles (*ūci*), sometimes weighted with pieces of lemon. The ‘fire-walking’ festival (*tīmiti*), dedicated to the goddess Draupadiyammaṅ, is also very popular among overseas Tamils, but particularly in countries of colonial immigration, where the ecstatic and trance-like practices associated with it are more easily accepted than in countries of more recent immigration. *Vināyaka caturthī* (or *Gaṇeśa caturthī*), which celebrates the arrival to earth from Mount Kailash of the elephant-header god Vināyakar with his mother goddess Pārvaṭī, is another important religious festival for overseas Tamils, especially in Paris. Every year, from Canada to Malaysia, passing through the Mascarenes, London, and Fiji, images of the rituals performed during these celebrations in different Tamil immigration countries circulate on the Internet, on social media, and in the press, reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a transnational Tamil

community whose practices are not only shared but also simultaneous, for they are conducted on the same day.

Hinduism practised by overseas Tamils is thus very similar to that practised in South India and in the Tamil-speaking provinces of Sri Lanka. As in the homelands, it differs from North Indian Hinduism in some of its regional deities (in particular Murukan and the goddess Amman) and the cults addressed to them, and also in the architecture of its temples. These religious buildings fit the 'Dravidian' style, based on the *Āgamas* and characterized by large sculpted and coloured pyramidal towers (*gōpuram*), which are increasingly found, following the transnational trend of 'templeization'<sup>19</sup> already mentioned. This regional distinction of Tamil Hinduism is so embedded in the diaspora that, in some North Indian communities' temples (*mandir*), where the statues of the deities are usually white, the deities with a South Indian profile, such as Kārttikēya (called 'Murukan' by Tamils), are distinguished by their dark granite, characteristic of Tamil temples (*kōyil*). Actually, Hindu rituals practised by overseas Tamils rely on many cultural specificities, to such an extent that they can lead, depending on the local socio-political context, to a marked socio-religious ethnicization vis-à-vis non-Tamil Hindus, especially when they originate from North India. This process has been observed in Fiji (Basu 2021), for example, but it is particularly /p.256/ pronounced in Mauritius, where the Mauritians of Tamil origin now use the term 'Tamil religion' to refer to the Hinduism they specifically practise (whether popular or agamic). They also no longer define themselves as Hindus but only as Tamils—the term 'Hindus' being left to North Indian Hindus, who are in the majority in Mauritius (Trouillet 2014).

Overseas Tamil Hinduism is not only distinct from that of the North Indian Sanskrit tradition, but it also generally gathers Tamils of different origins. When Indian and Sri Lankan

<sup>19</sup> For example, in colonial immigration spaces, like Mauritius or La Réunion, many ancient Tamil temples built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a non-agamic architecture are currently replaced with new ones that conform to Tamil architectural treatises (Lang 2021, Trouillet 2014).

Tamils live in the same areas, as for example in Toronto or Paris, both of them can visit, sponsor, and sometimes even administer the same temples, although one community is always more involved than the other (and if caste distinctions can remain). For example, of the 19 trustees of the large Hindu temple in Richmond Hill near Toronto, which was founded mainly by Sri Lankan Tamils, six are Indian Tamils. Furthermore, overseas temples' managers and devotees recruit Śivācārya priests regardless of their regional origin (Trouillet 2020). For instance, in Mauritius, some Tamils of Indian origin employ Sri Lankan priests in the temples they manage. And in Toronto, reciprocally, many Indian priests are employed in temples run by Sri Lankan Tamils. A number of Indian priests also work alongside Sri Lankan priests there, and the few of them who preside over temples may even employ Sri Lankans as assistant priests.

More broadly, although the political nationalism promoted by some Sri Lankan temple committees may deter some Tamils from attending such places of worship, most overseas temples serve as a means of social integration for most Tamils regardless of their political position (Maunaguru 2021), because of the opportunities for encounters and the sharing of a common Tamil religiosity that they provide. Whether in its popular or more Brahmanical forms, Hindu religiosity brings overseas Tamils together both physically, in the meeting places of temples and processional routes, and symbolically, through their sharing of specific cultural practices.

## Global Connexity and Transnational Religion

Overseas Tamil Hinduism, in its various forms, is not only shared and widespread on a global scale but also increasingly 'transnationalized'. Indeed, while not all Tamils are personally involved in transnational networks, especially in rural areas of colonial settlement countries, Hinduism practised overseas is developing and transforming through the existence of highly dynamic transnational networks of religious actors. A more transnational Tamil Hinduism is

developing, which spreads and feeds the collective feeling of belonging to a transnational Hindu Tamil community.

The field that most obviously relies on transnational networks, exchanges, and circulations is that of temples. Many studies have already pointed out the **/p.257/** remarkable cultural and social importance of temples in the Tamil diaspora (Baumann 2009, Clothey 2006, Maunaguru 2021, Punzo-Waghorne 2004, Trouillet 2012, Wilke 2020, Younger 2010), and several studies have even demonstrated how certain diaspora temples benefit from the mobilization of transnational actors (Maunaguru and Spencer 2018, Trouillet 2020). For instance, the construction and inauguration of the first large and distinctly Tamil temple in Montreal (the *Arulmigu Tirumurugaṅ* Temple) mobilized a whole range of actors living in different places in the Tamil migratory space, in addition to the local Tamil community in Montreal (Bradley and Trouillet 2011, Trouillet 2012). First, the founders called upon a Śivācārya Brahman from Sri Lanka to officiate as referent priest (*stāṇikar*) of the temple. Secondly, to build the temple, they turned to 12 craftsmen (*cirpi*) and to two architects<sup>20</sup> (*stapati*) with the required skills and knowledge in building science (*vāstuśāstra*) and in the *Āgamas*, who all came specially from Tamil Nadu. Then, to celebrate the ritual consecration (*mahākumpapiṣēkam*) of the temple, about 30 Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil priests came from other Canadian cities, but also from the United States and even from Europe and Asia where they were employed, to assist the chief priest.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the main source of funding for diaspora temples is local. Indeed, even if more and more priests, architects, temple craftsmen, and musicians are called from India or Sri Lanka, which remain the reference lands in terms of sacrality, competence, and authenticity, it

<sup>20</sup> The first one was in charge of planning the temple structure, of getting the work started, and then of the ‘sod turning’ (ground-breaking) ceremonies. The second one supervised the construction of the building.

<sup>21</sup> Source: Saiva Mission du Quebec (2006) *Thirumurugaṅ temple. En souvenir de la consécration*. Montréal.

is generally the local overseas communities that contribute and call for donations to finance what mostly remains a local project.

This transnational process is effective in most of the temples following the Tamil tradition based on the ritual and architectural treatises of the *Āgamas*, which have been multiplying all over the world since the 1980s. This was notably the case for the Pittsburg temple studied by Clothey (2006: 30–58) or for the Richmond Hill temple near Toronto, which is said to be the largest Hindu temple in North America respecting the precepts of the *Āgamas*. This is also true for many temples in the former destination countries of the Tamil indentured, such as Mauritius and La Réunion, where, as already mentioned, many old and less ‘agamic’ shrines are replaced with this type of ‘Dravidian’ temples. For instance, one of the very first temples in Mauritius, built between 1838 and 1856 in the remote village of Clemencia, was renovated in 2016 under the supervision of an architect from Devakkottai, Tamil Nadu.

The migration of these architects, artisans, and temple priests illustrate the current transnationalization of Tamil Hinduism and the links that exist between **/p.258/** different places in the Tamil diaspora space. For example, in 2014, one of the craftsmen recruited in Tamil Nadu to participate in the renovation of the Richmond Hill temple told me that before his three-year stay in Canada, he had previously worked for seven years in the US and five years in Australia to build other temples.<sup>22</sup> Such circulation throughout the transnational Tamil migratory space also involves, of course, the ‘migrant priests’ of the diaspora temples (Trouillet 2020). Indeed, the Brahmanical ban on leaving the ‘holy land’ (*puṇya-bhūmi*, *karma-bhūmi*) of India and crossing the ‘black waters’ (*kāla-pāni*) of the Indian Ocean, which was particularly binding for high-caste orthodox Hindus in colonial India between 1850 and 1920 (Clémentin-Ojha 2011), is today far from dissuading these temple priests from seizing the economic opportunity represented by a multi-year work contract in a diaspora temple (Trouillet 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview, May 2014, Toronto.



Moreover, some of these migrant Brahman priests are Sri Lankan refugees who also often experienced a transnational migration, especially among those officiating in North America and Europe (ibid.). The journey of Sivakumar,<sup>23</sup> who was working in a temple in Toronto in 2014, is particularly evocative of these circulations and transnational relationships. He explained as follows how he managed to work in Mauritius, Paris, and Toronto:

‘It was my *guruji* [from the Pillayarpatthi school of priests, Tamil Nadu] who sent me to Mauritius [in 2003]. Someone from Mauritius asked for a priest at my *pāṭacālai* [school of priests], then he sent me. I worked there for a year. Then after one year of service there, I went back to India. Two years later I saw an ad in a Tamil newspaper [*Dinamalar*] about a priest vacancy at the Māṅikka Vināyakar Paris temple, then I did the interviews. Mr. Sanderasekaram [the Paris temple president at that time] selected me and then I was an assistant priest there to perform the rituals for Māṅikka Vināyakar. After working there for five years, I returned to India to get married [in 2011]. I’ve had a daughter since then. And then here also there was a vacancy [in Canada]. One of my relatives informed me and asked the president [of this temple] to take me. And I’ve been working here for two years now.’<sup>24</sup>

This kind of transnational circulation of Tamil Brahman priests also concerns old immigration countries, like Mauritius. Surendrakurukkal, an Indian priest I met there in 2013, explained that after having worked for 20 years in the same temple in Tamil Nadu (in Coimbatore), he went to Mauritius in 2000. Then he left for La Réunion for two years, before going back in India for six months in 2003. Then he went to Malaysia for two years (in 2004–2005), and he went again to Mauritius in 2010.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview, May 2014, Toronto.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview, February 2013, Mauritius.

**/p.259/** These transnational recruitments sometimes aim to respond to the need of certain overseas Tamil communities to recompose the ritual specificities and the social ties based on the collective patronage of a specific temple in their locality of origin (*ūr*). Indeed, in contexts of recent immigration, the solidarity recreated in the temple may sometimes mainly concern members of the same extended family, clan, or caste. This is the case of one Toronto temple dedicated to Nagapūśani Amman (or Nagammal), which is the local goddess of the Nainativu island in Northern Sri Lanka, from where many families have fled since the beginning of the civil war and the establishment of a naval base on the island in July 1983. The new Toronto temple was founded by a community of 21 former residents of Nainativu who succeeded in recruiting a Śivācārya priest precisely from the original temple in Sri Lanka (where his family enjoys the hereditary right of priesthood). This transnational recruitment was facilitated by the social links that this local Tamil community has kept with its native island and by two of the founding members having been ritual patrons of the original Nainativu Temple. The transnational nature of this place of worship is also intentionally made visible by the satellite images of the island of Nainativu that its managers have chosen to post on the walls inside the temple, between the secondary deities' altars. Furthermore, the forms of the deities represented in the new temple are exactly the same as in the original one, and festivals are celebrated at the same time, which nurtures the devotees' feeling of transnational ritual links and synchronicity with the homeland. Such a replica of a real temple of the homeland is not an exception in Toronto. There are at least four other community-based temples, as, for instance, a replica of the Murukan Temple of Nallur (one of the most important temples in the Jaffna region), whose chief priest also comes from the original temple in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, this kind of priest recruitment from the specific native places of diasporic communities is much less likely in

countries of immigration of former South Indian indentured labourers, since most of their descendants rarely know the precise locality from which their forefathers had emigrated.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes, these migrant priests maintain links between the diaspora and the countries of origin by organizing transnational pilgrimages. This is the case of Indian priests<sup>27</sup> employed at a Sri Lankan-run Ayyappan Temple in Toronto, who have been organizing an annual pilgrimage from Canada to Sabari Mala (Kerala), the main Ayyapan pilgrimage centre in India, since 2000. The transnational nature of this pilgrimage is illustrated by the fact that Canadian pilgrims perform their departure ritual (*sirappu pūjā*) and put on their ritual necklaces (*mālā*) not in India, but in the Toronto temple before leaving for Chennai. It is also illustrated by the starting point of their pilgrimage to India, Pillaiyarpatti (Tamil Nadu), which has been the ‘biggest’ school of priests in Tamil Nadu since the early 2000s (Fuller 2003: 97) and which now sends priests throughout the Tamil diaspora (Trouillet 2020). The priests who initiated this pilgrimage were trained in this agamic school, whose *guru*, K. Pitchai Gurukkal, also supervised the three construction and renovation ceremonies (*[mahā-]kumpapiṣṭhānam*) of the Toronto temple. After Pillaiyarpatti, the pilgrims from Toronto continue their pilgrimage through two other major religious (and tourist) places in Tamil Nadu (Rameshwaram and Kanyakumari) before proceeding to Sabari Mala. Finally, the transnational nature of this pilgrimage is also illustrated by the fact that the majority of these Tamil pilgrims travelling to India from Toronto are not Indian but of Sri Lankan origin.

The transnationalization of Tamil Hinduism is thus effective not only in host countries but also in the homeland. And the transnational networks set up for the construction of overseas temples can also benefit projects localized in the country of origin. For example, after the

<sup>26</sup> But many temples in these countries are named after famous Indian or Sri Lankan temples, like Madurai or Palani, with which the founders have no social ties. In these cases, reusing the name of a famous temple depends rather on a strategy to maintain a collective memory of the original places and to gather as many devotees as possible. This logic of temples’ replication is also frequent in India.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview, May 2014, Toronto.

devastating tsunami which struck Sri Lanka and South India in 2004, the committee of the Richmond Hill temple (Ontario, Canada) joined the transnational Tamil community in providing relief. The board contributed over \$100,000 to the Sri Lankan relief effort and \$20,000 to the Andhra Pradesh state government and the Tamil Nadu tsunami relief funds.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding homeland temples, the Āṟu Paṭai Vīṭu Complex<sup>29</sup> inaugurated in 2002 in Chennai and dedicated to Murukaṅ, illustrates how Tamil transnational networks can be used to create temples in India and also how they can be ritually displayed within sanctuaries. First, most of its trustees live in the US and define the shrine as an ‘NRI temple’.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the founder of this temple (Dr Alagappa Alagappan, an ex-UN Official<sup>31</sup>) is also known for being the founder of the first Tamil temple established in New York city (the Mahā Vallabha Gaṇapati Temple). Thirdly, this sanctuary gathers together within its precincts the replicas of the six main Murukaṅ temples of Tamil Nadu around the replica of the Gaṇapati Temple of New York. Finally, the land for the temple was provided by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, following the request of the Sankaracharya (abbot) of Kanchipuram.

Once again, local and transnational actors are involved in the founding and management of this temple. The story of this Indian temple confirms, just like for the other overseas temples mentioned, the capacity of contemporary Tamil Hinduism to be simultaneously local and global, but also to display signs of its **/p.261/** transnationalization inside the temple grounds for the attention of the devotees. Indeed, whether through their ritual actors and the transnational pilgrimages they may motivate, their founders and managers, or through the places represented in their precincts, these ‘transnational temples’ allow the devotees not only to maintain a ritual, cultural, and memorial link with their country of origin, but also to concretely experience the

<sup>28</sup> Source: Hindu Temple Society of Canada (2012), *Punarudharana Maha Kumbabishekam Souvenir*, Richmond Hill, Ontario.

<sup>29</sup> The ‘Six Abodes’ Complex.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with the temple treasurer, May 2007, Chennai.

<sup>31</sup> For more information on this temple and its founder, see <http://murugan.org/temples/arupadai.htm/>, and also Punzo-Waghorne 2004 (171–95; 239) and Trouillet (2010: 300–4).

transnationalization of Tamil Hinduism, which feeds the diffusion of the feeling of belonging to a transnational Tamil community, in host countries as well as in homelands.

## **Conclusion**

The joint consideration of Hindu Tamils from India and Sri Lanka shows that it seems appropriate to speak of a global Hindu Tamil diaspora, given the geographical scope of Tamil emigration and the transnational socio-religious links that have been forged between dispersed communities and individuals. However, it should be kept in mind that all Hindu emigrants of Tamil origin are far from being a homogeneous community, as they are marked by class, caste, or regional differences. As Parekh, Singh, and Vertovec (2003) have pointed out concerning the Indian diaspora, the great diversity of the Tamil diaspora makes it very difficult to generalize. And despite the gradual diffusion of the expression 'Tamil diaspora', especially among scholars and the Tamil cosmopolitan elite, and following the transnational trauma of the Sri Lankan war, there are still many people of Tamil origin who have no connection with other Tamils living in a country other than their own, or who do not consider themselves to be part of a diaspora or a transnational Tamil community, especially among the descendants of immigrants.

However, refusing to use the term 'diaspora' in relation to overseas Hindu Tamils risks not only ignoring all the Tamils who do use it, but also failing to understand the transnational logic at work in the permanent fabric of Tamil Hinduism. Tamil Hinduism can obviously no longer be considered as being limited to South India and to the north and east of Sri Lanka, since it is increasingly linked to devotees and ritual actors scattered and circulating all over the world. A transnational Tamil Hinduism is being constructed, as Tamil temples multiply throughout the world, as their construction and functioning mobilize transnational networks and actors, and as ritual practices become transnationalized, as shown by pilgrimages to South India carried out

from the countries of settlement of the diaspora. The diasporization of Tamil Hindu communities as well as the transnationalization of Tamil Hinduism have effects in homelands too, where Hindu Tamils are increasingly encouraged to rethink their ethno-linguistic community and their religion in transnational and globalized terms.

**/p.262/** The other argument in favour of recognizing a global Hindu Tamil diaspora is that it is around Tamil Hinduism that Tamil émigrés and their descendants gather the most, regardless of their regional origin, their caste, or their social class. Indeed, much more than the Tamil language, which is not spoken by all overseas Tamils, it is Tamil Hindu religiosity, through its popular or more agamic/Brahmanical forms, that best unites overseas Tamil Hindus (especially vis-à-vis Hindus who are not of Tamil origin). This is true locally, in temples and processions, but also transnationally, when local communities seek help, workforce, or expertise from the country of origin or from other diaspora communities to establish and run their temples, which feeds the sense of belonging to an imagined transnational community. Thus, what makes the Hindu Tamil diaspora global is not only its global reach but also the transnational connexity of an increasingly shared and linked Tamil Hinduism.<sup>32</sup>

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