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TAMIL HINDUS AND NORTHERN HINDUS THE EROSION OF A RELATIONSHIP ?

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Résumé

Cet article traite de la problématique des rapports inter-ethniques et inter-communautaires dans l'île Maurice du 20^e siècle. Il est question des rapports existant entre les Hindous du Nord et les Tamouls dans un contexte historique donné et souligne les facteurs de rapprochement et d'éloignement entre les deux groupes mentionnés. Alors que les facteurs culturels et religieux sont de moindre importance dans la constitution des liens entre les deux groupes, les facteurs politiques donnent naissance à des rapports de force et des intérêts conflictuels, surtout dans une démocratie où les ressources naturelles, financières et humaines sont limitées. Cependant, la mondialisation peut avoir d'une part une réduction dans le clientélisme politique mais d'autre part, en cas de difficultés économiques persistantes, il existe des risques pour une marginalisation sectaire.

Mots-clés : ethnicité, politique, Hindous du Nord, Tamouls–Hindous, identité, intégration.

Abstract

This article examines the inter-ethnic and community relationships between the Northern Hindus and Tamil Hindus in a historical perspective. It highlights the various factors impeding and consolidating unity between the two communities. It shows that in the increasing distance between the two communities, cultural and religious factors are less important than political factors in a democracy where natural, financial and human resources are limited. While on the one hand, globalisation can reduce ethnic clientelism, there are also the risks that deteriorating economic conditions can lead to greater ethnic marginalisation.

Keywords : ethnicity, politics, northern hindus, tamil hindus, identity, integration.

This paper is an attempt to examine the relationship between the Tamil Hindus and the Northern Hindus in Mauritius over the present century. Although the Hindu community of Mauritius is made of a number of linguistic and cultural groups such as the Biharis¹ Telegus, the Marathis and the Tamils, it is the Tamil group which has distanced itself most from

1 The northern Hindus came mostly from Bihar and spoke Bhojpuri. But over the years they have adopted Hindi as their written and spoken language and preferred to be called Hindi-speaking Hindus. It is this term which is retained in the text.

the Bihari component of the Hindu community. The relationship between the two is often referred to as one between a majority and a minority since northern Hindus forms the majority section of the Hindu community but this appears to be an inadequate explanation. There are historical roots to explain the cultural distance between the two communities both in India and in Mauritius yet the two communities have lived closely as indentured labourers for more than a century and one could have expected closer relations between the two groups. In spite of their distinctive identities, separatist tendencies between the two groups were in-existent until the urban Tamil merchant class in search of a constituency to assert their political power fostered them. Over the years it is mostly the political competition between the new northern Hindu leadership and the middle class Tamil that has deepened the gulf between the two communities. At present, these two communities stand at a crossroad in their relationship. Whether further erosion or more integration will occur will depend on the political leadership of the two communities. This paper will briefly survey the milestone in the relations between Tamil Hindus and northern Hindus over the last century.

During the past decades, it appears that there has been an erosion in the relationship between the Tamil Hindus and the Northern Hindus so much so that Tamils do not want to be referred solely as Hindus. This view is premised on the fact that the two communities had been extremely close in the past. In fact the majority of the Tamils of Mauritius were indentured labourers just like those who came from Bihar and other parts of India through the ports of Calcutta and Bombay. In spite of their cultural differences, linguistic and religion practices, they all generally came from labouring classes and for more than a century have lived, worked and struggled together. Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, there is evidence of only one group fighting between Madras Indians and Calcutta Indians on the estate of Terracine² and no other incident of conflict was reported in the press. The relationships between the ethnic groups had been exceptionally harmonious. In spite of diverse cultural and religious practices, which can be traced to their places of origin in India, both communities had participated in each other's activities without any hindrance.

In the 1870's, Indians of all backgrounds actively supported the movement of protest initiated by De Plevitz and Rajarethnum Moodeliar, an Indian nationalist from Madras. On sugar estates, Tamils and Northern Hindus had done various jobs, whether as sirdars, labourers, job contractors, and petty conflicts which existed were about work relations rather than ethnic. In estates and villages, Tamils and Northern Hindus, whether one dominated the other in terms of numbers, lived in harmonious relations.

2 *Cerneen* 16th January 1852.

It was between 1900 and 1930's that the two communities began to assert themselves separately in public affairs, partly because the Tamil elite had different social origins either from the indentured Tamil labourers or those from Bihar. This was in a sense to be expected. There had been an urban Tamil community which traced its settlement in the island from 1729 and which in the 1850's had come to be dominated by. An urban merchant class which came from India. With increasing social mobility in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, a new rural bourgeoisie had emerged, which was predominantly Northern Hindu although rural Tamils were also an integrated part of that new class. The Urban Tamils have had to face competition first from the Gujerati Muslim elite in the economic field to whom they had lost their « supremacy ». Conflict between Muslims and Tamils in the 1890's in Port Louis during the Cavadee festival had its origins in competition in trade and commerce.

The emergence of a rural Indian bourgeoisie, in turn, threatened the pre-eminence of the Tamil merchant class as the elite of the whole Hindu Community. In 1901, the few Hindus among those who welcomed Gandhi were Tamils They were Narainsamy, Valaydon and Armoogum³. In 1909, it was again mainly the Tamils who supported Manilall Doctor, Gandhi's emissary to Mauritius when he stayed in the country. Not surprisingly, the Young Men Hindu Association, founded by Manilall Doctor, was essentially a Tamil urban educational institution⁴. In 1911, urban Tamils supported Action Liberal promoted by Dr Laurent and Manilall Doctor while rural Hindus, including Tamils, generally supported the Franco-Mauritian oligarchy because they were dependent on the sugar industry⁵.

There were occasions when Indians, whatever their ethnic origins, collaborated with each other irrespective of religious and ethnic origins on certain specific issues. In 1901, urban Hindus and Muslims and rural Hindus came together to raise fund for famine in India. In 1919, Pandit Atmaram and Vadivel Mootoosamy organised a meeting with G.Issac as President and R.K Boodhun as vice-President to thank the British Government on the elevation to the peerage of lord Sinha as a member of the British Government⁶. But these efforts were sporadic the gulf between the two elite communities remained wide apart because of the cultural differences between the urban and the rural hindus could not be superseded by a coherent philosophy of unity. Another major reason was that in the rural areas, despite the same economic background between rural Hindus and Tamils, the latter looked for their model of social mobility in the middle class urban Tamils with they were culturally integrated. On

3 P. Ramsurrun, *Arya Samaj Movement in Mauritius*, Mauritius, 1970, p. 37.

4 R. Sooriamoorthy, *Les Tamouls à l'île Maurice*, 1977, p. 70.

5 S.J. Reddi, « The Development of political awareness among Indians 1870-1930 », *Journal of Mauritian studies*, vol. 3, n°1, 1989.

6 *Le journal de Maurice* 28th January 1919.

the other hand the northern Hindus constructed their own middle-class without any model so that the model which eventually emerged retained and developed profound cultural differences which made it difficult for a pan-Hindu group to emerge.

In the 1930's, the rift between the two groups became evident during the celebration of the arrival of the Indian immigrants because the dominant Tamil elite subscribed to a different concept of the settlement of the Indians in Mauritius. The urban Tamil business community refused to identify themselves with the Indian indentured labourers who had different history in Mauritius. Though only a tiny minority of urban Tamils could trace their ancestry to the Tamil merchant class, the majority of the Tamil Hindus in Port Louis were not. The Ponnusamy came from Goodlands, the Sooriamoorthy from D'Epinay, the Ringadoo from St Julien, the Periatamby from Central Flacq, the Sungeelee from Rose-Belle and the list could be extended. Many of these Tamil families from the rural area were sympathetic to the celebration but could not influence the Tamil leadership. The very few Tamil intellectuals in Port Louis who participated were intellectuals close to the Arya Samaj movement. Canabady the most prominent Tamil Trader in Port-Louis dissociated himself from the celebration. The Hindu Maha Jana Sangham the religious organisation of the Tamil merchant class too refused to participate. It is, significant that the main representative of the Tamil community in the 1935 celebration was Iyasamy, a planter and president of the Stanley Kovil. By that time, Stanley and Rose Hill were producing their own Tamil elite, as distinct from the Port Louis elite, the former being essentially of indentured labour origins. In 1985, the rival conception of the history of Indian settlement in Mauritius surfaced again during the celebration. The 150th anniversary celebration of the arrival of indentured labourers in Mauritius was followed by the commemoration anniversary of the 250th arrival of the Tamils in Mauritius to mark their distinctive identities. However the motifs on the monument of the « Silambou » to mark the Tamil presence at the Plaza duly acknowledged also the indentured origins of the Tamils.

The 1935 Indian centenary celebration marked the emergence of a political elite among Northern Hindus but it was the strike of 1937 of the small planters and labourers which provided the northern Hindu elite with a political base. The Colonial Government, realising the importance of the labourers and small planters, granted them representation in the Council of Government as economic, not as ethnic groups. Seeroobarkhan and Osman were preferred to Indian intellectuals as the Colonial Government looked upon all intellectuals with suspicion. Consequently the business and the elite communities were by-passed and the Tamil elite community too was ignored. The political recognition of the middle-class northern Hindus by the Colonial government was a slow process and was the result of their increasing role in electoral politics. In 1911 it was R. Boodhun who was

nominated in the Council of Government. In 1927 Dhunputh Lallah and Gujadhur were elected, in 1932 R. Gujadhur was nominated in the council of government and in 1938 Seeroobarkhan and Osman were nominated. All these elected members or nominees were northern Indians. On 6th November 1938, at Terre Rouge Sinnatambou Kovil, P. Seeneevassen, on behalf of the Mauritius Hindu Congregation⁷, a Tamil organisation, appealed to Governor Clifford Bede to nominate a Tamil Hindu. The Tamils still considering themselves part of the Hindu community felt that could aspire to represent the Hindus in Mauritius them. The Governor Bede was opposed to ethnic representation and their demand fell flat.

While the Tamils were seeking some form of political representation, some efforts made by the northern Hindus to develop a pan-Hindu movement came from the Bissoondoyal Brothers in the 1920's. Although the movement was basically northern Hindu, its closeness with the Indian National movement, the Arya Samaj movement, and the working class appealed both to Tamil intellectuals and labourers. In 1927, the Divali festival, which had always been celebrated as a public event by the Tamils was organised on an all-Hindu level by the Bissoondoyal brothers. The celebration was officiated by the Tamil priest of the Kyallassum Kovil, who spoke in Tamil and pleaded for Hindu unity. Parma Soobrayen, the Tamil intellectual, spoke in English and Pandit Atmaram spoke in Hindi. In 1943, the Maha Yaj, again organised by the Bissondooyal brothers, was presided over by Swami Hari Hara Iyer of Sockalingum Meenatchee Amen Kovil⁸. It was the Arya Samaj movement that trained the first group of militant Tamil teachers in the rural areas and it is these Tamil teachers who formed the backbone for the preservation of Tamil language teachings in Mauritius. Permal Soobrayen, Gopal Pareemanum M. Sungeelee, Veerapen and Rengasamy were some of the famous Tamil teachers of their time.

It was not, however, the Bissondooyal movement which ultimately won the political support of the Tamils but the Labour Party through the influence of Renganaden Seeneevassen and supported by the Tamil merchants of Port Louis. Tamils, in Port Louis, remained socially apart from rural Tamils and the rest of the Hindu community. It was the Labour Party that integrated a considerable number of the rural Hindus and planters with the urban Tamils, the one represented by Ramgoolam and the other by Seeneevassen. The latter was the labour party platform in 1938 and Ramgoolam joined the Labour party in 1947. In the 1940's it is difficult to assess the support of rural Hindus for the Labour Party, which was a Creole dominated party, in its leadership and, in its executive committee. In the 1948 elections, Ramgoolam and his friends won the North and S. Bissondooyal, the South of the Island. Moka-Flacq was divided between

7 R. Quenette, *Anquetil Mahatma Gandhi*, 1985, p. 68.

8 U. Bissoondoyal, *Promises to keep*, Wiley Eastern Ltd, 1990, p. 93.

the two groups. Between 1948 and 1959 Tamils, northern Hindus and Creoles dominated the Labour Party.

The death of Seeneevassen, in 1958, is often considered a turning point in the attitude of the Tamils towards the Labour Party. The overwhelming majority of the Tamils remained with the Labour Party until 1967 mainly because of the presence of Ringadoo and a few others like Vel Govinden, Sunassee and Chettiar, who were all close to the community. However the political crack within the Tamil community as from 1963 can best be explained by the following factors. While the death of Seeneevassen had no immediate repercussion on the Tamil support for the Labour Party, it was the policy of divide and rule, engineered by the PMSD, the party of the Franco-Mauritians opposed to the independence of Mauritius, which proved to be most effective factor of division as the debate on independence gathered momentum. The launching of the *Eclaireur* newspaper, around 1963, by a small group of Tamils in the pay of the PMSD coincided with the rise of the DMK Movement in South India which spearheaded an anti Brahmin and an anti Hindi Campaign in India. The DMK movement struck a responsive chord among many Tamils, especially the urban young. For the first time, the black and red flag of the DMK¹⁰ flew on the kovils to replace the yellow flags of the Cholas. « Namaskaram » was replaced by « Vanakkham », and in 1961, a lively debate took place between Swami Venkatesananda of the Divine Life Society and members of the Tamil United Party, a party fathered by the PMSD. In the same period, a Tamil Renaissance took place in Mauritius. Vacoas became the focal point of this renaissance where a number of cultural events were organised. The celebration of the Saint Tiruvalluvar and the formation of the Bharati band are two examples of this renaissance. The Tamil United Party even campaigned for Tamils to be classified as Dravidian in the national census. In spite of the cultural renaissance, the political consequences were limited. In 1962 only very few Tamils had defined themselves as Dravidians. The census of 1962 listed 11709 as Tamil speaking Sanatanists, 2080 as Tamil Samajists and 36191 as Tamil speaking Hindus¹¹.

Although many Tamils would have preferred to be recognised as Tamils during the 1965 Constitutional Conference and in the subsequent independent constitution, they subordinated their Tamil identity to the general Hindu identity in the struggle for independence of Mauritius. Tangavel Narrainen the PMSD candidate associated with separatist tenancy was defeated in Vacoas and it was Angidi Chettiar, the Labour candidate who was elected. Only in Rose-Hill was a PMSD candidate elected. In other constituencies such as Mahebourg, Rivière des Anguilles, Grand-Bay and Vacoas, the majority of the Tamils voted for the Labour candidates.

10 *Tamil Voice* 14th January 1966.

11 Population Census 1962. Mauritius and its dependencies, vol. I, Table 13, p. 21.

Since independence, the official category « Hindu » in the Constitution, which incorporates Tamil, became a source of discontent because Tamils felt that they were not being given due recognition and accepted as a full fledged membership in the Hindu community. The fundamental cause of this dissatisfaction was not due to the fact that they were being labelled Hindu but rather, in a post independent society, unequal opportunities and disparities led to conflict and competition among various groups. The struggle for independence was not carried out by a mass movement but by elections and candidates had to seek electoral support in the language and on conditions that the electorate could understand. In these conditions, political and ethnic clientalism flourished and after independence the scramble for scarce resources in the form of employment continued. While the formal struggle for resources took the form of class struggle, deep below, these tensions acquired communal, caste as well as class colours. Writing about those labelled as « low castes » within the north Indian community, Mannick wrote « promotion in government services was either delayed or prevented and they were kept out of some departments; social welfare, education, family planning and broadcasting."¹² Although the same criticism does not apply to the Tamils in that period, they too began to feel that they were being discriminated, but not on the same scale, and started to express resentment at the Government and indirectly to the north Indian. The main grievances, articulated by the Tamils from the mid-sixties up to the present, have not changed fundamentally. As far back as 1963, Tamils' grievances voiced in the « Tamil Voice » a newspaper close to the Labour Party and which advocated Hindu unity, were mainly directed against the MBC and the Civil Service. On the 5 April 1965, the Tamils were complaining that in the 6 hrs of Indian programme—they got 1½ hr only and that they were being discriminated for jobs and promotion in the Civil Service¹³. In 1990's the same complaints were reiterated in the newspapers¹⁴.

The Civil Service, the parastatal bodies and the MBC are the three areas, which are seen as evidence of the insensitivity of the northern Hindus to Tamil rights and feelings. The MBC provides, according to many Tamils, tangible and irrefutable evidence of this insensitivity but also of hegemonic inclinations. The MBC might advance a number of reasons for poor allocation of Tamil programmes but these do not stand to scrutiny. The Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation was unable to justify unequal allocation of hours, films and other programmes and even poor quality programmes. Tamils complain that, whenever a programme had to be cut down for special events, it is always Tamil programmes that are cut. Tamils

12 A.R. Mannick, *Mauritius ; The Development of a Plural society*, Spokesman, 1979.

13 *Tamil voice* 5th April 1995.

14 *Lumiere*, April, May and July 1995.

will provide numerous and weekly instances of what they perceive as discrimination and the MBC, because of its poorly trained personnel is vulnerable to such criticism.

Tamils usually quote examples of discrimination from all communities, including Creoles and Muslims in both the public and the private sectors, even going so far as to argue that Nagapen should have been made Bishop of Mauritius. It is, however, the northern Hindus who are usually the main target of all ethnic recriminations since they are perceived as wielding power in most of the public institutions. In actual fact cases of discrimination are cited against every community by every other community, both publicly and in private, whether in the government or in the private sector. Such cases may be imagined or real. In most cases it is difficult to specify the precise cause of discrimination in each case because too many factors operate at the same time and it is difficult to evaluate the weightage of ethnicity in each of these cases. People have neither the time nor the skill or the necessary information to analyse the causes of discrimination in Mauritian society whenever they occur. All other factors tend to be reduced to ethnicity or politics or ethnic politics. Since northern Hindus are seen by Tamils to be the ones who have overall political power, any discrimination is ultimately laid at their doors as an ethnic group but not as individuals. Ethnic groups are wrongly viewed in Mauritius as monolithic groups with coldly calculated blue prints.

The most notorious example of discontent among Tamils regarding promotion in government service was in 1995, when Judge Bernard Sik Yuen, was appointed Senior Puisne Judge, Judge A Pillay who was senior to Judge Sik Yuen in the Service exclaimed « my rights have denied », as he felt he was being debarred from acceding to the post of Chief Judge. In spite of the separation of powers in our system of government, the mere fact that Judge A Pillay was denied his promotion for some time and then obtained his promotion as Chief Judge later suggests that political interference at the highest level in the judiciary. There may be a number of reasons why Judge Pillay was denied his promotion. One of the reasons might have been just one person seeking to consolidate his power to obtain control of the judiciary. The Tamils, in this specific case, attributed the discrimination to an ethnic group rather than to the person responsible. This case is being used to show, how ethnic explanation is the most favoured one to explain conflict in Mauritian society, and Tamils do not behave differently from the rest of the Mauritian society.

Another most notorious example in the conflict between Tamils and the government on the question of the Bank notes. In 1998, the Bank of Mauritius decided to remove the Tamil alphabets from the top of the bank notes and replaced them by Hindi ones while the Tamil alphabets were relegated to the bottom. This led major protests across the island until the

government accepted to replace the bank notes¹⁶. Up to the present no valid explanation has been given to explain the alteration of the order of the Tamil language on the notes. The reasons may in fact, be neither political nor ethnic or may be both but for the Tamil community it is the latter reasons which are considered to be the real ones. It is argued that since 1967, Government had not brought about any changes until the 1980,s and such changes started under the Jugnauth government to be continued under the Ramgoolam government ? Is it the result of a new northern Hindu social group in power since 1982 ? One could suggest an affirmative answer to that question. The term « Hindu » when used by the IFB and Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam integrated the Tamils but in later years it was increasingly being used to refer to Northern hindus only, especially in the political context.

The first political rift between Tamils and northern Hindus can be traced to the advent of the PSM, when the criticisms of its leader, Harish Boodhoo, on Sir Veerasamy Ringadoo, the State Bank and Air Mauritius were perceived by Tamils as Tamil bashing. Although in 1983, H.Boodhoo succeeded to a limited extent to repair the harm that had been caused by supporting the nomination of Ringadoo as governor General and the appointment of a Tamil, Mr Umanee at the Public Service commission and by maintaining close contact with the Mauritius Tamil Temple Federation.

Political analysts have not advanced any reason to explain the division between Tamils and northern Hindus! Petty conflicts between these two communities had always existed. So why did such feelings were overtly expressed in private political meetings ? One of the explanations is to be seen in the changes within the internal structure of the northern Hindus' political leadership. The political leadership and the electorate are deeply ridden by caste divisions as well as by political culture. Political leadership in the Hindu community has always been dominated by western educated leaders who embraced a generally secular, national and a progressive e approach but who, for political survival, were often compelled to make ethnic and caste concessions. Such leadership, whether under Ramgoolam or Bissoondoyal, incorporated all ethnic groups and castes on secular or non-caste criteria. Yet that leadership could not forego the ascribed caste in which they were born. Even within the same caste group, the Vaish, which had provided the northern Hindus their first politicians since 1900, has in recent decades been divided into two strands that had developed differently. Those, who had benefited from western education and urbanisation and with long historical roots, can be generally called the « Historical Vaishs » which is a caste component of the historical bourgeoisie within the Hindu Community. This group, which emerged around 1900, is western and secular in their approach to politics, of which the most notable

16 *Mauritius Times*. « Bank notes National Heritage and the Tamils », 6th-12th November 1998.

examples was S Buguth who stood in the Municipal elections of 1911, Dhunputh Lallah in the 1920's and 1930's and afterwards, none other than Sir S. Ramgoolam. This group had always come under pressure from the more populist and more religious-oriented section of the northern Hindu electorate and politicians. It is this latter group which contested the Labour Party leadership in late 1970's, which formed the PSM and later the MSM. This new group might be described as the « New Vaish » separated from the historical Vaish by education, political culture and family ties. It is more rural and populist and resents not only the political domination of the « historical vaish », but also their secularism and their more liberal and, at times, socialist outlook. It is against this group that a political group the TTM comprising of Tamils, Telegus and Marathis was formed after 1988. It is equally this group which pressurised the Jugnauth government to have a non-Tamil Hindu, as Minister of Finance and which succeeded in doing so after the 1995 elections. Whatever be the reasons of the change on the front bench of the government after 1995, the satisfaction of the northern Hindus in securing the post of Minister of Finance was matched by the glee with which the downfall of that Minister of Finance was greeted among Tamils. Evidence of this conflict in the government persists and becomes publicly visible when one northern Hindu Minister applauded warmly the opposition's criticism of the University of Technology and yet failed to support the opposition's amendments on the third reading of the bill.

On the other hand, the political leadership in the Tamil community has been inexistent because Tamil politicians behave as individualists and no attempt has been made by them to chart a future for the community. They tend to consider ethnic issues as non-political and their political actions remain limited. In the absence of political leadership, cultural leaders have also been unable to fulfil that role as they became increasingly enmeshed in corrupt practices. Finally the Tamil elite which used to serve as a guide to the Tamil community has disintegrated as it migrated from Port Louis to Plaines-Wilhems where at the moment it is in the process of being reconstituted around the Tamil League now located in Reduit.

If at government level, the ethnic conflict is played out between the politicians on personal animosities, at the popular level the distinct ethno personalities of the Tamils and the northern Hindus result in mutual resentment. Both communities have developed stereotypes of each other that are used by both middle and lower middle classes ethnic mobilisers to further their selfish interests. Tamils are perceived to be garrulous, pompous, arrogant, outspoken and, recently, communalist while northern Hindus are perceived to be meek, humble, self-effacing, nepotist, circuitous in their relationship and, most of all, greedy. One is capable of hurting by words, the other retaliating by deeds.

They, hardly, understand each other's views and values — both act and react on these misinterpretations. Developments that reinforced stereotypes are highlighted and those that do not are ignored.

Politicians and other middle class leaders of both communities foster and play on such negative stereotypes to serve their own interests and had completely failed to educate their respective communities on the duties, responsibilities as well as the limitations of political power. Tamils and northern Hindus feel that their opinions, apprehensions and interests have never been understood or considered with sympathy by their political representatives except in exceptional circumstances or at election times. On rare occasions, the efforts made to improve relations between the two communities have not proved durable because they had been badly conceived and managed. In the MSM, the leadership's refusal to yield to the lobby not to allocate the portfolio of the Minister of Finance to a Tamil is seen as the result of political strategy rather than genuine political collaboration. With experience, the MSM leader, Sir A. Jugnauth made a real effort to nominate Sir V Ringadoo as Governor General and in the end found a device to make Ringadoo the first President of the Republic to satisfy the Tamil community. Similarly Prime Minister Ramgoolam accepted to withdraw the Bank notes, but he appeared to have conceded under popular pressure than out of an understanding of the deep feelings of the Tamils. Even when actions are positive, they are too rare and far between to build the relationships between the two groups on solid ground.

The failure of both communities to understand each other is seen in the sterile debate about whether Tamils are Hindus or not. This debate has lasted for more than 40 years and will never reach any conclusion simply because the discussion is masked by what is really an issue about identity and politics. No suggestion has so far been made that, in a most extreme case, that no present-day Hindu may be called a Hindu, if we take the view that the term « Hinduism » is a nineteenth century term coined by cultural imperialist to describe the religion of India. Those, who practised these religions, never called themselves Hindus until Europeans labelled them as such. Yet this is not the crux of the debate. Northern Hindus emphasise the use of that term to describe religious beliefs, which both north and south Hindus undoubtedly shared. It is not the religion use of the term « Hindu » which is really contested for thousands of Tamils do proclaim privately and publicly their Hindu faith, and even the greatest Tamil Kovil has retained the historical name of its management, which is the prestigious name of Hindu Maha Jana Sangham. The term « Hindu » is, however, contested by Tamils on three counts. First they do not want to submerge or subordinate their Tamil identity for by using the term Hindu, they think they will be doing so. Secondly they do not want the political term Hindu to be applied to them unless they are considered a full-fledged member of the Hindus politically, and not the Cinderella group of the Hindu community. Finally any use of the

term « Hindu » which implies forceful assimilation of the Tamils in a larger group in which they have only token recognition will inevitably meet with fierce resistance.

But as yet northern Hindu leadership is unprepared as yet, of accepting Tamils as equal member of a grand political Hindu group for to do so would mean a sharing of power which it refuses to contemplate. All that it could do so far is token membership although some efforts to work out a better relationship had been sporadic. These are many weaknesses in the northern Hindu leadership, which explain their failure to do. Its present power is built on the myth of numbers that can disintegrate at any time. As far back as 1982, the end of the Hindu Raj was being anticipated in the column of Weekend by S. Gobin because of the internal political division within the Hindu community. More fundamentally, the north Hindu community is deeply ridden by divisions of caste and its various caste segments are in turn weakened by various factions. It had no real power, whether economic or cultural, and it is extremely vulnerable to a hostile anti-Hindu public opinion backed by the economic muscle of a private sector, which is generally anti-Hindu. Equally important, it is incapable of establishing a policy for a fair sharing and distribution of resources simply because this will necessitate the revolutionary transformation of the economy and at this juncture the country is too committed to capitalism to support such changes. Having taken the greater responsibility of governing one of the most complex and plural societies in the world, where resources are extremely limited, it requires a well-thought, coherent policy which can show up the way to the future with all the potentialities and limitations. Such policy can, however, only be formulated in the most democratic manner. Unless people are aware of the limits of any policy making, frustration is bound to follow among all groups and Tamils, like the rest of the population will have its perpetual share of dissatisfaction.

Yet to paint this relationship in its dark colours may appear to be an exaggeration. In spite of the political resentment, which characterises the relationships between the two communities, cordial relations continue to coexist. Other factors tend to operate for better relationships. Just like for the rest of the Mauritian communities, interests bind members of the two groups rather than divide. Such interests can be class, status or professional level and these do not operate along ethnic lines only. Moreover, in spite of divergence of beliefs and attitudes, Tamils and north Hindus share a set of common values, which they have inherited from India. As immigrants from different parts of India, they may be different, but they share commonness against others whose core values are different. When Tamils are evaluated by themselves and by others on a scale of social distance, unsurprisingly the two communities will be found to be the nearest.

Whatever be the discourses of middle class ethnic mobilisers in both communities and their competition for resources whether it is material or

power, relationships at the private level continue to improve. Inter-ethnic marriages, without dissolving ethnic markers or boundaries, tend to bring greater understanding and less verbal recrimination and abuse within inter-ethnic families. There is even greater participation of northern Hindus in Tamil religious festivals, Cavadee or walking on fire. In the rural areas, walking on fire continue to attract considerable north Hindus participation. All these create greater collaboration and dissolve some of the prejudices. Tamil Hindus and northern Hindus are generally beginning to accept new identities, despite some inevitable resistance. At present Sheela Ramgoolam is a Tamil, brought up in Tamil Culture, winning Tamil prize at CPE examination. On the other hand, Kevin Ramsamy will be a Northern Hindu, learning Hindi and identifying himself with northern Hindu and perhaps a new type of Hindu is in the making !

Social and cultural changes in the two communities will speed up at an unprecedented rate and whatever be the new identities that will be invented, they will be more syncretic and eclectic than ever before. The inauguration of the flight between Chennai and Mauritius will usher a dramatic transformation of both the Tamil and northern Hindus. Tamils will rethink of their identity, as some of the myths will explode. Tamils will rediscover that they are considered as the most orthodox Hindus of India or the « real » Hindus but they will also be considered together with Northern Hindus as foreigners that cannot speak Tamil. One can expect greater changes in social relationship between northern Hindus and Tamils, which point towards integration but not assimilation.

This paper has tried to highlight a certain facet of communal relation between Tamil and northern Hindus over the past decades. We have tried to identify elements of tension but also traditions of cooperation between the two groups. One major conclusion, which can be drawn, is that the political factors are contributing more to the persisting cleavage between the two communities rather than shared culture. At times of great cultural revival, Tamils have subordinated cultural considerations to higher political issues. It is only when political and cultural issues are combined that the highest tension is registered. One can therefore argue that politics will continue to matter in the rapport between northern Hindus and Tamils and it is in this area that the problems need to be anticipated and addressed. Similarly the relationships among the various communities in Mauritius must be investigated so that solving and managing these tensions by the state can help to bring greater unity to the nation.