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*'same same but different'***

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Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and other Tamils in the Montréal diaspora: *‘same same but different’*

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According to a recent study published by Statistics Canada, in 2036, more than half of immigrants in Canada will be of Asian origin, and South Asians will be the group with most people. Today Tamil people represent the most important South Asian group in Montréal, but their profiles and stories are many and diverse. Immigrants of Indian origin, refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka or re-settlers from Malaysia or Africa, they recount dissimilar migration histories and profess different faiths. Focusing on the largest group, the Sri Lankan Tamil Saivite Hindus, this paper explores the relationships of this group with other Tamils living in Montréal, namely Tamil Catholics and Pentecostal Christians, as well as with Tamil Hindus of Indian origin. Also, this article discusses the different strategies of integration of these Tamil communities into the French-speaking majority of Québec and the English-speaking majority of Canada, which represent a main figure of the ‘Otherness’ encountered by the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in this diasporic context. More broadly, the article shows that the development of Hindu religious solidarities and interplays in diaspora depend on the socio-cultural composition and cohesion of the Hindu groups, but also on their migration stories, and on the social and political context of the host country. As a result, it turns out that in Montréal, Sri Lankan Hindus feel much closer to Sri Lankan Catholics than to Indian Tamil Hindus, which seems to imply that the sharing of the same land of origin, language, and migration pattern, is much more important than the belonging to Hindu religion in the re-building of togetherness and solidarity.

Introduction

Canada and Montréal in particular have long been favoured destinations for immigrants. However, for the major part of the 20th century, South Asians were not welcomed to Canada¹ and immigration to this country represented a very difficult endeavour if not an impossible task. Only after World War II did the doors of the country open, and very little at that: a quota system was adopted² allowing entry to no more than 150 Indians, 50 Pakistanis and 50 Ceylonese annually³. It would only be at the end of the 1970s that an unbiased policy of immigration was adopted by the Canadian government based on merits and qualifications. Nowadays, of course, things have changed. By 2036 more than half of immigrants in Canada will be of Asian origin⁴ and South Asians will continue to be, just as presently, the most important group among the visible minorities of Canada⁵.

For Statistics Canada, the term visible minority is applied to 'persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and who do not report being Aboriginal'. This represents a great number of human beings including Black, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, West Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian people⁶.

There are possibly many reasons for this long-standing ostracism against South Asians and one of these could be that Canadians of the time feared the long-lasting influence that these people, Indians, Ceylonese, Pakistanis, who were perceived as exceedingly different, could have on their relatively homogeneous society, mainly European rooted.

The effect of migration on social forms in the 'receiving' country or region should not be underestimated. Thus, to take an example, South Asian migrants to Canada are, among other things, carriers of certain religious forms which they may or may not identify as Hinduism⁷.

In 2011, a National Household Survey conducted by Statistics Canada⁸ reported that close to 17,000 people in the province of Québec declared that Tamil was their

¹ See Buchignani & Indra, (1985)

² Following a similar decision taken by the United States a few years before (St-Germain Lefebvre (2005)

³ Carsignol. 2011, p. 126

⁴ Statistics Canada, (2017). [<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170125/dq170125b-eng.htm>]. Cons. 10.01.2018

⁵ Statistics Canada, (2011). [<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.pdf>]. Cons. 10.01.2018

⁶ Statistics Canada (2017). [<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/pop127-eng.cfm>]. Cons. 10.01.2018

⁷ Beyer (2006), p. 59

⁸ Statistics Canada. [<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-fra.cfm?TABID=1&LANG=F&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105388&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=J>]. Cons. 22.08.2014

mother tongue, which makes this community the most important South Asian diaspora⁹ in Québec. Those numbers represent a hike of almost 20 per cent over the 2006 figures, five years earlier, when the reported number was 13,895¹⁰. Not surprisingly, almost all these people, then as today, live in the Greater Montréal Area.

However, many researchers working with the Montréal Tamil communities do not believe that these figures represent accurately the reality and some think that these numbers are under estimated by as much as 50%¹¹. If true, this would make Tamil the foremost South Asian language spoken in Montréal¹².

It may come to some as a surprise to read the words 'Montréal's Tamil communities', plural form. The fact of the matter is that the Tamil-speaking people of Montréal do not form one homogeneous community but rather two, and some would even argue for four or even six distinctive Tamil communities living in Montréal.

Objectives and methodology

This paper's main objective is to explore the various factors responsible for this diversity in the many Tamil communities or groups in Montréal, which remain quite unknown in comparison with other important diasporic Tamil communities in North America (Toronto, USA) and elsewhere (Europe, Malaysia, for instance). I will show that some of these differences are structural and others punctual. Some are inherent to the communities and individuals themselves, some have been imposed on them. What interests me the most is the interactions these different groups and persons entertain between themselves and with the host community, the French-speaking people of the city.

India and Sri Lanka are separated by about sixty miles at most and, between them, the two Tamil communities have had a lot in common. They share a more than two thousand years' history, the same language and many elements of culture and religion. The *Saiva* religious denomination, which is that of most Sri Lankan and South Indian Hindus - as well as other Tamil Hindu communities in South-East Asia and elsewhere - has deeply shaped their personal, social and cultural lives. Based on the philosophy and teachings of *Caiva Cittāntam* (skr. *Śaiva Siddhānta*), it is one of the main threads of Saivism, a monotheistic tradition that proclaims that the universal supreme God, although He may appear in a multitude of forms, is only one: Shiva, the 'auspicious'.

⁹ In this paper, I am using Vertovec's (1997) definition of the term diaspora: 'Any population that is considered "deterritorialized" or "transnational"- that is, which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe'.

¹⁰ Das (2008a), p. 11

¹¹ Das (2008a, 2011); Bouchard (2009a); Gross (2009).

¹² According to Das, Punjabi was the most widely spoken South Asian language in Montréal in 2008. (2008a, p. 11)

Business was once brisk between the two groups. It might thus be surprising to learn that the two Tamil communities of Montréal do not share a lot. In this article, I will try to understand how this came to be. Geography, history and religion, all have played important roles into the matter, as also one of Québec's national linguistic laws called in French '*La Loi 101*' and in English 'Bill 101'.

This paper is based on an ethnographic analysis of the various Hindu communities of Montréal. In order to produce this essay, I have relied on documented scholarly sources as well as good old ordinary fieldwork, including interviews and observational research in places of worship. I have now been conducting fieldwork within the Tamil Canadian community for more than twelve years. Starting in 2004, I have been irregularly attending the various Hindu temples of the Montréal area, whether North Indian, Tamil, Gujarati or Sikh. Over the last six years, as part of my job as a lecturer attached to UQAM, I have been conducting scholarly visits to a majority of these places of worship for a quite diverse public, ranging from elementary school children to elderly citizens, but more frequently university students. Throughout these years I have established warm relationships with a good number of members of these different communities.

Second, both my Master's dissertation and my Ph.D. thesis were centred on the Canadian Tamil Hindu community originating from Sri Lanka. The first studied the importance of religious practice for the sake of identity transmission within a refugee community, and the second investigated the transformation and adaptation of final rites in the Sri Lankan Hindu Tamil-Canadian community. The fieldwork required for both productions was based mainly on two sources: encounters and participant observations on the one side, and various interviews of willing participants on the other. In total more than thirty different individuals were interviewed, twice as many men than women, all adults aging from 18 to 77, all born in Sri Lanka before migrating to Canada at various stages of their lives. Different questionnaires were applied to these participants and some of the material gathered throughout these years proved useful towards the production of the present essay.

Also, additional material used here comes from research done prior to the writing of my post-graduate productions. I was then partnered with other assistants in a broad research programme looking into links between ethnicity and religious practices within four minority communities in Montréal: African-born Pentecostals. Cambodian-born Buddhists, North-African-born Muslims and Sri Lankan-born Hindus. This project was named GRIMER for *Groupe de recherche interdisciplinaire sur le Montréal ethno-religieux* and it was based at UQAM. That research involved participant observation and interviews were also conducted with adult participants.

Finally, a few years ago, I spent a year and a half doing fieldwork in Toronto and Montréal interviewing young Tamil men, Canadian-born or young immigrants, who had lost one of their parents. Nothing came out from this research. However, some information obtained through these interviews has found its way here.

The importance of Tamil language and culture

Tamil is a very ancient language documented more than 2,000 years ago¹³ and it was the first of the Indian languages to be officially declared 'Classical Language of India' by the Government of Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee in 2004, one year before Sanskrit was recognised.

Up to the 20th century, the world's largest Tamil-speaking populations were found in South India and Sri Lanka. Between 1830 and 1950, Indian Tamils went through an important migration cycle. In 1931, more than 1.5 million ethnic Tamils from South India were enumerated in other British colonies, mainly Ceylon, Malaysia and Burma¹⁴. As for Sri Lankan Tamils, their exile operation started with their island's independence in 1948 but it raised sharply after the start of the civil war with the Sinhalese in 1983. It is estimated that over one million Sri Lankan Tamils have now left their native country for India, Europe and North America, mainly Canada¹⁵. Today, Sri Lankan Tamils may be found all around the world from Australia to Norway and from Singapore to Toronto, which is believed to host the largest Sri Lankan Tamil population outside of South Asia¹⁶.

Today more than 70 million people speak Tamil around the world and it is ranked the 20th most widely spoken language on earth. Tamil is recognised as an official language in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. However, in all these countries Tamil is a minority language. There is no country on earth where Tamil is the majority language.

Minority language speakers meet other minority language speakers.

Upon their arrival in Montréal, both the Indian Tamil immigrants and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees discovered a situation similar to one they were familiar within their country of origin. In Montréal, most of the population is French-speaking, but the French Canadians are a minority people in the whole of Canada. Interesting enough, the two Tamil groups followed different ways of integrating into their new society. For instance, right from the beginning, the Sri Lankan Tamils introduced themselves as Tamils first¹⁷ and as Ceylonese or Sri Lankan second, whereas the Tamil-Montrealers of Indian origin preferred to be known as Indo-Canadians, pushing forward their Indian roots rather than their Tamil ones¹⁸.

¹³ Source: [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/article2408091.ece>]. Cons. 10.01.2018

¹⁴ Guilmoto (1992)

¹⁵ Schalk (2007)

¹⁶ Das (2011)

¹⁷ « Dans la communauté, l'identité tamoule domine sans partage, de même que les associations et organismes mis sur pied par les Tamouls au Canada s'identifient comme « tamouls » à commencer par le Congrès tamoul canadien (*Canadian Tamil Congress*). » Castel (2012), p. 123

¹⁸ The same can be said of the Sri Lankan Tamils in France, according to Goreau-Ponceaud (2017), in this volume.

Also, on a linguistic level, Tamil spoken in Chennai and Tamil spoken in Jaffna may be considered as two quite different languages. First, while Tamil spoken in India has been many times influenced over the last few hundred years by Hindi and English and most recently by Bollywood's culture, Yalpana¹⁹ Tamil has been isolated from the outside world up to an extent, and still uses expressions that have been abandoned in India. Moreover, Tamil is a diglossic language, meaning that there are two levels of spoken Tamil, one of which is more literary, used in formal addresses and in communications, and the other, a more day-to-day Tamil, used by family members and spoken on the streets. This phenomenon has been observed in Montréal by Sonia Das, a linguistic anthropologist who studied the differences between the various levels of Tamil spoken.

Das writes that Sri Lankan Tamils greatly value their language, their culture and traditions, everything that makes them distinct from other Canadian communities, while Tamils from Indian heritage in Canada see themselves as modernists as they embrace more freely the North American culture. Thus, Das writes:

Indian Tamils are seen as speaking an impure, colloquial language and Sri Lankan Tamils are seen as speaking a pure, literary language. Indian Tamils speak a 'modernist' style of Tamil while Sri Lankan Tamils speak a 'classicalist' style of Tamil²⁰.

During her study, Das relied on many informants. One of them was Mohan, a 30-year-old family physician, born and raised in a middle-class suburb of Montréal, where he attended English-medium private schools and universities. Mohan was born in Montréal to a family of Indian origin and he testified that when he was interacting at the clinic where he works with Tamil patients from Sri Lanka who do not speak English, he requires the assistance of a translator. Writes Das: 'Mohan maintains that Sri Lankan Tamil is a language unintelligible to the average Indian speaker educated in Canada'²¹. So, together with the country of origin, language definitely appears as one of the major factors behind differentiation between the Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Montréal.

Religion and immigration differences

Language is not the only difference between the various Tamil communities of Montréal. Religion is another important element of distinction. If Tamils of Indian origin are mostly Hindus (some are non-religious), Québec's Sri Lankan Tamils are of a great variety of affiliations: most of them are Saivite Hindus, but many are Catholics and a few hundreds are Evangelicals Christians (Baptists and Pentecostals, mostly). As for Tamil Muslims, there might be some individuals in Montréal, but I have never heard of any. These affiliations are those from their country of origin, before immigrating to Canada. Not

¹⁹ Yalpana was the Tamil name of the Jaffna kingdom during medieval times (1215-1624 CE).

²⁰ Das (2008), p. 161

²¹ Das (2011), p. 778

many cases of conversion are known to have happen here after their arrival and installation.

Although there are no conflicts of any kind, in Montréal, between the Tamil Hindus of Indian origin and those of Sri Lankan origin, the two groups worship in different venues and according to different weekly schedules.

Because of their clear-cut differences in social status and political ideology, Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils have maintained a high degree of ethnonational segregation in establishing residential neighborhoods, social networks, and community organisations²².

In fact, Tamil Hindus of Sri Lankan origin have less contact with Hindus of Indian origin in Montréal than with other Sri Lankans of other religious denominations. As we will show shortly, there are more interactions between Hindus and Catholics of Sri Lankan origin. This might be explained by the fact that all Sri Lankan Tamils, regardless of their faith, have suffered the ordeal of the war.

Finally, and probably most important, another major difference between the two Tamil groups (from India and from Sri Lanka) is that most Sri Lankan Tamils did not choose to emigrate: they were forced to leave their country, their job and their loved ones because of the war. And this exodus continues even today. On the other hand, most Indian Tamils came to Canada on a voluntary basis and a good number of them keep close links with their country of origin, which is not yet the case for many of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Migration histories

Like most South Asians, Tamils have come to Canada relatively recently after the immigration laws were changed in the 1950s²³. However, very different patterns of immigration were used by the Tamils originating from India and by those fleeing Sri Lanka. In fact, four distinct migration histories for the Tamils may be observed over the last decades.

During the 1960s and the early 1970s, a few hundred Tamils, most of them young men belonging to upper-scale society, English-speaking and educated came from India. Surprisingly, most of them did not come from Tamil Nadu but rather from large Indian cities, like Delhi or Bombay, where their family had previously moved one or two generations earlier and where their chances at professional advancement were bleak due to the socialist politics of the Indian government at that time²⁴. These individuals, often

²² Das (2011), p. 777

²³ For more on Hindu immigration to Canada see St-Germain (2005).

²⁴ Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government (1966-1977), fiscal laws made it almost impossible for major foreign companies to open subsidiaries in India without forsaking the majority ownership of

the first Hindus to settle in Montréal, found jobs fairly easily, some as professionals and university teachers, others in engineering and research.

The second wave of Tamil immigration to Canada, the one with the greatest number of individuals, came from Sri Lanka in the mid-1980s following 1983's 'Black July' massacre and sustained violence against hundreds of Tamils by Sinhalese extremists in Colombo and elsewhere in the island's up-country²⁵. Since the independence of Ceylon in 1948, thousands of Tamils had already gone into exile rather than suffer at the hands of the newly empowered Sinhalese majority. After Black July, hundreds of thousands also left by any means possible, many of them dying before reaching safety abroad. Over all, Peter Schalk estimates that one third of the three million Sri Lankan Tamils have left their native country²⁶.

Before that time, a few Sri Lankan Tamils had come to Montréal in the 1970s, mostly as students, and they had joined the Indian Tamil community readily. However, after the 1983 massacres, tens of thousands of Tamils fled Sri Lanka for Canada²⁷. Statistics show that these were mostly men, middle-aged or younger middle-class city-dwellers from Colombo or Jaffna. They all were quickly granted refugee status.

At the time that these horrible events were taking place in the island, many Sri Lankan native Tamils were already living in Europe and South-East Asia, notably in Malaya and Singapore, or in East Africa, mainly in Kenya or Uganda. A great number of these individuals decided to resettle in Canada. Upon their arrival, these Sri Lankan ethnic Tamils were marked as "twice-migrants" by the Canadian authorities, just like many other South Asians, mainly Indians, who had been living in other Commonwealth countries as teachers, traders and civil servants and had been sending part of their salaries to their families back home in Sri Lanka²⁸.

their investments. Thousands of engineers and technology-savvy young Indians, eager to develop their skills, left for abroad, the UK, the USA and Canada.

²⁵ In July 1983, after thirteen Sinhalese soldiers were ambushed and killed in Northern Sri Lanka by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a vengeful fury erupted in many pogrom-like massacres in Colombo and other parts of Sinhala-dominated places of southern Sri Lanka against Tamil civilians. The slaughter lasted more than three days. The official death toll was fixed by the Government at 400 but it could amount to close to 3,000 men, women and children. For many weeks, months and even years after, the Tamil population of the island was subjected to many forms of violence: 'internal displacements, destruction of property, interrupted education for generations of students, post-traumatic experiences related to massacres, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, harassment in daily life, rape and extended periods of emergency law'. Schalk (2007), p. 94.

²⁶ Schalk (2007), p. 91

²⁷ Between 1981 and 1990: ± 21,000; between 1991 and 2000: ± 54,000; between 2001 and 2011: ± 38,000. Source: Statistics Canada: [<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-fra.cfm?LANG=F&APATH=3&DETAIL=&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105388&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>]. Cons. 10.01.2018

²⁸ More than 5,000 had come to Canada from Uganda in 1972 after Idi Amin Dada expelled thousands of that country's Asian minority.

Thirdly, during the 1990s and the early 2000s, as the war continued, and violence grew in Sri Lanka, immigration laws were changed in Canada for asylum-seekers, both at the federal level and at the provincial legislature, as immigration is a shared responsibility between the two orders of government. For example, Québec was the first province in Canada to offer social benefits to Tamil refugees²⁹. This second Sri Lankan Tamil wave came to Montréal bringing women this time as well as men³⁰. These individuals were generally less educated than the members of the first group, originating from rural sectors or fishermen communities of the Jaffna peninsula, and often with almost no knowledge of English at all.

Das writes that, according to Rudhramoorthy Cheran, one of Canada's most respected Tamil intellectuals, during that period, while Toronto received a larger share of upper-caste Vēlāḷars, to Montréal came a greater number of people of lower castes³¹. In his Ph.D. dissertation, Cheran did not expand on this topic, noting only that there has been a general reluctance in discussing caste issues in public. "The issues of caste have been treated as *pesāp porul* (silent topics) in Tamil language nationalist discourses. The tendency is to assert that caste was a thing of the past and Tamil Eelam will be caste-free³²." However, it is quite possible that some of the new-comers in Montréal were members of the Karaiyar caste and that others could have been duty bound to the Vēlāḷars, like Koviya domestic (kudimai) or Pallar servants (adimai). For a better understanding of the traditional caste system in Jaffna, see Madavan (2011)³³ and David (1974)³⁴.

Finally, the fourth and most recent arrival of Tamils to the Montréal area comes again from India, mostly Tamil Nadu this time. The last ten years saw the coming of many young entrepreneurs and students looking to complete their doctorate or post-doctoral studies at one of Montréal's two Anglophone universities.

Today Canada is home to the largest Sri Lankan Tamil community outside of South Asia, and one could ask why cold Toronto or freezing Montréal could be attractive to people coming from a tropical island almost half way around the world. Sonia Das writes that, for them, failing living in a Tamil country of their own, the sectors of Toronto and Montréal called 'Little Jaffnas' are the best places to live and speak Tamil on a daily basis³⁵.

²⁹ Bradley & Trouillet (2011), p. 117.

³⁰ Castel (2012), p. 135

³¹ Das (2008a), p. 135

³² Cheran (2000), p. 180

³³ Madavan, Delon. (2011), 'Déségrégation socio-religieuse d'une ville dans l'immédiat après-guerre, Jaffna, Sri Lanka', Carnets de géographes, no 2, p. 1-24

³⁴ David, Kenneth. (1974), 'And Never the Twain Shall Meet? Mediating the Structural Approaches to Caste Ranking', Structural Approaches to South India Studies, edited by Harry M. Buck & Glenn E. Yocum. Chambersburg, Pa.: Wilson Books, p. 43-80

³⁵ Das (2008a), p. 137

Two different communities

I will now try to show why Tamils of Montréal cannot be considered as part of only one group, homogeneous and vibrant, but rather as part of at least two different communities, whether originating from India or from Sri Lanka, English-schooled or French-educated, of Christian or Hindu faith, and so on.

Most recent studies estimate the number of Indian Tamils in Montréal to be between 2,000 and 3,000 whereas the Sri Lankan Tamils would be ten times that number, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000³⁶. Studying the data available from the 2011 census, researcher Frédéric Castel conducted a comparative socio-analysis of the two communities. According to Castel, men and women of the Indian Tamil community living in Montréal are more educated than their Sri Lankan counterparts, and both women and men have better jobs, mainly in the professional sector: they are doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers, men as well as women. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan women, working outside their home as many do, are mostly found in the manufacturing and industrial sectors³⁷. As for Sri Lankan men, many are in the small-business sector. There are more than forty-five Sri Lankan-owned shops in Montréal: grocery stores, restaurants, jewellery and music stores, etc., catering mostly to the Tamil community but not exclusively. There are also two printed Tamil newspapers and one Internet Tamil Radio, all catering to Sri Lankan Tamils' interests³⁸.

The difference between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Montréal also relies on differences of castes, which can be formulated in terms of *jāti* as well as of *varṇa*. Indeed, most of the Sri Lankan Hindus in Montréal belong to the caste (*jāti*) of the Vēlālars³⁹, a community of landowners that has been constituting the main dominant caste of the island for centuries, or to some fishermen castes (Karaiyars). Nevertheless, from the Brahmanical point of view, both castes are considered part of the lowest Hindu *varṇa*, the *śūdras*. This is an important point because most of the Indian Tamils living in Montréal are Brahmins and, in Canada as well as in South Asia, the ritual duties and obligations of the Brahmins and those of the *śūdra* are not the same, and the two groups usually do not attend the same temples.

Temple building

Over the years, upon their arrival, most Hindu immigrants to the area patronised the existing temples until the national community⁴⁰ became large enough to open a new place of worship. Whereas a majority of Montréal Hindus originating from North

³⁶ Das (2011), p. 777

³⁷ Castel (2012), p. 141-142

³⁸ *Montréal Irusu*, *Tamil Montréal*, and ITR-FM [<http://www.itr.fm/>]. There are also various community web sites like *montamil.ca* which is also on Facebook and YouTube.

³⁹ Das (2008), p. 147

⁴⁰ The Gujaratis, the Bengalis, etc.

India congregate each Sundays at the *Hindu Mandir* in the suburb of Dollard-des-Ormeaux, the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus undertook to build a temple of their own at the turn of the millennium in the same area of the city, the *Thiru Murugan Koyil*⁴¹ (figure 1) where the most important weekly gatherings are held on Friday evenings. Trouillet (2011) has shown how temple building is important for Tamils in a diaspora context: more than a mere religious edifice, it becomes the founding rock of the community's identity⁴².



Figure 1. The Montréal Thiru Murugan temple

Based on the Dravidian architectural principles described in the *Vāstu Shastras*, the commission for the Murugan temple was given to an Indian architect (*stapati*) and a group of specialised artisans (*cirpi*). It was officially consecrated in June 2006. Whereas the Hindu Mandir's exterior is resolutely modern, the *koyil* was built in the old South Indian style with both a *vimanam*⁴³ over the main altar and a *gopuram*⁴⁴ over the main entrance. Inside, the various deities are each installed in individual altars at different locations throughout the temple. By contrast, the Mandir adopted the North Indian approach where the *mūrtis*⁴⁵ of the main deities are all standing side by side on the same row at the back of the prayer hall⁴⁶.

⁴¹ Tamil for temple.

⁴² Bradley & Trouillet (2011)

⁴³ Tower which crowns the innermost sanctum of a Hindu temple, in the Dravidian architecture.

⁴⁴ Gatehouse tower, usually ornate, at the entrance of a Dravidian Hindu temple.

⁴⁵ Image or statue of a Hindu deity.

⁴⁶ For more information on the *Thiru Murugan* temple, see Bradley, M. & Théophile-Catherine, J. (2006) and Bradley, M. & Trouillet, P.-Y. (2011)

Interestingly, the decisions to build the Mandir and the Koyil in this part of town were not made because of the presence of a large Hindu population in the area. There is not. The reason is more pragmatic: these areas are close to an important highway, making the temple easily accessible from many directions, and both temples are situated in an part of the city zoned for industrial development, meaning fewer residents troubled by religious activities at night and during weekends, and a lower tax rate.

Education

One would think that the children of both Tamil communities would meet at school. However, it was not to happen and this is mostly because of a disposition of a language law that was adopted by the Québec Government in 1977 called Bill 101. This piece of legislation was adopted by the nationalist government of the Parti Québécois elected the year before in order to protect and guarantee the survival of the French-speaking population of Québec, which is about 7,000,000 strong, surrounded by more than 350,000,000 English-speaking people in North America. This law, Bill 101, made it compulsory for children of future immigrants to Québec to be sent to the French school sector for their primary years of education, including elementary school and high school. An exception was made for families of which one member had previously studied in English anywhere in Canada.

As almost all members of the Indian Tamil community had already started their studies at English schools, they continued on this path and they still do so today. On the other hand, most Sri Lankans arrived in Québec after 1977 and the passing of Bill 101 and so, with few exceptions, they sent their children to French schools and they still do.

Second, Sri Lankan children in Montréal have access to special Tamil language education at public school during weekdays, and at two Hindu temples or the Tamil Catholic Church during Sunday school. In the Québec school system, a learning programme is offered to linguistic minorities in order for their children to keep their mother tongue alive. This programme is called PELO⁴⁷, *Programme d'enseignement des langues d'origine*. The most popular demands are for Spanish and Italian, Vietnamese, Arabic and Tamil⁴⁸. However, in order for their children to benefit from this programme, parents must declare that their family belongs to a linguistic minority, but the Indian Tamils of Québec have always refused to be called a minority and have rather chosen to present themselves as part of the English-speaking majority of Canadians. Thus, these

⁴⁷ The PELO program was also created in 1878 by the Parti Québécois Government of Québec.

⁴⁸ *English Montréal School Board, 2012-2013 Annual Report*, p. Source: [http://www.emsb.qc.ca/emsb_en/pdf_en/governance_en/2013-12-19-EMSB-AR_English%20FINAL.pdf] Cons. 11.12.2014

families do not qualify for the PELO programs and their children do not study Tamil at school.

As mentioned earlier, language classes are also offered to Tamil children in special Sunday-school programmes organised at religious venues. During the school year, every Sunday afternoon, about 300 children, boys and girls of all ages, gather to study religion and Tamil language at a Sri Lankan Hindu temple⁴⁹ or at a Sri Lankan catholic church⁵⁰ in Montréal. However, as Indian Tamil children do not attend these mostly Sri Lankan religious institutions, they are not enrolled in these programmes.

The result of this whole situation is that today, Sri Lankan children in Montréal still speak Tamil at home with their parents and grandparents. They also speak French with the French-speaking majority people of the city and also between themselves whenever they don't want their parents to understand what they are saying. And they have picked up English fairly easily from the streets, television, movies and the Internet. Many of these youngsters are now considered some of the best trilingual Canadians. On the other hand, most of the Indian Tamil children in Montréal speak English at home with their parents, family and friends, and also at school. Their French and their Tamil skills are not as great.

Religion

Studies conducted in 1995⁵¹ and again in 2008⁵² show that more than two-thirds of Montréal's Tamil population are Hindus and 15 to 25 per cent are Catholics. The others would be Pentecostal or Evangelical Christians, atheists, or with no religion.

When Indian Tamil families arrived in the 1960s and early 1970s, none of the Hindu communities of Montréal, the Gujaratis, the Bengalis or the Punjabis, were numerous enough to build their own national Hindu temple. Instead they gathered around a common project of erecting one temple that would cater to all communities originating mostly from North India, and following the *Smārta* tradition⁵³ of Hinduism. This endeavour produced the elegant *Hindu Mandir* located in the posh Dollard-des-Ormeaux suburb. In total, there are now five North Indian Hindu temples in the Greater Montréal Area and five Sikh *gurdwaras*⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ St-Germain Lefebvre (2008), p. 122

⁵⁰ Das (2008b), p. 237

⁵¹ Aruliah (1995), p. 153

⁵² Das (2008a), p. 146

⁵³ The *Smārta* tradition is an important movement of Hinduism aligned with the *Advaita Vedānta* philosophy of founder Adi Shankara (8th and 9th century AD). It professes the worship of five equal deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Ganesh and Shakti.

⁵⁴ India considers Sikhism as another movement within the Hindu religion. To my knowledge there are no Sri Lankan Sikhs living in Montréal.



Figure 2. The Montréal Hindu Mandir

For their part, Sri Lankan Hindus, mostly Saivites⁵⁵, arrived in great numbers during the 1980s and 1990s and, after a short period attending the North Indian temples, they soon began to open South-Indian style temples following the *Saiva* Hindu tradition. Presently, there are four Saivite temples in Montréal, one of which was built following the principles of Dravidian architecture, the *Thiru Murugan* Temple, named after an almost exclusively Tamil deity, Lord Murugan⁵⁶, a divine figure almost nonexistent in North India. Highly distinctive, this temple serves not only as a religious institution but also as a reference symbol for all Saivites Hindus in Montréal and in Eastern Canada. As explained by Pierre-Yves Trouillet:

In the Tamil migratory space, the temple is not only a place of identity differentiation and of adhesion to common values, but also a landmark representing the territorialisation of identity and the expression of political issues.⁵⁷

Ten years ago, the Sri Lankan Catholic community of Montréal took over a declining French-speaking parish, purchasing the run-down church and renaming it *Our Lady of Deliverance*. Nowadays, every Sunday, hundreds of Tamil-Montrealers of Sri Lankan origin attend mass performed in Tamil, with songs and lectures given both in Tamil and English, and with very little French spoken.

⁵⁵ Followers of Saivism are called Saivites. They revere Shiva as the Supreme Being, all other deities being different aspects of God.

⁵⁶ Murugan is known by a total of 108 names, the most popular being Shanmukha, Skanda, Karthikeya and Subramanya.

⁵⁷ Trouillet (2012), p. 6



Figure 3. The Our Lady of Deliverance church, in Montréal

As for other Christians, the picture is a bit more complex. Up to now, I have identified seven Evangelical or Pentecostal churches. However, these communities have a relatively small number of followers and the Tamil Protestant scene in Montréal is changing frequently.

Religious interactions

Hindus and Hindus

I would now like to address relations between the various Tamil communities in Montréal on a religious basis. I will start first with the Indian Hindus and the Sri Lankan Hindus. As stated earlier, the majority of the Indian Hindus of Montréal belong to the Brahmin caste, while most Sri Lankan Hindus, whether *Vēḷāḷars* or *Karaiyars*, are considered *śūdras*, the lowest of the four-tiered *varna* system. As a result, most of the time, the two groups do not mingle. The Indian Brahmins would attend the Hindu Mandir, and the Sri Lankans Tamils would patronize one of four *Saiva* temples in Montréal. However, at times, there is definite interaction and cooperation.

For instance, a few times a year, the Indian Tamils will ask the Sri Lankan Thiru Murugan Temple to hold a special *pūjā* in honour of Lord Venkateswara, the Tamil representation of Vishnu, Lord of Tirupati, the richest temple in India situated in Andhra Pradesh, just a few miles north of the border with Tamil Nadu. The reason for this is that the *Thiru Murugan Temple* hosts a quite beautiful *mūrti* of Lord Venkateswara, while

there is none at the Hindu Mandir which is mostly patronised by Hindus whose roots are in North India.

Also, on the high days of the annual festival at the Thiru Murugan temple, in August, many Indian Hindus will come to pay respect to Lord Murugan and participate in various capacities, sometimes just sitting as Brahmins among other Sri Lankan temple priests.

Hindus and Catholics

Contacts between the Sri Lankan Hindus and the Sri Lankan Catholics are more frequent. It is important to recall that both groups have suffered heavily from the bloody civil war in their country of origin. Also, both groups still have family members living in Sri Lanka who are, still to this day, frequently discriminated against.

One of the best-known religious sites in the city is the Catholic Saint Joseph's Oratory of Mount Royal and, surprisingly enough, it is very popular even with Tamil Hindus. One must understand that, according to the Tamil *Saiva* tradition, Lord Murugan's preferred resting places are on mountain tops and many of the most famous pilgrimage temples dedicated to Lord Murugan in India are situated on mountain tops.

L'Oratoire Saint-Joseph⁵⁸, as it is called in French, is a huge basilica built on top of the only hill in Montréal, otherwise a flat island in the middle of the Saint-Laurent River. Started in 1904 by a Catholic order of priests, its construction was not finished before the end of the sixties. Since its inauguration, l'Oratoire has attracted millions of people (and not only Catholics) and it is still the main religious pilgrimage site in the city. From the street to the crypt church, there are 283 steps to climb and, every so often, pilgrims young and old would do it on their knees.

One of the informants for my Master's degree dissertation had a very special link to l'Oratoire. While he was still a child in Sri Lanka living with his mother, his older brother hurt his leg badly. It soon became infected and there was even talk of a possible amputation. His father who had been recently accepted in Canada as a refugee then started a special devotion to Saint Joseph. Every day, he would apply on his own leg, here in Montréal, some Saint Joseph Oil that he would purchase at l'Oratoire⁵⁹. Twice a week he would check over the phone with his wife about their eldest son's progress and after a few months, supposedly without having received any special treatment, the boy was completely cured. The next year, the father was given permission to sponsor his wife and two kids as immigrants to Canada and, a few months later, coming out of the airport, the first stop of the freshly reunited family, even before going to the Tamil Temple, my informant assured me, was for l'Oratoire. And he added, with a big smile: "*Et on est tous montés sur les genoux*" (And we all climbed the steps on our knees).

⁵⁸ <https://www.saint-joseph.org/en/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.saint-joseph.org/en/spirituality/saint-joseph/saint-joseph-oil/>

In Sri Lanka, it is not infrequent to see Catholics come to a Hindu temple and offer an *archana*⁶⁰ in order to obtain a particular deity's blessing. Similarly, Hindus would at times enter a Catholic church and light a candle to Saint Anthony. In the same way, in Montréal, many Catholics will come and attend the annual festival at the Thiru Murugan Temple, and Tamil Saivites will also come and participate in the most important events of the Catholic year, like the annual procession of the Virgin Mary.

However, these practices do create some problems. Not so much to the Tamil Catholics themselves but rather to some Montréal Catholic priests. What follows was chronicled by anthropologist Méliissa Bouchard a few years back. During the summer of 2007, during a pilgrimage dedicated to Holy Mary at the *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* sanctuary forty miles out of Montréal, Hindus came to participate just as they would in Sri Lanka. However, at the time of the Holy Communion, there seems to have been an outcry from a French-speaking priest who noticed that some Hindus were in line to receive the Eucharist. He then started shouting that this was sacrilegious and that, according to the teachings of the Holy Church, only Christians having already received the sacrament of First Communion could receive the Holy Host⁶¹. From then on, Bouchard wrote, people were put in charge of checking the communion lines in order to spot Hindus and call them out⁶².

Also, during another pilgrimage organised in the same summer of 2007, there seems to have been a capacity problem. Some French-Québécois priests had invited Sri Lankan Tamil Catholics to participate in an event to be held at a small shrine dedicated again to the Virgin Mary⁶³, estimating the participants would number about five hundred. However, as many Hindus had heard of this very auspicious activity, they came out in great numbers and, on the day of the pilgrimage, the organisers discovered an enthusiast crowd of about 5,000 Tamils, more than half being Hindus. Since that day, writes Bouchard, the Québécois priests are no longer inviting any Tamils to participate in their activities, Catholics or Hindus.

Hindus and Evangelicals

As for the Sri Lankan Protestant Christians in Montréal, no formal studies seem to have been conducted yet among the Tamil Evangelical and Pentecostal communities and so, not much can be said about them. These congregations are relatively small in numbers and there seems to be a lot of movement between them. However, I am told that a common rhetoric of these groups is to the effect that Tamil Hindus in Canada should

⁶⁰ Oblation to a deity accompanied by the recitation of sacred mantras by a priest in a temple on behalf of an individual.

⁶¹ Bouchard (2009a), p. 100

⁶² Bouchard (2009b), p. 10

⁶³ The most important Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka, *Our Lady of Madhu*, is located in the Tamil country. Pope Francis visited there in January 2015.

abandon their old ways, considered sorcery, and should instead follow the North American religion of Evangelical teachings. It seems that some of these groups are in competition to make conversions among young Sri Lankan Tamils born in Montréal. This trend should not be considered unique to this city as it seems to happen elsewhere also. In 2000, Martin Baumann, the great German specialist on Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas, quoted Vertovec about the decline of Hinduism in Trinidad in the nineteen sixties and seventies in face of Pentecostalism: “Throughout the island Hindus felt themselves to be ‘on the defensive’ against evangelical Christian criticism⁶⁴.”

One incident that occurred at a funeral I attended for the benefit of my doctoral research is worth mentioning. The deceased was the family’s father, aged about fifty. As the Hindu tradition dictates, the principal agent of the ceremony should have been the eldest son of the deceased. This person is called the *karttā* and his role is to preside over the ceremony assisted at all times by the priest. He would be bare-chested and wearing only a traditional wraparound *vēṣṭi*.

However, in this case, the *karttā* was an elderly gentleman of about eighty, who happened to be the father of the deceased. Strangely enough, the three sons of the dead man were present and, all through the religious ceremony, the *kiriyai*, they kept going out of the room and coming back. I could not understand why the eldest, who was about 18 years old, would not have accepted the responsibilities of the dutiful son towards his father as commanded by the *Vedas* and the *Āgamas*. Eventually, the ceremony came to an end and instead of getting up and proceeding towards the cremation facilities in another part of the funeral parlour, the crowd in attendance kept still as the Hindu priest gathered his many accessories and left the room swiftly. As he was doing so, a gentleman dressed in dark Western clothes came up to the front of the room and started reading excerpts from the Gospels, calling for Jesus Christ’s redemption of the deceased, pleading mercy for his sins and mistakes and repeatedly declaring Christianity the sole true faith.

After asking a few friends what was going on, I was told that the three sons of the deceased, two of them born in Montréal, together with their mother, had converted a few years before to a Pentecostal church and that the person who was so zealously preaching in English to the Tamil mourners was the leader of that small community. I was told that they had accepted (although reluctantly) that a Hindu funeral ritual be conducted as of respect for their Hindu Saivite grandfather on the express condition that he himself would be acting as the *karttā*. There was no question however of any of them participating in a ceremony that they considered totally pagan.

⁶⁴ Baumann, Martin. (2000), ‘Becoming a Colour of the Rainbow: Indian Hindus in Trinidad Analysed along a Phase Model of Diaspora’, 18th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Durban, South Africa, 06-11 August 2000

Conclusion

Anyone who has been roaming the night markets of South Asia has heard this line from a vendor eager to sell: 'Same Same but Different'. What you see looks very much like the real thing but it is somehow different. Better price, better fabric, better something. Tamil Canadians could be considered in a comparative manner. Fifty years ago, there were not fifty Tamil families living in Montréal. Today, according to some studies⁶⁵, Tamil Canadians could number between 300,000 and 400,000⁶⁶. All of these are Tamils, of course, but a great many differences can be found between them all.

Each person's country of origin, present province of residence, religious affiliation, primary education and even language level, make him or her different. The year of his arrival and the route of a person's migration are also important factors, just like his age generation and caste. Thirty years ago, many middle-age Tamil men and women came to Canada, some with young children. Over the years, many of these first comers sponsored the immigration of their elders and other family members, while their young ones were growing up and now have families of their own. This question of 'Others' then comes under a totally new light and is thought-provoking. Exactly who now are these 'Others'? Are they not all the same? The answer could very well be: Yes, same, but different.

The Canadian context is very meaningful in addressing the resettlement of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in diaspora since this country hosts their largest community outside of the island. The Montréal situation first confirms the idea developed by Clark, Peach and Vertovec (1990), according to which the development of Hindu religious identities and solidarities in diaspora – hence the relations between 'us' and 'the others' - depends on the socio-cultural composition and cohesion of the Hindu groups, but also on their migration stories, and on the social and political context of the host country. Indeed, Hindu Tamils in Montréal refer to different communities, in terms of languages, castes, sectarian preferences, territories of origin, migration patterns and social networks. Consequently, as Fred Clothey (2006) suggested, one should consider several Tamil diasporas instead of a single, homogeneous one.

Moreover, by focusing on the relationships between Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and the other Tamil communities they encounter in Montréal, it turns out that they feel much closer to Sri Lankan Catholics than to Indian Tamil Hindus. This implies that the sharing of the same land of origin, language, and migration story, is much more important than belonging to the Hindu religion in the re-building of togetherness and solidarity in this context. In other words, if Hinduism is definitely a point of contact between different religious groups and traditions, it is not always sufficient to create or to maintain solidarity, ritual interplays and togetherness among various Hindus in diaspora.

⁶⁵ Zulfika (2013); Cheran, R. (2000).

⁶⁶ The conclusions of the latest census (2016) should come out at the end of this year.

Addressing the relations to 'Others' indeed proves relevant and it is useful to keep in mind the internal diversity and plurality within Hinduism, against a somehow artificial, monolithic conception of Hinduism as an all-powerful unifying and unified religion. 🏠

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