Reunion Tamils Return To Their Saivite Roots
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Nine Tamil devotees from Reunion assembled on the raised platform of India's famed Siva Temple, Chidambaram, for their Nama Diksha (name giving) ceremony. Though Tamil by descent, they spoke no Tamil and had never set foot on Tamil soil until a week before. They had been baptized as Catholics when they were born and given names such as Jacques, David and Brigette. Now, in the shadow of the temple's kodimaram, they were being brought into the Saivite fold as they returned to the religion of their soul. They were participants in the 1986 India Odyssey Pilgrimage of the Saiva Siddhanta Church, the reason they came to India.

These pilgrims are typical of 120 thousand Tamils on the small French island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, 400 miles east of Madagascar. Indians came to Reunion as indentured laborers in the mid-nineteenth century. By law, they were required to become Catholics and to this day must be baptized in the Catholic Church and receive a Christian name. A dawning awareness of their great Hindu heritage has come to many in recent years.

The activity of Saiva Siddhanta Church on nearby Mauritius came to their attention in 1983. There the Hindu Church was both strengthening religion among the Saivites and reclaiming those who had been forced into other faiths by economic or legal pressure. At their request, several missionaries of the Church visited Reunion, culminating in the visit last year of the Church's head, His Holiness, Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami.

Appealing to the Saivite leader for guidance on returning to Hinduism, they explained they were now aware of the rich Tamil Saivite tradition which their ancestors left behind in India. Subramuniyaswami said, "Come to India with me," and hence the Church's 1986 India Odyssey Pilgrimage came to be with devotees from Reunion, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and America participating. Soon the Reunion Tamils were stepping from the plane in Madras wearing Yves Saint-Laurent pants and French berets. With exclamations of Mon Dieu, they knew

they had returned home.

Overwhelmed from all sides by religion - the temples, the priests, the Gods - the first any had ever seen before, their European facade melted. High-fashion Continental clothes were traded for saris and verthis, make-up for Holy Ash, and French food for the equally exquisite Tamil cuisine.

The group returned to Reunion determined to bring Saivism back to life on their small island: to build temples, hire priests, and train their children in the Sanatana Dharma. Their first order of business is a test case to challenge the laws regarding compulsory baptism and Christian names. Appeals may be needed all the way to the High Court in Paris to overturn the present laws. The devotees also know that the Catholic Church had no irreversible hold on them. Once they leave to practice another religion, they are automatically excommunicated from Catholicism [see the article in Hinduism Today, November/December, 1986, on conversion from Catholicism]. Other devotees in Reunion look forward to the next pilgrimage in 1987, when more will return to the Holy Feet of Siva Nataraja to graft their soul again to its Saivite roots.