

[Reunion Hindus Try For a Revival](#)

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Catholic Dominance and Natural Reluctance Team For a Slow Startup

That thinly disguised form of slavery known as indentured servitude deposited Hindus upon many a strange and distant land. One group, brought in the mid- and late-nineteenth century and now numbering 250,000 descendants, are on the French island of Reunion (next to Madagascar off the coast of Africa). Each of the early arrivals - at the insistence of their employer/owners and the government administration - took on Christian names and had their children baptized in the Catholic Church. But they did not abandon Hinduism in the process and to this day it is common for the Indians (named Alexis, Francois, Jean Marie, Nicole or Huguette) to attend Catholic mass and confession, yet visit the Hindu temple also [see HINDUISM TODAY, September, 1991, p. 25]. "It is the way it is here," the local lay Hindu priests say. "If you belong to both religions. God will look at you twice." On the other side, the Catholics are distressed by the Hindu approach of adoring all the saints as various forms of God and not embracing the idea of Christ's supremacy. The Hindus also worship the "Black Virgin," which is a blend of Goddess Kali and Mother Mary - the exact combination made independently by the Hindu-origin Gypsies of Europe.

The island's nascent Hindu revival is presently dealing with very basic matters. The first is how much the thoroughly integrated, educated and prosperous French-speaking Reunion Indians really want to assert their Hindu identity. As it is the Hindus do not stand out as a distinct group though they represent fully one half of the island's population. The state's official government religious listing gives 500,000 Catholics, 12,000 Muslims and nothing else! According to the government, there is not a single Hindu in Reunion-even though 50% of the country is of Indian descent.

Indians in Reunion are known as "Tamouls," and do come from South India, but the term Tamoul is more akin to "Hindu" in local usage. Island food is mostly adapted

Indian, supplemented with French wine and beer. TV programs are 95% French, 5% in Creole, a corrupted version of French similar to that spoken on Mauritius. Creole is actually the mother tongue of 80% of the people. In appearance and manner the Indian people are quite French, in the case of the women, strikingly so, especially in their forthrightness. Unemployment runs 20%, with disproportionate impact on the youth who are in general suffering a severe identity crisis, Their suicide rate is high.

A collective Hindu awareness is slowly increasing. It is aided by the occasional visits of Hindu holy men and women to the island, who come in conjunction with visits to the Hindus of nearby Mauritius and Africa. Through these visits the higher aspects of the sanatana dharma are being brought forward, a necessary adjustment to some surviving Hindu practices on the island which border on black magic. These Hindu missionaries enhance the natural reawakening of the Indians to their spiritual heritage.

The issue of the moment in Reunion is Catholic affiliation and Christian names. The powerful local Catholic Church has told Reunites that they cannot be separated from the church, that the baptism is permanent. This is not true [see below]. While baptism was never required by law, it was up to some twenty years ago a significant social event necessary for the family's status in society.

The second problem is how the Hindus can divest themselves of the imposed Christian names and take up proper Hindu names. Changing one's name under French law requires going before a judge and receiving official permission to do so. Names are most commonly changed because of marriage, but can be altered for other reasons. To do so requires proving an interest legitimate, that is, a legitimate cause warranting a favorable judgment. A representative of the French Consulate in San Francisco who deals with name changes said he felt the judges "will be softer in Reunion" toward Hindus of Indian descent who wish to reclaim their ancestral heritage for religious reasons. He explained the principal reason for the law on names, which dates back to 1791, was to prevent criminals and debtors from hiding their identity. In general, French courts have not looked favorably upon changing a French-sounding name back to a foreign name, even when it was the original name of the family. Curiously, one legitimate reason for a change of name is when it indicates a particular national origin, race or religion which everyone knows and the person would rather have a more neutral name. The Hindus, of course, want to do the opposite. To date there has been no test case made by any Hindu in Reunion to change his name for religious reasons.

There are two other options simpler than a legal name change. One is to add a second first name, which can be done as a simple administrative procedure not requiring a judge. Another method allowed since 1985 is to register a "current" first and/or last name with the government. This name will appear on passports and driver's licenses, but is not changed on the birth certificate. There are no reports of Hindus in Reunion adopting a "current" Hindu name, though some have taken a second first name, usually in addition to the Christian name.

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