

[Saivites of Mauritius Confront Problems of Conversion and Effective Religious Education](#)

Category : [August 1982](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1982

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Sprouting up from the southwestern Indian Ocean floor like a verdently speckled mushroom, the Lilliputian island of Mauritius is at once exotically beautiful, industrious and self-assured. Economically and socially it is standing up straight and tall after its 1968 colonial independence. By any standards Mauritius is a modern country, with television, excellent roadways, new cars and appliances, extensive communication and trade with the West. Its predominate sugarcane industry is stable, the standard of living is high, and a certain affluence is enjoyed by the educated and industrious.

With new ways of doing things come new ways of thoughts, a juncture of re-evaluation - Why, exactly, are we doing this? Perhaps at this time we should be doing something else? Mauritian Hindus are at this sensitive juncture where the Space Shuttle, living room computers and recombinant genetics have captured the imagination of the world, leaving the plough, axe and even vacuum tubes in the dust. And, often, religious traditions and values are being thrown out with them. This dilemma and others are compelling Mauritius's conscientious religious leaders to try to sift the orthodox from the superstitious, and the viable and practical from the outdated. They sense the youth looking on, musing, "Is our religion of the past?"

Answering this question for today's youth is not easy. As Dr. C.M. Pillay, a distinguished community leader explains, "Frankly, we ourselves are not well enough equipped, not knowledgeable enough in our religion to satisfactorily answer these questions. These days, everything starts with 'why' - not a derogatory 'why,' but a genuine, searching 'why.' They are very eager to learn. Much of the time we cannot answer them." As the former Chairman of the Mauritian Tamil temples Federation, a body which unites many of the islands 125-plus temples, Dr. Pillay is in a good position to survey the paved but bumpy terrain Mauritian Saivism is currently driving through. "The young aren't going of their own volition to the temples anymore. They question how it's helping them, whether it's necessary. We

followed the traditions because that was what you were supposed to do."

With half a million Hindus forming almost 1/2 of the island's population, a solid religious education is being looked at as one of the keys in meeting the youth's technological, logical-technique awareness and passing the religion intact onto the children. V. Lutchmanen, a children's religious teacher, who is himself in his middle twenties, explained, "We want to teach the religion, pass it on to the children, but with clarity and understanding." Balan Gopaldu added, "To reach the average Hindu on Mauritius we need clearly-written textbooks in Creole-French [the commonly spoken language of the island]." Pinpointing another aspect of the language barrier, Dr. Pillay says the children are not learning Tamil, which "has weakened one of our strongest links with our spiritual roots in India." Tamil is not compulsory in the educational system and there is no organized parochial effort to keep it alive. Having been in Mauritius for almost a century and a half, virtual isolation has worn on the Tamil Saivites' religious connections and traditions. Tamil was one of their strongest bonds, and now that is wearing thin. Dr. Pillay also sees the real need for comprehensive religious textbooks to be put into French. "If we get high-quality books in English, then we can translate them into Creole. What we need are teachings that are non-contradictory, logical and make sense to today's inquiring minds."

Positive, productive ideas and efforts are going in this direction of education. A large percentage of the 20-to-middle-30 age bracket of Mauritian Saivites are effectively involved in the activities of the several temple associations. But this is predominantly temple administrative and development activity, with no solid ministerial programs. As Dr. Pillay pointed out above, there is no one really qualified to institute, develop and guide such an endeavor. In short, "We need dynamic religious leadership, spiritual men who are wholly devoted to the Saiva knowledge and practice." This is a widely voiced point. Balan Gopaldu boiled the solution to many of Mauritius's needs down to his statement, "We need a resident swami who can teach us and guide us in our religion." It sounds simple enough, but so far Mauritius has been mostly a brief stop-over point for Saivite religious leaders who are passing through. With a few notable exceptions, no Saivite leader has dug in on the Mauritian beachheads to help in this agro-techno transition.

But this trend of isolation hasn't stopped the Mauritian Saivites from continuing to create opportunities for Saivite leaders to visit their country, and at least give a few lectures. A persistent S.O.S. call to Sri Lanka payed off when Balasubramaniam Sharma, a highly-trained kurukkal, came with his wife to settle in Mauritius, where he has lived in Port Louis for the past two years. Now one of the island's most

highly respected priests, he not only officiates at the Sri Sökkalingam Meenakshi Temple, but does a weekly seven-minute talk on Saivism for radio broadcasting. He is also actively involved in training a number of young Brahmachari men in orthodox puja and personal conduct - a development that is looked on with great enthusiasm by community observers. In it are some of the seeds for bringing the youth back to the temples. Recently, an eminent grihastra swami from South Africa's Saiva Sithantha Sungum, Swami Brahmananda, toured Mauritius's temples and organization halls giving lectures and encouraging the Mauritian Saivites to practice their religion faithfully and with pride.

Throwing out nets to still further seas, Tamil Temples Federation member Retnon Velvindron sought the guidance of His Holiness Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, head of the United States' Kauai Aadheenam, and cordially invited him to visit Mauritius as a part of his World Tour. Mr. Velvindron, through correspondence, had expressed considerable concern over the zealous conversion activities of Mauritius's Christian Church - a challenge equally as important as the past-traditions/future-options gap. Observed Velvindron, "The campaign of conversion is carried on mostly by its ordinary adepts, not so much the leaders. After being well trained and indoctrinated, they try to bring as many new adherents as possible, chosen mainly among their relatives and friends...But there are leaders who, according to information, choose to cheaply exploit the young minds of their Hindu adherents by systematically denouncing and ridiculing the presence of many deities in our temples behind each of whom, they say is a satanic presence." Considered as a very serious threat to the integrity of their religion, the Mauritian Tamil Temples Federation has held a number of meetings solely to discuss how to stop this process. When apprised of this and other situations in Mauritius, H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami had his monastic staff immediately make the necessary arrangements to include Mauritius in his World Tour.

Late in February of this year, His Holiness Sivaya Subramuniyaswami and two sannyasin disciples arrived in Mauritius as guests of the Tamil community there. Said Dr. Pillay, "It was not an opportunity we were going to treat lightly," Retnon Velvindron, along with an official Reception Committee, headed by Rajen Mootusamy and Baln Gopaldu, organized a minute-by-minute four-day schedule for the Kauai Aadheenakartha including talks at over a dozen temples, an audience with the Governor General, Prime Minister, and Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, live T.V. coverage and a radio session recording eleven 10-minute talks on various aspects of Saivism. Through good coordination and organization, which included a diplomatic car at Gurudeva's disposal, the Mauritian Saivites were able to condense about 4 months of regenerative activity down into the 4 days he was there. It was a high-exposure tour with the kind of audience receptivity that brought out the inner clarity and direction the Mauritian Saivites were looking for.

"Personally, I was so happy to hear Gurudeva talking about the Gods as real beings," commented R. Sooriamoorthy, who is authoring a book on Lord Muruga, and found the Karthar's visions-of-Muruga talk at the Muruga Kadavul Kovil of Mount Roches revitalizing.

Besides the public exposure, at the top of H.H. Sivaya Subramuniaswami's agenda were private conferences and meetings with many of Mauritius's Saiva community leaders. Specific problems were discussed and often a tailor-made solution would soon become apparent. He reminded the men in the community, "We no longer have kings to build our temples, pay our priesthoods, and provide all the facilities a religion needs. That is your duty now. Be creative. Be concerned. Don't wait for the religious leader to have to come and beg you to help them financially. Go to them. Reassess the invaluable part you play in the promotion of the religion." His often repeated advice was that religious education is the most effective antidote to many of the problems - especially the conversion issue. Specifically, he advised, "Educate the youth in the practical day-to-day benefits of temple worship, the reality of our Gods, the rewards of studying the writings of our rishis and saints, and all the wonderful benefits of living a full Saivite life." In this light he made available the full use of two modern lessons on Saivite Hinduism produced by Saiva Siddhanta Church and encouraged everyone to use them as basic textbooks for the religious instruction Saivite children on the island. He also intimated that these lessons are being translated into French by a qualified linguist in the United States. In response to the Mauritian Tamils entreaties to provide a monastic member of the Church to reside on the island, the Kauai Aadheenakartha promised to send them a French-speaking monastic in early 1983. A facility is already being built on the grounds of Port Louis's Sri Sockalingam Meenakshi Temple for the Church's use.

It is no easy thing for Hindus around the world to adjust to the fast-paced technological world and know just what is proper to save of tradition and what is wise to let go. What is first needed is to recognize that a challenge does exist, and secondly take steps to effectively meet that challenge. The Mauritian Saivites have done just that.