Karl-Fritz Daiber /Gerdien Jonker (eds.)

Local forms of religious organisation as structural modernisation: Effects on religious community building and globalisation

Lokale Formen religiöser Organisation als strukturelle Modernisierung: Einflüsse auf die religiöse Gemeinschaftsbildung und Prozesse der Globalisierung

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Martin Baumann: Organising Hindu traditions in Europe, the case of Tamil Migrants from Sri Lanka

This paper provides a case study of a transplanted religious tradition and the tradition's endeavours to reconstruct organisational patterns in a socio-culturally different environment. I shall look at Hindu traditions from Sri Lanka which in cause of the flight of Tamil people came during the last two decades to Europe.

My presentation has three parts: Part I outlines the emergence of the Tamil Hindu diaspora in Europe. It sketches main developments and takes-stock of the present situation. The focus will be laid on processes of religious institutionalisation, exemplified by the German case. Part II systematises main models of organising a Hindu temple, both in Sri Lanka and in Europe. The final part provides a selective analyses, concentrating on issues of membership and structural modernisation.

I.   The emergence of the Tamil Hindu diaspora in Europe

The context in which Tamil Hindu temples emerged: Presently, the largest group of Hindu people in continental Europe is constituted by Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. In contrast, in Great Britain the vast majority of Hindu people is made up of immigrants from India, in particular from Gujarat and the Punjab. Tamil Hindus in Britain comprise a small minority within this heterogen fold of an estimated 600.000 British Hindus. Crossing the channel, in continental Europe, especially in Switzerland, Germany, France and Scandinavia, Tamil Hindus numerically form the largest group. Altogether, Tamils come up to an estimated number of 210.000 persons. Numbers for refugees from Sri Lanka given are: Germany 64.000, France and Switzerland about 40.000 and Great Britain 35.000 Tamils. Minorities of a few thousand Tamil refugees live in the Benelux countries and in Scandinavia. In Eastern Europe, we find a few Tamil refugees only, if admitted to stay at all (Baumann 2001).

In religious terms, about 75% of the Tamil refugees are Hindus, about 20% Catholics and some 5% Protestants of various denominations. For Germany, we may speak of about 45,000 and for Switzerland about 30,000 Tamil Hindus.

Tamils from Sri Lanka have come as asylum seekers to Europe since the late 1970s. I shall outline the developments in more detail and concrete figures by looking at the German situation. In 1978, about 1,300 Sri Lankan people, mainly students, lived in Germany. As the conflict between the Sinhalese majority (74%) and the Tamil minority (18%) increased in Sri Lanka, steadily more men left the island and applied for asylum. However, in the wake of the escalating civil war since 1983, the number of refugees rose significantly. In 1985 alone, 17,400 refugees from Sri Lanka applied for asylum.

Chart 1: Sri Lankan persons applying asylum in Germany (1978-2002)[ii]
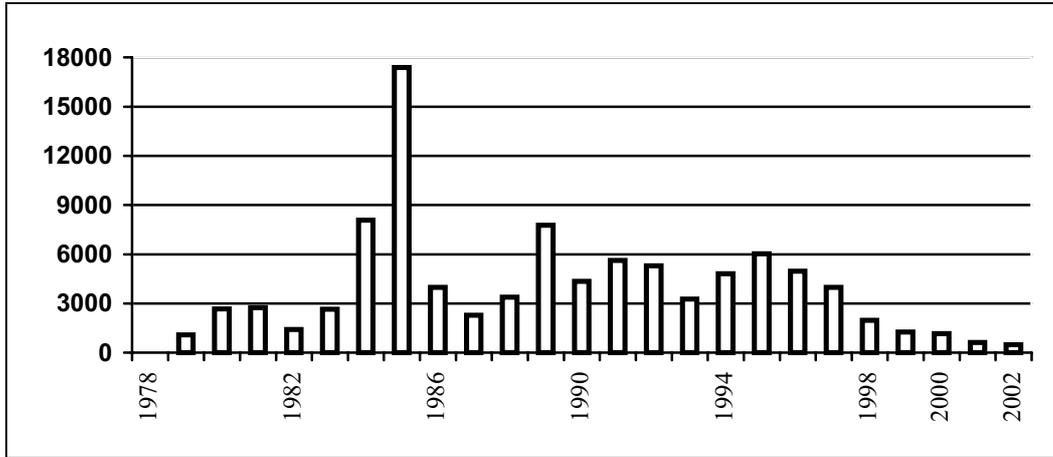
Whereas up to 1983 about 7,600 asylum seekers had come, two years later their number had climbed to 27,500 people in total. A steady increase ensued during the next years. The figure peaked in 1997 with 60,300 Sri Lankans counted in the foreigners' statistics. About 90% of the refugees are Tamil people.

During the last five years, the number fell significantly, to 45,000 statistically registered Sri Lankans in June 2002. The main reason for this drop is the rapid increase of adopting German citizenship by Sri Lankan Tamils. These German Tamils are no longer reckoned in the foreigners' statistics. In the 17 years 1981-1998, only 6,600 Sri Lankans were able to gain German citizenship. During the following three years, 1999-2001, 10,700 Sri Lankans became Germans. Charts 2 and 3 visualize the developments:

Chart 2: Sri Lankan and naturalized citizens in Germany (1978-2002)[iii]
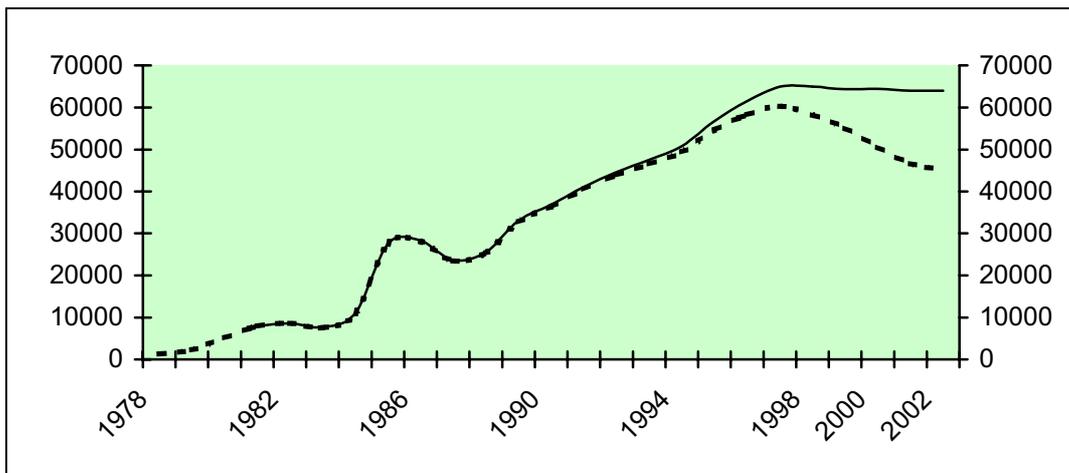
Graphic 3: Sri Lankan persons gaining German citizenship (1981-2001)[iv]
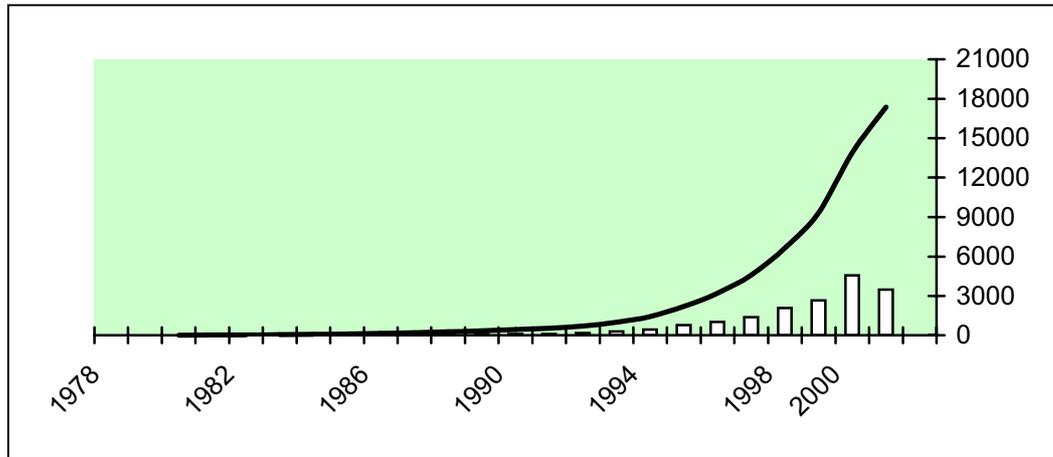
The main reason for this significant increase is the legal possibility for a foreigner, having stayed in Germany for 15 years, to be entitled to apply for German citizenship. In total, 17,400 Sri Lankan Tamils are now legally Germans. This makes up a good third (37,3%) of the entire Tamil population, numbering all together 64,000 people. We can state that for a growing number of Tamil people the flight has turned into a permanent stay, the former refugee has become an immigrant and citizen.

The social and legal profile: In the beginning mainly young men came, fleeing both persecution by the Sri Lankan army and forced recruitment by the Tamil Tigers, the "liberation" army. Since the late 1980s, also women and children succeeded in escaping from terror ridden northern parts of Sri Lanka. Whereas, in the mid-1990s there had been twice as many men as women, in recent years the percentage distribution has grown closer together. Both sexes are comparatively young. The legal status of Tamils in Germany varies according to their date of entrance: Whereas those coming until 1989 had been granted asylum and a right to stay, those arriving since 1989 were able to acquire a status of toleration only. This shift is due to a changed jurisdiction. The status of being tolerated has to be renewed every six months. All in all the legal status of about half of the Tamil population is comparatively safe whereas the status of the other half varies between different levels of allowances to stay for a time.

In line with German policy of distributing asylum seekers all across the country, the refugees from Sri Lanka were settled in small numbers in a multitude of towns and cities. This policy intended to prevent the formation of ethnic colonies. Nevertheless, a numerical concentration of Tamil people evolved in the Ruhr area (situated in the mid-northern part of Germany). This was (and is) due to pragmatic reasons such as a less restrictive jurisdiction and the fact that relatives have lived there already. Of relevance is also the fact that permission was granted to work legally while still being subjected to the asylum proceedings. It is in this region that a small Tamil infrastructure with shops, cultural and political societies and the founding of Hindu temples has evolved.

Despite their insecure legal status, Tamils have started to open small places of worship since the late 1980s. Both the sharp increase of the number of refugees and the arrival of women and children played a decisive part. In addition, those Tamils, having lived for several years in Germany by then, had acquired financial resources and administrative skills to get a society and temple functioning. Whereas in 1990 only five small temples, in 1995 the number had increased to twelve temples. And again, until Autumn 2002, the number of temples had doubled to 24, of which 14 are situated in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (58%). A clear concentration with 11 temples is observable in the industrial Ruhr valley, the city of Hamm being home to three temples alone. [Map 1 for October 2002, not reproduced here]

Apart from the ongoing process of founding additional places of worship, since the mid-1990s a related development came to the fore: Temple committees had been eager to move their temples from the initial poor and secluded basement rooms to more spacious and representative halls. Formerly small and unnoticeable places of worship changed to well arranged temples with splendidly decorated shrines. The enlargement of the temples and the founding of new sacred places can be interpreted as a consolidation and stabilisation of the Tamil Hindu presence in Germany. The uncertainty and unresolved existence during the 1980s has changed to a growing familiarity with the unknown surrounding and an intention to build a new home away from home. Religion appears to play a vital role in this process of maintaining one's identity and difference on the one hand and of integrating in the new society on the other. Despite the expansion of places of worship, in general the temples are hardly known and noticed by the public.

The size of the temples varies according to the rooms available and to the financial support obtainable. Some temples are more or less hidden in small cellars. Others are set up on the ground floor of a residential house. A few temples are arranged in spacious halls of converted industrial buildings. Finally, in Hamm/Westphalia the first traditionally South Indian styled temple with a huge *gopuram* (entrance portal) has been inaugurated in July 2002.[v]

A central board or organisation to bring together the various officiating priests and *brahmins* and the temple committees does not exist. On the one hand competition for prestigious status and influence has prevented any organisational platform or unified representation so far. On the other hand, divergent attitudes exist with regard to the issue whether a close preservation of rituals or, in contrast, adopted and abbreviated ceremonies should be carried through in the temple. In general, this fragmentation in organizational terms mirrors the heterogene and diversified situation of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority in Germany. This also is true for the situation of Tamils in other European countries. This fragmentation is also an important reason why in Germany priests and *brahmins* have spend no thoughts at all to possibly apply to have "Hinduism" registered as a public body by a German federal state (status of *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*). In contrast, other migrant groups, in

particular those of Turkish Muslims and Vietnamese Buddhists[vi], have eagerly striven for such a reputable status in recent years.

II. *Organising Tamil Hindu temples in Europe: basic structures*

In which way are temples organised and maintained by Tamil Hindus in Europe? What is the temple's basic structure in financial and organisational terms?

All temples are financed by donations of believers and worshippers. These donations are given in various ways: *bhaktas*, i.e. worshippers of the god, may pay for a private ritual performed by the priest in the temple. The length and elaboration of the ritual varies, depending on the specific demand of the worshipper – and the money spend on the previously bought "ritual ticket". Prior to the little ritual, the *bhakta* has purchased a so-called "ticket" for € 3,- or € 5,- or more euro. According to the ticket's value the priest conducts a more or less elaborated ritual in honouring the god or goddess and passing on the demands and wishes of the worshipper. Such so-called *arccanai* rituals are very common and they take place after the joint, elaborate worship of the gods. The focus of this little ritual is the family and the individual *bhakta*. This system of buying tickets was introduced in South India during the 1930s and 1940s and was taken over in temples in Sri Lanka.[vii]

Apart from the income through ticket sell, worshippers may donate money to the temple occasionally. This applies in particular while visiting the temple or taking part in festivals. Also, a family may subscribe to bear the costs of a specific festival day, i.e. to pay the costs for food, flowers, substances like oil and camphor used in the rituals. Finally, worshippers who feel more aligned to a specific temple may contribute on a regular basis, i.e. spend € 108,- or € 1008,- per year. Also, some give loans or cash for specific items of the temple.

Who owns the temple? As in Sri Lanka, we find two basic models: A temple may belong to a particular family, i.e. is privately owned, or it is owned by the residents of the area. In this case, the temple belongs to a society and is managed by a committee of office-bearers.

Apart from a few exceptions, stated below, most Tamil Hindu temples in Europe are society-owned and are constituted on the basis of a registered religious body or registered society. This society owns the temple in the way that it has bought the land and building or it pays a monthly rent for the use of the converted house. Such societies are usually named "Tamil Hindu Cultural Society" or variations of this. The society is headed by a committee of seven to eleven office-bearers, usually consisting of a president, vice president, treasurer, secretary and three or more committee members. Tamil Hindus have reconstructed the main patterns to organise a temple, known from the Sri Lankan model, also in Europe. I will systematize these patterns:

a) A temple committee exists and it employs a priest. The priest's responsibility is the sacred sphere, i.e. performing ritual acts and serving the gods and goddesses. In functional correspondence, the committee's responsibility is the non-sacred sphere of the temple, i.e. the management in terms of administrative, financial and representational work. This binary structure of committee and salaried priest is the general practice in Sri Lanka, especially in the Jaffna region. Committee members are high-caste persons, usually of the agricultural Vellalar caste. Most temples in Switzerland, Germany and for example the only temple in Sweden, the Ganesha temple in Stockholm, are set up along these lines.[viii]

b) Though officially a temple committee exists, it is mainly the head priest who manages the temple. The priest is both a member of the committee and of the religious staff. In structural terms, the priest is employed by the committee and receives a monthly salary. This model, though not often in use, can be found in some urban temples or pilgrimage centres in Sri Lanka. Albeit a straightforward concentration of power is at hand, this organisational structure prevents committee infightings and - depending on the priest and his reputation among worshippers and donators – can exercise a dynamic growth and outreach of the temple. In Europe, the by now almost famous Sri Kamadchi Ampal temple in Hamm/Westphalia is based on this structure. Its main priest, Sri Paskarankurukkal, is both an energetic organiser and a pious temple priest. Founded in a private cellar in 1989, the temple grew steadily up to its current size as the biggest Tamil Hindu temple in Europe. Three months ago, in July 2002, 14 priests from Sri Lanka and India inaugurated this newly built sacred abode for the goddess Sri Kamakshi in Hamm. The temple's annual festival with a public procession of the goddess attracts up to 12,000 visitors, turning the area into a little Jaffna for a few hours. (Baumann 2000: 147-168; Luchesi 2001 und 2003)

c) The temple is owned privately and the owner employs a priest. In Sri Lanka this model of temple patron and priest is often employed by wealthy members of the Vellalar caste. Many of the Vellalar are land owners and enjoy a high social prestige. However, in ritual terms they are of a low caste, originally no "twice-born" persons (Pfaffenberger 1982). Members of this caste respectively certain sub-lineages, have built a temple, maintain it and pay for the rites and the priest. It is them who receive the lion's share of the religious benefits of temple worship and festivals (Pfaffenberger 1982: 61-64).

Looking at Tamil temples in Europe, we find this patron – priest model at the Murugan temple in Hamm/Westfalia. This small, nicely decorated temple was established by the shop owner Yoganathan in 2001. According to Yoganathan, in dreams, the god Murugan asked him to build the temple and he did so (Wilke 2003). Yoganathan is not a Vellalar but a person from a low caste. In Autumn 2001, Yoganathan brought a *brahmin* priest from Sri Lanka. He employs him as salaried priest to do the worship (Tam. *pucai*). Apart from some financial win which the Yoganathan hopes to generate during the next years, the temple also serves as a

status maker and status climber. The temple conducts the annual festival (Tam. *tiruvila*) and the founder aims to establish this temple on a similar level with fully acknowledged brahmanical, orthodox temples through a process of Sanskritisation.

d) Finally, we have the case where there is no committee and the temple owner is the main priest resp. priestess. This model is based on extraordinary or charismatic gifts of the person, acknowledged by people coming to him/her seeking help and advice. In Hindu terms, the cosmic energy "*shakti*" manifests in this person and acts or speaks through her/him. In Hindu traditions, this is an established and known model. It leaves apart caste barriers, restrictions based on religious purity and concepts of formal religious training. Though this model is the rare exception (Sivathamby 1990: 162), it can be found all over South Asia and nowadays in Europe too.

One extraordinary example is the Sri Abirāmi goddess temple in Brande in Denmark. This temple, located on a rebuilt farm since 2000, belongs to the temple priest Lalitha Sripalan and her husband. Due to her ability to get possessed and to heal and to speak diviniations in this state, the female priest and her temple have become well-known among Tamils in Europe (Fibiger 2003).

III. Selective analysis: Membership and structural modernisation

Having sketched the main structures in which way Tamil Hindus in Europe have achieved to organisationally recreate the institution of a Hindu Temple as an abode of a goddess or god, I would like to step back a bit. Temple life is only one among various aspects of Hindu religious life. Of great importance certainly is the religious practice at home, e.g. the observance of purity regulations, of fasting, regular worship at the home shrine, reliance on astrological calculations, the singing of devotional songs and much more. Also, we have the dimension of life circle rites, celebrated at home and in the temple (see, among many, Knott 1998). However, I would like to turn to the sociological questions central to this workshop. Following, I address two key concepts given in the theoretical framework sent out to the participants. I will focus on analytical insights raised by Niklas Luhmann. Issues selected are that of membership and that of structural modernisation of the temple institution. Again, the analysis takes us out of Europe to South Asia and back again.

Membership in Hindu traditions in South Asia: Except for mendicant orders of ascetics (*sadhus*), monasteries and neo-Hindu movements evolved in the 19th century, Hindu traditions in general do not have a formal membership. A Gujarati follower of Krishna or a Tamil worshipper of Shiva do not "enter" a specific tradition and become a new member. They are a part of the tradition – and thus a "member" in general sense - by. Later they may selected a

specific god or goddess within the encompassing tradition. Birth regulates caste membership. And membership in a specific caste (Skt. *jati*) regulates access to sacred knowledge and ritual practice. Access by far is not admitted to all. In particular people of low castes and so-called Untouchables are assumed to be defiling to high caste people and to ritually purified places such as temples. In this respect, many Hindu traditions are highly exclusive and separative – a decisive contrast to the idealised image of the tolerant, philosophical Hinduism painted in many western text books.

Interestingly, this binary structure of admitted/ non-admitted person comes to the fore highly visible in the context of the Hindu temple. Who is entitled to enter a Hindu temple and who is forbidden?

For two millennia, in India and Sri Lanka Untouchables were prevented to enter an orthodox, brahmanical temple. Social exclusion, ritual stigmatisation and violence formed a strong alliance to keep the temple doors close to them. Untouchables and low-caste people maintained their own temples and strove to upgrade them in Sanskriticising the practice and pantheon. However, those temples and people remained at the bottom of Indian society. In the 19th century, first voices, strongly influenced by western and Christian ideas, criticised the exclusion. However, it was no earlier than the second half of the 20th century that so-called scheduled castes and tribal people were admitted to Sanskritic, orthodox temples.[ix]

In Sri Lanka, this issue of temple entry let feelings run high in the late 1960s, as Jaffna society, the centre of Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindu culture, faced the so-called temple entry conflict. Untouchables and low caste Tamils, having profited from the introduction of general school education and new professional opportunities, demanded access to brahmanical temples. This temple entry movement started with nonviolent protests at prestigious high-caste temples in 1968. Strong high-caste responses strove to save and regain the status quo, however. Observers spoke of a war of castes and an end of established (Vellalar dominated) Hindu society in Jaffna. Due to public pressure, during the 1970s most large temples opened their doors to Untouchables, though hesitantly (Pfaffenberger 1994).

Analysing this issue of membership admittance in sociological terms, the rapid social and economic change which Sri Lankan society faced during colonial and post-colonial times, demanded an adaptation of the institution of the temple to new social structures and conditions. The temple committees had to take decisions how small or wide it will draw its range of membership. The previously harsh restrictions applied to certain social groups had to be sooftened, i.e. the doors could not be hold closed any longer. A closer look shows, however, that the restrictions had to change to less explicite terms of exclusion – i.e. admittance to a certain degree -, in order to maintain the established institution of the temple.

In terms used by Niklas Luhmann in his *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, temple committees used the means of "tactical manoeuvres" (*taktisches Lavieren*, 2000: 239). In specific, restricted areas the organisation implemented reforms and shifts. However, basically patterns of social and economic power remained unchanged, ritual practices and doctrinal

teachings were not altered. Though theoretically low-caste persons can enter a brahmanical temple now, few do so due to an ongoing implicite stigmatisation. In this respect Luhmann seems to be right in his observation that organisational reforms at best push through their linguistic ruling (*Sprachregelung*) but do not achieve a success with regard to the intended goals and effects, i.e. an actual acceptance of low-caste people in religious terms (Luhmann 2000: 246).

Coming to Europe, both Sri Lankan refugees and my reflexions, the power relations to a large degree were reconstructed in the diaspora. In most cases, persons from the Vellalar caste have been instrumental in setting up a temple. Vellalar people dominate the temple boards and committees. Temples are open to all, though Vellalars expect that people from lower castes obey to their instructions. Also, as social scientist Christopher McDowell in his study on Tamil refugees in Switzerland observed, at times low-caste men avoid visiting Vellalar temples. Instead, they undertake pilgrimages to certain Catholic Churches. Here, they pray to Maria, who is assumed to be a Hindu gooddess. Maria is expected to fullfill wishes and to help in crisis. For example, the Black Madonna at Einsiedeln is considered to be Mariyamman, a popular and powerfull goddess in Sri Lanka and South India (McDowell 1996: 233-236).

In general, Tamil Hindu temple organisations have transplanted and - according to Vellalars successfully – reconstructed known patterns from Jaffna society. Due to the diasporic situation, temple committees had to take decisions, at times awkward ones, for example to admitt low-caste persons and women to the board. It has to be studied whether such decisions, inherent to an organisational institution such as the temple, also will or has already led to a deconstruction of doctrinal contents and teachings, as Luhmann holds (2000: 248).

Secondly, in future times a transformation of the implicitely structured Tamil minority in European states into formal structures is not unlikely. I suppose two parallel developments: The yet unstructured circle of regular supporters of a temple, referred to above, might develop into a formal membership society with fees. Secondly, we might observe the formation of caste societies, institutionalising the implicite differences and boundaries. Such a trend took place in Britain among Gujarati and Punjabi Hindus during the 1970s and 1980s. However, size is an important factor of this development. Whereas in Britain the number with about half a million Indian Hindus had been big enough, the Tamil minorities in continental Europe might be too small to form separate Vellalar or Karaiyar caste societies. In this respect it is important to notice that a future growth of the Tamil minority is unlikely, as the number of new asylum seekers dropped significantly in recent years (see chart 1 above).

Structural modernisation: Part II sketched the basic patterns of a temple's organisation. It certainly deserves an indepth study whether the evolved model of temple patron and priest and that of temple committee and salaried priest displays a structural modernisation. I think so

that it does. For, we have a functional differentiation of spheres, the committee being responsible for worldly management affairs, the priest taking responsibility for the sacred sphere. This organisational pattern is a heritage of colonial times, and again we have to travel to Sri Lanka and past times to better understand present structures. I will not do so here (see Pathmanathan 1990, Pfaffenberger 1994).

However, fact is that the organisational formation, evolved during colonial times, acquipted people and institutions of the tradition well to be reconstructed in a different, modern environment. Compared to other migrant groups and transplanted religious traditions, Tamil Hindus have been very effective and successful in founding societies and recreating a home away from home. In a short span of time, Tamils in specific regions achieved a functional completeness to cater for their socio-cultural, political and religious needs. It is not an "institutional completeness" (Breton 1965) in the way that Tamils could live in a world of their own. Rather, Tamils use compartments of both the residence society and the newly created little Tamil world in Europe. Beneficial to this achievement certainly have been cultural features prominent among the middle and upper strata of Jaffna society: These are a high esteem of learning and education as well as an aggressive and diligent working ethics. Such cultural features are highly compatible with structures of a modern, differentiated society and are supportive to a successful integration of the migrant group. Also, such cultural compatibilities will, I expect, accelerate the structural modernisation of both socio-economic and religious organisations of the migrant group. These developments are occuring presently and it will be interesting to observe whether in a few years a functional differentiation not only between politics, economics and religion exists (which we have got already), but whether also a differentiation between Tamil culture and Hindu Shaiva religion is worked out.

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[ii]   Based on table "Asylbewerberzugänge, Hauptherkunftsländer und Anerkennungsquoten", BMI-A5-936 047/05, from 01.07.1998 and table »Sri Lanka, Asylbewerberzugänge seit 1995", letter

dated 30.09.02 from the Bundesministerium des Innern to the author. The number for 2002 has been reckoned on basis of the months January to August 2002.

iii   Based on Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie 1, Reihe 2, 1988: 20-21, the same 2002: 20-21 and Bundesverwaltungsamt Köln, Ausländerzentralregister, »Die ausländische Bevölkerung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland am 31.06.2002«, letter dated 13.08.2002 o the author.

iv   Based on Statistisches Bundesamt, »Einbürgerungen nach ausgewählten früheren Staatsangehörigkeiten«, 1981-1999, Tabellen V III B 175 and the same, Fachserie 1, Reihe 2, 2002: 57 and table 14 »Eingebürgerte Personen 2001 nach bisheriger Staatsangehörigkeit und Altersgruppen«,letter dated 06.08.2002 from the Statistische Bundesamt to the author.

v   Pictures are available at the URL http://www.baumann-martin.de/Kamad-Tem.html.

vi   For "Islam in Germany" and its endeavours to apply for the status, see, Hannemann/ Meier-Hüsing 2000, Fritsch-Oppermann 2000 and the studies by Gerdien Jonker. For similar endeavours by Vietnamese Buddhists, see Baumann 2002.

vii   See for the ticket system in Tamil Nadu, South India, Fuller 1984: 10-11, 21-22, 98-101 and Good 1987: 12-15. For Sri Lanka see Sivathamby 1990: 166. For Great Britain, here the Murugan temple in Archway (?), see Taylor 1994: 326-328. For Germany see Baumann 2000: 135-136.

viii   For Sri Lanka, see Banks 1971: 67; Sivathamby 1990: 162-165 and Pfaffenberger 1994: 144. For temples in Europe, see Baumann et al. 2003.

ix   For example, the Kamakshi temple at Kanchipuram, administered by the Kamakoti vidyapith (a monastery and lineage of gurus) and considered a bastion of Smarta brahmins, opened its doors no earlier than 1983. In this year the reigning Shankaracarya, Sri Jayendra Sarasvati. (b. 1935), began a radical transformation of the temple's and monastery's outreach; as a consequence, also members of scheduled castes and tribes were admitted (Cenkner 1992: 63).