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Disputed Space for Beloved Goddesses: Hindu Temples, Conflicts and Religious Pluralism in Germany

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Though I would like to draw some generalized conclusions about conflicts, religious pluralism and public representation in contemporary Germany, at the outset I would like to introduce the case study of Hindu traditions (appearing in the German public domain): In early June this year, about 10.000 Tamil people will travel to a small, hardly known town in the North of Germany. This town, Hamm/Westphalia - or rather its industrial outskirts -, will stage a huge festival honouring the Hindu goddess Sri Kamadchi Ampal. The goddess will be taken out of the temple and will circumambulate her sacred abode in a public procession. The goddess's departure from the temple will enable visitors to have *darshan* - seeing the divine image (Eck 1998). At the same time the power and grace of the goddess will bless the people, the town, and the country, according to Hindu view. It will be the ninth time that this annual procession will take place. A few years ago, a procession like this one had given rise to a local conflict. This conflict can be taken as symptomatic of reaction of some Germans to the public emergence of so-called 'foreign' religions and immigrants in Germany. Although the conflict may mark some German hostility towards the appearance of 'foreign religion' on German soil, it also demonstrates that both Tamils and Germans can find ways, which can provide mutual accommodation.

In the generalized perspective, the paper shall touch on the history of religions in Germany and the recent institutionalizations of non-Christian religions. As a matter of fact, a part of this history are social conflicts in terms of disputes on the building of houses of worship and prayer of non-Christian traditions. Conflicts on temples or mosques, built by migrant communities have come to the fore during the 1990s in Germany in particular. These

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conflicts show that German society is going through transformation, which the citizens have to cope with.

First, I shall present a few facets of religious dominance and pluralism in Germany. Having sketched this broader context, part 2 will outline the case study of building new homes for Hindu gods and goddesses in Germany. The concluding section shall analyse these institutionalisation processes within the general frame of a 'foreign' religion's access to and representation in the implicitly normative public domain. It will be argued that despite a stated equal treatment of non-Christian traditions, an unspoken hierarchy of legitimacy to claim space in the public domain comes to the fore in such social conflicts. The analysis shall be done from a sociology of religions point of view.

Facets of Religious Dominance and Pluralism in Germany

Let us turn back about a century: Until the end of World War I, Protestantism was the state religion in Germany, the German Emperor being the supreme bishop of Prussian Protestantism. Apart from Protestantism, also Roman Catholicism dominated the religious landscape, especially in Southern Germany. Non-Christian faiths and groups, apart from Jewish communities and a few occult or spiritist groups, had not been present until the early 20th century. Although there existed an internal Christian plurality with a number of small denominations and sects, in the public space Germany was religiously structured in bi-confessional terms. Protestantism and Roman Catholicism dominated the religious scenery and public.

This pattern continued well after World War II. Even more so, Christian Churches witnessed an increased interest in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Apart from a very few converts to Buddhist, Baha'i or Theosophical circles, the religious landscape and the public domain were undoubtedly dominated by Christian traditions. Religion in Germany was, and to a large - although decreasing - extent is, thought of as synonymous with Christianity.

Due to labour shortage, during the 1950s and 1960s workers from Southern Europe and Turkey were recruited to work in industries in Germany for a three-year period. However, the designed rotation system proved to be uneconomic and the so-called guest workers

were allowed to extend their stay. Due to the prolonged stay, the families of the mainly male workers were permitted to come to Germany. Since the mid-1970s, family re-union caused migrant life to 'migrate' from the hostels to houses and to pay more attention to religious observance and religious instruction of the children, of the second generation (see among many, Karakasaglu and Nonneman 1996: 246).

Whereas workers from Italy, Greece or Spain have brought with them Christian traditions, workers and their families from Turkey imported Muslim traditions (mainly Sunni tradition). Although Islam and mosques had been present in Germany since the 1920s (in fact Muslim soldiers had served in the Prussian army during the 18th and 19th century, a mosque was built for them in 1739 in Postdam, near Berlin, already), it was not until the migration of Turkish people that Islam grew considerably in number during the 1970s and 1980s. Also, due to refugees and asylum seekers, other religions came to Germany during the 1980s. Refugees from Vietnam and Laos imported Buddhist traditions. They provided a considerable addition to the small number of Germans who had converted to Buddhism (Baumann 1995). Likewise, Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka brought with them Hindu traditions and refugees from Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Iran and African countries extended the spectrum of Muslim presence in Germany. Added to this influx of non-Christian religions due to migration, new religious movements and off-springs from mainstream Christianity have further expanded the religious landscape in Germany. International religious organisations such as Transcendental Meditation, the Neo-Sannyas Movement of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Hare Krishna (ISKCON), Unification Church or Scientology had succeeded in finding a German footing. A fierce public debate ensued about the assumed dangerousness of these organisations. Christian pastors and so-called "sect specialists" had been at the forefront of this polemical discussion, using their history derived societal power to define what is right and wrong (Usarski 1988; Introvigne 1998). The net-result of these processes of conversion and immigration has been the transformation of the former bi-confessional domination to an incipient religious plurality within a short span of time. Due to historical reasons and specific privileges for the main churches, however, it certainly is justified to speak of a "limited pluralism" only (Daiber 1995: 172).

In numerical terms, two thirds of the 82 million inhabitants of Germany are members of the main Christian churches. The second largest group, so to say, is constituted by people with no formal religious adherence and belonging, constituting some 26%. The rate, however, varies considerably between former East and West Germany (70% resp. 15%; Pollack 1999: 766). Among non-Christian religions, altogether a bit more than 4%, Islamic traditions with their 3 million adherents undoubtedly comprise the largest religious group. Buddhists come up to 150.000 followers. Hindus can be estimated at 80.000 to 90.000 people, Jews about the same number currently. Other religious communities and new religious movements (NRM) make up a minority of together some 120.000 to 140.000 followers (0.15%). In total, non-Christian faiths with about 3.5 million people constitute a diversified minority of together 4.2% (Remid 2000).

Religious traditions in Germany: numbers and percentage, 2000

Protestantism	27.4 mill.	33.4%
Roman Catholicism	27.3 mill.	33.3%
Free + Orthodox Churches	1.8 mill.	2.2%
sum of non-Christian traditions	3.5 mill.	4.2%
Islam	3.0 mill.	3.7%
Judaism	80.000	0.1%
Hindu traditions	90.000	0.11%
Buddhism	150.000	0.18%
Other religions/NRM	140.000	0.17%

Source: <http://www.remid.de>

New Homes for Hindu Goddesses and Gods in Germany

Within the fold of non-Christian traditions, Hindus comprise a comparatively large grouping. It is an internally heterogen minority. The numerically strongest Hindu group currently is constituted by Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. The number of Tamils comes up to some 60.000 people. About three fourth of them might be considered Hindus, about 20% Catholics and some 5% Protestants of various denominations (Baumann 2000: 114-116).

In addition to these about 45.000 Tamil Hindus, also Hindus from India and Afghanistan as well as western converts in Hindu-related groups live in Germany. Indian Hindus, many of them businessmen, doctors or engineers from Kerala, Bengal or Gujarat, have come since the 1950s and might be estimated to some 40.000 people. Despite their number - estimated

30.000 to 40.000 people -, no permanent places of worship have been founded by the Indian Hindus (for the Frankfurt area, see Dech 1998).

Afghan Hindus came to Germany fleeing the civil war during the 1980s. Of the about 66.000 Afghans in Germany, a minority of some 5.000 refugees are Hindus. They maintain four nicely constructed temples in Hamburg, Frankfurt and two in Cologne. The temples are often visited by Indian Hindus and Sikhs too.

Finally, there is the group of Germans who have converted to a Hindu tradition. These western Hindus in groups such as the Hare Krishna, Ananda Marga, Transcendental Meditation or the Osho Movement might be estimated to some 7.000-8.000 people. They come together in numerous local groups to pursue devotional acts or meditation, no more provoking public debates as had been the case during the 1970s and 1980s (detailed numbers online available at Remid 2000).

Tamils from Sri Lanka have come as asylum seekers to Germany since the late 1970s. Their number rose significantly in the wake of the escalating civil war in Sri Lanka during the mid-1980s. In 1990, 36.000 Sri Lankan citizens, about 95% of them Tamil people, lived officially registrated in Germany. The figure peaked in 1997 with about 60.000 Tamils, dropping since then by a few thousand. Whereas in the beginning mainly young men came, fleeing both persecution by the Sri Lankan army and forced recruitment by the Tamil Tigers, since the late 1980s also women and children succeeded in escaping from terror ridden Northern parts of Sri Lanka. In Germany, there are twice as many men as women, both sexes being comparatively young. The legal status of Tamils in Germany varies according to their date of entrance: Whereas those coming until 1988 had been granted asylum and a right to stay, those arriving since 1989 were able to acquire a status of 'toleration' only, 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. However, since the mid-1990s the number of Tamils who acquired German citizenship has risen steadily. In 2000, some 10.000 Tamils have legally become Germans, comprising

about 15% of the Tamil population in Germany (see in detail Baumann 2000: 96-101, 106-107).

In line with German policy of distributing asylum seekers all across the country, Tamil refugees were settled in small numbers in a multitude of towns and cities. This policy intended to prevent the formation of ethnic colonies. Such clustering of like national or cultural people is held in certain political circles to hinder integration of the sojourners and migrants. 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 with permanently installed deities since the late 1980s. Both the sharp increase of the number of refugees and the arrival of women and children have been vital here. In addition, those Tamils, having lived for several years in Germany by then, had acquired financial resources and administrative skills to get a temple functioning. Whereas in 1989 only four small temples, situated in poor basement rooms existed, in 1994 the number had climbed up to ten temples. And presently, in Spring 2001, the number of temples has risen to 25 temples. The distribution and localities of temples shows that every second temple is situated in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, with its industrial heart of the Ruhr valley. (see the map provided at <http://www.baumann-martin.de/london-paper.htm>).

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. Finally a few temples are arranged in spacious halls of converted industrial buildings. So far no purposely, newly built temple exists. However, in Hamm/Westphalia the construction of a traditional, South Indian styled temple with a huge *gopuram* (entrance portal) is on its way.

Apart from the on-going 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. With one exception, the places of worship are not identifiable as temples by their outer design or architecture.

Nevertheless, a move into the public and a growing recognition by the neighbourhood and local authorities occurred as temples started to carry out public processions during their annual temple festivals. It was at these ten or fourteen days lasting festivities that, for the first time, Tamil Hindu religiosity and devotional acts became visible and apparent to the wider, non-Tamil population. The first public procession, the deity's circumambulation of the temple along the surrounding streets, was carried out at the Sri Kamadchi Ampal temple in Hamm/Westphalia in 1993. Whereas this first procession was attended by some 300 visitors, the number grew to some 4.000 people three years later. And, in 1999 and 2000, each time the festival attracted some 10.000 Tamils (Luchesi 2001), coming to Hamm from all over Germany and far away places such as France, Switzerland and Denmark. Similar processions, on a much smaller scale with a few hundred devotees, have been carried out in a few other places only (in Hannover and Gummersbach). Undoubtedly, the festival in Hamm is the biggest Hindu event in Germany and its organizer, the Sri Kamadchi Ampal temple, is the best known temple amongst Tamils living in Germany. Also it is here, where vows are fulfilled and religious disciplines are carried out in public during the procession (Baumann 2001).

Disputed Space for the Beloved Goddess

As mentioned in the introduction, in Hamm a local conflict arose due to these publicly held processions. In 1989 the Dravidian temple priest Siva P?skarakurukkal had established the temple honouring the goddess Sri Kamadchi. Initially situated in a small cellar, in 1992 the temple shifted to an adjacent former laundry. In 1996 the temple encompassed various rooms for the Sri Kamadchi and several deities, the *navagraha* (nine planet shrine) and personal.

However, the temple was situated in a residential area, surrounded by apartments blocks and private gardens. As the attendance at the annual festival procession increased rapidly, anger and hostility amongst a few neighbours arose as well. They complained about blocked garage entrances and lamented litter lying in the front gardens. In the forerun of the procession in 1996, residents voiced their misgivings in letters to the local newspaper. They foresaw „intolerable state of affairs in their street" and demanded a ban of the procession. On basis of numerous conditions imposed by the local authorities, the procession could take place, although the last time in that area. However, the temple in no way complied with German regulations of fire prevention and security standards. Thus, the local municipality had to close the temple. In a very cooperative way the municipally authorities of Hamm helped the Tamils to find a new site for their temple however.

Soon a suitable property was found in an industrial area, far outside of Hamm. In order to present to the local residents the future neighbours and temple, the authorities summoned people to a public meeting. Quite differently than expected by the town's administration, self-declared spokesperson of the community dismissed the plan. In an aggressive atmosphere these loud speakers rejected the project in an openly racist way. Hindus and Tamils were dismissed as „foreign" and the temple as non-fitting to the village and the neighbouring industries. The speakers vehemently demanded that the temple should be shifted somewhere else.

In reaction to this, two days later in a public statement, the mayor of Hamm expressed his strong criticism of the intolerance and hostility to foreigners which had dominated the

meeting. Previous to the meeting, the municipality's press office already had declared that the temple had gained importance for the cultural life of the town. Supporting the temple would be an "expression of openness and ability to integrate foreign customs and practices." (see in Baumann 2000: 151)

In contrast to the refusal voiced at the previous gathering, the authorities ordered that the temple would find its new home in this area. Fairly quickly a pragmatically arranged house was built, adjacent to an existent house where the priest and his family would live. In autumn 1997, Sri Kamadchi and her entourage were brought from the old temple and re-installed at the new place. Plans quickly developed to erect a spacious temple hall with a high rising tower (*gopuram*). Although the new place is hard to reach by public transport as it is located far outside of Hamm, it does provide plenty of space to carry out the well-attended festival and procession. Apart from a few left hardliners who still reject the temple and the visiting Hindu Tamils, in general life has come back to normal and to a state of distanced toleration.

Non-Christian religions and the normative public domain

This local conflict makes up a little incident of disputes surrounding contemporary institutionalisations of non-Christian traditions. Similar controversies and heated debates have evolved in particular with regard to the building of mosques and minarets (e.g. Schmidt 1995, Hannemann and Meier-Hüsing 2000). It is the infuriation and rejecting rage which makes one wonder. The apparent hostility undoubtedly moves beyond understandable complaints about parking problems, nuisance of noise or litter problems. Although some local residents may have expressed traditional hostility towards the 'different' and 'other', it is simplistic to dismiss their views as being unacceptable. Sociological analysis requires a proper understanding of their unease with the appearance of a place of worship that seems alien to them.

As this conflict and other controversies illustrate, getting along with non-Christian faiths is rather a new and very uncommon experience for many German citizens. This certainly applies to the realm of public visibility and public recognition of religion as well. Changes

and shifts in the representation of religion, i.e. which faiths and religious traditions have access to and are part of the public domain, produce uncertainties, worries and fears. Coupled with a nervous attitude towards the unknown and new, such changes are quickly constructed as a threat. The fierce reactions to the building of a far visible minaret or the carrying through of a public Hindu procession to a certain extent go back to such anxieties and perceptions of being threatened (Nye 1998, Baumann 1999).

Perceived from this point of view it becomes obvious that the public domain is far from being a neutral space, potentially accessible to every competitor. Rather, it is a domain socially constructed, carrying implicit dominant Christian norms and values (in the German context). Apparently, new players in the domain such as migrant groups with a different, non-Christian faith have to stand up for the right to be present visibly and thus publicly. They have to demand the right to represent themselves in the architecture, activities and life of a locality. Such local conflicts make obvious that this public domain is normative and bitterly defended by dominant groups. Strategies of closure by way of legal measures such as building ordinances, noise and traffic regulating decrees prescriptively aim to control the access (and also the planning process). The limitations which the migrants face in having access to the public domain underlines the unspoken hierarchy of legitimacy according to which the local people claim a kind priority that may exclude the visible migrants from recognition of their tradition in the public domain. (Asad 1990: 468, Rex 1991: 13-14, Vertovec 1996).

This is, however, hardly surprising against the historical background of bi-confessional domination and the 'limited pluralism' of religions in Germany. On the other hand, there seems to be no way out than to start understanding that an irreversible transformation has taken place. The bi-confessionally dominated society has changed and continues to change to a society with many faiths and different cultural styles. Also, the state's outspoken insistence on democratic principles, freedom, and liberty of the market may require a critical examination of the patronizing and hegemonic attitude towards migrants in the allocation of resources for their self-representation and recognition in the public domain. Obviously, the indispensable renegotiation of the normative and thus political culture of the public domain is at its start in Germany. Disputes and heated debates are most likely to increase and

continue as migrants organise to claim their civil rights. As the outlined case study demonstrates, however, such renegotiations can succeed in finding compromises if both parties, the migrant and the local authorities, share a mutual respect and a willingness to cooperate. This may provide avenues for the incorporation of migrant and minority groups of non-Christian faiths.

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