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1978 Hinduism in Vancouver: Adjustments in the Home, the Temple, and the Community.

Draft copy. Mimeo.

Published in 1980 in K.V. Ujimoto and G. Hirabashi, Eds., Visible Minorities and Multiculturalism, Toronto, Butterworths. pp. 277-289.

Draft Only: Not for
citation or quotation

HINDUISM IN VANCOUVER

ADJUSTMENTS IN THE HOME, THE TEMPLE, AND THE COMMUNITY

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Canadian Society for Asian Studies,
Guelph, Ontario, May 24, 1970.

In contrast to Vancouver's Sikh community, the Hindu population has received little attention from social scientists. This may be due in part to the fact that Hindus in Vancouver are believed to be far less numerous than East Indians of other beliefs, although this has not been verified. Probably more significant is the fact that the Hindu population of Vancouver does not behave as a community even to the extent that the Sikh population does. Rather, they are dispersed -- residentially, linguistically, occupationally -- and, until recently, have had no common grounds for communication, let alone concerted action.

However, in 1974 a Hindu temple was founded which has continued to grow in size and complexity. It was from families attending this temple that Professor I.D. Desai of the University of British Columbia obtained a sample of children for a study of nutrition patterns among East Indians in Vancouver. One year latter, eighteen of the same families were interviewed by a team of anthropologists in a pilot study intended to measure the retention of traditional folklore. It emerged that, to all intents and purposes, folklore is not being retained.

But the inquiry revealed that other aspects of Hinduism are being maintained to differing degrees. This paper seeks to describe what form Hinduism appears to be taking in the home, in the temple, and in the larger Vancouver community.

The literature dealing with Hinduism among East Indian immigrant populations elsewhere falls into two broad categories. That concerning the descendants of indentured labourers indicates the maintenance of numerous agricultural and village life rituals and the adoption of local pilgrimage sites, saints, and superstitions (Kluss, 1961; Kuper, 1960; Mayer, 1973). The literature on "free" immigrants and their descendants notes a retention of a few domestic rituals, but a lack of any religious roots being put down in the country of immigration (Dotson and Dotson, 1968; Morris, 1968; Pocock, 1957). The Hindus in Vancouver resemble the "free" immigrants more than the ex-indentureds in language, occupation, and class. But whereas the majority of "free" immigrants settled within easy reach of India, the Hindus of Vancouver for the most part cannot travel to India frequently. The question, then, is how Hindus in Vancouver, free immigrants relatively cut off from India, are

adjusting their religious practices and beliefs to the realitis of their new environment.

In the Home

The focal points of worship in the homes visited range from a single three-inch statue on a bedside table to an entire kitchen cupboard and counter displaying pictures of several dozen deities. In addition, the Bhagavad Gita is found in virtually every home and is read frequently by most adults. In some homes, less traditional religious artifacts have been purchased, particularly to help children learn about their heritage. For example, English language comic books depicting episodes from Indian mythology are available from the temple. The Gayatri Mantra has also been transliterated on a plaque so that the children can follow the Sanskrit words in the English alphabet. A few families have pujas on long-playing records which they import from California, and in one family the children's first request upon getting into the car is to hear arti music on the tapedeck!

Religious practices take place on a daily basis in over half of the eighteen homes visited.[1] At

least eleven wives perform puja or an equivalent form of worship every day. (It should be noted that one wife is an American Baptist, and that one man's wife has died.). However, only seven of the eighteen men interviewed indicated that they perform any ritual on a daily basis. It may be that the pattern wherein men appear to be "behind" their wives in attention to ritual also characterizes middle-class urban households in India. Alternatively, men who have chosen to immigrate may be particularly inclined to relegate religion to their women. In his study of East African Indians, H.S. Morris (1968:54) quotes one Hindu as saying: "The gods are unwilling to cross the sea. Most of them, I think, stayed in India. The women brought over a few that are important to them; but for me, it will be time to pray to God when I go back to India."[2] In a few cases, a husband and wife stated that they perform their daily ritual together, or that it is their goal to do so. Nuclear family life, whether in Canada, India, or elsewhere, may result in religious couples praying together. Or the Western concept of the husband-wife relationship may encourage Hindu couples to desire this form of sharing. But I am inclined to believe that these factors combine with

a sense of isolation (and perhaps freedom) experienced in the foreign environment to produce the idea of joint worship.

In the home, children sit with their parents during puja with varying frequency. Some parents reported that the children participate whenever a ritual is performed, while others indicated that their children rarely take part in or even witness a ritual. Perhaps more so than in India, the attitude of the parents is flexible: it depends on the children's whim whether they participate or not. Certainly one practice occurs that is not common in India: in several households, the children are expected to perform a special ritual of their own. It may be a minor fast, a mantra, or a bedtime bhajan. This could be an effect of Western values: it is, after all, western society that has conceived of unique interests and activities for childhood and adolescence. More specifically, the practice may have been picked up from the Christian practice of bedtime prayers. (Dotson and Dotson (1968:91) suggest this for Indians in Central Africa.) In either case, the possibility also exists that parents may be attempting to counter Westernization, to offer their children a handle by which to grasp Hinduism on their own.

On special occasions and in times of crisis, men, women and children may participate in rituals even if they do not do so daily. As in India, Divali in particular is a time for household prayers; and in at least a few homes in Vancouver it is the only predictable time. But also during crises, several "Divali Hindus" find themselves acting in a religious manner. One man reported that if he is engaged in a particularly difficult business transaction he will join his wife in puja (cf. Morris, 1968:54). Another couple related how their son overcame his fear of dogs when they taught him to face the dog and repeat "Hari Om" sternly. Perhaps the most dramatic story of crisis religion came from a refugee from Uganda. This man, who was raised a non-practising Hindu, suffered from severe depression after arriving in Vancouver. He finally cured himself by learning "three good arthis" and starting to pray twice daily (see footnote 2).

A few persons, most of them followers of the Arya Samaj, stated that even in times of crisis they do not turn to rituals and the associated gods and goddesses, but to a more abstract entity, God. (Only one man claimed never to pray: "If you break your leg, God won't do anything for you that you can't

do for yourself.") Indeed, there was a general tendency on the part of most respondents to stress the oneness of all the various manifestations of God. Dotson and Dotson (1968:92-93), speaking about Hinduism in Central Africa, suggest that a "vague monotheism" emerges because "polytheism is clearly not socially respectable," particularly when the believer is in conversation with a Christian. Certainly the desire to have his religion understood by outsiders may motivate a Hindu's emphasis on one God to a certain extent. But in Vancouver, the presence of several Arya Samajists and the desire to unite the Hindu community have also favoured the monotheistic aspect of Hinduism.

In the Temple

The Vishva Hindu Parishad was reportedly established for social and cultural reasons. According to one of its founders, the temple was intended "to create an East Indian community consciousness" and "to give the kids an idea of their culture." Physically, it gives the impression of a hall rather than of an Indian temple. On the main floor a rich red carpet covers the entire rectangular area, at one end of which is a small stage. Large portraits of

Shiva and Vishnu stand garlanded on the left, a life size cardboard figure of Krishna holds centre-stage, and a low table with microphones and a copy of the Gita occupies the front right-hand position. Several small images fill spaces inbetween these major furnishings. Towards the rear of the room stands an elaborately decorated and canopied wedding mandap.

Upstairs are administrative offices and classrooms for Hindi, dance, and music lessons. Although no one in the present temple mentioned taking music lessons, two daughters were studying Bharat Natyam, and virtually all respondents' children had either studied Hindi at one time, or were studying it now, or were going to study it when older. However, despite the parental concern that their children learn an Indian language, it should be noted that while all but one child could "follow" his parents' non-English conversation, fewer than half spoke the mother tongue, and children from only two families could write in it at all. "As long as we maintain our language, then there won't be any danger of losing our religion," Dotson and Dotson (1968:103) quote a Central African Indian leader as saying. Yet in Central Africa, as in Vancouver, the language is not being maintained.

The temple also serves as a cultural centre in so far as calendrical and life-cycle rituals take place there. Since there are no professional family priests in Vancouver, the temple priest serves the needs of individual families, reading horoscopes, performing wedding ceremonies and occasionally other samskaras, and "giving good advice." One woman remarked that "one way of teaching about marriage is to take daughters to wedding ceremonies." In another case, a couple who fear that their children have lost their religion insist on going to temple at Divali time: "We tell them (the children) we want them to see our Christmas."

A few families also bring their children to hear guest speakers. These are usually men from India, learned members of the Hindu religious community on tour among overseas settlements. As in Central Africa, they frequently "reiterate the ancient past and the great accomplishments of Indian civilization" (Dotson and Dotson, 1968:100), and strive to relate the achievements to the modern context of their listeners. For the second generation, however, the problem with most of the discourses is the same as that with the wedding rites or Divali hymns: they are not in English.

In the basement of the temple are kitchen facilities and a large room furnished with long tables and folding chairs. It is a room which greatly facilitates the social functions of the temple. About once a month on a irregular basis, a vegetarian meal is served. The meal may be sponsored by a particular individual or family as an extension of the prasad offered upstairs, or it may be produced by a group of regular attenders wishing to see a special occasion celebrated. In either case, people of very diverse backgrounds sit down together in what an outsider would have to describe as a relaxed, friendly and happy atmosphere. In a somewhat more restricted vein, the room may also be booked for wedding receptions or other special activities, such as "the Gujarati Ladies' Cooking Competition."

At least one woman who participated in the founding of the temple would not agree that the membership displays a sociable bent. She feels that as a community or social centre, the temple has failed. According to her, "it is a deep thing in Indian tradition to discriminate a lot." She does not like to listen to discussions about regional origin or religious differences, and she feels that

"the people who go to temple are concerned about these things and argue on these grounds." The literature on other overseas communities of Free East Indian immigrants lends credence to her view. In East Africa, the description of the Kampala temple resembles that of the Vancouver one, with the addition of a school, rest house, and library (Morris, 1968:88). However, after an offer of rent-free temple sites, sectarianism split the membership into three factions (pp. 30-32). Eventually, as the East Indian population increased, caste exclusiveness became the organizing social principle, over-shadowing the importance of sect (pp. 31-32). In Central Africa as well, "any attempt to create community-wide support for religious practice immediately runs into sectarianism" (Dotson and Dotson, 1968:107).

On the other hand, at least two heads of households indicated that their sole reason for attending temple was to see people or to meet people. East Indians new to Vancouver are encouraged to join, both through word of mouth and by the newspaper published by the temple. Official membership has increased to over 700 families, of which an estimated 200 may be represented on an ordinary Sunday morning. The possibility exists that a second temple will be

necessary and viable in the not-too-distant future. But whether the present membership would divide, if it does, according to mother tongue, sect, or place of residence in Vancouver, I would hesitate to guess at this point.

Further into the future, what happens to the Hindu temple will depend as much on its second generation as on newly immigrated East Indian membership. As a social centre for youth, however, the temple offers little in the way of organized activity apart from the Hindi classes. On Sundays, class is dismissed in time for children to hear the reading of the Gita, but, in the words of one ten year old, "the priest talks in our language and I don't understand." After worship, groups of adolescent boys stand in small circles chatting and telling jokes, while smaller circles of girls stand more quietly near by. A committee was organized to study the possibility of a youth group, but it was disbanded when parents objected to the mixing of the sexes. Ironically, this means by which children could absorb in their own terms the significance of Hindu beliefs and practices was vetoed as too Western.

Despite the apparent lack of religious purpose in the minds of the founders, the temple is thought of as a place of worship by at least some of its members. In addition to Sunday morning prayers and readings, havan is offered on Wednesday afternoons and bhajans on Thursday evenings. There may be some correlation between the backgrounds of the worshippers and the services they choose to attend. For example, in the present study, the two families going only to bhajans are the two lower middle class Gujarati families, one from India and one from Uganda. If further investigation confirms such a correlation, it might provide the answer as to how the membership is divided internally. It would also provide a tentative explanation of how the single institution has accommodated such a diverse population.

Taking all three weekly services into account, the present sample of eighteen families divides roughly into thirds: those that go to temple about once a week, those that try to get there once a month, and those who go once or twice a year, on special occasions. Among the middle group are several who would attend more frequently if they could. They complain of lack of transportation, lack of time, and the responsibility of very small

children with no live-in babysitters, i.e. relatives, to take care of them. As a rule, older children are not pressed to attend temple; and many of them choose to go far less frequently than their parents. In between babies and adolescents is an age-group very much in evidence during Sunday morning service. They become a bit restless during some hymns, and more so during the interpretation of the Gita, but when arti is performed no worshipper looks more reverent.

One respondent emphasized that because "everyone comes at 10:30," there is "the appearance of being congregational, but it is just coincidence." On the one hand, the appearance is not completely convincing: services start with a dozen individuals and may finish with hundreds. No one seems to mind, and late-comers make no apology. The only understanding appears to be that even if a person comes forward to the foot of the stage to take darshan of the gods, he retreats to the back of the already assembled group before sitting down. Most persons simply maneuver from a distance and go directly to the left (for men) or right (for women).

On the other hand, even if the membership does not exactly congregate in the Western way, the worship

format and functions of the priest do appear congregational, relative to Indian practice. Typically, the priest offers an opening prayer, the congregation sings a couple of familiar hymns in unison or responsively, and one solo is offered in the classical style. Next, the priest reads a passage from the Gita and comments on it at length in Hindi. Following the "sermon," worshippers designated by the priest perform arti while everyone stands and sings. Finally, there are announcements: the results of a fund-raising drive, the topic of next week's guest speaker, or -- on one occasion -- brief instruction on the display of the Indian flag (it had been displayed upside down at the temple bazaar).

In one sense, the congregational appearance is just a "coincidence." The Hindu community can support only one temple, and dispersed as they are residentially, the majority of them can reach it only on Sundays. But it is more than just an "appearance." Members may take turns giving special readings, raising topics of interest, or leading the singing. The priest organizes and leads the service, participates in temple administration, and ministers to the religious needs of member individuals

and families. Dotson and Dotson (1968:107) feel that "any truly integrative effort which would embrace all Hindus in one place could not be by definition traditional Hinduism." However, they also acknowledge that Hindus take change in their religion for granted (p. 105). A change toward congregational worship may be taking place in Vancouver, not only in the form of worship but also in the religious tenets of the worshippers. At least one young man, in an ongoing debate with his uncle, stated that "the mind can go toward God only in temple."

In the Community

From the perspective of the Hindus interviewed, there is no conflict between themselves and European Canadians regarding religion. After all, "all gods are one," "any learning about God is good," and "Hinduism is tolerant" (cf. Dotson and Dotson, 1968:33). Several respondents went further, explaining the Hindu counterparts to the Ten Commandments, the parallels between Krishna and Christ, and their own appreciation of the Bible. Particularly families with school age children incorporate certain features of Christianity in their lives. Most have a tree

and gifts at Christmas time, and some roast turkey.[3]

Several children attend church or church camps with friends, and one grown niece shares an apartment with Catholic roommates. Parents appear to feel quite comfortable about these arrangements; indeed, they seem proud to be able to prove how flexible and broad-minded Hindus are.[4] It is only when the "I found it" campaign sounds intolerant, or in one case when two children asked to convert to Catholicism, that the strength of the value placed on religion shows. The mother of the children hoping to convert told them: "No matter what, we have our religion. You can't change your religion: that is what you are."

Difficulties between Hindus and European Canadians arise, the respondents feel, when the latter mistake them for Sikhs. Several persons suggested that it was the "bad example" of the Sikhs that had "spoiled the reception "for other East Indians. It was the Sikh dress, manner, and habits that offended Canadians, not Hindu culture. (Ironically, the Sikhs with whom the Hindus are categorized are themselves misthkenly called Hindus by Canadians). With only one exception, the persons

interviewed said they experience no problems due to their race or religion with people they know. But several felt certain that incidents of discrimination did occur when they were taken for Sikhs.

The relationship between the Sikhs and the Hindus of Vancouver is a complex one. As indicated above, there is a distinct we-they feeling. On the other hand, the Hindu temple has Sikh members (the number 200 was mentioned), and it houses a Granth Sahib covered appropriately in pink silk. In some respects, the Hindus have followed the Sikh lead, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is the Sikh temple, for example, which is well-known for offering a hot meal after Sunday worship. (Its large prayer room is also carpeted in rich red). But in other respects the Hindus explicitly wish not to follow the Sikh example. According to one man, the Sikhs have allowed their temple to become an arena for politics. One woman felt that the Sikh membership was parochial, "not mixing" like that of the Hindu temple.

Conclusion: Realities and Adjustments

Hinduism, as it appears to be developing in Vancouver, reflects a major adjustment to two sets of realities. On the one hand, there are the realities of Western urban life, the features of North American society and religion which impinge on the Hindu immigrant's consciousness. On the other hand, there are the realities of the East Indian Hindu population in Vancouver, its size, diversity, and commonalities. Singly and in combination with one another, those realities may be seen to be either accommodated, ignored at no risk, or ignored at risk by practising Hindus.

Thus, in the home, Hindu children are not obliged to participate in their parents' daily worship, but they may be expected to perform a brief ritual of their own. The parental desire to convey their religion to their children, a reality in itself, must take into consideration the facts that a) the family lives in a nuclear household, geographically removed from like-minded friends; b) Canadian friends who interact with them have the tradition of bedtime prayers for children, if they have prayers at all; and c) Western society tends

to age-grade most activities, a fact to which the children may become accustomed before the parents.

In similar fashion, the fact that the Vancouver Hindu community supports just a single temple requires several adjustments.[3] Given the residential dispersion of its members, temple-going has become a weekly instead of a daily affair (or a monthly instead of a weekly one). In combination with the fact that Sunday is the one day when most members can get to the temple, a congregational format has been arranged. And the possibility exists that the single temple manages with diverse linguistic and sectarian groups by offering different types of rituals on weekdays. Perhaps the most noticeable adjustment, due in part to the fact that there is just one temple and one priest, is the agreement to emphasize one God. But this agreement also represents accommodation to the realities that the dominant host community believes in one God, and that the diverse sects agree philosophically that all gods are One.

Not all realities require adjustment. For example, the Christian church tradition of congregating at a given time (latecomers being

seated all together at a specific juncture in the service) has not influenced the Hindu temple tradition of easy coming and going. Nor has the institution of Sunday school and silence during the service changed the custom of having children accompany their parents in most activities. Most significantly, within the single temple and its congregational service, members may continue to engage in individual acts of worship.

But some realities to which the Hindu community has not adjusted are ones which may threaten its very survival: the children of today speak English, and the children of today believe mixed-sex activities are normal and enjoyable. The temple was founded with the second generation in mind, but it does not yet speak to them in their own language. It hopes to attract their interest and participation but it has vetoed the organization of a youth group. Perhaps, but only perhaps, enough young people of today will become adult members in the future that the necessary adjustments can be made.

Notes

1. Household ritual behaviour is variously referred to as puja, arti, diva, agarbati, mantra, bhajan, and havan. Since the significance of these terms changes from place to place and from sect to sect, I do not attempt to distinguish among them here, but consider them all equally as ritual.

2. Among Hindus in Canada, the picture is confused by the fact that a majority of those persons who have come from East Africa, where the importance of religion is supposedly less than in India, are persons who have not emigrated freely but have arrived in Canada as refugees. In the present sample, all four families from Uganda were forced to leave that country, and all four have husbands who participate daily in household prayers. In contrast, of the three families which emigrated freely from elsewhere in East Africa, none has a husband who performs rituals daily. Whether refugees tend to be religious men who would not have migrated freely, or whether the refugee circumstances produced religious men is a question which could be explored in future. I suspect the answer lies in a combination of both factors.

3. Descriptions of East Indian life in Trinidad and Fiji indicate that Christmas may also be used as a legitimate excuse for alcoholic drinking (Klass, 1961:163-164; Mayer, 1961:87).

4. The children of one of the families recited Christian fundamentalist beliefs while the parents smiled. Seven years previously, a woman had knocked on their door and offered to teach the children English and religion. The family accepted her offer and the woman has been coming once a week ever since. I asked the fourteen year old daughter whether she believed that everybody went to Heaven, or whether some persons might be reincarnated. She answered: "Oh no, not everybody goes to Heaven, only 144,000."

5. The "realities" of one priest and one temple in turn may be viewed as adjustments, not only to the relatively small size of the Hindu community, but also to its degree of secularization. They could afford family priests and neighbourhood temples if they wished to give them top priority.

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