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The Creation of South African Indian Identity in Natal in Relation to Hinduism

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INTRODUCTION

*"Though largely illiterate the forefathers of Indian South Africans brought to the shores of their land a heritage steeped in religion and culture - the foundation of the social education of MAN. They planted this heritage firmly in the virgin soil of what was to them a strange land."*¹

Perhaps one of the most pervasive ways in which Indians or people of Indian descent are identified is in terms of religion. It is a perception held both by and about Indians and it is with this in mind that I have made the subject of my Honours dissertation the way in which South African Indian identity in Natal is shaped by Hinduism. I wish to first make my own position clear as I am not merely a disinterested researcher but have a stake in the findings of the research itself. My own background as a South African Indian of Hindu origin has influenced by choice of topic and this may impact upon my findings in a way that I may be unaware of. It is however impossible to prevent biases from coming out in an individual's work but it is perhaps possible to minimise it by making the reader aware of my own position in relation to this dissertation.

I have divided my dissertation into three parts each dealing with what I perceive to be important issues centering around the formation of South African Indian identity in relation to Hinduism. The first is the notion of the diaspora and here I will discuss the way in which South African Hinduism views itself in relation to the Indian subcontinent. I will be discussing this in relation to themes such as the architecture of temples, the growing number of priests from Sri Lanka as well as the way in which temple rituals may differ from those on the subcontinent and the reasons for this. The second section deals with the notion of official and unofficial spaces of Hinduism which is closely linked to "popular" and "official" Hinduism. Particularly relevant to this is a discussion of the role of Hindu women who, due to a patriarchal system, often find themselves confined to the domestic sphere - the "unofficial" space. The final part of my dissertation deals with the

¹ *Stree Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam - Stree Vedas Trust Launch Souvenir Brochure*. A.N. Naidoo, ed. (Durban : Rapid Graphic, 1989) p15.

way in which contemporary South African Indians identify themselves in relation to Hinduism today and key themes evident here are conversion and growing Westernisation as well as the effects of multiculturalism and syncretism on Hindu religious identity.

As part of my discussion on Hinduism I will be making some reference to the temple in Umgeni Road, Durban, in relation to the issues I will be addressing - however most of my arguments deal with other religious spaces as well. My choice of this temple as representative of Hindu temples in Natal is due to it being one of the largest in the Southern hemisphere and, in addition to this, is its great age. The initial structure built in 1885, was a wood and iron building constructed on land donated by two prominent Tamil goldsmiths in Durban.² Initially meant to be a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Lord Siva, the temple finally housed the three main sects of Hinduism - Saivism (Lord Siva), Vaishnavism (Lord Vishnu) and Saktism (the female deity Marieamman).³ The three temples underwent subsequent renovations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century - the first being the rebuilding of the Siva temple in concrete in 1889 and the addition of two domes and an enclosed hall between 1917 and 1926. The building of the Vishnu temple commenced in 1911 and was only completed in 1950 when funds were raised to complete its hall.⁴ Sakti worship had initially been conducted in a tent until the building of a brick structure which commenced in 1920. Additional structures built include a boundary wall in 1934, the priests' living area, a front wall and arch and the Krishna Kalyana Mandabam - the money for the latter being donated by an affluent Hindu family.⁵

In addition to its religious functions the temple plays a wider role in the Indian community such as holding weddings, etc. It is also responsible for the propagation of Hinduism particularly in relation to the Tamil ethnic group. Furthermore, Hindu movements such as the local chapters of the Ramakrishna Centre, the Divine Life Society

² *Stree Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam*. p7.

³ Umgeni Road Temple. "The Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam" 1994.

⁴ "The Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam"

⁵ *Stree Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam*. P7.

and others were founded at the Umgeni Road Temple.⁶ Throughout its history therefore, the Umgeni Road Temple has played a prominent role in the lives of the Indian community in Durban and its surrounding environs - particularly those of South Indian descent. This was thus a contributing factor in my choice of the temple as a case study for my dissertation.

In addition to secondary sources relating to history, anthropology and architecture, I have drawn upon a wide variety of primary sources. These include the writings of temple committee members evident in the temple brochure as well as a history of the temple itself. In addition I have drawn upon other publications put forward by other Hindu and Tamil organisations in an attempt to understand the role played by Hinduism in the formation of identity. I have considered my own experiences and thus used anecdotal evidence - all of which arise from my own position as a Hindu of South Indian descent - which forms one aspect in the construction of my own identity. Finally, I have conducted interviews with the temple priest, a former temple committee member and devotees, both in order to explore contemporary issues relating to Hinduism in the South African context, and to address the key issues that have arisen in my research such as the notion of the diaspora, gender relations and multiculturalism. My interviewees thus represent a small cross-section of contemporary South African Indian society in terms of being drawn from academic, converted and official and unofficial academic backgrounds.

Several points of interest are worth mentioning in relation to my use of interviews.⁷ Before I had even begun my interviews I had already centred my dissertation around three themes - the diaspora, gendered spaces and religion in the present - which influenced the type of questions I asked, restricted me to looking for certain types of information and hence excluding others. My situation was further complicated by my being, to an extent, a member of the same group I had chosen to understand which meant that I already had certain preconceptions of the answers I was looking for and where they might lead. This further restricted my interviews and influenced the type of excerpts I

⁶ "The Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam"

⁷ Here I have drawn heavily upon an earlier essay I have written entitled "'The Truth is Out There?' - A Discussion of Orality"

chose for the dissertation itself i.e. those that supported my argument. However, this process is more dialectical than the impression I have given. The information I obtained from my oral interviews to an extent shaped the form my dissertation took - it was impossible to simply hold on to a rigid framework if there was evidence to the contrary - in a sense, therefore, my interviewees were partly co-creators of my dissertation - although this relationship is unequal and the responsibility for the final product remains my own as the author of the text.

When I began the interviewing process itself, I was confronted with a number of issues I had not sufficiently considered beforehand. The first, of course, is that people speak in a manner very different from the way in which we write, regardless of whether one is dealing with an oral or a literate society (I was dealing with the latter). Pauses, hesitations, etc were common as people thought about their answers. In addition, speaking appears more flexible - one can clearly understand what the individual is saying but when one transcribes it, the meaning is often not as clear or is difficult to read due to the strict grammatical rules applied to writing. This ties in to the issue of speaking itself which, unlike writing, is more than just words. The body language of the person being interviewed, their manner of speaking, the way their responses vary depending on the question are not features which translate easily to paper, yet they are vital as they add a richness and depth of meaning greater than the transcription of words alone can convey. A final feature is the way in which people are likely to speak of what has greater meaning to them in personal terms and what is foremost on their minds at that particular moment - which may not be what the interviewer expects.

I have also found the notion of silences to be particularly relevant. Due to my inexperience at conducting interviews, I felt it would be best if I began by interviewing people that I already knew or, as was the case in some instances, was related to. I found that the interviewing process produced a very different and more formal relationship than our previous interactions. Furthermore, different answers were produced as they were being interviewed to the answers I had received in my informal conversations with them. The transcripts produced out of this context therefore do not necessarily reflect the "true

beliefs as these were divulged "off the record". After careful consideration as to why two different sets of answers would be produced in two different contexts, I came to the conclusion that, when conducting a formal interview, I am no longer an acquaintance or a relative, but a historian with the full weight of academia behind me. They become conscious of the audience for which this work is intended and its production as part of the public rather than the private sphere. They may thus feel less free divulging their true feelings - censoring it, so to speak, for the broader audience they expect will receive it. This has larger implications as I became aware of this discrepancy due to my previous knowledge of those I interviewed. When speaking to an individual for the first time in the context of an interview the historian may be unaware as to whether the person is consciously censoring their own experiences and hence producing silences.

This leads me to considering the value of oral testimony itself as drawn from memory. Over time there appears to be shifts in privileging either writing or orality over each other. Our emphasis on writing is due to the emphasis placed on it by the Enlightenment which was a major factor in colonial ideology. In our current postmodern context there appears to be a shift advocating the superiority of orality as it gives voice to those who were not previously heard and is said to embody a more authentic experience. However memory is itself not an objective reflection of reality. At the time of a particular event, the person's experiencing of it is determined by his/her context and his/her world view. Those that I have interviewed are therefore recalling the past from their position in the present and their perceptions in the present are shaped by their experiences in the past.

In the interviews I have conducted around the themes of my dissertation I found that they were far less straightforward than I had expected from the conventional views on the subject of Indian identity. In addition there was a dearth of information available on the construction of Indian identity in South Africa in relation to Hinduism. My dissertation is therefore an attempt to stimulate further research by South African historians on what I believe to be an important aspect in the formation of South African Indian identity in all its complexity. Thus, in my discussion of the diaspora, official and unofficial spaces and

conversion I try to demonstrate the tension produced by holding contradictory identities simultaneously.

CHAPTER ONE – THE DIASPORA

Introduction

“I have a bond with India because my ancestors originated from there. It’s a country rich with culture and tradition and many of our practices were adopted from India.”⁸

In this chapter I discuss the identity of South African Indians as derived from their ancestral origin in India and its subsequent effect on their consciousness. A prevalent theme here is the way in which India is perceived as the ultimate source of authority for Hindu religious practice – which is viewed as the most authentic when modelled on India. This introduces the notion of space – the closer one is geographically to India, the more likely one is to engage in “real” Hindu practice and for those who are distant from the Indian subcontinent i.e. South African Indians, certain measures are used to “import” this “authenticity”. A discussion of these measures is the basis of this chapter.

With the initial arrival of indentured labourers, religious practice was an informal and fluid affair with the construction of simple shrines and most Hindu worship occurred in homes. The arrival of Brahmins led to the formation of a more institutionalised form of Hinduism which was further entrenched by the end of contracts of indenture leading to Indians congregating in communities where, often, one of the first constructions was that of a temple. Co-inciding with the growth of a new South African Indian intelligentsia at the beginning of this century, was the building of temples in brick and stone – suggesting permanence and acceptance on the part of these people of South Africa as their home.

However, co-existing uneasily with this growing sense of identification as South Africans, was a looking to India as a source of religious authority. This was evident in terms of the temple architecture which was closely modelled on South Indian temples and builders trained in India were brought to South Africa to build these permanent temples. Furthermore, requests were made for the immigration of Hindu priests from India and Sri Lanka to officiate at these temples – a practice which continues today.

⁸ Interview conducted with Miss Premakumarie Reddy by S. Chetty. October 26, 1999. P2.

It would however be a great simplification to see Hinduism in this sense as merely being imported from India. Local economic, social and political conditions affected the extent to which Hinduism could have been modelled on India – this is evident in the modifications made to South African temples. In addition the use of Sri Lankan priests in temples over the past two decades have provoked growing criticism on the part of South African Indians due to the exclusion of local priests from temples and the conflict over religious practice which has had to change and adapt to the South African context.

Another issue that I discuss in this chapter is that of ethnic identity which, in the case of Tamils, crosses all geographical boundaries and is particularly evident in the strong emotion provoked by the political situation in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously however, ethnic identity in South Africa tends to take on a racial slant due to the internalisation of Apartheid values where distinctions are made within and between ethnicities due to the degree of darkness of skin complexion.

This chapter thus attempts to show the complexity underlying the way in which the South African Indian diaspora construct their religious identity.

Beginnings

The first Indian indentured labourers arrived in Natal in 1860 for an indenture period of three years which was later extended to five years. Although they had initially been recruited to work on the sugar plantations, they were also employed in the coal mines, dockyards, municipal service and domestic work.⁹ Following the arrival of the indentured Indians came a smaller group termed “passenger” or “free” Indians – so called as they arrived voluntarily, paying their own passage. These Indians were of a largely middle class background and set up shops, procuring goods largely for the indentured labourer but also drew White and African customers.¹⁰

⁹ Hilda Kuper. *Indian People in Natal*. P2.

¹⁰ Kuper. *Indian People in Natal*. 3.

Despite these class differences and the different circumstances under which they had arrived, the greater number of these Indian arrivals experienced a tremendous sense of isolation and alienation brought about by their loss of connection with traditional networks in India. This was particularly true of the indentured labourers who had come from largely rural backgrounds and had thus been uprooted from their ancestral villages hence losing their kinship ties. The situation was exacerbated by their different linguistic and caste backgrounds as well as their isolation from Indians on other plantations, making it difficult to communicate and enhancing their sense of isolation – a reason which has often been cited as being one of the key factors leading to the high incidence of suicide among indentured labourers.¹¹ The harsh conditions of indentured labour was another contributing factor and it is within this context that religion was perhaps utilised to provide a sense of familiarity and stability: “In considering the religious practices among the Hindus it is apparent that family worship and community festivities would, from the earliest times, have provided support, a sense of solidarity and thus of security in an uncertain world.”¹²

Although much of the Hinduism practiced by the early indentured labourers was of an informal nature, the arrival of *Brahmins* – or Hindu priests – in Natal changed this. Having to claim a lower caste status in order to be allowed into the colony, these Brahmins were able to travel to the different plantations acquainting labourers with the Hindu scriptures.¹³ The arrival of the Brahmins had two repercussions on the development of the religious identity of indentured Indians – it gave them a sense of continuity with a traditional religious past. In addition, it fostered a sense of group consciousness – to counter their isolated and alienated context – due to their common religious practices, giving them the sense of belonging to a wider Hindu community. Both these features are strong themes in the notion of the diaspora.

¹¹ S. Bhana and A. Bhana. "An Exploration of the Psycho-Historical Circumstances Surrounding Suicide Among Indentured Indians, 1875-1911" in *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* S. Bhana, ed. (Leeds : Peepal Tree Press, 1990). P159-160.

¹² J. B. Brain. "Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians" in *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*. S. Bhana, ed. (Leeds : Peepal Tree Press, 1990) p214.

¹³ Brain. "Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians" p211.

The arrival of the Brahmins brought a more institutionalised form of Hinduism leading to the establishment of Hindu temples and religious organisations. This was significant in two respects – the early temples were often constructed from wattle and daub which was later replaced by more permanent structures such as brick and concrete, implying a growing acceptance on the part of the ex-indentured labourers of Natal as being their new and permanent home. In addition, Indians who had served out their time of indenture congregated around areas in which temples had been constructed, leading to the development of communities and, with that, an extension of a community consciousness.¹⁴ Furthermore, the temple construction itself required the co-operative effort on the part of these Indians in terms of raising funds as well as the actual building process itself.

It is thus a strong possibility that Hinduism would be a key feature in fostering a sense of group identity on the part of the immigrant Hindu population in Natal – an identity based both in terms of their common South African context as well as their origins on the subcontinent. The temple played an important role in the fostering of this identity by being an arena where dispersed groups could meet as well as the focal point for the development of communities. In addition, the temple played a role in the development of an identity based on the notion of the diaspora – a feature which I will now develop further.

Hindu Temple Architecture

“In any Hindu Temple there invariably lurks the Divine in the background, the spirit of reverence in which it was built by artisans, the inescapable feeling that there indeed is a place of worship, the eternal and spiritual domain of God.”¹⁵

The actual building of temples is often seen as being part of the act of Hindu worship itself hence the gradual fixing of particular architectural styles:

“The design of temple buildings, as indeed all other forms of building, became clearly

¹⁴ Brain. "Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians" p212.

¹⁵ Sarres Padayachee. "South Indian Temples in South Africa" in *The South African Tamil Federation 25th Anniversary*. P63.

defined rituals, the very action of building temples became *Bhakti*¹⁶ worship in itself. The rules are laid down in a series of manuals...[which] remain a vague guide to present-Day temple builders.”¹⁷

The caste of the builder and the most auspicious days for construction to commence were important.¹⁸ It is with this complexity behind the actual building process in mind that I would like to consider the master builders associated with the Umgeni Road temple.

The oldest temple in the Umgeni Road complex is the Siva Temple built by Kothanar Ramsamy Pillay who had learned some skills in temple building in India before serving as an indentured labourer in Mauritius. Upon completion of his term of indenture he arrived in South Africa in 1885 and was commissioned to build a number of temples ranging from the Subrahmanya Temple in Port Elizabeth to the Railway Barracks Temple in Durban.¹⁹ The Vishnu Temple in the Umgeni Road Temple complex was built by Alaga Pillay in 1911 who had been brought to Durban by the Umgeni Road Temple Committee for that purpose. He had learned the art of temple building in Madurai in India and he was brought to Durban in order to design and build the Vishnu Temple in an attempt to model it on those in South India. Like Ramsamy Pillay, Alaga Pillay was also involved in other temple building projects in Ladysmith, Umzinto, etc.²⁰ The key themes evident in my discussion of the master builders involved in the construction of the Umgeni Road Temple suggests a conscious attempt by the Umgeni Road Temple Committee to model their temple on those in India. In addition the number of different temple projects worked on by these builders suggest that this mindset was not unique to the Umgeni Road Temple Committee. A provocative notion developed by Mikula, Kearney and Harber: “Many temple committees would like it to be known that the building was designed and built by someone brought from India for the task. In most cases, however, this was not the case,”²¹ suggest that a certain legitimacy was conferred

¹⁶ P. Mikula, B.Kearney and R.Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. (Durban : Hindu Temple Publications, 1982) p5. *Bhakti* refers to a means of attaining *moksha* (salvation) through love and devotion to God and has led to the development of various sects, each dedicated to a particular Hindu deity.

¹⁷ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p6.

¹⁸ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p16.

¹⁹ *Our Glorious Heritage, Parts I and II - Historical*. V.R. Naidoo, ed. (Natal : Tate Publications, 1986) p137.

²⁰ *Our Glorious Heritage*. P137.

²¹ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p13.

on temple builders who had either originated from or had been trained in India as opposed to local temple builders.

However, despite the attempt to model South African Hindu temples on those in India, certain local constraints at almost every step in the building process made this impossible. The first obstacle occurred with the actual location of a site for the temple. The *Silpa Sastras* – a fifteen-hundred-year-old manual used by temple builders – states that a temple must be built in a beautiful location suited for the housing of God. The lack of availability of land and the restrictions placed on ownership of land in South Africa made this an almost impossible criterion.²² As I have mentioned earlier, the land for the Umgeni Road Temple had been donated by a pair of affluent Indian jewellers and its location in Umgeni Road adjacent to the railway tracks, a highway, as well as being amidst factories and autobody workshops, mean that from the outset it was a compromise between Indian standards of temple building and local conditions in South Africa.

The restriction on land has a further repercussion in terms of the three sects present in the Umgeni Road Temple complex i.e. Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism and their corresponding temples. In conventional Hindu temples only one major deity is generally represented with the others confined to more marginal roles, however in South Africa, it was often necessary to represent both Saivism and Vaishnavism in one compound²³ and the Umgeni Road Temple goes a step further by representing all three major sects:

“It [Umgeni Road Temple] is unique in the sense that it is maybe one of the few temples whereby the three sects, namely you find Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism, being reflected in one temple – on one temple precinct. Now, very often you find in all the temples in South Africa, they have Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism in the same temple simply because of finances, etc.”²⁴

In conjunction with a lack of finances, came the architectural compromises – the temple representative of each sect has to be laid out in a particular manner unique to each, as do the temple halls used for social functions and the priests’ quarters. The incorporation of all these elements on a single site where space was at a premium added a greater

²² Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p11.

²³ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p11

²⁴ Oral Interview conducted with Mrs Sarres Padayachee by S. Chetty. October 4, 1999. P6.

complexity to the temple construction than would actually have been the case in South India.²⁵

Regardless of the compromises necessary, temples employing the South Indian Dravidian style of temple architecture had to adhere to basic design criteria i.e. an east-west orientation, the square form of the shrine known as the *cella* and the axial development of an external altar and flagpole known as the *kodi* pole. As communities around temples became wealthier and more funds were raised, renovations were carried out to incorporate more design elements reminiscent of South Indian temples.²⁶ However two elements which are a distinguishing feature of temples in South India i.e. the water tank and the entrance tower known as the *gopirum*, are rarely, if ever, present in South African Hindu temples. The lack of water tanks are attributed to the building of temples in areas where communities of ex-indentured labourers had settled which was usually near an available water supply such as rivers and streams, in order to carry out market gardening. Thus water tanks would have been redundant, particularly in their traditional village role as reservoirs.²⁷ Although the water tank is not a key criterion in temple construction, its absence in the South African context suggests that even environmental factors such as an abundance of water impacted upon the construction of temples in South Africa, despite the attempts to be faithful to an ideal Indian model.

The elimination of entrance towers or *gopirums* is far more significant²⁸ as a *gopirum* is considered a requirement in South Indian temples due to its religious significance as a gateway to the house of God: “Inevitable, an entrance to the house of ‘God’ had to be a massive form towering into the sky and visible for miles around.”²⁹ The *gopirum* was often elaborately carved and sculpted and temples – particularly those situated near densely populated urban areas – could have many *gopirums* and marked the growing significance of the temple to the community:

²⁵ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p11.

²⁶ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p10.

²⁷ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p11.

²⁸ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p11. The only Hindu temple in South Africa employing both the high boundary wall and the *gopirum* is the temple in Pretoria.

“The temple had by now evolved into the centre not only of the religious, but also social, economic and cultural life of the urbanites. The maintenance and financing of this social centre was comparable to that of any large-scale institution of modern times.”³⁰

The lack of the gopuram in South African temples – particularly the Umgeni Road Temple which fulfills the criteria of being located in a densely populated urban settlement – indicates a departure from the South Indian model which can, once again, be attributed in part to the financial constraints experienced by an Indian population drawn largely from an indentured background. There is thus a clear break between the desire to emulate the Hindu temples of India as is evident by the bringing to South Africa of Indian master builders, and the political, environmental and financial constraints which necessitated a departure from this ideal.

However, despite not adhering completely to South Indian architectural styles, South African temples have managed to provide a space – in stark contrast to their surroundings – of tranquility and religious worship – the key functions of any place of worship – as is evident in this extended poetic description of the Umgeni Road Temple:

“One enters the group of temples through a low brick arch on a wide, paved walkway flanked by a low, natural stone retaining wall. On each side, for forty metres or so, stretches a forest of beautiful, old coconut palms interspersed with low mango and bread-fruit trees. Through time, the trees have branched over the walkway, creating a tropical tunnel which frames the crisp, white Shiva temple in the distance... The buildings are best seen in the late afternoon, when the low sun strikes the heavily-modulated structures, and when devotees in their colourful saris come to pay their respects. The peacocks are always there to add a further exotic touch of colour to this urban oasis.”³¹

In this respect, very little separates the Umgeni Road Temple from its forebears in South India.

Priests and Religious Practice

*“The council of the Temple [Umgeni Road] brought qualified Priests from India and Sri Lanka to reside at the Temple and conduct all the rituals according to the tenants [sic] practised in South India. This also enhanced the prayer festival.”*³²

²⁹ Satish Grover. *The Architecture of India - Buddhist and Hindu*. (Uttar-Pradesh : Vikas Publishing House PVT LTd, 1980) p199.

³⁰ Grover. *The Architecture of India*. P200.

³¹ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. 61.

³² “The Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam”

With the desire to have South African Hindu temples emulate as closely as possible those on the subcontinent, came a desire to have religious practice itself do the same. As I have mentioned earlier, soon after the first Indians arrived as indentured labourers in the nineteenth century, Brahmins entered the colony of Natal, bringing with them the knowledge of Hindu customs and practices derived from Hindu scriptures. This served to add an official element to the unofficial rituals originally practiced by the labourers, and gave them a sense of maintaining a connection with their “homeland”.³³ From the early part of this century priests from India and Sri Lanka were brought to South African temples in the belief that, being closer to the source, they were more knowledgeable about Hinduism – as is evident from my opening quote.

This suggests a perception of Hinduism as timeless and unchanging – unaffected by social, political, economic, historical and geographical contexts. However this is not the case. From its very inception Hinduism does not exist as a single dogmatic religion as a wide variety of religious beliefs fall under the term “Hinduism”. For instance, the worship of the Hindu deity Siva is largely confined to South India and is referred to as Saivism. In North India on the other hand, the emphasis is on the worship of Vishnu – known as Vaishnavism. The historical development of Hinduism is best summed up by Romila Thapar:

“[The evolution of Hinduism was] not a linear progression from a founder through an organizational system with sects branching off...[It was instead] the mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the adjusting, juxtaposing and distancing of these to existing ones, the placement drawing not only on beliefs and ideas but also on the socio-economic reality.”³⁴

Over its five thousand-year-old history Hinduism survived social, economic and political upheavals such as the Muslim invasion and the effects of British colonialism, due to its ability to incorporate and adapt – a far cry from the notion of it as a rigid, timeless and unchanging religion. One of the key transformations undergone by Hinduism occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century and is significant as it occurred during the period

³³ Brain. "Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians". P211-212.

Indians were entering into indenture. The growing interference of the colonial state in matters of religion, particularly its placing in rigid opposition the categories of Hindu and Muslim,³⁵ led to the creation of religious reform. Reform could be based on either rationalism or nationalism grounds but it did not simply involve a disregarding of everything Western and a veneration for everything “traditional”:

“We are to have what the West can give us, because what the West can give us is just the thing and the only thing that will rescue us from our appalling condition of intellectual and moral decay...we shall find it expedient to select the very best that is thought and known in Europe, and to import even that with the changes and reservations which our diverse conditions may be found to dictate.”³⁶

Rationalist reform was thus an attempt to incorporate the best of Western thought into Hinduism. The above example clearly illustrates that the myth of a timeless and unchanging Hinduism is just that – a myth. Hinduism could not help but be affected by its context and adapt accordingly – it is the reason for its survival. However, bringing to South Africa priests from India and Sri Lanka arises within the context of the internalisation of the West’s notion of India as static and unchanging. Hence the importation of Hinduism as practiced in India gives the impression of practicing a timeless form of the religion – linking South African Indians to an “eternal” India.

Although priests have been brought to South Africa since early this century, there has been an increasing number of Sri Lankan priests arriving over the past fifteen years. One of the reasons for this has been the political situation in Sri Lanka. Conflict between the Sinhalese – a largely Buddhist group – and the Tamils – a largely Hindu group – has led to a constant state of emergency in the country resulting in a number of Tamil refugees seeking sanctuary all over the world.³⁷ Another reason given is that the Sri Lankan priests formed a network, as most of South Africa’s Sri Lankan priests originate from the

³⁴ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal. *Modern South Asia - History, Culture, Political Economy*. (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998) p20.

³⁵ A particularly influential notion has it that the British, in a sense, constructed the notion of communal strife between Hindu and Muslim by portraying isolated incidents solely in terms of communalism, which was seen as the only relationship between Hindu and Muslim. See Gyandra Pandey. "The Colonial Construction of 'Communalism' : British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century" in *Subaltern Studies IV - Writings on South Asian History and Society*. R. Guha, ed. (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1989).

³⁶ Bose and Jalal. *Modern South Asia*. P113.

³⁷ *The Macmillan Concise Encyclopedia*. A. Isaacs, E. Martin and D. Pickering, eds. (Aylesbury : Market House Books Ltd., 1991) p680.

Gurukul family – including the Umgeni Road Temple’s resident priest Muthu Iyer Radhakrishna Gurukul: “So what I think must have happened was maybe the first few [Sri Lankan priests] – one or two came in – and then they, with their contacts, made arrangements for people from their family etc to come in – and that is why we’ve had a flood of Sri Lankan priests.”³⁸ A final reason put forward is one that has always been utilised for bringing in priests from India and Sri Lanka – they are seen as being more knowledgeable about Hindu religious practices: “...people have developed a mentality of looking up towards the Sri Lankan priests.”³⁹ The resident priest at the Umgeni Road Temple reveals that cultural events and religious festivals at the temple occur in a similar manner to those on the subcontinent however certain constraints are present in the South African context: “...they take the whole day in our country their preparation and everything because they can get easily holiday from the government or institutions. Here it is not like that so here time is limited...We divide them [the religious days into sessions] so in between people get a chance to go to their work...”⁴⁰ To enhance the notion of authenticity the idols utilised in temple worship at the Umgeni Road Temple were themselves imported from South India.⁴¹

In the nineties however, there appears to be an adverse reaction to the role of Sri Lankan priests in South Africa. Their arrival has meant an increasing marginalisation of local priests leading to resentment. In an interview I conducted with a former Umgeni Road Temple Committee member, she put forward a number of criticisms of Sri Lankan priests ranging from incompetence: “Interestingly enough, many of them are not qualified as priests...the very priest at Umgeni Road Temple...he’s more an accountant – he’s not a qualified priest,” to corruption: “...the exploitation that’s taken place with regards to the Sri Lankan priest – it’s become a money game now...”⁴² This suggests a deeper significance in terms of the relationship between the Sri Lankan priests and South Africans – a counter-reaction to the notion of priests from the subcontinent embodying the ultimate authority in religious practice. This is an indication of tension in terms of a

³⁸ Interview with S. Padayachee. P8.

³⁹ Interview with S. Padayachee. P8.

⁴⁰ Interview conducted with Mr Muthu Iyer by S. Chetty. September 28, 1999.

⁴¹ Mikula, Kearney and Harber. *Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa*. p61.

clash between two spaces i.e. the diaspora and the “homeland” where the values of the latter are not simply inscribed onto the former. It suggests that the relationship between the two is no longer one where the diaspora unproblematically view the subcontinent as the ultimate source of authority. The divergent history of the diaspora from the “homeland” has led to the formation of different cultural emphases which are not necessarily in harmony with those of the subcontinent.

Ethnic Identity

In my discussion of ethnic identity I will be concentrating solely on the ethnic groups of South Indian origin – the Tamils and the Telegus. My reasons for this is that, although other ethno-linguistic groups engage in temple worship and there is much interaction across groups, temple worship on the whole is largely a South Indian phenomenon. In addition the Umgeni Road Temple has a distinctive Tamil identity in terms of the festivals it holds, the ethnic constitution of the Temple Board, the priests at the temple, etc.

I would like to begin by considering the historical background to South Indian ethnic identity in South Africa. The greater majority of indentured Indian labourers arriving in Natal were of South Indian and particularly Tamil origin. The Tamils originated from Tamil Nadu and the minority of Telegus came from present-day Andhra Pradesh. In India vast geographical boundaries separate the various linguistic groups, particularly in the case of North and South India. However, in South Africa, the various Indian linguistic groups were compelled to live in close proximity, leading to an inevitable blurring of distinctions. This was particularly evident in the case of Tamils and Telegus who, in the period of indenture, were viewed by the other racial groups as well as the other ethnic groups of Indian origin, as constituting one group, the “Madrassis”.⁴³ This misnomer is due to their geographical origin in India – the Telegu state of Andhra Pradesh was only created after India’s independence out of the eleven Telegu-speaking

⁴² Interview with S. Padayachee. P8.

⁴³ Ranji S. Nowbath. "The Hindus Of South Africa" in *The Hindu Heritage in South Africa*. Ranji S. Nowbath, Sookraj Chotai, B.D. Lalla, eds., (Durban : Universal Printing Works, 1960) p18.

districts in Madras.⁴⁴ In addition there are linguistic similarities between Tamils and Telegus. However, despite the perception by “outsiders” of the lack of distinction between the two groups, from my own experiences drawn from my ethnic origin as a Telegu, both Tamils and Telegus maintained clear distinctions between each other: “...the Madrassis consisted of two linguistic groups who were conscious of their separate identities, who had their different customs, practices and rites and who in their domestic lives lived apart.”⁴⁵ However, there was perhaps more interaction between these two groups than there is between those of North Indian and South Indian origin.

Since the early twentieth century in South Africa however, a conscious decision was made on the part of these two groups to actively distinguish themselves from each other. This is evident in the formation of cultural institutions and organisations based on ethnicity⁴⁶ such as the South African Tamil Federation, the Natal Tamil Vedic Society Trust, etc and their Telegu counterparts. This occurred within the context of the emergence of a new intelligentsia termed the “new elite” who, although asserting their identity as South Africans, were promoting their ethnic identity through associations such as the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) formed in 1908, where meetings were conducted in Tamil⁴⁷. This is also the period in which requests were made for priests from Sri Lanka to officiate at the numerous temples which were now being built in concrete and brick by temple builders trained in India. It was perhaps the grouping together of all South African Indians into one racial category regardless of the ethnic and linguistic differences within the category “Indian” that led to attempts to assert their respective ethnic identities. By 1960 and the centennial anniversary of the Indian arrival in South Africa, the Tamils and Telegus had successfully portrayed their distinctiveness to the rest of South Africa.⁴⁸ This is not to say that no interaction occurred between these groups – intermarriage was and continues to be a common practice. In addition, on the board of the Umgeni Road Temple, although Tamil workers have always been the majority by far, Telegu members have been in evidence as well. Furthermore, the Group

⁴⁴ Bose and Jalal. *Modern South Asia*. P209.

⁴⁵ Nowbath. "The Hindus of South Africa" p18.

⁴⁶ Nowbath "The Hindus of South Africa" p18.

⁴⁷ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. (Johannesburg : Ravan Press, 1985) p192.

Areas Act which confined Indians to common areas regardless of ethnicity, meant that interaction between all Indian ethnic groups could hardly be avoided.

In the interview I conducted with temple devotees there was, in some instances, an assertion of ethnic identity even as interaction between different ethnic groups occurred: “I actually grew up in this home until the age of 21 when I married and went out into another Hindu home – that was a Tamil home, I came from a Telegu home and went into a Tamil home...”⁴⁹ In South Africa these ethnic divisions – although fairly fluid in terms of intermarriage, etc – appear to take on an almost racial cast as well: “There is a very subtle thing between Tamils and Telegus because some Telegus are often lighter-complexioned than Tamils and these Telegus actually call Tamils ‘black’”.⁵⁰ This appears to be due to an internalisation of the racial values perpetuated by the history of racial oppression in South Africa and the corresponding feeling of inferiority on the part of the oppressed due to not being the same skin colour of their oppressors. Distinctions are made based on the gradations of skin colour with a fair complexion being seen as superior due to it being closer to the skin colour of White South Africans.

Despite the devotees of the Umgeni Road Temple being drawn from the various ethno-linguistic backgrounds, the overall form of worship at the temple remains strongly Tamil for several reasons. For instance, the largest festival held at the temple is the *Kavady* festival which is Tamil in origin – although large numbers of Telegus do participate.⁵¹ In addition the temple issues a Tamil calendar every year which can be distinguished from a Telegu calendar as the former is based upon a lunar reckoning whereas the latter is based upon the solar calculation. The calendar contains information about Tamil festivals and religious events as well as annual events in which all Hindus participate. The temple’s role in the formation of a Tamil ethnic identity is emphasised by the establishment of a Tamil school to teach the Tamil language on the temple premises. A common language is particularly important in determining a sense of identity based on ethnicity, however

⁴⁸ Nowbath. "The Hindus of South Africa". p18.

⁴⁹ Interview conducted with Mrs Jackie Katharayan by S. Chetty. October 23, 1999. P1.

⁵⁰ Interview with P. Reddy. P2. The issue of skin colour is a prevalent one in all countries that have experienced the full impact of colonialism and imperialism.

the situation is different in South Africa where the larger portion of South African Indians speak English as a first language. However, learning to speak Tamil and engaging in specifically Tamil practices is particularly important in the formation of a sense of Tamilness across geographical boundaries – an issue which I will now go on to discuss.

The Umgeni Road temple's utilisation of Sri Lankan priests in carrying out its religious practices is an indication of a sense of a global Tamil identity which has been reinforced by the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In an interview I conducted with Sarres Padayachee (a former temple committee member), although she remained ambivalent about both the growing numbers of Sri Lankan priests and their religious competence, she places their arrival within the context of the unrest in Sri Lanka: "You do know we've had what is referred to as the genocide and it's still going on at the moment in Sri Lanka..."⁵² Her use of the word "genocide" is not neutral but indicates a particular stance and a sense of empathy with the Tamils in Sri Lanka. From my informal conversations with people, this belief was not unique. South African Indians drawn from the Tamil linguistic group feel a sense of identification with the Tamils in Sri Lanka – this is not based on sharing the same language but on a feeling of "Tamilness" which transcends geographical boundaries. This is evident in the support by Tamils all over the world for the Tamil Tigers and their demonstrations against the oppression of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The situation in Sri Lanka has been related to oppression in South Africa as well, thus linking Tamil ethnic identity with a South African identity: "...in our most recent history indigenous people were relegated to the barren homelands and stripped of their citizenship in their motherland. This is the tragedy shared by the Tamil counterparts in Sri Lanka. If fellow South Africans search their souls, they will know...they cannot support this fascist regime."⁵³ The conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka over the former's desire for an independent state has foregrounded the issue of Tamilness which is further emphasised by the exodus of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who have formed communities all over the world:

"...they have actually looked for a haven in other places and you'd find that the Sri

⁵¹ Nowbath "The Hindus of South Africa" p20.

⁵² Interview with S. Padayachee. P8.

⁵³ Rajesh Moodley. *Sunday Times Extra*. September 13, 1998, KwaZulu-Natal : Durban.

Lankan communities are concentrated throughout the world – when I travelled to Paris Three years ago – I did some research at a temple in Paris – I found that here was a large Concentration of Sri Lankan people.”⁵⁴

The use of Sri Lankan priests in Tamil temples – which has occurred all over South Africa, the establishment of a Tamil school and the holding of largely Tamil festivals suggest an identity based on the notion of being Tamil which is located within a larger global framework. Despite this, the resident priest at the Umgeni Road temple calls for an attempt to overcome ethnic distinctions within South Africa’s Indian community in the common interests of Hinduism and “Indian culture”: “So we must forget the differences – this man Telegu, this man Tamil, this man Gujerathi, this man Hindi...We must get together – we must try to educate the people. We must try and teach the people. We must...educate all in Hinduism.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

I would like to adapt Edward Said’s conception of space as giving individuals a sense of identity:

“...space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here.”⁵⁶

Although here Said is writing of the notion of a territorially bounded space as providing a sense of identity whereby it sets up a distinction between “us” and “them” – those who lie outside the borders,⁵⁷ this notion can be adapted to the context of the diaspora where India becomes the space in the consciousness of the Indian diaspora according to which they formulate a sense of identity. It is evident in my discussion of the Indian diaspora in Durban, particularly in relation to the Umgeni Road Temple, that India is seen as the source from which an Indian identity is derived. It provides the blueprint for Hindu religious practice as can be seen in the temple’s construction using builders trained in India and the use of Sri Lankan priests to lend an air of “authenticity” to religious practices – the latter suggesting that Hindu practices remain constant over time and space, when this is clearly not the case.

⁵⁴ Interview with S. Padayachee. P8.

⁵⁵ Interview with M. Iyer.

⁵⁶ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York : Vintage, 1978) p54.

⁵⁷ Said. *Orientalism*. P53-54.

A key reason for which the Indian diaspora in South Africa derive their sense of identity from India is this country's Apartheid past where races were segregated and isolated, hence making it impossible to develop a sense of shared nationhood. This was built upon the earlier alienation felt by the Indian indentured labourers whose arrival in a strange land after being uprooted from their familiar settings and kinship networks, compounded by their harsh living and working conditions, led to the development of feelings of nostalgia for a happier past – which was not necessarily based on fact but which exerted a strong hold nevertheless. However, the idea of the diaspora as a displaced group belonging neither to their adopted home nor to their place of origin, is not just a South African phenomenon – it is a condition of the diaspora as a whole and the questions posed by Salman Rushdie are ones which most individuals who make up a diaspora have to consider even if their responses may vary:

“What does it mean to be ‘Indian’ outside India? How can culture be preserved without being ossified?... What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us?...How are we to live in the world?”⁵⁸

Finally, it would be a great simplification to assume that Hindu religious practice in India could be simply transported to South Africa and that the Indian diaspora here was a tabula rasa on which this form of Hinduism could simply be inscribed. If one considers the construction of Hindu temples in South Africa, local social, economic and political conditions prevented modelling these temples as an exact replica of those in India. Furthermore, South African Indians while, to an extent, looking to India as a source of authority for religious practice and developing a form of ethnic identity which crosses all geographical boundaries, still appear to have a sense of being South African i.e. having a unique history different from any other population of Indian origin. This is reflected in the growing ambivalence over the issue of the Sri Lankan priests in terms of a questioning of their authority. In addition, Hindu practices and beliefs have been

⁵⁸ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands - Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. (London : Granta Books, 1992) p17-18.

modified in the South African context, often for more pragmatic purposes – an issue which I will discuss in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO – OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL GENDERED SPACES

Introduction

Before I set out the line of argument I will be making in this chapter I would like to begin by giving a broad overview of Hindu religious practice in general as I discuss certain practices in the chapter with which the reader may be unfamiliar.

Hindu worship may occur on three fronts – the first and most formal being the temple. There is a clear distinction between North and South Indian temples in terms of architecture, etc. however temple worship is a largely South Indian phenomenon. Temple worship is largely left to the individual and may occur more or less frequently depending on this – ranging from once a month to once a year. It involves the taking of offerings such as fruit and milk to the temple, with which one walks around the temple three times lighting camphor at specific points before one enters. Once inside, the devotee prays at statues of certain gods before handing over the offerings to the priest and receiving a blessing (usually in the form of ashes placed on the forehead) in return.

People may go to the temple to engage in specific prayers depending on their needs. In addition, important festivals on the Tamil calendar (I speak here of the Umgeni Road Temple) are held at the temple on an annual basis – the most important being *Kavady* where devotees may take a vow to carry the *Kavady* - which is a modern type of frame festooned with garlands – at the *Kavady* festival for a number of years in order to be cured of sicknesses, etc. Some devotees may undergo trances during this period and are able to pierce their bodies with needles etc., appearing to feel no pain and with no evidence of bleeding.

Another ceremony which some temples may engage in is that of firewalking dedicated to Hindu goddesses such as Marieamman and the Mother Draupadi. After fasting for eighteen days beforehand, devotees who undergo a trance, “are ready to be pierced with large silver hooks, some with coconuts, lime and brass containers, into the backs and arms of firewalkers. Sharp needles pierce the tongues and cheeks of these devotees who

do not bleed and are immune to pain.⁵⁹ Devotees then walk – or run – across a fire-pit filled with hot coals.

The practice of Hinduism in the home is a more informal affair which occurs on a more frequent basis – ranging from daily to weekly worship. Here an area of the home is set aside as a type of shrine which may contain statues and pictures of the Hindu pantheon. It is here that the lamp is kept which is usually made of brass and has an intricate carving of the Hindu goddess Luxmi on it. The lamp is filled with oil and a wick is placed in it which is lit. Lit camphor is turned three times before the lamp and the individual's prayers are made in front of it. The lamp is viewed as the essence of Hinduism in the home as it symbolic of God's presence.

The final form of Hinduism falls outside the official forms of Hinduism and is referred to as “backyard” temples – conservative elements relegate it to the realm of witchcraft and “black magic” not considering it Hinduism at all. Little is available on the practices here other than that they are used to help people deal with pragmatic aspects such as achieving certain goals in the workplace or protecting oneself against others, etc. In addition, another feature falling into this category is the notion of “miracles” where perceived miracles occur in people's homes, making them sites of pilgrimage.

In this chapter I discuss these spaces in terms of their relation to Indian women. The temple appears to be a largely male sphere in terms of its use of male priests and the predominance of male members on the board. Women are largely confined to the domestic sphere and are largely responsible for worship in the home. This serves to maintain the distinction between the public and private spheres which are gendered spaces.

Religion does provide however, for the empowerment of women which may lead to a challenge of patriarchy. This is evident in the worship of Hindu goddesses such as Kali and Marieamman which creates a sphere where women – despite poor economic

⁵⁹ *Our Glorious Heritage*. P67.

backgrounds and lack of education – may feel empowered to challenge patriarchal authority. To demonstrate this I draw upon Alleyn Diesel’s caste study of Pat Pillay. The increasing education of Indian women plays a similar role in their empowerment, allowing them to challenge the patriarchal nature of Hinduism.

This chapter therefore attempts to analyse the way in which specific religious spaces – both official and unofficial – impact upon the identity of Hindu women in South Africa.

The Historical Perception of South African Indian Women

“In India alone the sight of feminine modesty and reserve soothes the eye.”⁶⁰

This section of Chapter Two is an extension of an earlier essay I have written entitled “Perceptions of South African Indian Women in Natal.” Here, I wish to link the perception of Indian women to the global themes of colonialism, race and patriarchy. My concern is largely with those women of indentured origin as their experiences derive from their social status as being both indentured and working class. In addition they are largely of South Indian background and of Tamil origin.⁶¹ By making issues such as class and ethnicity explicit from the outset I am largely influenced by Higginbotham’s criticism aimed at Black nationalist writers where she puts forward the argument that viewing women as a unity solely based on race and gender ignores other criteria such as social class, which may provide as important a role in shaping the experiences and consciousness of women:

“At the threshold of the twenty-first century, black women scholars continue to emphasise the inseparable unity of race and gender in their thought. They dismiss efforts to bifurcate the identity of black women (and indeed of all women) into discrete categories – as if culture, consciousness and lived experience could at time constitute ‘woman’ isolated from the contexts of race, class and sexuality that give form and content to the particular women we are.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Swami Ranganathananda. "Hindu women" in *Aum Sathya*. Hindu Students Association Executive - University of Natal, Durban, eds., (Durban : Art Printers, 1994) p12/

⁶¹ Alleyn Diesel and Patrick Maxwell. *Hinduism in Natal - A Brief Guide*. (Pietermaritzburg : University of Natal Press, 1993) p6. At present tamils form approximately 45% of South Africa's Hindu population.

⁶² E. Higginbotham. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" in *Feminism and History*. Joan W. Scott, ed. (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996) p201.

As my dissertation is largely concentrated with South African Indians of Tamil origin, I do not know how these arguments may be generalised to South African Indian society as a whole as clear differences separate Indians depending on their origin from North or South India. I am thus making explicit the group of South African Indian women that I am considering in this chapter so as not to give the impression of a false unity of Indian women based solely on race and gender.

I would like to first consider the historical background of Indian women in Natal in terms of the economic, social and political conditions which impacted upon the experiences of indentured women. Perhaps the most pervasive theme here is the oppression experienced by these women in terms of race and gender. The exploitative conditions which male indentured labourers experienced in terms of poor living conditions, harsh working conditions and lack of adequate food rations, was exacerbated in the case of female indentured labourers. This stemmed partly from the reluctance on the part of both planters and the colonial authorities to allow entry to Indian women in Natal in the first place as their presence implied that the residence of Indians in Natal would be permanent. In theory married women were not expected to work but were nevertheless entitled to food rations, accommodation and medical care. Those women who did work were to receive half the food rations that men did. No provision was made for single Indian women or those women who had been married according to Indian custom as this – although applying to the greater majority of Indian women – was not recognised by the Natal colonial authorities. Furthermore, a great discrepancy was evident between theory and practice as all Indian women – regardless of marital status – had to work in order to receive food rations and accommodation.⁶³ In this scenario it is clear that the work of these women was not accorded the same status as that of men despite it being of a similar nature. The perception of work as liberating for women therefore appears to be a largely middle-class Western feminist construct. A similar argument is made by Bell Hooks in her compelling book *Ain't I A Woman?* where a clear distinction is drawn between middle-class women who may view work as liberating due to it granting them some

⁶³ Jo Beall. "Women Under Indenture in Natal" in *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*. S. Bhana, ed (Leeds : Peepal Tree Press, 1990) p108.

measure of independence, and working class and Black women who are usually compelled to work due to economic necessity. In addition, the notion of women working in the nineteenth century was a departure from the Victorian bourgeois ideal of the woman being confined to the domestic sphere, hence demeaning the status of those women who had to work outside the home and entrenching the view of them as being inferior when compared to the ideal Victorian White middle-class women.⁶⁴

Despite the difficulty of working on the plantations, domestic service brought with it additional forms of exploitation such as physical and sexual abuse: “About ten days ago whilst in my master’s bedroom regulating it, he came in, shaking his pocket and saying that he would give me three pounds if I were to lie with him...I refused saying that my husband would beat me.” Charges of sexual harassment were usually resolved in favour of the perpetrator who was believed to have been incapable of controlling himself due to the promiscuity of Indian (and African) women.⁶⁵ The stereotypical view of the promiscuity of Indian women is very much in evidence in Daphne Rooke’s novel *Ratoons* which is an important text despite its fictional nature as it reveals the attitudes evident towards Indian women in this period on the part of both the author and the protagonist / narrator. This promiscuity is evident in the character of Leela’s daughter who, at the age of thirteen, is described as having an expression of “shadowed sexuality”.⁶⁶ Chanjaldi’s promiscuity is an ongoing theme in the novel: “Chanjaldi had many lovers, this was well known...”⁶⁷ It culminates in her having an affair with the protagonist, Helen’s son and her subsequent deception that she was pregnant.⁶⁸ Both the promiscuity and the deception are seen as essential features of Indian women – Chanjaldi was herself the child of an affair between Leela and another man – and are attributed to their inherent characters. The sexuality of “the Other” is an important theme in the context of race and colonialism. In Bell Hooks’ discussion of African-American women in the United States, the high incidents of rape experienced by these women, particularly during the era of slavery, led to a stereotyping of Black women as the seductive

⁶⁴ Bell Hooks. *Ain't I A Woman?* (Boston : South End Press, 1981) p146.

⁶⁵ Beall. "Women Under Indenture in Natal" p106.

⁶⁶ Daphne Rooke. *Ratoons*. (South Africa : Chameleon Press, 1990) p113.

⁶⁷ Rooke. *Ratoons*. 126.

temptresses of White men.⁶⁹ Similarly in the colonial experience, indigenous women – who were usually women of colour – served as the projected fantasies of White colonial men due to the repressive nature of nineteenth century Victorian England:

“The tropics provided a site of European pornographic fantasies long before conquest was underway with lurid descriptions of sexual license, promiscuity, gynecological aberrations and general perversion marking the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan consumption...If Asian [and other colonised] women are centrefold to the European voyeur, European women often appear in male colonial writings only as a reverse image...”⁷⁰

The conditions under which Indian women existed in Natal were further exacerbated by the low ratio of indentured Indian women to men. Not only did this increase the domestic labour performed by women in addition to their waged labour as they often had to perform domestic duties for a number of men, it led to a breakdown of both family life and relationships. Women were expected to inhabit the same crowded quarters as that of men and often experienced sexual harrassment by supervisors even if they were married. This usually led to conflict in marriages and many incidents occurred where husbands beat or even killed their wives for engaging in relations with supervisors (*sirdars*) or other men, even if it may have been beyond her control. The poor economic conditions under which Indians found themselves often led to husbands being complicit in this situation where they would “sell” their wives to other men. Any attempts at a conventional life were further compromised when husbands and wives were employed on different estates and women’s low rations and wages may have led to them becoming dependent on other men. The inevitable increase in sexually transmitted diseases which came about as a result of these interactions was attributed to the promiscuity of Indian women.⁷¹

However, despite these negative perceptions of Indian women arising within the framework of race and colonialism, there exists a profound ambiguity. Alongside the

⁶⁸ Rooke. *Ratoons*. P203.

⁶⁹ Hooks. *Ain't I A Woman?* P84.

⁷⁰ Ann Stoler. "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power" in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Post-modern Era*. Micaela di Leonardo, ed. (Berkeley : California University Press, 1991) p53-54.

⁷¹ Beall. "Women Under Indenture In Natal" p108-110.

view of Indian women as being promiscuous and hence not adhering to the conventional European notions of womanhood, is the view of Indian women as the moral and religious bearers of Indian culture and religion. This ambiguous view of Indian women can be applied to women as a whole. If one considers the Western Christian tradition, a similar feature is evident in terms of the dichotomous opposition between the Virgin Mary and the seductive Eve whose tempting of Adam led to the fall of mankind. The social role of women has been seen as a function of their physiology and reproductive processes, making them responsible not only for the bearing of children but the instilling in them of the moral and religious values of society.⁷²

The view of women as moral has additional ambiguous repercussions – while it is relatively better than viewing women as being promiscuous, it confines women to the domestic sphere, relegating them to nurturing roles, thus further entrenching their inequality.

Indian society in South Africa appears to adhere closely to this view of Indian women – a view which is reflected in Hinduism:

“Sita⁷³ is the name in India for everything that is good, pure and holy; everything that in woman we call womanly...Every attempt to modernise our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day. The women of India must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita, and that is the only way.”⁷⁴

The patriarchal nature of Indian society holds to the ideal of confining women to the domestic sphere. This relates to Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of the way in which patriarchal authority was reconstructed in the context of Indian nationalism. This led to a distinction between the material and spiritual realm where the former is external to the individual and subject to Western encroachment and domination. The spiritual realm is perceived to be the arena where the east is inherently superior to the West and remains impervious to Western influence, hence providing a site of resistance to colonial

⁷² Ornella Moscucci. *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1990) p36.

⁷³ *Sita* refers to a Hindu goddess - the consort of Rama - renowned for her qualities of purity and virtue. After her abduction and subsequent rescue by her husband, she underwent a trial by fire and her emergence unscathed was a demonstration of her virtue.

⁷⁴ Swami Ranganathananda. "Hindu Women" p12

domination: "...the nationalists asserted it [the West] had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture."

⁷⁵ It is within this context that Indian women were relegated to the private sphere in order to maintain spirituality: "The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality."⁷⁶ It is here that this new form of patriarchal authority has relegated women to the home – a situation which has also been evident in South Africa. Within the context of religion women are expected to carry out certain aspects of religious practice relating to their role as the mother of the home – a situation which I will now discuss.

The Home

*"Now the ideal woman, in India, is the mother, the mother first, and the mother last. The word mother calls up to the mind of Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother."*⁷⁷

Although many features of Hindu worship are conducted at temples, a number of rituals are conducted in the home – often on a daily basis. It is often the latter in which women play key roles:

“...if we look at the religious practices at home it is totally different to what happens at the temple in the sense that we could actually look at, for instance, the daily ritual – what I would refer to as a ritual – and here, of course, the mother of the home would get up – you normally have your bath in the morning, light the lamp,⁷⁸ do your prayer and carry on with your normal sort of work.”⁷⁹

The ideal role of the Hindu mother and housewife has been modelled on Hindu Goddesses such as Parvati and Sita and, according to Alleyn Diesel, the aim of this has been to maintain patriarchal authority by extolling the virtues of the submissive and obedient wife: “Traditionally, it has understandably, been more unusual for Hindu society

⁷⁵ Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and its Fragments - Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1993) p121.

⁷⁶ Chatterjee. *The Nation and its Fragments*. P126.

⁷⁷ Swami Ranganathananda. "Hindu Women" p12.

⁷⁸ *Aum Sathya*. P19 - "The Holy Lamp is the symbol of God in the form of light. In Tamil 'Jothi' means light and God is often referred to as 'Arut Perum Jothi' meaning Great Compassionate Light." The lamp is usually maintained by the woman of the house and may be lit everyday and on auspicious religious occasions. It is passed from the mother to her daughter upon marriage when she goes to her new home.

⁷⁹ Interview with S. Padayachee. P1.

to regard married / consort Goddesses like Sita, the faithful wife of Rama, as role models for obedient, submissive wives and mothers.”⁸⁰

The education of Indian women provided the opportunity for criticism of patriarchal institutions but the early history of the education of Indian women does not suggest this. The first secondary school for Indian girls in Durban was the Durban Indian Girls' School which was established in 1930⁸¹. Initially there was tremendous opposition on the part of Indian parents towards their daughters attending school – part of this being due to the early schools being established by missionaries hence leading to the fear of attempts at conversion. In addition conservative Indians feared the “contaminating” influences of Western education: “With a standard three education - a daughter can read newspaper to mother – and write letter to married sister – but more education will write love letters.”⁸² Thus the initial attendance figures for Girls' High were extremely low (only 35) and a concentrated attempt was made to recruit Indian girls for the school.⁸³

Despite these early obstacles there was an increase in the number of Indian women receiving an education – however this was still linked to their traditional roles in the domestic sphere as is evident in a discussion of the education of Indian women in the 1960s: “Her increase knowledge and awareness of the developing world around her profits both her husband and her children. She is able to understand and solve their problems more easily than it she had no idea of the world outside her home.”⁸⁴ In this way the education of the Indian woman is a means of enhancing her duties as wife and mother. An education in this context is not seen as a means of independence or an alternative to marriage but as a means of overcoming adversity should the ideal role of

⁸⁰ Alleyn Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess as an Empowering Symbol for both Hindu and Contemporary Feminist Women with Special Reference to the worship of the Hindu Amman Goddesses in KwaZulu-Natal*. PhD Thesis, 1998. P235.

⁸¹ George Singh. *The History of Indian Education : 1860-1995*.

⁸² Pietermaritzburg Indian Girls' Secondary. *50th Anniversary Brochure (1935-1985)* 1985. P15.

⁸³ Singh. *The History of Indian Education*.

⁸⁴ K. Pather. "Academic Achievements of Indian Women" in *The 1860 Settler*. (Durban : Cavalier Publishers, 1964) p49.

wife and mother not be fully realised: “With an education, the wife should be able to fend for herself and children if widowed or to assist her husband in times of need.”⁸⁵

By 1973, the Indian Education Act which made schooling compulsory, led to a tremendous increase in the number of girls receiving an education: “Consequently, literacy among the Indian community improved and the attendance of girls, which for so long was a problem, improved greatly.”⁸⁶ Education thus came to have greater significance for Indian women – which is becoming particularly apparent in this decade.

In the present, as growing numbers of Indian women are receiving secondary and even tertiary education, tending to be more career-orientated, tensions are evident as their growing role in the public sphere may conflict with that in the private sphere:

“In general, the wife today is less subservient to her husband. The traditional separation of the sexes has also disappeared, so that members of the family associate more readily as an intimate unit...[However, in] modern and complex and urban families...the responsibilities for family peace-keeper and overall organiser, certainly in Hindu homes, fall mainly on the mother. To add to her difficulties, the mother in the nuclear family has to be more self-reliant and perform her tasks without the helpful advice and guidance of other, perhaps more experienced, female members normally found in a joint family.”⁸⁷

This brings in an additional change undergone in the traditional family structure – Indian families in the past were extended units with the young wife often living with her husband’s family. The transition to a nuclear family system similar to the Western model leads, to an extent, to a shift away from older religious practices carried out by women in the home as there are no older women to guide the young wives in religious practice:

“...there has been changes in the sense that, initially we had the basic family unit system and today you find the Hindu family is more concentrated on the so-called nuclear system and the housewives of today would not follow the religious practices as possibly my generation or my mum’s generation would have followed...with the nuclear system you find that the nuclear wife is more veered to the Western way.”¹²⁴

In an interview I conducted with Mrs Sarres Padayachee, a staunch Hindu who is currently completing her PhD dissertation on a topic related to Hinduism, I found tension

⁸⁵ Pather. "Academic Achievements of Indian Women" p53.

⁸⁶ Singh. *The History of Indian Education*.

⁸⁷ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P10.

¹²⁴ Interview with Mrs S. Padayachee conducted by S. Chetty, October 4, 1999. P2.

in terms of her attempt to reconcile her education with her traditional role as a Hindu wife. She initially stated that a Hindu woman's first duty was as wife, mother and propagator of Hinduism:

“I think she [the modern South African Indian woman] should be the ideal Hindu housewife first and thereafter look at her outer activities. In this context I want to mention that it is so important that she retains her cultural identity, she carries out her norms at home, teaches her children everything about culture, religion, etc., unlike today's sort of women.”¹²⁵

However, she is simultaneously challenging aspects of the patriarchal system such as the prohibition of Indian women from engaging in any form of religious rituals whilst menstruating:

“...I think it's time that we as women should actually stand up for our rights and we need to educate the other sex...they feel that a woman could be very unclean during that period of time etc., there again, this is debatable because if you take the mind – how clean or how unclean is the mind?”¹²⁶

Her use of the word “educated” as qualifying women who can challenge the patriarchal system suggests her belief in education as also playing a liberating role.

The notion of women during menstruation as being considered “unclean” to engage in ritual religious practice is, according to Diesel, a hegemonic feature of patriarchal societies: “It should also be noted that patriarchal world views tend to view the female body with its effluents of blood and birth waters as being more closely linked to the dangerous flux of finitude than the male body.”¹²⁷ This is an issue that Indian women are beginning to challenge, regardless of the degree of their education: “Women are restricted from participating in any prayer ritual during menstruation as this is regarded as unclean when in actual fact it is a natural part of life.”¹²⁸ Whereas women are asserting the naturalness of this function, viewing the prohibition on their participation in religious activities as a punishment for a natural physiological function, conservative men assert the opposite. In an informal discussion with a Hindu priest I was informed that if a woman did not conduct her household chores adequately, she would be punished by God, hence menstruating when prayers were conducted which would prevent her participation.

¹²⁵ Interview with Mrs S. Padayachee. P1.

¹²⁶ Interview with Mrs S. Padayachee. P3.

¹²⁷ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P16.

¹²⁸ Interview with Miss Premakumarie Reddy conducted by S. Chetty, October 26, 1999. P1.

In addition, with the increasing influx of Hindu women working in the public sphere they are questioning the conventional division of labour in the private sphere, particularly their sole responsibility for domestic duties and religious practice in the home:

“...why should women only wash the lamp and not men? Women are expected to behave in a very respectable manner because they are regarded as the Luxmi¹²⁹ of the house. And I have personally heard from the older generation criticism that if a lady does not keep her house clean and wash the lamp then there is no Luxmi in the house and that is what causes the bad luck. The lady is blamed for this. When there is a prayer you find the women preparing while the men sit around in groups discussing politics and business, etc. – why can't they also participate? – after all they are Hindus as well.¹³⁰

Mrs Padayachee makes a similar argument for the tertiary-educated women: “...now I find that if one looks at the academic woman, she seems to be wanting to get her husband equally involved in the prayer as well. I've known of cases where they've actually brought the men in even to assist them when they prepare for the various ingredients to offer for prayers...”¹³¹

It seems therefore that the private sphere is in a state of transition where conventional gender roles in the conservative Hindu patriarchal framework are being questioned and challenged. However transition has not been confined to the domestic sphere – a similar process is evident in temple worship.

The Temple

“Perhaps initiated through one man's religious inspiration – then encouragement from wife, children and brothers, the completed Temple would stand as a constant symbol of faith and aspiration of the Hindu community. A place of prayer and worship for celebration and family, festivity, priests and Gods. A place of liberation from everyday toil – for the resuscitation of the spirit.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Luxmi is a Hindu Goddess who is seen as being responsible for prosperity and good fortune.

¹³⁰ Interview with Miss P. Reddy. P1.

¹³¹ Interview with Mrs S. Padayachee. P5.

¹³² *Stree Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam – Stree Vedas Trust Launch Souvenir Brochure*. A.N. Naidoo, ed. (Durban : Rapid Graphic, 1989) p10.

The temple can be viewed as the most official form of Hindu worship – it is here that key festivals are held and given official sanction by Hindu priests. Mrs Padayachee drew a clear distinction between worship at home and that at the temple, clearly advocating the latter:

“I don’t think you could actually compare the homefront from the temple form of worship because the temple is really a place where we go for a particular prayer, etc, and the difference is that because the deities have been installed and life has been given to the deities, we wouldn’t get the same situation at home – although this is debatable – many people feel they could light their lamp at home and they feel that the prayer is as good as the temple – I would beg to differ with a person with views like that really.”¹³³

The temple is thus given superior status to worship in the home – to an extent this corresponds to gendered spaces as, whereas women play the leading role in religious worship in the home, the priests at temples are predominantly male.

Hinduism does allow for women to be trained as priests. However female priests are usually allocated to female deities, particularly Marieamman – priestesses are not permitted in temples reflecting the male Hindu deities: “...on the Mount Edgecombe Hindu temple complex...the Marieamman Temple only had priestesses and they would not allow male priests to actually perform the daily rituals...but the males would find it difficult for a priestess to actually go to a temple where there were deities which reflect the male aspect..”¹³⁴ At present however there is a decrease in the number of female priestesses – one of the reasons for this is the conservative nature of the some temples who are reluctant to use priestesses: “...if we look at the context you find that Hinduism did not restrictively say that it had to be males but because of the so-called dominating patriarchal philosophy thinking, this has been handed down from generation to generation...if you take the average Hindu temple, for instance, Umgeni Road Temple, if you talk about a woman priest it will be far-fetched.”¹³⁵ In addition to the conservative attitudes of the temples, the influx of Sri Lankan priest into South African Hindu temples – which I have discussed in the preceding chapter – has led to less local male priests in temples, hence leaving little opportunity for female priests. Women are, however, still trained as priests in the neo-Hinduistic movements which have arisen this century such as

¹³³ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P1.

¹³⁴ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P4.

¹³⁵ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P4.

the Ramakrishna movement and the Arya Samaj – where prevailing attitudes are not as conservative.¹³⁶

In terms of actual worship at the temple, women are confined to roles which are usually seen as an extension of their domestic duties: “...I’ve always felt the patriarchal system dominated very strongly and is still very dominant...You take a simple situation like the Umgeni Road Temple – you find that at the Umgeni Road Temple the women are there to make the garlands, to cut the vegetables for food, etc.”¹³⁷ In addition women are not allowed into the sanctum sanctorum of the temple or to carry out rituals such as the bathing of the deities.¹³⁸ These prohibitions are largely due to the perception of women as being “unclean” during menstruation – an issue that I have discussed earlier.

On the organisational level women are permitted on temple boards although they are a minority and, according to Mrs Padayachee, a former temple committee member, they are not considered to be on an equal footing with men:

“The woman is capable – she is absolutely capable of being a chairperson but because you’re a woman, you not good enough to be chairperson...there’s only maybe one or two women sitting on the committee and the rest of them are male...even when it comes to decisions...if you contribute towards something you could be way above them but, because you’re a woman and the patriarchal system’s so...”¹³⁹

However, it is unclear as to what extent the features of the Umgeni Road Temple Committee can be generalised to other temples. What is apparent is that the temple in terms of its organisation structure, employment of priests and certain rituals is a male sphere which is in opposition to the home. Their conservative nature allows women to only engage in roles which could be seen as an extension of their conventional duties in the patriarchal family system. The decrease in the number of female priests enhances this conservative aspect.

However, women like Mrs Padayachee, are evidence that women are not simply trapped within this system. Her criticism of the patriarchal nature of Hindu temples leaves open

¹³⁶ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P4.

¹³⁷ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P2.

¹³⁸ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P2.

¹³⁹ Interview with Mrs S Padayachee. P3.

the possibility for challenging and hence changing the system as criticism demonstrates an awareness of inequality and a need for reform. In addition, although certain aspects of religious worship – particularly trances which may occur either in homes or temples – provide a subversive potential and a means by which women may effect a form of liberation. This theme will form the core of the following section.

Religious Possibilities for the Empowerment of Hindu Women

“I think the men are threatened by us, because we are closer to the Mother than men; they’re frightened of our power. They want to have more power than the woman, so they won’t treat us as equals.”¹⁴⁰

To view women as the passive recipients of patriarchal oppression in both the home and the temple is to deny the existence of their active agency and to prevent the possibility of women challenging the system and attempting to bring about their own liberation. If one considers the Mother Goddesses for instance, Sita – as I have mentioned earlier – can be used to entrench patriarchal authority by advocating the ideal Hindu woman as subservient and obedient to male authority. However this is in contrast to the “dark” Goddesses: “While the light Goddesses represent the life-giving, nurturing forces of nature, the fierce Goddesses largely represent the dark sides of life, such as decay, disease, famine and death. There is therefore a need to propitiate these deities.”¹⁴¹ These Goddesses provide alternate role models for women and, as Diesel suggests, a possible means of challenging patriarchal authority:

“The characteristics of various Goddesses help to extend, and finally negate, the stereotypical definitions of femaleness: instead of weakness, coyness, submissiveness, deference, prettiness, etc, the Goddess encourages women to display strength, courage, assertiveness...many of the great Goddesses were not merely mothers, but also givers of the arts, writing and wisdom¹⁴²...many of the great Goddesses were completely independent of men, often called ‘virgin’, their own persons, not in any way defined by their relationships with men,¹⁴³ [e.g. mother, sister, wife, etc].

¹⁴⁰ Alleyn Diesel. “The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother: A South African Hindu Woman Worshipping the Goddess” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. (Vol 13, No1, 1998) p81.

¹⁴¹ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P13.

¹⁴² The Hindu Goddess Saraswati, for instance, is seen as the goddess of wisdom and music.

¹⁴³ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P43.

The darker Goddesses – those who are not solely defined by being the consorts / wives of the male deities – are worshipped independently and women play a large role in this form of worship. As I have mentioned earlier, female priestesses are usually linked to nature and blood sacrifice: “...the Great Goddess everywhere demands sacrifices...Because the decisive moments of life of the female – menstruation, deflowering, conception and childbearing – are intimately bound up with a sacrifice of blood, the goddess perpetuates life by exacting bloody sacrifices that will assure the fertility of game, women, and fields, the rising of the sun, and success in warfare.”¹⁴⁴ Here the notion of blood, particularly as it relates to women’s physiological functions, is given positive connotations in terms of its life-giving properties. This is in contrast to the conventional view of women as “unclean” – which I have discussed earlier: “Women have been taught to regard their bodies as impure, polluted and a hindrance to their spiritual progress...the Goddess presents women with the ‘explicit veneration of female sexuality and its creative potential’, an appreciation of the ‘awesomeness of female sexuality’,”¹⁴⁵ hence challenging conventional negative patriarchal stereotypes.

Temples are built in order to worship these goddesses and one of the most dramatic forms of worship is the firewalking ceremony and, in particular, trances. Trances can be perceived as an alternate form of consciousness. Here individuals are believed to be possessed by certain deities taking on some of their characteristics. For instance, if a man is believed to be possessed by Hanuman,¹⁴⁶ his cheeks puff out and, in some cases, he is even able to climb the *Jhanda* (a bamboo pole on which a flag has been raised) as nimbly as a monkey.¹⁴⁷ Individuals undergoing trances are often unable to speak but communicate using gestures. They are revered by devotees as it is believed that they are actually possessed by the deity and are thus sought out for their blessings. Prior to the firewalking ceremony, individuals prepare by fasting beforehand – those who are in a trance are able to walk across live coals without appearing to burn their feet. In addition,

¹⁴⁴ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P68.

¹⁴⁵ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P44.

¹⁴⁶ Hanuman is a male Hindu deity with the face of a monkey.

¹⁴⁷ The concept of *Jhanda* is an interesting one as it is of Hindi i.e. North Indian origin and at these prayers there is usually a Hindi priest officiating yet for South African Indians of Tamil and Telegu ethnicity it is

during festivals such as the Kavady festival – which is the largest festival held at the Umgeni Road Temple – “they [those in a trance] do not seem to feel pain when needles are inserted through their tongues and cheeks, and hooks, with garlands attached to them, are pinned through the flesh of their chests and backs.”¹¹² No bleeding is apparent either. Trances also appear to be gendered – men are usually possessed by male deities such as Hanuman whereas women are possessed by female deities such as Marieamman.

The trances experienced by women such as the Kali trance offers a form of liberation as it is an opportunity to subvert the conventional behaviour expected from Hindu women:

“...they [women undergoing a Kali trance] emulate her by behaving in wild and seemingly uncontrolled ways; letting down their hair, dancing, shrieking, drinking blood and apparently torturing their bodies, as well as being commanding and assertive... the wildness and anger of the Goddesses also gives such sanction to women to express something of their own stored-up anger against patriarchal oppression.”¹¹³

For Diesel the trance offers a means by which women, by engaging in behaviour deemed inappropriate, challenge patriarchal norms as well as give expression to what may usually remain repressed:

“...Kali represents all that is powerful and selfassertive, but severely suppressed in the average, obedient and submissive Hindu woman. Woman’s potentially creative, but repressed, and often violated, sexual energy, at times expresses itself in aggressive, violent outbursts which...could challenge and destroy the fear and hypocrisy which patriarchal demands place on them.”¹¹⁴

However, during the trance, women are believed to be possessed by the Mother Goddesses and, as such, their actions are not believed to be their own, hence keeping them within the conventional patriarchal framework. In addition, once the trance is over, the woman returns to her conventional role making any challenge to patriarchy short-lived.

However trances may be more liberating to women in terms of the increased status accorded to women who undergo them. This is demonstrated in Diesel’s case study on an Indian woman, Padmani Pillay (Pat) from Pietermaritzburg, who undergoes a Kali

seen as an authentic form of worship and is an example of the way in which Hindu religious practice is of a fluid nature and the identity of Indians as derived from Hinduism is an extremely complex issue.

¹¹² Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P40.

¹¹³ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P220.

¹¹⁴ Diesel. *The Veneration of the Goddess*. P220.

trance. She is from an economically depressed background with no formal education.¹¹⁵ However, through her periodic possessions by the Mother Goddess Kali, she has acquired some status in her community. This does not arise simply from her being possessed by Kali but due to the healing powers she obtains when this occurs: "To do her healing and counselling work Pat invokes a powerful Kali trance in which she believes she actually becomes Kali, acting and speaking as the Goddess. Her healing work covers a range of ailments...such as curing sterility in women."¹¹⁶ In addition she aids other women who are experiencing oppression in the home:

"...helping women with husband who are unfaithful, drink too much, beat them or abandon them...Husbands who drink too much and cause trouble at home are severely dealt with by the Mother (Pat speaking in a trance) and told they must give up alcohol... wives are helped [due to] being in the presence of the Mother [who] 'gives them marvellous support'."¹¹⁷

Thus a woman from a poverty-stricken background who would ordinarily be one of the worst victims of patriarchy, is given status due to her falling into trances and is also able to help women drawn from similar backgrounds.

Pat Pillay appears have become so empowered by being possessed by Kali that she has even challenged the patriarchal authority of the temple committee of the Hindu temple in Pietermaritzburg over the issue of firewalking. Women have been banned from participating in the firewalking ceremony held at this temple and initially, Pat and her other female friends have had to travel to Durban to participate in the ceremony there.¹¹⁸ Their success at it has increased their sense of self-esteem leading to them questioning the ban on their participation in Pietermaritzburg:

"If other temples can welcome us and allow us to walk, why not here? The committee can't choose who will walk and who can't. Everything is decided between the men and the women are just left out. Women are being stopped from carrying out their calling to worship the Mother. Woman is Draupadi; she is closer to the Mother than men because she has the same body as Mother. Women can pin, get the trance, bless, join in the procession, but when the time comes to walk, they are told, 'You are dirt'. And this is a woman's festival!"¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p77.

¹¹⁶ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p78

¹¹⁷ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p78-79.

¹¹⁸ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p80.

¹¹⁹ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p81.

She is thus advocating that women be allowed to participate based on their gender – which is the same reason cited by the temple committee for prohibiting their participation. In challenging the patriarchal authority of the temple committee, Pat made her views clear in a newspaper interview and drew up a petition. However no change was apparent at the time of Diesel’s writing.¹²⁰ The incident does demonstrate however that trances may give women a sense of empowerment, leading to the possibility of challenges to the unequal treatment of women.

However there are limits to the challenges that these women can present. The very sense of empowerment they may derive from the Mother Goddesses suggests that it is only this that gives them the strength to subvert patriarchal notions. This also limits the empowerment of women largely to those who undergo trances – which is a small minority. In addition, Pat herself still appears to be deeply implicated in a patriarchal framework as she still adheres to the view that menstruation in women is “unclean”: “...Pat drank the blood of some sacrificial goats and chickens. From that time on, she claims, she has not menstruated. She regards this as important for her ritual purity, as she no longer has to observe the traditionally required abstinence from participating in rituals when menstruating.”¹²¹ Her argument against the temple committee’s prohibition on women participating in the fire-walking ceremony due to them being “unclean” when menstruating, is that women know when they are “pure” enough to participate and the ban can also not be applied to post-menopausal women.¹²²

This implies that elements of patriarchy evident in Hinduism are deeply hegemonic. I am here drawing on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony: “...the supremacy of a social group [in this case, patriarchal authority] manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’.”¹²³ The latter concept is particularly important to Gramsci’s theory. Elements of patriarchy in Hinduism such as the prohibition of women from participating in religious rituals due to menstruation have become accepted as

¹²⁰ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p82-83.

¹²¹ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p78.

¹²² Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p81.

common-sense. However this does not preclude the possibility for change as Gramsci utilised the notion of the dialectic where the dominant and subordinate groups bring about change in each other, hence creating opportunities for challenging the oppressive aspects of the system. Thus, although Pat may still adhere to certain patriarchal notions, other women are questioning the view of women as “unclean” – as I have demonstrated earlier. Furthermore, Pat has herself also instituted her own challenges to patriarchy.

“Backyard” Temples

Perhaps the most unofficial form of temple worship occurs in so-called “backyard” temples. The practices which occur here fall under what Steven Vertovec in his discussion on Hinduism in the Caribbean terms “Amorphous” or “Peripheral” forms of Hinduism:

“...they [these forms of Hinduism] have often been maintained in a rather clandestine and unformulated, often quite vague, manner by a decreasing minority. They are usually directed toward therapeutic or protective ends, and include: beliefs and precautions regarding the evil eye...the use of specific mantras and motions to cure various afflictions...talismans...specific acts to undo the work of malevolent forces or omens... black magic...exorcisms of ill-meaning spirits, and offerings to minor deities.”¹²⁴

Although Vertovec is concerned with the Caribbean and the practices involved in this form of worship are heavily influenced by their context in the Caribbean with the influences of the African religions present there, the overall framework of “backyard” temple worship and the reasons behind it can be applied to the South African context – it does deal with what people find to be more pragmatic matters such as success in the workplace, warding off the evil eye, guarding oneself against evil or, in fact, attempting to cause harm to one’s enemies or rivals, etc.

In my informal conversations with people about “backyard” temples I found that none claimed to have had anything to do with them and the pervading view toward them was of contempt and a belief that they are in opposition to “Godliness” and morality: “But

¹²³ Tony Bennett, Martin Graham, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott. *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*.

¹²⁴ Steven Vertovec. "'Official' and 'popular' Hinduism in the Caribbean: Historical and contemporary Trends in Surinam, Trinidad and Guyana" in *Across the Dark Waters - Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean*. D. Dabydeen and A. Brinsley, eds. (Hong Kong : Macmillan Publishing Ltd., 1996) p127.

I'm not sure whether this thing works. I say if backyard temples are so powerful which means then God has no power? If they can do so much to harm – because they're ordinary human beings like us, they just get into a trance but if they could do so much to harm another human being so where is God then?"¹²⁵ The conventional view of "backyard" temples is of places of witchcraft and superstition where people are charged exorbitant fees by "witchdoctors" often to engage in practices not necessarily sanctioned by "official" Hinduism. Proponents of "official" Hinduism often make a clear distinction between themselves and "backyard" temples and the latter is viewed as a threat to the status of the former:

"To many the temple is the bastion for idolatory and indiscipline, for mechanical rituals and bizarre ceremonies. Priests are recruited from the unemployed masses. Many are soothsayers, medical quacks and healers. 'Backyard temples' have added to the mystery and ignorance of the true spirit of temples."¹²⁶

Other than the overwhelmingly negative view there is also a positive aspect to "backyard" temples. This stems from the distinction made between black, grey and white magic. Black magic is that which is believed to be most negative and involves inflicting harm on others. It has been negatively termed as "voodoo" and makes use of grisly paraphernalia such as the: "...remains of beheaded chickens, mutilated photographs of a pregnant woman, dough effigies, fruit pierced with nails..."¹²⁷ Grey magic is also perceived to be negative in terms of its use for material gain: "Those who practice grey magic do so to further their own ends. Pride, desire for fame, ambition and avarice are among the powers that move them."¹²⁸

The way in which this form of "magic" is perceived thus depends on the motivation of the individual using it. White magic is therefore an attempt to help others. It is here that the figure of Sai Baba is often invoked. He is the leader of the neo-Hinduistic Sai Baba movement and his many followers cite his ability to perform miracles such as materialising ashes and jewellery as a convincing explanation for his deification. In this

¹²⁵ Interview with J. Katharayan. P3.

¹²⁶ Swami Saradananda "Temples" in *Aum Sathya*.

¹²⁷ Trevor Harris and Juggie Naran "Phoenix Voodoo Terror" in *The Leader*. February 18, 1983. Durban. P1.

¹²⁸ "Leader Reporter" "RCA Study on Sai Baba" in *The Leader*. October 31, 1980. Durban. P1

context white magic and “miracles” are seen as a sign of divine grace: “His only motivation is a pure love for his fellow men – with their wish to love, their sorrows and sufferings and to lift them up to higher levels of understanding and happiness. If a man has reached such lofty standards of action...then miraculous powers will surely be his”¹²⁹. In South Africa much coverage has been given to homes which have been the site of miracles attributed to Sai Baba such as the materialisation of ashes from his photograph, etc. These homes often become the sites of pilgrimage for other Sai Baba devotees acquiring an almost temple-like status. This demonstrates that the distinction between official and unofficial spaces of worship is not as clear-cut as one may be initially led to believe.

The overall negative stereotype of “backyard” temples possibly arises from them providing an alternate form of Hinduism which people may find more suited to their pragmatic needs, hence undermining and offering a potential challenge to the traditional authority of “official” Hinduism. However the negative stereotype of “backyard” temples may prove so pervasive that it actually undermines challenges to patriarchal Hindu authority. In my discussion of Pat Pillay’s attempts to persuade the temple to allow women to participate in firewalking in the previous section, her challenge was, “dismissed [by the chairperson of the temple, who viewed Pat] as a trouble-maker who runs a ‘backyard temple cult’”.¹³⁰ By reducing her challenge to the status of a “backyard temple cult” her role is relegated to the domain of the negative connotations associated with “backyard” temples, thus keeping the authority of the temple intact. Despite this however, the very fact of the existence of “backyard” temples and of people who go to them, is itself a challenge to “official” Hinduism, suggesting that “official” Hinduism does not necessarily fulfill all the spiritual and pragmatic needs of Hindu devotees.

¹²⁹ "Leader Reporter" p1.

¹³⁰ Diesel. "The Empowering Image of the Divine Mother" p83.

Conclusion

“Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them, who are you? Liberty is the first condition of growth.”¹³¹

Since the period of indenture, Indian women in South Africa have been viewed in a fundamentally ambiguous light. Due to the prevalent framework of racism and colonialism, Indian women were perceived as “the Other” to European women – savage, primitive, childlike and the promiscuous temptresses of White men. This view tended to ignore the economic, social and political factors affecting Indian women and indicated their double oppression in terms of race and gender. Co-existing with this perception and still prevalent today is the notion of Indian women as the holders of Hindu morality and virtue. This serves to confine women to the private sphere and is designed to buttress patriarchal authority.

The traditional role of Hindu women in the home has been to carry out Hindu religious practices as the “mother of the home” and to instill Hindu religious values in their children – hence fulfilling the nurturing role. However, with the increase in the education of Indian women, their subsequent entry into the public sphere as members of the workforce and the growth of the nuclear family, tension is evident between the traditional roles of women and present circumstances. Women are thus, to an extent, challenging patriarchal domination in terms of conventional gender roles. However, much ambivalence is present as women stand on an uneasy threshold between the present and the past.

Although Hindu temples have largely been viewed as male strongholds due to the decrease in the number of female priests, confinement of women to roles which are merely an extension of their domestic ones, lack of voice given to women on temple committees and exclusion of women from participating in certain rituals due to their perception as being “unclean” during menstruation, women are attempting to challenge

¹³¹ Swami Ranganathananda. "Hindu Women" p12.

this. This challenge is evident in the growing awareness of Hindu women – regardless of their level of education – of the patriarchal oppression apparent in Hindu temples, who continue to be conservative.

Women however, are not merely the victims of patriarchal, racial and gender oppression in South Africa. Hinduism allows for a subversion of patriarchal norms which is particularly evident in the worship of the Mother Goddesses who provide Hindu women with alternate models of behaviour to the prevailing view of Hindu women as obedient and subservient to patriarchal authority. Women engaged in this form of worship who undergo trances are able to elevate their status due to their reverence by the community in terms of the healing and counselling they undertake as well as the sense of empowerment which may allow them to present a challenge to patriarchal authority. This is evident in Diesel's case study of the Hindu woman Padmani Pillay in relation to the firewalking ceremony.

Finally, although the patriarchal elements of Hinduism have given women a form of religious identity designed to maintain women in the private sphere as subservient wives and mothers, this is not accepted unquestioningly. The education of women as well as the potential for subversion in Hinduism itself, creates the opportunity for women to develop a new form of identity around Hinduism which is more empowering and assertive.

CHAPTER THREE – FORMS OF CONVERSION

Introduction

"...conversion is defined not as a renunciation of an aspect of oneself (as it is in the personal or confessional narrative form), but as an intersubjective, transitional, and transactional mode of negotiation between two otherwise irreconcilable world views."¹³²

In this chapter I am heavily influenced by Gauri Viswanathan's article "Ethnographic Politics and the Discourse of Origins" from which the above quote is drawn. Viswanathan concentrates on the relation between Islam and Hinduism in India in terms of the way it was constructed by British census takers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She demonstrates a contradiction in terms of the way they were advocating both similarity and difference. The difference occurs when Hindus convert to Islam which is thus seen as a distinction from and a denial of their Hindu religious identity.¹³³ At the same time the notion of similarity was present in terms of the emphasis placed by the British on the way in which these Muslims were, in fact, converted Hindus and still engaged in practices which had their origins in Hinduism.¹³⁴ I find this fluidity of religious boundaries to be particularly relevant in my discussion of Hindu identity in terms of its interaction with - and sometimes conversion to - Christianity where the boundaries between the two religions are similarly blurred.

It is in this context that I would like to discuss the quote from Viswanathan's article which I have inserted above, as I believe this to be central to this chapter. I believe that Viswanathan is trying here to add complexity to the notion of conversion. It cannot simply be seen as the rejection of an aspect of one's identity to embrace an aspect derived from outside influences - as many Hindus actually perceive conversion to Christianity as entailing. Conversion is instead a point where the individual is placed at the intersection of the boundaries of two different world views, belonging to both and yet wholly to

¹³² Gauri Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics and the Discourse of Origins." (SEHR, volume 5, issue 1: Contested Politics) <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/viswanathan2.html> p10.

¹³³ Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics" p5.

¹³⁴ Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics" p4.

neither. It is thus a point of transition, of becoming, and this relates not only to religion but to any arena where cultures come into contact with, and impinge upon, each other such as, to put it simplistically, the East versus the West.

This final chapter is particularly important to me on a largely personal level. The issues that I will be considering here relate to my own position in terms of my attempt to formulate my own identity as a South African of both Indian and Hindu origin. The themes into which this chapter has been divided have recurred time and again as I was growing up and continue to be important in discussions I have had with family, friends and others around religious identity and Hinduism. Some of my evidence for the arguments I make here will therefore be drawn from numerous anecdotes as well as my personal experience, in addition to the use of interviews and secondary sources.

I have divided Chapter Three into three sections, each one dealing with what I perceive to be the key issues in relation to Hinduism in South Africa in the 1990s. This is not to suggest that these themes are only relevant now or only apply to the South African context – for instance, my first section deals with conversion to Christianity which was as relevant at the beginning of this century. In addition, conversion to Islam and Christianity has been an important issue in the context of India as well. However my emphasis on South Africa in the present is largely due to two factors – South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994, bringing with it the adjustment of living in a multicultural society. In addition, the increasing globalisation and impact of Western hegemonic cultural forms – which particularly evident in the mass media – impacts on cultures which are not Western.

This theme runs through my second section which deals with “Westernisation” in terms of the tension evident between the growing influence of Western culture on the one hand and the problems that may arise when it conflicts with “traditional” cultural norms and values. I am not suggesting however that one can have a simple dichotomy between Western culture and Indian culture as this would be too reductionist – to an extent each makes an impact and exerts an influence upon the other. This is a feature of cultural

interaction which has always occurred when two cultures come into contact with each other as no culture exists in a vacuum. In addition, no culture remains static and unchanging over time but responds to and is shaped by its context. There are thus multiple layers evident when one is considering the notion of Westernisation.

In my final section I discuss an issue which appears to be particularly relevant to the South African context – multiculturalism. This arises from this country's history of segregation and apartheid – the rationale behind which was that cultures were fixed and unchanging and could hence be isolated as distinct and separate entities. Since 1994, with the advent of the “Rainbow Nation”, bringing with it the growing interaction between various cultures to a greater extent than before, fears have arisen over the loss of distinct cultural identities and I will be concentrating on this issue here.

Using these three themes I want to attempt an understanding of the way in which Hindu religious identity is now being constructed.

Conversion to Christianity

Although conversion may in its barest sense be seen as leaving one religion in favour of another, simply looking at conversion from Hinduism to Christianity ignores the fluid interactions between the two religions – one could also include Islam in this equation. This fluidity in terms of the crossing of religious boundaries was evident from the period of indenture. There is a shrine which had been built by indentured labourers in Mount Edgecombe and was dedicated to both Marieamman and the Virgin Mary. When the shrine fell into ruin the cross was removed and placed in the Mount Edgecombe Temple. In this instance the religious identity of the labourers, although Hindu, incorporated elements of Christianity.

A similar incorporation of Hindu elements is evident in Christianity. Indian Catholics – regardless of whether they are recent converts – use the “Cross-lamp”. This is the lamp as used in Hinduism but, instead of the Hindu Goddess Luxmi (see footnote 80 in Chapter Two), the lamp has on it the symbol of the Cross. In addition, Hindu worship at

the lamp entails the turning of lit camphor three times in a clock-wise direction. A similar ritual is evident in terms of the “Cross-lamp” with an exception – the lit camphor is used to make the sign of the cross. This ritual is a demonstration of the way in which Hinduism had influenced Indian Catholicism in Natal.

From my own experience, as I was growing up, I was taken to the cathedral where my mother would pray at all the statues of the saints, cross herself with holy water and light candles. This occurred on a regular basis despite her being a staunch Hindu and her hostility both to the notion of converting to Christianity and to converts themselves. Furthermore, she would take me to get blessed at the *bashaphir* which is a type of Islamic temple. I was thus raised in an environment where, although we adhered closely to conventional Hindu practises in terms of conducting prayers, going to temples, fasting, etc, Hinduism was not viewed as a self-contained, isolated religion. By going to Christian and Muslim places of worship there existed a more syncretic form of religious identity, although the core remained Hindu. I simply saw the other religions as different paths to the same God but it was still instilled in me that my path was the Hindu way and no other.

I was unaware of the extent to which my early experiences could be generalised to the Hindu population as a whole and therefore to whether this form of tolerance could also be generalised. It was then that I came across an article in a brochure published by a Hindu temple in Port Elizabeth which is an anecdote entitled "Stone Statues and the Holy Cross". The gist of the article deals with two Hindu women who are praying at a church and, when they return home, are confronted by a recent convert who encourages them to convert to Christianity: "You must pray to the living God JESUS. Hindus, when they accept Christ throw their brass images away. I was a Hindu myself and when I accepted Christ I threw my brass lamp away and I chased the devil from my heart and I have Jesus sitting there. Now I walk with Jesus and talk to him."¹³⁵ This relates to a conventional criticism aimed at Hinduism by both Muslims and Christians of Hindus worshipping

¹³⁵ *Shri Siva Subramanier Aulayam 1901-1971 Souvenir Brochure*. (Port Elizabeth : Shri Siva Subramanier Aulayam, 1971) p44.

idols. The rest of the article goes on to argue against this by citing the Christian Cross and the Muslim Kaba in Mecca as being analogous with the Hindu lamp.¹³⁶ However, the important theme evident in the anecdote is the same as the one with which I have grown up with - that of "the Hindu as a universal worshipper" who "will still retain his identity with the Hindu Religion".¹³⁷ This is a view which I will be complicating later on in this section in relation to my discussion of tolerance and syncretism.

A final issue regarding religious fluidity which I would like to discuss is dietary taboos. Hindus are forbidden from eating beef and Muslims from eating pork. However Hindus here often observe a taboo on eating pork as well which, in some instances, may be stronger than that on eating beef. This is in contrast to the reconversion issue in India where Hindus who have been converted to Islam and wish to reconvert to Hinduism have to engage in non-Muslim behaviour such as pork-eating as a test demonstrating their rejection of Islam. From these examples therefore it is clear that there exists no rigid boundaries between religions in terms of the adoption of syncretic practises. Despite this however, people still maintain identities based on specific religions i.e. whether they are Hindu, Muslim or Christian, and this is the reason that conversion still provokes such strong emotion.

In an interview I conducted with the resident priest at the Umgeni Road Temple, a theme that occurred very strongly was the conversion of Hindus to Christianity which he viewed as *the* key problem facing Hinduism today. In addition he felt it was an occurrence unique to South Africa:

“Getting converted – crossing over to Christianity from Hinduism is not easily done – easily not adapted – easily not practised. Very few people – they cross over from Hinduism to Christianity. But in this country – easily they are converted...I never heard in this country a Christian man coming to Hinduism but I very regularly hear of Hindu people – they are regularly going to Christianity.”¹³⁸

According to the priest, several reasons lead to people converting – one of which is a reluctance to carry out Hindu religious practises seen as demanding such as fasting

¹³⁶ *Shri Siva Subramanier Aulayam*. P44.

¹³⁷ *Shri Siva Subramanier Aulayam*. P44.

¹³⁸ Oral Interview with Mr Muthu Iyer conducted by S. Chetty, September 28, 1999. P1.

which, during *Purtassi* (September/October), continues for a month: "...I think, I feel they are not willing to fast. They feel our, you know, Hindu festivals are almost lot of fasting involved so I think maybe that is one of the reasons."¹³⁹ However, many Hindus choose not to fast – or not to fast for the entire length of time required – yet still see themselves as Hindu.

A factor seen by the priest as key to the conversion of Hindus is a lack of knowledge on their part about the religion. Part of this stems from a lack of infrastructure to propagate and educate people in Hinduism. In addition growing Western influence has entailed a turning away from Hinduism: "...they don't have enough knowledge about our religion so they must take steps to study. They can't depend on the Hindu leaders of government or an organisations...all those practises getting forgotten because getting modernised – getting Westernised..."¹⁴⁰ The priest's solution is for the different Indian ethnic groups i.e. Tamil, Telugu, Gujerathi and Hindi, to unite and overcome their differences in order to develop a strong Hindu identity and propagate a form of Hinduism which would be impervious to Western influence – which he views as the main challenge to Hinduism.¹⁴¹

Another factor leading to conversion is intermarriage. It is believed by many of the Hindus I have spoken to that if a Hindu marries a Christian or Muslim – regardless if they are men or women – the Hindu has to convert to the religion of their spouse. Hindus thus seek to explain conversion as being forced upon the individual – as in the case of marriage, as a lack of knowledge or as the indiscipline of the individual in carrying out the demands of Hindu religious practise. Rarely is the reason for conversion believed to be the persuasion of Christian and Muslim doctrine over Hindu doctrine. This links to Viswanathan's discussion of the way in which different religious groups attribute different reasons for conversion based on their position:

"It is to be expected that the sections written by Muslim informants would stress that Hindus converted to Islam voluntarily and as a result of the deep impression made by Koranic teachings, communicated not just by preachers but by enthusiastic lovers as well. It is also to be expected that the descriptions written by Hindus would minimize the role of

¹³⁹ Interview with Mr Iyer. P1.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Mr Iyer. P1.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Mr Iyer. P1.

Individual conviction and attribute conversion to force...”¹⁴²

This is a factor to bear in mind when considering the attributions made by informants such as the priest about conversion.

In an interview I conducted with Jackie Katharayan, a woman who converted to Christianity less than a year ago, I found that her reasons for doing so did not necessarily adhere to those conventionally put forward by Hindu informants. Prior to her conversion she was a staunch Hindu who fasted twice a week and her husband used to get Hanuman trances. Her reason for converting was that her husband had been having an affair and the only way that she came to know about it was when Jesus Christ appeared to her in a dream and informed her of it:

“Eventually – how I came to know about this [the affair] was...it was the Lord Jesus Christ I say and I presume – came in a vision in my dream one Sunday night and spoke to me about it. He spoke to me and I also spoke to Him in my dream saying that I knew there was something going on but I didn’t know what it was.”¹⁴³

Therefore to attribute conversion to lack of education or religious discipline is too simplistic an explanation as it fails to account for the consciousness of a person who would feel compelled to make such a drastic transition from one religion – which in the case of Hinduism, is almost a way of life – to another. Furthermore Mrs Katharayan was extremely knowledgeable about Hindu practises and is as disciplined now about going to church as she was about praying and fasting when she was a Hindu. Her reason for converting appears to stem from a deeper shift in consciousness where she came to perceive Jesus Christ as the only figure who could help her through a difficult period. I found this issue to be relevant to my discussion in the previous chapter of the way in which Hinduism may empower women. In a similar way conversion to Christianity may serve the same purpose. Mrs Katharayan's belief in Christ's support allowed her to gain some measure of independence by leaving her husband to live on her own.

In addition the church appears to play a role in her everyday life by offering her support and encouragement: “...they [the church] never encourage divorce. They always say no problem is too big to be solved. We can sit and talk about the problem...the

¹⁴² Viswanathan. “Ethnographic Politics and the discourse of Origins” p6.

church...always gives me encouragement.”¹⁴⁴ By helping her deal with real experiences the church thus appears to be filling a void that Hinduism may not have been able to fill. Her turning to the church and Christianity for support suggests that she is looking to religion for more than just the knowledge to carry out certain religious practises but is, in a sense, searching for more pragmatic help. In this way conversion to Christianity can be equated to the reason many Hindus use “backyard” temples – which I have discussed in my previous chapter.

Despite this complexity lying behind an individual’s decision to convert – which is still an issue needing a great deal more research – conversion entails more than simply changing religions as it affects more than the individual but their family and community as well who may have remained Hindu. In all my informal discussions with Hindus there appears to be a great sense of resentment toward people who have converted – reasons for conversion such as the one given by Mrs Katharayan are seen as a sign of weakness and a lack of conviction:

“I pity them because I actually feel they are weak because you are born into a religion and it should not be so easily given up just to obtain peace of mind. You should stick by your religion because people of all religions have problems.”¹⁴⁵

In addition to this is a sense of betrayal which is particularly evident when family members convert, hence refusing to participate in any Hindu rituals and often condemning Hindu practise itself:

“From personal experience in my own family, my brother and sister who have converted, are experiencing more problems than they did as Hindus but are too stubborn to admit it and are very critical of the Hindu religion. My regret is that this brother and sister refused to participate in the Hindu ritual during my father’s funeral and ceremony. They feel it’s against their adopted religion to do so. Yet I do know of converted Christians who have performed these rituals and have come to no harm.”¹⁴⁶

To an extent I can identify with this perception particularly as it relates to the intolerance of newly converted Christians who seek to propagate Christianity by attacking Hinduism. A few years ago I recall going to a funeral service where the pastor – a newly converted Christian – constantly preached against Hinduism as the worship of false gods. I

¹⁴³ Oral Interview with Mrs Jackie Katharayan conducted by S. Chetty. October 23, 1999. P1.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs Katharayan. P2.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Miss Premakumarie Reddy conducted by S. Chetty. October 26, 1999. P2.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Miss Reddy. P2.

remember feeling a sense of extreme outrage. In this way, conversion demonstrates great ambivalence as, co-existing with the syncretic and more tolerant elements, is a strong conservatism particularly on the part of Hindus who are reacting to the criticisms of them and their religion made by those who have converted to Christianity.

I found myself falling into this way of thinking where the tolerance of Hinduism can be seen in contrast to religions such as Islam and Christianity which demonstrate intolerance in terms of their attempts to convert Hindus by attacking Hinduism. However Viswanathan adds complexity to this simple dichotomy in the discussion of Vidya Dehejia's essay on Tamil art which employed both Vaishnavite (North Indian) and Saivite (South Indian) features: "Dehejia's argument raises fundamental questions about whether tolerance can be assumed to be equivalent to syncretism, and intolerance to absolutism and exclusivity."¹⁴⁷ I found that Hindus do not, in fact, equate tolerance to syncretism - tolerance here involves a recognition and an appreciation of other religions whilst, at the same time, maintaining a distinctive Hindu religious identity. This is an issue I cover in greater detail in my section on "Multiculturalism". The feature key to this discussion however is that: "...incorporation and exclusion resist being unproblematically located in ideas of religious syncretism and religious absolutism, respectively."¹⁴⁸ This is particularly evident in relation to conversion.

This complex issue is further complicated in the South African context where race plays a very strong role. Hindus often accuse those who have converted as wanting to be "White". I have spoken to people informally where derogatory remarks were made towards converters such as: "Why don't they just paint their faces white then?" Here Hinduism is viewed very strongly as being part of a racial identity and conversion is seen as a betrayal of one's race and a "crossing over to the enemy" as it were. This bears certain similarities with Viswanathan's discussion of the way in which Hindus in India may feel betrayed when other Hindus convert to Islam:

"There are...two kinds of often conflicting memories that inhabit the Hindu past: one, the memory of having once been an undivided community that had been violently torn asunder

¹⁴⁷ Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics" p1.

¹⁴⁸ Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics" p2.

by foreign invasions, depredations, and cultural violence, of which forcible conversion is most radical and divisive; and two, the memory of betrayal, repudiation, and willful re-affiliation to another community that the Muslim self-definition as 'foreign-descended' appeared to suggest to Hindus."¹⁴⁹

In South Africa Whites have been viewed as the oppressors and converting to Christianity is thus seen as a betrayal of being Indian.

However, being Indian does not simply imply a rejection of all that is Western, which is an issue I would now like to discuss.

"Westernisation"- Another form of Conversion

"We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result...we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools..."¹⁵⁰

At the beginning of this century Westernisation was associated with receiving a Western education – which was confined to a small minority due to them coming from indentured labour backgrounds where many parents could not afford to send their children to school. This new elite therefore: "came from families who had grasped the significance of education in the process of vertical mobility in South Africa, and who were so committed to raising themselves above the general level of the mass of the people that they were willing to undergo whatever hardships were necessary in order to equip their children properly."¹⁵¹ In terms of religion, more than half the population of the new elite were of South Indian Hindu origin which reflected their representation in the population as a whole. However Christians were overrepresented¹⁵² and this was largely due to the first schools for Indians being missionary-run schools. Christianity was a major factor in Westernisation due to its "emphasis on education and Western values and norms".¹⁵³ The Western educated new elite were involved in "white collar" work for the colonial

¹⁴⁹ Viswanathan. "Ethnographic Politics" p7.

¹⁵⁰ Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. P15.

¹⁵¹ Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P12-13.

¹⁵² Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P13.

¹⁵³ Brain. "Religion, Missionaries, Indentured Indians" p224.

administration as interpreters, clerks, etc,¹⁵⁴ suggesting the need for their adoption of Western values and standards. Despite this however, they remained committed to their ethnic identity and formed political organisations in opposition to the Natal Indian Congress – which was largely composed of the merchant class – such as the Hindu Young Men’s Association (HYMA) which stressed their Tamil identity: “Its (HYMA) religious nature excluded prominent members of the emerging elite (Christians) while the decision to use Tamil as the Association’s official language discouraged still others (non-Tamils).”¹⁵⁵ Another organisation founded by the new elite was the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) which emphasised their identity as South Africans and de-emphasised their Indian identity.¹⁵⁶ The emergence of this new class termed the new elite, in the early twentieth century demonstrate the influence of the West in terms of their education, white collar work and politics which emphasised their South African citizenship. At the same time they advocated an identity based on religion (Hinduism) and Tamil ethnicity.

Initially, therefore, Western influence was mainly confined to a small elite who had been able to receive a Western education, leaving behind their indentured labour status. The greater majority of Indians in Natal (about 95%) were not literate in English.¹⁵⁷ Two features this century led to a greater Western influence on the South African Indian population which was not solely confined to the elite. The first is the growth of educational institutions for Indians. This was particularly evident in the 1930s with the establishment of schools such as Sastri College Secondary School which, although built with money raised by the Indian community and donations made by affluent Indians, were government-aided schools. Through the twentieth century therefore there was a steep rise in the number of Indians receiving primary, secondary and even tertiary education, leading to an increase in literacy rates and the degree to which English was spoken – so much so that very few Indians speak the vernacular languages with any degree of fluency today and, for most Indians in South Africa, English is a first language. This is evident in the criticism by Umgeni Road Temple priests, Muthu Iyer: “S.A.

¹⁵⁴ Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P15.

¹⁵⁵ Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P16-17.

¹⁵⁶ Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P17.

¹⁵⁷ Swan. *Gandhi - The South African Experience*. P12.

Indians are deeply religious and very devoted but sad to see we are losing our interest in our vernacular languages,” and Arunasala Aiyer: “Religious aspects of our lives is well covered but too much stress on English and Afrikaans. Must find some time to learn any Indian language.”¹⁵⁸

An extreme case of the way in which Western education may lead to a rejection of Indian “traditional” and cultural values is represented by Dr Goonam – one of the first Indian women in Natal to receive a tertiary education abroad and become a medical doctor. In her biography written in 1991 she demonstrates an intolerance of those Indians whom she viewed as still being tied to a traditional past: “I couldn’t teach *them* to think logically. Tact and diplomacy did not go very far with *them* [emphasis added]...Tradition, superstition, ignorance and ritual dominated Indian life and I am afraid I had practically no patience with those things.”¹⁵⁹ A similar rejection of “tradition”¹⁶⁰ is evident in her views on Hinduism – despite her Hindu background: “Incense was burning, a priest with a snow white cap and dhoti was chanting from the holy book throwing bits of twigs and ghee into the container of hot embers (hawan)...The hatchet-faced old girl, busying herself with the priest, gestured to me to be gone as soon as possible.”¹⁶¹ Her use of the word “them” in relation to the rural Indians she is discussing suggests that she is distancing herself from them, employing a dichotomy of herself as the civilised, Western-educated doctor and “them” – the uneducated, poverty-stricken, rural Indians mired in superstition. She is thus asserting her own identity as a Western educated member of the elite by “othering” Indians who remain within a “traditional” framework yet she was simultaneously involved in political activism, fighting on behalf of those same people she tends to condemn. Dr Goonam’s perception must therefore be placed within her context in the first half of the twentieth century where Indian people were homogenised and negatively stereotyped, and Western cultural values were almost universally accepted as

¹⁵⁸ Souvenir Temple Brochure. P3

¹⁵⁹ Dr Goonam. *Coolie Doctor*. (Durban : Madiba Publishers, 1991) p60-61.

¹⁶⁰ I am using “tradition” in inverted commas as I do not want to give the impression of it being a static, unchanging phenomenon which is the opposite of modernity but, rather, a fluid feature which adapts to different contexts. Here I am using the word “tradition” to distinguish Indian cultural practices, etc from Western ones.

¹⁶¹ Goonam. *Coolie Doctor*. P62

inherently superior to any other.¹⁶² Her views must thus be seen in relation to the notion of Western hegemony particularly in terms of modernity versus tradition. Talal Asad makes an important point here by suggesting that modernity is itself a tradition - but a Western one which views itself in opposition to all other traditions.¹⁶³ Dr Goonam is thus a product of the internalisation of this Western hegemonic belief which, although to an extent is being questioned by postmodernism, remains very much entrenched.

Dr Goonam is perhaps an extreme case of the way in which Western acculturation may lead to a rejection of Indian culture and “tradition” yet she also displays an ambiguity in her work by still clinging to the notion of being Indian. Many Indians now – even if educated – do not reject and may actually be strong proponents of Hindu culture and religion. Despite this there exists what I perceive to be a tension between Western and Eastern cultural influences. To illustrate my point I wish to use my interview with Mrs Sarres Padayachee (See Chapter Two) as a case study. Despite her extensive tertiary education she views herself as a staunch Hindu and this is evident in her view of the role of the modern South African Indian woman:

“I think she should be the ideal Hindu housewife first and thereafter look at her outer activities. In this context I want to mention that it is so important that she retains her cultural identity, she carries out her norms at home, teaches her children about culture, religion, etc, unlike today’s sort of women. You find them exposed to an acculturation of two cultures – the Western culture and the Eastern culture and, in most cases, you find that the Western pull is greater than the Eastern pull. But in my way, if we are going to survive in the South African climate, we need to ensure that our children are given all their cultural training on the homefront because that, I think, is the most important place.”¹⁶⁴

From this extended quote it is clear that Mrs Padayachee views Western influence as negative as it leads to a distancing from Indian cultural values.

At the same time however she is influenced by the West and her education which is particularly evident in her radical stance where she challenges what she perceives to be

¹⁶² For my discussion on Dr Goonam I have drawn heavily on an earlier essay I have written entitled “Perceptions of South African Indian Women in Natal”.

¹⁶³ Saba Mahmood. "Talal Asad - Modern power and the reconfiguration of religious traditions" (SEHR volume 5, issue 1 : Contested Politics, February 27, 1996) <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad/html>. P2.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P1

the patriarchal nature of Hinduism both in the home – in terms of the woman’s sole responsibility for domestic duties – and in the temple where she criticises the lack of power given to women on temple boards and their exclusion from becoming priestesses (See Chapter Two). She therefore appears to be advocating a combination of the best of both the West and the East:

“Maybe you’d say I’m a mixture of the South African woman and the basic Indian woman if you look at the Indian community in South Africa, they definitely are made up a bit of the Western culture and they are made up of the Eastern culture – they’re a mixture of the two cultures – if you look at the dressing – Western dress, more convenient, quicker, more adaptable but they would still want to retain their cultural identity and ways.”¹⁶⁵

Here Western influence is not perceived as negative or as leading to a rejection of Indian culture, but as enhancing their lives. This is particularly evident in her advocacy of education for women leading to them getting better jobs and creating opportunities for independence:

“...the male-dominant attitudes are now changing because the woman has become more sort of independent and you find, in some cases, women even earn more than their husbands do...because she’s more independent, she’s now able to say: ‘Look this is what I’m going to do and this is what you’re going to do.’”¹⁶⁶

An ambiguity is therefore evident in the extent to which one should embrace Western value systems.

In addition to the influence exerted by the growth of Western education, the second feature is the influence of Western cultural forms which has been particularly evident in the latter part of this century. The growth of mass media such as television, radio, cinema and now the internet, bringing with it American influences in dressing, music, etc, has made a large impact on South African Indian society today: “...in a world constantly bombarded by American cultural symbols and in a diverse society where cultures battle to survive, it is difficult to hold on to your cultural heritage.”¹⁶⁷ In the 1990s, with the end of Apartheid which also marked the end of South Africa’s isolation from the international arena, we have been almost overwhelmed by American popular culture ranging from food chains such as McDonalds to brand names like Nike.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P5.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P5.

¹⁶⁷ Thembisile Makhalemele. “What’s your heritage, kid?” in *The Independent on Saturday*. Durban, September 25, 1999. P9.

Television, cinema and radio have aided in the propagation of American cultural forms – the influence of which can be seen in the music people listen to, the films they watch, the clothing they wear and the food they eat. In a sense this phenomenon – which has been negatively termed the United States’ cultural imperialism – crosses religious, racial and ethnic boundaries in South Africa leading to a form of homogenisation and hence posing a threat to the diverse cultures in South Africa.

When considering South African Indians this is particularly evident in the younger generations who are accused by older people of “not having any culture” due to their inability to speak vernacular languages, their adoption of Western dress and mannerisms and their growing alienation from Hindu religious practice – which may be one of the reasons for the high number of conversions and the priest’s emphasis on the lack of religious education and knowledge evident in the present (see previous section). However one cannot make the general assumption that we are simply being dominated by outside influences. The priest at the Umgeni Road Temple claims that there is still a tremendous interest in Hinduism on the part of young people: “[Young people] are showing too much interest. Youngsters – they are showing interest in learning Hinduism so we must teach them. They are showing enthusiasm – they are showing interest. They are thinking properly – I feel that. But the only thing is they don’t have enough guidance from the elderly people.”¹⁶⁸ Therefore, co-existing with Western cultural influence, exists Hindu practices and religion, rather than a case of simple domination of the latter by the former. Indian identity at present thus appears to be a combination of East and West – of belonging to both worlds yet to neither.

In South Africa in the present however, provision has been made for the recognition of all cultural forms as part of our democratic transition. This brings me to the issue of multiculturalism which has become a dominant discourse in South Africa today. This will be the main focus of the following section.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Mr Iyer. P1.

Multiculturalism

*"...I want to mention that Mahatma Gandhi ended it off very well by stating that he'd allow all the cultures to blow through his window but he wouldn't allow any culture to blow him off his feet and this is exactly the kind of philosophy that I would want to see being used from time to time."*¹⁶⁹

I would first like to clarify what I mean by multiculturalism and syncretism in this context. Multiculturalism involves the co-existence of cultures with equal validity given to all. It differs from syncretism in that the ideal of multiculturalism does not allow for the crossing of cultural boundaries. It can thus be loosely defined as "separate but equal". Syncretism however implies the recognition that cultural boundaries are not so clearly defined. Simply, because of their co-existence, cultures cannot help but influence each other and this presents the greatest threat to cultural "purists".

Multiculturalism has huge significance for South Africa in the present. This is due largely to our history where the policy of Apartheid in terms of the Group Areas Act where people were divided according to race and ethnicity, led to a lack of interaction between cultures. This is not to give the impression that there was no interaction between people but that Apartheid was a policy designed to enforce separateness – its pretext was the maintenance of cultural purity by advocating the separate but equal development of cultures, and interaction was believed to result in the inevitable degeneration of cultures. Of course, in practice, Apartheid was the dominance of one group over others – the notion of “separate but equal” never really existed. However this notion was, to an extent, assimilated into the consciousness of people. It creates the belief that cultures exist in a type of vacuum as a pure form and the incorporation of other elements into a particular culture would lead to its degeneration as it would no longer be “pure”. This perception ignores the way in which cultures may change over time and space as they adapt to changing circumstances and the changing needs of the people they incorporate.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P11.

In 1994 when South Africa made its transition to democracy, the geographical boundaries created by Apartheid were legally removed however, these spaces and borders still exist in the consciousness of people. The confrontation with the sheer diversity of cultural and religious practices has brought a conservative element to the fore:

“...with multiculturalism in the present-day context, it’s important that Hinduism needs to sort of retain its identity on its own and not become filtered – because the way multiculturalism is moving, you find that the subcultures must be there to form multiculturalism and Hinduism would be one of the subcultures. But if we neutralise that subculture then eventually we are not going to have too many cultures to form a strong multicultural society and, in this context, I want to mention that I’m a *purist* [emphasis added] – I want to follow my faith, I would want to retain my cultural identity no matter what forum I’m at...”¹⁷⁰

First it is apparent that there is a confusion of multiculturalism with syncretism where the former is also perceived to be a threat to cultural purity. There thus appears to be a fear of losing one’s distinctive cultural identity by interacting with other cultures. This fear stems from two factors – the first is the growing influence of the West in terms of the United States’ cultural hegemony (which I have discussed in the previous section). The second factor here is Hinduism’s minority status. South African Indians form a tiny percentage of this country’s population and Hinduism is an even smaller percentage (many South African Indians are of other religious faiths such as Islam or Christianity). The small number of Hindus in conjunction with the number of conversions to Christianity and other faiths as well as the adoption of Western culture, has led many staunch proponents of Hinduism to believe that the religion is under threat and is hence responsible for the conservative reaction and calls for cultural purity.

In spite of this however, Hinduism has built into it a strong sense of tolerance – its flexibility has allowed it to assimilate other religious elements which was a key reason for it surviving the various conquest in India and it continues to thrive despite perceived threats arising from Western influence, etc. In addition there is a liberal element evident in Indian society as well. For instance, the Sai Baba movement which is a neo-Hinduistic movement preaches a great degree of tolerance despite it maintaining a Hindu core: “...they pray to all manifestations of, you know – all aspects of God in the different faiths

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P10.

like, for instance, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc., because they feel that God is one and it's like, describing it very easily – it's like various rivers which flow into one massive ocean.”¹⁷¹

There is evidence of cross-cultural interaction in Indian classical dancing, singing etc., but there are widely differing views on this. The more liberal individuals welcome it, believing that interaction across cultures enriches Indian culture, giving it a distinctive South African influence and hence privileging South African identity over Indian identity. The more conservative elements however see it as an example of cultural deterioration. For them being Indian is to maintain a “pure” religion and culture and hence a distinctive identity which they fear would be lost should cultural boundaries not be maintained. Conservatism is the means by which many people are dealing with the increasing globalisation and a growing sense of fragmentation and disorientation which is a product of the postmodern context. The calling into question of stable world views previously taken for granted and the tremendous and rapid changes in communication brought about by technological innovations such as the internet has brought with it a sense of liberation in terms of a feeling of belonging to a global culture. In a sense this can be seen as a form of conversion as it involves the individual creating a sense of identity based on numerous world views and cultural influences. However this also has an adverse effect as it can be seen as alienating. Cultural and religious conservatism is therefore an attempt to create a stable identity - based on clinging on to a single culture - in the midst of this fragmentation: “As culture makes people feel that they are part of the history, when people feel insecure they want something to hold on to and culture and language is what people want to hold on to.”¹⁷²

The issue of multiculturalism is an important one in South Africa today and provokes mixed reactions within the South African Indian community. Many welcome it yet there are as many who fear losing their distinctive culture and religion. This is partly due to the internalisation of the legacy of Apartheid but also stems from the growing

¹⁷¹ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P10

¹⁷² Makgalemele. “What’s your heritage, kid?” p9

encroachment of Western influence in Indian society and the insecurity felt by people living in the postmodern era. In spite of this however, those who derive their identity from being Hindu can make an important contribution to South Africa as it teaches co-existence and tolerance which is essential for our society.¹⁷³

Conclusion

“Each nation has a language and a culture of its own. By knowing yours you also learn to respect others’. This not only makes you more tolerant and broadminded, but also lets you make your own unique contribution towards our multi-racial society and thus live in harmony with people of different racial, religious and language groups.”¹⁷⁴

Conversion to Christianity is one of the key issues facing Hinduism today. The reasons put forward for conversion range from lack of education and knowledge of Hinduism to a lack of discipline in carrying out Hindu practices and a weakness on the part of the individual who converts. However the issue is more complex than that as people who have converted feel that Christianity may fill a void or help them through a difficult period. The conventional attitude of many Hindus towards those who do convert is a sense of resentment and betrayal. The latter often arises when members of a family convert and may thereafter condemn Hinduism. Conversion is thus perceived as a threat to Hinduism.

However, to simply see conversion as a transition from one religion to another is to ignore the way in which there may be interactions across religions. This is not only a product of the South African context at present as there have been elements of Hinduism present in Christianity, particularly Catholicism, and vice versa. The same can be said, to an extent, for Islam as well. There is thus the possibility for both unity and division across religions in South Africa. However conversion tends to take on a racial slant as it is perceived as adopting a “White” way of life and hence betraying the Indian race. This

¹⁷³ Interview with Mrs Padayachee. P11.

¹⁷⁴ *Aum Sathya*. P18.

sense of betrayal must be seen in the light of South Africa's history where Whites have been perceived as the oppressors of other races.

In addition to conversion, another perceived threat to Hinduism has been that of "Westernisation" – both in the form of receiving a Western education and of the growing influence of Western culture – particularly from the United States. In the early part of this century Western education was usually the privilege of a small elite. For some members of this new elite, receiving a Western education led to the ambivalent rejection of Indian culture and religion as is evident in the example of Dr Goonam. For the greater majority however there exists a tension – which is still evident today – between being a Hindu and being educated in the Western tradition. This tension is not necessarily negative as the beneficiaries of a Western education may be able to criticise and hence introduce reforms to certain features of Hinduism.

With South Africa's entry into the international arena in this decade, there has been an influx of American cultural forms which has been particularly prevalent in the mass media of television, radio and cinema. Young people tend to adopt Western patterns of dressing and speaking and very few are able to speak the vernacular, as the first language of the majority of South Africa's Indian population is English. At the same time however, Hinduism is still a strong force and, according to the priest at the Umgeni Road Temple, is still supported by young people. The identity of Indians in South Africa today therefore tends to be a syncretic mixture of Hindu and Western influences as well as a desire to embrace the notion of a "pure" Hindu culture - indicating both separation and interaction.

Finally, the issue of syncretism which is a particularly relevant to South Africa in the present, has provoked some very different reactions among South Africa's Indians. While many support it, there are an equal number who fear losing their religious and cultural distinctiveness. Part of this is due to the internalisation of Apartheid value systems but part of it is also a response to the instability created by postmodernism and a

subsequent desire to return to the form of stability provided by the notion of a “pure” culture and religion.

CONCLUSION

The feature that I found most striking as this dissertation progressed was the incredible degree of complexity that became evident as I considered the way in which Hinduism impacts upon the creation of South African Indian identity in Natal. The formation of this identity is fraught with tension and ambiguity - making it difficult to draw anything but tentative conclusions.

In Chapter One I discussed the way in which Indian identity is constructed around the notion of the diaspora and hence in relation to India. One of the features I used in my discussion was a demonstration of the growing formalisation of Hinduism which occurred at the beginning of this century - and coincided with the growth of a new Indian intelligentsia. An important development at this time was the building of Hindu temples in brick and concrete. This is significant in two respects - it demonstrates a growing sense of permanence and an acceptance of South Africa as their home on the part of Indians. In contrast to this, the building of these temples also represented turning toward India as the source of religious authority - stemming from the view of India as static and unchanging. This is evident in the use of builders trained in India to construct temples modelled on those in South India. However, local circumstances affected the way in which these temples were built as it was necessary to adapt them to the South African context. It was thus not possible to live up to the "ideal" of Indian temples in this instance.

Another means by which South African Hindu tradition was lent "authenticity" was through the bringing to South Africa of Hindu priests from India and Sri Lanka - requests for which were made at the same time as the temple building which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the present however, the predominance of Sri Lankan priests at Hindu temples across the country have provoked mixed reactions - whereas many Hindus perceive them to be a source of religious authority, there is a growing criticism of their presence in South Africa due to conflicts over religious practice and the exclusion of local priests. This chapter demonstrates that, rather than the

simplistic view of the South African Indian diaspora as merely looking to India as a source of authority, there is a tension between identity as derived from India and South African identity. This tension is evident in the new elite at the beginning of this century who, although asserting their identity as "colonial-born" South African citizens, were responsible for the building of these temples and the initial bringing to South Africa of priests from the Indian subcontinent. In addition they formed organisations such as HYMA and NIPU which were based on ethnic Tamil and Hindu identity. The identity of the South African Indian diaspora in the past and today therefore exists in an uneasy state of tension between their identification with India and as South African citizens. This is given greater complexity due to South Africa's history of racial segregation and Apartheid where Indians were not considered citizens until South Africa became a republic.

My second chapter deals with the way in which Hindu religious spaces are constructed on a gendered basis. I begin by discussing the way in which Indian women in South Africa have been perceived in two contradictory ways - the first arises from the context of colonialism and racial oppression and perceives Indian women as the savage and primitive seductresses of White men. This can be applied to women all over the world who formed part of the indigenous population experiencing the full brunt of colonialism. In stark contrast to this is the perception of Indian women as the bearers of the nation's morality and culture. This view is largely responsible for confining women to the domestic sphere which is, as Partha Chatterjee suggests, a result of the distinction between the material and spiritual realms - the latter remaining impervious to Western influence, and hence presenting a site of resistance to colonialism. It was in this context that Indian women were relegated to the private sphere in order to maintain its spirituality and, it is in this light that Indian women in South Africa have been largely confined to the home in carrying out Hindu religious practice.

In contrast to this, the temple is seen as a male sphere of dominance due to the growing exclusion of female priests and their lack of voice on temple boards. A key theme here is the perception of Indian women as being "unclean" during menstruation and their

subsequent exclusion from participating in religious activities. Despite the dominance of this patriarchal world view however, two challenges are apparent on the part of Indian women. The first is as a result of their increasing education which gives them a position from which they can be aware of, criticise and possibly introduce reforms to the patriarchal elements present in Hinduism. The second challenge arises from Hinduism itself and deals with the sense of empowerment experienced by women who undergo trances, as it gives them esteem in the community and allows them to help other women. All of this contributes to a sense of empowerment where these women may be able to challenge the patriarchal system present in temples, as is evident in Diesel's case study of Pat Pillay.

Despite this sense of empowerment however, women tend to display ambivalence in terms of both challenging and adhering to patriarchal notions. This is evident in Sarres Padayachee's belief that a woman's duty was first as wife and mother yet she is simultaneously challenging the patriarchy evident in Hindu temples and their exclusion from religious rites due to menstruation. A similar ambiguity is evident in the case of Pat Pillay who, while challenging her temple's prohibition on allowing women to engage in firewalking, adheres to the notion of women as being "unclean" during menstruation. At present therefore, although women are challenging the patriarchal elements of Hinduism in Natal, they still remain linked to it as some features of the patriarchal system have become deeply hegemonic.

In my final chapter I discuss the issue of conversion in relation to both conversion to Christianity and an adoption of Western culture and values. Despite claims to the contrary, conversion cannot be simply viewed as the abandoning of one world view in favour of another. It is instead a negotiation between two world views. Hindus tend to take a negative view of those who convert to Christianity, attributing it to a lack of discipline and weakness on their part. This stems largely from a sense of betrayal on the part of Hindus compounded by the attacks on Hinduism which may be perpetuate on the part of recent converts. In an interview I conducted with a newly converted woman however, I found that her reasons for conversion were more complex as Christianity

offered her support during a difficult period. In addition it gave her a sense of empowerment allowing her to gain a measure of independence from her husband and family.

In addition to Christianity, another perceived threat to Hinduism is that of growing Western influence. This is present in two forms - the first being Western education, bringing with it the adoption of Western value systems. This does not necessarily lead to a rejection of Hinduism, but instead, an uneasy tension in holding simultaneously what appears to be two contradictory world views. The second encroachment from the West comes in the form of American cultural imperialism present in the mass media and U.S. consumer goods, leading to an adoption of Western standards of dress and behaviour. Existing simultaneously with this is the issue of multiculturalism versus syncretism where there is tremendous insecurity on the part of the conservative elements of Hindu society of losing their cultural distinctiveness. Although part of this is due to the internalisation of the Apartheid ideal of "separate but equal", much of it results from the postmodern context where increasing globalisation and fragmentation has created a desire to cling to a stable identity in the midst of perceived chaos.

Thus, the issue of Indian identity in relation to Hinduism is an extremely complex and contradictory one. Tensions are evident in terms of the simultaneous adoption of both an Indian and a South African identity, challenges to as well as an adherence to patriarchy and the complex interaction of "traditional" and Western value systems in relation to conversion. The only stability in the creation of identity is that there is no stability, as South African Indians may utilise all the complex features in the creation of a single identity, rather than being solely composed on any one feature. However this does not suggest that Indian identity is simply composed of a miscellaneous assortment of features assimilated from other cultures, etc., for, if we were to consider Viswanathan's discussion on religious identity, the blurring of boundaries between cultures is an attempt to create a stable world view based on a point of transition.

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