EDITORIAL

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The present volume of Nidān focuses on expressions of Hinduism in a global context of the Indian diaspora. Although such expressions are based on the original cultural locations from where the diaspora originated, it is invariably the case that new locations and their cultural and social conditions influence the perpetuation of religious beliefs through various cultural institutions and art forms. Often the diaspora communities have a much stronger desire and cultural as well as social need to continue their traditions which their forebears had brought with them to the new society. This phenomenon can be exemplified through documented accounts from various parts of the world where the diaspora communities live. The Hindu diaspora is none the different in this regard. In offering this editorial introduction, I do not wish to provide simply an overview of the papers presented in this volume, but rather to place them in a broader comparative context of the Hindu diasporic experience with a view to signify their theoretical salience both in the study of Hinduism as well as in the broader social sciences.

The Ramlila that originated in the northern parts of India is one such religio-cultural expression that dominates the Hindu diasporic experience. Ramlila is a dance form that is based on the Ramayana story derived from the Hindi version of Ramcharitramanas which the Hindi speaking Hindu diaspora have come to cherish both as an art form as well as an identity marker. While in Trinidad and Fiji this particular art form is famously celebrated and continued, there is less evidence of it in South Africa where the story of Rama through the telling of Tulsidas' Ramcharitramanas continues to be very significant, but its expression through theatre and drama seem to have disappeared. It continues more as a form of recitation in ritual context rather than as a popular art form. Not only is it true of Ramlila in South Africa, it is also the case with the Terukkuttu dance associated with the Firewalking ritual observed by the Tamil Hindus in South Africa. Terukkuttu dance used to be a prominent religious art form performed by Tamil communities during the Draupadi Amman festival when the Firewalking ritual is observed. But it is no longer observed during the festival as there are no artists left to perform this ancient art form in South Africa. The reason for the survival of Ramlila as a religious art form in Trinidad and its

absence among Hindus in South Africa perhaps has to do with the nature of the two communities in Trinidad and South Africa respectively. While the Trinidadian Hindus predominantly live in the rural setting where such older traditions are still strongly preserved, the South African Indian community generally became more urbanized and gradually lost the folk religious art forms. However, while this observation is one possible way to explain the differences, future researchers in the field of the Ramlila studies must explore the reasons for such divergences within the Hindu diaspora. What is particularly interesting from a sociological point of view is the fact that in Trinidad, as Mahabeer and Chand point out (see Mahabeer and Chand's paper in this volume), the Ramlila continues to be influential not only among Hindi speaking Hindus, but also among their Mulsim counterparts who are just as much a part of the audience of the drama. It is this cultural influence of one religious expression across multiple religious communities is one that must interest sociologists of religion as well as religionists to engage in a comparative study of this phenomenon.

Despite the unifying influence of religion in the lives of Hindus and Muslims through popular religious art forms such as Ramlila, it would be oversimplification if we were to assume that religion is a sufficient ground to unify communities. On a practical level, religious matters are personal and communal, and religious communities therefore resort to using their individual religious identity to gain access to political power which is essential for the survival of the immigrant community. This invariably means that individual religious communities deploy their particular religious resources to build pressure on the dominant society. In other words, Hindus would have to use their particular religious resources to build institutions that would provide them with social and political advancement and not rely on others' religious resources. A case in point is the Sanathana Dharma Maha Sabha's initiative to build schools in Trinidad and the head of the organization to use them as leverage to enter politics to secure political rights for the Hindus. In the face of the attempt of the dominant society to use secular ideology as a way to discourage religious involvement in politics, the Hindu leadership successfully deployed its Hindu identity. By doing so, the Hindu leadership was able to secure not only better educational facilities for Hindus in Trinidad but also the opportunity to develop their Hindu identity (see Vashti Singh's paper in this volume).

It is now globally recognised that religious rituals and observations do undergo changes and transformations in the context of the diasporic communities. Nevertheless, what has not been studied adequately is how diasporic Hinduism is adjusted to already existing assimilations that occurred centuries prior to the practices observed by more recent diasporic communities. As Agarwal's paper in this volume points out, Hinduism and its influence in Thai society goes back to centuries prior to the more recent immigration of Hindus to Thailand. As such, some of the ancient rituals of Hindus such as Brahma worship came to be incorporated into the Thai royal rituals. This pre-existing practice seems to have given impetus to the more recently established diaspora community to expand that practice and establish it as a part of the diasporic Hindu practice. It is this pre-existing practice of Brahma worship in Thailand that led to the Hindu Samaj in Bangkok to establish Brahma statues in the

temple to accommodate the widely popular worship of Brahma. While Brahma worship is not as popular in India, Thailand presents an interesting case where practices that are either no longer observed or not mainstream aspect of Hinduism in the land of the origin of the diasporic community are introduced or invented under local conditions. This observation is theoretically critical in conceptualising Hindu diaspora and its religious practices in that we cannot assume that diaspora communities' religious expressions are limited to what they would have carried from their land of origin to the host society. It rather shows that not only do diaspora communities adjust their practices to local conditions, but more importantly introduce new rituals and practices to make sense of their life in the new society. The invention of Muneeshwaran, a rural Tamil Hindu deity, as an urban deity in Singapore is another example. Scattering ashes of the dead in the Chao Phraya River, observing bathing rituals at the sea in Chonburi as substitutions in the context of Thailand are further examples of how sacredness is localised in the diasporic context (see Agarwal's paper in this volume).

While the issues faced in the context of the diaspora community are about the transformations, adjustments and changes in religious beliefs and practices as seen in the three papers discussed above, the scholarship on Hinduism in the subcontinent has moved in the direction of contemporary global issues related to ecology and environment. The paper by Nimbalkar in this volume tackles precisely these issues by invoking traditional Hindu scriptures and Gandhian thought. The world in which we live today is facing the consequences of our modern day living and our tendency to exploit the planet earth for our human comforts. The traditional scriptures and charismatic thinkers such as Gandhi rightly remind us of the need to pause and reflect on our human actions and make moral choices to preserve the finite resources of the planet for future generations. In this regard, Nimbalkar's paper calls our attention to work with nature. However, the questions that Nimbalkar raises in her paper—"Does worshipping nature inspire Hindus to act in an environmentally conscious way? Is there any relationship between their reverence for bio-divinity and their care for biodiversity?"—still need to be answered through sustained social scientific studies.

This volume also include two book reviews that have made a significant difference to our understanding of pre-colonial Hindu traders and the medieval Tamil devotional tradition respectively. Although Machado's book— *Oceans of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1850* – has been reviewed by other scholars elsewhere, Gail Presbey in this review places Machado's work on the involvement of Hindu traders in the slave trade within the context of its broader history by highlighting its absence in earlier historical accounts. In the second review of Archana Venkatesan's book— Nammāḻvār, *A Hundred Measures of Time: Tiruviruttam*— Soneji offers a deep insight into the critical and creative approach of Venkatesan to the translation and exegesis of a difficult Tamil poetic text.

The papers and book reviews presented in this volume (nos. 1&2) of 2015, I believe, are worthy of scholarly attention and I therefore invite scholars and advanced students to read and pursue the issues that are raised in them.

THE PHENOMENON OF RAMLEELA/RAMLILA THEATRE
IN TRINIDAD

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Abstract

Trinidad and Tobago is home to 240,100 Hindus who are descendants of immigrants who had migrated as labourers from India during the 19th and early 20th century. They keep Hinduism alive in the Afro-Christian-dominated region mainly by participating in religious activities such *Divali, Phagwa/Holi, Shivraatri* and *Ramleela/Ramlila*. As a form of free open-air theatre, *Ramlila* is staged only in Trinidad (and Tobago), although there are thousands of Hindus living in neighbouring Guyana and Suriname. Accordingly, *Ramlila* in Trinidad has become the oldest surviving form of outdoor folk theatre in the Caribbean. It also holds the unrivalled record of being the only play to be performed at dozens of venues for over 100 consecutive years in the region, and it is the only drama of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

This paper focuses on the emergence and evolution of Ramlila phenomenon as a cultural art form and socio-religious event and its dramatization as an open-air village theatre in the present time. The phenomenon is discussed within the theoretical perspectives explaining the concepts of "sacred spaces", "frames of analysis", "hyper-reality", "liminality" and "deep play". Furthermore, the paper expounds on the faith element, patriotism, cooperation and harmony as factors of preservation of Ramlila over the years in the new diasporic environment and its impact on the social and religious fabric of the East Indian community in Trinidad.

Keywords: Ramleela/Ramlila, indenture, indentured labourers, Hinduism, Ramcharitramanas, theatre

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Introduction: Hinduism in the Caribbean

In describing the cultural character of the Caribbean region, Gordon Lewis (1983: 3-4) stated:

> …every person of the Caribbean cast of *dramatis personae* has been a newcomer, the coloniser, the African slave, the sugar planter, the merchant, the overseer, the Asiatic estate worker, the colonial official, they came to be members of overseas communities that were culturally naked, devoid of inherited traditions and accumulated custom…

In this historically-created condition of "culturally naked" landscape, the development of culture in the Caribbean found its genesis. However, the cultural landscape in the Caribbean world did not arise out of nothing. In the words of Kenneth Parmasad, a Trinidadian author and poet (1999: 67-68):

> We have refashioned the landscape with our labor, …we have erected our sacred shrines and planted our flags in every corner, we have transformed the vegetation with new plants; the air vibrates with our rhythms.

The Indian migrants to the Caribbean and to Trinidad and Tobago in particular, were not devoid of "inherited traditions and accumulated custom". They brought their rich cultural heritage with them both in tangible (religious texts) and intangible forms (cultural beliefs, values).

The migrants were of varied religious and socio-economic backgrounds. About 85% of the indentured labourers, particularly to Guyana (238,909) and Trinidad and Tobago (147,592), were Hindus, 15% were Muslims and 0.1% were Christians (Vertovec 2000:44, Jain 1993: 23). Among Hindus, the various castes included *Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Bhumihars, Rajputs* and *Thakurs,* as well as farmers, *Ahirs* [cow-herders], artisans, fishermen and boatmen. Low-caste migrants like *Chamaras* and *Sudras* came mainly from South India (Mohanty 2014: 86, Clarke 2013: 20, Naidu 2007, Jayaram 2006).

Each district and village the migrants came from was associated with distinct religious traditions and worshipped a range of supernatural beings believed to be embodied in a village deity (protective in nature) as well as in saints, martyrs, ghosts, demons, witches, rivers, banks, wells, stones, animals, and trees in the village (Vertovec 2000: 46). These regional differences in Hindu religious beliefs and practices contributed to the heterogeneity of Hinduism in North India more than those in South India. The heterogeneity of the caste system also contributed to the diverse forms of Hinduism practiced among the Hindu migrants. For example, each clan within a caste had a special deity regarded as their clan god or goddess [*kuldevata*]. Thus, according to Vertovec (2000: 46-47) "the Hinduism that came to the Caribbean was a panorama of religious traditions that mirrored the heterogeneity of the Hindu migrants".

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Further intricacies in the Caribbean Hinduism emerged as the migrants forged brotherhood bonds during the long voyages across the oceans known as *jahajis* or *jahaji bhai* [ship brotherhood]. Caste, class and religious differences were broken down as brotherhood bonds became more prominent and sustained even when the migrants worked and lived in the plantations. In the absence of real kinship or blood relatives, they accepted each other as real family while living far away from home in the Caribbean (Mohanty 2014: 61-62).

During indentureship, working and living conditions in the plantations were harsh. Prejudice based on the Indians' physical appearance, language, religion and culture was common (Mohanty 2014: 62, Ally 2002, Wood 1968) and the British planters further degraded their social status by calling them "*coolie*" meaning cheap labour (Clarke 1993:121). Therefore, amidst the difficult working conditions, Indians sought comfort in their religious and cultural practices. Workers came together during the evenings and weekends to be entertained and relaxed at organised activities like wrestling matches, stick fighting, playing of traditional games (*kabaddi, guli danda, luha/lohar, eka buka*), singing of *bhajans* [devotional hymns], *alhas* [narratives] and reading from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Mohanty 2014:72, Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010, Mahabir 2007) which some migrants would have brought along. Plantation owners allowed Hindus to practice their religion on the sugar estates (Naidu 2007). Moreover, during 19th century, lengthy and elaborate plays like *Ramlila,* depicting the stories of the gods were being performed in the estates (*East Indians in Trinidad* 2015). In this background, *Ramlila* was emerging as an open-air theatre adding social, cultural and religious dimensions to the migrants' lives.

The colonial Caribbean Hinduism was also evolving and centred on everyday practices, temple life, domestic religions and individual worship (Mahabir, 2015, Mohanty, 2014, Edmonds and Gonzalez, 2010, Naidu 2007). Thus, we can say that Hinduism in the Caribbean was redefining and reconstructing Indian culture and religion in the New World.

Today, Trinidad and Tobago has a population of 240,100 Hindus (18.2% of the total population of 1,245,773). They also make up 51.25% of the East Indian population (468,524). Hinduism is the second largest religion after Roman Catholicism in this multi-ethnic society. Finding strength in their large numbers, Hindus in Trinidad have been celebrating religious festivals such as *Divali, Navratri, Ramleela/Ramlila, Phagwa, Shiv-ratri, Kartik,* and *Ganga Dhaara* since 1860s (Edmonds and Gonzalez 2010: 179, Mahabir 2007).

Emergence of Ramlila/Ramleela in Trinidad and Tobago

Ramleela, Ramlela or Ramlila (Rāmlīlā) is a theatrical folk performance based on the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. The central character in the *Ramayana* is Rama, the king of Ayodhya, a kingdom in Northern India, dating back to 7000 years. The *lila* or divine play depicts Rama's mystical birth, years of youth, marriage, exile and abduction of his wife, Sita, by the demon king of Lanka, Ravana, battle and release of Sita from

Ravana, the slaughter of Ravana, and finally Rama's triumphant return to his kingdom in Ayodhya (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2015).

According to historical accounts, the *Ramayana* was first composed by Sage Valmiki between 700 and 500 BC in Sanskrit. There are approximately 300 versions of the *Ramayana* including oral and written forms (Ramanujan 1991: 33). However, with the decline of the Sanskrit dramas during the 14th to 19th century, folk theatres shifted to performing in numerous regional languages (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2015). In North India, *Ramlilas* were made popular through the *Avadhi* version of the *Ramayana*, called '*Ramcharitramanas*' (meaning "The Lake of Rama's deeds"), written by Goswami Tulsidas in 16th century (Balkaransingh 2010: 92). These devotional texts in *Avadhi*, was accessible to all ranks of the society. Historically, a large percentage of Indians who came to Trinidad were from the provinces of North India (today's states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) and spoke *Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Magadhi* and *Maithili* (Richman 2010:78, Jayaram 2004: 149, Brereton 1981:103). Thus, chanting portions of the *Ramcharitramanas* in *Avadhi* and *Bhojpuri* was a core feature of *Ramlila* in Trinidad (Richman 2010:78).

According to Kamalwattie Ramsubeik, the President of the National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago (NRCTT), "…our ancestors, the indentured servants, came clutching the *Ramayana* under their arms…" (*The Sunday Guardian* 2008). Although, Indian Hindus carried only a few belongings to Trinidad, they are said to have brought the *Ramcharitramanas*, either in their memory or book form. It formed an integral part of their cultural heritage. Richman (2010:79) alludes that most Indians grew up hearing the text recited and watching it enacted.

Since their arrival to Trinidad, Hindu immigrants have adapted and maintained their religious traditions (Singh 2012: 55). Initially, *Ramlila* was performed in the rural villages of Trinidad. According to Rampersad (2013: 16):

> The first Ram Lila performances would have been held in an open community space that was available and accessible, and that was central enough for people from neighbouring villages to make it their annual pilgrimage destination. Ramleela was seen as a pilgrimage site, as it still is even today…

The earliest documented record of *Ramlila* in Trinidad can be traced back to 1880 in Dow Village, California, Central Trinidad. "Dow Village *Ramlila*" has an unbroken history of over 135 years of performance. In early days, it was an annual, open-air event held in a village recreation park or *maidan* which was a part of the Gordon Sugar Estate (Balkaransingh, 2010: 95) or in the area of a silk cotton tree on the outskirts of Dow Village (Sookhai 2007 cited in Riggio 2010: 126). The second oldest *Ramlila* celebration documented is the "Chaguanas *Ramlila*," later known as the "First Felicity *Ramlila*". This name was given to differentiate it from other *Ramlila* events such as the "*Maha Sabha Ramlila*" of Felicity and the "Pierre Road *Ramlila*" in Charlieville (located north east of the First Felicity *Ramlila*) (ibid: 96). "The First Felicity *Ramlila* and Cultural Group" has been in operation for almost a century. Other popular sites for *Ramlila* plays included St. John's Trace (Avocat), Felicity, Pierre Road, Sangre Grande, St. Augustine, and Cedar Hill (Ramsubeik 2013:12).

Hindu religious organisations such as the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), SWAHA (a non-profit Hindu organisation) and independent community groups have been instrumental in promoting and propagating *Ramlila* in Trinidad. Additionally, NRCTT has played a pivotal role in launching *Ramlila* nationally, regionally, and internationally since its formation in 2001.

The Evolution of Ramlila phenomenon as a cultural art form in Trinidad and Tobago

As an open-air theatre, *Ramlila* is exclusive to Trinidad and Tobago, despite the fact that there are comparatively more Hindus living in neighbouring Guyana (28.4%) and Suriname (27%) than in Trinidad and Tobago (18.1%). It is the oldest play performed annually for over 100 consecutive years in the region, and the only outdoor folk theatre of its kind in the Western Hemisphere (*Divali Magazine* 2013: 2).

Time and season

As an open-air theatre in Trinidad, *Ramlila* is believed to have emerged when the indentureship contracts ended and Indians sought to reconstruct their community life in a new society fashioned after their cultural traditions in rural India (Rampersad: 2013: 22). *Ramleela* consolidated itself as a popular festival during the period of the establishment of Indian villages in Trinidad in 1870s (Pamarsad 1999: 68).

As indentured labourers settled in the communities, they recalled how their evenings were spent in their native villages in India. They journeyed down memory lane to recall the festivals they had celebrated. Having no access to a Hindu calendar, they observed the seasons and celebrated some of the major festivals like *Phagwa* [Festival of Colours] and *Divali* [Festival of Lights]. In Trinidad, the blossoming of the poui trees [*Tabebuia serratifolia*] heralded the beginning of *Phagwa*, which corresponds to the spring season in India (March – April). Similarly, *Divali* is celebrated in the month of September or October or November. *Ramlila* is performed ten days before *Divali* (Interview March 21, 2015 Chase Village, Trinidad).

According to Jagessar Ganesh (2007), the President of the Dow Village *Ramleela* Association, "going to the bamboo patch and doing prayers and such things before we cut was an important memory of his childhood. Because the bamboo cannot be cut during *Pitri Paksh* (the memorial period of remembrance of the departed souls), which comes before *Dussehra*, and thus it has to be cut some three or four weeks before *Ramleela*" (cited in Riggio 2010: 127). This again gave a good indication of the time of the season when *Ramlila* was to be held in the years where no Hindu calendar was available.

Use of multiple languages in promotion of Ramlila

The languages used in the *Ramlila* plays have evolved over the years. According to a *pundit* of Charlieville (central Trinidad), "it is believed that the first performance of

Ramlila in Trinidad was rendered in a variety of Hindi called *Bhojpuri*. As early as the 1880s, *Bhojpuri* was spoken by indentured Indians in Trinidad. Therefore, memorising, understanding and chanting of the *Ramcharitmanas* in *Bhojpuri* as well as watching and acting in *Ramlila* plays were not an impossible task. The *choupais* [four line verses] from the *Ramcharitmanas* was read in *Avadhi* and explained in *Bhojpuri*. The text's verses were intelligible to nearly all, and many knew certain verses by heart. The *Ramlila* 'natak' or play was written by Ramdeo Benarsi, a Trinidadian, in *Bhojpuri* for the local audience". In late 1950s, the translation of the *choupais* was changed from *Bhojpuri* to Standard English as most of the children of the indentured labourers were being introduced to the English language through school systems. *Ramlila* plays in *Bhojpuri* were no longer understood by the younger generations. By 1970s, English had nearly replaced *Bhojpuri* for speaking with fellow Hindus, except elderly monolingual kin. (Interview March 21, 2015 Charlieville, Trinidad, Ramsubeik 2013: 12, Richman 2010:78, 82).

According to Raviji (2013:64), "in a single *Ramlila* performance, at least six languages: *Avadhi, Bhojpuri*, Hindi, Sanskrit, Creole and English are used". Additionally, a *pundit* from Charlieville further clarified that "Standard Hindi and Sanskrit are used in reading the sacred text, Creole English is used for explanation of the text, Bhojpuri in folk songs and devotional hymns [*bhajans*], and Hindi and English for narrating the "open-air" *Ramlila* plays" (Interview March 21, 2015 Charlieville, Trinidad). The use of multiple languages in the *Ramlila* plays can be seen as serving a three-fold purpose: to retain the sacredness of the text (Hindi and Sanskrit) in the minds of the audience, for community members to feel connected with the *Ramlila* play (Bhojpuris hymns), and making the texts meaningful and appealing to the young generation (Creole and Standard English).

An ancient style maintained

Trinidad has preserved the oldest style of *Ramlila* in the world which has been derived from the ancient villages in India. Three features characterise the ancient form of *Ramlila*. First, it has retained the open-air format. Second, the oral delivery is based on Tulsidas' version of the *Ramcharitmanas* which includes narrations, chants, music and song (Richman 2010: 79). Third, the performers display the *Lokadharma* performance in that they mime the dialogue. *Lokadharma* is a realistic and amateurish mode in traditional Indian performance which involves very natural expression and movement reflective of daily life which is passed down from generation to generation (Rampersad: 2013:22).

Ramlila as a site of pilgrimage

The absence of temples [*mandirs*] in the early indentureship period in Trinidad made *Ramlila* a popular site of pilgrimage for the immigrants. This annual pilgrimage instilled a sense of physical, mental and spiritual discipline among the immigrant devotees. They identified themselves with the story of the *Ramayana* and sought *darshan* [divine vision or the auspicious sight of the deity] from the divinity, embodied in the personification of Rama (Rampersad 2013: 18). Watching *Ramlila* enabled spectators to receive *darshan* from Lord Rama; and playing *Ramlila* allowed actors to steep themselves in Rama's deeds. Thus, both viewers and actors gained knowledge and merit (Richman 2010:80). Seeing the divinity at close-range in person motivated the devotees to attend *Ramlila* celebrations year after year. Other members of the community attended *Ramlila* to consolidate the community, as well as to be entertained, to relive and reconnect with mythical India (Rampersad 2013:18).

Selection of characters

In the early *Ramlila* performances, the role of divine characters [*swaroopas*] was specifically assigned to pre-puberty high-caste Brahmin males. Males with fair skin and soft feminine features were preferred to act instead of females (Rampersad 2013:22). Conversely minor roles were ascribed to actors [*patras*] who were both Brahmin and non-Brahmin Indians.

In the 1930s, only Brahmins were selected to play the major divine characters. They believed that gods like Rama should be played by *Brahmins* because of the conviction that they were pure and spiritually superior and more adept at fasting and performing rituals than non-Brahmins (Singh: 2012a: 75). They wanted to assert themselves as (potential) socio-religious leaders of the Hindu community. However, in the latter half of the 19th century, *Ramlila* productions were not strictly bound to caste distinctions. Actors were drawn from every stratum of the local village where *Ramlila* was staged. Non-Brahmins comprised of farmers, shopkeepers, small grocers and people who worked in the nearby Woodford lodge sugar-estate (Balkaransingh: 2010: 108, Richman 2010:99).

From the time *Ramlila* began in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1880s, there was always a shortage of *Brahmins* to play lead roles. Sometimes, non-Brahmins, including *kshatriyas,* were invited to perform the role of a deity in the play. However, divine characters continued to be played mainly by *Brahmins* (Interview March 21, 2015 Charlieville, Trinidad). Today, the actors are recruited from every segment of the society.

Gender and Ramlila

Before the 1960s, *Ramlila* was only performed by male actors who went through various preparatory rituals, including fasting for three months which was intended to purify the body and mind. During performance days, the principal actors would

abandon their homes and live in temples or small sheds [*kutiyas*] provided by the supportive villagers. The actors followed strict vegetarian diet and lived on the compound where *Ramlila* took place (Maharaj 2012). Women were not allowed to act in religious plays due to the censorious attitude among Hindus towards female performers and the ritual impurity assigned to menstruation (Singh: 2012a: 74). It was felt that women should be confined within the four walls of the house.

However, in the 1960s, females - primarily of pre-puberty age - were assigned minor roles. Women performed in communal scenes like Rama and Sita's wedding, *Bharat Milap* [Rama meeting his brother Bharat] and Rama's return to Ayodhya. By the 1970s, women were eventually selected to perform major roles in many of the productions. However, pre-pubertal girls were preferred over adult women due to the continued stigma of impurity associated with menstruation. By the 1990s, women had more socio-economic opportunities in the society. The increasing influence of Western and secular world views facilitated the inclusion of women as major performers in *Ramlila* (ibid: 76, Interview September 27, 2015 Cunupia, Trinidad, Ramsubeik: 2013: 14). Examples are seen in Baal Ramdilla's female chanters of Ragoonanan Road and Felicity (central Trinidad) and Lopinot's *Ramlila* production with an all-female cast. Almost all troupes now include female players.

Ramlila as a village theatre today

Today, *Ramlila* performances are dramatised in over thirty-five (35) venues across Trinidad. About twenty-two (22) groups continue to perform "on the ground" using huge amount of space and up to 100 players. The *Ramlila* plays run for 8 to 11 nights and are usually held from 6 pm to 8 pm nightly (Ramsubeik 2012, Dowrich-Phillips 2010: 17). In the mid-20th century, *Ramlilas* began in mid-afternoon and ended soon after dark. Villagers lived near the *grong* [ground] and the *tassa* [a form of kettle drum] signalled that opening time (Richman 2010: 82).

As an open-air form of theatre, *Ramlila* involves lengthy preparation and presentation. The success of the play depends on the meticulous preparation of the space, props, costumes and musical instruments. The production of *Ramlila* varies from venue to venue across Trinidad. Each production reflects the character of its village, *mandir* [temple]*,* and organising committee (Riggio 2010: 126).

However, in this paper, the First Felicity *Ramlila* will be discussed mainly due to its grand scale production and longest running play, only next to Dow Village *Ramlila.*

The preparation: performance space

In communities heavily populated by Hindus in Trinidad, playgrounds and recreational parks are converted into open-air theatres for the staging of the ten nights of *Ramlila*. *Ramlila* is currently performed in *maidans* [village playground] as well as on *manch* [traditional stage]. The *maidan Ramlila* runs for 10 to 11 days, whereas the *manch Ramlila* is staged for 3 to 6 days. *Maidan Ramlila* is most popular in Felicity and Dow villages. During the year, the *maidans* are used for village sports like football, cricket,

and kite-flying or for recreation. However, *Ramlila* totally transforms these recreational parks both in appearance as well as activity (Balkaransingh 2010: 96-97). The grounds (colloquially, *grong*), is demarcated from ordinary space by a bamboo railing, and undergo ritual consecration after which footwear must be removed before entering the *grong* (Richman 2010:79-80). The performance space is usually rectangular or spherical.

The day before the first day of the *lila* or the play, the *pundit*, with members from the Ramleela Committee and cast, will circumambulate the grounds. They would worship Mother Earth by sprinkling rice and water. They would invoke 10 cardinal points: East, West, North, South, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, Up, and Down. The consecrated inner playing circle marks the epic geography of the drama (Riggio 2010: 131).

In the village of Felicity, the *Ramlila* performance space measures about 150 feet long and 110 feet wide in the middle of the playground. A three-foot high oval-shaped fence of bamboo or metal is erected around the area to cordon off spectators from the performers. Tall bamboo posts are erected at regular intervals along the fence. On top of these bamboo posts flutter *jhandis* [triangular flags] in red, yellow, black and white. A 50-foot high bamboo flag pole is planted at the center of the oval-shaped "theatre". Numerous multi-coloured buntings and streamers extend from the middle of the central flag pole to the *jhandis* on the periphery of the oval barrier. The profusion of *jhandis* is a unique feature of the *Ramlila maidan* in Trinidad (Balkaransingh 2010: 98-99).

Within the oval fence, two raised platforms are built in the directions of north and south, representing the kingdoms of Ayodhya and Lanka, respectively. This is in contrast to the Ramnagar Ramlila in India where the positions of the kingdoms of Ayodhya and Lanka are along the North-east and South-west directions, respectively (Riggio 2010: 110). The kingdom of Ayodhya is royally painted in yellow and gold, and decorated with braids and sequins. Brightly coloured canopies shade the king on his throne. Behind the king, there is a painted backdrop depicting the palace. The kingdom of Lanka is decorated in shiny green, black and dark blue with red cloth and tinsel. The royal setting on the platform is same as the kingdom of Ayodhya. About 10 square feet is demarcated for each kingdom on either side of the stage. As the story unfolds each day, the props change to reflect the physical environment of the scene being depicted (Interview September 27, 2015 Cunupia, Trinidad, Balkaransingh 2010: 99, Riggio 2010: 132).

At the north-east of the oval space is a third platform with a huge tent over it which houses the musicians, the *pundit* [priest, who is the chief storyteller] and invited guests. The *pundit*, who is the chanter, is clearly visible, sitting in a raised, well-lit, roofed platform in the *Ramlila* ground. The chanter is symbolically and spatially pivotal to the content, shape, and pace of *Ramlilas* in Trinidad (Richman 2010: 79). The musicians sit and play on the carpeted floor. The sound system is located behind that third platform. In the south-eastern part of the performance space, another tent is erected which houses the *tassa* drummers who perform during the 10-day period. The inclusion of *tassa* drummers is another unique feature of *Ramlila* in Trinidad (Balkaransingh 2010: 99).

The other areas demarcated within the performance space include the *ashrams* [hermitages] of sages in the story, the river Ganges and *Ashok Vatika* (the grove of Ashoka trees) where Sita was kept captive in Lanka. The audience pavilion is located on the western side of the oval space, and food stalls are located on the eastern side. The "stage" is considered sacred during the entire 10-day performance of *Ramlila* (Balkaransigh 2010: 98, 100).

The preparation of the performers

In addition to the preparation of the physical space, the performers of *Ramlila*, also called *swaroopas* [players of divine characters] and *patras* [actors] undergo preparation for their respective roles. The performers are expected to be physically fit, especially if they are playing the role of *Hanuman* [monkey god] as well as the warriors. Rehearsals of their roles are also crucial. The performers pay close attention to the storyteller [the *pundit*] who teaches them to mime the narrations or *choupais* with corresponding gestures. The performers observe the rituals of purifying themselves because they believe that the heavenly deities descend on the *Ramlila maidan* and interact with the ordinary humans. The actors refrain from consuming meat and alcoholic beverages (Singh 2012a: 76, Mahase Maharaj 2007 cited in Richman 2010: 81, Interview March 21, 2015 Charlieville, Trinidad).

The performance

Most of the *Ramlila* performances run for two hours daily. Some begin in the mid-afternoon and end at sunset. Others, like the Felicity *Ramlila*, start from 7 pm and end at 9 pm. Every performance begins with a *puja* [worship]. All the performers arrive before time, fully attired to take part in the *puja*. They gather near the bamboo flag-pole in the middle of the performance space for the *puja* and the sanctification of the site (Richman 2010: 82, Balkaransingh 2010: 102, Interview September 27, 2015 Cunupia, Trinidad).

The village *pundit*, who is also the storyteller, conducts the *puja*. He narrates and sings *dohas*, *choupais* and *sorthas* directly from the sacred text, the *Ramcharitramanas*, and plays the harmonium simultaneously, accompanied by his musicians. The *pundit's* role is multi-faceted: he is the chief storyteller, lead vocalist, musical director, stage manager and spiritual guide. He performs all these roles in a standing position (Balkaransingh 2010: 106, Interview March 21, 2015 Chase Village, Trinidad). As chanter and director, the *pundit* provides English commentary during each scene. He not only recites an *Avadhi* verse to begin each scene, but also explains the religious logic that drives the scene, logic sometimes unfamiliar to today's youth (Richman 2010: 86).

"First Felicity" is one of the venues that begins its narrative with a *Jahajee leela*, dramatising the journey across the *Kalapani* (the oceans) carrying the Ramayana, the epic book (Riggio 2010:132).

After the *puja*, the actors enter the performance space dressed regally, holding their weapons, (e.g. bows [*dhanush*], arrows in quivers, swords [*talwar*], and clubs [*gadas or mukdar*]. They wear color-coded costumes signifying their roles as sages (gold with long beards) and deities (various colours). Hanuman's monkeys (red) or Lanka (black, dark blue, or sometimes green). The actors move around the field gracefully, keeping in rhythm with the *tassa* drumming. Their body movements are in harmony with the decorum befitting their roles. The actors hop and skip around the field. As the rhythm and tempo of the drummers change to a military mode, the performers shoot arrows and fight with *talwars* and *gadas* (Riggio 2010: 118, Balkaransingh 2010: 103-104, Interview March 21, 2015 Chase Village & Charlieville, Trinidad).

As the days progress, the props are rearranged to depict the respective geographical locations of the story. The scenes change from mount Kailash (the seat of Lord Vishnu and his wife, Parvati,) to the humble *ashram* [hermitage] of sage Vishwamitra. The action then moves to the *Panchvati,* represented by a grove of trees where Rama, his wife, Sita, and his brother, Laxman, spend their years of exile. The setting also includes Ashokvatika*,* where Sita is held captive by the demon king, Ravana, before relocating to the battle scene between Rama and Ravana, and finally, there is the erection of the effigies of Ravana, his brother Kumbhkaran, and son, Meghnath (Balkaransingh 2010:107, Interview September 27, 2015, Cunupia, Trinidad).

As the story accelerates to a climax, the battle intensifies with more vigour and aggression. Arrows fly into the air, sometimes close to the bodies of the players, and even the audience. The audience is excited as they witness the triumph of Rama over the defeat of Ravana and his army. The troops are often portrayed by children, who are allowed the freedom to chase, fight, die, then rise again, and continue with the battle in a gleeful playful fashion, while participating in a performance that has, as one of its aims, the education of the youth (Riggio 2010: 120).

In some villages, the performers march through the streets on the 10th day. They display the heads of the effigies of Ravana, his brother and son in the tray of a lorry. The heads are then affixed to the bodies of the effigies before they perish in flames (Interview March 21, 2015, Charlieville, Trinidad).

On the 10th day (the last day of the play) in the village of Felicity, after the destruction of Ravana, the champions Rama and his entourage walk through the streets in full dress regalia, accompanied by the stately rhythms of *tassa* drums. This procession symbolises the soldiers' triumphant return from Lanka to Ayodhya for the coronation of Rama. The villagers welcome the victorious Rama and his entourage. The stage extends to include the entire village (a radius of about 3 kilometers) which becomes sacred ground. Hindus believe that any ground upon which Lord Rama walks becomes consecrated (Balkaransingh 2010: 110, Interview March 21, 2015, Chase Village & Charlieville, Trinidad).

Theoretical perspectives on Ramlila as an open air theatre

In this paper, three theoretical perspectives explain the *Ramlila* phenomenon in Trinidad. These are briefly discussed as: "sacred spaces", "frames of analysis" and "hyper-reality, liminality, and deep play".

One of the distinctive features of *Ramlila* as an open-air theatre is that *Ramlila* grounds are considered as "sacred spaces" in all the venues across Trinidad (Maharaj 2012, Richman 2010: 79-80, Balkaransingh 2010: 110). Eliade (1959: 21-23), a renowned historian of religion, states that "sacred space is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world". Importance of spaces in festivals can also be seen in Schechner's (1993) study of *Ramlila* festival in Ramnagar, India. According to him, *Ramlila* is not a theatre of make-believe but of "hyper-reality". The imaginary takes over the real, creating a mythic-geographic space of the Hindu mythology in *Ramlila.* The characters and the spaces are rendered as sacred (as cited in Mokhtar 2012: 30).

Secondly, *Ramlila* plays depict broad patterns of community life. Goffman (1974), in his work on "Frame Analysis," illustrates how actions within a "frame" are governed by rules of behaviour separate from those governing the world of everyday actions in which they are embedded. In this context*, Ramlila* is a "frame" in which the real world is transformed into performance events. Scholars like Schechner (1988) and Turner (1986) have also used the notion of "frames" to describe the relationship between the performance events and the "normal" world (cited in Beeman 1993: 373).

Thirdly, there is a point in *Ramlila* when the distinction between the real and imaginary is lost. The characters playing the role of divine beings are transformed into their characters, and the audience surge to have a *darshan* of those "deities" (Rampersad 2013: 18, Richman 2010: 80). Baudrillard (2001) defines this phenomenon as "hyper-reality" when no distinction is made between the real and the imaginary. Also, Turner's (2007) concepts of "liminality" alludes to a period of in-between, a state of being neither in the real world nor in the imaginary, being in the threshold (as cited in Mokhtar 2012: 31). Additionally, Geertz (2005) lends the concept of "deep play" to denote the participants' emotional involvement in the main action. During the ritual performances and the dramatic enactment of *Ramlila*, the mundane loses attention as people are consumed by the "deep play". The Nobel Laureate, Derek Walcott (1992) have aptly captured the state of "hyper-reality", "liminality" and "deep play" when witnessing *Ramlila* in Felicity: "I am seeing the Ramleela at Felicity as theatre when it was faith". Even though, he was watching the play as depicted in the real world, it was the faith of the performers that was taking the performance to the next level.

Preservation of Ramlila as an open-air theatre in Trinidad

As a religious festival, *Ramlila* draws over 500,000 spectators (Hindus and non-Hindus) to about 35 different venues across the country to see the religious folk drama staged by over 30 groups who participate in the ten-days of performances annually. The events are advertised in the local media about a few days before the event (*Trinidad Express Newspaper* 2012).

The preservation of *Ramlila* in Trinidad for over a century is attributed mainly to the "faith" element among Hindus. Faith has been a major driving force behind the belief that good will overcome evil which is the central theme underlying *Ramlila*. The devotion to *Ramlila* has been vividly captured in the works of two Nobel Laureates in Literature, Derek Walcott (1992) from St. Lucia and Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (2001) from Trinidad and Tobago and other scholars (Singh 2012a, Brockington 1981).

In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, "Fragments of an Epic Memory" in 1992, Derek Walcott gives a colourful description of the Felicity *Ramlila maidan:*

> … It was as if, on the edge of the Central plain, there was another plateau, a raft on which the *Ramayana* would be poorly performed in this ocean of cane, but that was my writer's view of things, and it was wrong. I was seeing the *Ramleela* at Felicity as theatre when it was faith…They were not amateurs but believers….They believed in what they were playing, in the sacredness of the text …

As a non-Indian and non-Hindu, as well as a St. Lucian native, he was moved by the spectacle of *Ramlila* and the faith of the actors. His observation resonated the emotional intensity and sacred devotion displayed by the actors. In essence, it was not the mechanics of the drama that drove the actors to excel in their performance but their inner faith and mystical experience of entering into an illusion of assuming "divine proportions" (Singh 2012a: 76).

Naipaul grew up in Chaguanas where the "Felicity *Ramlila*," which Walcott describes, was performed. For Naipaul, the dramatisation of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* was a learning experience. In his collection of essays, "Literary Occasions" (2001), Naipaul writes:

> … Everything in that Ramlila had been transported from India in the memories of people. And though as theatre it was crude, and there was much that I would have missed in the story, I believe I understood more and felt more … the Ramlila had given reality, and a lot of excitement, to what I had known of the Ramayana (15).

The expression of faith has been also observed by the literary critic John Brockington (1981: 171):

> The whole thing is as much a religious ceremony as a dramatic performance, as well as having a significant role in the transmission of faith in Rama, among the illiterate masses (cited in Singh: 2012a: 70).

An informant attending *Ramlila* performances for a few decades believes that the content of the play has not changed, and the faith of the Hindu believers has continued:

> The *Ramayana*, story through the enactment of *Ramlila*, ignites a flame in the hearts of the audience that connects them to the Hindu "*dharma*" [faith] of their forefathers who came to Trinidad as indentured laborers. Many have adopted the western culture, but have continued to adhere to Hindu religion.

> It is this *dharma*, brought alive through *Ramlila*, has preserved our Hindu culture (Interview March 21, 2015, Chase Village, Trinidad).

As a driving force in the preservation of *Ramlila* year after year, faith is also articulated in the words of a prominent member of SWAHA Gyaan Deepak Kirtan Mandal of Trinidad and Tobago:

> Even though there may be a profound emphasis on the external attractions of Ramleela, such as the elaborate costumes, the scintillating scenes by the versatile actors, or the magnificence of the fire that consumes the effigy of Ravana, *Ramleela* can also deliver on intangible aspects which are not only felt once a year, but can continually be felt as an inward positive momentum that builds the human spirit (Boodram 2013: 36).

Coupled with faith element is the underlying belief by the performers and spectators that good will overcomes evil. This quality is another contributor to the preservation of *Ramlila* for over a century in Trinidad. In his "Literary Occasions" (2001), Naipaul writes about the burning of the effigy of the evil-king Ravana:

> … The pageant ended with the burning of the big black effigy of the demon king of Lanka. This burning was one of the things that people had come for; and the effigy, roughly made, with tar paper on a bamboo frame, had been standing in the open field all the time, as a promise of the conflagration … (15).

Every *Ramlila* performance climaxes with the burning of the effigies of Ravana, as well as his brother, Kumbhkaran, and his son Meghnath. People travel from far and wide to witness the closing scenes of the play which culminates with the torching of the effigies. The burning symbolises the victory of good over the evil forces. Parents instil moral lessons to their children. Also, Ravana's black effigy's depiction of evil and wickedness, is not specific to any caste, class or race (Singh 2012a: 72, Riggio 2010: 119-120 Richman 2010: 86, 87).

Devotion to one's religious beliefs is another factor in the survival of *Ramlila* tradition in Trinidad. *Pundit* Vishnu of Palmiste Park (South Trinidad) explains that Trinidad's distinctive role in preserving the *Ramlila* lies in this fact "The Trinidad *Ramleela* survived when it died out in other places... It survived here, so this was a patriotic thing" (Dutt 2006 cited in Riggio 2010: 115).

Cooperation and harmony are also contributors for the preservation of *Ramlila* in Trinidad. The spirit of cooperation was integral to the community life of Caribbean indentured Indians. The spirit of sharing, cooperation and mutual respect were inherent in the village life of India from where the Indians came. Rampersad (2013: 20) observes:

> It was not uncommon to find Hindus, Muslims and Christians coming together to host and support each other's cultural expressions. Ram Lila was one such performance that brought them all together, even if some participants were not devotees.

Ramlila has been preserved over the decades mainly because it has been able to incorporate topics relevant to Trinidad into the *Ramayana* tradition. Topics such as

white colonial oppression, racial and caste issues, negative influence of Western culture, and more recently, drugs, crime and violence, are dramatised in the *Ramlila* plays (Singh 2012a: 71).   Also, in the words of a *pundit* from South Trinidad, "We don't change the *Ramcharitmanas* to suit us: we make it applicable to our lives" (Richman 2010: 99).

Finally, the preservation of *Ramlila* in Trinidad for more than a century demonstrates that it is both a historical metaphor as well as an attempt by Hindus to reconstruct their community in a new environment in the diaspora (Walcott 1993: 4). As a historical metaphor, *Ramlila* presented a number of themes with which indentured Indians were able to identify. The central theme of Rama's exile from his kingdom equated with their separation from their Motherland, India and crossing the cursed "*kalapani*" to a foreign land. According to Naipaul (2001:16), "Rama's unjust banishment to the dangerous forest was like something I had always known". Rama's triumphant return represented the end of indentureship and beginning of a life of freedom and prosperity. The character of Ravana became a metaphor for those who threatened or oppressed them such as the colonial authorities, the estate bosses, or African-Trinidadian political leaders (Singh 2012a: 71-73).

Contribution of Ramlila to the social and religious fabric of the East Indian community

Ramlila has provided a space for young boys to participate in the "play" as well as to prevent them from engaging in deviant and criminal activities. *Ramlila* awareness motivates youths toward creating mind-awareness and intellect-equilibrium, and encourages spiritual practice, thus, resulting in a reduction of crime and wasted time (Bikramdass 2013: 42). According to a *pundit* of Charlieville, the boys are encouraged to participate in the play as well as to become part of the audience for 10 days. Being specially chosen for specific roles in the play gives them a sense of self-pride and enthusiasm. Involvement in the production also serves as a religious recreation for the youths of the Hindu community (Interview March 21, 2015 Charlieville, Trinidad). Additionally, teenagers and young adults players in Ramlila take pride in having renounced meat, salt, alcohol, or cigarettes during *Ramlila* scenes, which sometimes resulted in abstaining from meat altogether (Richman 2010: 101).

Ramlila engages youths in meaningful activities that contributes to their well-rounded development and educates them about their religion (Boodram 2015: 36). Studies have shown that youths who participated in *Ramlila* secured academic success and entrance into prestigious universities worldwide (Maharaj & Persad 2013: 38).

Ramlila has shaped the politics of the country. Local ministers attend *Ramlilas* to gain favourable political support from the Hindu communities. However, state funds are very little and sometimes non-existent. A survey conducted by the Dow Village *Ramlila* Committee indicated that political support is instrumental in the recognition and promotion of Hindu culture and impact positively on the success the *Ramlila* groups (Bikramdass 2012: 42).

Ramlila has established a bridge between people of two major religious groups in the Indian community, the Hindus and Muslims. Since the inception of *Ramlila* in Trinidad in the 1860s, Muslims have always been part of the audience. According to a local pundit, Muslims in the audience were so keenly tuned to listening to the *choupais,* that when someone made a mistake in his or her recitation of any verse, Muslims were quick to point it out. The Muslim members of the audience are well-versed in the oral version of *Ramayana* rather than the written text. Today, Hindus and Muslims mingle freely in Trinidad (Interview March 21, 2015, Charlieville, Trinidad).

Ramlila has shaped the social and religious lives of the Hindus. Themes on life cycle and religious rituals provided models for familial and marital relations and values associated with them. It has prompted Hindus to aspire towards high values and good behaviour. Furthermore, preparation and participation in *Ramlila* have fostered family-like bonds within the village. *Ramlila* has engendered a sense of community and self-esteem (Boodram 2013: 36). A well-known local historian, Bridget Brereton (2012) noted:

> As social realities changed for local Hindus, so different elements in the *Ramcharitmanas* were emphasised. As the traditional extended family, with the all-powerful father, the bullying mother-in-law and the down-trodden young brides, gave way to the nuclear family and more equal relations between men and women, those parts of the story which portrayed total obedience and deference to parents, and complete subordination of women, were down-played.

On the other hand, new social realities are emerging. By 1980s and 1990s, western influence has brought dramatic changes in the position of Hindu women in Trinidad. Consequently, an assertive, morally self-directed Sita is "constructed" out of the text, to suit the new realities of Hindu life (Brereton 2012).

Today, there is technological advancement in the productions of *Ramlila* plays across the country. Some villages are now running the sound-tracks from the popular television series "Ramayan" produced by Ramanand Sagar in 1986 in India. Traditional decorations of paper streamers, palm and mango leaves, and lighting of *deyas* [earthen wick lamps] are being superseded with synthetic and commercial decoration and lighting equipment. Moreover, the advent of Indian films has brought texts and gods to life, thereby deepening the aspirations for Hindu culture depicted in these films (Singh: 2012b: 62).

Furthermore, *Ramlila* has been able to develop without changing its content for over a century. Walcott (1992) aptly sums the above notion:

> The performance was like a dialect, a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it, but not a distortion or even a reduction of its epic scale.

The epic story of Rama continues to be narrated and dramatised for 10 days, shifting between Bhojpuri Hindi and English. It continues to evoke reverence from the

audience and the performers. Every year new dimensions are added to *Ramlila* which mirrors the changes in social and political arenas.

According to Schechner (1993), the theatrical experience is meaningful to the degree that it enables the spectator to feel the force of the original unmediated experience. The space is revered as "sacred" both by the performers and the spectators. The supportive mechanisms of the theatre like the costumes, lights, language, music and motion not only fulfil the poetic function but a phatic function. It is the aspect of communication that keeps all parties engaged with each other ("the deep play"). It goes beyond the immediate context ("hyper-reality and liminality"). It evokes and solidifies a network of social and cognitive relationship and fosters a triangular relationship between performers, spectators and the world at large ("frame analysis"). The phatic connection is fragile and constantly shifting (Beeman 1993: 386). Therefore, no single experience of theatre as in *Ramlila* is ever exactly like the one before. This indeterminacy is part of what makes *Ramlila* phenomenon forever intriguing.

Conclusion

As an open-air theatre in Trinidad, *Ramlila* has withstood the ravages of time, space and globalisation for over a century. The distinguishing feature characterising this oldest form of folk drama is evident in its preservation over the years. Although, there have been some changes, the arena stage, and the scale of production have remained unchanged.

The epic story enacted in *Ramlila* continues to appeal to Hindus and non-Hindus alike due to its universal appeal to real-life situations. *Ramlila* has been instrumental in breaking down the age-old conventions of caste, male supremacy and power and racial and ethnic differences. It has promoted inclusiveness, harmony and cooperation. *Ramlila* has been one of the institutions by which Hindus have used to reconstruct their community in a new environment in the diaspora.

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CHURCH AND STATE, RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE HINDU STANCE ON EDUCATION IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY TRINIDAD

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Abstract

This paper provides an historical account of church-state issues in education in Trinidad as it pertains to the government's thrust in Anglicisation and puts forward the formidable challenges the East Indian diaspora encountered for recognition to establish their own schools. The paper develops a key area of focus with an interrogation of the relationship between church and state and religion and politics. The Hindu initiative to build Hindu schools in pursuit of academic achievement merged with the entry of Hindus into frontline politics under the leadership of Bhadase Sagan Maraj. Hindu resistance to government's proposed state secular education system premised on the Aristotelian theory of the Ideal State was meant to avoid cultural absorption of Hindus and loss of their religious identity. The Hindu stance on education in mid-twentieth century Trinidad was strengthened through the merger of religion and politics, characterised by Hindu entry into political leadership as they sought redress for exclusion of Hindus from the total ensemble of historical principles and practices that governed church and state in education.

Keywords: Church and State, Religion and Politics, Hindu, Education

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"We cannot discuss churches, education or the role of the churches in education other than historically. Churches are not abstract entities; they are institutions involved in history. Therefore, to understand their educational role we must take into consideration the concrete situation in which they exist" (Freire 1985:1).

Historical background

Trinidad and Tobago was first colonised and brought under Spanish rule, French influence and later British rule in 1802. Following the emancipation of black slaves in 1834, Britain perceived that control over the education system would give added impetus to anglicisation as a core principle of English colonisation.[2] Provision for universal education in cooperation with religious bodies who were already providers of education was unavoidable. However, the search for initiatives that would further anglicisation in schools took precedence. According to Seesaran (1974:29): "The prestige of the English was obviously increased for the Anglican Church was officially recognised as the co-partner of the State in the field of education." On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church constituted a bulwark against anglicisation. By the 1840s, the British government recognised that the influence of French and Spanish Roman Catholic priests in denominational schools would serve only to propagate and intensify resistance to English culture, values and beliefs. Government, therefore, felt an urgent need for secular schools on account of the diversity of races, religions and languages in the belief that this type of schools would open accessibility to all (Ramesar 1980).

Governor Lord Harris introduced universal public education through the Ward School System in 1851.[3] Lord Harris stipulated: "That the instruction to be given at the training and primary schools be secular and without direct religious or doctrinal training" (Anthony cited in The Sunday Express: June 17, 1984:11). The stated principle of secularism was only meant to divert attention from the real problems of a complex diverse society. The Ward schools were intentionally designed to integrate and assimilate a rigidly divided multi-religious and multi-ethnic society on the basis of anglicisation. Universal secular education was also intended to reach the East Indian

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[2] Anglicisation can be appropriately defined as " the process through which non- English people become assimilated or bound into an English dominated cultural and ideological system" (Williams cited in Coupland 1990:19).

[3] Lord Harris was a Liberal politician and colonial administrator who served as the Governor of Trinidad from 1846 to 1856. The Liberal Party was one of two major parties in the United Kingdom in the 19th and early 20th century. It endorsed a political philosophy or worldview based on the ideas of liberty and equality. The Ward Schools Lord Harris introduced for all races were the forerunner of today's Government schools in Trinidad and Tobago (Anthony cited in The Sunday Express, June 17 1984:11).

immigrant population who first arrived in 1845 as indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations. The vast majority of immigrants were Hindus (80 percent) with a smaller group of Muslims (14 percent). Both Hindus and Muslims adhered to their respective religious practices, cultural heritage and language as strong determinants of identity.[4] A survey which had been conducted in 1868 recorded only 3 Hindu children among 1,221 pupils enrolled in the Ward Schools (Brereton 2005). This enrolment stands as strong testimony to the fact that Hindus as well as Muslims rejected secular education.

In 1969, Sir Patrick Keenan an Irish education expert was invited by the Secretary of State for the colonies to address the shortcomings of the education system in Trinidad which gave credence to the plight of Hindus and Muslims. Keenan (1969:38) documented: "I cannot recall to mind any other case of a people who having voluntarily came to a strange land which they have enriched by their labour, were – morally and intellectually so completely neglected as the Coolies have been during the past twenty-four years." [5] In addition to government's neglect of suitable provision for East Indian education, inefficient administration and inadequate supervision of the Ward schools coupled with anglicising and secular motives engendered strong opposition from a well entrenched Roman Catholic Church (Hamel-Smith 1983). Keenan who was himself a devout Catholic understood the concerns of his fellow Catholics and other religious bodies. Based on his recommendation, Governor Aurthur Gordon introduced a partnership between church and state in education in 1870.[6] Keenan's earnest desire was for East Indian to have an equal opportunity to participate in and to derive benefit from the advantages of this new national system of education.

While Keenan endorsed the establishment of separate schools for East Indian children under the management of the Canadian Presbyterian Missionaries who first arrived in Trinidad in 1868, he also warned against the dangers of proselytism. To the contrary, Fergus (1986:38) underlined: "The school system under the management of the Canadian Presbyterian Church took on the role of Anglicising the East Indian." The

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[4] Immigration from a country as vast as India with varying geographical conditions meant grappling with a complex and rather different facets of an ancient culture and its transplantation in a strange land. Between 1845 to 1917 approximately 143 000 indentured labourers came to Trinidad from the sub-continent of India channeled through two main ports, Calcutta in the North and Madras in the South (Jha, 2005).

[5] Immigration from India was also referred to as "coolie immigration". The term "Kuli" was also applied to other Asiatic peoples as well as to natives of India. In the Hindi language it meant "porter" or "labourer." It was also the official designation for the very lowest class of East Indian labourers (Grant 1923).

[6] Sir Authur Gordon was regarded as one of the most successful and hardworking Governors of Trinidad (1866-1870). Though himself an Anglican he intended to reduce the long-standing alienation felt by the Trinidad Catholics as well as the dispossessed East Indian immigrants (Singh 2002). The dual system of education between church and state still exists in Trinidad today.

Canadian Mission (CM) was the main provider for East Indian education into the twentieth century. However conversion, the passport to academic success, was too great a price for most Hindus and Muslims to pay (Samaroo 1982).[7] Around 1928 to 1930, Hindu and Muslim leaders understandably stood up against proselytism in CM schools with a strong demand for their admission into the denominational system on equal terms with the Christian churches. The Marriot Mayhew Commission (1931) advised that East Indians organise themselves on a model similar to the Boards of Management of Christian Churches as government was only prepared to grant aid to schools under a Head of Denomination (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Education, 1983).[8] The pertinent question was: Did either the Hindus or Muslims have a "Head of Denomination" on the island?

According to Campbell (1985:129) government's intention was " to use genuine divisions in the Indian community as an excuse for inaction on both the questions of a share of the ecclesiastical grant and a share of government's subsidies for education." The East Indian diaspora was faced with the formidable challenge to establish their own schools.The first non-Christian school to be recognised was the El Socorro Muslim School in 1949. This achievement served as an incentive for Hindus. In the general elections of 1950, Bhadase Sagan Maraj, emerged as a strong Hindu political leader when he won the Tunapuna seat as an Independent. His prime objective was to unite Hindus and build Hindu schools.[9] His political opponent, Dr. Eric Williams, Chief Minister of Trinidad and Tobago who would later become the first Prime Minister (1950:56) indicated : "In the last analysis, however, the question of the provision of State or denominational schools is a political one and must be determined by the British West Indian people themselves. The author merely indicates his preference for a fully State controlled system − that is, a democratic self-governing state." Hindus objected to a fully state controlled education system, especially one which unavoidably would be

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[7] In 1891, 27 percent of Christian Indians in Trinidad were Presbyterians (Ramesar 1994). However, there were some who only accepted conversion to gain employment as teachers in CM schools and upward social mobility (Seesaran 2002).

[8] The Marriot Mayhew Commission (1931) was appointed by the Secretary of State to consider educational problems on West Indian islands, including Trinidad. A major problem for Hindu leadership in education was the existence of two rival Hindu organisations: the SDA (Sanatan Dharma Association) and the SDBC (Sanatan Dharma Board of Control) apart from a third, the Arya Samaj. The SDA and SDBC organisations originated from controversy between the Presbyterians and Catholics who respectively approved and disapproved of divorce legislation. To compound the situation, the President of the SDA, Saran Teelucksingh was an Anglican and his counterpart of the SDBC, C.B. Mathura was a Catholic (Jain 2005).

[9] The realisation of Hindu schools was an imperative to eradicate illiteracy. The Census of 1946 recorded the illiteracy rate among East Indians as 50.6 percent which was far greater than any other racial group (Colony of Trinidad and Tobago, 1948).

operationalised on the continuation of a tradition of secularisation and Christian-European nationalist education.

A key area of focus in this paper is an interrogation of the relationship between Church and State, and Religion and Politics to conceptualise the interconnected and overlapping realms which strengthened the Hindu stance on education in mid-twentieth century Trinidad.

Conceptual framework: church and state, religion and politics

One of the main characteristics of democratic regimes in the Western world is the separation of church and state. The discussion of separation is often associated with a pronounced distinction between the concepts of theocracy and secularism. Theocracy is a form of government that supports privileged members of the ruling religion to the detriment of others (Croft 2013). Secularism can be defined as a modern political and constitutional principle that embraces two basic propositions. The first is that people belonging to different faiths and sections of society have equality before the law, the Constitution and government policy; the second proposition identifies that there can be no mixing up of religion and politics (Jayaram 1997). The two propositions imply conformity to a more general principle - the realm of validity of religion in the political public domain and the larger society is necessarily limited.

The separation of church and state and the secularisation it is intended to safeguard are widely accepted core principles of American liberal democracy.[10] The state has no role or authority in defining beliefs relating to God and worship. The free exercise of religion is guaranteed and meant to protect the people's right to express their views without fear of government's intervention (Peach 1986). The state is neutral between religions and permits citizens to believe or not believe in God, to engage or not engage in religious practices or to join religious organisations according to the freedom of their own conscience. While in contemporary American society the wall of separation between church and state remains standing, one of the main principles in classical or early Islamic theology is unity between church and state. For Muslims as well as Hindus and many other religious believers across the globe, there cannot be any unsanctified aspect of life that lies outside the scope of religious laws and persons who

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[10] At its core, American liberal democracy is based on the premise that democratic governance requires that those powers are moderated by the constitution. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution reads "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof " (Church 2004).

uphold them (Kilcullen 2012).[11] Hence, today the question arises – what possible basis is there for a separation of church and state or religion from politics?

An article entitled "Separation of Church and State" in the Boisi Center Papers on Religion in the United States (2007:20-1) underscored: "Church-State separation is at once simple in concept and irredeemably complex in practice. It is both a pragmatic strategy for maintaining religious vitality and a principled expression of the belief that theological and political legitimacy are distinct."[12] Current thinking on church-state issues in America reflect that in future the contours of religious and political liberty will continue to shift as compromises are made and cultures are integrated. In this instance, Hegel's culutralist approach is significant because it sidesteps the rigidity attendant on more judicial determinants to church-state separation (Buchwalter 2006).[13] For Hegel, what counts as a society's understanding of the separation of church and state, including the criteria for making that separation, is determined and validated in a process of public discourse. This process is characterised by overlapping consensus and an understanding of differences as a product of a functioning culture that embraces everyday religious and political orientations.

The contentious issue for secular democratic governments is whether a democracy is ideally underpinned by a society in which religion within the private realm has little influence on politics in the public sphere. One argument is that this type of government cannot regulate or prohibit private religious belief and worship or prevent citizens from organising politically and pursuing policy objectives which are aligned with their religious values, as long as they do not violate the constitution (Stepan 2001). Secular democracies must avoid establishing or showing favouritism to churches with no toleration of other religious beliefs; or swinging the balance so much in favour of separation of church and state that religious convictions are ignored, disrespected or persecuted.[14] According to Driesen (2010:4), "heavy-handed ruling against religion in democracies runs the risk of provoking counterproductive, anti-democratic forces which lie within religious fundamentalism and furthermore obscures the full breath of options

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[11] East–West comparative perspectives have shown that historically the relationship between church and state has taken a variety of forms from the religion dominating the state to the state dominating religion, one often trespasses in the realm of the other over power, authority, law and unavoidably education (Bereday and Lauwerys 1966).

[12] The Boisi Centre for Religion and American Public life is a research institute at Boston College committed to fostering scholarly discussion about the role of religion and how it functions in the United States.

[13] George Wilhem Friedrich (1770-1831) was a German philosopher who recognised the need for some separation of church and state while he appealed for a more integrated relationship between religion and politics.

[14] The latter perspective indicates that further separation of church and state is not necessarily associated with higher levels of democratic rights and freedom.

open for healthy relationships between church and state." This autocratic approach weakens the potential religious and political processes that can help to legitimise and strengthen new democratic regimes.

In order for secular democratic regimes to earn legitimacy, it would seem logical to root and ground essential democratic and political rights in the most sacred values of the predominant culture, with neutrality. Although he does not explicitly use the term "public good", Gill (2008) emphasised that common belief systems, including religious ones, can be useful for society both in the interests of politicians seeking legitimacy as well as religious leaders seeking relevance and survival. Secularism is not about curbing religious freedom, it is about freedom of thought and conscience and equality among religious believers and non-believers alike.

Therefore, the conceptual framework presented on church and state, and religion and politics leads to a central point: some separation of church and state is a fundamental requirement for a secular democracy, but the total removal of relgion from politics and vice versa, is neither required nor always ideal. In the light of the experiences of Hindus described in this paper, any radical separation of the latter is undesirable since a genuine vibrant democracy depends on the degree to which both domains complement and mutually enrich one another to be recognised as repciprocal guarantees of strength.

Hindu initiative in education and politics

The year 1952 recorded the unification of Hindus as a powerful collectivity deemed necessary for educational advancement provided in their own schools. The first act of Bhadase Sagan Maraj as a Member of Parliament was bringing together the two warring factions of the SDA and SDBC to form a stronger pressure group and Hindu religious organisation, which is known today as the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS). The SDMS was incorporated by Ordinance #41 on June 26, 1952 (The Trinidad Royal Gazette.Vol 121.No.52. June 26,1952:463). Bhadase was elected as the first President General of the SDMS. By virtue of his position, he also became Head of Denomination for Hindus. The SDMS was accorded recognition as a school building authority on July 25,1952 (Narayansingh cited in *The Trinidad Express*: February 26,1995:9) From its inception, the SDMS reflected a desire of the Hindu community at large to have meaningful participation in both political and educational opportunities that were taking shape in Trinidad in the mid-twentieth century. Political gain created a pathway for Hindus to build their own Hindu denominational schools and avoid their

incorporation into the proposed state secular system of education.[15] Hindus were now a more united force conscious of the impact of politics on Hindu initiative in education.

Following adult franchise in 1946, a brief period of alliance politics between some White and coloured politicians resulted in political bargaining to bridge urban-rural differences. The bargaining process favoured education to disadvantaged rural East Indians as Bhadase Sagan Maraj intended to transform the rural Hindu community from one of illiterate cane cutters to one with equal opportunities for access to schooling. The illiteracy rate in the Debe area was estimated to be over eighty precent in mid-twentieth century Trinidad. According to Seetahal-Maraj (1991:39), the Head of the Hindu Denomination, Bhadase Sagan Maraj had communicated to the Minister of Education and Social Services his intention as follows: "Hindus would not have to travel long distances to receive an education and instead education would be taken to them, even if it meant building a school in every trace of the Debe Penal area." The Minister was "a real friend of the Indians" and felt much sympathy for the Hindus in their struggle to access education.[16] Wherever Hindu schools were erected by the Hindu community, the Minister visited the sites and took the issue to Cabinet for approval. Within a relatively short four year period (1952-1956), the SDMS had built forty-one primary schools. The noteworthy evidence was that only eleven of them were granted financial assistance from the government due to poor building construction.[17] Evidently, the founding of Hindu schools was facilitated through alliance politics over the decade 1946-1956.

SDMS schools inevitably had become enmeshed in politics within the complex framework of Bhadase's religious and political leadership. In 1953, Bhadase Sagan Maraj launched the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and subsequently won five of the twenty-four seats in 1956 Elections, then renamed as the Democratic Labour Party (DLP). This meant that the President General of the SDMS, a Hindu Head of Denomination also became the official leader of the Opposition. Bhadase Sagan Maraj chose to consolidate his religious and political leadership by becoming the President of

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[15] Bhadase Sagan Maraj knew that if Hindus specifically were to occupy their rightful place in the ladder of economic and social advancement, they required not only western education, but education in an environment conducive to promoting and retaining the tenets of their faith (Mohammed 1995).

[16] Considering the political divide between the two major races, Africans and East Indians, it is meaningful to consider that the Minister was of Syrian origin and his wife was an East Indian (Singh 2011).

[17] For construction of many schools financial costs were absorbed by Bhadase Sagan Maraj himself who had acquired considerable wealth through war surplus trading. His political affiliations also propelled the SDMS school building programme (Bhadase Seetahal-Maraj 1991).The first six schools were established through additions and refurbishing of pre-existing structures built by the community on private land. Necessary renovations were completed at the expense of the community (Narayansingh cited in *The Trinidad Express*, February 26 1995:9).

the major sugar union, the ATSEFWTU (All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Trade Union). The PDP as a predominantly Indo-Trinidadian political organisation readily drew support from the Hindu rural masses. Meanwhile, Dr. Eric Williams led the nationalist struggle into the decisive formation of the People's National Movement (PNM) in 1956: a party which had immense support from Afro-Trinidadians in urban areas (James,1962).[18] The merger between Hindu religion and politics was accentuated by the racial divide and presented a unique and highly contentious issue for the newly founded Hindu schools.

The erection of Hindu schools featured prominently in the 1956 election campaign. Dr. Eric Williams described the SDMS schools in the rural East Indian areas as "political cells of the PDP" (Campbell, 1992). With reference to the the term "denominational politics" he emphasised: "Another group builds schools for the specific purpose of fostering political activity and demands as a condition of service the votes of the staff. In effect, the teacher is not voting for a party, but a member of a religious order" (Williams cited in PNM Weekly Vol.1. No.6.July 23, 1956:6). In its new role as a denominational body in education, the SDMS chose to respond. Simbhoonath Capildeo, in his capacity as an executive member of the SDMS as well as a Member of the DLP Opposition, believed that Dr. Eric Williams' quest for power had led him to take the extreme step of insulting the second largest religious group in the colony.[19] Capildeo seized the opportunity to reinforce that the SDMS of Trinidad and Tobago as a religious organisation of Sanatanist Hindus of the Colony, incorporated by private bills passed by the Legislative Council after due scrutiny; and furthermore "the participation of individuals in politics was the common freedom enjoyed by all persons in the colony" (Capildeo cited in *The Trinidad Guardian*, August 5, 1956:8).

Simboonath Capildeo aptly underscored: "For the 105 years of their existence and suffering, Sanatanists of this colony have had to sit by and watch their numbers decimated by proseltytising activities of non-Sanatanists. They have suffered in silence during these long years and to use the words of the 1946 census, their importance have been dwindling from year to year. When in 1952 they were granted recognition, we believed that this discrimination against us will end" (Ibid). Hindus felt that the Hindu community suffered discrimination in education to the extent that in the year

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[18] A similar configuration of divisions based on religion, race and geographical location is still apparent in national elections in Trinidad at present.

[19] To heighten the accusation, Dr. Eric Williams stated there was a link between the SDMS of Trinidad (a purely religious organisation representing Hindus) and the intolerant fanatic Hindu Maha Sabha in India which he charged was responsible for the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (Malik, 1971). Capildeo responded: "there never has been, nor is there any connection of any kind whatsoever between the Hindu MS of India and the SDMS Inc. of Trinidad and Tobago… The Trinidad MS was incorporated in May 1952, Gandhi was assasinated in January 1948. There could be no possible connection between the two events" (*The Sunday Guardian*, August 5 1956:8).

1956 "out of every 100 Indians more than 51 could neither read nor write" (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, Education Department, 1957). This argument not only supported the need for Hindus to have their own schools but sanctioned Hindu participation in frontline politics.

The PDP was said to have functioned on purely religious lines. Ryan cited in Vertovec (1992:84-5) affirmed that the SDMS was in fact a pillar of strength for Bhadase Sagan Maraj: "The PDP in fact had never really functioned as an autonomous political party with a constitution… It felt no need to organise since the branches of the Maha Sabha and the priesthood were easily converted into political instrumentalities." [20] To his political advantage, Dr. Eric Williams highlighted that he had no objection whtever to the participation of denominational bodies in politics, however "if the denominations enter the political arena they must develop and put forward political programmes" (Williams cited in Special Supplement to the *PNM Weekly*. Vol.1. No.8. August 9, 1956:1). Thus,while Dr. Eric Williams identified with the Hindu educational endeavour, his point of powerful attack was that the President General of the Hindu SDMS was also the Political Leader of the PDP.[21] As a Hindu denominational body, the SDMS felt that their initiative taken to build schools and eradicate illiteracy should have been readily endorsed and supported by the state.

The state acknowledged the right of Hindus to own schools but only on condition that the physical structures set up met the requirements of the law. According to Dr. Eric Williams: "The PNM emphatically states that Hindu schools…are entitled to the same rights, privileges, duties and obligations as the schools and colleges of all other religious denominations, subject only to respect for and conformity with the Education Ordinance and law of the land" (Williams cited in Special Supplement to the *PNM Weekly*, Vol. 1. No.10. August 23, 1956:6). While insistence on conformity to the law is understood, the political divide strongly impeded educational advancement of East Indians. The SDMS school building programme was severely hindered following the PNM victory at the polls in 1956.[22] Dr. Eric Williams was critical of the Hindu schools which he commonly referred to as "cowsheds." In response, Bhadase Sagan Maraj stated: "It is better to be educated in a cowshed than not to be educated at all" (Narayansingh cited in *The Trinidad Express*: February 26 1995, 9).

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[20] The SDMS lack of organisation and apparent conversion of religious affiliations into political forces stands as an illustration of the fact that for Hindus there can be no clear cut distinction between religion and politics or church and state.

[21] On the contrary, it was a deliberate attempt on the part of Bhadase Sagan Maraj to consolidate his religious and political leadership with a central focus on provision of education for Hindus.

[22] As many as ten Hindu schools already constructed were condemned and consequently never opened their doors. Yet Hindu children in rural districts remained without access to education (Singh 2002).

The period of alliance politics (1946-1956), contrasted sharply with the slow rate of rural development that characterised the subsequent period of "nationalist" politics when the urban based, predominantly African People's National Movement would be pitted against the rural-based, predominantly Indian People's Democratic Party in the 1960s and 1970s (Singh 1994:226). The success of alliance politics which facilitated the founding of SDMS schools essentially evolved from a merger of politics and Hindu religion.

According to Jain (2005:468): "To understand this alliance of politics and religion we must look to the major activity of Bhadase Sagan Maraj, his dynamism in creating East Indian educational institutions, something inevitable in the special configuration of denominational education in Trinidad." Bhadase's dual role as religious leader and politician did well for Hindu schools to feature in denominational education at a time when the nationalist movement recognised government schools as an integrating force for nationalism and de-emphasised differences based on religion within the education system.

Hindu resistance to a proposed state system of education

Having entered the denominational system of education, the SDMS carefully aligned with the position taken up by a well entrenched Roman Catholic Church against the introduction of a fully state controlled secular system of education. The state and the church in Trinidad were on opposing sides of the Aristotetian theory of the Ideal State as illustrated in the proposed "Great Debate of 1955" between Dr. Eric Williams and Dr. Dom Basil Mathews.[23] In conformity with Aristotle's perspective that the state is the supreme being , Dr. Eric Williams argued in favour of the introduction of state schools as follows: "I see in the denominational school the breeding ground for disunity; I see in the State school the opportunity for cultivating a spirit of nationalism among the West Indian people and eradicating the suspicions and antagonisms growing in our midst. I place the community above the sect or race" (*The Trinidad Guardian*, September 15,1991:1). Dr. Dom Basil Mathews stated his intention to engage in discussions with partial reference to Aristotle's philosophy which embraced certain aspects of the relationship between religion and the state. Dr. Eric Williams cleverly

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[23] Dr. Dom Basil Mathews pursued studies for the Catholic priesthood at Mount St. Benedict in Trinidad and was ordained priest in the Order of St. Benedict in 1935. Count Finbar Ryan, D.D. (Doctor of Divinity) had endorsed Mathews as Williams' opponent to discuss the concept of Aristotle's Ideal State and debate secular vs. denominational education in contemporary Trinidad.

indicated that in order to fully understand the debate, Aristotle's philosophy should be discussed in its entirety. The Catholic Church agreed to Dr. Dom Basil's expedient withdrawal from the debate.

In sum, Dr. Eric Williams desired an opportunity to expound upon Aristotle's argument that "the goal of the state" was to educate with a view towards "the ends of the state" and preservation of its institutions (Davidson, 1900). The achievement of this goal required consensus among all groups based on virtues to promote "the good life for the whole community" (Barnes 1995). The Catholics, the SDMS and other denominational bodies recognised that they were expected to accept a secular education system designed to serve the state without due consideration for values derived from their religious beliefs.

Thirty-six years later in 1991, Dr. Dom Basil Mathews presented a critque on the proposed "Great Debate of 1955." While Aristotle's ancient Greek philosophy focused on the belief that the state was the supreme being and a true citizen is loyal to the state, the Greek were non-believers who were opposed to Christian values. Dr. Dom Basil Mathews emphasised: "The state could not dictate to the church what their policies should be. The church was determined to retain the moral and spiritual values, and that could not be translated through the secular state" (*The Trinidad Guardian*, September 1991:1).[24] The stance taken by the Catholic church in 1955 strengthened the SDMS endeavour to defend the preservation of the Hindu religion against secularism and emerging nationalists attacks during the establishment phase of Hindu schools (1952-1956). The SDMS in an orthodox sense was now considered a church.

In the mid-1950s, the teaching of religion in government schools including Hinduism proved to be a controversial topic of debate. Dr. Eric Willaims conveniently interpreted as the truth, Mahatma Gandhi's perspectives on India's secular education system and the question of religious instruction. The former pointed out that the Indian educational system was a secular one and Mahatma Gandhi who was recognized as Hinduism incarnate, repudiated not only state-aided denominational schools but also religious instruction in state schools.[25] Dr. Eric Williams cited Mahatma Gandhi in his newspaper "Harijan" dated July 16, 1938 as follows: "Religious instruction in the sense of denominational religion has been deliberately omitted. Unless there is a state religion it

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[24] The statement rejects heavy-handed ruling by a secular state over churches. It was this approach that deterred Dom Basil Mathews from participating in the Great Debate of 1955; it negated the role of religious and political discourse in the advancement of democracy.

[25] Dr. Eric Williams drew upon a comparative perspective between Trinidad and India not only as secular states but in recognition that Hindu immigrants in Trinidad revered the religious teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. The comparison was meant to be politically expedient.

is very difficult if not impossible to provide religious instruction as it would mean providing for every denomination. Such instruction is best given at home." (Williams cited in Special Supplement to the *PNM Weekly*, Vol.1. No.8. August 9, 1956:2). Dr. Eric Williams pointed out that nine years later in April 1947, Mahama Gandhi had made his disapproval of religious instruction in state schools even more precise in the following statement: "I do not agree that government should provide religious education… The government can only teach others based on the main principles common to all religions and agreed to by all parties. In fact ours is a secular state" (Ibid). However, Dr. Williams' interpretation, Mahatma Gandhi's disapproval of religious instruction in secular state schools based on the principles of equality and consensus require futher interrogation.

It is noteworthy to consider Mahatma Gandhi's question focused on secular India: "Should religious instruction form part of the school curriculum as approved by the State?" (Kumar, 2007: no pagination). Gandhi outlined: "The state interference would probably always be unwelcome… A curriculum of religious instruction should include a study of the tenets of faith other than one's own. For this purpose the students should be trained to cultivate the habit of understanding and appreciating the doctrines of various great religions of the world in a spirit of reverence and broad-minded tolerance. This if properly done would help to give them a spiritual assurance and a better appreciation of their own religion" (Ibid). Gandhi's major concern was whether the state can effectively deliver a curriculum to embrace all relgions and promote desirable virtues. Hence, Gandhi essentially did not disapprove of religious instruction in secular state schools; he welcomed teaching the doctrines of all great religions of the world in India's schools if this could have been implemented.[26] In the Trinidad context, the SDMS concurred with other denominational bodies that religious instruction should be offered in government schools. However, Hindus strongly desired their own schools cognisant of the fact that both government schools and even Church schools were already aligned between the motivations and existing outcomes of Anglicisation under the Christian-European Model of education.

Given the inextricable link between religion and language in shaping a society, Dr. Eric Williams was firm in his conviction the teaching of the Hindi language in Hindu schools would accentuate racial and ethnic differences to the detriment of building a national identity.[27] In his address entitled "Education for Democratic Citizenship in the Caribbean"

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[26] Mahatma Gandhi's argument is consistent with the view that a secular state should not curb religious freedom or expression ; instead a secular democratic government ensures freedom of thought and conscience must apply equally to all religious believers as well as non-believers.

[27] The core argument was that a new nation necessitates the cultivation of a new national identity and language played an important role in nation building and identity formation in a muti-religious, multi-racial and ethnically diverse Trinidad .

(1955), Dr. Eric Williams denounced the teaching of Hindi in schools thus: "It is not that this recognition is wrong, as I have said before, non-Christian denominational schools can't be wrong, and Christian denominational schools right…but it will be suicidal to aggravate this religious diversity and religious difference by a linguistic differentiation." (*The Trinidad Guardian*: May 20, 1955.p.6). A rhetorical question emerged from this argument: "How can any responsible person argue that in 1955, the second, third generation offspring of people brought here 100 or even 40 years ago, who do not speak Hindi in their homes , have a right to demand Mother tongue in the schools?" (Ryan 1972).[28] Unavoidably, this linguistic controversy elicited widespread public reaction.

East Indians organised themselves and raised a formidable issue based on the principle of fairness: "If Latin, Spanish and French are expected to be learnt by children in the schools and the expenditure for teaching them is met from the general revenue, then why should not the Indian who forms thirty-seven percent of the colony's population be given the facilities to learn Hindi?" (*The Trinidad Guardian*: May 20 1955, p.6.). Dr. Eric Williams and some members of the Creole community were hostile to what they described as an upsurge of "non-Christian religion" associated with a vigorous and claimant insistence on "indigenous culture."[29] InterestingIy, a Christian Indian, who was a member of the PNM responded that many Indians consider Hindi "the mother tongue." He cited Milton Kerwitz[30] as follows: "language as the carrier and preserver of a people's culture may be of primary importance in sustaining living ties between the alien and the country from which they emigrated." (*The Trinidad Guardian*: June 7, 1955,p.8).[31] From the very inception of indentureship in 1845, Hindus and Muslims had recognised the need for language preservation to maintain ties with Trinidad and India.

Hindus feared cultural absorption and loss of their Hindi language and religious identity within an "integrated secular state school system" under the Afro-based PNM party. Dr. Eric Williams thus drew upon a distinction between the words Hindu and "Indian culture" as stated by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, in his book entitled "The Dicovery of India": " It is incorrect and undesirable to use "Hindu" or "Hinduism" for Indian culture…A Christian or Muslim could, and often did, adapt himself to the Indian

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[28] Notably, the linguistic diversity of the first Indian immigrants was a characteristic feature of the immigrant community. However, Indians in Trinidad, similar to those in other sugar colonies, gradually came to create a common tongue, sometimes referred to as ''plantation Hindustani'' (Tinker 1974). They intended to develop and retain this shared language among themselves.

[29] Throughout the colonial period, "Creole" was an identity that distinguished someone born in the Caribbean rather than in Europe or Africa. It therefore meant evolving cultural, racial and social forms (Khan 2004). It also meant non-alignment with the need for preservation of Indian indigenous languages.

[30] Author is unable to trace the identity of this person.

[31] The statement signifies that language is not just a means of communication, it is an expression of culture and who people are as individuals, communities and nations with due regard for cross-cultural exchanges.

way of life and culture, and yet remained in faith an orthodox Christian or Muslim. He had Indianised himself to become an Indian without changing his religion." (Special Supplement to the *PNM Weekly*: Vol.1. No.8. August 9, 1956:1).[32] Dr. Eric Williams aspired to place national integration above any denomination or race. While this might be seen as admirable, the fundamental question that arose for Sanatanist Hindus was –" integration on the basis of what?" (*The Trinidad Guardian*: January 16, 1955:3b). Bhadase and others warned that the Ramayana and Hindu Dharma were in danger if non-Hindus held political office (Vertovec 1992). The onus was on the present generation of Hindus to mobilise political support and take a stance on denominational Hindu education towards creating a pathway for positive social change.

The Hindu stance on education

The Hindu religion emerged as a battleground with intense focus on a two dimensional struggle which solidified the stance on education taken by Hindus to provide denominational primary schools. First, Hindus sought the establishment of their own schools and intensification of Hinduism in resisitance to government's proposed integrated secular system of education premised on the Christian-European tradition. Simultaneously, the Hindu religion became a driving force for the mobilisation of political participation to ensure the realisation of Hindu schools and academic achievement among generations of Hindus for economic and social advancement towards a better quality of life.

In view of the incursion of nationalism and the controversies surrounding cultural absorption, the SDMS felt that the imperative of academic achievement in Western education for Hindus must complement a cultural awakening towards the consolidation of a collective Hindu identity (Singh 2002). First the wide range of geographical origins of Hindu indentured immigrants from different parts of Northern India to Trinidad thwarted genuine attempts to arrive at consensus on socio-cultural variations. The continuous arrival of new immigrants complicated deliberate initiatives towards social and cultural amalgamation among Indians on the sugar estates. The situation placed a serious responsibility on Hindu schools to institutionalise Hinduism and create a more homogeneous culture which would stand above religious divisions.[33] The SDMS

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[32] While Jawaharlal Nehru's comment is accurate, religion has proven to be inseparable from culture and its social, historical settings.

[33] It should be noted that caste divisions (with the priestly Brahmans at the top and leather working chamar caste of the lowest untouchable groups) among post-indenture Indian communities were generally only a reflection of a person's social status than a governing influence on it. Status was derived from factors such as wealth, occupation, political power and education (Mayer 1967).

intention was to bring about religious change through education aimed at continuous social and ideological reconfiguration of Indian communities.

The SDMS Parishad (Council of Pundits) accepted the mantle of leadership and worked towards coordination of activities between temples and schools through standardisation of a publication for Hindu pupils called "My Prayer Book", a collection of Sanskrit mantras (with English translations) and tenets of Hinduism.[34] Given that the academic component of the curriculum of Hindu schools was modeled on the Christian- European educational pattern operative in the society, Bhadase Sagan Maraj was firm in his conviction that teachers in Hindu schools should be teachers of religion as well (Seetahal-Maraj, 1991). SDMS pundits and teachers taught Hindi classes and religious instruction to enable pupils to know their sacred texts, namely the Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita and Mahabarata. There was also curriculum inclusion of Indian civilisation, India's cultural heritage and art forms such as music, dance and drama. Western education was complemented by opportunities for retention of traditional eastern culture.

Hence, SDMS schools offered Hindu children an education within a community of religious and cultural experiences conducive to the development of Hinduism and an awareness of a collective Hindu identity which government schools could not give.[35] Activities in SDMS schools and affiliated temples led to the founding of branches which required locally-composed boards to coordinate religious activities. The boards and their practices were overseen nationally by the SDMS which convened Trinidad-wide assemblies of local representatives. These operations provided for Hindu education and religious organisational activities which meshed with Hindu participation in front-line politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Conclusion

The year 1952 marked a turning point in the history of the Indian Diaspora in Trinidad on account of Hindus' access to education in their own schools. A critical part of this history involved the interplay between church and state, religion and politics. First, the SDMS attained significant control of orthodox Hinduism which afforded an opportunity for Hindus to constitute a "Church" in the technical sense within the denominational

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[34] The Prayer book is still used in both primary and newly established secondary SDMS schools in Trinidad.

[35] The state was left with no alternative but to recognise the invaluable incorporation of Hindus into the the dual system of education given their collective and communal solidarity in organised religious and political endeavours.

education system. In the battleground for education against the state, the Hindu religion was not only "standardized" but it also became "politicised." Although Bhadase's role as a religious leader came into conflict with his political agenda, he understood the socio-political forces at work and seized the opportunity to unite Hindus into a powerful group than they had previously been. The experience did well for Hindu schools to feature in denominational education at a time when the nationalist government recognised schools as an integrating force of nationalism and de-emphasized religious and cultural differences within the educational system.

The concept of the Aristolean Ideal State was clearly premised on citizens' obedience to secularism over religion. It was an entirely different approach to embrace the Hindu denomination in the thrust towards a state system of education, especially one which would unavoidably be operationalised on favouritism for the continuation of a tradition of Christian-European nationalistic education. In stark contrast to church and state separation in the Western tradition, the emerging reality was that everyday religious beliefs and practices of Hindus potentially supported politics in a movement forward for Hindu denominational education. Furthermore, while church and state concerns the relationship between institutions that are structurally independent of each other, religion and politics deal with two spheres of activities in the life of the same persons. As members of a religious group as well as citizens of the secular society, Hindus felt that their ethical convictions for social equality rooted in the Hindu religion gave them a legitimate right to engage in political activites and take a stance on education.

The researcher concludes that working out relations between church and state, and religion and politics in secular democratic states, presents many complexities and overlapping realms within which practical solutions can be found to strengthen religious and political processes. Hindu religion and politics merged to seek redress for Hindu exclusion from the total ensemble of historical principles and practices that governed church and state in education. Of profound significance, Hindus understood that the merger of Hindu religion and politics could open the way for the establishment of Hindu schools to deliver education to generations of young Hindus. The founding of Hindu schools inspired not only academic achievement but religious institutionalisation, cultural homogeneity and a distinctive Hindu identity. Today, in the 21st century, the curriculum of Hindu schools in Trinidad affords Hindu children an opportunity to maintain religious and cultural attachments to their motherland, India; and to develop a deeper understanding of how to preserve the shared memory of the heritage of their ancestors' struggles and achievements.

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HINDUISM TRANSFORMED? A CASE STUDY OF HINDU DIASPORA IN THAILAND[1]

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Abstract

Hindus, living outside their place of origin, preserve their local traditions and at the same time make amendments depending on the situation in their host country. This paper attempts to study the Hindu diasporic community in Thailand, a country with a strong Hindu presence. The main focus is on the transformations Hinduism has gone through among the diasporic community living in Thailand for several generations. Although the Hindu diasporic community constitutes only a small fraction of the total population of Thailand, the evidence of strong incorporation of Hinduism into Thai Buddhism, makes the case of the Hindu diaspora in Thailand an important study. The Hindus of the diaspora are an important group contributing immensely to the local foreign environment but they have been understudied in the past. This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting Thailand as a home away from home for the Hindu diaspora. Hinduism has gone through several transformations in this country however important elements, central to the traditional Hindu beliefs, remain

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unchanged. This paper will be divided into three parts: brief history of Hinduism and its presence in Southeast Asia; the transformation in Hindu beliefs in a foreign land; and the extent to which traditions have been preserved among the diasporic community.

Keywords: Diaspora, Hinduism, Thailand, Rituals, Transformation

Introduction

Defining Hinduism can be a daunting task. However it is referred to as *sanatana dharma* meaning the eternal tradition. This refers to the belief that the origin lies beyond human history, and the truths were revealed and passed on through the ages and were recorded in the *Veda.* A clear definition is difficult because there is no known founder, no central revelation, and no institutional structure that fits with the huge diversity of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. In fact the emergence of the term Hinduism, to refer to the religion of India, itself has been under debate among academics. Such scholars as, Robert Frykenberg (1989), Christopher Fuller (1992), Brian Smith (1989), and Heinrich von Stietencron (1989), among others claim that Hinduism was a term coined by British writers in the 19th century. Scholars however find no clear evidence that the term 'Hindu' was being used as a religious identity prior to its imposition by the Europeans in the colonial period (Smith 1959; Stietencron 1997). Thapar (1990) makes similar claims that Persian writers used the word *al-hind* to refer to India and to the people living beyond the Indus River as 'Hindus'. The term was used as a geographical and ethnic term and only later was it used to refer to those practicing native religions of India who were neither Muslims nor Christians (pp 6-10). On the other hand scholars such as Lawrence A. Babb (1986), Alf Hiltebeitel (1991), Peter van der Veer (1994), Cynthia Talbot (1996), and David N. Lorenzen (1999) have questioned the claims that Hinduism was invented or constructed by the colonizing Europeans in the 19th century. They claim the term existed and was in use way before the 1800s. Lorenzen (1999) for example, in his essay suggests that a Hindu religion theologically and devotionally existing in the *Bhagavan-gita,* the Puranas, and the philosophical commentaries on the six *darsanas* formed a stronger self-conscious identity because of the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus during 1200s and 1500s, and thus was firmly established before the 1800s.

In this paper therefore I argue that the term 'Hinduism' is very vague and Hinduism as a religion is extremely broad. This leaves room for changes in religious beliefs and traditions as Hinduism encounters the local beliefs and traditions central to the host environment where it travels. To assess these changes or transformations, the Hindu diaspora in Thailand is presented as a case study. This article is a result of qualitative research based on observations and interviews conducted with the representatives of the Hindu communities in Bangkok.

Hinduism in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has shared long historical relations with India for over 2000 years that has resulted in the spread of Hinduism[3] in this region along with the South Asian practitioners (Coedès 1968). The Indian settlement in Southeast Asia has been documented since the 6th century BCE and has contributed greatly to the development of the national culture of the Southeast Asian countries. Several factors contributed to the Indian settlements in Southeast Asia including the Kushan invasion of India around the 1st century AD and their rule, expanding to include much of north India, exerted pressure on the local population to emigrate overseas. Other factors included the opportunities that opened for high caste Indians to pursue their fortunes outside India (Coedès: 21-22). Other scholars suggest that the Indian contact with Southeast Asia was more commercial and that migrants brought the traditional arts, religious beliefs, and customs along with them. This historical linkage prompted more Indians to move to Southeast Asia to continue the old traditions of trade relations thereby forming the Indian Diaspora in a foreign land. The historical presence of Hinduism in Southeast Asia, going back to over 2000 years, was able to create an important religious sphere for itself in a predominantly Buddhist country like Thailand. Thailand has a population of over 90 percent Buddhists, yet many Thais engage features of Hinduism in worship that comes from these historical, cultural and religious influences.

The motivation behind Indian migration[4] to Thailand ranged from frustration to attraction. The factors included social, economic, or political coercion prompting people to leave their homeland in search of better opportunities. The Tamils and Gujaratis migrated in the late 1800s and were mainly involved in the gem and textiles trades. A larger scale migration took place in the 1890s from northwest India followed by a wave of Sikhs and Hindus from Punjab (Bangkok's... 2009). According to Kernial, & Mani (1993), in the 20th century, the most important factor bringing migrants to Thailand was economic. This included poverty-ridden life in the villages due to droughts, crop failures, and unemployment. Additionally, political problems like the India Pakistan partition in late 1940s contributed to increasing numbers of Indians, both Hindus and Punjabis, from the Pakistan side moving to neighboring countries. The facts that Thailand was a peaceful country and that family links already existed with earlier settled immigrants made it easier for the politically displaced families to create a new home in Thailand. Religion was important to these migrants as it provided social and financial support from the already established religious organizations of the earlier migrants. Others relied on support from their previously settled family members. Religion then acted as a force binding the different groups (former and more recent) of Indian

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[3] Coedès uses the term 'Hinduism' to refer to the belief system practiced in ancient India. As mentioned previously this term is a relatively modern invention.
[4] I use the term "Indian migration" here as people belonging to different Indian communities migrated to Thailand. These include the Hindus, Gujratis, Parsis, Sikhs, and Tamils among others.

migrants together. A general feeling among the Indian community in Thailand is that living here is like being in a home away from home.

It is important to study religions and diasporas because of the strong connection they share. Smart (1999) suggests three reasons for this. Firstly, the study of diasporas and their methods of adjustment provide understandings of the general forms of religious transformation. Secondly, diasporas may themselves affect the development of religion in the homeland whereby the wealth, education and exposure to foreign features transferred from diasporas may have important effects on organization, practice and even belief. Lastly, with the greater number of diasporas in the modern world, 'multiethnicity is now a commonplace' (Smart 1999:421 cited in Vertovec 2009). Smart is right and his ideas are visually evident in the case of the Indian diaspora in Thailand. This paper will attempt to make parallels to Smart's ideas with the Indian diaspora in Thailand. Vertovec (2000) and Parekh (1993) reinforce Smart's idea that religion is an important part of the Indian diaspora. The strong roots of belonging come from Hinduism, an ethnic religion of India (Parekh 1993: 140). Over 85 percent of overseas Indians worldwide are Hindus who refer to their homeland as 'Mother India' with deep spiritual and emotional longings that are fulfilled through routine visits and pilgrimages. Several religious minorities exist within the Indian diaspora including the Muslims and the Sikhs. The heterogeneity and diversity are the factors that distinguish the Indian diaspora from their counterparts in the respective countries (Parekh, Singh & Vertovec 2003: 4-5). What really bind the Indian diaspora together are the emotions, acquaintances, customs, feelings and attachments for their motherland that appeal to generations of emigrants. These create a sense of belongingness and a unity in diversity through a unified identity of the motherland. Indian media plays an important role in preserving this identity among the ethnically diverse Indian diaspora by promoting the Indian values, customs, and the links to the motherland.

Methods of adjustment to the host environment and the resulting transformations

The long presence of Indian diaspora in a foreign land forces them to experience great social, religious, economic, political, and cultural changes. The focus here is on the changes evident on the cultural and religious context. Living away from home may induce the diasporic community to abandon some traditional practices, adopting new ones and evolving a distinct way of life overtime. To further elaborate on this, the next section will be subdivided into firstly changes with adjustment to a new environment for the Hindu migrants and secondly the changes resulting from the Thais encountering Hinduism. Luchesi (2004) in her study on the Tamil community in Germany provides an insight into the importance of community formation through religious and cultural organizations. She shows how the places of worship for the Tamil community started to emerge firstly in rented places and later moved to more permanent facilities all over Germany. These places served as an inspiring force bringing people together, connecting them to the homeland, and helping to create an idealized image of the

homeland for the later generations in a foreign land. Thus Luchesi shows how religious places help to maintain a collective memory of the homeland through shared practices. Similarly in Thailand, Sikhs have their own Gurdwara known as the Sri Guru Singh Sabha located in Phahurat (Little India) which is known to be the largest Sikh temple in Southeast Asia. The most well-known South Indian Hindu temple is the Sri Mahamariamman temple on the Silom Road that is not only popular among the diasporic Hindus but also among the Thais and the Chinese. Popularly known as Wat Khaek, the Sri Mahamariamman temple was built in late 19th century in what is now the financial district of Bangkok. The current priest at this temple is from the fourth generation of the Tamil immigrants (Bangkok's.... 2009). Traditionally people belonging to the various Indian communities gather every Sunday at their respective places of worship to perform religious duties and these gatherings are evidently important social gatherings for the respective communities. For example the Sikhs gather in Gurdwaras and Hindus gather in their temples on Sundays in Bangkok. It is important to note that a community gathering on a Sunday in Thailand is an adaptation from the modern Western society. In India, Sunday gatherings are not so common. Worshippers in India generally visit their respective places of worship either based on their convenience or on days that are dedicated to personal gods. For example, devotees of Hanuman will pay their respects by visiting a Hanuman temple on a Tuesday and devotees of Durga do so on a Friday.

Since most countries including Thailand follow the Western calendar, Sunday is the day off, and so after a busy week of work, it proves to be an ideal day of the week to organize gatherings where people can revitalize and reunite with their fellow community members. Special religious activities like sermons, rituals, festival celebrations, or community meals are organized to bring the community together. One example of a special religious activity is the Navratri (nine days festival dedicated to Goddess Durga) organized every year to worship Durga. Special offerings, nine days of daily recitation of Durga prayers, and *Homa* on the first and last days of the festival are organized with the collective help of community members. Navratri is an important Hindu festival and is celebrated by Hindus living in and outside of India.

In addition, special events like once a year *Gau-dan* (donating a cow) are also organized annually at the Hindu Samaj temple (the Hindu temple in Bangkok). The members of the Hindu community, through donations, support the event where a cow, an animal of great importance to the Hindu religion, is donated to a Thai temple. Even during the ancient times, kings and others donated cows to Brahmins as *Gau-dan* during one's lifetime bringing great merit to the individual. The Hindu Samaj temple organizes *Gau-dan* in order to provide the diasporic Hindu community in Thailand with merit accumulating opportunities thus making them feel at home away from home.

Contribution of diasporic community to the development of Hinduism in Thailand

The earlier section provided some insights into the fact that Hindu religious traditions performed in Thailand by the diasporic community have actually changed when compared to similar traditions followed in India. As Vertovec says, religious and cultural reproduction generally takes place over generations. Issues related to maintenance, modification or discarding of religious practices are raised among the later generations that are born and brought up in a foreign land. The religious and cultural practices, cultivated by parents at home, religious education at school and participation at places of worship shape the identities and activities of the second and third generation of migrants. The identity and activity between the second and the third generations set them apart from their immigrant parents (2009: 139-40). In places outside of India, the basic Hindu ritual procedures have been curtailed, refashioned, or eclectically performed. In most places, Hindu rites are popularized in order to appeal to the young, diaspora-born Hindus compared to the more conservative elders. For example, in Malaysia Hindu leaders complain that the inclusion of music produced in India has created the 'disco-ization' of Hindu rituals (Willford 1998 cited in Vertovec 2009: 142).

Sinha's (2005) work on the making of a new Hindu deity and rituals in the urban temples as part of the popular Hinduism in Singapore is another example of the refashioning of Hinduism. She shows how a new god in the diaspora is created, along with the integration of western practices like celebration of Father's Day and collective cake cutting in the temple as a new form of devotional expression. She shows how Muneeshwaran, a rural guardian deity in Tamil Nadu (brought to Malaya over 170 years ago), has been reconfigured as a god of urban residents and is popular with the third and fourth generations of Singaporean Hindus. His worship encompasses free and liberal use of deities, symbols and ritual practices associated with other religious traditions as mentioned earlier.

Additionally in relation to the idea of sacred space in Hinduism, Jacobsen & Kumar suggests that among diasporic Hindus, India is no longer exclusive in claiming Hindu sacred places. Many local places, and rivers are seen as sacred to them (Jacobsen & Kumar 2004 cited Penumala 2010: 421). In Thailand, the Chao Phya River has long been seen as a sacred river for the Thais as sacred as the Ganges. As Suarez recorded in 1690 Engelbert Kaempfer, a resident in Ayuthaya mentions the Siamese view of the source of the Chao Phraya River as rising just like the Ganges in Bengal from the Himalayas and its various arteries penetrate Cambodia, Pegu, and Siam and join with the Ganges (1999:156). With this sacredness, some of the Hindu rituals in Thailand that are to be performed at the Ganges are conducted at the Chao Phraya River instead. A Hindu Brahmin[5] in Bangkok does not see any problem in doing so as 'all rivers are sacred and you can't afford to visit India every time a ritual needs to be conducted at

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[5] Interviewed on 13 February 2014 in Bangkok. The Brahmin prefers not to be named and so I will refer to him in this paper as Pandit ji.

the Ganges'. Upon death, in Hindu tradition, the ashes of the deceased collected after cremation have to be immersed in the Ganges so that the deceased attains moksha. However with the limitation of time and financial resources, many families scatter the ashes of the deceased in the Chao Phraya River where a Brahmin may be invited to conduct the ceremony.

Another example of a reshaping of Hinduism in Thailand is related to the sacred bath in the Ganges. On special events devotees (especially of the priestly class) take a bath in the Ganges to wash away their sins. These events include Ganga Dusshera and Kumbh Mela, among others. Ganga Dusshera celebrates the birthday of Ganges and Kumbh Mela is the most extravagant festival that attracts millions of pilgrims to take a ritual bath in the river when the water is said to become nectar (King 2005: 171-72). As Acharya[6] mentions, for diasporic Hindus in Thailand, due to time and financial constraints, it is not always possible to travel to India to participate in these events. To fulfill the religious needs and also to maintain the Hindu traditions, Hindu Samaj[7] temple in Bangkok organizes a bathing ritual for the devotees at the sea in Chonburi[8] instead. As a committee member[9] explained, the temple makes necessary arrangements, ranging from transportation to religious goods and Brahmins accompanying the devotees to help perform the bathing ritual which is open to anyone willing to attend. According to the same committee member, this is done so that the younger generation will become aware of the traditions and continue to practice them in the future. However also evident is that an increasing number of Thai devotees have been joining the event over the years. When asked, Acharya explained that for Thai devotees ritual bathing is a new religious experience evoking the sense of sacredness within them.

Multi-ethnicity a commonplace

The Thai population has been exposed to Hinduism from the early times as Hinduism was incorporated into the Thai society by the elites historically[10] and has been an important part of the Royal rituals. This historical integration of Hinduism in Thailand and in other parts of Southeast Asia has been widely studied by scholars like Coedès (1968), Hall (1981), Sandhu, & Mani (1993) among others and therefore my focus here will only be on more recent developments.

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[6] Interviewed on 22 August 2015 at Hindu Samaj, Bangkok. He is a Brahmin at Hindu Samaj but prefers not to be named and will be referred to as Acharya.
[7] Established as Hindu Sabha in 1925 by Pandit Raghunath Sharma in order to serve the religious need of the diasporic Hindu community. The current Hindu Samaj (also known as Dev Mandir) was inaugurated in 1969 by their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand.
[8] A province on the Bay of Bangkok at the northern end of the Gulf of Thailand.
[9] He is a diasporic Hindu who has been a member of the Hindu Samaj working committee for almost a decade. The interview with him took place on 20 August 2015 at the Hindu Samaj Temple in Bangkok. He prefers not to be named.
[10] For more information see Coedès *1968*, Kam-Aek 2007.

One of the very popular Hindu deities of worship in Thailand is Brahma a Hindu god. It is interesting to note that Brahma is not a deity of worship in India any more but is very popular among the Thai devotees. The most significant and popularly known shrine devoted to Brahma is the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok built in 1956 to ward off the difficulties faced in the construction of the Erawan hotel. In the Hindu tradition Brahma is one of the Trimurti (trinity) with Siva and Visnu being the other two gods. In the Thai context, however, Brahma is seen as a powerful deity. The Erawan shrine has given rise to several smaller shrines which business and homeowners build and use to make daily offerings to please the deity believed to be the owner of the land. Households maintain smaller shrines dedicated to the spirit of the place while businesses maintain shrines dedicated to Indian deities that have been incorporated into the Thai Buddhist tradition. The daily offerings at these shrines are believed to bring success to the businesses. It is interesting to note that these Hindu elements have become so integrated into the Thai society that they have been localized. Brahma, for example, has only a handful of temples dedicated to him in India where counting the total number of temples itself is a daunting task. However Brahma in Thailand has gained importance with the Erawan Shrine and is commonly seen by the Thai devotees as a Thai deity.

With this popularity, the Hindu Samaj temple in Bangkok enshrined a Brahma statue. The purpose was to accommodate the demands of the host society. Because of Brahma's popularity among the Thai devotees, the Hindu Samaj temple decided to import a Brahma statue from Jaipur (India). A ceremony was conducted where the statue was taken in a procession from the Hindu Samaj temple to the Erawan Shrine and brought back and enshrined. The event was attended with great enthusiasm by both the Thai and Hindu devotees. However, according to Acharya, since Brahma is not a deity of worship, there have been no festivities or rituals performed to venerate him in the Hindu Samaj temple since his installation a decade ago. More recently a goddess, Gayatri, has been enshrined next to the Brahma image upon the request of one of the Hindu devotees. According to the legend in the Varaha Purana, Sarasvati (wife of Brahma) is addressed as Gayatri, the goddess of learning who is worshipped regularly once a year (Wilkins 2003: 111). She is considered the mother of the Vedas and the embodiment of the Gayatri Mantra. Acharya explains that Gayatri in India is better known from the Gayatri Mantra and it is uncommon to find her statues in Hindu temples. However a Hindu devotee who worshipped Gayatri as his personal deity brought in a Gayatri statue from Jaipur. According to temple sources, it took 2 years to get the committee members of the temple to give their consent to install the Gayatri statue which finally took place in February 2014. When asked for the reason for such a long wait both Acharya and Panditji provided the same explanation— a priest who must act as the host as well can be the only one to enshrine a Gayatri statue. In addition only those belonging to the three upper castes namely priests, warriors, and merchants can perform rituals related to Gayatri. Therefore it is not common to find Gayatri statues enshrined in temples in India.

When asked how religious the Hindus living in Thailand are, Panditji said he sees a diminishing importance of religious belief among the Hindu community. He rather sees the local Thais more involved in Hindu rituals and practices than the diasporic Hindus. According to him this is because the younger generation, born and brought up in Thailand, are influenced by the surrounding Buddhist environment and do not carry the Hindu beliefs as their forefathers did. Many visit Buddhist temples and perform Buddhist ceremonies as a way of assimilating into the host society, which they see as home. Panditji and his fellow Brahmin friends are invited more by the Thai devotees to perform Hindu rituals and ceremonies. He sees the popularity of Brahma and more recently Ganesa as the reason behind the increasing involvement of Thais in Hinduism. This has lead to the creation of a popular Thai Hinduism in a predominantly Buddhist country.

In addition to Brahma, the other deity who has become very popular in recent times in Thailand is Ganesa. Ganesa has been widely accepted throughout India as a god for warding off obstacles. He is more popular in Maharashtra, the western state of India where a festival dedicated to him, viz., Ganesa Chaturthi, is celebrated with great enthusiasm. The festival has historical and political importance. The tradition of community celebration was started by Chatrapati Shivaji (a warrior king of the Maratha Empire in the 17th century) as a public event to promote traditions and nationalism. The festival was the highlight of all the seasonal festivities until the Marathas were defeated in the 3rd Anglo-Maratha war in 1818. Bal Gangadhar Tilak revitalized it in late 19th century, with a message of freedom, to struggle to bring unity and to revive the patriotic spirit. All classes of the society regardless of the caste differences were brought together against the British. Thus, Ganesa Chaturthi was a festival for all castes or classes. Cultural events including dance, dramas, musical nights and religious gatherings were organized during this ten day festival. Since then the festival has become of great significance to people in Maharashtra especially Mumbai where the city virtually shuts down as millions of people celebrate the festival. The festival has gained further popularity through television broadcasts and movies with Mumbai being the center of Bollywood. This popularity has spread to places where Indians have migrated, with Thailand more recently becoming one of them. In the past the celebration was limited to Indians in Thailand coming from Maharashtra, but over the years with the influence of the media, and Bollywood in particular, the festival is gaining popularity among the Thai devotees as well.

As the president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in Thailand, Susheel Saraff, said in an interview with the Times of India:

> *Thailand is the only place in the world where there are more non-Hindu followers of an Indian God. The Shiva temple (in Ramindra), Utthayan Ganesa temple (in Nakhon Nayok) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad celebrate Ganesa Utsav with enthusiasm. Participation by locals gets bigger every year. (8 September 2013)*

The VHP Thailand started celebrating Ganesa Chaturthi in Bangkok seven years ago when they were granted permission from the Thai government to do so. The government however had a condition that the deities should be eco-friendly. Each year the number of participants increases and, to accommodate the increasing number of Thai devotees, the prayers are made available in both Thai and English. Idols of Ganesa are made and ceremonies are performed. At the end of a week of festivities, the idols are brought out in procession and taken for immersion in the Chao Phraya River. These processions have become increasingly attractive to the Thais and with the influence of the media more devotees join such events. With more Thai devotees becoming aware of the festival through the media, different Hindu temples and shrines conduct Ganesa Chaturthi to serve the religious needs of the believers. The celebrations are more Thai than Hindu with the incorporation of spirit mediums and Buddhist style offerings. The participation of Thai spirit mediums, businessmen and transvestites at the Hindu festivities is a new phenomenon. An increasing number of transvestites join Hindu rituals as it provides them freedom to express their devotion. Because transvestites are marginalized in Buddhism, they are attracted to other religious beliefs that give them freedom of devotional expression. Their presence is very much evident in religious processions organized by Wat Khaek during festivals like Ganesa Chaturthi and Navratri. Additionally, businessmen joining these festivities have added the financial element that leads to commodification through the demand of services of the Brahmins, and trade in icons and other religious goods.

Although a number of changes have taken place in Hinduism among the diaspora, some changes remain unacceptable by the Hindu Brahmins. I have observed a number of times that the Brahmins at the Hindu temples in Bangkok do not allow spirit mediums to demonstrate their supernatural abilities on the temple premises. A number of times, spirit mediums exhibiting their supernatural abilities have been asked by the Brahmins to leave and sometimes even banned from entering the temple premises in the future. When asked, all of the 5 resident priests at the Hindu Samaj explained that the common Hindu belief is that the human body is not pure enough to enshrine spirits of any gods. Therefore spirit mediums promoting the idea that their bodies are enshrined with Hindu gods, is not acceptable. In the Thai context, however Hindu gods are very popular among the spirit mediums[11]. This provides evidence that spirit mediums have incorporated Hinduism into their spiritual lives in Thailand but this is still not accepted in Hinduism.

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[11] *See* Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 'Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*: The National University of Singapore, Vol. 36. No. 3, pp 461- 487.

Acculturation with the host environment

Baumann (2004) argues that the preservation of native religious traditions that are different from the dominant religious affiliation of the host country does not hinder the social integration of the group. Instead, keeping the heritage of difference and merging with the host society's socio-economic patterns go well together (2004: 77). The different Indian communities in Thailand maintain their native religions and cultures in addition to taking part in the religious activities of the host country. In addition, securing jobs and their futures exert pressure on members of diasporic communities to acculturate into the new host environment. However, there is a two-way acculturation in the case of Thailand. The Thai Royal ceremonies are infused with Brahmanical rituals that were incorporated by the elites in the past. Representatives from the Indian community have been present at these royal ceremonies to observe and participate in the rituals. Additionally, the Buddhist holidays are also observed at the Hindu temples and special ceremonies are organized where an active participation of the members of the Hindu community is evident. With effective acculturation, the newly and earlier settled Indians have acquired Thai language proficiency and have a picture or a poster of HRM the King in their homes to show their respect and their inclination to be part of the Thai society. On the King's birthday, the Hindu temples have special observances, which sometimes include processions organized by the temple authorities.

Traditions preserved or modified?

The Indian traditions are a mix of a range of diverse traditions that differ from one ethnic group to another and from one place to another. However there are some traditions commonly found all over India. The tradition of welcoming guests has always been an important part of Hindu tradition. Guests are seen as gods visiting one's home and a common saying known to every Indian is 'Atithi Devo Bhava" meaning guests are god. Visiting guests are given utmost respect and special foods are prepared. The tradition continues wherever Indians go and are known for their hospitality to guests. Other important traditions are the rites of passage including birth, maturity, marriage, and death. In a Hindu family, a newborn baby is welcomed with a ceremony by tasting honey as the first thing upon birth. This is followed by a naming ceremony done ten to twelve days after birth and later with the ear piercing (for girl babies) and first haircut ceremony, which are considered highly significant. The other rite of passage is observed by a sacred thread ceremony which is held in some Hindu families when a boy reaches maturity. Upon reaching adulthood, a marriage is arranged which may vary from region to region. However the common elements are the marriage vows made around the sacred fire and the elders and the priest blessing the couple. The last rite of passage is the death ritual that has a uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas. However there might be variations between sects, regions, castes, and family traditions. A priest traditionally performs the death rites. The eldest son in the family according to the Hindu traditions cremates the body of the deceased. The traditions related to all the

rites of passage are kept alive among the Indian diasporic communities. The form of performing the rites might change but the contents remain the same. For example the naming ceremony is traditionally done at home in India but becomes a bigger event for Hindus in Thailand where the ceremony is held in hotels with parties thrown for relatives and friends to join in. The sacred thread ceremony is rarely held among Hindus in Thailand. Panditji mentioned that it is very rare for him to be invited to conduct the sacred thread ceremony. However as confirmed by yet another head priest (who is referred to as Ajarn) of a popular Hindu temple in Bangkok, the marriages are conducted traditionally but have become more lavish at the same time. He explains how marriages in India last for several days but in Thailand the ceremonies are curtailed to just one or two day events depending on the convenience of the families. The rituals are curtailed and confined to only the most important rituals in a Hindu wedding. They also involve western elements such as cake cutting at wedding receptions and the Thai element of seniors (boss or superiors) of the bride and the groom adorning the couple with flower garlands. It is to be noted that in the Hindu tradition, the bride and the groom themselves adorn flower garlands during weddings but under the Thai influence the tradition has changed to the seniors offering garland to the couple as a form of their blessing to the newlywed couple.

The question then arises as to how these and many other Hindu traditions are preserved among the diasporic communities. The parents play an important role in the preservation of traditions where children are taught and exposed to them by regular participation in these different rites of passages. In addition children are sent to International schools run by Indians so that they can learn the home language (Hindi or Punjabi) in a foreign land. Moreover, the food culture is maintained where Indian food is served during the weekdays while weekends are generally left for people to eat outside depending on their likings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to assess the transformation of Hinduism among the diasporas with an emphasis on the Hindu diasporic community in Thailand. Defining Hinduism is difficult as it is a mix of several traditions and belief systems. Scholars have been debating whether the term was introduced by the colonizing powers to refer to people believing in the religions of India or was already in use even before the European encroachment into South Asia. Hinduism is therefore vague and leaves a lot of room for changes that can be brought in by those believing in Hinduism. My focus in this paper was not to get into that debate but rather to concentrate on the existence of Hinduism and diasporic Hindu community in Thailand and the changes that have been brought about in the traditional Hindu practices by this diasporic community residing in Thailand. India and Southeast Asia share a long history of trade relations. These relations gave rise to an integration of Hinduism into this region and particularly into Thai society. The historical trade links, earlier settled Indian migrants, and the presence

of Hindu gods in Thailand allowed the new Indian migrants to feel at home away from their home. However several changes in the Hinduism of Thailand have been evident and in this paper are assessed according to Smart's analysis of the three reasons why religion and diaspora share a strong connection. Several categories of changes are evident including those resulting from an adjustment of the Hindu diasporic community to the host environment and those resulting from the Thais encounter of Hinduism. Several of these changes were assessed in this paper with a conclusion that even though many changes have taken place, some elements, like customs, traditions and beliefs important to Hinduism remain unchanged. The Hindu diasporic community has been able to maintain and preserve its Hindu identity in addition to acculturating with the demands of the host society.

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THE TRADITIONAL HINDU PERSPECTIVE ON ENVIRONMENT AND M.K. GANDHI'S VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

The 21st century has posited many challenges for man, the environment issues being the most urgent. Many alternatives are being suggested to provide solutions and insights to deal with the gnawing challenges of environment, one being the role various religious traditions can play in resolving the complex environmental concerns of today. The religions of the world through various aphorisms teach us how to motivate ourselves and others to act on global climate change, if only we listen, talk and synthesize. The article examines the rich treasure trove of various ancient Hindu scriptures which contains words of wisdom to protect the different components of environment. In the present century, the relevance of M.K. Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence and truthfulness are acknowledged the world over. The influence of Hinduism is profound on Gandhi. He experimented with and wrote a great deal about simple living in harmony with the environment. The article also examines the influence of Gandhi's views on environment.

Keywords: Environment, Hinduism, Gandhi, non-violence

Introduction

Sarvamavrityatishthati ('abiding in everything, he exists')–Bhagvata Gita, 13.13.

The current worldwide ecological crisis has only emerged during the past four decades and its effects have been felt within southern Asia more recently. As the region copes

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with decreasing air quality in its cities and degraded water in various regions, religious thinkers, academicians and activists have begun to reflect on how the broader values of religious tradition might contribute to fostering greater care for the Earth.

The religions of the world have traditionally expressed concern for environment and its creatures. They have accorded some moral significance to other creatures, and proposed some ethical responsibilities on the part of humans, although these ethical dimensions are usually secondary or inferior, relative to responsibilities to other humans.[2] The numerous dos and don'ts laid down by ancestors in day to day activities point to the belief system of the harmonious co-existence of nature and human beings. They also had better realization as to what the ill-effects of the disharmony will be, when it arises. However, for reasons yet to be best understood, religious concerns for the environment faded with the rise of modern society.

The beginning of Environmental ethics as a new discipline of philosophy began in the early 1970's. It challenged the anthropocentric or human centered view which assumed moral superiority of human beings to members of other species on earth.[3] An intricate relationship is observed between Environmental ethics and values closely related to the behaviour of man towards the conservation of nature. Values, as Bharucha notes, lead to a process of decision making which leads to action. For value education in relation to the environment, this process is learned through an understanding and appreciation of nature's oneness and the importance of its conservation.[4] It is an intellectual code of behavior that regulates man's relationship with nature. It cannot be imposed by law but has to be articulated, systematized, codified and brought to the doorsteps of each and every individual.

The religious hermeneutical lens seeks answers from the scriptures, texts, rituals and, myths. O. P. Dwivedi in his 'Dharmic Ecology'[5] paper looks at religion as a strategy that puts into practice the Hindu concept of 'eco-care'. The paper is divided into two sections, the first section examines how the traditional Hindu concept of nature contains words of wisdom to conserve and protect nature and the second section explores the dynamics of M.K.Gandhi's philosophy towards environment ethics.

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[2] http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/environmental_ethics/lesson10.html,   retrieved September 25, 2015.

[3] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/#IntChaEnvEth, retrieved September 25, 2015.

[4] Bharucha, Erach. (2005). *Environmental Studies*. Hyderabad: Universities Press, p.230.

[5] Dwivedi, O.P. (2000) '*Dharmic Ecology'* in Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP for Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, 2000), p. 4.

Section I

The relation between Hinduism and the environment

The tradition of frugality in Indian everyday life has been well documented[6] and there are many anecdotal accounts of it. The common man in India has through the ages utilized and conserved the resources through recycling, re-using and deriving value out of whatever he could. However, as the population of India increases and as the modern lifestyle continues to demand consumer goods, the balance of sustainability is being shattered. With a renewed appreciation of the five great elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether) -a new interpretation of social duty (dharma) expanded to include the ecological community and a recollection of an abstemious ethic, the Hindu tradition can develop new modalities for caring for the earth.[7]

Environmental ethics forms the core lore of Hinduism. Hindus revere the rivers, trees, animals and birds. Nature is worshipped in India and it has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. However, its rich natural resources are under heavy pressure due to a growing economy and exploding population.[8] A need is felt to seek the role religions can play in fostering moral thinking and acting about environment. Several scholars have opened up discussions about the role religious communities can play in protecting the environment. Does worshipping nature inspire Hindus to act in an environmentally conscious way? Is there any relationship between their reverence for bio-divinity and their care for biodiversity?

The religious traditions of India are rich and varied, offering diverse theological and practical perspectives on the human condition. The *Isa Upanishad* tells us that 'all this is for habitation by the Lord'[9], which means, everything from a blade of grass to the whole cosmos is the home of God. God lives in every corner of existence. Therefore, all creation is sacred, nature, life, mountains, rivers and animals are to be revered. This sense of the sacred in creation is fundamental to Hindu's relationship with nature.[10]

The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* contain messages encouraging the protection of the environment and inspire a sense of respect for nature. Sacred texts emphasizes that nature is not to be conquered. Humans are to live in harmony with nature and recognize that the divinity resides in all living elements, including plants and animals.

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[6] http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/history_overview.htm,retrieved December 20 2015.

[7] http://fore.yale.edu/religion/hinduism/, retrieved April 29, 2015,

[8]   India   with   its   population   of   1.2   billion   is   second   next   to   China, http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Provisional_Population_Total_link/PDF_Links/chapter3.pdf, retrieved, 20th December, 2015.

[9] file:///C:/Users/Acer/Downloads/17IshaUpanishad%20(2).pdf, retrieved 12th April, 2015.

[10] Prime,Ranchor (1992). *Hinduism and Ecology- Seeds of Truth*. London: Cassell Publishers Limited, p. 72.

The *Vedas* believed to have been written around 3000 B.C.E. and considered sacred in Hinduism, contain one thousand and twenty-eight hymns dedicated to thirty-three different gods. Most of the thirty-three gods are nature gods. The hymns contain several references about protecting the environment and thus indicate an intimacy with the seers and people of that time. The *RigVeda* venerates deities like *Mitra*, *Varuna*, *Indra*, *Maruts* and *Aditya* that are responsible for maintaining balance in nature, whether the mountains, lakes, heaven, earth, forests or the waters. Seers recognized that changes caused due to indiscreet human activities could result in imbalances in seasons, rainfall patterns, crops and atmosphere and thus degrade the quality of water, air and resources. One seer admonished:

> "Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution." (*RigVeda* 6:48:17)
> "Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere." (*YajurVeda* 5:43)
> "We invoke all supporting Earth on which trees, lords of forests, stand ever firm." (*AtharvaVeda* 12:1:27)
> "Whatever, I dig of you, O Earth, may that grow quickly upon you. O Pure One, may my thrust never pierce thy vital points thy heart."[11]

The concept of *Rta* or Cosmic Order originates in the *RigVeda* (10.85; 4.23, 9-12; 10.190). In the Vedic vision, the universe is not conceived as a haphazard mass of elements and events, but as an ordered whole in which each part inheres the whole and the whole is balanced by its parts. *Rta* is, in essence, the ordering principle of nature, the inflexible law of universal order and harmony, the universal cosmic flow which gives to everything from the vast galaxies, down to the nucleus of an atom, their nature and course, is *Rta*. *Rta* is observable everywhere. The eternal bond between man and nature is nourished by *Rta*. In the *Vedic* vision, this law of cosmic order is conceived to be manifesting at three levels: on the cosmic plane *Rta* governs the law of nature; on the socio-ethical level, *Rta* imparts justice and on the religio-spiritual level, *Rta* mirrored the ritual performances of the sacrificial ritual (*yajna*). *Rta* contributes to the maintenance of balance between the micro and macro levels of existence.[12] It is also believed that the *Prajapati* (the "Lord of Creatures" of the *RigVeda*) is the creator of the sky, earth, oceans and the species. *Prajapati* is also their protector and eventual destroyer.

The Hindu belief is that the Earth is mother, the Earth is goddess, the Earth is *Kali*, the Earth is *Prithvi*, the Earth is Sita and – and she is the home of God. The *Prithvi Sukta* in the *Atharva Veda* (verses 12.1.1 -12.1.63) is a beautiful hymn composed in honour of Mother Earth. The *Atharva Veda* teaches practitioners how to respect air, fire, water, trees and rivers. In the *Prithvi Sukta* the Vedic seer solemnly declares the caring and

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[11]   Griffith R.T.H. (2009). *The Hymns of Atharva Veda*.USA:Evinity publishing Inc, 1st Ed., 12--1-35.
[12]   http://www.exoticindiaart.com/book/details/rta-cosmic-order-IDD686/, retrieved September 27, 2015.

reciprocal attitude to Mother Earth: mātā bhūmiḥ putro'ham pṛthivyaḥ: Earth is (my) mother, I am her son.

For the Hindu, the Earth evolves, breathes, is conscious, creates, destroys and recreates. Mother Earth is celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. Her blessings are sought for prosperity in all endeavours and the fulfillment of all righteous aspirations. A covenant is made that humankind shall secure the Earth against all environmental trespasses and shall never let her (Earth) be oppressed. A soul-stirring prayer is sung in one of the hymns for the preservation and conservation of hills, snow-clad mountains and all brown, black and red earth, unhurt, unsmitten, unwounded, unbroken and well-defended by *Indra*. The following hymn in the *Bhumi Sukta* of the *Atharva Veda* is infused with ecological and environmental values:

> "Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and other waters,
> in which food and cornfields have come to be,
> in which lives all that breathes and that moves,
> may she confer on us the finest of her yield.
> Earth, in which the waters, common to all,
> moving on all sides, flow unfailingly, day and night,
> may she pour on us milk in many streams,
> and endow us with luster,
> May those born of thee, O Earth,
> be of our welfare, free from sickness and waste,
> wakeful through a long life,
> we shall become bearers of tribute to thee.
> Earth, my mother, set me securely with bliss in full accord with heaven,
> O wise one, uphold me in grace and splendor."[13]

Trees were worshipped and protected for their contribution to the sustainability of species, genetic diversity and ecology. The *Varaha Purana* mentions that trees have five types of kindness which are their daily sacrifice. To families – trees provide fuel; to passers-by – trees provide shade and a resting place; to birds -- trees provide shelter; with their leaves, roots and bark trees provide medicines.[14]

The scriptures such as the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and subsequent texts sing praise to nature. The *Pancha Mahabhutas* (the Five Great Elements), that is, *Prithvi*, *Ap*, *Teja*, *Vayu*, *Akasha*, (Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space) is the sum total of the environment which is derived from *Prakriti* – the primal energy.[15] By including the five elements, the

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[13] Singh, Karan. (1987) *Essays on Hinduism*. Delhi: RatnaSagar Pvt. Ltd, pp. 117-118.

[14] http://www.gita-society.com/scriptures/ALL18MAJORPURANAS.IGS.pdf, Varaha Purana 162.41-42, retrieved May 10, 2015.

[15] www.greenfaith.org/files/top-10-hindu-teachings-handout, retrieved April 18, 2015.

ancient people recognized the importance of biodiversity. Hindus believe that the spark of the divinity is present not only in the human soul but also in other living things such as the Earth. The Divine reality is manifested in the form of *Prana/Shakti* and forms the very fabric of religion.   They also believed that the Divine resides within the universe and is not outside creation. The *Mundaka Upanishad* describes the Divine as follows:

> The sky is his head, his eyes are the moon and the sun;
> the quarters his ears, his speech the Vedas disclosed,
> The wind is his breadth, his heart the entire universe,
> from his feet came the earth, he is indeed the inner Self of all things.[16]

Hindus believe in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth which is governed by *Karma*. Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.[17] It means that a person to reap the fruits of his *karmas* will be reborn again and may come back as a bird or another animal. This faith has made the Hindus hold on to the firm belief that every aspect of creation should be respected and revered.

The *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* states that "ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers, and seas, they all are organs of God's body; remembering this, a devotee respects all species."[18] The ancient people were wise to realize the importance of forests and every animal in the ecosystem. The *Virata Parva*, the fourth book of the Mahabharata, very categorically states, "Don't destroy forest with tigers and don't make the forest devoid of tigers. Forests can't be saved without tigers and tigers can't live without forests because forests protect tigers and tigers protect forests."[19] For Hindus, human beings are considered as but one link in the symbiotic chain of life and consciousness. Vegetarianism is practiced to avoid the negative karmic effect. The basic concept is: seeing the presence of God in all, [living beings] and treating the creation with respect without harming and exploiting other [living beings] (*vasudevah sarvamiti*).[20] The *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* confirms this fundamental principle: A good devotee is the one who sees in all creation the presence of God (*sarvabhūtesu yeh pasyed bhagavadbhāvamatmanah).*[21]

The *Mahabharata* states: "The purchaser of flesh performs *himsa* (violence) by his wealth; he who eats flesh does so by enjoying its taste; the killer does *himsa* by actually tying and killing the animal. Thus, there are three forms of killing: he who

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[16]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mundaka_Upanishad, retrieved May 29, 2015.

[17]http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ataglance/glance.shtml, retrieved May 10, 2015.

[18]Goswami, C.L., Shastri, M.A., (English translation) (2014), *The Srimad Bhagvata Mahapurana,* verse 2.2.41*,* Gorakhpur*:*Gita Press.

[19] Dutt C Romesh,(1984)5th ed, *The Mahabharata – Epic of the Bharatas*, 4.5.45-46, India: Jaico Publishing House.

[20] Prabhupada*,*Swami*,*(1989) *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, 7.19. Mumbai: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

[21] The *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*, 11.2.41.*opcit*

brings flesh or sends for it, he who cuts of the limbs of an animal, and he who purchases, sells, or cooks flesh and eats it. All of these are to be considered meat-eaters."[22]

The *Mahabharata* (18.113.8) states: "One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of *dharma*. Yielding to desire and acting differently, one becomes guilty of *adharma*." In the *Moksadharma Parva*, Chapter 182, verse 20 of the *Mahabharata* it is said that all living beings have a soul, and God resides as their inner soul: *Sarvabhūtatma bhūtastho.* Ideally it means that the rights of other species should not be encroached upon.

The *Manu Smriti* prohibits wanton destruction of both wild and cultivated plants.[23] It further emphasizes that violence against domesticated animals to be *himsa*.[24] The *Dharma Shastras* state, "Without doing injury to living things, flesh cannot be had anywhere; and the killing of living beings is not conducive to heaven; hence eating of flesh should be avoided."[25] The *Chandgoya Upanishad* (8.15.1) bars violence against "all creatures" (*sarva-bhuta*) and the practitioner of *ahimsa* is said to escape from the cycle of reincarnation.[26]

Based on this belief, there is a profound opposition in the Hindu religion to the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds and fish for human consumption. From the perspective of Hindu religion, the abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is considered unjust and sacrilegious.[27] Reference can be made to the *Manusmrti* (5.38) which states, "A person who kills an animal for meat will die of a violent death as many times as there are hairs of that killed animal". The *Yajnavalkya Smrti Acaradhyayah*[28], verse 180, warns of hell fire (*ghoranaraka*) on those who kill domesticated and protected animals: "The wicked person who kills animals which are protected has to live in hellfire for the days equal to the number of hairs on the body of that animal."

Another interesting aspect in Hinduism is the reverence for animals. The animal kingdom is considered as sacred. Hindu deities move around in their own *Vahana* (vehicles) that are usually animals. These animals are considered as sacred as God. This divine status provides animals a privileged status. To give few examples, Lord

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[22] *The Mahabharata – Epic of the Bharatas*, 14th book, Anu 115:40. *opcit*

[23] *ManuSmriti* 11.145.(2012) New Delhi:Pustak Mahal Publications.

[24] *ManuSmriti* 5.27- 44, *opcit*

[25] http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Ahimsa_in_Scriptures#cite_note-17, retrieved May 15, 2015.

[26] Radhakrishnana, S., (1978) *The Principal Upanishads*, London: Allen & Unwin.

[27] Dwivedi, O.P. (2000) '*Dharmic Ecology*' in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker.Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP for Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, p. 6.

[28] https://archive.org/stream/yajnavalkyamriti00yj/yajnavalkyasmrit00yj_djvu.txt, retrieved April 20, 2015.

Ganesha - the Remover of Obstacles, has a mouse as his vehicle. Symbolically the mouse signifies *Ganesha's* ability to destroy all obstacles. Similarly another Hindu God, *Shiva* - the Destroyer, has *Nandi*, the Bull as his vehicle. *Nandi* the bull symbolizes sexual energy and fertility. The Lord of Death, *Yama* visits on He-buffalo, *Lakshmi* has the owl as her vehicle, *Saraswati* has swan or peacock. There is thus an all-pervasive ethos among Hindus that perceives the animal and the human world as one unbroken continuum.[29] Of all the animals, the cow occupies central position. It is considered to be representative of the Divine. Lord Krishna states in *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*: chapter 10, verse 28: "Among cows, I am the wish fulfilling cow" *(dhenūnāmasmikamadhuk).*[30]
There is a rich treasure trove in Hinduism with regard to its concern for environment and it can be succinctly concluded from the first verse of the Isha – Upanishad.[31] It says:

> 'The whole universe together with its creatures belongs to the Lord (Nature). No creature is superior to any other, and the human being should not have absolute power over Nature. Let no species encroach upon the rights and privileges of other species. However, one can enjoy the bounties of nature by giving up greed.'

In spite of the rich treasure trove of wisdom in the various scriptures of Hinduism to have deep reverence to Mother Earth and its varied animal and plant kingdom, it is observed that there is a loss of respect towards nature. It has resulted in environmental crisis. The huge difference is due to the gulf in theory – practice praxis. It can also be explained in view of the fact of different invasions which took place in India, resulting in people becoming more inward looking and self – centered. Under such circumstances, religious values which acted as sanctions against environmental destruction do not retain a high priority because people have to worry about their very survival and freedom; hence, respect for nature gets displaced by economic factors.[32] Against this background, M.K.Gandhi did yeomen service to the people of India. He through the power of truth and non-violence made the people of India realize the inherent moral power, also known as the soul force inherent in them. He had warned humanity of the grave dangers due to industrialization and the impact it can have on environment. The next section will deal with M.K.Gandhi's viewpoint to Environment.

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[29] Kumar, Sehdev and Mehndritta, Aaloka. (1993) "Environmental Ethics – Ancient Traditions and Contemporary Dilemmas- A Hindu Perspective" in *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Vol 6, retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1078, April 28, 2015.
[30] http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/Articles/holy-cow.html, retrieved April 28, 2015.
[31] www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriauro/downloadpdf.php?id=32, retrieved April 23, 2015.
[32] http://history-of-hinduism.blogspot.in/2010/07/spirit-of-hinduism.html, retrieved December 22, 2015.

Section II

M.K. Gandhi and the environment

There were many people in the past who could foresee the future and visualize the price mankind will have to pay while competing in the mad race of industrialization and urbanization. One among them was M.K.Gandhi (1869-1948) revered as father of the nation in India. M.K.Gandhi was a deeply religious person and his advocacy of simple living through the principles of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and holding to truthfulness (*satyagraha*) could give some Hindus pause as they consider the lifestyle changes engendered by contemporary consumerism. Nobody in his senses can suggest today, "to destroy all machinery and mills", not even Mahatma Gandhi, who, too, however reluctantly accepted the fact that "machinery has its place, it has come to stay."[33]

In the strict sense of the term, Gandhi does not come under the category of environmentalist. This is not because Gandhi was indifferent to the environmental problem, but it was not of such great magnitude in his times. His experience as a global citizen (studied law in London, practiced law in South Africa, became national leader of Indian Freedom movement) cultivated in him an insight to anticipate the problems which the world would experience as the fruits of industrialization, economic growth, distribution of goods and services along with pollution of air, water, land, desertification, deforestation, toxic wastes, urbanization, etc. Gandhi was a passionate champion of a life pattern based on three cardinal principles: Simplicity, Slowness and Smallness.[34] His view that "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed"[35] serves as a role model of practicing an environmentalism based on limited possession. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher with whose name Deep Ecology[36] is inextricably intertwined, has testified that from Gandhi he learnt that the power of non-violence could only be realized after the awareness of "the essential oneness of all life."[37] Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna who have been at the helm of the Chipko movement (to save trees) and Baba Amte, Medha

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[33] Young India, 5 -11-1925.

[34] http://www.mkgandhi.org/environment/jha.htm, retrieved September 25, 2015.

[35] Pyarelal, (1958) *Mahatma Gandhi, Volume X: The Last Phase, Part II,* Ahmedabad: Navajivan, p. 552.

[36]Deep ecology is a contemporary ecological philosophy that recognizes an inherent worth of other beings, aide from their utility. It provides a foundation for the environmental, ecology and green movements and has fostered a new system of environmental ethics. Similar views have been propounded by Devall, W. and G. Sessions. 1985 in their work '*Deep Ecology: Living As if Nature Mattered'* Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc.. Holding the view that everything is connected to everything else, they observe the changing trends of emerging deep ecological consciousness that goes beyond anthropocentrism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_ecology retrieved 24th September, 2015.

[37]Lal Vinay in '*Too Deep for Deep Ecology: Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life'* in Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker.Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP for Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, pp. 183-212.

Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan (protest against dam building on river Narmada) acknowledge that their inspiration has come from Gandhi.[38] It can be safely argued that Gandhi inspired and even fathered the Indian environmental movement.[39]

The Gandhian concept of non-violence is its practice in though, speech and action. The notion of non-violence is also extended to include the responsibility which man should undertake to protect the biotic and abiotic world. He envisaged for a peaceful, just society, where man could cohabit in harmony and have reverence for all things living and non-living.

The influences which shaped Gandhi's thought were the teachings of *Isa Upanishad*, *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita* as well as John Ruskin's book *Unto the Last*. These influences catalyzed his desire to lead a life of frugality and develop ideas that foster 'sustainable development'.[40]

The influence of Patanjali the compiler of *Yoga Sutras* is evident on Gandhi. The Yoga's ethical guidelines of *yamas* (restraints) and *niyamas* (observances) were practiced by Gandhi in all sincerity. The *yamas* are the ethical precepts, essentially a set of rules of don'ts. The five *yamas*: (i) non-violence (*ahimsa*) towards all animate and inanimate creation; (ii) truth (*satya*); (iii) avoiding the use of materials obtained by illegitimate means and avoiding destruction (*asteya*); (iv) celibacy (*brahmacharya*) to keep check on the growing population and demand for resources; and (v) not amassing wealth beyond requirement (*aparigraha*). Gandhi also practiced the *niyamas*, or the set of rules of dos which relate to cleanliness of surroundings and of the self. The practice of *Shaucha* (purification) removes impurities which adversely affect our state of mind, and prevent the attainment of real wisdom and spiritual liberation from both of our environment and body. *Samtosha* (contentment) suppresses the craving for what an individual does not have as well as discourages him from coveting the possessions of others. *Samtosha* is the realization that happiness gained through materialism is only temporary. An individual must also consciously work at surrounding himself with a pure environment (including food, drink, friends, entertainment, home furnishings and transportation) to not add any external impurities back into our bodies or minds. Other *niyamas* are austerity (*tapas*), contemplation of one's life (*svadhyaya*) and devotion to God (*Ishvara Pranidhana*). The austerity through the practice of *yamas* and *niyamas* by Gandhi confirms deep respect for the environment.

Gandhi established ashrams in South Africa and in India. His ashrams were based on local self-reliance, equality of gender, participatory management. One is filled with awe and wonder to see Gandhi in his early formative years of his philosophy in South Africa,

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[38] VinayLal, *ibid* p. 185.

[39] *ibid*

[40] Khoshoo, T.N. (1995) *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology*. New Delhi: Tata Energy Research Institute, pp. 1-2.

to live a minimalist life in the Phoenix ashram (1904) and Tolstoy Farm (1910).   While at the ashrams in India, Gandhi formed a tertiary school that focused on manual labour, agriculture and literacy, in order to advance his efforts for the nation's self-sufficiency. His emphasis on local self-reliance is what the environmentalist of today are stressing upon, when they speak about reduction of carbon footprint. It took almost a century for the policy makers and thinkers at the global stage to realize the thought process of Gandhi in conservation of environment.

Gandhi formulated economic order in the context of this design of an ideal social order: a non-violent, non-exploitative, humanistic and egalitarian society. His approach to economics was through the avenue of truth and non-violence. Its goal is not pure material benefit, but the advancement of humanity on its road to progress by strengthening the characters and the development of personalities. "No one's gain should be anybody's loss -- financial, physical, moral or spiritual. If there is to be a choice, the preference should fall on the internal constituents of man rather than on the material."[41]

The Gandhian thought is built upon a form of non-exploitative "moral economics" in which everyone works for the common good without seeking to accumulate any more than they need, from individual to nation (through family, village, region, etc.) Gandhi's emphasis on the voluntary limitations of wants which he also sometimes referred to as voluntary poverty has put him at loggerheads with almost all his followers who considered themselves progressive-minded and wanted to lead the people of India into affluence. Gandhi was criticized in strong terms for wanting to keep the people in perpetual poverty and demanding ascetic austerity from them but Gandhi never demanded ascetic mortification of the flesh from the people and neither did he practice it himself. Gandhi believed that for any change to be meaningful it must begin at the bottom and reflect in the changes in the realm of health, education, culture and economic development for the lowliest of the lowly.

Gandhi suggested an alternative economy for India. His observation of the western civilization had made him wise enough to realize that short-term economic gains will do little good for the Indian society. Further, India lives in villages. There is a chasm between the rich and the poor, urban and rural, of India. And as always, it will be the poor who will firsthand pay the price of development as they will get delineated from the use of natural resources, such as land, water and forests. Gandhi was aware that the growing chasm would divide the society, giving rise to conflicts. The gnawing question to which we have to find an answer is: Is it possible for us to avoid the situation in the present century? It will be wise to recall the Talisman which Gandhi gave, "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you may have seen and ask

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[41] Sharma, Rashmi. (1997) *Gandhian Economics: A human approach*. New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication, p. 33.

yourself if the step you contemplate to take is going to be of any use to him.Will he gain anything by it?"[42]

Gandhian thinkers have suggested many remedies to prevent the deterioration of environment. About those remedies Shri Thakurdas Bung says, "For saving environment we will have to impose restrictions on industrialization, greater urbanization, wanton pleasure and frame a policy under which requirements of all around be fulfilled. We will have to follow the policy of 'Simple living and high thinking with an emphasis on 'recycling of goods' instead of 'use andthrow' policy."[43]

Conclusion

India has had a distinct civilization and culture that was very much in consonance with natural habitat. Nature (prakriti) was revered with utmost devotion and the civilization was known for its cultural and spiritual heritage in protecting its environment. These factors constituted an important element in sustaining the natural wealth but have been constantly neglected by the mankind. The western concept/perception that nature and environment exist for the service of humanity has slowly crept into Indian society, promoting the values of unsustainable consumption and acquisitive materialism. Dwivedi rightly observes that 'culture and religions of the world can provide a solid foundation for changing people's attitude on the preservation and conservation of the environment. World religions and cultures particularly Oriental belief systems, do not inherently subscribe to the abuse and exploitation of Nature for material and selfish gains.' Unfortunately, 'culture and no part of the world have remained immune from makind's irreverence towards nature, an irreverence that has brought in its wake the destruction of our own habitat, our progeny and ourselves'. He also identifies that ethical values emanating from the world religions and cultures are some of the basic determinants of our behaviour towards nature.[44]

Gandhi's ideas are of great relevance today. These are relevant to the path of development we wish to pursue. Gandhi was of the firm view of "consume only what you can produce"[45] and also a strong proponent of the need for an alternative process of development. The task of mankind is to "cooperate judiciously and caringly with the Nature's Economy of Permanence."[46]

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[42] Mahatma Gandhi, Last Phase, Vol. II (1958), P. 65

[43] Thakurdas, Bang. (2005) *Bharat - Kal, Aaj AniUdya,* Paramdham Prakashan. Pavnar, Wardha, p. 22.

[44] Dwidevi, O.P. (1994) *Environmental Ethics*. New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House.

[45] Sharma, Anand. (2007) *Gandhian Way, Peace, Non-violence and Empowerment*, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, p.154.

[46] Singh, Savita. (1999) *Global Concern with Environmental Crisis and Gandhi's Vision*, New Delhi: A.P.H Publishing Corporation,p.63.

To plead for an awakened interest in the old –age traditions is not to advocate a return to the conditions of antiquity but understanding the ancient traditions and wisdom will help to put into practice the eco-care vision of Hinduism. The guiding principle mentioned in the Mahopanishad VI – 71 -73 of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*[47](the world is one family) should be promoted for *sarva –bhuta-hite –ratah* (welfare of all beings).[48]

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[48]The Bhagavad Gita, 5.25, *opcit*

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Special Review Essay

Review of Pedro Machado, *Oceans of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1850.* Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1107070264; 329pp.

Gail M. Presbey,[1] University of Detroit Mercy

Pedro Machado's background makes him an excellent person for the kind of study he undertakes in his book. He's a research associate of the Indian Ocean World Centre. He knows many languages, and has worked on various World History projects on slavery and on leprosy. His focus is on ocean trade and in particular the products of cloth, ivory and slaves (as they are considered a trade commodity).

Overview of Machado's book

The main argument of the book is that Hindu Vaniya merchants based in the Kathiawar peninsula of Gujarat, India had an extensive Indian Ocean trade from 1750 to 1850. They had a thriving shipbuilding industry in Daman (80-85), skilled crews and cartographers who mapped ocean depths and studied ocean and weather conditions (92), and an organised network of cloth manufacturers, so that they could go to (what we now call) Mozambique and trade cloth for ivory, and eventually, for slaves and silver. Their cloth was greatly in demand due to its high quality, and the merchants were paying a lot of attention to African consumer demand in cloth. They ensured they manufactured and sold the kind of cloth that Africans most wanted, so Machado plays up the constructive role that African consumer choices made in the development of the

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trade (showing how receptive producers were to consumer demand). African demand particularly had to do with demanding a high quality cloth, which was used in their culture on specific occasions to mark high status events. Machado tries to show that the cloth was being considered a kind of currency, even though there were sometimes complaints about its fluctuation in value (128-30). The merchants traded cloth for ivory which was mostly used in India itself for ivory bangles which culturally symbolised wedded bliss, and so they were highly in demand (especially since the bangles were broken at the death of a marriage partner and so were not recycled).

The merchants had an extensive banking and credit system, and were able to insure trading ventures, and they worked with the Portuguese rulers to take advantage of their status as imperial subjects to benefit from lowered import and export tariffs. Conditions in the 1820s and 30s changed dramatically due to a drought in Africa, during which time the amount of slaves for sale rose higher (perhaps because some were attempted to flee the drought, see 205). After 1833 when the British banned the slave trade, Brazilians were engaged in buying slaves in Mozambique as a way of avoiding the West African coast where they would more easily be detected by British ships trying to interrupt the slave trade. Vaniya merchants traded cloth for silver, which then allowed them to purchase slaves; they bought and shipped slaves to both India and Aden and other Middle Eastern ports. They brought silver back to active silver markets in Kathiawar and Gujarat. They also exchanged slaves for silver with the Brazilians, and brought the silver back to India.

Machado's overall point is that the Vaniya merchants' participation in the Indian Ocean trade was substantial and multi-faceted, and that their presence as Hindu traders, in contrast to Indian Muslim or British traders, changes the more dominant historical narrative that imagines that they dropped out of their prominent role after they reduced trade to the Persian Gulf and Red Sea ports like Aden and Mocha (where they had been trading since the fourth century BCE, see 18-19) due to discrimination and violence against Hindus (for example, a massacre ordered by the imam of Mocha, see 22-23), or narratives that overemphasise British control of Indian trade. The merchants did not just drop out, they adapted, and searched for new markets in Southeast Africa.

In this book we see that the Vaniya merchants worked with Portuguese colonial officials to take advantage of their trade rules (see 55) and their courts, when it suited the traders (but they ignored these courts and used customary *mahajan* guild organisations when they thought it would be to their benefit, see 10), but, these merchants were independent businesspeople who were making their own business decisions and financing their own projects. They were not dependent on colonial rule and they weren't just doing the bidding of the colonisers. In fact the Portuguese were jealous of the Vaniya traders' success and power (63, 155). It's important to notice this because "Dependency Theory" shows how colonisers created dependency when it wasn't there before, by destroying what had been thriving economic systems. This is a portrait of the thriving economic system that would eventually be taken over by the British when they rule India as part of the British Empire. Also, within the context of Portuguese influence

on trade in India, the emphasis had been on the role of Goa, and little emphasis has been on the thriving Kathiawar peninsula and Gujarat; Machado corrects that deficit by filling in the details of the story of this vibrant more Northern India-based trade.

Machado also shows that the Vaniya merchants had extensive working relationships with African businesspeople/agents called *patamares* who were gathering the ivory, as well as African traders of the Zambesi Valley called *Vashambadzi* who assumed the risks of the dangerous ivory trade (and were not "slaves" but of slave status, see 39-40, 191-193). He also discusses the long distance traders of Ivory in Yao in northern Mozambique (185). His book therefore departs from a genre of history writing that focuses on European demands for luxury goods and how European consumer demand impacts world trade. He will instead talk about African consumer demand for cloth, and Indian consumer demand for ivory, which is usually not mentioned.

The author shows us how culture played a role in several crucial ways, such as, Vaniya merchant culture focused a lot on the extended family as agents that one could trust. In a "verbal culture" with limited literacy (34, and 44 footnote 76), trust and reputation were crucial to thriving businesses, while talk and rumour could destroy a business. Semi-formal and informal organisations developed to monitor trust and control dangerous rumours (see 46-49). Vaniya cultural preferences made them reluctant to own property since they preferred mobility; but they did own property that they were given to cover debts owed to them (65). Ships' crews had an authoritarian structure. Also, while they designed ships that could carry cannons and arms, they preferred to emphasise speed and manoeuvrability rather than to slow down their travel time by transporting heavy armaments (74-75).

Other important roles for culture included choices that Africans made about the cloth they wanted to buy. Cloth carried cultural and symbolic meaning. Cloth was used as "a means of bestowing moral and social qualities, of marking both high and low status" (123). Giving a gift of cloth could commit others to obligations in the future. There were important investiture ceremonies that used certain cloths. Africans also insisted on high quality cloth (132). Some cloths were especially used to exhibit mourning, or to be worn at sacrificial ceremonies for the ancestral spirits (135). Vaniya merchants paid great attention to their consumer markets' desires for products.

The book's relation to the larger field of World History

One very important reason to engage in the study of World History is to unlearn the Eurocentric distortions we have been taught in school and that are reinforced in many aspects of mainstream American culture (see Manning, 2003:38, 76; Wolf, 2010:xx). The actual, more fully informed version of World History is fascinating. Eric Wolf, an important founder of the field of World History, emphasises showing the interactions between Europe and Africa, Latin America and Asia. Historians as well as the general public routinely under-estimate the level of interaction, and we ignore the way that

southern continents, for example, have impacted Europe (since most history books focus on how Europe impacted other areas). Wolf also debunks the "billiards" metaphor in which cultures and nations are seen as bounded and bouncing off of each other; instead we see peoples and cultures as permeable and malleable, being changed by their encounters in a context where national boundaries are not the walls we presume they are (Wolf, 2010:4, 6; Manning, 2003:285). It's not only consumer goods but also social practices that can be mutually influential. For example, according to Sinha, Britain and India both influenced each other's gender perceptions (Sinha, 1995; see also Manning, 2003:97-98).

A key way in which Machado's book departs from the Eurocentric norm is that he is most interested in describing producers, traders, and consumers who are not European. So he does not chronicle the trade of items going to or from Europe. He does not have to delve into describing what Europeans wanted, or what they did, since the main agents are Indian and African. Yes, there are some Portuguese rulers and businesspeople, but they are not dominant in the story line that Machado is telling. He writes a "South-South" history. Another key theme in World History is exploring race, class and gender as it impacts history. The challenge is always to find sources adequate enough to give us a sense of the daily life, struggles, cares, and interactions of those who don't appear much in official records or who haven't written their autobiographies. It is then that historians turn to a variety of sources, whether they are court records, business records (and Machado's study of traders depends a lot on inventories of ships, or records of business loans etc.), or the archaeological study of material culture, or the linguistic study of the development of a language, to get at what daily life had been like. To seek out the stories of those who are of a race or ethnicity with lower prestige, or the stories of women who for centuries (with some important exceptions) did not write history books or their life stories is necessary in order for us to have a more accurate and objective historical record.

It was Eric Wolf who emphasised the theme of political economy in World History. It was also he who used commodity chains as a focus for studying links and interactions between regions. Following Marx, he wanted to study the growth of the world market (Wolf, xxi, 21). Various historians have followed these chains, all the way from production to consumption (as does Sidney Mintz (1985) in his study of sugar). Machado's study also looks at the production of cloth, the gathering of ivory and slaves, and the sale of these three items (that is, their destination, and the significance that consumers have given this item in their local context). While he follows the silver from the time that traders receive it from Brazilians to the places where it is used, he does not follow the trail to the production of the silver in any detail (perhaps because silver mining happens in a region beyond the Indian Ocean). Likewise, although he asserts that Indian cloth made it to Brazil (Machado, 158), he was not able to find much of that record, and he does not do a study of Brazilian consumers of Indian cloth.

As Kopytof notes, despite the widespread commoditisation of people through slavery throughout various times in history, it seems unacceptable, and even a category

mistake, from our current perspective. "This conceptual polarity of individualised persons and commoditised things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional" (Kopytof, 1986:64). Nevertheless it can be jarring to study the slave trade in a blasé way that lists slaves along with cloth, ivory, and other commodities without and special reference to the moral distinction involved. Machado definitely downplays any controversy and portrays his Hindu merchants as engaging in the slave trade in a business manner, and not out of any inherent cruelty but rather in conformity to the way business was done in the time period.

As important as slavery is as a topic, it is just one way of focusing upon the important theme dwelled upon by Eric Wolf, which involves the question of how societies socially deploy their labour. Who rules or influences who? What choices do agents have over their own lives, even if their roles and choices are circumscribed? How are these roles and relationships contested? Slavery has ended (for the most part), but it is very interesting to note how it ended, and what forms of labour took its place. Oftentimes some of the alternatives were a lot like slavery!

While I have presumed that Wolf's approach to World History is a direct influence on Machado, since his book focuses on political economy and international trade, nevertheless Machado never mentions Eric Wolf. Also, Machado has chosen a topic that is barely covered in Wolf's otherwise seemingly exhaustive coverage of world trade. Machado emphasised that he would cover the history of extensive Hindu trading on the Indian Ocean, and he insisted that most books covered Muslim trade (or later, trade to and from India controlled by the British) while ignoring trade by Hindu merchants and companies. A look at Wolf's index sees that he only lists the topic of Hindus on two pages (although there are 14 pages that mention Hindus or Hinduism if one searches the book using google books). In contrast there are large sections in the index on Islam (with 22 pages mentioned under "Islamic sphere" and 7 pages under "Muslims" and "Muslim Spain"). While Wolf has extensive coverage of the ivory trade, he does not mention at all that Hindus were involved in the trade. As regards shipbuilding in India, Wolf covers the Arab ship designers and builders, but he does not mention the extensive ship building engaged in by Hindu ship builders in Daman (see Machado, 80-85).

In a chapter called "Trade and Conquest in the Orient," Wolf covers India by emphasising the roles of the British and the Muslims, hardly mentioning any of the history of Hindu traders that Machado covers. Wolf says that the British arrived in India as traders with the East Indian Company, and were able to trade due to their relationships with the Mughals, the Muslim rulers of India. He mentions that the British bought textiles dyed with indigo in Surat. Wolf says, "Shipping was in the hands of Muslims who traded with the ports on the Red Sea; brokerage, commerce and money lending were dominated by powerful lineages of Hindu merchants" (Wolf, 2010:240). This is some acknowledgement of the role of Hindus in trade at the time (as bankers), but it is a mere fraction of their actual involvement, since Hindus were not only financiers but shipbuilders and distance traders. Wolf goes on to talk more about the

Mughals and the British, but does not develop the story line of the role of the Hindus. His book has a map of India, that shows both Surat and Diu, but there is no mention of what trade goes on in the port town of Diu. But from reading Machado's account we know that a lot of long distance trade went on in Surat and Diu, and that such trade preceded British involvement. While the Portuguese are involved in trade in Diu and Goa and Southeast Africa, they don't have enough funds, ships, and know-how to run large scale trading businesses themselves. In fact the Vaniya traders have a greater business ability than do the Portuguese (Machado, 63, 155). The traders position themselves to benefit from Portuguese rule when it benefits them (such as gaining access to lower import and export tariffs, see Machado 55), and to avoid or circumvent Portuguese control when it doesn't suit them (using customary guild organisations called *mahajan* when it seemed to be in their interest, see Machado, 10).

Wolf has a five page description of India's caste system as it was set up in the 1400s (Wolf, 2010:45-50). He briefly mentions that it was mostly the Brahmins that "furnished links with wider networks of trade and markets" (Wolf, 2010:49). But he doesn't go into any descriptions of other aspects of Indian culture. In contrast, Machado dwells, not upon the religious practices of the Hindus, but of their family relations, since their family relations serve as a basis and a model for their business relations. Extended family members are wedded together in relations of trust, which then help them in the business world (Machado, 33). Vaniya cultural preferences also valued mobility, and so the merchants were reluctant to make large land and building purchases in Africa, although they did own some buildings, mostly those they were given as collateral for debts (Machado, 65). This preference for swift mobility also influenced their ship design (74-75). While culture is important, Wolf would caution us about how we refer to a group's culture. The old, nationalistic way of describing culture insisted that each culture had an inner nature whose unique expression explained their achievements in some sense. So we shouldn't be looking for some attribute of Hinduism, for example, that would explain the merchants' success or failure, or would determine their business choices.

As Machado reported on p. 239, "There does not appear to have been any Hindu opposition to, or prescription against, the shipping of African slaves." He at least notices that a moral discussion is missing on this topic. But Machado seems mostly an apologist for the Gujarati merchant traders. He explains "Slave trafficking had, in other words, become part of the fabric of coastal exchange and was therefore unavoidable as a reality for those conducting business along the coast" (248-49). The traders had not gone out of their way to seek this kind of trade, circumstances mostly just thrust themselves upon the traders. He also explains that few slaves, maybe only 400-500 yearly, were brought to Asia (252). Indian traders (Hindu and Muslim) began trading African slaves before the Portuguese arrived (213). Machado mentions that there was a "lively" slave traffic in Porbandar, the city of Mohandas Gandhi's birthplace (256). Also, African slaves were circulated in a trade that included South Asian slaves, usually women and girls; perhaps this is why the demand for African slaves focused on boys

(258-59). Machado also mentions that sometimes African slaves were preferred, especially for domestic work, because lower-caste Indians taken as slaves or servants could "pollute" their owner in a way that Africans could not (261). Slavery only came to an end due to British pressure which led to its criminalisation in 1860 (261). Much of this history of slavery in India could be found in *Slavery and South Asian History* by Indrani Chatterjee (2006) (the book which Machado keeps quoting).

The one place that Machado discusses moral issues involved with slavery is on p. 221 where he notes that the Portuguese Viceroy wanted to ensure that Vaniya slave traders brought slaves to Catholic ports (where they could be baptised) and not to Muslim destinations. Machado claims that the Portuguese were actually worried about competition from Muslim merchants (and not sincere in their seeming moral concern). He notes that Hindus were not allowed to convert Africans since their religion was not one that proselytised (220). In Machado's coverage of Hindu traders' involvement in the slave trade, he says, "Slave trafficking had, in other words, become part of the fabric of coastal exchange and was therefore unavoidable as a reality for those conducting business along the coast" (248-49). So, since they wanted to sell cloth, and get silver, they had to involve themselves in the slave trade. There is a need for more detail on this topic. It would be good to know more about the conditions of slaves, both on the boats and when they arrived at their destinations and were sold.

But one area that Machado has covered in detail is the organisation of the Indian spinners, weavers, and designers. Machado explains that this whole chain of production in India was self-governing, without the influence of Europeans, until finally the Portuguese insisted on imposing themselves directly on this chain of supply (in an effort to cut out Hindu middlemen). One could wish that he told the gender story of the spinners and weavers in a little more detail, so that readers could get a better glimpse into the life of women in the region. Machado also excels in telling the story of how traders conveyed African customer preferences back to India and directly influenced the production of cloth. No one book can tell an entire story. The world is so interrelated, at a certain point one has no choice but to drop the story line and leave parts to others. But Machado's book fills an important gap. We learn about the Hindu Vaniya traders, the bankers and financiers of Surat, and the Daman ship builders, and their relationships with the traders and customers of Southeast Africa, to an extent heretofore not covered by other authors.

And now, at last, our attention can turn to the animals and the question of animal rights. The topic absent in Machado's book is the discussion of the morality of the ivory trade, from the perspective of the merchants themselves as practicing Hindus. Machado says that estimates are that 26,000 to 31,000 elephants were killed from the 1750s to 60s (207), so imagine over the course of 100 years how many elephants had been killed. He had made a big point of the fact that the traders were Hindu, and not Muslim (71). He doesn't comment once about any possible moral questions regarding killing elephants in pursuit of (meat and) ivory. Not only were the merchants Hindu, but, the area of Gujarat which was the focus of his study was a centre of Jainism, an even more

strict religion of nonviolence, where all living beings are treated as equal, and where caste was not practiced. At least, Jainism did not practice caste (at least in its early days near its founding), although over time they have practiced it (some said it was the influence of Hinduism). Machado notes that elephants were not killed in India for their ivory because they were too valuable as beasts of burden (169). Since Machdo had covered African consumer preferences for cloth with such cultural detail and giving it much importance, one can only wish that he addressed with equal concern the Hindu and/or Indian consumer desire for ivory. How was it that bangles made of ivory were to symbolize wedded bliss, in a region where elephants were not generally killed? Machado's book may not be able to cover all topics from all angles, but the depth in which he delves to uncover the history of Hindu merchants on the Indian Ocean is formidable, and very helpful to scholars.

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Book Review

Archana Venkatesan, trans., Nammāḻvār. *A Hundred Measures of Time: Tiruviruttam*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2014. 255 pages.

Reviewed by Davesh Soneji[1]

Nammāḻvār is perhaps best known to most audiences through A.K. Ramanujan's translation of selections from his monumental poem *Tiruvāymoḻi*, published in *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981). The compendium of writings attributed to the Tamil Vaiṣṇava bhakti saints (*āḻvārs*), the *Nālāyira Tivviyap Pirpantam* (The Divine Collection of Four Thousand), contains a total of four poems attributed to the poet known variously as Nammāḻvār, Caṭakōpaṉ, or Māṟaṉ. These are the *Tiruvāymoḻi*, the longest and perhaps most well known and highly regarded among the poems, the *Tiruviruttam*, the *Tiruvāciriyam*, and the *Periya Tiruvantāti*. Within the Śrīvaiṣṇava theological context, these four poems are identified with the four Vedic *saṃhitās*, with the *Tiruviruttam* and the *Tiruvāymoḻi* representing the Ṛk and Sāma texts. The coupling of the *Tiruviruttam* and the *Tiruvāymoḻi* as texts that hold pride of place extends well beyond this powerful allegoric identification. Indeed, one could argue that it is near impossible to understand the massive thousand verse *Tiruvāymoḻi* – in all its exegetical and theological fullness – without reference to the *Tiruviruttam*, which until now, has remained rather inaccessible to the scholarly world.

Archana Venkatesan's masterful study and translation of the *Tiruviruttam* in *A Hundrerd Measures of Time* represents a significant intervention. Not only is it the first full study and translation of this text, but it also represents one of the most detailed scholarly analyses of *āḻvār* poetry that we have to date. Venkatesan's translations from Tamil relentlessly capture the sophisticated longing that is at the core of *āḻvār* poetry, while her contextual analysis takes the reader through a fascinatingly erudite yet enchanting world of devotional aesthetics.

Part I of *A Hundred Measures of Time* consists of a highly artful translation of the hundred verses of the *Tiruviruttam* into English. Venkatesan's rendering of the verses is, like her earlier translations of the female poet Āṇṭāḷ, nothing far from stunning.

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Nammāḻvār's original text, written in the *viruttam* metre, contains very rich and dense language, and structurally is marked by a frustrating sequence of, what Venkatesan calls, "fits and starts, of repeated beginnings and endings." Yet Venkatesan's English rendering of the verses only makes lucid the highly complex, interwoven structures that lie beneath the exterior of the text. The text is what Venkatesan calls "bifocal" – at once inward and outward looking – mirroring the Śrīvaiṣṇava hermeneutical technique of identifying the "outer" (*anyāpadeśa*) and "inner" or "esoteric" (*svāpadeśa*) meanings of text. Venkatesan's translations reflect all the semantic fullness of Nammāḻvār's sacred speech, and yet manage to remain both polished and accessible.

Almost three-quarters of *A Hundred Measures of Time* is dedicated to a deep and very rich analysis of the reception, interpretation, and ritual uses of the text. Venkatesan's approach brings together an incredible range of materials, from her masterful knowledge of Śrīvaiṣṇava commentarial texts, to inscriptional materials, to colonial sources on the *āḻvārs*, to her analysis of contemporary ritual and performance traditions at the Ātinātar temple in the town of Alvar Tirunagari, the living heart of the Nammāḻvār traditions. Part II of the work is entitled "The Measure of Time: On Reading Nammāḻvār's *Tiruviruttam*" and foregrounds both Śrīvaiṣṇava hermeneutical technique as well as the aesthetic and literary conventions – such as the elaborate female persona of Nammāḻvār as the Parāṅkuśa Nāyikā – that are particular to this context. The scope and rigor of Venkatesan's analysis is quite simply outstanding. Part III of the text is entitled "Periyavāccāṉ Piḷḷai's Commentary on the *Tiruviruttam*" and identifies the reception and dense theological interpretation of selections of the *Tiruviruttam* by its foremost commentator, the twelfth century Periyavāccāṉ Piḷḷai, who wrote his commentary in Śrīvaiṣṇava Maṇipravāḷa. Here too, Venkatesan's translations and interpretations of the commentary are unmatched. The book ends with three very useful appendices that help readers identify characters, literary and religious motifs, myths, places, and names that appear in the text.

A Hundred Measures of Time offers a perfect example of the study of "text in context." It pushes readers to think about the not only the theological and aesthetic milieu of the production and dissemination of early Tamil bhakti, but also about its afterlives in the worlds of contemporary exegesis, ritual, and performance. Venkatesan's approach provides what I would consider an ideal model for the study and translation of devotional texts from early South Asia.