

12-2014

Being Hindu in the American South: Hindu Nationalist Discourse in a Diaspora Community

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BEING HINDU IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH:
HINDU NATIONALIST DISCOURSE IN A DIASPORA COMMUNITY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy & Religion
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

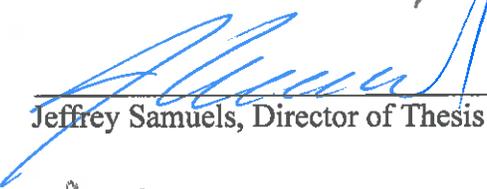
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Daniel J. Shouse

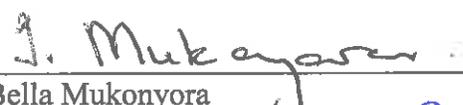
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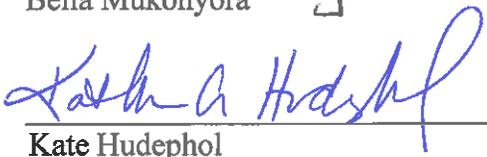
Date Recommended July 28, 2014



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 12-1-14

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Acknowledgments

This project would never have been possible without the support and assistance of many people throughout the several years. I would like to thank Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo for his generous support of my research throughout the years; Dr. Nahed Zehr for her support in my developing interests; Dr. Kate Hudephol for years of compassionate instruction and advice; Dr. Bella Mukunyora for assistance in developing the original concept for this project; Dr. Jeffrey Samuels for his unlimited understanding and guidance throughout the years.

I thank my parents and parent-in-laws for their undying confidence in my abilities; Melissa Dever for her willingness to discuss the complexities of ethnographic ethics. I would also like to thank Kayla Baldwin, my friend and classmate; our frequent discussions of everything from theory and method, teaching, and the finer points of geek culture have been very influential in developing my thinking. But most importantly I thank my husband, Ryan. His constant support of my dreams, tolerance of my faults and love of my eccentricities have often been the sole comfort during the incredible, frustrating, and absolutely insane process of earning a graduate degree. Without him, I would never have made it this far.

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December 2014

108 Pages

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According to a recent Pew poll approximately 97% of all Hindus live in the countries of India and Nepal. However, there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Hindus living in other parts of the world. Across the United States, Hindu temples are joining the religious landscape of the country. They are often greeted as signifiers of a “model minority” by the mainstream because of Asian American economic success. However, as religious and racial minorities, Indian immigrants and Indian Americans just as frequently face ignorance and discrimination. This rejection by mainstream society, combined with a desire to reconnect with the traditions and heritage of their homeland, India, pushes many Hindus in diaspora to explore and embrace a nationalistic interpretation of their religion.

This thesis seeks to understand the trend toward religious nationalism among diaspora Hindus in the United States through an ethnographic examination, using the Sri Ganesha Temple of Nashville, Tennessee as a case study. This community is an ideal case study for two reasons. For one, its internal diversity exemplifies the necessity in diaspora to find commonality in order to build new communities, which creates an opportunity for Hindu nationalism to address pragmatic concerns of the community. Second, the community’s location in the American South, particularly the Bible Belt, places the temple in an environment in which clear, logical and universalist

interpretations of Hinduism are needed to deal with real and perceived threats from conversion and discrimination.

Throughout this project, it is argued that the Hindu nationalist discourse is pervasive among the Sri Ganesha Temple community, though few in the community would actually endorse the political positions of Hindu nationalist organizations in India. This contradiction is explained theoretically in the nature of transnationalism and diaspora, which uproots ideas and practices from one context and adapts them to become meaningful in new circumstances. It is also explained ethnographically by acknowledging the particular concerns and issues faced by the diaspora community, especially the perceived need to create a strong community in order to prevent future generations from abandoning the Hindu religion and its distinctly Indian heritage.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The American South is a “god-fearing” land, though that God is often conceived through the Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. What is more, the prevailing traditions are conservative, often evangelical churches, many of which place an explicit emphasis on missionary work and general proselytization. It is in this part of the United States, where an overwhelming majority of people are Christian, that people feel compelled, often upon first meeting a new person, to identify themselves in no uncertain terms as a Christian. All of this contributes to the ubiquitous nature of religion in the American South, specifically the Christian religion.

But in a growing number of places in the South the divine is being worshipped by different names; other traditions are beginning to form enclaves in what used to be an almost exclusively Christian domain. For some of them the divine is best understood using names such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the *trimutri*, the ‘Hindu trinity.’ Nashville is not only one of the earliest places in the United States where a formal Hindu temple has been built, it is one of the few in the South. Even more remarkable, it is an exemplary case study for understanding how groups go about building, growing and maintaining a community in an often hostile environment. Nonetheless, as we will see shortly, there is little scholarly work on this community, or other Hindu communities in the United States, and many Americans outside the academy are completely oblivious to the presence of this influential and fascinating minority.

This project seeks to redress this glaring oversight by placing the community of Nashville's Sri Ganesha Temple in the foreground of this study. Not only has the community been remarkably successful at overcoming the challenges it faced, it has thrived and become a model for other burgeoning Hindu communities in the United States and abroad. This success has often been the result of a pervasive pragmatism among community leaders, but has also relied on carefully utilizing the diverse resources available to the community and its members. As we will see, this has often led to surprising outcomes, such as the prevalence of nationalist ideology in a diaspora community. This project seeks to illuminate this prevalence utilizing an ethnographic perspective that privileges the community's perceptions of self and other to explain the significance of religious nationalism to people who have left their homeland to live out their lives in a different nation. First, let us take a brief look at the literature to position this study within a larger academic discourse.

The Road Not Taken: A Literature Review

There is a long and prestigious lineage of scholars dedicated to studying Asian Religions throughout the world, with experts in numerous fields bringing invaluable insight to our understanding of ancient and contemporary facets of the rich and diverse traditions arising and thriving on the continent. However, as Asian cultures, ideas, and cultures, ideas, and especially people—who often bring the former two with them—have increased dramatically in their global distribution, the academy has failed to keep pace with the many new avenues of study emerging. There are no doubt many reasons for this,

and they are not particularly important for our discussion here, but it is vital to note the dearth of scholarly attention to Asian religious traditions, especially Hinduism, in transnational or diaspora contexts. This study seeks to begin to redress this imbalance demonstrating the significance of such projects.

When attempting to study Asian religions in the United States, one will immediately notice an imbalance of coverage. The study of Buddhism in America (or the growing interest in an 'American Buddhism') has a fairly respected position in the academy and includes an impressive lineage of scholars (Fields 1981; Hammond and Machacek 1999; Seager 1999, 2006; Prebish 1999; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Prebish and Baumann 2002). This is, in part, due to the high degree of visibility and "trendy"-ness of Buddhism in American popular culture from the 1960s on, with Buddhist-like characters featured in numerous films, television series and other forms of popular media (Iwamura 2011). And, no doubt, the much larger size and longer tenure of East Asian immigrant communities has contributed to the growing infatuation of American culture with Buddhist themes and ideas (Sakamoto, Kim and Takei 2013; Seager 1999).

Until fairly recently, the study of Hinduism outside of India was considered an eccentric endeavor with little merit, even as the numbers of Indians immigrating to the West began to increase dramatically in the last few decades (Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 2010; Bhardwaj and Madhusudana 1990; Sakamoto, Kim and Takei 2013).¹ However, the topic began to receive some serious attention when a number of those immigrants who worked within the academy turned their attention to the unique situation in which

¹ It is important to note Indian immigration has a long history, with the recent surge to the United States being only the most recent development (Amrith 2011; Brown 2006).

they found themselves (Assayag and Benei 2003). Slowly, a number of small-scale, brief studies entered the literature, offering snapshots of communities in different parts of the country, though primarily California and New England (Eck 2000; Kurien 1998, 2002; Narayanan 1992; Simon and Thakur 2000).

The literature is still largely confined to these small projects, with most additions coming in the form of a chapter in edited volumes or articles in niche journals and continuing the largely descriptive effort of early scholarship. There have been a relatively small number of larger projects that have sought to deepen the literature by providing in-depth analysis of specific communities or organizations (Dempsey 2005). In fact, most of the literature on Hinduism in the United States, or on Indian immigrant communities more generally, are intended for non-academic audiences and aim at a general familiarity with the culture than with the contingencies of transnational and diaspora life (Leonard 1997; Arun 2013; Shattuck 1996).

As more scholars begin to turn their attention to the Hindu diaspora in the United States (and elsewhere), we can see an interesting—some might say disturbing—trend developing. Many of the largely middle-class, highly-educated members of the diaspora have turned to an unexpected source: Hindu nationalism, the ideology promoted by the Hindutva movement (Kurien 2004, 2007; Mathew and Prasad 2000; Rajagopal 2000; Bhatt and Mukta 2000).² How do we understand this unexpected trend, and what does this suggest for the future of Hinduism in the United States and elsewhere? This thesis

² Hindutva literally means “Hindu-ness.” The term can be used as a noun to refer to the ideology of Hindu nationalism or as an adjective to describe the various political organizations that promote this ideology. The terms Hindu nationalism and Hindutva are therefore largely interchangeable in use. The term will be explicated more fully in the following chapter.

addresses these concerns by providing an extended ethnographic analysis of one community where this trend can be found, the Sri Ganesha Temple of Nashville, TN.

Course of the Study

To address some of the lacunae in the academic literature, this project seeks to situate itself broadly in the academy, drawing on the insights of several fields to illuminate our subject. This positioning will be the subject of Chapter 2, which will present the theoretical background of the future chapters. Briefly put, the chapter will justify the continued use of the term diaspora as an analytical and heuristic term in the study of transnational immigrant communities such as those of Hindus in the United States. To help clarify this muddy term, we will briefly turn to transnational studies and the tools offered therein in response to the increased use of "diaspora" and "transnational" by both scholars and non-academics. This will suggest some affinities with theories of nationalism, which will be explored. Finally, we will quickly outline the Hindu nationalist discourse and position it within the wider phenomena under consideration.

With theory firmly in mind, we will turn to a discussion of methodology and ethnographic ethics in Chapter 3, paying special attention to the role of the researcher in both gathering and analyzing data. We will revisit the perpetual dilemmas posed by issues of etic and emic perspectives, as well as "insider" and "outsider" statuses. Of particular concern will be the difficulties and problems posed when studying a community that is skeptical of outsiders, especially academics who might inadvertently misunderstand and misrepresent the community to others. Beyond methodological

concerns, the chapter will also present general information about the community, such as demographics, history and organization.

In Chapter 4 we will develop the outline of the community with a discussion of ethnographic data collected through observation and interviews. This will represent the most significant evidence for the prevalence of Hindu nationalism in the community and will cover several topics of concern, including conversion, history and the important issue of developing a group identity. While many of these points will not include explicit references to Hindutva thinkers or organizations, we will see their influence very clearly in the lives of this community, especially among the leaders.

We will continue to develop this line of argument in Chapter 5 by analyzing some of the material culture and media present in the temple community. Of particular concern will be the Sunday school curriculum used by volunteer teachers at the temple, which leans on Hindu nationalist thinking to explain the tradition to the next generation of Hindus. This effort is considered extremely important among the temple community as it is seen as the best way to stave off the future conversion of the youth to other religions, especially Christianity. We will examine a number of media that makes this point abundantly clear, and also take a look at some of the supplemental materials parents use to teach their children how to be Hindu.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Chapter 6, we will return to a broader focus to think about the factors and influences that have contributed to the reality presented in this project. While it would be naïve to suggest the observations made here are completely representative, we will nonetheless offer some conclusions with regard to the temple and

extrapolate to likely trends to be found in other communities in the American Hindu diaspora. To finish, we will consider what these observations and conclusions suggest for future projects and the relationship between our subjects and our own positions within the academy. So without further delay, let us begin by turning our attention to our theoretical framework.

Chapter 2

Inside and Outside the Nation: Diaspora, Transnationalism and Hindutva

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

from "The Ballad of East and West" (Kipling, 1914)

A Story of East and West:

Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West" is perhaps not one of his best, but its narrative represents, in his characteristically unsubtle way, a common way of looking at the divisions between East and West. In it, a colonel's son is sent to chase after a horse thief named Kamal, who has built quite an anti-hero reputation for himself. Upon catching up to the thief, the two exchange threats and bravado, with Kamal ultimately conceding and returning the horse and sending his son to work for the colonel as penance. In this narrative, the distinction between East and West is presented, briefly subverted, and triumphantly reasserted, leaving little room for commonality or understanding between the characters.

However, the world has changed drastically in the century since Kipling penned this narrative, and despite the claim of his opening line, East and West have met, meshed and intermingled considerably. In fact, the pace of interconnectedness only seems to be increasing; information technology enables the rapid exchange of news and currency, transportation developments allow for the shuttling of people from continent to continent in a matter of hours, and international organizations such as the United Nations create spaces for global dialogue. Arbitrary distinctions like East and West, North and South, while still influential in many ways (for example, in popular culture), have lost much of

their significance in the last several decades, as the ties that connect the globe become less novel and far more numerous.

This chapter seeks to shed some theoretical light on this process of connecting East and West, here and there, as it pertains to people who both create and utilize these connections. In particular, I am concerned with immigrants who, leaving their nation of birth, live out their lives in another nation, while maintaining, often very strong, ties to the former. This description points our discussion toward the term "diaspora" and we will therefore begin with a consideration of the conceptual framework this word suggests. However, "diaspora," much like "religion," is a compromised term, which has lost analytic clarity from wide and popular usage describing a variety of phenomena. Therefore, we will seek to clarify our discussion with a consideration of transnationalism.

From there, we will develop our discussion in the direction of the topics more directly of concern to the present study, namely nationalism and the Hindutva movement of India. Building on the theories of diaspora and transnationalism discussed in the first half of this chapter, the second half will seek to make sense of the phenomenon of religious nationalism in Indian diaspora communities, ultimately arguing the conditions of diaspora make such a phenomenon more likely. However, the formulations of religious nationalism that emerge in diaspora are not simple copies of a distant original, but represent adaptations particular to the given context. Therefore, the arguments developed and presented in this chapter will be considered largely in the context of the Sri Ganesha Temple of Nashville, TN and can only be considered true for that community. However, in considering these larger themes in light of the particularities of this community, this

study will nonetheless provide some ground for larger generalizations and comparisons.

Diaspora: What Are We Talking About?

As was just mentioned, the term "diaspora" has been compromised by its rapidly expanding usage, especially in news media and popular culture, where the implications of the term are typically not recognized explicitly. Because of this, some scholars have suggested the term be scrapped altogether in favor of neologisms that can be created to more precisely indicate the exact nature of the topic under consideration (see Brettell 2003). However, I reject this line of thinking as overly idealistic and elitist, serving little more than to separate the language of academia (the pure dialogue of intellectuals) from the language of the rest of the population (who unreflexively use terms like "diaspora" as if they really *mean* something).

Rather, I see it as more logical and beneficial to use the term with a degree of caution and reflexivity, realizing that we must outline what exactly we mean by the term in a given context. Much like the debates in religious studies about the meaning of "religion," anthropology's debates about "culture," or sociology's debates on "society," (and this list could be expanded almost without end) the word "diaspora" should not be abandoned because of its richness of meaning. I find it more useful to apply the construct, but only after outlining which of the possible meanings I intend to evoke. Therefore, this must be the topic to which we presently turn our attention.

The English word "diaspora" comes from the Greek construction *dia speiro*, meaning "to spread over" (Cohen 1997:ix). While the word itself originally referred to migration and colonization, it soon became associated with the expulsion of Jews from

Israel and their experiences as a scattered people.³ As such, many scholars look to the Jewish experience as the only legitimate model of diaspora, and other communities are only included by comparison to the Jewish 'original.' Sudesh Mishra, an Australian social scientist, labels this as the "scene of dual territoriality."⁴ This school of thinking seeks to create a typology and categorical definition of diaspora, by emphasizing different configurations of the triadic relationship between homeland, hostland and diaspora community (Mishra 2006:24-49; see also, Dufoix 2008:20-23). In this configuration, each of these three entities is treated as stable, and largely autonomous constructs that are capable of differing degrees of influence in their often oppositional relationships, and the diaspora community is largely seen as reacting to the forces of one or the other of these two entities (Mishra 2006:27-28; Dufoix 2008:53-58).

William Safran is the most notable advocate of this perspective, and his taxonomy has found its way into many later definitions or considerations of diaspora.⁵ For this reason, it is beneficial to consider it here. Safran lists six features he contends create a diaspora consciousness. However, communities need not possess all six features to be usefully considered through the lens of diaspora, and in fact he suggests only the Jewish diaspora has ever contained all six and is thus the "ideal type" (Safran 1991:84). Safran's taxonomy seeks to extend the definition of diaspora to those

expatriate minority communities whose member share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign,

³ For a concise history of the development of diaspora as an intellectual construct, see Baumann 2000 or Brubaker 2005.

⁴ Though using different terminology, Clifford 1994 produces a similar periodization of diaspora theory to Mishra's.

⁵ For example, see Assayag and Benei 2003; Cohen 1997; Fuglerud 1999; Malloo 2007; Vertovec 2000 to name just a few.

regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland - its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not - and perhaps cannot be - fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return - when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. [Safran 1991:83-84]⁶

While this definition does a great deal to return agency to the diaspora—note that all six begin with "they," referring to the self-perceptions of the diaspora as constitutive of the experience—it does little to destabilize the perception of monolithic entities. In fact, the shift to diaspora consciousness only makes the diaspora appear even more homogenous, containing only a singular "ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity." As Mishra notes "if the category of diaspora is internal to the consciousness of dispersed minorities...then it is possible to give short shrift to a whole host of extra-subjective factors" (2006:38). However, as Gopinath discusses in the explanation of her use of the term "queer diaspora," looking at these factors allows a perspective that can shed new light on concepts of "heterosexuality and the nation while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy" (2005:11).⁷

Robin Cohen, an influential British sociologist, adapted Safran's model, in an effort to account for some of these subjectivities. Rather than relying on the Jewish model

⁶ Though I have serious misgivings about Safran's definition, I would point out the Indian diaspora in the United States, very generally speaking, conforms to all of his points except number 4, and even this was (and perhaps still is) common in the first generation.

⁷ See Manalansan 2003 for an ethnographic account of how (homo)sexuality alters the experience of diaspora and provides different orientations towards self and other, here and there.

as an ideal type, Cohen advances a number of types of diaspora—victim, labor, trade, cultural, etc.—which may be most exemplified by a certain diaspora but is not equivalent to it. Furthermore, Cohen recognizes there is no "perfect match between a particular ethnic group and a specific type of diaspora" because most groups have historically involved multiple types at different times (1997:xi). However, Cohen is reluctant to expand the term too far, and rejects including such "cognate phenomena" as world religions, borderland cultures, and what he calls "stranded minorities" largely because "they do not seek to return to, or to recreate, a homeland" (Cohen 1997:187-191). This exclusion is important, as it casts doubt onto the current project, but as we will soon see, we need not be too concerned.

In many regards, Cohen can be seen as a transition to the second "scene" in diaspora theory, that of "situational laterality, which seeks to examine the subjectivities of various diaspora groups while advancing a multi-polar geography that allows for more diversity than the prior model (Mishra 2006:52-96). In this scene, there is a marked reorientation toward post-structural, post-modern theories and a tacit celebration of difference and hybridity. As Stuart Hall, who is nearly the sole progenitor of this scene,⁸ put it:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. [Hall 1990:235.]

⁸ Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer were also influential in advancing this theory of diaspora, but it is important to note that both Mercer and Gilroy were students under Hall (Mishra 2006:61).

Drawing on Bhaktin and Derrida, Hall strikes a careful balance between the unchanging, bloc identities of earlier theories of diaspora and the complete relativism of post-modernism. Hall navigates these extremes by discussing the distinction between signification and meaning, "for if signification depends upon the endless repositioning of its differential terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop - the necessary and temporary 'break' in the infinite semiosis of language" (1990:229).

Diaspora identity, Hall argues, follows a similar pattern, requiring a careful distinction between the existential states of "being" and "becoming." Whereas "being" is directed toward the past and provides a sense of a shared, stable, unchanging identity, "becoming" is directed toward the future and alludes to the "discordant, polymorphous detours of the sign" (Mishra 2006:63; Hall 1990:223-226).⁹ This conception of diaspora, as both stable and unstable, here and there, moving and looking both forward and backward, allows us to speak about the experience in new and illuminating ways. For example, Mucahit Bilici demonstrates the versatility of this conception by flipping the traditional direction of diasporic longing:

Diaspora can make sense only in relation to a home and exists only as a separation from it. But at the same time, home is not just a past place, it is an object of desire. It is the separation itself that creates the object and the

⁹ Mucahit Bilici uses similar language to discuss the experience of the immigrant, which sheds light on the experience of diaspora for the first generation of Indians living in the United States:

the immigrant is a "becoming," while the citizen is a "being." Becoming is in flux (like a current), whereas being is stabilized (like an atmosphere). It is no wonder that the benign view of the immigrant (i.e., the view from liberal inclusiveness) perceives him as an incomplete citizen, while the malign view (exclusive nativism) sees him as an alien intruder. As a "becoming," the immigrant wants to find rest and become a "being," a citizen. The citizen, on the other hand, has no distance to travel, no oath to take, and no burden to carry... His belonging is fluent. The immigrant is restless because he is not at home—yet. Being diasporic, he carries a burden (which is himself) and struggles to come to his own as a full citizen. [2012:10-11]

desiring subject. If we do not impose our chronological definition of home on the immigrant, we will see that home is not exclusively what is left behind but also *what is always ahead*: home is a destination, even a destiny. Home is that toward which one walks to close the wound of separation. Home need not be narrowly conceived as the place of origination but rather can be viewed as the destination of longing. [2012:205]

We can see then, that there are far more possibilities when we detach ourselves from the Jewish "ideal type" and begin to look at the lived experiences of diaspora. Perhaps most importantly for this project, this opening up of the concept makes room to discuss the experiences of peoples and communities who may not have any desire to return to the homeland, but for whom the relationship to that land and its culture still plays a significant role in their lives.

This emphasis on hybridity, multiplicity and plurality in general not only gave way to a shift from the bipolar homeland/hostland dichotomy but to an increased exploration of mid-points, and ultimately to borders and especially transgressions. Many began to fixate on the border and the hyphens that accompany its transgression as the seminal diasporic space (see Brah 1996:181). As Mishra explains:

the argument runs as follows. In marking the joint/rupture between one space and another (or several others), the border is clearly devoid of its own space and yet indispensable to spatial cartographies. It is the function of the border/hyphen to break up structured unities and pre-given stabilities while positing them on every side. Inhabiting the hyphen, one is neither absolutely one thing nor another but constituted multiply in the line of fracture which, as logic would have it, is also the line of suture. From the vantage point of the hyphen/border, one is never solely one thing or another, but altogether something else - a veritable third. [2006:85]

This perspective grants far more flexibility in speaking about diaspora communities and the individuals who comprise them. It acknowledges that rather than standing between oppositional territories that compete for influence, diasporas actually bridge these two (or

more) places through their multiple belonging. They share elements of commonality with multiple places, while possessing qualities unlike these places.

I find that this perspective of both/and rather than neither/nor is far more useful in analyzing the experiences of diaspora when trying to understand the complicated, paradoxical relationship American Hindus have with Hindu nationalist discourses. American Hindus of Indian origins are at once both American and Indian in varying degrees.¹⁰ While many are primarily self-identify as Indian, and are even legal citizens of India, they nonetheless possess certain American qualities adopted over many years living in the United States. Others are born American citizens and self-identify first and foremost as Americans, yet maintain cultural, economic, and religious ties to India. These ties are the focus of the next, interrelated portion of this chapter, which will briefly examine the concept of transnationalism.

Transnationalism: Drawing the Lines and Transgressing Them

Some scholars, whether out of disciplinary training or personal inclination, bypass the debates around diaspora and focus their efforts on analyzing transnationalism. However, this term has also grown rather ubiquitous in recent times, likely, at least in part, to the poorly delineated field of inquiry that is the norm for any new area of study. Nina Glick Shiller, in a survey of the field, distinguishes between three major trends within transnational studies:

¹⁰ While still fairly uncommon, there are a growing number of primarily white, middle-class converts to some traditions within Hinduism. The most notable are the Hare Krishna's, members of the reformist International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), though other traditions are beginning to gain followings outside the Indian American community.

Transnational cultural studies have focused on the growth of global communications, media, consumerism, and public cultures that transcend borders to create... a 'global ecumene'... globalization studies have called attention to the recent reconfigurations of space and polity and the growth of global cities... In contrast, scholars of transnational migration have been concerned with the actual social interactions that migrants maintain and construct across borders. [1997:155]

These three subfields are presented as discrete endeavors, but the concerns of this project begin to blur the lines. While we are primarily concerned with the social world of a particular immigrant community, these interactions are intimately connected to advances in communications, media—which allow for the creation of what we might call a global diasporic ecumene—and what Appadurai has termed "diasporic public spheres" that seek to reconfigure notions of space and polity (1996:10).

This is perhaps why Glick Shiller proposes a new way to develop academic efforts to understand transnational processes by focusing on three issues "(1) the specification of location and agency; (2) the relationship between transnational processes and states; (3) the historical simultaneity of and interaction between global, transnational, national, and local social fields" (1997:156). This provides a far more cogent framework for the purposes of this project, as the second issue speaks directly to the concerns of this endeavor.¹¹ To be explicit, we are concerned here with the relationship between the transnational processes of diaspora (formation, maintenance, identity politics, etc.) and interpretations of states that conflate the "national," which we will discuss in the next section, with the state.

¹¹ The first and third issues are not unimportant to this study, and traces of them will emerge from time to time throughout our argument. However, the issues surrounding transnational processes associated with diaspora and their relationship to states are of primary relevance.

However, it would seem we are simply speaking about diaspora, but using different terms. Indeed, the two notions are intimately linked, sometimes to the point of conflation. Just take for example the renowned journal *Diaspora*, which is fully titled *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. Since both terms are rather amorphous and refer to such complex phenomena both have a history of being poorly defined, such that scholars often use them without any reference to what the words have traditionally meant. Stephane Dufoix noticed this tendency, saying:

The noun 'transnationalism' and its adjective 'transnational,' which have become so common, often serve only to distort different relationships to physical space... people [] use the word 'national' and its derived words as synonymous for 'state' and [this] prevents us from considering, for example, any nonstate national factors [like diaspora communities]. 'International relations' are actually 'interstate relations.' 'Transnational' presents the same problem. Composed of the prefix 'trans-', meaning 'by way of' or 'through,' and the adjective 'national,' it logically refers to phenomena that take place through or by way of nations. But this is not the meaning promoted by writers who use the word. [2008:61]

To resolve this ambiguity of terms, Dufoix proposes, following a similar move by William Miles and Gabriel Sheffer, four interrelated "ideal types that involve the structuring of collective experience abroad... 'centroperipheral,' 'enclaved,' 'atopic,' and 'antagonistic'" (2008:62).¹²

The antagonistic mode is perhaps the easiest to explain, and primarily refers to groups, such as exiles or refugees, who do not support or consider legitimate the current regime in their state of origin (Dufoix 2008:63-64). Centroperipheral mode corresponds to Khachig Toloyan's "transnation" which comprises all of a country's citizens inside and

¹² Miles and Sheffer 1998 proposed to distinguish between diasporic entities that are transnational, composed of different nationalities but maintaining a singular linguistic-cultural identity, such as Francophone organizations, and trans-state, composed of one nationality but dispersed across several state borders, such as Zionist organizations.

outside of the borders, with official institutions playing a central role (Dufoix 2008:62; see also Toloyan 2000). In other words, it is a semi-official trans-state nation that seeks to represent the interests of its members to the states in which they reside. The enclaved mode refers to the purely local organization of individuals around a shared identity, rather than formal nationality. These enclaves may orient themselves to the referent-origin in different ways, depending on local contingencies, and, as the name suggests, tend to be isolated from one another (Dufoix 2008: 62-63). Atopic mode refers less to place and more of a space, "a geography with no other territory than the space described by the networks" and "is best expressed in dispersion itself" (Dufoix 2008:63).

Although this may seem similar to the schemas developed by other theorists, Dufoix is quick to point out "this is not a typology" (2008:64). Rather, these modes—note they were described as such in the preceding paragraph—represent different ideal types that can be combined or alternated depending on the particularities of the moment (Dufoix 2008:64-66). The Sri Ganesha Temple, for example, represents an example of the enclaved mode, seeking first and foremost to build a local community. But through its participation in organizations such as the Council of Hindu Temples of North America and the Hindu American Foundation, the latter of which has extensive connections to the Indian state, involve it in the centropipheral mode. Likewise, traveling tours of swamis, gurus, and performance groups from across the Indian diaspora, not to mention to proliferation of diasporic media, connect it to the atopic mode.¹³

¹³ Speakers and performers have travelled to the temple, usually as a stop on a global tour, from places such as Hawai'i, Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, and numerous locations in India.

Having thoroughly worshipped at the altar of ideal types, we may now utilize our vocabulary with considerably more precision. We can now speak of transnationalism—or should we write it as trans-nationalism, a nationalism that is trans-state?—as a phenomenon involving the spread of "money, information, people, and ideologies" that "have produced forms of solidarity on the same *political* plane as those that were traditionally monopolized by the nation-state" (Appadurai 2006:24). Furthermore, we can discuss this phenomenon with an eye to the dual tensions of universalization and globalization. According to Joanne Punzo Waghorne, the key distinction, which is often missed, is "globalization can continue to provide a space for locality, whereas universalization tends to blunt both *locality* and *neighborhood* in the religious dimension of worldwide migration" (2004:178).

However, before we can begin to examine the seemingly opposing forces of a trans-state nationalism with universalist tendencies and a trans-state network of local enclaves born out of globalizing forces, we must first pay heed to the scholarship of nationalism, particularly the recent emergence of Hindu nationalism. The way we conceive of the nation theoretically has implications for how we begin to discuss nationalism, and perhaps more dramatic consequences should we uncritically deploy a theory of nation that does not take note of the political significance, both global and local, of nationalism.

Nationalism: What's in A Nation?

Like diaspora and transnationalism, the concept of nationalism is not particularly helpful until we consider what it is we mean by such a word. A simple definition of nationalism might go something like this: a sense of extreme pride in one's nation. But

this kind of definition, which pervade dictionaries, do little to illuminate the phenomenon to any degree.¹⁴ If nationalism is pride in a nation, we still need to know what is meant we say the word "nation." Thinking about our discussion of transnationalism, it becomes clear that nation can refer to several things, perhaps most significantly either 1) the structures of the state or 2) the sense of unity derived from communal ties such as ethnicity. Thus, speaking of a Hindu nation could refer to a belief in 1) A government of an intrinsically Hindu nature or 2) A community premised on a one-ness felt by Hindus, regardless of in which state they live. Both of these uses of nationalism will be relevant to our discussion so we must be careful to maintain a distinction between these two connotations.

Before we go much further, we must begin to discuss academic theories of nationalism. It seems most logical to begin with the work of Benedict Anderson, whose work *Imagined Communities* is probably *the* seminal work on nationalism. Before its publication in 1981, few had given much critical thought to nationalism, especially in regards to its origins or development. It was largely considered an obvious development of modernity, a simple by-product of the development, first in Europe and later elsewhere, of nation-states as the global standard of political organization. But Anderson challenged this assumption, demonstrating the development of nationalism was far more complicated and significant.

For Anderson, nations and nationalism "are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (2006:4). To understand these artefacts, we must contextualize them in the gradual

¹⁴ See for example the entries for nationalism on www.dictionary.com, www.meriam-webster.com, or www.ahdictionary.com.

decline of feudal and religious (i.e. papal) authority over people's lives, which when combined with "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (Anderson 2006:46).

Because of its historical context, Anderson believes this community to be conceived in secular terms, relying largely on the development of vernacular language reading publics to provide a sense of distinctiveness from others.¹⁵ As this uniqueness becomes more and more prevalent in the consciousness of the reading public, though largely just the elite portions, it creates a conscious awareness and leads to the conception, the imagining of a nation.

This nation is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 2006:6).¹⁶ It is limited in the sense that it encompasses only a specific group of people and explicitly excludes all others; it is a collective among collectives. Meanwhile, the nation is innately sovereign; bound by the will only of its own and maintaining rights to autonomy, security, and preservation of its culture. But perhaps most significant in this theory of nationalism is the emphasis on consciousness; the nation is *imagined* into being, with an accompanying *forgetting* of certain elements, especially from the past (Anderson 2006:205). As Anderson explains it "all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (2006:204). This emphasis on the imagined

¹⁵ Anderson is not the only theorist to consider language as a preeminent force in the development of nationalism. For example, Ernest Gellner, a famous anthropologist put forth a similar argument a short time later, believing it instilled a powerful sense of *Blut und Boden*, "blood and soil" (2009).

¹⁶ It is interesting to note the nation is also imagined as male, with the land often personified as a goddess and its people described as *bhumiputra*, "sons of the soil," who are bound to protect their mother (Banerjee 2005; Kovacs 2004; Nagel 1998).

nature of the nation has proved insightful for many scholars, even those like myself who find many faults in Anderson's theory.¹⁷ If the nation is imagined, logically speaking there must be few limits on how it can be imagined.

If we think back to our discussion of transnationalism and our consideration of "trans-nationalism" the first point of interest for this project is the potential to create and maintain a nationalism from outside the homeland. If the imagining of the nation is essentially limited only by the imagination of the people, there is no reason to believe this to be impossible. Anderson himself recognized the potential for this development, later coining the term "long-distance nationalism" to refer to nationalist movements outside the territory of the state, what we could call diasporic nationalism. In fact, there has been a great deal of work investigating this phenomenon—especially the case of Sri Lankan Tamils—which Anderson described as "ripping open the classical nation-state project from a different direction (1994:326).¹⁸

At first this may seem an odd development. We often think of immigrants dropping ties to their old country in order to establish fresh connections to their new country of residence. Indeed, the idea of the United States is premised on precisely this process; immigrants arrive and acculturate to the wider American culture to become new citizens of the nation-state. Immigrants may be allowed to join the nation on certain conditions, but often they are never fully accepted and maintain a stigma of having been,

¹⁷ For example, Partha Chatterjee had great issue with Anderson's argument that colonial nationalist movements were merely a response to the colonial project (1993). Kelly and Kaplan are equally dubious about this and other claims, arguing the impact and end of World War II was far more significant than retreating colonial powers (2001).

¹⁸ For just a small sampling, see Brown 2004; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Fuglerud 1999; Skrbis 1999; Thiranagama 2014.

and continuing to be, Other (Bilici 2012:91; Van der Veer 1995:6). This is especially true when groups cannot or will not make changes to bring themselves into conformity with the nation's mainstream culture. For example, Indians, being of darker skin tone, become racialized and are blocked from full acceptance because of their racial status (Lowe 1996).

This rejection from full, equal inclusion due to their perceived ineligibility for membership in the nation tends to create a greater sense of connection with immigrants' heritage. This connection is more likely to take nationalist tones among educated, middle-class Indian immigrants, who tend to be accepted economically but rejected socially (Hanson 1999:64-65).¹⁹ Van der Veer has noted "this discourse [of nationalism], which marginalizes and demonizes the migrant, also breeds nationalism among those who are marginalized" (1995:7).²⁰ Working with Sri Lankan Tamils in Norway, Oivind Fuglerud noticed the refugees he studied had very few relationships with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Tamil nationalist group) before their arrival in Norway. However, as they began to become alienated and disillusioned with their lives in exile, more and more Tamils became active in LTTE activities and voicing support for its cause (Fuglerud 1999:186-188). While this is an extreme case, it demonstrates the power of the imagination to expand the bounds of the nation to create networks of trans-states and trans-nationalism.

¹⁹ As Hanson explains elsewhere, historical observation has revealed it is among the upwardly mobile where ideas of nationalism often gain the most resonance, in large part because it is this segment of the population that is most at risk of fears of insecurity created by the ambivalent nature of the modern (1999:7-11).

²⁰ Similarly, Kamala Visweswaran has pointed out many social science discourses often reproduce false senses of difference, thereby alienating those who do not conform to the majority racial or ethnic group and unwittingly supporting nationalist claims (2010).

However, as mentioned above, Anderson thought nationalism emerged only with the decline of religious influence; the nationalist consciousness is explicitly a secular one for him.²¹ However, other scholars have found this line of reasoning insufficient in explaining or describing the phenomenon of nationalism in many of its permutations.²² Charles Blattberg argues scholars should pay more attention to nationalist artists, noting many utilize religious motifs and scenes, and suggesting the nation may not be conceived in purely secular terms by nationalists (2006:603-606). It is hard to imagine a Jewish nationalism, for example, that does not include aspects of religion if the word diaspora is used to refer to the Jewish people, and the nationalist narrative converges with the mythology, "sacred history," of Zionism.

In a sweeping article, Rogers Brubaker offers ways to conceive of the relationship between religion and nationalism. He hypothesizes four conceptions, which he contends represent the vast majority of current scholarship on the topic. According to Brubaker, these four conceptions are 1) religion and nationalism are analogous phenomenon 2) religion helps to explain nationalism 3) religion is part of nationalism and 4) a religious form of nationalism (Brubaker 2012). Of the first trend, Brubaker notes the important role played by concepts such as ethnicity in the formation of individual and collective identity, categorizing religion and nationalism as similar way of organizing and orienting people (2012:4-5).²³ From Brubaker's perspective, many phenomena would fall into this category, including those others have identified as religious forms of nationalism. For

²¹ Anderson does concede nationalist imaginings maintain "a strong affinity with religious imaginings" due to shared concerns about death, but considers this affinity "by no means fortuitous" and therefore refuses to give much consideration to the potential of a religious nationalism (2006:10).

²² Consider the cases of Jewish, Irish, and Malaysian nationalisms, for example.

²³ On the nature of ethnicity see Nagel 1994; for an application of this to nationalism, see Calhoun 1993.

example, considers most Islamist groups, which have become the preeminent example in our post-9/11 world, to be acting in anti-national or supra-national ways.

In order to meet Brubaker's requirements, a religious form of nationalism would utilize religion to "provide[] a distinctive way—or a distinctive family of ways—of joining state, territory, and culture (2012:12-13). Offering up the work of Roger Friedland as a representative, Brubaker claims to find little reason to consider Islamist movements, or other purported religious forms of nationalism, as inherently nationalist in nature. He proposes to more carefully delimit the use of nationalism as an analytic tool arguing "there is no compelling reason to speak of 'nationalism' unless the imagined community of the nation is widely understood as a primary focus of value, source of legitimacy, object of loyalty and basis of identity" (Brubaker 2012:14). In this statement, Brubaker has unwittingly provided support for discussing the Hindutva movement as a religious form of nationalism.

Peter Van der Veer, a leading scholar on the Hindutva movement, points out that "religious nationalism equates the religious community with the nation and thus builds on a previously constructed religious identity (1994:80). This would certainly meet Brubaker's criteria, as nation, territory and religion are seamlessly blended together such that to be Hindu is to be Indian, and vice versa. Membership in another religious community, especially Islam, is seen to revoke membership in the national community and suggest allegiance to a faraway territory representing this different identity. In order to demonstrate this point, and the relevance of our last theoretical tool, we will now turn to a brief discussion of Hindu nationalism and the ideology of Hindutva.

Hindutva: The Ideology of Hindu Nationalism

The term Hindutva literally translates as "Hindu-ness" and was coined by an early Indian nationalist by the name of V.D. Savarkar around the turn of the 20th century. According to Chetan Bhatt, "Savarkar's key aim was to provide a comprehensive definition of what constituted 'Hindu identity' (2001:85). This was a necessary step in the process of imagining India as an essentially Hindu nation, much the way conservative Christians in the United States conceive an America founded on "biblical principles." Scholars are often quick to point out this is a historically new way of thinking, since Hinduism is a religion without any centralized organization (Bhatt 2001:77). However, it is undeniable the movement and ideology it supports has quickly grown to become a significant agent in the contemporary conception of Hinduism and what it means to be Hindu. We should quickly note the term "Hindutva" can refer to either an ideology, that of Hindu nationalism, or a socio-political movement, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party, "Indian People's Party," with the latter espousing the former as its own brand of cultural nationalism.²⁴

The BJP is an Indian political party that has stood in elections since its inception in the 1980, even managing to win enough seats to win select the Prime Minister twice—once briefly in the early 1990s and again just this year. The BJP is also closely affiliated with other Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, a kind of boy scout/volunteer group that instructs young Hindu males in martial arts and nationalist ideology. Perhaps most importantly for us, the BJP and RSS also maintain

²⁴ While the organization will be mentioned here, all future references will be to the ideology, its narrative and discourse unless otherwise explicitly noted.

close ties to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or "World Hindu Council." The VHP was founded in 1966 with a stated mission to "develop a simplified, easily comprehensible, and commonly accessible Hinduism, understood as a catholic set of common symbolic denominators acceptable across sects and castes. The aim was to disseminate a common code of conduct for all Hindus" even, and especially, those who no longer live in India (Hanson 1999:102).

This project is achieved largely through a series of ideologically-driven interpretations of history, texts, and traditions. For one, nationalist discourse ties Hinduism to the Aryan culture and Vedas, which are argued to be the original glory of the tradition; all later texts are only considered valid if they conform with certain key elements of Vedic scripture (Bhatt 2001:94). Most notably, unsavory elements that have historically been part of the tradition, such as untouchability, gender inequality and Brahmanic elitism, are completely whitewashed as either outside corruptions or misinterpretations of Vedic scriptures (Visweswaran *et al.* 2009:105-107). This often takes the form of an explicit rationalization, whereby elements considered superstitious or overly exoteric, especially rituals, are reinterpreted into less fantastic and more "reasonable" elements (Hanson 1999:103).

As Hindutva conceives of India as an essentially Hindu nation, there is a significant amount of tension with non-Hindu groups that often boils over into massive, deadly riots (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Hanson 1999; Van der Veer 1994). The logic of essential Hindu-ness extends even to those Indians who are not Hindu. Indian Christians and Muslims are considered either Hindus who have been lured from their tradition or the descendants of brutal foreign invaders (Bhatt 2001:77-78). The former are considered in

need of being "reclaimed" by reconversion to Hinduism, and the latter are deemed disloyal and treacherous (Hanson 1999: 72). Furthermore, the history of India is literally rewritten, in both India and the U.S., as a story of persecution, first by Muslim invaders and later British imperialists (Visweswaran *et al.* 2009:101-102). The new view of history, which is thoroughly infused with Hindu nationalist ideology, is then represented to Hindus of all ages and traditions as the definitive narrative.

This narrative, with an alternating emphasis on victimization and glory, also helps to reinforce orientalist and imperialist scholarship that has long since been disavowed in the academy, setting Hindu nationalism on a collision course with scholars in numerous fields (Van der Veer 1994:67). In fact, a common practice of Hindu nationalist groups is to challenge "offensive" or "inaccurate" interpretations of Indian history or Hinduism (Gohain 2002: 4597-4598; Joshi 2013:207-208; Kurien 2007:160-161). It may not be surprising then, to learn there is a strong belief in Hindu nationalism in the fundamental difference between the East and West, and the superiority of the latter in matters of culture and spirituality (Banerjee 2005:42). With so many strong beliefs, often supported by rational interpretations and truly impressive organizational management, Hindutva has pervaded the public culture of India (Hanson 1999:18-19). When participants in this public culture then move abroad and set up new communities, they bring many of these ideas with them, though often in modified forms. Thus we end this discussion as we began it, contemplating the meeting of East and West in a world where such distinctions are becoming empty words in the academy, but retain powerful meaning elsewhere.

Conclusion

Let us return now to the words that began this chapter. "Oh, East is East, and West is West and never the twain shall meet." In some regards, this notion seems laughable. The discussion of diaspora and transnationalism above makes it quite clear such a conception of discreteness is untenable in the current age. Clearly the contemporary era is ripe with meetings of East and West as populations shift and merge, relocate and diverge in unprecedented ways and at ever-increasing rates. It is not surprising then, that Vijay Mishra, a prominent diaspora theorist, once remarked that diaspora is "the exemplary condition of late modernity" (1996:426). Indeed, hybridity, transgressions of borders and populations-in-motion seem to be edging closer to the norm rather than the exception.

However, it is important not to lose focus of the reality of lived experiences. Much like the allegedly imminent death of religion, which has been a favorite prediction for centuries of social scientists, it has recently become popular among scholars of globalization to foresee the doom of the nation-state as an organizing principle of populations.²⁵ However, nations are still incredibly important to peoples' lived experiences, and there are numerous indications of an increase in nationalist movements. As we have discussed above, even those most distant from the nation can become fervent nationalists. And, in fact, the increasing movement of peoples across the globe may actually make this more likely.

²⁵ While I suspect this may simply be the newest target of social scientists looking to give a eulogy, many influential theorists have predicted the oncoming death of the nation-state. See, for example, Appadurai 1996, Kearney 1991, and Rouse 1991.

Perhaps, then, Kipling was not as far off as he might have first seemed. For in the meeting of East and West, sometimes rather than a melding the result is a bravado that exchanges threats and leads to reassertions of East-ness and West-ness. In this way, we can see the continued relevance of nationalism in general and the Hindutva discourse more specifically. These ideologies and movements provide a meaningful way for individuals to reassert themselves, sometimes violently, when living in situations of personal, cultural and even global flux. The contingencies of diaspora, transnational experiences, in addition to orienting people toward new futures may also encourage them to reorient themselves toward shared pasts.

The last two lines of Kipling's poem may provide one last insight to our considerations here; "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth/ When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth" (Kipling 1914:11). In the liminal space of "becoming," confronted with challenges to one's perceived "being," the determination of the latter falls away to confront the challenge. However, liminality is inherently temporary, and the individual must eventually return to a state of "being," even if for only a short time. But the liminal time of "becoming" leaves a mark and alters the perception of one's own "being," makes its own alterations. Thus, just as the colonel's son reasserts the primacy of the West in Kipling's poem, the individual reasserts his or her "being" though perhaps in a different configuration than before. And this new "being" thereby shapes and molds the possible "becomings" of the future, making it all the more important to understand the specificities and contingencies that prompt these "beings" and "becomings." In the next chapter, we will begin to do just that, by discussing the methods for uncovering and understanding

these realities, as well as providing some of the most fundamental information gathered through these methods.

Chapter 3

Getting to Know the Sri Ganesha Temple

It is Easter Sunday and the temple has organized a celebration to Hanuman, in addition to the regular weekend activities. Unlike other celebrations at the temple, this one is almost entirely lay-led, a group of around twelve women (and one man) sitting at the front of an amorphous gathering of devotees, leading the group in singing different, apparently self-chosen devotional hymns. Not knowing the songs myself, and hardly able to keep up with the foreign lyrics, I amble about the sanctum a bit, making small talk with a few acquaintances and observing the larger group from a small distance. After some time, Rajesh, one of the temple's lay employees, makes his way through the crowd of sitting and standing people, clearly heading in my direction with some purpose. "Have I done something wrong? Perhaps this is supposed to be a private function... but there were no fliers or announcements to that effect. What am I going to do if he wants me to leave?" When Rajesh succeeds in winding his way to where I am standing he smiles, makes the *namaskar* gesture and asks politely, "Would you mind giving us a hand in the kitchen? We need some strong young guys to help us move a big pot." As we walk downstairs to the kitchen Rajesh says that it is very fortunate that I am here today. He would not want to disturb any of the devotees with this kind of thing, especially not during a service. I brush off the comment with a joke about not being as strong as Hanuman, but hopefully still strong enough to help out. Rajesh laughs, saying Hanuman wanted me at the temple this morning to do this charitable act for his devotees. And that makes twice in five minutes that Rajesh has, intentionally or not, made explicit note of my outsider status. Clearly, I can be trusted enough to help with a task such as this. But even after two years, I am no closer to approaching the status of a group member.

This anecdote, and many others like it, demonstrates the way in which the research for this project has been conducted, namely through ethnographic methods such as participant observation. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss some of these methods and their implications, not only for how and what types of information I gathered, but also for the analysis and presentation of the data within this thesis. While there is nothing unusual about the methods of research used for this project, they have presented unique challenges and successes that warrant a more careful consideration of

the methods themselves. Like other ethnographers aware of the challenges and successes of their own research, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss methodological problems faced during my fieldwork.

It is my intention, as an ethnographer committed to a liberal understanding of my role as researcher, to explain my role as ethnographer, especially the relevance of my own positionality. By foregrounding any discussion of the data itself with considerations of my own role in gathering and interpreting that data, I hope to demonstrate the interconnectedness between myself and the information I was able, and sometimes unable, to gather. It is not my intention to force myself into the narrative inappropriately. However any consideration of my arguments and claims must be tempered by considerations of my inescapable influence on the data I am using to support those claims. As in the opening anecdote, a real incident adapted from my fieldnotes, this chapter will reflexively consider my relationship with both my subjects and the data. In doing so, a fuller image of my own role as researcher will emerge, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions about potential limitations and shortcomings in the pages to come.

Ethnography: What is it?

Clifford Geertz, perhaps one of the most influential social scientists of the last century, once remarked that “if you want to understand what a science is... you should look at what the practitioners of it do. In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology [as well as a number of other social science disciplines], what the practitioners do is ethnography” (Geertz 1973:5). And what ethnography *is*, he says, is an intellectual

endeavor attempting to observe, understand and explain “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit” (Geertz 1973:10). In doing this, the ethnographer relies on a number of methods, typically qualitative in nature but not necessarily so, to gather data in order to present a ‘thick description,’ that is, not only a presentation of what objectively happened, but something of the subjective meanings and interpretations of the people involved as well.

The classic example is a wink. Anyone can simply observe the interaction between two individuals and note that one moved his or her eyelids in a certain manner. This presentation is not inaccurate, but misses the more subtle, meaningful strata of the interaction. The ethnographer presenting a thick description, observing the same movement of eyelids, attempts to interpret and represent this behavior with a mind to the meaning underlying the interaction. Thus, a distinction is made between a twitch, which is an unintentional behavior, perhaps caused by a speck of dust and a wink, which is an intentional behavior with various social implications. Ethnographers then, having differentiated between twitches and winks, attempt to uncover—using further methods, such as interviewing—the meanings and implications of winks and twitches in a given context. We then present our opinions as to the appropriate meanings and implications of the observed behavior, often in narrative or semi-narrative format.

However, ethnographers must acknowledge “that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz 1973:9). In order to ensure our constructions are as precise and plausible as possible, ethnographers must be as mindful of this fact and maintain a

reflexive dialogue with ourselves and our data. Failure to do so risks unnecessary abstractions and unfounded conclusions with little resemblance to the constructions of our subjects. This process is often compounded in the ethnographer's description, as the potential precariousness of his or her interpretation is veiled by the realities of academic writing and the removal of the subject(s)'s agency in presenting an alternative interpretation. The best ethnography therefore attempts a balance between the emic, insider interpretation, and the etic, outsider interpretation.

As an example, let us consider an anecdote proposed by the religious studies theorist Wayne Proudfoot in his book *Religious Experience*. In his discussion of the interpretive process, Proudfoot describes a hypothetical incident in which two individuals go for a walk in a forest. At some point in their walk one of two is suddenly struck by an intense fear, believing he or she has just seen a bear. The other person, however, is positioned on the trail at a different angle to the "bear" and is able to deduce that it is, in fact, simply a tree. It would be both misleading and unkind to suggest the first individual was frightened by the tree; he or she was, in fact, frightened by what he or she *perceived* to be a bear (Proudfoot 1985:192-193). However, we must nonetheless acknowledge that there was, in reality, no bear. Thus, the researcher should approach "a reflective equilibrium" balancing the description and explanation in such a way the description still resonates with the first individual's perception without sacrificing an accurate explanation of his or her (mis)perception (Proudfoot 1985:219).

Navigating this balance of description and explanation is precisely what the ethnographer attempts to do when presenting an interpretation of some behavior or belief, and it is what I have attempted to do throughout this endeavor. Nonetheless, there are

inevitably instances in which the explanations provided by the ethnographer and the subjects differ. In these instances it is fair to say that both interpretations have some value; the subjects' interpretation is not inherently better or worse, nor is that of the ethnographer. Rather, each is dependent upon and constitutive of the differing perceptions held by the respective party while attempting to explain the same event (Proudfoot 1985:114). As such, presenting differing, even opposing interpretations is completely normal (Proudfoot 1985:197). My subjects will surely not agree with all of my explanations, but I hope my evidence and rationale for reaching those explanations will be considered reasonable and plausible to readers of this work.

Ethnographic Fragments and Positionality

Although any academic endeavor is inherently incomplete, in the sense of not being able to exhaustively explicate and explain the totality of a phenomenon, this is perhaps more clearly true for ethnographic endeavors. Kalpana Ram, an anthropologist who researches rural villages in Tamil Nadu, India, explains this reality thusly:

the interpretive method, properly understood, need make no claim to having exhausted everything that can about what counts as context. It need not be totalizing nor restrictive of the account it produces of people and places. As interpretation, it is open-ended without being relativistic. It functions as an invitation, to be joined by other projects of interpretation and to be superseded by more cogent interpretations as these come along. [2013:5]

While Ram only implies her deeper rationale for her commitment to fragments, my own commitment can be explained in terms of the postmodern. I will not rehash all the many debates of postmodern theory; however a few notes must be made to explain my thinking

on this matter. These notes can most profitably begin with the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Lyotard's most relevant contribution to postmodern social theory was his discussion of what he termed 'grand narratives,' which were those discourses that seek to present a universal, totalizing account of their subject (Lyotard 1984, Ritzer and Stepinsky 2014:625-629). Ethnographers have been guilty of this kind of narration in equal measure to other scholars, but ethnography as a method of research is perhaps more susceptible to being accused of these pitfalls, especially when many of the heralded scholars of our disciplines have frequently, though hopefully unintentionally, made a number of claims on the specious grounds of 'having been there' (Jacobson 1991). These accounts are often essentialist and inaccurate, and have come to be the public face of ethnography for its critics and the face of modernism to many postmodernists (Asad 1993:14-19).

Nonetheless, I take as equally important certain insights from the philosopher Michel Foucault. Most relevant to this discussion is Foucault's analysis of knowledge and its inextricable relationship to power. Thus, he provocatively states:

what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. [Foucault 1980:119]

Most poignantly for this research, which is itself concerned with the discourses of others, is the implication that power actually *produces* knowledge and my own discourse. Though I would scarcely like to dwell on it for long, my research, like all research, is inextricably bound up in relations of power. This is through no particular effort or fault of

my own, as “the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Foucault 1980:114). In a sense, ‘the game is rigged.’ As power produces knowledge and discourse, it effectively reproduces *itself* and thereby establishes a hegemonic monopoly over future power. Because of the nature of power, the knowledge and discourses produced by it go largely unnoticed, seeming to be natural and common sense in so many ways. And when they are sometimes challenged, it is most often by those already brought up in the existing network of power relations, thus already having been determined by the existing power relations.

The metaphor of war is apt here. Much like the defeated parties in a battle, I have become complicit in these relations of power without my consent. I have been born and socialized into these power relations. What is more, as Foucault said, these relations of power not only produce my circumstances, but determine them. A peasant can never be a noble by the very nature of the power relations between nobles and peasants. In a sense, I am a victim of history, born into conditions not of my choosing and largely incapable of altering them.²⁶ These conditions produce both knowledge and discourse and are, going back to Proudfoot, therefore constitutive of my perceptions and interpretations of reality. Therefore, it becomes important to acknowledge these influences, especially in ethnographic research, which relies so heavily on the ethnographer stepping into realms beyond his or her own conditions.

²⁶ I believe Foucault overstated the case here, as it is always possible for people who are reflexive of their position to alter the discourse to a greater extent. Much like Marx's peasants who are incapable of defending themselves against oppression and abuse become capable of revolution when they are confronted with the reality of their situation, the reflexive ethnographer is often able to subvert power relations in certain ways.

Feminist scholars have done a great deal to advance discussions in this area, especially in relation to the different roles of sex and gender—though also other vectors; race, class, religion, nationality, disability status and sexual orientation for example—in producing different perceptions of reality.²⁷ Much like the two people, one who saw a bear and the other a tree, these perceptions are to a degree constitutive of the reality in which people live. Thus, I see the world in certain ways, at least partially dependent upon my own position within it. These conditions, these “vectors of oppression and privilege” place individuals at different ‘intersections’ or positions in society and it is that position itself “that produces a particular experience” of reality (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:468). “Intersectionality theory recognizes the fundamental link between ideology and power that allows dominants to control subordinates” often times without many in the dominant group, or even subordinate group, even being aware of this control (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:469).

It is for these reasons then, that I am concerned with presenting my own Intersectionality, my positionality, in this research so I might reflexively combat unconscious instances of prejudice, general bias or even oppression in the presentation of this research. Additionally, it empowers readers of this work to see how I have viewed and interpreted the data. This is also why I stress, once again, the inherently partial nature of this project. My research has been conditioned and at least partially determined by my positionality, which is inevitably limited and influences the kinds and quality of information I have been able to gather.

²⁷ Walby, Armstrong and Strid 2012 notes there are significant parallels between the analysis Intersectionality and that of hybridity or multiculturalism such as can be found in transnational or diaspora studies (225).

Some of these positional limitations can be mitigated or erased, often with minimal effort. When researching a group, an ethnographer may adopt a manner of dress or speech to prevent unnecessary limitations on his or her ability to interact with individuals and gather data. For example, an ethnographer researching a socially conservative religious group may adopt a more subdued wardrobe and avoid “hot topic” issues in conversation. Inevitably, some positional limitations are far more difficult to maneuver and these are the ones that most clearly influence the ethnographer’s research. I, for example, am a young, white American male. I cannot be less young, white or male, at least not without serious alterations to my person. Therefore, when I approach subjects during the course of my research, they are always interacting with a young, white American male and that has implications for how these subjects interact with me. Again, some of these implication can be mitigated simply by being aware of them, but not all can be avoided.

One example of this has been the reasonable, yet fallacious assumption on the part of my subjects that I, positioned as I am in various majority groups, was associated with others which I am not. In other words, my obvious and unavoidable status as a member of the racial majority (white), the gender majority (male), and the cultural majority (American) prompted other associations in the minds of my subjects. The people with whom I interacted often and quite reasonably assumed I was also a member of the religious majority (Christian), the sexual majority (heterosexual), and the local political majority (Republican). Some of these inaccurate assumptions proved problematic, while others actually enabled me better access to the temple community.

Perhaps most notable in my case were the assumptions of my religion and sexuality. As members of such a small religious minority, most members of the temple community simply assume that anyone they meet, and who they do not know to be Hindu, is a Christian. This posed a number of problems in my research, as many in the community have had negative experiences with Christian missionaries and evangelists. The threat of conversion seemed always in the back of their minds, and only after repeated comments about my non-Christian identity and numerous demonstrations of my sincerity to learn from the community did the majority of people seem to accept that I was, in fact, *not* about to ask them if they had heard the ‘good news.’ Sometimes I suspect there are still some members of the community who secretly believe this has all been an elaborate charade to gain their trust before broaching the subject of their eternal damnation.

On the other hand, when community members simply assumed that I was a heterosexual male, I did not bother to correct them in most cases. In fact, I can only recall a very limited number of instances—perhaps three—during which I made mention of my homosexuality.²⁸ This was partly because it rarely would have been an appropriate contribution to an ongoing conversation, but also because many in the community are socially conservative and *may* have been less willing to cooperate in my research had the truth been known. Much like the hypothetical example above, I sometimes had to very carefully avoid anything that could have been a “hot topic,” such as my sexuality, or else risk subverting my efforts to build rapport and relationships with the community.

²⁸ Two of these instances involved community members with whom I became friends outside the temple context, the other was with an LGBT community member who brought up how her sexuality and religion were treated in mainstream American culture.

Getting to Know the Sri Ganesha Temple: The Methods

Now that we have spent some time considering theories and realities of ethnography, it seems appropriate to shift to a discussion of the methods actually used in this research. Over the course of this project, I have utilized a number of ethnographic methods, including participant observation, formal and informal interviews, photography, multiple forms of mapping, artifact analysis, surveys, questionnaires, the collection and analysis of material culture. By relying on such a wide variety of methods I have attempted to gather as complete a picture of the community as possible before gradually focusing, or ‘triangulating,’ to bring certain elements into the forefront of my analysis.

As both the staple of ethnography and also one of the best ways to build rapport with an initially skeptical community, participant observation was the most significant method used in this project. I attended a wide variety of temple activities over dozens of site visits. These activities included regular rituals, both secular and religious festivals, cultural events (such as concerts, dance performances, and dramas), religious education classes, and impromptu group discussions. These events took place at all times of the day, week and year over the last fourteen months, though the majority have tended to be on Saturday and Sunday mornings, simply because that is when most activities are scheduled.

Another significant method for gathering data has been an uneven combination of formal and informal interviews. I have conducted 9 formal interviews with 7 individuals, though only 6 of these interviews were recorded in accordance with subjects’ wishes. This number is lower than I would have liked, and necessarily limits my ability to include

the voices of my subjects directly into this work. The difficulty I had in getting community members to consent to interviews may be indicative of my difficulty in preventing certain assumptions made about me and my research. Nonetheless, I was able to conduct more than two dozen informal interviews which have been duly preserved in my fieldnotes. Thus, my inclusion of community voices will often take the form of paraphrasing and indirect quotations, simply because that is the data available to me.

One more method that should be noted before we move on to a discussion of the temple community is the collection and analysis of published materials in and around the temple. These have taken the form of fliers, pamphlets, magazines, books, newspapers, visitor's guides, and even Sunday school curriculum, to name the most common. The wealth of materials that circulate within the temple community is not only impressive for its sheer quantity, but has provided some interesting insights into the community itself. For example, by tracking the number and types of fliers posted to the temples bulletin board, I was able to get an idea for some of the non-religious concerns of the community, such as science education for their children, local community service opportunities, and access to various professional services (such as tax preparers, insurance agents, and realtors). In fact, these materials form the crux of the data for certain portions of this thesis.

The other methods mentioned above have contributed to this research in differing degrees, but all have allowed me to build a more nuanced understanding of the temple community than would have otherwise been possible. Each has enabled me, in different, limited ways, to attempt to step out of my own positionality and into that of my subjects, to move out of the role of ethnographer and approach the role of participant. Thus, while

this thesis will not emphasize photographic evidence, for example, the collection and analysis of this type of evidence has been important at different times during this research, and data gathered using different methods will therefore be used variously throughout the following discussions. This is perhaps all that needs to be said about methods for this thesis, so I will turn now to offer some of the basic information I gathered throughout my research.

Getting to Know Sri Ganesha: Early Findings

Sri Ganesha temple sits nestled into the side of a steep hill on a large plot of land outside Nashville, Tennessee. When the temple's founders were looking for land in the early 1980s, they turned their attention to the suburb of Bellevue, on the southwest side of the city. At the time, there was very little in the area, but it has undergone significant development in recent years. This has contributed to an increase in visitors and greater awareness in the city, as more and more non-Hindus learn of the temple complex.

The community itself has also grown steadily over the years. The group of about a dozen that coalesced around the effort to build the temple in the late 1970s gradually increased from a continued influx of immigrants. Once the original temple was opened in 1985, the attraction of having a specially constructed space for worship resulted in a rapid increase in people joining the community. Today, the community boasts the financial support of over 600 families (approximately 1500 people), with many hundreds more who visit the temple for special occasions. On any given weekend, 100-200 people attend the regular ritual services and partake of the communal meal.

This group of regular attendees and members is very ethnically diverse. Though the early community was almost entirely South Indian—explaining the Cola style of its architecture—the temple is now majority North Indian. Within the community, there are numerous sub-communities based upon ethnic identity. For example, there is a group for Kannada-language speakers, the Tamils have a separate group, and the Gujaratis can often be found discussing who will be hosting their next gathering. In addition to these, the community also boasts a number of Marathis, Rajasthanis, Orrisans, Bengalis, Telugus and Hindis. There are also a minority, though their numbers are growing, of Indian Americans, most from Tennessee, but many who from across the nation who moved to the area for school or work.

This brings us to the next major demographic. The community is very highly educated and is comprised almost entirely of middle-class professionals. Members often joke the temple is more safe than a hospital because of the extremely high percentage of devotees who are doctors. There is also an impressive number of lawyers, engineers, and people working in computer and technology industries. Virtually all adult members of the community hold a Bachelor's degree (or are in the process of earning one), and more than half hold graduate degrees in their respective fields. Just under 10 percent of the community—best estimates range from 5 to 9 percent—hold Ph.Ds, mostly in science-related fields, which is incredibly high when considering only 3 percent of the national population hold such degrees. The temple even funds a college scholarship for its young adults to encourage education amongst the next generation.

It is easy to see why Indians are often referred to as the 'model minority' in the United States, and the community, especially the older members, takes a great deal of

pride in this moniker. The most involved members tend to be retired parents and grandparents, who utilize the freedom of their retirement to study spiritual matters. However, the majority of the community is comprised of middle-aged, married couples with small children. As such, the community is currently undergoing a transition from the first-generation of largely immigrant, retired, conservative elders to the second-generation, which is more liberal and increasingly American by citizenship. It is too early to tell how this transition will effect Sri Ganesha Temple and its growing community, but we will soon see what this transition looks like at the present moment.

This description is of course only a fragmentary account of the community and its history. It would take an entire thesis to give fair coverage to all the complexities and nuances of the community's composition and development. Nonetheless, this brief account should be sufficient to highlight the issues we will be discussing in the coming pages. Keep these details in mind as we move through our discussion of the Hindu nationalist discourse. Before we move to this more sustained analysis, however, I would like to end this chapter with another excerpt from my fieldnotes. We must also be mindful of my role and positionality as we move forward. It is my belief this anecdote will provide a more nuanced understanding of this which can be used to help evaluate my claims in this text.

After observing the festivities up stairs for a while longer, I notice that it is about time for Bhagavad Gita class and quietly make my way downstairs. I put on my shoes and walk quickly, alone to the Priest's Quarters only to find I have arrived at the same time as the out-of-town visitors. Having noticed the two mulling about upstairs earlier in the day, clearly not Hindus, I wonder to myself what they are doing here today. "Perhaps they are friends of someone in the class. It's nice of them to visit the temple on Easter, when they likely have friends and family hunting eggs right now." Class begins, as it always does, about ten minutes late and we have an excellent discussion of the day's verse (about Karma Yoga) and how we

should strive to 'let go' of things. The visitors remain respectfully silent the whole class, much as I used to when first coming, but seem to have enjoyed themselves. As they are about to leave, the woman reaches into her large purse and begins to hand out small, plastic bags filled with candy. They quickly hand them out to all the temple members, thanking them for allowing the visitors to sit in on our class and see the temple. At the same time, I was putting away the copies of the Gita we had taken out for reference and was near the door. As the two finished chatting and expressing their gratitude, they passed me, handing me my own bag of candy. On the walk back to my car, I open the bag to peruse the contents. I notice something on the bottom, a card maybe, wrapped in a paper towel. Shifting through the candy I take out the item and open it. It is another gift, a CD/DVD about Jesus and how we should all try to follow his example. On it, a note, "Thanks for letting us share this experience with you. We also wanted to share something with you, and the message of Jesus is the most precious gift we could give. Please enjoy this DVD and contact us if you have any questions or want to learn more about Jesus and the Good News!" In less than a day, these two visitors have done what Rajesh could not after two years; just like that, they have positioned me 'in the circle', as 'one of them,' one who needs to be brought to Jesus.

Chapter 4

Hindutva at Sri Ganesha

Introduction

By now, we have discussed both the theory and methods of this project. This lends some context to the subject we will turn to now, which centers on the nationalist discourse in the Sri Ganesha Temple community. Although few in the community would identify with the explicitly Hindutva groups such as the RSS or BJP, many in the community utilize the language of Hindu nationalism nonetheless. The purpose of this chapter will be two-fold; first, to demonstrate the pervasiveness of nationalist discourse in the community and, second, to offer partial explanations as to why this discourse has found such resonance in a seemingly unlikely place. I argue the Sri Ganesha Temple community has adopted numerous elements of the nationalist discourse, whether implicitly or explicitly, for various reasons, most of which are highly practical in nature.

Being a Hindu/Indian: Constructing an Identity

Perhaps the most basic questions any researcher asks during the course of gathering data are demographic ones, attempting to detail the age, gender, ethnicity, and various other details of those subjects willing to grant us access to their lives. However, in the context of the diaspora Hinduism, otherwise straightforward questions of race and ethnicity, not to mention nationality, become intrinsically more complicated. When in the majority, as most of the community were in their lives before immigration, self-

identification can be more nuanced, allowing one to identify as a Bengali without that detracting from an identification as Indian. When in the minority the distinctions made must often be broader, less precise, thus leading many to identify as Indian first and Bengali second when introducing themselves to members of the majority.

This process is mirrored with religious identification. When in a group of co-religionists, Hindus are more inclined to accentuate their distinctions, presenting themselves as devotees of this deva, or followers of that guru, practitioners of these techniques or studiers of those texts. But when presenting themselves to a representative of the majority (such as myself), Hindus are more inclined to use larger categories that connect them to more people, perhaps a distant majority. Thus, when I asked the simple question “what ethnicity do you consider yourself?” the overwhelming majority of my subjects responded with the answer “I am a Hindu.” Similarly, when asked about their nationality, a significant number of respondents rejected the traditional answers of American or Indian, and once again responded “I am a Hindu.” After numerous encounters, formal and informal interviews involving different people, questions and topics it becomes quite apparent the expected answers are far less meaningful than these traditional responses.

What becomes even more certain is the emergence of “Hindu” as a master identity, equally relevant as an answer to questions about religious commitments, race, nationality and a host of other topics. Furthermore, by comparing responses between different individuals and between different conversations with the same individuals, there is a clear pattern of conflation between the terms “Indian” and “Hindu” such that the terms are used interchangeably, with little to no differentiation between meanings. To be

Hindu is to be Indian, and to be Indian is to be Hindu. This is itself a key element of the Hindutva discourse, which paints Hinduism as the religion of India and traces the origin of Indian civilization to the Vedic religio-cultural complex.

Thus, the community's conflation of Hindu and Indian identities (which are theoretically distinct, even if they overlap in practice), suggests one way in which the Hindutva discourse has found entrance into this particular example of diaspora Hinduism. It is necessary to point out that many of the temple community make this conflation a part of the process of reformulating their identities as diasporic, transnational beings and not out of support for Hindutva ideology, either implicitly or explicitly. Conflating two of their primary identity markers simplifies their presentation of self to outsiders and to the young members of the community, making explicit in America what for many was implicit in India.

However, there are a number of community members who make this conflation consciously and explicitly relate it to the Hindutva discourse. Dr. Subramanian, a respected member of the community and long-time resident in the U.S., made a point to instruct me on this when I inquired about his ethnicity.²⁹ "I am Indian," he said. "India comes from Hinduism, from Vedic society. Even though I am living in America, I am still Indian because I am a follower of Hinduism." Clearly, this is an implicit acceptance and presentation of the Hindutva discourse, which Dr. Subramanian felt I needed to know in order to understand Hinduism and the temple itself, a fundamentally Indian space in his view. He emphasized this point at the end of our interview when I asked my standard final question—"Is there anything else you think I need to know, or anything else you

²⁹ All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

would like to tell me?”—by telling me once more that Hinduism is very important to Indian culture, and I should therefore broaden my studies or else I would never understand the tradition.

For Dr. Subramanian, and several others like him, the origin of these terms is part of what makes them equivalent. When speaking with another leading member of the community, Mr. Maheshvara, he diverted from the question I asked to tell me “We are actually not Hindus, it is a misnomer and it is an insult to be called Hindu today. Because Hindu comes from the word *Sindhu*, which refers to the Indus river – the Aryans lived on the Indus river – and that was given away during Partition. So there are no Hindus alive today.” Since the Indus Valley is now located in Pakistan, an explicitly Muslim country, Mr. Maheshvara believes it impossible for anyone to be truly Hindu, the very word is corrupted because of “the castration of India,” just as it is not possible, in his view, for anyone to be a man without “his masculinity.”

Mr. Maheshvara is perhaps more extreme than most members of the community, however his seniority and position of semi-official authority give his opinions considerable weight. While they may claim to be respecting or even just tolerating a respected elder, I have seen few instances in which anyone challenged him or his opinions. And as his frank nature suggests, Mr. Maheshvara is very forthright with his opinions on any number of topics. We must consider him, therefore, to be representative of at least a section of the community, one that is tolerated, if not openly accepted by the majority for one reason or another.

God is One: The Discourse of Monotheism

Perhaps the most obvious and pervasive part of the discourse at Sri Ganesha Temple is the extreme emphasis on monotheism in presentation of the tradition. Scholars have debated for decades about how exactly to describe Hinduism as a whole, with its incredible number of deities yet emphasis on unity. Max Muller even coined special terms, such as henotheism, to find a way to navigate the logical pitfalls between labelling the tradition as monotheistic or polytheistic. However, Hindu nationalist discourse and the people at Sri Ganesha wholeheartedly and emphatically consider Hinduism monotheistic.

The temple's visitor guide is very instructive into the use of the discourse of monotheism in the community. Anyone who doesn't seem to belong to the temple is almost immediately given a visitor's guide upon entering the worship space upstairs, and I have been given many by members who did not recognize me from previous visits.³⁰ On the back flap of the pamphlet there is a section dedicated to explaining Hinduism in a few brief paragraphs, the first of which reads:

Hinduism believes in One Supreme Being who is infinite, all-pervasive and eternal, and the source of all creation. God is in everything that exists, and is at the same time beyond the manifest universe. The various divine functions and aspects of the One Supreme Being are given different names and worshipped through different images ["Visitor's Guide"]

Note the description uses "Hinduism" in the singular, proposing to explain the entire tradition rather than a specific, though popular, subset thereof. While the pamphlet does

³⁰ Because regular temple worship is not a standard part of many Hindu traditions, the composition of the congregation is highly variable from week to week. There is a small group of regulars who attend nearly every week, but the vast majority of the community visit on a far less frequent basis.

acknowledge a diversity of practices used by Hindus in different traditions, it proposes a singular, monotheistic theology.³¹

After this description, which echoes strongly those of the Himalayan Academy (see chapter 5), there is a famous quote from the Rig Veda which is often touted by Hindu nationalists to support their claims Hinduism is inherently tolerant. It reads "truth is one, the wise express it in many ways." While this is not necessarily perceived as a theological claim in many contexts, the structure of the pamphlet and my observations in the community suggest this quote is being utilized primarily as a theological argument. As such, it allows the community to deflect the approach of missionaries by referring to this bit of wisdom and the belief in the ultimate unity of all things. In fact, several community members recalled stories of conversion attempts in which they told the missionary that god is one, and thus they had no need to convert. One very senior member even recounted a time when he invited door-to-door missionaries into his house and proceeded to educate them on Hindu theology and philosophy before he would allow them to begin their conversion attempt.

The theology of "god is one" is so pervasive at the temple that many would actively try to convince me of their monotheism if they had not seen me at the temple before. In fact, this was a common thread in my early interactions with people at the temple. Dr. Balaji, a long-term member of the community who commands a great deal of respect, insisted for months he did not consider any deity more or less special than any other. When asked about his *ishta devata*, or chosen (personal) deity, during our first

³¹ This is the reverse of most scholarly descriptions, which often note Hinduism tends to emphasize orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy (Kulke and Sontheimer 2001:20).

interview, Dr. Balaji completely avoided my question with a very generic response. "God is all one; there is no distinction, no difference, only one" he said. Despite our numerous conversations at this point, I could not get anyone, even my closest contacts, to discuss their devotion to any particular deity. At the time I was willing to accept my biases may have led me astray on this particular topic.

However, as my relationship with Dr. Balaji developed, he began to open up about this subject, though carefully. During a future interview, when once again asked about his *ishta devata*-at this point I had gathered more information to suggest I was not, in fact, misled about the prevalence of devotion to a personal deity-he still wanted to make sure I did not misunderstand Hinduism as a polytheistic religion.

You know, God is one. But when I was young I walked to school and passed a small hill temple every day. I would go there after school to pray to the goddess there; her name was Chamundi. Chamundi is very special to me. I pray to her every morning when I wake up, first thing.

After reciting this prayer for me, Dr. Balaji and I continued to discuss his personal devotion to this manifestation of the goddess. Despite all this, when I brought students to the temple only two weeks later, he was sure to tell them Hinduism believes in only one God. And in future exchanges, the Dr. seemed to step back from our long discussion of devotion and return to the discourse of monotheism. At the Ganesh Chaturti festival about a month later, the Dr. and I met each other by chance among the crowd of people in the hall. "It is good you are here today. This is a very special day. Today we celebrate that God is one."³²

³² Ganesh Chaturti, "Ganesha's Fourth," is commonly explained as a celebration of Ganesh's birthday, but used to only be celebrated in the central Indian state of Maharashtra. As Ganesh is the principal deity at this temple, it is one of the largest festivals throughout the year. However, it is interesting to note the efforts of

“Not Like Them:” Creating Difference

Although the emphasis on monotheism alone may have alternate explanations, such as the emphasis on rationalism in a highly educated community, other elements of the Hindu nationalist discourse have found far more resonance in the temple community. Perhaps the most pervasive is an implicit Islamophobia, one often made explicit when outsiders find their way into the community. Through disparaging comparisons, many in the community attempt to distance themselves and their religion from Islam, drawing a stark distinction between “us” Hindus and “them” Muslims. It is a common occurrence to hear generalizations about “violent Muslims” or jihad, followed by quick assurances Hindus are “not like that.” This seems to be based on an assumption among many community members that Americans and Christians especially (identities which, as we discussed in Chapter 1, are often conflated) judge non-Christians harshly. In order to make their own religion more palatable to outsiders, community members often present a positive light for their own beliefs and practices and follow it with a negative light on others.

It is also common among the community to expand the meaning of the term “Hindu” to include other traditions, usually ones that do not appreciate their inclusion under a Hindu umbrella. For example, more than a few temple members have noted that I wear a Buddhist *mala* (literally, garland; here, a bracelet) on my left wrist. Some comment that it would be more appropriate to wear it on my right hand, while others compliment me for wearing it. But the single most common response is for members of

Hindu nationalist groups to establish this festival as part of a standardized ritual calendar across India and the diaspora, even in places where there is no precedent for this celebration (Courtright 1983: 164).

the temple community to tell me how Buddhists (and possibly me, by extension) are actually Hindus because the Buddha grew up as a Hindu, and his teachings have a degree of resonance with certain Hindu traditions.³³

By employing a selectively blind interpretation of Vishnu's ten avatars, these individuals, without exception, note that Buddha was an avatar of Vishnu, one of the primary Hindu deities, thus anyone who follows Buddha is following Vishnu. I have seen a similar logic applied to every religious movement and tradition related to India (regardless of whether it actually arose in India) over the last several millennia. The Hindutva discourse has done this historically with Sikhism in particular, which is lauded for its strong sense of devotion and the traditions willingness to defend itself from attack. The Sikhs rose up against Muslim rulers early in their history, serving as a precedent for later Hindus who feel under attack from the encroachment of Islam into India and the creation of a Muslim nation, Pakistan, from out of the Indian subcontinent (Wolpert 2009:101-103). Of course, Sikhs have also spent the better part of a century resisting Hindu hegemony and have repeatedly resisted the categorization of their tradition as Hindu (Wolpert 2009:105-108). Despite this, the resistance and martyrdom of early Sikh leaders to the Mughal empire stand as a bright page in Hindutva history books, marking a point when "Hindus" began to fight back.

Conveniently for Hindus living in the Bible Belt, Muslims present a "shared other," a group that both American Christians and Indian Hindus can agree are "not like

³³ Of course, the Buddha famously rejected his upbringing and much of the Hindu religion when he set out to find enlightenment. Nonetheless, in the Middle Ages the Buddha was reincorporated as one of Vishnu's ten avatars as the manifestation known for leading away heretics and demons from the Hindu dharma. Buddhism is thereby presented as related to Hinduism, but fundamentally flawed in its understanding.

us.” Invoking the hallowed memory of 9/11, many Hindus in the community are able to establish bonds with members of the majority by establishing a fictive kinship through mutual distrust of Muslims. I have seen community members utilize this assumed Islamophobia numerous times to bridge cultural gaps with me and other non-Hindu visitors. When taking several of my students to visit the temple for Ganesh Chaturti, Dr. Radhakrishnan, a founding member of the temple, took a few moments to speak to my students. He gave a few brief comments about Hindus believing in G.O.D. (Generator/Brahma, Operator/Vishnu, and Destroyer/Shiva), before commenting about how loving and tolerant Hindus are, unlike Muslims. “We are not like the Muslims; we do not kill for our religion,” Dr. Radhakrishnan told us. “Hindus have never started a single war,” he continued. “We have been in many wars; we have only ever defended ourselves, never the aggressors.”

These comments serve multiple purposes in this context. First, they represent Hinduism as a commendable tradition with a long history of peace and tolerance, features that make the religion more palatable to the Western world at large. This characterization also seeks to draw attention away from what may be a problematic element of the tradition for many outsiders, the appearance of polytheism. In juxtaposing his clever way of explaining the notion of *trimurti*, the three forms of God, with a disparaging remark about Islam, Dr. Radhakrishnan presents a core tenet of his understanding of the tradition and quickly shifts attention away from that tenet by immediately presenting a red herring. Furthermore, by presenting Hindus as non-aggressive, though not weak, Dr. Radhakrishnan is also undercutting American fears of an “Asian invasion,” and implying

that although Hindus are moving to the U.S. in ever growing numbers, there is nothing to fear from them because “we are not like the Muslims.”

In addition to these practical purposes, Dr. Radhakrishnan’s comments further suggest a Hindutva leaning in its unspoken conflation of India with Hinduism. With a few exceptions – the current efforts of Al-Qaeda and related organizations being an obvious example – wars have been, and continue to be, the domain of states. Therefore, when Dr. Radhakrishnan speaks of how “we” have not started any wars, he is not referring to disparate groups of Hindus as much as he is referring to the state of India, which, in its short history as a consolidated nation, can be argued to have been only defensively involved in all of the conflicts in which it has participated. By not even making this conflation explicit, especially in the instruction of outsiders, Dr. Radhakrishnan presents it as common knowledge or unworthy of attention, despite its problematic nature. For him, and many others at the temple, combining the Hindutva discourse’s historical narrative of Islamic persecution with an implicit equation of Hindu and Indian identities allows him to present his tradition in the best light possible, in part by presenting other foreign traditions in a negative one.

For the Children: Resisting the Threat of Conversion

The notion of the persecution and oppression of Hinduism and “the Hindu people” leads us into the final element of the Hindutva discourse that will be discussed in this chapter, the threat of conversion. As has already been mentioned, the temple is home to a Hindu Sunday school that teaches the youth of the community about their spiritual and cultural heritage by offering instruction in religion and philosophy, several Indian

languages, yoga and the arts. In a later chapter we will look more closely at the substance of the instruction, but for this chapter we will concern ourselves with the motivation for it. There are obviously numerous motivations, and different parents and children undoubtedly have different reasons for participating; however there is one that has been repeated by the majority of the parents and several community members not affiliated with the Sunday school. Explained in various manners, the common thread has been the desire to prevent the conversion of Hindu children to other traditions.

What is even more telling is this fear has been an important element of the community since its inception. If we refer back to the history of the temple construction movement (in Chapter 1), Mr. Gopal told us the founding members did not begin to think about the need for community until several of them started having children who would be raised in America. Part of the concern for giving these children a place to be Hindu was to stem the tide of assimilation to American culture, which is seen as inherently Christian and lacking in a number of important “Indian values.” “We started to realize that we were not going home,” Mr. Gopal told me “and we decided that we needed a place to get together, to teach our children and to practice our religion.” Of these, perhaps the most important to Mr. Gopal was the second, as his tenure in America was one of the longest, and he was a father who worried how his daughter would learn to practice Hinduism so far from India and with so few role models.

Mr. Gopal is not alone in these worries, even today. When I first began studying the temple many community members spoke proudly of the Sunday school and many parents of children in the program came to speak to me, to impress upon me the importance of this kind of education. Considering the demographics of the community,

with its high level of education and professionalism, it is not surprising they would value education, but these parents did not praise the value of education as an end in itself.

Rather, they praised the virtue of teaching their children to be good Hindus, people who could resist the teasing at school and grow into the religion. Vikram, an American-born Hindu who insisted we speak on a first name basis, excitedly answered a question about his most memorable moment involving the temple thus:

Growing up in the US, unless your parents really teach you about Hinduism or the Indian culture, a lot of kids forget what their culture, what their background is. So every summer they have this program for the kids and it teaches them about India, about the culture and Hinduism and things like that. One thing that I remember was my oldest son saying in the program like he finally felt like he was able to understand why he was different. He understood his heritage... If there is one thing he takes out of this, it's that he learned something about himself.

We should note Vikram started his description of topics covered in the program with India, of which Hinduism is presented as a subset, equally important as the culture or other “things like that.” In other comments during our conversation Vikram claimed the program was in no way religious, because it was designed to teach children about India and non-Hindu children were welcome to participate, assuming there was enough space.

Mr. Gopal and Vikram are representative of the kinds of comments and conversations I heard from dozens of people in the community, from parents, grandparents, those without children and even a few elderly men who vocally expressed their dislike of children. There seems to be a consensus among the community their youth need to be taught to appreciate their cultural and especially their religious heritage in order to prevent them from “forgetting” who they are. This is both a real and present danger. Every year, especially at major festival occasions, the community is reminded of the dangers of “forgetting” when sons and daughters who married outside the religion

return, often for their only visit of the year, accompanied by their spouses and children who are being raised, more often than not, as Christians. Rajiv, a more recent immigrant who is respected for his sociological insight, noted that

Here in America the intercaste marriages are many, the interracial marriages are many. I have spoken out against the caste system. When interracial marriages are many, they have got a problem; the couple has got a problem. 'Do I go to Christianity, or to Islam? Do I go to Buddhism or do I stay with Hinduism?' If Hindus are interested, I think they should try to bring those people into their fold... If they want to survive in this country, with their culture, and not lose their children to the other culture, they have to do it.

If they do not attempt to bring in their spouses, and to keep their children "in the fold," Rajiv warns that Hinduism will quickly begin to die out in the United States. For him, the threat of conversion is not only real, but immanent. Only through concerted efforts, especially in the area of spiritual education, can Hindus hope to hold at bay the danger of losing their children and grandchildren to American culture and Christianity.

Conclusion

We can see now elements of the Hindutva discourse have penetrated the temple community to varying degrees of depth and success. While few in the community would consider themselves nationalistic or identify with the political agenda of the Hindutva movement in India, many of them still utilize the discourse as a means to their own ends. Mr. Gopal was and is not fond of the Hindutva movement, but when he started to worry about his daughter growing up without learning about Hinduism, he quickly followed a model prescribed by the VHPA to set up a temple community and a Sunday school program, using the language of conversion to help rally support for his efforts. Similarly,

Vikram is completely unconcerned with the politics of India and identifies as an American first and foremost. Nonetheless, he is very concerned that his children learn about Indian culture and religion so they do not “forget” who they are.

When trying to practice and teach Hinduism so far from “the source” (i.e. India) many in the community utilize the Hindutva discourse strategically. While they may disapprove of the political agenda, or decry the evils of communalism, they realize their own situations require certain compromises if they are to preserve their traditions. Just as Rajiv advised Hindus in interracial (or interfaith) marriages to bring their family to Hinduism rather than condemning those unions, Hindus in the community make reference to larger ideas (often tinged with Hindutva, or taken directly from its ideology) to accommodate change. This says far more about the contingencies of life in diaspora than it does the power of Hindutva ideology. Khyati Joshi has argued there is more self-assertion than nationalism at work here, though her argument is largely premised on a lack of explicitly Hindutva organizations (2013). Nonetheless, this chapter aligns with Prema Kurien’s findings, which note the increasing relevance of Hindutva ideas and interpretations in Hindu communities in the United States (2007:160-161).

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see if the growing influence of Hindutva in the West will give these ideas increased legitimacy in India or abroad. At the very least, it seems likely the Hindutva discourse will have to develop in a way to incorporate local, contingently-derived variations from outside the Indian political sphere. The form these developments may take will be a rich topic for future research. For now though, we will continue to trace how these ideas play out in the temple community, which we will

do in the next chapter by analyzing some of the educational material used to help prevent children from leaving the religion.

Chapter 5

Raising Good Hindu Children in the Bible Belt

It's 10:30 A.M. on Sunday at the Sri Ganesha Temple. Services haven't started yet, but some of the temple's most active devotees are already there, in the auditorium on the first floor, discussing Hindu philosophy and chanting prayers. They come every Sunday, as only the most devoted do, but this is a group with distinctly unique needs and demands; they seek not to learn but to understand the rituals and philosophies of Hinduism. And they love a good story.

From "Sunday School," Tweed and Prothero 1999, p. 302.

The passage above and many others like it frequently appear in materials circulating in the Sri Ganesha Temple community, promoting the *Bal Vihar*, or Sunday school, and the success of its students. In one corner of the foyer, a bulletin board is decorated with pictures, stories, poems and other work done by students, and each spring the temple holds a weekend-long festival, called Annual Day, that celebrates the anniversary of the temple's founding. Every year a talent show of sorts is arranged, with each Sunday school class performing rehearsed acts such as singing, dancing or retelling epic stories on stage as parents, friends and other members of the community beam behind camcorders and camera phones. An observant visitor to the temple will notice a great deal of time, effort and pride caught up in efforts to educate the next generation of American Hindus, and for this reason it is necessary to discuss some of these efforts in light of our larger discussion of diaspora and nationalism. This is not only because the Sunday school is such an important part of the community's self-image, but also because the Sunday school provides a uniquely insightful opportunity for understanding how the temple interacts with the Hindu nationalist discourse.

In teaching a new generation, one separated from their Indian heritage by time and space, the Sri Ganesha Temple must distill the complex traditions of Hinduism into easily assimilated packages of information and interpretation to ensure the youngest of their members are being effectively instructed in the “proper” way to practice and understand the religion. With the ever-present threat of Christian missionary efforts (both overt and covert), the community recognizes they cannot simply assume their children will grow up to be good Hindus.³⁴ Therefore, the temple must work to erect and maintain social and ideological boundaries. This process quickly becomes complicated; as the temple must endeavor to incorporate the entirety of its incredibly diverse membership while still creating distinctions that will be meaningful, though in differing ways, to all of those members (Smith 1998:91-97). In order to teach these distinctions, especially to the youngest of their children, the community must necessarily simplify the categories. In the process, students are educated about the uniqueness of their religion and are taught who belongs to the group and who does not. In other words, the community must teach their children to recognize the difference between “us” and “them.” and must do so at a young age if they are to ensure these children are sufficiently aware of their heritage to appreciate it.

What follows in this chapter is a discussion of some of the ways the community has used to instill this awareness and appreciation among Hindu youth. In other words, this chapter discusses some of the anti-conversion efforts deployed by the community. This will consist primarily of analysis of material culture present in the community, such

³⁴ A number of "horror" stories circulate in the community about children who have grown up and abandoned the religion, or who are still Hindu but lack serious interest or devotion.

as pamphlets, fliers and lesson plans meant to guide and assist parents, teachers and friends in bringing up children to be "good Hindus" in a mostly non-Hindu environment. I argue this takes the form of what Gohain has referred to as the "saffronisation of education," (saffron being the color associated with Hindu nationalism), which Gohain contends is ultimately "a combination of a confident appeal to a brutalised mass consciousness and a coercive imposition of a dogmatic view of national history and culture" (2002:4597).

Because of review board requirements and the wishes of the community, I did not formally observe any of the children's Sunday school classes though I was occasionally able to indirectly observe some classes.³⁵ I was, however, given a great deal of freedom to access materials used in these classes and have collected a considerable amount of lesson plans, activity instructions, review sheets and other instructional materials. Our discussion will begin with an analysis of some of these materials before expanding to others which are not explicitly endorsed, but remain present in the community, such as those available through the Himalayan Academy.

Sunday School at Sri Ganesha Temple

As described in the passage beginning this chapter, the Sunday school at the Ganesha Temple holds various classes for school-aged children every Sunday during the

³⁵ My IRB approval does not allow for the use of minors in my study and Sunday school teachers were mostly unwilling to be observed themselves. Nonetheless, some teachers were willing to speak with me about their classes, and sometimes classes were offered outside, in full view of the community and myself. . Nonetheless, some teachers were willing to speak with me about their classes, and sometimes classes were offered outside, in full view of the community and myself. .

school year.³⁶ Classes on Hinduism are taught by volunteers, most of whom are female parents of enrolled children, for every grade K-6. Young adult classes are offered for middle school and high school students. Classes are also offered on Indian languages (the most popular is Hindi, with four dialects taught), yoga, and adult classes on the Bhagavad Gita and Vedanta.³⁷ It is the first category of classes, those focused on the Hindu religion, to which we will turn our attention.

The material taught in each grade of the Sunday school is based on the curriculum proposed by the Vedic Teaching Heritage Program, which was developed at the Sri Venkateshvara Temple in Pittsburgh, one of the earliest Hindu temples to be built in the United States.³⁸ The Sri Ganesha Temple has had an amiable relationship with the Pittsburgh temple since its inception, with some of the initial funds to build the temple having been loaned by Sri Venkateshvara Temple. Most teachers make little or no alterations to the lesson plans provided by this program, but a few, mostly for the older students, create new lesson plans only loosely based on the VTHP originals. This is largely a matter of personal choice. The Sri Ganesha Temple does not have strict prescriptions on what material should be covered at each level. The only major requirement is to teach students a number of *slokas*, or hymns, that have been compiled into a standardized Sunday school prayer book.³⁹ The prayer book contains more than a dozen *slokas* that have been written in *devanagiri*, transliterated into roman characters,

³⁶ Like normal school, students are expected to attend regularly. If a student drops below 75% attendance, he or she is removed from the classes and parents are not refunded the enrollment fee paid at the beginning of the year.

³⁷ Other languages taught include Tamil, Telugu, Bengali and Marathi.

³⁸ The VTHP was funded by the VHPA, the American branch of the VHP. Thus, it is heavily in

³⁹ This is an idiosyncratic use of the term. In the academy, *sloka* refers only to a very particular type of Sanskrit verse, but the prayer book, and the community more generally, refer to all hymns in Sanskrit as *slokas*. Any hymn in another language is referred to as a *bhajan*.

and translated into English. All teachers are expected to teach each *sloka* on the designated week so that each is taught twice to each class every year. Additionally, there is a *bhajan*, or devotional song, which students are expected to be taught and given the opportunity to practice periodically throughout the year.⁴⁰

So what, other than prayers and songs, are students taught during all those Sunday school classes? Many of the younger students are taught to recognize various Hindu deities and are told stories about these *devas*. Slightly older students are taught the characters and simplified plots of the epic stories the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Once children reach 4th grade and up, they begin to learn more about "core" elements of the tradition, such as karma, dharma and philosophy. For example, the primary topic for the 4th grade is the broad topic of values, which is a catchphrase of Hindu nationalist education programs. Students are taught to recognize the difference between "universal values," such as kindness, humility, speaking the truth, which are taught to be based on dharma, and cultural values which are dependent upon place, space and other factors (Grade Four Syllabus). Of particular concern for the class, respecting and loving one's parents is considered a universal value, one which must be observed despite a perceived lack in mainstream American culture. Parents are to be respected as divine and students are exhorted that "just as one worships God, one should look upon parents with an attitude of love, worship and respect" (Grade Four – Parents and Siblings:1).

Although it may seem like the Sunday school teachers are solely enforcing their interpretations of traditions brought from India, they are also mindful of their pupils and

⁴⁰ This *bhajan* acts as the temple's unofficial song, and is sung at virtually all significant ritual or festival events. Performing all or part of the *bhajan* is often used by one or more of the younger grades as their performance for the Annual Day festivities.

the American context in which they are growing up. Therefore, they often reinterpret “universal values” into terms that align with American “cultural values.” Most teachers provide stories, often loosely based on Indian folk tales or Hindu mythology, which present Hindu principles in contemporary, American contexts.⁴¹ For example, the lesson on “Parents and Siblings” tells the story of a boy named Rudra who balks at doing his chores because his friends are given allowances for doing their chores and he is not. To teach him a lesson, Rudra’s mother decides not to prepare him a snack that night, instead giving him a lesson on all the chores she does for him out of love. Rudra suddenly understand the importance of love and obedience and the family returns to normal. Thus, while attempting to instill their own “universal values,” the Sunday school teachers are careful not to ignore the real life experiences of their students.

Thus far, we have not seen the infamous hallmarks of the Hindu nationalist discourse present in these materials. An observer could easily identify these lessons as a reasonable response to the community's circumstances in diaspora. However, if we continue to look deeper we will see this does not preclude the Hindu nationalist discourse. As Prema Kurien notes “over the past decade, there has been an increase in the tacit acceptance of many of the central tenets of the Hindutva platform” among American Hindu organizations “as teachers at satsangs, bala vihars, and temples, parents needing help explaining Hinduism to their children, and second generation Hindus searching for answers to their questions about identity frequently turn to Hindutva organizations and websites for information” (2004:374). As such, there are many lessons which lend

⁴¹ One of the most popular of these is a simple drawing of Ganesha explaining the symbolism of his appearance in terms that sound as if they were pulled from an after school cartoon. His head is said to represent the need to “think big.” Meanwhile his ears symbolize the necessity to listen more and his mouth represents the importance of speaking less (Ganesha Symbolism).

themselves more explicitly to this discourse, especially as children grow older and are able to handle more complex ideas.

In the 5th grade, students begin to learn more about dharma, especially the notion of *Sanatana dharma*, or the "eternal religion", which is intimately tied to Hindu nationalist discourses. As part of their education, the students are expected to read an excerpt from a blog article, written by a leading member of the temple, about the origins of dharma. According to this article, Hindu dharma can be traced back to prehistoric times, even before the Indus Valley civilization, and is universal, unchanging and underlies the foundation of every world religion (Word Dharma:1).⁴² It also details a number of what might be called lesser dharmas, meaning duties in this case, such as to one's family, and especially to one's nation. Here, the nation is understood to be India, despite the fact that the vast majority of students are American citizens. India has already been identified as the birthplace of dharma, in this article, and is therefore both the oldest and greatest nation.

While younger students are taught more broadly about the importance of universal duty over personal desires, by the time they reach high school students are given more specific and explicitly Hindu nationalist instruction. They are taught to distinguish between two types of cultures, the spiritual and materialistic cultures, represented by India and America respectively (Hindu Culture:4). Materialist cultures are described as scientific, lacking in faith, hedonistic and possessing poor values. Meanwhile, spiritual cultures are said to be mystical, faith-based, contemplative, and

⁴² It is a frequent claim among Hindu nationalists that Hinduism is the world's oldest tradition. They are also particularly fond of claiming other traditions originating in India (i.e. Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism) as part of the *Sanatana dharma*.

harmonious, ultimately resulting in good values (Basis of Culture:1-2). Clearly then, the spiritual culture is far superior to the materialistic, a claim which is at the very heart of the Hindu nationalist discourse (Banerjee 2005: 63; Bhatt 2001: 102).

Students are also taught, in agreement with Hindu nationalist discourse, the “essence of Hindu culture [is] Sanatan Dharma,” which is identified as synonymous with the Vedas. The Vedas are presented as wholly responsible for the greatness of early India and its contemporary resurgence since independence (Hindu Culture: 2). It is further claimed spiritual cultures must periodically rediscover the basis of their faith in order to flourish and prevent stagnation, such as with the *bhakti* movement in medieval India. This represents a clear parallel with the Hindu nationalist narrative of history, which we will discuss later in this chapter. We can already see how the Sunday school works to educate children in seemingly innocuous ways. But much of the instruction represents a distillation and diffusion of Hindu nationalist discourse. The younger the children the more diffuse and less apparent this influence is, but when examining the lessons given to older students the presence of Hindu nationalist discourse is readily apparent.

We will turn our attention now to materials which are not explicitly endorsed by the temple. However, many leading members of the temple recommend these materials to members and visitors as educational tools for studying Hinduism. Furthermore, several of these materials, especially flyers and pamphlets, are readily available in the temple near the administrative desk. By this desk one can purchase small *murtis*, images of the deities, or prayer books written in a variety of Indian scripts. This is also where one would pick up free educational materials such as the visitor’s guide, a map of the local

area, or order forms for the Himalayan Academy, which provides puja supplies and subscriptions to *Hinduism Today*.

The Himalayan Academy and *Hinduism Today*

The Himalayan Academy is a non-profit organization based in the lush, tropical grounds of Kauai Aadheenam, also known as Kauai's Hindu Monastery.⁴³ There, a group of mostly white, convert monks are leading an effort to bring Hinduism into the modern age. The monastery's unofficial slogan, "where Hinduism meets the future," gives an impression of a forward-looking, reform minded organization, and a perusal of their website (www.himalayanacademy.com) solidifies this impression. On the monastery's beautifully designed and well organized website one can find news articles, blogs and free pdf files on everything from Hindu festivals and children's stories to yoga, meditation and complex philosophical positions. The site also offers a history of the monastery, details of the guru lineage of Abbot Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, virtual tours of the monastery grounds, a calendar of upcoming events at the monastery, and information about other locations affiliated with the Himalayan Academy.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most significant portion of the Himalayan Academy organization, however, is the magazine *Hinduism Today*, which has been written, edited and published by the monks of Kauai Aadheenam since 1979. The tagline, included under the title on

⁴³ While the various temples, buildings and features of the monastery are referred to by their Tamil (i.e. Hindu) names, the monastery itself almost exclusively utilizes this English name, presumably so as not to discourage the interest of non-Indian or non-Hindu individuals who may be intimidated by a seemingly unpronounceable name.

⁴⁴ The monastery self-identifies as Saivite, and claims a guru lineage from Sri Lanka that traces back to some very eminent figures, including Patanjali, the grammarian, and Tirumular, perhaps one of the most famous saints of the Tamil Saiva tradition.

every print and pdf version of the magazine reads “affirming Sanatana Dharma and recording the modern history of a billion-strong global religion in renaissance.”⁴⁵ The magazine does in fact live up to these claims, as each issue includes a combination of articles explicating various Hindu principles, news stories providing updates on events relevant to diaspora Hindus around the world, and opinion pieces, including both those written by the editors and those submitted by readers. A number of these articles, especially features, are often reprinted as educational pamphlets that can be ordered in bulk and easily distributed.

Many of these materials are designed for parents for use in instructing their children in Hindu beliefs and practices, often with an implicit rationale of combating missionary efforts by Christians. The magazine believes the only way to prevent children from being lured away by missionaries is to instill a strong pride in the Hindu tradition and Indian culture, which are conflated. In fact, this is a primary concern of *Hinduism Today* and the Himalayan Academy. While they are quick to denounce any perceived slights to Hinduism or Indian culture, they are incredibly critical of parents who fail in their duty to raise good Hindu children. In an opinion piece printed in the fall 2008 edition of the magazine a reader slams parents saying “I’m not so sure that young American Hindu’s ignorance or confusion about Hinduism has to do with institutional bias. Rather, it starts at home” (Balaji 2008:9). The author goes on to criticize Hindu parents for what he perceives as their inability or unwillingness to explain Hinduism to

⁴⁵ This is likely an overestimate. Recent Pew polls suggest the number is probably around 3/4 of a billion. However, as will be made clear later, the editors use a Hindu nationalist definition of "Hindu" which allows them to claim more individuals than would self-identify as Hindu.

their children in ways the children can understand,⁴⁶ resulting, he argues, in a generation of religiously illiterate American Hindus and ultimately the loss of faith or conversion of thousands of young Hindus (Balaji 2008:9).

The pamphlets created as part of the Himalayan Academy's effort to combat conversion are insightful for our discussion of nationalist discourse as they are necessarily partial explanations of a wide variety of sophisticated beliefs and practices. This allows us to see which elements are emphasized and which elements are excluded, giving us an idea of the Himalayan Academy's perception of what Hinduism is and ought to be. For example, the leaflet entitled *Nine Hindu Beliefs* lists as number two that "Hindus believe in the divinity of the four *Vedas*, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the *Agamas* as equally revealed." This statement is not totally false. However, it is definitely misleading due to its extreme simplicity.

As Gavin Flood points out, Hinduism is a complex category without sharp, clear boundaries and thus includes people like "a Radhasoami devotee in the Punjab, who worships a God without attributes, who does not accept the Vedas as revelation and even rejects many Hindu teachings." While this individual may not be the most representative or "prototypical" member of the "Hindu category," he or she still self-identifies as Hindu and can be easily identified as a Hindu if we use a broader definition (1996:7). What is clear, however, is Himalayan Academy is not concerned with representing *all* Hindus, but only those who conform to an essentialized conception of the tradition.

⁴⁶ The meek Hindu, afraid to have pride in his-remember the nationalist narrative is about males needing to reclaim their masculinity-religion is a frequent motif in Hindutva narrative (Banerjee 2005: 34-36).

Nonetheless, Himalayan Academy presents itself as a valuable resource for Hindus of any tradition or denomination, but especially parents in diaspora. They have a number of materials written for parents as guides, sources, and lessons for teaching their children about Hinduism, and about parenting more broadly.⁴⁷ For example, the pamphlet *Parenting With Love* has very little content that might be considered religious. It opens with a letter from Bodhinatha Veylanswami about his guru's "quest for a cruelty free system of raising children" which he explains emerged from a strong conviction for *ahimsa* and against corporal punishment (Hinduism Today 2009:I2). After this opening letter, the remainder of the pamphlet discusses Dr. Jane Nelsen's "Positive Discipline" system, augmented with stories from Hindu parents who have followed her system in raising their children.

Other pamphlets are more clearly connected to Hindu traditions, and these are the pamphlets that present certain assumptions made about what Hinduism is and how one ought to believe and practice as a Hindu. One of the longer pamphlets on parenting, *Raising Children as Good Hindus*, combines the virtuous characteristics described in *Nine Qualities to Cultivate in Children*, which is not particularly focused on religion, with instructions for modeling good Hindu behavior so children might learn by example.⁴⁸ The pamphlet instructs parents to be "the first guru" in their child's life, calling on them to be the active teachers of their children.

⁴⁷ The latter materials are often not directly tied to Hinduism in any way, presenting general tips and advice akin to what might be handed out by pop psychologists on morning talk shows. However, the Himalayan Academy sees these materials as emerging from deeply held religious beliefs and therefore Hindu.

⁴⁸ The Nine Qualities are an alliterative list including such virtues as Positive Self-Control, Pious Character (the only trait explicitly tied to religion), and Parental Closeness.

Parents can become the first guru by doing such things as worshipping together with children, and explaining the practices involved therein. This should involve worship at both home and a temple on a regular basis. Parents are also exhorted to teach their children to practice vegetarianism and nonviolence, and instruct children in basic Hindu concepts such as the four valid aims (*dharma* - duty, *artha* - wealth, *kama* - love, *moksha* - liberation).⁴⁹ Parents must do these things, at a minimum, because “without your [the parent’s] help, there is no guarantee that your child will follow their faith as adults” (Hinduism Today 2005b:I-2). And this seems to be the worst fear of most Hindu parents in the United States: to have their children reject the heritage of their ancestors for the comparatively shallow American materialism.

While many of these notions would be in line with many Hindus’ understanding and practice of their faith, a few elements are important for our discussion. First, the prescription to take your children and worship as a family at a temple represents a unique perspective on the place of temples in Hindu worship. While it is common among diaspora Hindus to attend temples for rituals and devotional practices more frequently than their counterparts in India (though even then it is not likely a weekly routine), it is exceedingly rare for most Hindus to attend a temple so regularly. The Hindu nationalist discourse, however, places great emphasis on temple attendance and worship, especially at those with particular symbolic significance such as the Ayodhya temple (Van der Veer 1994:2-11).⁵⁰ Another point to note would be that vegetarianism has only been prescribed

⁴⁹ This "first guru" perspective on parenting is unique to Hindu nationalist discourse. Prema Kurien has noted "Hinduism [in India] stresses orthopraxis over theological belief" such that young Hindus in India are taught to perform rituals, but are often "hard-pressed to explain why they observe many rituals and practices" (2007:32).

⁵⁰ Bhardwaj and Rao have noted regular attendance at a temple has a transformative effect on diaspora Hindus, often creating and deepening ties with Hindu nationalism (1998:140-142).

for all Hindus in very recent times, beginning with reform and nationalist movements in the 19th century (Ghassem-Fachandi: 2012).⁵¹

The Himalayan Academy presents a similarly idealized, essentialized version of Hinduism in the pamphlet *A Hindu Primer*, which is intended as a guide to the “minimal requirements” that a Hindu must do to “dispatch my duty to my religion and my children” (Hinduism Today 2005a:I-1). In this pamphlet, various practices, beliefs and guidelines are given so parents may know they have done their duty. However, these lists, presented as requirements, once again are too narrow. Precept 5, for example, counsels parents to teach their children that the Vedas were revealed by God and encourage their children to study these sacred texts under the tutelage of a learned guru. The injunction to study the Vedas has not traditionally been recognized as important for all Hindus and is given only to twice-born, male children in the very texts themselves. Nonetheless, the pamphlet goes on to encourage parents to be a “dharmic voice” by teaching Vedic precepts to their children “while driving, eating and playing” (Hinduism Today 2005a:I8).

I could continue to argue in this vein for some time, pointing out all the assumptions and simplifications in these parenting materials but suffice it to say the prescriptions for being a “good Hindu” represent a very narrow view of Hinduism, one which, I argue, is tied to the construction of a Hindu nationalist discourse in diasporic Hinduism in the United States. This will be made clearer in the next section, which

⁵¹ As Ghassem-Fachandi notes “the new twist in this development [of 'unequivocal vegetarianism'], however, is the clever and systematic politicization of vegetarianism in the context of Hindu nationalist activities that are often more astute and culturally sensitive than they are credited for” (2012:17).

discusses a single text published by the Himalayan Academy, a text that contends to represent the totality of Indian culture and history.

The History of Hindu India

Although *The History of Hindu India* is a publication of the Himalayan Academy like those discussed above, it is far more than a free parenting pamphlet. It is a textbook designed for use in 6th grade social studies classes throughout the country, especially in states like California, where a significant number of Indian Americans and immigrant Asian Indians have settled.⁵² As such, this is material produced primarily *for* children rather than *about* them, as many other Himalayan Academy materials have been. It is interesting to note the six chapters that comprise the book were originally published as featured articles in *Hinduism Today*, later being reprinted as individual pamphlets and finally in textbook format, suggesting the topics covered have found some resonance with Himalayan Academy's audience.

The first five chapters chronicle the history of India, which is always referred to as an inherently Hindu nation. It starts from the earliest days of the Indus valley civilization and continues all the way up to contemporary times.⁵³ The sixth chapter describes and explains several significant festival occasions celebrated by Hindus, with plenty of photos and factoids about various things associated with each festival. Every chapter has a number of additional topics such as yoga, art, dance, and "fun facts"

⁵² It seems reasonable to conclude this text was created, at least in part, as a response to the California Textbook Controversy in which Hindu nationalist organizations protested the portrayal of Hinduism in sixth grade social studies textbooks. The organizations recommended hundreds of modifications, including dozens of significant revisions and deletions, in order to bring the text in line with their own ideological positions (i.e. Hindu nationalism) (Jaffrelot 2007:361-369).

⁵³ This structure mirrors the "Hindutva view of history" (Visweswaran, *et al.* 2009).

sprinkled throughout in text boxes, charts, and notes in the margins. In this fashion, the textbook attempts to portray itself as a near-comprehensive, total account of Hindu history and culture. Furthermore, the text attempts to achieve legitimacy by noting the various external reviewers. The text is written by the editors of *Hinduism Today* with the collaboration of Dr. Shiva Bajpai.⁵⁴ The text also displays, on the page opposite of the author bios, a list of prominent academics and other influential individuals who served as reviewers or were otherwise consulted.

While it is to be expected the material in a children's textbook will be simplified and condensed in order to be retold in language that will be meaningful and understandable to children, the text nonetheless makes certain oversimplifications characteristic of Hindu nationalist discourse. Chapter one, "Hinduism from Ancient Times," almost immediately conflates the Indus Valley civilization with India and Indian culture, proceeding to declare an uninterrupted continuity of practices and beliefs from more than 5,000 years ago to the contemporary world. Of course, this is a highly problematic notion, but the text never admits the precariousness of this argument, while decrying as outdated and highly questionable other narratives of the past, especially the Aryan Invasion theory (Himalayan Academy 2011:3-5). In fact, even the possibility of external influence in the early development of Hinduism or Indian culture is outright rejected as untenable and offensive.

The narrative of an ancient, wealthy, sophisticated India, which is inherently Hindu, forms the core of the entire text, but in order to make this argument the category

⁵⁴ Dr. Bajpai is a leader of the VHPA and has strong affiliations with other Hindu nationalist organizations operating in the United States.

of Hindu must be greatly expanded. The text does this by ignoring the complexity of other Indian religions while simultaneously imposing a very selective definition of Hinduism, one which contends the entirety of Hindu thought can be found in the Vedas. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi is identified as a devout Buddhist and a paragon of her tradition, but in the context of a discussion of the “Hindu” doctrine of *ahimsa*, non-violence (Himalayan Academy 2011:8).⁵⁵ It is not considered she would promote non-violence based on an understanding of Buddhism, but only as a follower of Gandhi. It should be noted however, that *ahimsa* is primarily Jain in origin, and was brought into mainstream Hindu discourse when Gandhi adopted it as part of his own spiritual practice (Flood 1996:259-261; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 187). This tendency is present throughout the text, with Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is mentioned in tandem with prominent Hindu saints as an exemplar of *bhakti*, the Hindu devotional movement (Himalayan Academy 2011:46-48).

Thus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and some tribal people of India are brought under the umbrella of Hinduism, much like they are in many Indian laws and other discourses influenced by nationalist Hindus (Sarma 2008:346-358). Virtually the only religious groups that are not identified as Hindu are Muslims and Christians, and these two are presented as villains in the narrative. Structurally, this is done by dedicating the first two chapters to outlining the splendor and sophistication of Hindu culture up to 1100 C.E. These chapters are immediately followed by two chapters in which Hindus are depicted

⁵⁵ She and Martin Luther King Jr. are touted for their use of non-violent means to protest injustice, but are firmly placed in the Gandhian tradition, allowing no room for their own spiritual underpinnings or motivations.

as a minority persecuted by cruel Muslim invaders and devious British imperialists who sap the wealth and glory of India at the ends of their superior weapons technology.

This is a particularly popular feature of the Hindutva narrative, presenting a clear and easily identified “them” against which a notion of “us” can be constructed. In the years preceding India’s independence from colonial rule, this was put to political ends to help rally support among the Indian people, but here it carries similar connotations to the more extreme versions of this discourses that have helped legitimate communal violence in India (Flood 1996:262; Banerjee 2005:4-5). Unable to claim material or technological superiority during this “difficult period,” the text suggests Hindus were spiritually superior and credits the bhakti movement with helping the persecuted Hindus survive this “time of trial” (Himalayan Academy 2011:46-47). Similarly, the text argues Hindus were largely impervious to conversion attempts, seen as the most insidious element of foreign rule, because of the caste system, claiming

It guaranteed to Hindus a secure identity and place in their community, which they would lose by converting. Also, other religions did not appeal to them either philosophically or culturally. Some low-caste Hindus were tempted to convert to improve their social status. But, in fact, converts to both Christianity and Islam retained their caste position. [Himalayan Academy 2011:49]

Not only is this argument illogical (how does the caste system prevent conversion if conversion does not alter one’s caste position?), it smacks of cultural chauvinism, implying Hindu religion and Indian culture are so perfect that not even the lowest of society would wish to convert, though they may be tempted. However, this kind of ethnocentrism is firmly denounced when it is used to describe the British justifications for colonial expansion. According to the text, “The English defended their conquests by claiming that they were a superior race with a noble mission: to spread Western

civilization. This sounds very racist today. But it was then a firm belief of most Englishmen” (Himalayan Academy 2011: 62). In fact, the text mentions the racism, violent and greedy tendencies of the English several times throughout the chapter, acknowledging the benefits accrued under British rule (infrastructure, legal reforms, formation of government agencies), but never in a charitable fashion.

Rather than portray the British in anything like a flattering manner, the text gives a great deal of emphasis on figures such as Gandhi and Vivekananda and credits them with the resurgence of India as a proud, independent nation. Any blots on the pride of this nation are swept under the rug. For example, Partition, too big a topic to completely ignore, is presented in a few short sentences that describe, but do not explain the event or its causes. Similarly, it is mentioned, in an almost offhand way, that “on January 30, 1948, a Hindu, enraged over the partition, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi” (Himalayan Academy 2011:65). It is unlikely a child will remember this detail, however, as Gandhi and Vivekananda are given an entire section of the chapter, immediately following this brief remark, which outlines their philosophies and claims, with little evidence, their direct influence on millions of people in India and especially foreign nations. The notion of religious tolerance and pluralism, for example, are claimed to be inherently Hindu and their popularity in the U.S. is attributed to Vivekananda, though it is not explained how he achieved their popularity (Himalayan Academy 2011:68).

The arc of this narrative—the early sophistication of “India,” the Muslim invasions followed by British colonial rule, and finally the resurgence of India as an independent nation—is cleverly crafted to leave little chance the intended audience will misunderstand the text’s message; India is a great and prosperous nation that is home to

beautiful artistic and philosophical traditions, which can all be attributed to the sophistication of its native religious tradition, Hinduism. The text ends with a chapter on major religious festivals, which has little to do with the arc of this narrative. This final chapter has a two-page spread for each of five major festivals full of colorful pictures, recipes and “tidbits” about each festival or the relevant deities. However, the editors did include a “fact & fiction” text box for each festival that serves as a final presentation of key points of the nationalist discourse, one claiming that Hindus respect all religious traditions and “never proselytize” (Himalayan Academy 2011:107).

Conclusion

The Himalayan Academy and others engaged in the construction of this American Hindu nationalist discourse assert all religious paths lead to the same goal, but maintain the position that Hindu children are in need of a proper education of their traditions so they might come to appreciate and propagate these traditions. Christianity and Islam are seen to be perfectly respectable traditions for people born into them (though they are still implicitly less desirable), but Hindu children need to be protected from those who seek to draw them away from their faith through conversion. At the same time, Hindu parents must ensure their children are brought up to represent the best features of Hinduism as the faith will be judged, from the outside and inside, based on their proficiency with doctrines and the sophistication of their spirituality.

This subtext can be traced throughout the Hindu nationalist discourse discussed in this chapter. The assumptions and positions of the Hindu nationalist narrative are the same as those underlying the efforts of parents and community leaders as they create and

maintain this discourse, both for themselves and their children. It is important we acknowledge the legitimate fears diaspora Hindus experience around issues of conversion and disinterested youth. These are very real and sadly pervasive threats to their conception of community and self, threats not easily resolved and ignored at great cost. However, we must also acknowledge this discourse for what it is, a nationalist retelling of history and an essentialist definition of Hindu traditions.

The discourse constructed by the Himalayan Academy and the Sunday school curriculum is clearly intended to allay fears about conversion and youth who grow up to be Hindu in name only. On the one hand, this discourse gives Hindu parents and children the tools and resources to study and grow in their faith in often inhospitable locations. On the other hand, it is complicit in creating false dichotomies and distorted views of history that fly in the face of living in a religiously plural society. It can be hoped the children who are taught in Sunday school, or whose parent's read them stories from Himalayan Academy pamphlets will remember the parts about acceptance and tolerance of others more readily than the gruesome depictions of evil Muslim invaders or hateful British imperialists. In short, we can hope, as their parents do, these children will exhibit the very best of their traditions.

There is good reason to believe these children will grow up to be excellent members of the Sri Ganesha community and the wider society in which they live. Speaking to a recent graduate of the Sunday school who was about to leave for a prestigious university in New England, I was struck by something she said. While I was still trying to grapple with the obviously Hindu nationalist undertones of some of the lessons, she said, in an offhand way "I really hope to find a temple in the area [of her

University]. After doing *seva* ["selfless service," or volunteering] with the Sunday school for so many years I have really come to appreciate the value of helping others." Despite any concerns I may have about the presentation of material in the Sunday school, it is important to remember the agency of each individual. Though the materials in the community are often slanted toward xenophobia and fundamentalism, many young Hindu men and women nonetheless grow up to embrace the messages of love and acceptance promoted in parts of their tradition.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

On my first visit to Sri Ganesha Temple I inadvertently coordinated my visit with the arrival of a tour group from the local art museum, which had just closed an exhibit on Hindu devotional art to Vishnu. Clearly not belonging to the community, the volunteer guide simply assumed I belonged with the tour group and proceeded to show me around with all the others. During this guided tour, Dr. Radhakrishnan, a small, elderly gentleman welcomed us enthusiastically and offered to speak with anyone who wished to learn more about the temple or Hinduism. Part shy, part overwhelmed I did not follow up on this kind offer of hospitality.

On a later visit, after the shock and awkwardness of ethnography began to wear off, this same kind-hearted man approached me as I sat slightly off to the side, observing. He asked if I had come before and, once I confirmed I had, quickly proceeded to recall the encounter. Dr. Radhakrishnan gently took me by the hand and walked directly into the throng of devotees gathered for the morning puja. He took me under his wing, showing me what to do, when, and how. Soon, he was offering me literature on Hinduism, Indian culture, and asking for my contact information. I was once again overwhelmed by his sincerity and generosity, especially when I realized many of the resources he gave me were things he had himself purchased in the past and was no longer using. This man is truly a wonderful person and deserves a great deal of respect.

I do not say all this to reminisce about my fieldwork experiences, many of which were quite positive. I say this to bring our discussion back to a consideration about what

this project has all been about; people. While this study has focused at length on the discourse of Hindu nationalism in the Sri Ganesha community, we must remember this community is composed of numerous people, leading lives in very different circumstances than we may be able to imagine. Thus, while we may wish to criticize their pragmatic use of Islamophobic rhetoric or distortion of accepted historical facts, we must remember these things serve a purpose in the community.

I am reminded of Prema Kurien's work, in which she often discusses the apparent contradiction between the "genteel" and "militant" strands of American Hinduism. Though we may wish to discuss one to the exclusion of the other, we must recognize these are both a result of adapting to life as Hindus in the United States. As she explains

Although it is tempting to believe we can separate the two aspects of American Hinduism as discourses employed by different groups, or as discourses used strategically by the same group of leaders for different audiences (external versus internal), my argument is that the militant nationalism that many Hindu American leaders exhibit can only be understood if we see it as integrally intertwined with the multiculturalism that many of the same individuals profess. [Kurien 2007:161]

Often times, it is no easy task to deal with this cognitive dissonance. Many of us scholars are members of privileged groups, and indeed being in the academy itself is a form of privilege, and have difficulty dealing with groups such as this which espouse some principles which we hold dearly, yet also expound ideas we find equally abhorrent.

For this reason, and others no doubt, there is often a serious suspicion between diaspora Hindus in the United States and scholars who study them. So much so some scholars have begun to work against the grain, offering quasi-apologetics for the actions and behaviors of American Hindus (Joshi 2013). I have endeavored to strike a balance between these two extremes, apologetics and critique, but only the reader can judge the

degree to which I have been successful. In that regard, it may be beneficial to briefly reflect upon the arguments and claims developed in this project. Let us do so now.

The Road Now Travelled: A Review

In Chapter 2 we began our discussion by trying to make sense of the often amorphous and inchoate literature on diaspora, transnationalism and nationalism, connecting these discourses with reference to the specific circumstances of diaspora Hindus in the United States. We emphasized the hybridity and multiplicity of diaspora, using the well-established discourse in that vein to highlight the complex relationship between people and nation. From there, we clarified our perspective somewhat by reference to transnationalism as a way to more precisely delineate the notion of a trans-state nationalism which is used to unify Hindus scattered throughout the world.

This posed the conceptual challenge of an explicitly religious nationalism. Though this was anathema to early nationalism scholars, we saw how religious nationalism could collapse the notion of separation between church and state, providing a way to conceptualize nation as a religious community. This is exactly the kind of discursive move we find in the Hindutva movement, which espouses the ideology of Hindu nationalism. And, as we saw, this ideology provides a much needed sense of unity and support for Hindus living outside of the state, but who can still be considered within the nation.

The prevalence of the Hindu nationalist discourse at the Sri Ganesha Temple presented numerous methodological concerns, which we discussed in Chapter 3.

Foremost among these was a serious limitation on my ability as a researcher to gather data. Both the discursive emphasis on preventing conversion and the community's own experiences with numerous missionaries made them wary of my presence and intentions. Thus, I was often unable to gather data from certain sources or about certain topics until I had sufficiently demonstrated my sincerity. However, the loose structure of the community made this a constant challenge, as every visit would find me interacting with a very different group of community members.

Having acknowledged the limitations and incompleteness of the project, we began our discussion of the Hindu nationalist discourse in the Sri Ganesha community in Chapter 4. Through interviews and observations, numerous examples of the discourse were found. It was argued this discourse was actually quite pervasive and representative of much of the community, especially the elders, who were the most willing to cooperate with my research efforts. Through a discussion of monotheism, Hindu/Indian identity, and Islamophobia we could clearly see the Hindu nationalist discourse at work among the people of the community.

However, many of the efforts of the community are focused on youth. Therefore, in Chapter 6 we examined some of the materials found in the community related to teaching children about Hinduism. Many of these resources were explicitly placed in the context to prevent children from converting to other traditions out of ignorance or a lack of pride in Hinduism. Several of these materials seemed to only implicitly support Hindu nationalism, but many were quite clearly participating in that discourse. We also saw how many of the resources produced to assist in this process of educating the youth

were created by organizations with clear ties to Hindu nationalist organizations in India, thus cementing the connection.

Concluding Remarks: Looking Forward

The evidence for the presence and influence of Hindu nationalism in Sri Ganesha Temple, and reports of its prevalence in other Hindu diaspora contexts in the United States and elsewhere are even more convincing. This clearly has serious implications for the future development of contemporary Hinduism, both in diaspora and in India. As the networks of international organizations such as the VHP and various reformist movements in Hinduism diversify and strengthen relations between populations spread throughout the world, innovations and reforms in one context will be more easily transplanted and adapted to others. The series of interactions will increasingly defy state boundaries, and potentially consolidate nations that are likewise transgressive.

Beyond that, the developments in this study have implications for the academic study and teaching of Hinduism. Until only recently, there was relatively little interaction between academics studying Hinduism and practicing Hindus beyond the personal relationships between researchers and their subjects. Now, Hindus in the West are actively engaging with the academy to address the way their tradition is presented. When these engagements have been confrontational, as they often have been in the case of Hindu nationalism, they have had a chilling effect on research into various topics. Even Prema Kurien, who is very well respected in the academy, admitted to serious contemplation about abandoning her research of Hindu nationalism in the United States for fear of the potential backlash (2007:86). Other scholars, such as Paul Courtright and

Wendy Doniger have faced serious criticisms, some may call it persecution, for their interpretations of certain Hindu scriptures.

In the classroom, the academy is going to have to learn to instruct an increasing number of students who are raised Hindu but lack the kind of historical and philosophical understanding religious studies courses tend to emphasize. It will not be an option to simply avoid the topic, as some of us try to do with Christianity in certain contexts. As a profession, we must learn to teach Hinduism, and other Asian religions that are increasingly practiced in the West, with a more sensitive touch. Of course, at the best of times, our discipline can handle these developments with few if any alterations. But we will nonetheless have to be more aware, and more explicit, about our own roles and relationships with Hindu traditions. We need not see this as a challenge to our authority, or a difficulty to be overcome. I for one am excited to see how these developments impact the academy and hope to rise to the occasion and emerge as a better researcher and instructor for all my students.

Appendix:

Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare & Meaning of Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

From Sri Ganesha Temple Bhajan Book

Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Swami Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Bhakta Jano Ke Sankat Daas Jano Ke Sankat

Kshan me Door Kare Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Jo Dhyawe Phal Paave Duhk Binse Manka

Swami Duhk Binse Manka

Sukh Sampati Ghar Aave Sukh Sampati Ghar Aave

Kashta Mite Tanka Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Maata Pita Tum Mere Sharan Padum Main Kiski

Swami Sharan Padum Main Kiski

Tum Bin Aur Na Dooja Prabhu Bin Aur Na Dooja

Aas Karum Main Kiski Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Tum Pooran Paramaatma Tum Antaryaami

Swami Tum Antaryaami

Paar Brahma Parameshwar Paar Brahma Parameshwar

Tum Sabke Swami Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Tum Karuna Ke Saagar Tum Paalan Karthaa

Swami Tum Paalan Karthaa
Main Sevak Tum Swami Main Sevak Tum Swami
Kripa Karo Bharta Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Tum Ho Ek Agochar Sabke Praanapathi
Swami Sabke Praanapathi
Kisa Vidh Miloo Dayaamay Kisa Vidh Milloo Dayaamay
Tumko Main Kumati Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Deen Bandhu Dukh Harta Thaakur Tum Mere
Swami Rakshak Tum Mere
Apne Haath Uthaa Apne Sharan Lagaa
Dwaar Padu Mai Tere Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Vishaya Vikaar Mitaavo Paapaharo Devaa
Swami Kashtaharo Deeva
Shraddha Bhakti Badhaavo Shraddha Prem Badhaavo
Santana Ki Seva Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

Tan Man Dhan Sab Hai Tera
Swami Sab Kuch Hai Tera
Tere Tujko Arpan Tera Tujko Arpan
Kyaa Laage Mera Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare

(Jai Jagadeesha Hare)

[page 29]

Meaning of Om Jai Jagadeesha Hare:

Hail to Thee, O Lord of the universe,
Remover of sorrows and Master of all!
Salutations and prostrations unto Thee.

(O instant) Remover of the troubles of devotees!

Thou rewardest those who sing Thy glories and removest their sorrows.
With Thy name, happiness and prosperity dawn, and pain disappears.

O Lord, Thou art my mother, father and only refuge.

O Indweller of all beings, Thou art perfect, absolute, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient.

O ocean of compassion, Thou art the protector of all
O merciful Master, help me, whom am Thy servant.

O life of all lives, Thou art the only one and (still) invisible

O merciful Lord, guide ignorant beings to Thy Divine Knowledge.

Thou art the support (protector) of the weak (friend of the weak and poor),

The remover of sorrow and pain,

O my protector, bless me with Thy Compassionate hand,

I surrender to Thee.

Relieve me of passion and suffering (or imperfections or vices),

Bless me with ever increasing faith, Divine love and spirit of service.

Whatever I have belongs to you and I offer all that to you.

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