Diasporic Desires: Making Hindus and the Cultivation of Longing

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This dissertation explores the means by which Hindus in the United States theorize and cultivate desires in the midst of the larger project of making Hindu subjectivities for themselves and their children. It suggests that the cultivation of desire—while significant in creating any type of subjectivity anywhere—is a centerpiece of making identities for Hindus in the diaspora. From its very beginnings, in reference to Jews, the language and sentiment of diaspora have always been associated with desires. Specifically, there is the longing for the homeland, which most diasporic communities have cultivated. For many Hindus, the idea of India as a desired ‘homeland’ is also fundamental, but for them, as throughout history, the desires associated with diasporic experiences have been enacted in a range of ways and they have always been about more than simply place. Hindu parents and community members are engaged in the development of other types of desires—moral-spiritual, theological, narrative-historical, “sanctioned” romantic and familial, gastronomic, and material. Many contemporary practices of Hindus in the diaspora—educational, ritual, representational, political, and consumer—revolve around the inculcation and fulfillment of desires, for both children and adults. Desire is a recurrent trope, articulated differently by parents, teachers, community leaders, married couples, students, young adults, devotees, and children. Not only do people express their own desires, but they negotiate, facilitate or hinder the desires, both real and perceived, of others.

Through an examination of various Hindu realms and practices, I trace some of the types of Hinduism that are forming in the United States, as well as the affective cultures and desires that seem to animate them. The chapters explore: the development, content and cultures of Hindu supplementary educational programs; new modes of Hindu exhibition as ritual and devotional...
practices, and as reflections of collective desires about Hindu representation; the role of consumer cultures—particularly the place of ethnic stores and practices of shopping; the rise in forms of Hindu advocacy, particularly with respect to the concomitant desires to control representations of Hinduism and Indian history within educational and other public spheres; the place of Hindu nationalism and the motivations of participants in a variety of Hindu spaces; and the expression of ‘strategic citizenship’ on the part of a Hindu community seeking public recognition and acceptance.

My hope is that this work not only sheds light on processes at work within contemporary Hindu communities in the U.S., but helps us to consider larger human questions about the development of religious selves and sensibilities, the shaping of identities, the cultivation of belonging, the negotiation of public and civic spheres, and the politics and poetics of nationalism and self-representation. The ways people locate themselves and are located by others, both consciously and unconsciously, are often artifacts of desire, and it is through desire that various identifications are negotiated.
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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This dissertation was conducted among transnational communities, mainly in the United States, but also drawing on my experiences in and research on a variety of places—the United Kingdom, the Caribbean, Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong, etc.—and, as a result, language is a complicated thing.

In most of the communities I studied, English was one of the primary languages, although Sanskrit comprised a good portion of the ritual vocabulary, as did Hindi and common variants of it, such as Caribbean Hindustani or Fijian Baat, both of which are generally derived from Bhojpuri and Awadhi. Certain specific vernaculars, such as Guyanese creole, were also spoken. In those languages, I could generally make my way, but in other contexts, where devotees or community members spoke Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi, or Gujarati, I relied on our common language of English and the ritual vocabulary of Sanskrit, and sometimes Hindi to navigate our communications. It was extremely rare for me to find people with whom I couldn’t find a common language; even if a grandmother only spoke Tamil, there was usually a family member around who was willing to translate. In almost all of the educational contexts where I did my work, the primary language of instruction was English, especially if children were involved, even if it was often significantly peppered with other languages. At many regionally-homogenous mandirs, it is quite common for a regional language to dominate in public discourses, or casual conversation, even though some English was almost universally present.

The same was true in Indian groceries and shops, where English was the language of commerce, but Hindi and other Indian languages were spoken with relative ease and frequency. I have translated different things throughout, and any translations that are not attributed are my own.

Many of the communities I work with produce materials—for educational, informational, artistic or public relations purposes—that are intended to be accessible to a range of audiences. This means that it is quite common to find not only Indic scripts rendered on fliers or posters or in books, but also transliterations, and translations. In cases where I quote these sources, I have maintained their transliterations verbatim.

With Sanskrit words, I have maintained the sheva (final a) at the end of words, although many of the communities I work with drop the sheva in pronunciation, unless I am directly quoting people, in the course of making a transliteration from an Indic language, in which case I retain their pronunciation style and drop it. Thus, in the text, I have written Mahabharata or Ramayana, rather than Mahabharat or Ramayan.

As a general practice, I have chosen not to use diacritical marks. Words in South Asian languages, which are found in italics, are translated in parentheses the first time they appear in each section of the dissertation. After that they will appear without translation, and without italics. Leaving out the diacritical marks can make proper pronunciation more difficult, as it renders different letters in South Asian languages with one letter in English (t and ṭ will both be written with a single letter t, ṣ and ś are both rendered sh). On the other hand, such omissions conform to general South Asian diasporic conventions. In that this project is ultimately all about the ways in which cultures are translated across time and place, and from one language and generation to another, I have chosen to use spellings that carry the hope of being accessible to the largest number of people.
INTRODUCTION

(1) A PRIMER IN THE PROJECT

This research began a long, long time ago. One moment, among many that led to this project, happened in 1999. In the basement stacks of Union Theological Library, I came across a text that had not been checked out for over three decades. The book, *Sanatana Dharma: An Elementary Text-book of Hindu Religion and Ethics*, which was published 1903 by Central Hindu College in Benares, seemed at once curious and conventional. Primers are among the oldest material culture in the history of education, not only giving us insights into what educators thought worthy of instruction but also providing a tangible example of what students were expected to embody through repetition and memorization. Paul Leicester Ford writes, in his history of *The New England Primer*, that the standard form and method of primers,

> securing uniformity by uniting alphabet and creed, was as old as printed books [emphasis mine]. The Enschedé Abecedarium, which has even been claimed to be the first specimen of printing with type, and which certainly was printed in the fifteenth century, contained besides the alphabet, the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo and two prayers, being the elementary book of the Romish Church.¹

Primers played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge, including the promotion of both literacy and religious doctrine, offering us a window into—what was deemed at the time of their publication and use—the building blocks of both education and religion. A consideration of the history of primers points to the complex history of education itself; at once, early primers sought to make individuals more independent, able to read and write, and yet various Christian groups understood that independence could be dangerous. Individualism and thinking for oneself could just as easily lead one to the Bible as away from it. Therefore, as Ford

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describes it, people needed “teachers” to be told “what they were to think for themselves,” and children needed primers so that, “in their earliest years,” they could be “drilled and taught what to believe when they were to think for themselves when the age of discretion was reached.”

Primers were intended to be guides for children and youth, but also for parents, teachers, and religious leaders. These texts became the tools of various sectarian and reform movements, codifying beliefs in books in order to establish expectations and promote conformity. As primers proliferated, with different Christian groups producing their own versions, they helped to initiate children and parents into various communities of commitment, promoting theologies and philosophies about God, the Bible, proper conduct, and social good. And, as the use of primers became increasingly common in educational settings, between the 17th and early 20th centuries, these textbooks also became tools in colonizing and missionary efforts throughout the world.

Hence, the appearance of a primer in the Union Theological Library stacks was in its way rather unremarkable; many primers can be found there. What caught my attention, however, was

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2 Ibid, p. 6.
3 Ibid, p. 7.

4 At this same time, in America and England between the late 17th and early 20th centuries, entire philosophies of education were emerging, based largely on new ideas of the “child” and “childhood,” as a distinctive type of subject and stage in life. These ideas were linked to new scientific theories about stages in child development—including studies by Darwin and others arguing that nurture was the key to the constitution of moral character and virtue. In the spheres of Christian religious life, discourses about the innocence and purity of children developed that countered ideas about children as inherently sinful, and in need of discipline. Also at this time, movements to promote compulsory education, and its relationship to social order, obedience, and conformity. At approximately the same time, different ideas of children and childhood were germinating in India, especially in relationship to British colonial ideas about the importance of education as a civilizing project. Such ideas, however also came into contact with other Indian and Hindu conceptions of children and childhood, whether it be Lord Krishna as a divine child or ideas about the proper means of education based on the model of the gurukul (schools) and the guru-shishya (teacher-student) relationship. See Steven Mintz, Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); John Stratton Hawley, Krishna the Butter Thief (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Thomas Babington Maccauley, “Minute on Education,” February 2, 1835 (Bureau of Education: Selections from Educational Records, Part I, 1781-1839, ed. H. Sharp. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920); Sharon Stevens, Children and the Politics of Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
that this—*Santana Dharma: An Elementary Text-book of Hindu Religion and Ethics*⁵—was a Hindu primer, not a Christian one.

Central Hindu College was founded in 1898 by Annie Besant, famed Theosophist and convert to Hinduism. Besant’s mission was to impart “sound secular education, combined with moral and religious instruction, based on the fundamental tenets of Hinduism.”⁶ The text is an early 20th-century product of collaboration between a British-woman-theosophist-activist and Indian-Hindu-brahmins—Bhagavan Das chief among them. This English primer, replete with Sanskrit *shlokas* (verses), is emblematic of an important trend in the development of modern Hinduism. Seeking to elucidate the “eternal teachings” of Hinduism to young students and adherents of the tradition, the textbook is a decidedly comparative enterprise, although it does not state that explicitly.⁷ It organizes Hindu teachings into categories that work within the concept and framework of “world religions,” as they were emerging during this historical period.⁸ However, unlike texts such as Max Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, this work was intended for use by Hindus, not European Christians, and is reflective of the complex processes and products that emerged as a result of colonial and other cross-cultural interactions. The enterprise was born out of the “third space,” described by Homi Bhabha, which enabled the colonized to appropriate the language and knowledge of the colonizer to subvert colonial norms


⁷ See the following article for more information on the history and present life of the text: John Stratton Hawley, “Sanatana Dharma as the Twentieth Century Began: Two Textbooks, Two Languages,” *Ancient to Modern: Religion, Power, and Community in India*, eds. Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Saurabh Dube, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009): pp. 312-36.

⁸ For more on this process see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
and discourse, and often uphold them at the very same time. And in this instance, as well, Besant’s appropriation of Hindu language, theology, and philosophy to promote a particular version of Hinduism characterizes another aspect of the colonial encounter, wherein the Orientalist-colonizer presumes and employs colonial norms while simultaneously being transformed by the colonized in a distinctive type of hybridization process.⁹ So, although the Santana Dharma textbook’s reach may not have been particularly wide, it has stayed in print continuously since the time of its first publication, and it is part of a much longer and larger story about how modern Hinduism came to be articulated in a new hybrid language to a new generation of Hindus, and often non-Hindus at the same time.¹⁰

The 1903 primer is an early example of what became an increasingly commonplace sort of publication both in India and abroad, especially among Hindu Reform groups—such as the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Vedanta Society—founded in the later-half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. One particular educational reform movement, led by Vidyasagar and centered in Bengal in the 19th century, is characterized by Brian Hatcher as a “complex process of cultural convergence through which alien discourse and practice become affiliated to indigenous traditions,” in a phenomenon that he describes as “vernacularization,” which was historically and linguistically contextual.¹¹ This notion of vernacularization is a useful way to consider how texts like primers were created in conjunction with the development of growing transnational discourses, institutions, and practices in the early 20th century. Such texts made Hinduism not only more palatable and comprehensible to non-Hindus, but also more easily transmittable to

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).
¹⁰ Hawley, “Sanatana Dharma as the Twentieth Century Began: Two Textbooks, Two Languages.”
Hindus, especially in environments outside of India—the Caribbean, Fiji, South Africa, the U.K., and the U.S.—where Hindus increasingly found themselves. Reform movements had a significant impact on formations of Hinduism in the Indian diaspora: self-consciousness about the need to promote their conception of Hinduism, and maintain a realm of autonomy amid domination, in response to changing conditions—the growing Independence Movement, modernization, and migration, among other things—these groups were particularly focused on education as a means of social, as well as spiritual, improvement and transformation. As Partha Chatterjee explains in his classic work, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, these ideologies, projects of reform and progress were imagined in new ways, paired with and invested in the maintenance and transmission of that which was deemed “tradition.” According to Chatterjee, much of Indian nationalism was built on an essentialized concept of tradition and a system of exclusion through which dichotomies between the spiritual and material, home and world, feminine and masculine, were articulated. In a deeply gendered discourse, women, the domestic, tradition, and the private were all conceived as realms that male nationalists needed to protect, as arenas of sovereignty, through their public engagements and political struggles with the world at large. However, these dichotomies—home/world, domestic/foreign, interior/exterior, private/public—are troubled a bit when we think of how concern with the preservation and protection of tradition

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13 Ibid. See Chapters 6 & 7, and his article on the same topic in *Recasting Women*, entitled “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question.” Chatterjee’s work has been criticized for taking the nationalist rhetoric as reality. He does not acknowledge the emancipatory work of women themselves, or their own articulations, such as those in Hindi women’s journals. Furthermore, he states that nationalism refused to make the women’s question an issue of negotiation with the colonial state—something which is not true. Examples that counter that assertion are evidenced in the Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act XVIII of 1937; Sarda Act, Age of Consent, or Child Marriage Restraint act of 1929; Shariat Application Act of 1937; and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act 1939. This is also evinced by the activism of the All India Women’s Conference and efforts directed at the creation of a uniform civil code. Furthermore, the dichotomies he suggests do not fully account for the ways nationalists, like Sarvarkar and Tilak, for example, framed the gender of tradition and its place in the anti-colonial struggle.
is manifest in Hindu communities outside of India. How does home come to be reimagined? Who is considered to be the keeper of tradition and where is it located once the Nation it is associated with, India, is at a distance? How are notions of the indigenous or native measured in relationship to the concept of ‘tradition’ when its enunciation is already somehow “foreign?” These questions become further compounded when we think about how, even within India, this discourse shifted once Independence was achieved. Hinduism itself has increasingly, and sometimes unabashedly, entered the public domain; the gender of “tradition” is much more fluid, although often not more flexible, than it likely was in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries;\(^{14}\) and the registers and realms in which Hinduism speaks have proliferated. In studying the evolution of modern Hinduism as it has increasingly moved into worlds beyond the Subcontinent, questions abound.

The iterations of Hinduism that are found in the *Sanatana Dharma* primer and others like it were commonly viewed, in the world of South Asian Studies, as worthy of inquiry only in so far as they revealed something about colonialism and the European imagination of Hinduism. Indeed, scholars of religion have, until quite recently, routinely dismissed material religion produced for children, or for educational purposes, as watered-down, derivative from the lofty and “real” religious texts and practices of traditions that warrant academic attention. Furthermore, many of these articulations were not considered “authentic” Hinduism precisely because of their genesis in experiences of encounter rather than in classical or folk traditions that seemed to be “purer” in origin, and this has been manifestly so with respect to articulations of Hinduisms emerging outside of India. Yet an obsession with origins and authenticity ultimately

\(^{14}\) In light of these gendered norms, Besant’s leadership within the international Theosophist movement, the instrumental role she played, and the public credit she takes for crafting a particular vision of Hindu tradition, with direction and knowledge garnered from her brahman collaborators, become all the more notable.

15 Endeavors intended to preserve and disseminate traditions are indeed deliberately meant to be formative experiences in the lives of children and parents, and as such they beckon our consideration. Viewing the emergence of new modes and means of articulating and transmitting Hinduism in modernity, and the ‘era of globalization,’ requires that we heed Homi Bhabha’s call to:

think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are reproduced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community-interest, or cultural value are negotiated.”

The Hindu diaspora—a choice in terminology I will discuss later—is one of these in-between spaces where new “strategies of selfhood” are practiced, identities are inhabited, and differences and similitudes are expressed and reinforced. Reading the 1903 *Sanatana Dharma* primer inspired me to think more broadly about the conscious and unconscious means of producing Hindu subjectivities in the contemporary moment. For if we fast forward a little less

16 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 1-2.
than 100 years, we find a plethora of texts, and educational, cultural, community, and civic-based programs and practices to accompany them (religious and cultural schools, classes, camps, retreats, and youth groups, secular school-based presentations, exhibitions, ritual explications, and enactments) which both resemble and depart from the primers produced in the early years of the 20th century. For the most part, these cultural productions are created by Hindus of Indian descent for Hindus of Indian descent with the future of cultural traditions, values, and identifications of the “next generation” in mind.

In the pages that follow, I wish to ask in what ways are Hindu identifications primed and subjectivities cultivated in late 20th and early 21st century America. In order to explore this question, I turn not only to the overt forms of education, such as textbooks and curriculum, but to other affective spaces, and political, ritual and cultural practices where Hindu selves—communal and individual—are defined and negotiated.

In part, I use the language of a primer here to suggest that the late 20th and early 21st centuries have given rise to a new wave of Hindu primers (catechisms and chrestomathies, to employ markedly Christian terms), especially in the diaspora. Many of these are manifest in the pages of actual texts, but they also find form in sets of practices intended to assist in the embodiment of particular identities. Here I seek to examine both the content of these educational endeavors—which are not aimed simply at children, but communities at large—as well as the contexts in which they have arisen.

(2) Mapping the Dissertation

This dissertation emerged from comments and conversations that revealed a common discourse I found among parents, acharyas (Hindu teachers), and pandits (priests) in Hindu and Indian contexts in the U.S. and abroad. Perhaps the set of desires I am going to outline here come
as no great surprise: they seem somewhat fundamental, but still, the continual utterance of specific desires is something that struck me time and time again. The repetition of these desires and the embodied practices—which are understood to produce and inspire them—are, I believe, worthy of attention, not simply only they help us to document the transnational experiences and processes at work among contemporary Hindus, but because they shed light on larger human questions about the development of religious selves and sensibilities, the shaping of identities, the cultivation of belonging, and the politics and poetics of nationalism and self-representation.

I begin by describing the nature of the research and explaining my methods of inquiry.

Chapter I, “Contextualizing and Recognizing American Hinduism,” provides a brief history of American Hinduism, while considering a variety of ways Hindus and Hinduism have been seen and recognized by ‘Others’ and themselves.

Chapter II, “On Desire and/in Diaspora,” charts the relationship of desire to the diasporic experience. It examines the space of diaspora as a locus of desires, as an idea, and as a social, existential, and theological location and point of articulation among American Hindus.

Chapter III, “Hindu Educational Philosophies, Pedagogies, and Practices,” draws upon ethnographic fieldwork at a number of Hindu supplementary schools, camps, and teacher-training sessions, and provides a window into the development of diasporic and transnational educational practices and curricula that have developed in the course of the last several decades, focusing especially on those used by Hindus living in the United States. Ultimately, the chapter explores the philosophies of self (as to both nature and culture) that are at work among parents and teachers as they seek to create Hindu subjectivities for their children. Through an exploration of the content, pedagogies, and discursive practices of these schools and camps, such a study
allows us to consider which versions of Hinduism and Hindus are being shaped and articulated in America (and, in some cases, beyond) and their implications.

Chapter IV, “Exhibition Agents and Agency: Contemporary Hindu Displays and Constitutions of Community,” looks at what is at stake in the act of representing Hinduism to larger publics. It explores three contexts: official public venues (museums, cultural/ritual festivals, community centers); in-situ exhibitions (primarily Hindu temples/mandirs), and roving/portable educational formats (classrooms, interfaith contexts, internet, civic and government spaces, pamphlets and publications). While it considers the content of these exhibitions, the chapter is concerned with how the act of exhibition itself has produced a particular type of Hindu subject, and also emerged as a new type of Hindu practice, one that is almost ritualized or devotional in nature.

Chapter V, “Material Desires and Belonging in American Hindu Cultures.” examines the ways in which desire for and ownership of the material and symbolic goods of Hinduism are cultivated in children, and the Hindu community at large, as a means of producing sentiments of belonging and attachment. Noting that the slippage between Indian and Hindu, which will be discussed in more detail, is not simply one of verbiage, or political orientation, but a part of diasporic life, I argue that we cannot only fix our gaze on the explicitly religious or “Hindu” sites; grocery stores and restaurants, sari and other ethnic shops, attitudes toward and experiences of consumption, travel, and practices such as yoga, also work to construct modern Hindus and Hinduism. All of these—and the sum of them, in composite form—shed light on how Hindu belonging is conceived and cultivated.

Chapter VI, “Defending Dharma and Controlling Content: The Polemics and Politics of Hindu Educational Representation,” examines reactions to and advocacy surrounding the
infamous California textbook controversy of 2006, and considers textbook controversies that have occurred since that time. It also seeks to understand these controversies in the context of proactive efforts on the part of Hindu educators (India in Classrooms, the Hindu Education Foundation, the Hindu American Foundation) to shape what is taught about Hinduism in public schools and other public contexts (state houses, courtrooms, universities).

Chapter VII, “The Nature of Engagement: Sentiment, Interpretation and Entangled Politics in Hindu Spaces,” considers what draws people to participate in Hindu mandirs, camps, classes, etc. Looking not simply at the discourses of engagement, but the nature of the practices and sentiment at play among participants, I ask what involvement in Hindu nationalist organizations means when the actual experiences and activities subvert (often unintentionally) nationalist agendas. This chapter also considers what happens when people engage in such Hindu organizations from a position of relative ignorance, asking how we might measure the enduring power of nationalist endeavors. It asks whether it is possible, and if so what are the implications of disentangling political messages from the practices that surround them? In part, this chapter probes ideas about the homogenizing and “Hindutva” tendencies that seem so endemic to the discourse of contemporary globalized and diasporic Hinduism by placing them in a broader historical context—the history of Hindu education in the Caribbean, for example, and also the history of religious education in America more generally. All the while, the chapter seeks to identify and discuss the insidious and pervasive influence of Hindu nationalist and chauvinist agendas in shaping the tenor and political discourse in American Hindu communities.

Chapter VIII, “Desiring Acceptance: The Practice of Strategic Citizenship and Modeling Moral Virtue in the Wake of Divine Desecration,” documents the response of the Hindu community in Maple Grove, Minnesota, following the April, 2006, desecration of eleven
partially consecrated *murtis* (sacred images). It traces the Hindu community’s response to the desecration of divine bodies and the development of a temple body politic and public discourse that articulated not only how Hinduism might hold out hope for the temple community itself but also for the young men who perpetrated the vandalism. By exploring the response and rhetoric of the temple leadership and other Minnesota publics (local, civic, interfaith, etc.) from the time of the vandalism to the present, this chapter reflects on how the emotions of pain, violence, anger, and retribution were eschewed in favor of a set of Hindu values that focused on hope, reconciliation, repair and forgiveness. This act of strategic citizenship, which involved what many devotees understood to be an act of spiritual discipline, enabled the Hindu community to represent itself, in its own terms, to various publics as it desired. It also, interestingly, drew attention away from Hindu “idol worship” and replaced it with a discourse about morality and model citizenship. This response to temple desecration marks a significant departure from normative Hindu views and practices surrounding temple desecration in India itself. The practices of the community entailed not simply acts of forgiveness, and the advocacy of restorative justice, but the choice to bury the murtis on temple grounds in ways that allow for continual reference to the act of vandalism and the temple’s virtuous, Gandhian response.

Coupled with the previous chapters, this chapter focuses on a single incident seeks to explore other types of Hindu responses to feeling embattled in the American environment in which they find themselves. Attention to how responses have differed in remarkable and instructive ways, both revealing and disrupting a sense of corporate Hindu identity that is proclaimed to be perennial, but is actually rapidly evolving.

The dissertation concludes by returning to the cultivation of different types of desires as an essential element in the cultivation of modern Hindu subjectivities, reflecting upon the
implications of these practices and discourses for how we might better understand the production and performance of religious identifications and subjectivities more generally.

(3) EXPLORING THE TERRAIN: METHODS AND FIELDS OF INQUIRY

In order to study questions about the cultivation of identifications and affections, I conducted intensive field research in a range of Hindu communities and contexts. The fieldwork took the form of participant-observation, interviews, and, occasionally, other modes of ethnographic observation and was concentrated in southern and northern California, with some work in other states in the U.S. (New York, New Jersey, Illinois, D.C., Minnesota, Texas) and abroad (the U.K. and India), between the years 2000 and 2010. Preliminary fieldwork began even earlier, in the late 1990s, I started to explore the viability of the topic; some of that material is included here as well. I did not limit my field of inquiry to the United States, believing that the realities of transnational migration as well as contemporary modes of communication and technological innovation mean that people and ideas move more rapidly across national and cultural borders than ever before. As a result, the commitments and associations of Hindus living in New Jersey, for example, may resemble very closely those of Hindus living in the U.K., Canada, Guyana, Trinidad, Singapore, and even India, especially because many Hindus residing in the U.S. have relatives in other countries with whom they communicate regularly, to whom they send money, and with whom they share ideas. Therefore, I will include narratives, fieldwork, and research drawn from countries outside of the U.S., even though the primary focus remains Hindu articulations in the United States. Furthermore, California is featured prominently in this work not simply because it is where my research began, following some limited work in New York, but because the significant Hindu population there makes among the active and vibrant sites in the Hindu diaspora.
The majority of spaces in which my fieldwork occurred were “official” Hindu spaces (mandirs, Hindu educational contexts, camps, festivals, rituals), but other non-Hindu arenas were also in my sights; for it is also in those realms (public squares, museums, parades, city halls, school boardrooms, college campuses, various forms of media, parks, grocery stores) that conceptions of Hindus and Hinduism are propagated, publicly constituted, and contested.

This project stands at the intersection of a number of fields: Religious, Diaspora, Transnational, South Asian, American, Educational, Performance, and Gender Studies, Anthropology, and History. Like the field of Religious Studies, this dissertation is intentionally interdisciplinary, drawing upon a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. At times, I take a more anthropological and locally-focused approach, drawing upon conversations or teachings I observed, interviews I conducted, rituals, and performances I witnessed in order to paint a picture of the particular spheres of Hindu life I explore in the pages to follow. At other times, I explore the material productions (textual, visual, performative, political) of Hindu communities and individuals in the U.S. and globally, building upon and making assertions about national and international discourse, processes, and politics. Initially, I thought that this project would attend to questions about explicitly educational contexts (schools, and camps for children), but as my questions developed and I spent time in the field, I realized that I needed to take into account the pedagogical practices and articulations of identity occurring in the other spheres that are regularly traversed and inhabited by the children, families and religious leaders I had started to explore.

In *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement*, Tulasi Srinivas discusses the methodological approach she employed in her research, noting that the “reified ethnographic trilogy: one observer, one time, one place,” which
Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes, did not make sense in work that focused on globalization. In the case of this project as well, a narrowly focused study on one site or even a single organization, such as the Chinmaya Mission, which in my case may have seemed to make sense, would have been insufficient to achieve my research goals; I have sought to trace sentiments, practices, and ideas that move from place to place, and which are shared, albeit inflected differently, by people in various regions of the United States and beyond. Like the Sathya Sai Movement, the Chinmaya Mission Worldwide is, in fact, worldwide, and to study it invites a similar approach to the one Srinivas employs. However, while the Chinmaya Mission’s educational work is an exemplar of Hindu-making endeavors in the U.S. and transnationally, fixing my gaze only on them would require ignoring the larger landscape in which distinctive, derivative, and parallel processes are at work. Audacious though it might be, therefore, I attempt a type of “multisited ethnography” and exploration, which, following from Lila Abu Lughod’s charge to do such work, Srinivas argues “opens us up to alterity—to different ways of being in this world.” And, as she notes, drawing upon Taussig, “alterity, or how we distance ourselves from the other, also says something about its opposite, mimesis, or how we come to adopt another’s culture.” I would add, in the case of my work, that exploring the twin processes of alterity and mimesis provides insight into how we come to recognize, know and adopt our “own cultures,” however that idea is construed.

To take on such a broad topic obviously has pitfalls, risking generalization and lacking specificity. I hope I have compensated for these limitations, in some part, through detailed

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18 Ibid, p. 44.

19 Ibid.
accounts of moments, trying to highlight not only the similarities between people, practices, and places but also the differences. In that this work was conducted over such a long period and in various locales, it has the value of continuity, which enabled me to trace the evolution of articulations, individual people, communities and institutions over time. In turn, however, despite the positive ways that the longevity of the project has provided me with the ability to note change, it has also meant that my field has been dynamic; institutions have come and gone, people have moved, been born, and died. I have, more than once, returned to a place hoping to find someone I spoke to years earlier, only to discover that nobody knew where they had gone, or that the storefront mandir I hoped to revisit existed no more. As frustrating as these moments were, I see value in them, serving as reminders that religions are in motion just like the people who practice them. There were stretches where I visited sites every week, and sometimes there were long gaps—months, even years, in some instances—between my visits to places and people. I have always tried to keep up my contacts despite my physical absence, often sending short emails or making quick phone calls in an effort to keep up-to-date with people’s lives and the endeavors they were engaged with, be it running a school, camp, or in-service educational program for public schools. I am on more listservs than I can count, subscribing to newsletters, and inspirational messages from every mandir, Hindu school, and camp who offers one. I even have a designated email account solely for that purpose. Still, I have lost contact with some people and suffered the consequences of my own failures to be meticulous enough in my field notes, so that more research than I wish has been relegated to the “I-can’t-in-good-conscience-do-anything-with-this” category. It is difficult to try and tabulate the number of people I spoke to, or sites I visited, but I have fieldnotes and recordings that document, in some small or large part, the voices of over five-hundred people who self-identify (or have previously identified) as
Hindu. The more than 1100 pages of partial transcriptions from 482 formal and informal interviews represents only a fragment of what I was lucky enough to gather over the past few years. I also have another set of 131 recordings and partial transcripts from the bala vihar classes, lectures, and camps I observed. While what is included in the pages to follow captures only a small portion of my work in the field, I have sought to make it representative.

Above all else, this project is about people, and none of this research would have been possible without the generosity of many individuals and institutions along the way. I hoped, in some way, that this work could serve as a history of the growth of particular types of institutions and sentiments among American Hindu in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In the pursuit of that goal, however, the tension between anthropological and historical methodologies was most acute. Any scholarship involving living people, and the institutions they are involved with, faces distinctive challenges that writing about the long-ago past does not; this is especially the case when some of the subjects of study may well read one’s work. In that history seeks to document with precision the evolution of institutions, social processes, and the words and creations of particular people in particular places and times, this dissertation sometimes offers what could be called an historical account. In that vein, there are times when the names written here are actual names of institutions and people. With respect to people, there are two cases in which I have used people’s real names: firstly, when the statements, acts, or individuals are considered public; and secondly, when the individuals themselves asked to be named (usually only by first name). I have not noted when I used a pseudonym and when it is a real name, so as to maintain a little more anonymity for those who wished it. When this work isn’t focused on a specific place or person, but rather the religious, political, social practices and ideas in play among American Hindus more generally, I have been more general about how I described sites, institutions, and
people. All the locations mentioned, however, are as stated. In some instances, I may be very specific about a place (i.e., The Malibu Hindu Temple in Calabasas, CA), while at other times, I may be more general (a class for Hindu children in Houston, TX, or a mandir in Orange County, CA). At one point, a number of people suggested that I give everyone a pseudonym, with the exception of public figures. My resistance to that idea was about more than my desire to be as historically accurate as possible, but it was about questions of gender and the politics of attribution. If I were to have recognized only public figures by name, fewer women (teachers, mothers, shopkeepers, etc.) would have been credited. Furthermore, as much as possible, I wanted to acknowledge, by name, the work and creativity in the seemingly quotidian acts (raising children, making food) of the people who make it possible for public displays, speeches, events, etc. to happen; it is these people who often engage in the behind-the-scenes work required to maintain a mandir, camp, or school, and it is their experiences and sentiments that I wanted to highlight. Everyone I spoke with was offered a choice: they could have me use their real names (usually only their first names); choose their own pseudonym; or have me offer a suggestion of pseudonyms from which they could choose, or which I would assign. I usually brought three books with me to interviews and site visits, just in case people wanted aids to help them pick names: a general collection of baby names from around the world, a collection of “more than 1,000” Indian baby names, and a book of names for Hindu children. I often found people’s selection of pseudonyms to be illuminating. Multiple times people told me how much they liked the idea of picking a name that could really “reflect who they were,” or how they wanted to be.

Although I always made my intentions clear when speaking to people, my own perceived identity allowed me to blend in. When I go to Hindu settings, I almost always dress in Indian
clothing; that is my practice and preference—the way I feel personally most comfortable and appropriate—but this also had the unintended consequence of providing a type of “cover,” even when I was explicit about my research, never proceeding without clarification of my purpose and without explicit permissions. I have straddled the line between outsider and insider, and I developed relationships with people, knowing the intimacies of their lives, details about their aging parents, and the challenges they faced with their children, or at work. I have seen children grow, alongside my own children, from babies into college students and I have been lucky to be present at graduations and weddings. All of those things have helped me to read what is often lost in written text; it was in dialogue, through gestures, silences, and laughter that I was able to better understand the sentiments behind the words and actions I heard and observed. The opportunity for personal interaction, in that regard, was invaluable. This has made it harder for me to make some claims or generalizations that might have seemed self-evident based on written texts, public statements by Hindu leaders, or even from sources on the internet, and I am grateful for the ways in which engaging with people has helped me to see things in messier and more complex ways, even if it does not lend itself to the clarity of argument for which I would hope.

Working in environments where children were often present required that I needed to be even more clear and vigilant when explaining my intentions and the focus of the research. When speaking with or observing children, I took great pains to get permission—in the form of oral and, in some cases, written consent—from both program organizers and parents. At public gatherings or exhibitions, too, I could easily blend in, and, in those settings, I took on more of a participant-observer position. In the early years of this research, I sometimes arrived at sites pregnant or with a baby in tow. Being recognized as a mother by other parents afforded me another point of entry; people trusted me and spoke to me as someone who shared their concerns
about what it means to be raising children in the 21st century. As my children started walking, I didn’t bring them to sites very often, but people usually asked, “Are you married?” “Do you have children?” My choice, and ability, to answer those questions in the affirmative very likely made me more approachable and less threatening to some of my interlocutors. I was always honest when people asked about my religious or cultural background, but I didn’t usually offer up personal information unless I was asked directly. In many settings, I simply observed, and generous teachers, camp organizers, mandir presidents, board members, parents, pandits, and swamis granted me permission to sit, and take notes, recordings, photographs, and/or videos, in some cases week after week.

The ongoing relationship between one’s scholarship and one’s subjects is something that I have thought about a lot over the course of this research and I will come back to in later chapters. Knowing that this work may be read by some of the people it is about has been a source of anxiety and also inspiration. I have often worried about how this might be received, and I have also wanted to make sure that I was as careful and accurate in my representations as I could be, while still recognizing that ultimately this work is subjective. While I could not have done this without the help of countless people, any errors in representation or interpretation are all mine.

I may well win the most undesired award in the category of length-of-time-for-dissertation-completion. The road to finishing this project has been more than windy, it has been bumpy and full of fits and starts. The birth of children, personal illness, and more significantly the illness of family members and the sad passing of some, moves for jobs, and teaching, in the

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20 I am not particularly happy about the fact that these things gave me access that others might not have been afforded, but it would be disingenuous of me not to acknowledge that my ethnicity, racial-ambiguity, cultural and social status changed how people related to me. Sometimes my religious affiliation and the fact that my spouse is a rabbi came up, and that generally required explanation and clarification, but I am pretty sure that my appearance and how I comported myself (my dress, knowledge of language and comfort with the ritual expectations) meant that I was still perceived to be like one of the group much of the time.
most rewarding, nurturing and also demanding of environments, at Carleton College have all
slowed my path of progress. The only silver lining—and it is perhaps quite tattered—is that I am
writing this project with many years of fieldwork in hand. I never really left “the field” to return
home and write. I have always lived in and between my various fields, and, to this day, my
research on the cultivation of affect, community, and identities among American Hindus has
never really stopped.

(4) THE TRAJECTORY OF THE PROJECT

My own background and social location have decidedly influenced the focus and
trajectory of this research. How I came to this project has shaped my positionality, something
that conventions in feminist theory and anthropology have asserted one needs to delineate as an
essential element of ethical work. It is through noting positionality that scholars are meant to
recognize and own their subjectivity, situate their positions with respect to the research, and
acknowledge biases, recognizing, of course, that there are limitations to how much any of us can
truly place ourselves. Not surprisingly, perhaps—on a larger scale—the matter of how people go
about recognizing their “position” and attempting to define it in ways that they can “recognize”
is the very subject of this project.

Most of the people I explore in this research are conscious, to some extent, about what
they see as the value of claiming identities, and they have invested energy in cultivating
environments that foster recognition, a process I explore further in the chapter on “Hindu
Educational Philosophies, Practices, and Pedagogy.” In the contexts, I encountered over the
course of my research, the question of what it means to know and recognize oneself emerged
repeatedly.
While a fraught enterprise, recognizing that we are all fragmented selves constantly in formation, I have chosen to try and to locate my multiple positionalities with respect to this project, situating not simply myself, but also the South Asian Hindu immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s and following.

Born in Berkeley, California in 1971 and raised as the child of an East-Coast, American-Jewish mother and an Indian-immigrant, Hindu father, I have always been interested in questions about identification and belonging, the contours and boundaries of communities, and the criteria, and conditions for one’s inclusion in, or exclusion from, particular spheres of cultural and religious life. I grew up in an international family, with relatives on five of the seven continents affiliating with almost all of the major religious traditions found in the world.

Having left Sindh at different points in the 20th century, both pre- and post-Partition, my father’s family is widely dispersed throughout the world; the Hinduism that most of my family practices is not “pure” in the way that many of those I encountered (in urban India and elsewhere) believed theirs to be, or as detailed as books on Hindu traditions I read in college and graduate school suggested “official Hinduism” to be. Steven Ramey describes it succinctly in his book, *Hindu, Sufi, or Sikh: Contested Practices and Identifications of Sindhi Hindus*, “While Sindhi Hindus identify themselves as Hindu, most do not see that identification conflicting with their veneration of Sufi pīrs and Sikh gurus.”21 The syncretic and complex nature of the Hinduism among my own family members, especially as expressed by my Grandma Sati, from whom I learned most of what I know about Sindhi custom and belief, always made me suspect of the clear definitions of religious traditions and communities characterized by pronouncements

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such as, “Hindus do,” or “Hinduism believes,” which are so often emphasized and championed in the service of political agendas. Just by virtue of variation among my own family members with respect to religious practice and doctrine, I always knew such generalizations were ultimately too simplistic to reflect the complicated commitments in the lives of real people. The academic study of religion has only further affirmed this understanding for me, as scholar Carl Ernst notes:

A major consequence of the historical study of religion is that it becomes increasingly impossible to consider a religion to be a “thing” (scholars called this process the “objectification” or “reification” of religion). Although it is common to hear people say, for example, “Christianity says that…” or “according to Islam…,” the only thing that can be observed or demonstrated is that individual people who call themselves Christians or Muslims have particular positions and practices that they observe and defend. No one, however, has ever seen Christianity or Islam do anything. They are abstractions, not actors comparable to human beings.22

Such an understanding of religious traditions necessitates that we take time to study particular people, in particular times and places if we actually wish to understand how religions shape the lives of individuals and communities and, in turn, how religious traditions are shaped by them.

In my approach to the very notion of identification,23 I begin from a similar place as I do with the concept of religion, which is informed both by personal experiences, and shaped by the theoretical insights offered by critical studies of identity, race, gender, and sexuality. My own personal “failure” to fit neatly and easily into readymade categories of identification and belonging exposed, from a relatively young age, how much identities are products of social

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23 I will use both the term identity and identification throughout the dissertation. I prefer the language of identification as it points away from essentialist ideas and makes room for an intersectional perspective that recognizes that people not only are identified, or given identifications by others, passively, but they also can assume, take-on, or embody different types of identifications in different times and places. I persist in the use of identity, however, because it has been the primary language in both scholarly, public and colloquial discourse.
construction and reproduction. I proceed in this work with the understanding that identities are socially-constructed and never static.

My own mixed background has invited a lifetime of questions about my identity(ies), authenticity, and rights to claim membership or belonging in particular communities. And I have consistently wanted to understand the processes whereby identities are formed and subjectivities are affected. That knowledge as one of the main portals of entry into various worlds has driven my interest in the primacy of the relationship between modes of education and experiences of belonging and identification, as ascribed by oneself and others. Two things made me particularly and personally aware of this relationship: my own religious and cultural upbringing and education; and observing my younger sister struggle with how much or little she wanted to identify with the Hinduism and Indian cultures that my Hindu step-mother and father sought to inculcate in her.

I grew up amidst an eclectic mix of “adopted family” in California among people who were my parents’ closest friends, many of whom remain so to this day. They comprised an unconventional, but beautiful mixture of cultures, traditions, and languages which I experienced and knew to be normative; my sense of the normative, I later learned, was not shared by everyone. With my father’s family, like most Sindhi families, spread the world over, and my mother’s family primarily back East, weekends and holidays were spent with a core group of people, most of the men having studied engineering at one point or another—Sindhi and Bengali Hindus, a Goan Catholic, South American Catholics and Jews, American Jews, Punjabi Sikhs, and a smattering of others from the U.K., France, and the States—who also left their families and came out West dreaming of a California that brought opportunities of all kinds: educational, professional, personal, and spiritual. A few of the South Asians in this group—my father
included—came a little earlier than the vast majority of immigrants who arrived in the last third of the 20th century. Reaching Michigan in 1960 to pursue his master’s degree in mechanical engineering, my father became friends with a very small cohort of Indian men who had also come for graduate studies. This bunch was not particularly religious, and most of them married non-Indian women. My father’s own father died suddenly after a heart-attack, right after he arrived in America; there was no chance of returning for the funeral rites, both because of finances and how travel worked in those days. My father has always said that had his father lived, things might have proceeded very differently, and he might well have returned to India to live. Like many of these early immigrants, my father came here uncertain about his intentions for the future. He entered the U.S. on a student visa, making him one of only 6,000 Asian Indians to enter the U.S. between 1947 and 1965,24 and one of the only 14,000 South Asians to reside in the country at that time.25 That Visa converted into an H1-B Visa when he stayed to work as an engineer. It was unclear if his time in the U.S. was to be temporary—an opportunity to gain knowledge, degrees, skills, and make some money to bring home—or whether this was to be a permanent move.

My father moved to Berkeley after visiting a childhood friend from Bombay, who told him he should join him in California, and leave the job he had at Boeing to work for I.B.M. As I grew up, it was clear that for my father—like many of the South Asian immigrants I spoke with over the course of my fieldwork—it wasn’t just a far-off fantasy, but an abiding hope that California might really be the Golden State where the American Dream could be realized. Along


with some of his friends from Michigan, they widened their circles, making friends at U.C. Berkeley. It was there that my parents eventually met, marrying in 1966.

In the early years, residing in America on H-1 and student visas, and unsure if they were staying in the United States or not, these new immigrants didn’t initially focus on or invest in, creating institutions or producing institutional facsimiles of home. But, although they weren’t yet building temples or creating schools, they were, to be sure, trying to find ways to get the spices and ingredients needed to make home-cooked cuisine, and improvising where need be (i.e. substituting Rice Crispies for puffed rice). Some of them made home altars and celebrated festivals with friends and family. Yoga was becoming popular in those years and, in my parent’s circles, some of the women (especially the non-Indian wives) embraced it, along with mastering regional Indian cuisines, and knowing how to tie perfect saris.

By the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the same California where my parents lived was at the epicenter of the Neo-Hindu movements, which were popular within the countercultural sphere. These ran the gamut from experiments with Transcendental Meditation to Hare Krishna gatherings in Golden Gate Park. Yet, for the most part, the South Asian Hindus in my family’s circles were not involved with or attracted to these modes of religious involvement or expression.

As time progressed, however, and as these immigrants started to have children (myself included) something changed. The Siddha Yoga ashram was founded in Oakland by Swami Muktananda in 1975. With an Indian-born guru and some elements a familiar Hindu environment—darshan (divine seeing), arati (a part of puja, in which light is presented as an offering), the chanting of mantras feeling familiar (although others were also quite novel, and particular to Siddha Yoga), some among my parents’ friends started to attend the ashram. It was
not only, or even primarily, the South Asian men or women who were most interested in the ashram. My own Jewish mother attended meditation regularly after my parents separated, and I recall having to go and sit for what seemed like long hours for chanting, satsang, or puja, enticed only (as a young child of 6 or 7) by the good cookies and vegetarian café that was run by the devotees at the ashram. While catering primarily to white Americans who had jumped on the Eastern spiritual-questing bandwagon, the Oakland ashram could count a growing number of South Asians within its walls by the late 1970s and early 1980s.

It was at this same time, in the mid- to late 1970s and early 1980s, as the first generation of immigrants became more established in their careers, and the second-generation progressed past the toddler years, that members of the California Hindu community—just like their counterparts in Pittsburg and New York—started to build Hindu temples on a grander scale, as well as create schools and camps to educate the next generation. These institutions and endeavors will be the subject of the chapters to follow.

By the late 1970s, as well, “Indian” grocery stores, as they were first called, sari shops, and restaurants were already visible fixtures on University Avenue in Berkeley, and institutions devoted to teaching Indian music and dance flourished, attracting immigrants and non-immigrants alike. In my own case, family friends (also Sindhis) found a Bharatnatyam (a

26 Because there is some debate over the proper terminology, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will use first-generation to refer to those who immigrated to the U.S. from India or other countries, many of whom have become naturalized citizens. I will use second-generation to refer to the children of these immigrants.


28 Also established, to meet the needs of educating aspiring musicians was, most notably, the Ali Akbar College of Music, founded in Berkeley, CA in 1967, only 12 years after the founding of the first school in Calcutta, India. While serving a number of white Americans interested in Indian music in its early years, Ali Akbar College, along with the freelance teachers, began to instruct second-generation students as well. The same was true with Indian dance teachers, who held classes in their living rooms or basements, or who came to the homes of families to teach small groups of students (almost always of girls). Instruction in music and dance was a major feature of cultural
form of South Indian dance) teacher and invited a few of us to take weekly lessons. The fact that a group of us who had parents (or in two of our cases, a parent) with North Indian backgrounds was not regarded as something extraordinary, although Bharatanatyam is a distinctively South Indian dance form. The idea that we would be exposed to Indian cultural traditions was all that seemed to be important to our parents. There wasn’t much emphasis on or opportunities for regional specificity with respect to Indian culture or Hindu traditions. In that regard, the notion that Bharatanatyam was the “National Dance of India,” seemed to have permeated into the Bay Area South Asian community’s ethos. A similar “nationalization” of Bharatanatyam was happening in India itself at the same time. This eclectic embrace of Indian cultures, with little concern for regional purity or differentiation, was also evident in how we would enjoy celebrations of Durga Puja with a gathering at the home of Bengali friends, or attend a Vaisakhi party at the home of our Punjabi ones.

When I was eleven, my own sense of what was involved in acquiring cultural knowledge and learning to embody a tradition felt acute. Straddling two cultures, I was sent to Jewish Hebrew/religious school three times a week, and I had just started preparing to study for my bat mitzvah. I loved Bharatanatyam dance; my teacher asked that we devote ourselves more fully to practicing at home, and I was then taking both private and group lessons. When I was twelve, I felt I needed to make a choice: I couldn’t both have a bat mitzvah and prepare for an arangetram (the traditional solo debut performance that a dancer undertakes once she has completed a stage education in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as they are still, and the lines distinguishing between religious and cultural education were blurry at best, and they remain difficult to delineate in many contexts still today.

29 An added dimension of this story is that Katherine Kunhiraman, our teacher, was an American woman, who had studied classical dance in India in the 1960s, married a well-known Kathakali and Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher. The two moved to Berkeley in 1975 and they are widely recognized as playing a “significant role in disseminating South Indian arts traditions…in the U.S” (K.K. Gopalakrishnan, “Their Classical Saga,” The Hindu, June 12, 2014).
of formal training). I chose to have a bat mitzvah. At a relatively young age, the experience of standing in/in-between two worlds, which have traditionally been immersive, laid bare for me the power of cultural, social, and psychological practices, whose aim extends beyond the simple dissemination of information, seeking instead to produce identification. Furthermore, I was profoundly aware that in my choice to embrace one form of knowledge, I lost part of my access to the pleasure and the power derived from another. Little did I know then, that so much of my life work would involve trying to acquire aspects of that cultural knowledge, albeit from a different critical and academic vantage point, as well as a personal one.

Many years later, I watched my sister, who is fourteen years younger than me, as she embraced and, much more forcefully, resisted the Hindu and Indian cultural education that was offered to her. She was sent to bala vihar (supplementary Hindu schools). My step-mother came into my life when I was ten years old. She and my father had an arranged marriage, at his mother’s urging, when he was forty, and after he had been in the States for half of his life. My sister was raised in Southern California in the 1980s. She was brought up in a much more traditional household, and among a more insular, predominantly Sindhi Hindu social-world, than the one in which I was raised in Berkeley. I assumed, therefore, that she would just naturally imbibe and embrace Indian culture and Hindu traditions. Unlike my own mother, who could send me to the local synagogue to an established religious school program, the Hindu parents among my sister’s peers worked hard to create environments conducive to teaching tradition to their children. There was nothing easy or passive about it. I was twenty-three when I visited my

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30 The term bala vihar is used by a large number of Hindu organizations to refer to the programs they offer as a form of supplementary school for children. Although there are other names that are used for these types of children’s programs, I have chosen to employ bala vihar throughout the dissertation as a generic term for such schools. At times, I will refer to specific bala vihar programs, such as those offered by the Chinmaya Mission throughout the world, and I will be specific to note the sponsoring organizations.
parents and decided to go and observe my sister’s bala vihar class, which, at that point, was held in the living room of one of the participating families. As a graduate student in religious studies, I came into the class curious about how the concepts of Hinduism I was studying might be taught (if they were at all) in the bala vihar environment, and how bala vihar might compare to educational settings I had visited in India. I also observed the class through the eyes of a teacher, as someone who had already spent a number of years teaching and developing curriculum in Jewish religious school contexts. I found the nascent class to be a sort of laboratory, in which various methods were tried in the hope that something (a particular story, mantra, ritual, but most significantly sense of self) would stick. They didn’t have a readymade primer that outlined the essentials for what American Hinduism might look like, but in many ways — in the form of texts, practices, rituals, the establishment of temples, schools, camps, and cultural and political advocacy groups — that is just what American Hindus have been doing for the past forty-plus years. Now, in the early 21st century, there are many different Hindu American “primers” out there for people to follow, embellish, amend or reject.

Before I turn to the various ways that diasporic Hinduism and Hindu identities have been cultivated over the past fifty-two years, I turn, in this next chapter, to setting the stage and contextualizing these modern iterations and transformations in a larger historical context. Indians, Hindus, and Hinduism did not first come to America in the 1960s, and along with encounters with the west from the colonial period onward, it was the early migrations of Indians, Hindus, and Hindu concepts that also served as some of the initial primers, laying a foundation for the Hinduism that would be articulated by American Hindus in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.
CHAPTER I: CONTEXTUALIZING AND RECOGNIZING AMERICAN HINDUISM

The body of literature documenting the history and experiences of South Asians—and specifically Hindus—in America is relatively small and in one respect surprisingly uniform. Almost every work in the field begins with a historical narrative aimed at providing context. I will follow this tradition in what is about to come, but before I do, I wish to draw attention to the complex implications of writing and telling this particular story.

The very act of producing and narrating stories for and about Hindus in the United States is one of the many ways that Hindu subjectivities are made, passively, and one of the many things that Hindu groups seek to do—for themselves and others—quite actively. The communities I work with are acutely aware of the power of history as a source of knowledge that shapes perceptions not only of the past but of the present. It is well understood among Hindu educational, cultural and political advocacy groups that the right to shape and write one’s own history (for others outside of the community and for the next generation within the community) is valuable and something worth fighting for.

The stories of how class, caste, gender, sexuality, race, region of origin and region of immigration alter people’s trajectories and experiences have rarely been included in the conventional history of Hindus in the United States. And while I cannot possibly do a comprehensive job of addressing all these variations in history, I wish to be mindful that there is no single narrative that captures the story of all North American Hindus. I will return to the subject of the poetics and politics of writing Hindu histories in Chapter V, “Defending Dharma: The Polemics, Politics, and Poetics of Hindu Educational Representation.”

There are many moments from where we might begin telling the story of Hinduism in the United States. Most contemporary accounts begin with the Immigration and Nationality Act of
1965, known commonly as the Hart-Cellar Act, while others start with Swami Vivekananda’s arrival for the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893. Already, however, by the time of Swami Vivekananda’s arrival, India and Hinduism were a part of the American story, even if in imagination only. We need to think no further than the classic narrative, which is still recounted to children in schoolrooms to this day, that Christopher Columbus set sail for India—its treasures and riches—only to land on the shores of North America; hence the infamous assignation of “Indians” to denote the diverse Native American peoples whom Europeans encountered upon their arrival, a term which quickly became one of derision, associated with conceptions of the “primitive” that both resonated with and diverged from colonial, orientalist, exoticizing, and missionary conceptions of Indians from India. This case of mistaken identities recalls not only the historical outlook that allowed for the simultaneous denigration of real Native Americans and imaginary Indians—as uncivilized, barbaric, exotic, heathens—but the repetition of this story means that Columbus’s assumption requires on-going clarification and response by American school children of Indian descent even into the 21st century.1 This misrecognition—characterized most acutely by its racism and xenophobia—resembles another, more contemporary, type of racial and xenophobic misidentification; post-9/11 South Asians, simply for “being brown,” are often mis/recognized as Muslims and in turn, some have been victims of Islamophobia, regardless of their religious identification. These elisions in identification often elicit denial of the misrecognition—“I’m Indian from India, not Native American,” or “I’m Hindu, not Muslim”—and in the denial, aimed presumably at educating the ignorant offender, Indians or Hindus, among others, often participate (intentionally and

1 Numerous times in the course of my research, parents, and children noted the problem of terminology with regard to Indians (referencing both indigenous Native Americans and those of Indian descent) as the impetus for requisite explanations and identity clarifications, as well as a source of taunting and derision on playgrounds and the like.
unintentionally) in an affirmation of the very stereotype to which they have been subjected. In these responses, misrecognition often emerges as a flashpoint, sometimes with fatal consequences.\(^2\) Defensive articulations that seek to mark the difference between Hindus can belie something else as well: an understanding and sentiment of Hindu superiority to those others with whom they have been equated. In fact, in some progressive American Hindu and Sikh circles awareness of the troubling effect of disassociation has led to public awareness campaigns that aim to educate about religious difference without maligning others (specifically Muslims) in the process.

Thus, part of writing the history of Hindus in America requires attentiveness to the semantics of group identification and characterization, historic and contemporary, a topic I will return to in Chapter VII.

\(^2\) For example, according to the Sikh Coalition, since 9/11, Sikhs are at least a thousand times more likely to be the victim of a hate crime than the general American population. The vast majority of these crimes seem to be motivated by Islamophobia and hence acts of misrecognition and fears of difference, more generally. South Asians, as well as those from the Middle East, have more generally been targets, and numerous organizations—such as the Southern Poverty Law Center—have documented the rise in hate crimes since 2001. Sangay Mishra, in his book, *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans*, notes that since 9/11 the effects of “security racializing” on South Asians have manifest in a dilemma, whether or not it is prudent or ethical to separate one’s community from those who are the primary targets, or if developing and strengthening a “common identity” is the preferred route. He writes, “Some Indian Americans have come to believe that economic strength and professional achievements will give them a secure place in the nation….and that as Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians, they shouldn’t be targeted as Muslims. But that approach ignores the fundamental dynamics of racism, which dehumanizes people along crude lines, ignoring any internal distinctions among those with broadly similar looks, treating them all as uniformly suspicious. That is how racism works: By treating those with particular physical characteristics as collectively guilty of some action or inclination, it erases individuality, distinctiveness, and humanity.” Sangay K. Mishra, “An Indian Immigrant is murdered in Kansas,” *Washington Post*, March 7, 2017.
Delineating what constitutes a history of “Hindus” and “Hinduism” is a fraught enterprise. To begin, we must confront the abiding problem with defining Hindus and Hinduism; this challenge—the creative and contentious responses to it—is something with which this dissertation is principally concerned. Definitional concerns exist at a host of levels. Firstly, the contested parameters and history of what we call Hinduism need to be acknowledged, and in doing so I rely on the rich scholarship that traces the construction of modern Hinduism and its pre-colonial and colonial antecedents. Secondly, and related to this, is the fact that outside of India, in particular, it is common for India—indeed at times all of South Asia, India and South Asians—to be designated as Hindu, despite the profound factual inaccuracies with such conflations. For example, Punjabi men, primarily Sikh peasant farmers, who were among the first to come to America, and California in specific, largely in pursuit of economic opportunities (to work on railroads, and in lumber, and agriculture) in the early 20th century, were generally identified as “Hindoos,” regardless of their distinct religious identification.4 The lack of

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4 See Karen Isaksen Leonard, Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). According to Leonard, of those who came between 1900 and 1917, 85% were Sikhs, 13% were Muslim and 2% were Hindu. Her work focuses on the Punjabis who came during this early period, looking in specific at what she calls their “ethnic choices,” which involved a large number of these Punjabi Sikh men marrying Mexican women. Children were most often raised Catholic and taught Spanish and English. Her important work on the choices people make when educating and constituting religious and cultural identities provides an important historical counter-point to work on similar processes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Pointing to a much older example, Cynthia Talbot’s work, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim
knowledge—regarding nomenclature and, more importantly, distinction—that named Sikhs “Hindoos,” finds a parallel, still today, in the assumption that Hinduism is synonymous with Indianness, an understanding of Hindu as an ethnic identity that is found not only among non-Hindu Americans but also Hindus themselves. Such a vision of ethnic Hinduism, naturally, has profound political and nationalist implications and is part of an on-going debate that began in India, but which has always been transnational in its scope; born not of ignorance, this debate about what constitutes Hinduism and who is a Hindu is at the heart of contemporary Indian political, legal, and religious life. North American Hindus, and their interlocutors play an important role in shaping these definitions, which establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Thirdly, Hinduism did not only come to the United States by way of individuals of South Asian descent, but it came, as Susan Bean has documented, in the form of material goods (statues, paintings, texts, textiles, jewelry and foodstuffs) brought via trade routes, through fictional accounts of the mythic and exotic East, and from the personal memories, theologies, philosophies, and practices of transcendentalists, missionaries, merchants, and Orientalists.5 As early as Jefferson and Adams, translations of Sanskrit texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, and Upanishads were circulating in the U.S., and by the late 1830s, Emerson and Thoreau encountered translations of Sanskrit texts, such as the Gita and Upanishads that would come to influence them significantly. As Vasudha Narayanan characterizes it, although some Americans started to engage with traditions “embedded” in Indian and Hindu cultures, and rituals in the 19th

Identities in Pre-Colonial India” drawing on epigraphic evidence, argues that although there were a host of ways in which Hindus described Muslims, when negatively characterizing their political opponents, Hindus employed they what she calls ethnic, rather than religious difference in their rhetoric. In the contemporary United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, for example, I would argue, a similar rhetorical strategy emerges in the racialization of religious groups.

5 Susan S. Bean, Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail, 1784–1860 (Salem, MA, 2001).
century, these “philosophies, texts and practices such as Vedanta, Bhagavad Gita, forms of meditation, and yoga …[were] pried loose from Hindu traditions, presented and interpreted as part of a timeless and universal vision of human spiritual evolution.”

During this period, Hindu texts were consumed by Americans who did not identify themselves as Hindu. The particularity of the traditions (including whether they were of Buddhist, Jain, Shakta, Shaiva, or Vaishnava origin) and the histories of the people who produced and practiced them was beside the point; what was significant is that these texts represented the best that the East had to offer, an ancient spiritual wisdom, which as Narayanan notes, is a stereotype that gurus, of both Indian and non-Indian descent, draw upon even to this day in their characterizations of Hinduism.7

Michael Altman, in documenting some of the ways which India, Hinduism, and Hindus were conceived by Americans in the mid- to late 19th century, argues that long before Vivekananda’s appearance in 1893, Americans used their imaginings of Hinduism and Indian traditions to help them define the very category of religion, suggesting that as early as the late 18th century New England Protestants “deployed representations of Hindu religions within their own inter-Protestant theological debates”;8 drawing upon Hinduism (in the form of philosophical texts) and later Hindus themselves (i.e. Rammohumn Roy, Vivekananda, etc.) Americans developed new notions of Protestantism through comparison to Hindu heathens and hedonism, as well as crafting new types of spiritualism (most notably in the form of Theosophy).9

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7 Ibid, p. 334.


9 Ibid.
(I) **HINDU EMISSARIES AS EMBODIMENTS AND TRANSMITTERS OF SPIRITUAL WISDOM**

Although the forms and images of Hinduism that emerged in America in the 19th century are radically different from those we find today, the influence of these representations has continued. When Swami Vivekananda traveled to America at the tail end of the 19th century, he brought his vision of neo-Vedanta with him, and its influence on American Hinduism endures. Vivekananda himself became a living artifact of India and his words—spoken at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and in the two years following—were reported in newspapers and simultaneously challenged and reinforced the prevailing notions of Hinduism in circulation at the time. One example is in his characterization of Hinduism: “From the high spiritual flights of philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, from the atheism of the Jains to the low ideas of idolatry and the multifarious mythologies, each and all have a place in the Hindu’s religion.”

Although deriding those things about Hinduism that were seen as characteristically “heathen” in missionary terms—worship of images or idols, elaborate practices of ritual, and the like—Vivekananda also criticized Christian missionaries in India, and championed the spirituality, timelessness, and universality of Vedanta and its ability

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12 See Swami Vivekananda, “Religion Not the Crying Need of India,” The Complete Works of Vivekananda, (September 20, 1893), http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/complete_works.htm: “Christians must always be ready for good criticism, and I hardly think that you will mind if I make a little criticism. You Christians, who are so fond of sending out missionaries to save the soul of the heathen — why do you not try to save their bodies from starvation? In India, during the terrible famines, thousands died from hunger, yet you Christians did nothing. You erect churches all through India, but the crying evil in the East is not religion — they have religion enough — but it is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats. They ask us for bread, but we give them stones. It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics.”
to transcend the particularity of any one religion: “by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws, discovered by different persons in different times.”

In making the appeal that Vedanta was the very essence of rationality and scientific understanding, Vivekananda wrote,

> Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so with the laws that govern the spiritual world; the moral, ethical and spiritual relations between soul and soul, and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits were there before their discovery and would remain even if we forgot them.

Through this language, he appealed to ideas familiar to his predominantly Christian audience and articulated a vision of the divine as a single Father, while also setting the stage for his introduction of a monistic theology. He also may have been among the first Hindu to describe Hinduism to western audiences as a model of universalism and toleration, which included all other religious truths within its ambit, and which recognized that ultimately all religious traditions derive from and lead to a singular Truth, descriptions that are commonplace among American Hindus and within global Hindu movements today.

Vivekananda was convinced that he had important work to do outside of India; writing to friends at the close of 1894 he said, “I find I have a mission too,” making reference to the

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13 Ibid.


15 See Swami Vivekananda, “Addresses at the Parliament of Religions,” (Chicago, September 11 and 15, 1893). By no means was Vivekananda the first to articulate a vision of a more universal Hinduism. The work of Andrew Nicholson, for example, points out that such notions have philosophical and intellectual roots that date, much farther back, to philosophical schools, which emerged in the 12th-16th centuries. Nicholson’s argument considerably nuances debates over the genealogy of Hinduism that are very much alive within many of the communities I study. See Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University, 2013). Where Vivekananda represents more innovation is in the way he spoke specifically to Western audiences in an effort to articulate a Hinduism that was simultaneously framed as inclusive of Christian (and other religious) thought and also superior to it.
mission of his guru, Ramakrishna. “One blow struck outside India is equal to 100,000 within.”16 California emerges an important part of this story of blows being struck; already its distinctive culture set it apart from Chicago and locations farther east. When Swami Vivekananda returned to the United States on his second trip, in 1899, he traveled to California, staying there from December 1899 through May 1900, giving numerous lectures and teaching classes. On April 14, 1900, on the urging of his students, to ensure that the study of Vedanta could continue when he left, Vivekananda founded the first Vedanta Society in North America. He sent his disciple Swami Turiyananda to run the Northern California Vedanta Society, on 160 acres of land a follower had gifted him to build a retreat center, and Swami Turiyananda founded Santi Asrama in the San Antonio Valley. Very few disciplines joined him and he returned to India after two years in California. When he left California, Swami Trigunatitananda was sent to lead the Vedanta Society, and he turned his focus to the group of followers that had grown up in San Francisco, where he taught classes and built the first “Hindu temple” in the United States, dedicated in 1906. I place the word Hindu in quotation marks because it did not resemble Hindu temples in most respects. In a pamphlet describing the new temple, Swami Trigunatia wrote, “This temple may be considered as a combination of a Hindu temple, a Christian church, a Mohammedan mosque, a Hindu math or monastery and an American residence.”17 Despite its appearance, the Vedanta Society eschewed any Hindu ritual practices. One could not find murtis, or witness the performance of puja; rather, lectures on Hindu philosophical texts and some


limited meditation were the norm.\textsuperscript{18} Unlike the New York Vedanta Society that had been founded in 1894, this San Francisco building was envisioned differently. The Temple’s architecture was intended to embody and exhibit Vedanta theology. Another element of Vivekananda’s articulation of Hinduism in America was that his rhetoric was decidedly political, not only with respect to reforming Western notions of Hindus and the barbarism of India but also in his staunch support for the Indian Nationalist cause. The Hindu reformers of this period, Vivekananda among them, laid a theological foundation that has undoubtedly shaped the direction of modern Hinduism, especially as manifest in the U.S.

I will take up the relationship between these early articulations and contemporary ones in a number of chapters to follow. The relationship between modern articulations of Hinduism and Nationalist and other political causes will be discussed in Chapters VI and VII. I will further elaborate on Vivekananda’s lasting significance as an exemplar of Hinduism in Chapter IV. While Vivekananda was the most famous emissary of Hinduism to come to the U.S. at the turn of the century, as Lucia notes, he was not the only one presenting a vision of Hindu Reform at the World Parliament of Religions, The Brahmo-Samajis—another Hindu reform movement started in Bengal in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century—also offered up a similar vision of a universal and capacious religion that was inclusive of all others.\textsuperscript{19} Two other notable representatives of a type of Hindu/Eastern spirituality were Sri Yogendra and Paramahansa Yogananda. In addition, as Hugh Urban’s work has illustrated, Tantra was brought American shores in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, but not by Indian Hindus, rather by white men.


\textsuperscript{19} Lucia, “Hinduism in America.”
Like the Vedanta Society, the first Tantric organization in the United States has its roots in San Francisco, when Pierre Bernard founded a Tantric circle.\(^{20}\) Urban argues that Tantra’s appearance in the West is inextricably wrapped up in Orientalist and Colonialist imaginings, which deem Tantra as alluring and repulsive at the same time.\(^{21}\) He argues that, in the hands of white men, Tantra was sexualized and scandalized in early 20th century America, and even though there were some who sought to “sanitize it,” their efforts failed.\(^{22}\) The very notion of Tantra, full of dark, and sexual secrets needs to be taken into account when we imagine the environment that these early South Asian emissaries of Hinduism encountered. In many ways, Vivekananda, Yogendra, and Yogananda sought to answer—with appeals to science, and rationality, among other things—the implicit and explicit critiques of Hinduism and Indian spirituality that Tantra, even in its marginal and limited domain, evoked.

In 1919, Sri Yogendra (born Manibhai Haribhai Desai) founded the first Yoga Institute of New York, “which aimed to present postural yoga as a medically informed, scientific technique for the prolongation of health, strength and life.”\(^{23}\) Yogendra’s explication of a relationship between yoga and science did not reference Indian philosophical systems or religious traditions. He was committed to the idea of free-thinking and in 1920 he distributed a pamphlet called, “The Lost Science of 5000 Years Ago.”\(^{24}\) In this regard, he charted a course that many yoga

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\(^{22}\) Urban, “Tantra, American Style,” p. 442 and p. 446.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

practitioners and gurus have followed, and which remains contentious to this day.\textsuperscript{25}

Contemporary American accounts of Hinduism’s contributions to the world often make reference to its scientific insights, a trope that is particularly prevalent when Hindus, living outside of India, teach about their religion in public contexts and educational settings. In the early 1900s, Yogendra’s message was, like Vivekananda’s, directed at Americans of non-South Asian and non-Hindu descent.

The same was true for another spiritual teacher, Paramahansa Yogananda (born Mukunda Lal Ghosh), who traveled to the United States in 1920, and proceeded to build a spiritual movement, inflected heavily by Hinduism, first in America and then internationally. As Lola Williamson characterizes it in her book, \textit{Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion}:

By 1920 when Yogananda arrived in Boston, Vivekananda’s Vedanta Society was in its twenty-sixth year, and the Theosophical Society [which had a particular stronghold in New England] was in its forty-fifth year. New Thought had been a vibrant force in America for more than forty years. All of these movements helped to pave the way for American Religious Liberals to hear Yogananda’s message.\textsuperscript{26}

While Yogananda’s message certainly resonated with many of the things that Vivekananda propagated, his message was decidedly a form of syncretic ecumenicalism, harmoniously combining Hinduism and Christianity, perhaps influenced by the fact that his first audience in the U.S., and the impetus for his coming, was to attend the International Congress of Religious Liberals, sponsored by the Unitarian Church\textsuperscript{27} In 1946, he published the \textit{Autobiography of a}

\textsuperscript{25} The best example of this is the Hindu American Foundation’s, “Take Back Yoga” Campaign, which began in 2008 after the advocacy organization took on the representation of yoga in the magazine \textit{Yoga Journal}. Following this, in 2010, Deepak Chopra and Aseem Shukla engaged in “The Great Yoga Debate,” which began with Shukla’s \textit{Washington Post} “On Faith” blog post entitled, “The Theft of Yoga” on April 18, 2010.

\textsuperscript{26} Lola Williamson, \textit{Transcendent in America: Hindu-inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion}, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{27} Narayanan, “Hinduism in America,” p. 338.
Yogi, which has remained continuously in print since that time and became a classic “countercultural sensation….widely regarded as the ‘hippie Bible’” in the 1960s. Early on, first in India and then in the United States, Yogananda also emphasized the education of children, writing:

Parental and filial love is the laboratory in which human love can be transformed into perfect love. God manifests through conjugal love, and that love then becomes purified through sacrificing, expanding love for the child….Parents should look upon their every child as an honored temple, where their conjugal love can be purified and expanded, to become reflected, in time, in filial love They should feel like they are serving God in those little temples.

In 1940, driven by these sentiments, he founded a Self-Realization Fellowship Sunday School at the Hollywood Temple. Today Self-Realization Fellowship Sunday Schools can be found in Yogananda Ashrams in California and Arizona.

Williamson suggests that while both Vivekananda and Yogananda viewed “the United States as fertile soil for the growth” of their philosophies and both were “successful in transplanting their versions of Hinduism,” they represent different ends of the spectrum of the Hindu inspired movements in the early 20th century. “While Vivekananda preached the good news of an impersonal God based on Vedanta, Yogananda stressed heartfelt devotion to a personal God. Vivekananda was intellectual; Yogananda was devotional to the core.”

Narayanan also notes that Yogananda developed a spiritual philosophy that worked particularly well within an American context, drawing on the practice and life of his own guru: yogic practices focused on “inner transformation,” the “recognition of divinity within oneself,” and

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28 Lucia, “Hinduism in America.”


“private practice” did not necessitate that one “transform one’s outer appearance.”31 The formulations of religion espoused by both Vivekananda and Yogananda were, in different ways, inflected by Protestantism.

This Protestant affect was likely both unconscious and strategic, and it foreshadows much of the discourse in American Hinduism today. In addition to the emphasis on rationality and science, both men emphasized personal- and belief- oriented elements over practice. And, as scholars such as Gregory Singleton have noted, they adopted what had long been an American Protestant mode of religion, the “Voluntary Organization,” as their models. Singleton relates Vivekananda’s message from the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, quoting Vivekananda’s pronouncement that in America “he faced his greatest temptation,” but it was “not a lady, it is organization!”32 In explicating this further, Singleton notes that 19th-century voluntary organizations, with branches that resembled the corporations that the new middle-class was developing at the time, “facilitated an expansion of the American consciousness from localism to nationalism…ultimately facilitating the emergence of a corporate society.”33 He suggests that Protestant “voluntarism” established a “basis for a rhetoric of individualism, expressed within the context of conformity to the social order,” and that it allowed for “ethno-class identification during a period of increasing ethnic heterogeneity.”34 The emphasis on voluntary affiliation and individuality was most decidedly a feature of both Yogananda and Vivekananda’s organizations, although their emphasis on a universalist identification in order to appeal to American devotees


34 Ibid.
was distinct from the ethno-class centric model that flourished in the Protestantism of the Victorian era. In many ways, the fact that voluntary organizations allowed the individual to identify with a larger national body, agenda, and type of consciousness does resonate with what the two Swamis envisioned. Interestingly, as well, the corporate-voluntarism model—simultaneously focused on individualism, social conformity, and ethno-class identification—is an excellent characterization of many Hindu national and international organizations today.

While these men were exemplars of what Indian spiritual wisdom looked like to Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the other South Asians who came during those years were representative of something else entirely. The period between the 1890s and 1920s is recognized as marking the First Wave of South Asian immigration to the United States.35 As noted, Hinduism, during these years, was found primarily in the realms of the imaginary, Theosophist, Orientalist, intellectual, and spiritual iterations. But the South Asian migrant workers who came to California in the early 1900s, a majority of whom were Punjabi Sikh men, draw our attention to different elements of the Hindu imaginary which, although manifest differently for Americans and South Asians, was based primarily in national, racial, and ethnic categories.

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35 The characterization of these different “Waves” of immigration is commonly employed in Asian American historical literature, as well as in the scholarship on South Asian Americans. See Prema Kurien, “To be or not to be South Asian: Contemporary Indian American Politics,” Journal of Asian American Studies 6, no. 3 (2003).
(II) SIKH AS “HINDOO:” RACIALIZING SOUTH ASIANS, HINDUISM, & CONTESTATIONS OVER CITIZENSHIP IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Like the Hindus that would follow over forty years later, these Sikh migrants to California established themselves in the U.S. and founded religious and cultural organizations. The first gurdwara in America was inaugurated in the Central Valley—the heart of California’s agricultural region—in Stockton in 1912 and remains a working gurudwara today. In some respects, the spatial organization of the worship hall in this first American gurdwara resembled a Christian Church in ways reminiscent of the Vedanta Society. Attendees sat on chairs, and the langar (the ritual meals served to the community) was served at tables. The chairs were removed from the worship space when the Gurdwara moved to a new building in 1929.

Although marriage and assimilation patterns among this first group of immigrants were markedly different than the South Asians who came in the last third of the 20th century, we find significant parallels in other ways. Religion and nationalist politics were far from separate; it was the same two men who founded the Gurdwara—Baba Jawala Singh and Baba Wasakha Singh—who established the Pacific Coast Hindustan Association, known most commonly as the Ghadar party, a little more than a year later, in 1913. No strangers to transnational politics, the Ghadar Party was a nationalist resistance movement, mobilizing for Indian Independence from British

36 By inclusion of Sikhs here I do not intend to suggest that Sikhs are Hindu, but to note that the elision between categories of belonging and identification informs how American Hindus and Sikhs self-understanding and representation. Furthermore, on a larger scale, the relationship between Hinduism and Sikhism, as well as Buddhism is a topic of tremendous contestation, wrapped up in larger conversations about Indian indigeneity and the composition of the nation-state. I will return to these topics in later chapters.

37 This is based on a discussion with some older men who attended the Stockton gurdwara. They also showed me pictures from the Gurdwara’s early years. These conversations occurred in 2005, before the anniversary of the Gurdwara’s 100th year, which happened in 2012. At that time, even more of the history of the gurdwara was on display.

rule. They published a Punjabi newspaper, sent home remittances, held meetings, and even sent hundreds of members to India to fight for independence.³⁹

For a short time, it appeared that California might be a haven for Sikh Americans, some even leaving seemingly less hospitable environments in Canada, Washington, and Oregon to come to the Golden State. However, rising Nativism, and populist sentiment following World War I, made this period of welcome relatively short-lived. Most famously and illustrative is the case of Bhagat Singh Thind. Bhagat Singh came to the U.S. in 1913, studying at U.C. Berkeley and working in Oregon Lumber.⁴⁰ He enlisted in the United States Army and served during WWI. Honorably discharged in 1918, Bhagat Singh Thind applied for citizenship in Washington State, citing the Naturalization Act of 1906, allowing white persons and those of African descent or nativity to become citizens.⁴¹ Although his petition was initially granted, the decision was immediately rescinded. He was granted citizenship a second time in Oregon, but the Immigration and Naturalization Service sent an appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court, citing Thind’s activism in

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⁴¹ In the context of the war and the growth of Nativism, the Immigration Act of 1917 was passed. The act was also known as the Literacy Act, or the Asiatic Barred Zone Act. It required all immigrants to take a literacy test, reading 5 lines of the Constitution, and barred entry to anyone coming from the Asia-Pacific Zone. Japanese and Filipinos were excluded from this and covered under other provisions. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had already ended immigration from China. Both Ozawa and Thind had already entered the U.S. when the 1917 act was passed, but it was indicative of the prevailing sentiments in the country and was cited in the Supreme Court decisions.
the Ghadar party, and arguing that because he was “not a ‘white person’” he did not meet the racial criteria for naturalization. The case went to the Supreme Court in 1923.

Only three months before Thind appeared before the Court in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, was denied citizenship in *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922). Ozawa argued that his skin color classified him as a “white,” and therefore he should not have been denied citizenship. The court ruled that Japanese people were not white, but “members of an unassimilable race.” Rather than questioning the constitutionality of the racial barrier to citizenship, Thind followed Ozawa’s suit arguing that he should be classified as a white, Caucasian. Thind self-identified as “a high caste Hindu, of full Indian blood.” Thind drew upon linguistic, and regional theories to assert his status as an Aryan, who by definition, was of the Caucasian race. In his summary of the case, Justice Sutherland references the fact that, while “the rules of caste” were intended to “prevent” the intermingling and mixture of races, they did not work to achieve that purity, rendering Hindus and Asian Indians non-white. Furthermore, the Court argued that rather than racial superiority, their decision pointed “merely [to] racial difference,” that was of “such a character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation.” The way in which Hindu and

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45 Ibid. The fact that Indian Sikhs were seen to be a different race is captured well by a quote, relayed by Bhagat Singh, from the young Ghadarite, Kartar Singh, that is repeated as a key part of the gurdwara’s story and the establishment of the nationalist movement, found in brochures and on their website: “[Kartar Singh] would be very upset when he heard himself being called a damn Hindu or black man by the whites. At every step, he felt his country’s dignity and respect in jeopardy. With the constant memory of home, he also visualized India – helpless and in chains. His tender heart began to harden gradually and his determination to sacrifice his life for the freedom of country began to become firm.” While the quote is generally used to affirm Kartar Singh’s dedication to the Ghadar Party, it is illustrative of how race may have been understood by members of the community at that time,
Indian were simultaneously racialized and conflated in the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* is reflective of an ongoing process of conflation and racialization that is evident in the present as well. Inversely although Khayti Joshi’s discussion of the racialization of religion describes the contemporary context, it speaks particularly well to Bhagat Singh Thind’s case as well:

Omi and Winant (1994) characterize racialization as an ideological process shaped by history, prejudice, and the human tendency to use conceptual categories to simplify their ascription of meaning to nonidentical experiences. Among other things, racialization involves the attribution of undifferentiated identities, cultures, and behaviors to individuals on the basis of their membership in a racialized group….The racialization of religion is a process whereby a specific religion becomes identified by a direct or indirect reference to a real or imagined physical appearance or ethnic/racial characteristic. Certain phenotypical features associated with a group and attached to race in popular discourse become associated with a particular religion or religions. Race thereby becomes a proxy for religious affiliation in the American visual library.\(^46\)

As Joshi suggests, this process has not been exclusive to Hindus, but common to Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews as well. What is notable is that the racialization of a religion can function in multiple ways simultaneously; for example, in modern-day America, a South Asian person may be perceived to be both Hindu and Muslim. The traits stereotypically associated with a racialized religious group can be both negative and positive at once, and, as such, minority groups sometimes try to marshal those characterizations and associations to their advantage.


people of color, etc. or not—that has remained persistent, although heightened, since the early 20th century.\textsuperscript{47}

The populist sentiments of this period were also evident outside of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and beyond the corridors of Congress or Supreme Court. As Amanda Lucia notes:

Even established Hindu American institutions like the Vedanta Societies struggled to survive economically. The nativism of the period culminated in the 1927 publication of Katherine Mayo’s book \textit{Mother India}, which offered a scathing indictment of Indian culture. Mayo argued that the problems of India stemmed from the unbridled sexuality of the Indian male; as a result of this and its subsequent detrimental effects on Indian women, Indians were not suitable subjects to govern themselves.\textsuperscript{48}

As a result of nativist sentiments like these, and the correlated immigration reforms, South Asian Immigration slowed significantly by the start of the 1920s, and it came to a screeching halt in 1924 with the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, which included the National Origins Act and the Asian Exclusion Act. The Act set up quotas for immigrants based on national origin (which were changed dramatically in 1965, but which have resurfaced again with the Trump administration’s immigration agenda), effectively increasing white, Protestant immigration from Northern and Western Europe, and intentionally, and drastically, curtailing immigration from Eastern and Southern European countries, and reducing the numbers of Jews entering the country. The 1924 legislation also included the Asian Exclusion Act, extending the 1917 barring

\textsuperscript{47} After completing his Ph.D., Bhagat Singh Thind was eventually granted citizenship in New York in 1936. He was finally granted citizenship by appealing to a new act permitting Asian veterans to be naturalized. With the passage of the Act of June 24, 1935, “Congress finally …reached a compromise on the issue of race with respect to naturalization…. Asian Americans were able to garner the support of the traditionally nativist American Legion in pressuring Congress to allow their naturalization.” Deenesh Sohoni and Amin Vafa, The Fight to Be American: Military Naturalization and Asian Citizenship, \textit{Asian American Law Journal}, 17 (2010): pp. 119-50.

\textsuperscript{48} Lucia, “Hinduism in America.” The vilification and sexualization of the racial “Other,” sadly is not exclusive to this period of American history. We have seen it continuously used—to this day— in racist rhetoric directed against African Americans and Mexicans, among others.
of Asian entry, and was explicit that nobody who was ineligible to become a citizen would be allowed to immigrate.\textsuperscript{49} The 1924 law remained in effect until 1946 with the passage of the Luce-Cellar Act, which lifted the bar on Filipino and Indian immigration minimally, allowing 100 people to immigrate from those two countries per year. The act also lifted the bar on the naturalization of Indians and Filipinos, reversing the decision in \textit{United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind}. In 1952, the policies of protectionism and isolationism were reevaluated post-WWII and the Holocaust, leading to the passage of McCarran-Walter Act, which ended the racial restrictions to naturalization and developed categories of immigrants: those with special skills, and relatives of U.S. citizens (who were exempt from the quotas), refugees, and standard immigrants. This Act paved the way for the landmark 1965 legislation. These early debates over citizenship rights and immigration are significant in that “struggles over citizenship’s meanings, are, in fundamental respects, struggles over competing normative visions of collective life,” and serve to elucidate how a nation understands itself.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the prevailing national discourse, the South Asians who settled in California continued to establish themselves. Between the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, no more than 10,000 South Asians had come to the United States, and the population decreased to less than 1,600 by 1946.\textsuperscript{51} The small South Asian community in California continued to be active in local, international, and national politics. In 1948, they founded a

\textsuperscript{49} Immigration Act of 1924, Public Law 68-139, 43, \textit{U.S. Statutes at Large} 153 (1924).


\textsuperscript{51} For more on the history see “A Century of Sikhs in California by Bruce La Brack,” The Sikh Foundation International, July 3, 2011, \url{http://www.sikhfoundation.org/sikh-punjabi-language-studies/a-century-of-sikhs-in-california-by-bruce-la-brack/}.
second gurdwara, the El Centro California Gurdwara, which was established in a former
Japanese Buddhist Temple, which had been vacated as a result of the Internment of Japanese
Americans during WWII. And in 1956, Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian American and
first Sikh to be elected to Congress.

While there are many reasons to suggest that the experiences of South Asians in America
from the late 1890s through the middle of the 20th century are indicative of radically different
trends and experiences than those that followed in the second part of the 20th century, there are
also numerous continuities. Even with a small population, the South Asians who resided in the
U.S. during these early years engaged with many of the same things that animate immigrant life
today. They were concerned with: matters of cultural and religious continuity; reproducing and
creating institutions for religious worship and study; engaging in both national and transnational
politics; and navigating the challenges of social structures and representations within the
established and shifting frameworks of the American religious, racial, cultural, ethnic, legal, and
social milieus.

Since 1965, the demographics of the South Asian and Hindu populations in the United
States have changed dramatically. While the orientation of this project is focused on the
qualitative vagaries and complexities of contemporary Hindu articulations, I want to turn briefly
to the details and complexities of quantification.

(2) COUNTING AND PLACING HINDUS IN THE UNITED STATES

As of 2015, the Pew Research Center estimated that there were approximately 2.23
million Hindus residing in the United States. This number is extremely hard to verify because

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52 “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center, conducted in 2014, accessed December 1, 2016,
http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/hindu/.
of the abiding problem with defining Hindus and Hinduism, and the fact that U.S. census data, by design, does not gather information about religious affiliation or background. Organizations such as the Pew Research Center have drawn on census data, and their own studies to approximate the scope and scale of Hindu articulations and activity in the United States. Based on population estimates in 2014, California is home to the largest population of Hindus in the U.S. (population estimated at 780,000), followed by New Jersey (population estimated at 270,000), New York (population estimated at 200,000), and Texas (population estimated at 270,000). With respect to concentration levels, New Jersey, has the largest percentage of Hindus in a single state (3 percent in comparison to the population at large), with New York and California following (with approximately 2 percent of the population identified as Hindu). With respect to racial makeup, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Survey, Hindus are one of the least racially diverse groups in the United States, with approximately 91 percent coming from Asian backgrounds and tracing their heritage to India. Hindus account for a little over half of the Indian Americans in the United States, with others identifying primarily as Muslim, Sikh, and Christian. 53 According to the recent book, The Other One Percent, Indians in America,

Not only did the U.S. immigration system make possible a selection of India’s most educated population, but that base population out of which the Indians were selected had itself been selected through decades and centuries of caste and other forms of hierarchy and discrimination….In 2003,…while the lowest socioeconomic groups in India accounted for one-third of India’s population, only 1.5 percent of U.S. immigration came from them. High cases (like Brahmins) and dominant castes (like Patels in Gujarat and Kup and Kamma in Andra Pradesh) constitute over 90 percent of Indians in America, distilled from a base of around one-fourth of the Hindu population in India. 54


Overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas, Hindus are also among the most highly educated and wealthiest minorities in the United States, statistics that Hindu advocacy groups often cite with great pride. These numbers, however, need to be contextualized. These estimates are based on studies of “Asian Indians,” not Hindus specifically. Although 36 percent of Asian Indians, have household incomes above 100,000 dollars per year, and 34 percent of households have incomes above 50,000 dollars per year, because a majority of Hindus also live in some of the most expensive regions of the country, households often include more than two generations, and 30 percent of households make below 50,000 per year, it is important not to jump to conclusions about widespread affluence among Hindus. With regard to education, an extremely high percentage of those surveyed, 73.4 percent, have college and post-graduate degrees. Like income statistics, however, because of the surveyors’ access to people based on age, gender, language, and socio-economic location, as well as the limitations of the questions themselves, these numbers likely do not tell the whole story.

In concert with the quantitative data, it is critical to pay attention to the ways in which certain “facts” are marshalled by specific groups—in this case, American Hindus—in the construction of collective identities and public representations, while also being used by other groups and individuals as a means of and justification for categorization and discrimination. The question of how data of this sort, in tandem with historical narratives and cultural stereotypes, are employed by Hindu groups in the United States is a topic to which I will return in greater depth in the chapters to follow. When we consider the socio-economic makeup of Hindus in the

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United States, regional background, caste, and country of emigration (India, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Great Britain, etc.) all figure quite significantly into how people experience migration, including the professional, educational, and recreational opportunities available to them. In developing this assertion in the chapters that follow, I will draw upon qualitative evidence based on fieldwork and I will read and analyze a range of cultural productions. When we look beyond the numbers a much more variegated picture emerges.

Work by scholars Jigna Desai and Khayti Joshi, in particular, has helped to draw attention to prevalent model minority and racialized discourses that shape Asian American public- and self-perceptions.⁵⁶ In their work on Asians in the South, they seek to highlight the discrepancies in experience, representation, and perception that emerge from considering Asian Americans in a region where their presence has often been ignored or considered to be always already out-of-place. Illustrating how attention to Asian Americans in the South can disrupt the binary notions of race that are particularly common in rhetoric and scholarship about the region, they also note that “experiences of racism and class difference within Asian America continue to be erased so that Asian Americans are constituted as a model minority, pitting them not only against African Americans, but also against Latino Americans.”⁵⁷ Their critique of the July 2012 Pew Research Center Study, “The Rise of Asian Americans,” with the subtitle, “Meet the New

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Immigrants: Asians Take Over Hispanics”\textsuperscript{58} can easily be applied to the Pew Research reports on Indian Americans and Hindus that have followed since that time. Desai and Joshi write that:

Playing on many discourses that evoke an Asian tide, model minority, tiger mom, and perpetually foreign, the online report rejuvenates multiple stereotypes. It is important to note that the Pew study proffers economic statistics and explanations that can be misleading—the study explains that Asian Americans have the highest incomes and most education because they “place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success.”\textsuperscript{59}

Not only does the Pew study draw generalizations about values from statistical averages and data samples, according to Desai and Joshi, but they note that its “heavily biased presentation of information, misleading framing, and perpetuation of stereotypes” has drawn the criticism of scholars of and activists in the Asian American community. Pew researchers fail to calibrate the data so as to account for such things as household size and the varying status of migrants—whether, for example, they come to the United States as refugees, skilled laborers, graduate students, or professionals. These types of failures to nuance the data promote a perception of homogeneity where there is actually heterogeneity.\textsuperscript{60} Data-driven generalizations can have profound consequences; in educational contexts, for example, this has often meant that early detection of learning disabilities is less common among Asian American students on account of the fact that they are presumed to be “naturally smart” and generally more “docile” or “quiet.”\textsuperscript{61} It is imperative to be attentive to the ways in which data and the unwarranted


\textsuperscript{59} Desai and Joshi, \textit{Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p. 21.

conclusions drawn from it work to affect not simply how Hindus are perceived by others and conceive of themselves, but also how they are perceived by scholars. Much of what has been written about American Hindus emphasizes certain types of social positions and orientations—upper caste, affluent, nationalist, etc.—without noting that such positions and orientations are not representative of the entire population. Furthermore, the easy slippage between Asian Indian, Asian American, South Asian, and Hindu that happens in various reports means that we are often not considering the same population when we draw on multiple sources in an attempt to produce a more robust portrait of the landscape.

In the world of religious studies, stereotypes about Hindus can have a flattening effect. It is not uncommon, even among scholars working on Hindus to presume that we can equate Hindu with upper class and upper caste. My own research indicates that within the Hindu communities living in the U.S., people come from different socio-economic classes, and often segregate themselves from one another by caste. For the most part, different caste and class groups attend separate mandirs and participate in distinct educational and political endeavors, seva (charitable service) projects, and cultural and devotional practices. In the same city, we find architecturally elaborate mandirs as well as those that have been constructed in converted warehouses and garages. Guyanese Hindus, descendants of indentured servants, do not commonly mix in the same circles as Tamil brahmins. Regional, linguistic, and sectarian differences too often manifest themselves in types of communal segregation, be it in the development and maintenance of separate institutions, or even within the same one, wherein different shrines, or festivals are attended by groups with distinct devotional orientations, or hailing from different regions in India.
While I would love to claim that this dissertation is more inclusive than much of the previous scholarship with respect to class and caste, I fear that I too have unearthed more that is reflective of the lives of middle and upper-middle class (or caste) Hindus than others, and I will try to signal when that is the case. Mitigating this—and serving as some form of corrective—is the fact that I spent a substantial amount of time with Indo-Caribbean populations, who generally fall into lower socio-economic and caste backgrounds, and attended a number of mandirs and schools run and attended by newer immigrants, with fewer economic means than many of those who attend more established mandirs.

In the broader field of South Asian studies, as well, there is a prevalent assumption that to study Hinduism in diaspora inherently means studying a homogenized, politicized population that enacts a singularly nationalistic version of Hinduism. While there is no doubt that Hinduism in the context of globalization can well seem more uniform than what one meets in India itself, and that it is often embroiled in nationalistic agendas, this is not always the case. In addition, even when public and political Hinduisms are at work, there is a tremendous amount of variation even within those formulations, which I believe demand critical and nuanced scholarly attention.

(3) RECOGNITION, IDENTIFICATION & BELONGING

Recognition is an aspect of knowing that implies a type of reflexivity: to recognize is to perceive something or someone to be the same as something else and to identify “something that has been known [or encountered] before.”62 The act of recognition is ultimately a process of categorization that presupposes, in some way, that “identities” or “positions” are already present in an individual, only needing to be named or discovered. As Judith Butler characterizes it:

one finds, for instance, a continued emphasis on the language of “positions” and a recourse to an inarticulate map of social power on which various subjects are said to be placed—or “positioned.” Subjects are said to speak “from” these positions, and these positions are conceptually fixed in ways that persistently pose the risk of cultural solipsism. In such a view, a position precedes the act of speaking and remains that which is “reflected” in and by that speaking. Speaking itself is paradigmatically an act of self-representation.”

In this formulation, the act of representation is inherently reductive. To say, “I am this,” or “this is where I stand,” involves presuppositions: that I am something, that I can know it, that where I stand is stable, and nameable. When the manifold pitfalls and challenges with claiming a specific position were highlighted by critics, theories of intersectionality emerged, aiming to magnify the multiplicity of identities that people embody—a person’s commitments can rarely, if ever, be reduced to the singular. While certain identities may be more dominant or fundamental, human beings are not reducible. And to view others or even oneself this way, it could be argued, moves people from subjects to objects, and enacts a form of violence. And yet, whether in the pursuit of political coalitions or religious aims, it can be expedient or desirable to assume particular identities, be it as a mode of strategic essentialism, a process of self-exploration, an expression of sentiment, or a way of constituting community.

For many Hindus, the very act of self-recognition is understood as a devotional and formative act, which parents seek to facilitate for their children through various means. Above all

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else, recognition involves the production and embodiment of knowledge. Ultimately knowledge of the self enables the recognition of others who share one’s likeness. Rather than the recognition of difference so often championed and challenged in the realm of identity politics, my research begins with a focus on the flipside, on the recognition of sameness. How does one know oneself, ultimately desire things that are one’s “right” by birth, and desire relationships with others who resemble you, whose “birthright” is similar to your own? Recognition requires skills, and affect. It is fostered through taste, smell, sight, sound, touch, through physical practices and experiences, images, material objects, and engagement with other people and things. Implicit in the cultivation of skills of recognition and their affective dimensions—including familiarity, comfort, pride, attraction, longing, love, and peace—is its inverse, the cultivation of the skills required to recognize “others.” How people are educated about and respond to difference takes on many forms. Most disturbingly, it is manifest in aversion, disdain, hatred, conceptions of inferiority, but it can also involve such things as love, concern for justice, empathy, and humanism.

Indeed, self-recognition is understood as inextricably linked to public recognition, which is wrapped up in ideas about how the recognition of difference is a tool of identity politics that often leads to increased civic participation and power in public life. Multicultural discourse, and the politics of identity and difference that animate the socio-political landscape in the U.S., Canada, Britain, and India all contribute, in significant ways, to the development of diasporic Hinduism. The ways in which conceptions of selfhood are fashioned, articulated, and reshaped among those who define themselves as Hindu Americans, depending upon context, is part of what I seek to explore in the pages that follow.
In their volume *Identities*, Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. write, “Ethnic and national identities operate in the lives of individuals by connecting some people, dividing them from others. Such identities are often deeply integral to a person’s sense of self, defining an ‘I’ against a background ‘we.’”\(^{66}\) Identities that are perceived to be based in the visible and/or biological—race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity—have particular political and social histories as a result of the very nature of embodiment and religious identities often fall into a murky territory where such matters are concerned. With respect to identity politics in the U.S. in specific, Appiah and Gates note that

ethnic and racial identities have been understood in terms of differences both internal and external to the American Nation. But the internal contrasts have often been figured in terms of outside contrasts because it has always been possible (by occluding the Native American presence) to see America as a “nation of immigrants,” whose separateness could be mapped onto their places of origin.\(^{67}\)

In the 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) centuries, the power of originary identity politics in the U.S., and to some extent internationally, has been inextricably linked to rhetoric and policies evoking pluralism, multiculturalism, and diversity.\(^{68}\) Discourse about America’s “special” relationship to immigrants has become all the more significant as the rights of immigrants have, in recent days, come under attack. Yet a conundrum arises: the strategic essentializing of people as immigrants from a specific place naturally lends itself to the very type of generalizations that many who invoke such nomenclature, and images of America, seek to disrupt. On a global level, identity politics as a politics of difference has often manifested in structural oppression and inequity,

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\(^{67}\) Ibid, p. 2.

communal strife and violence. We need to look no farther than Gujarat, Jerusalem, or Ferguson for evidence. Yet differences of identification can also produce some of the most beautiful and varied aspects of human existence (artistic and culinary cultures, language, and ritual, cosmologies, and philosophies, etc.), and it is in spaces of difference that people create, experience, and often find home. How the same type of things associated with belonging, safety, comfort, familiarity, and the type of knowledge that can only come from being steeped in a tradition are also so often the very things that produce so much pain is the abiding and underlying question that led to the more specific questions that animate the bulk of this research and directed me throughout my project.

In his book *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah explores how identities fit into “broader moral projects,” serving as sources of “value” (offering solidarity, satisfaction, joy, meaning, purpose), not simply as a realization of values (understood to be consistent with the aspirations and lifestyle of a particular identity group). Attentiveness to the ethical prompts us to discern when and how the ‘value of identification’ empowers, and when and how it exploits? In some cases, the value of identity is internal to a group and irrelevant or imperceptible to those outside. This is especially evident with religious traditions born out of a particular soteriology, or rituals connected to notions of purity or impurity, and related to transcendent concepts such as God’s law, or ancestral custom. In other cases, the value of identities is more public, providing solidarities that can be marshaled to create political coalitions and institutions. There is an economy to identities, which can be a source of capital that affords one entry into spheres of

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Inversely, identities can be the very reason why some are devalued, barred access and persecuted. I explore the ethical implications of these identity formations throughout the dissertation.

In his piece, “What is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity,” Akeel Bilgrami tells the story of a time when he was asked his religion by a prospective landlord, in “a predominantly lower-middle-class Hindu neighborhood, hostile to Muslims.” To his surprise, he declared, “I am a Muslim.” While his personal beliefs, experiences, and outlook might have seemed to belie such a statement, he writes that “It…seemed the only self-respecting thing to say in that context. It was clear to me that I was, without strain or artificiality, a Muslim for about five minutes. That is how negotiable the concept of identity can be.”

Bilgrami highlights the functional aspect of identities. Identities are contingent. And the very contingencies of identification provide stability to the concept. There is no essence to be found. Bilgrami’s work also seeks to champion a notion of Islamic identity that views the very idea of “being Muslim” as a dynamic process not an inherently fixed set of commitments. This concept of identification, however, can come into conflict with the way that others understand identities to function, be it their own identities or those of others.

The diasporic experience, in particular, is often understood to be characterized by this sense of instability, and uncertainty with respect to one’s place, identity, and even future. As I noted earlier, my father’s uncertainty about his future in the States, when he first arrived, was


72 Ibid, p. 212.
echoed by many of those I spoke with, who came post-1965, in what is called the Second Wave of Asian Immigration to the United States. This Second Wave revealed a marked difference in education, orientation, class and caste background as compared with the first wave. The vast majority of those who came in the late 1960s and early 1970s entered with H-1B or H-1B1 (Specialty Worker) Visas, which were introduced into the 1965 Hart-Cellar or Immigration and Nationality Act. The Act provided for sweeping immigration reform, notably overturning the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924. It also established preferential visa categories, including H-1 visas, allowing employers to temporarily or permanently hire “specialty Workers” who could address the country’s needs for professionals with knowledge in specific fields;\(^\text{73}\) abolished the naturalization quota system established in the 1920s; and supported immigration for the purposes of family-reunification.\(^\text{74}\) The 1965 Act is credited with dramatically changing the demographic makeup of the country. The 1980s brought a Third-Wave of South Asian immigrants, many of whom did not come from the same types of socio-economic backgrounds the immigrants who came in the post-1965 Second Wave; in contrast, increased needs for specialists in high-tech IT fields, which was responded to with the Immigration Act of 1990, brought more professionals and students, many of whom settled in California’s Silicon Valley.

\(^{73}\) It currently still the case that South Asians, Indians & Pakistanis specifically, make up the greatest percentage of H-1 Visa holders; in 2013, over 70% of H1-Visas were held by Indians or Pakistanis, and 2014 estimates bring the number closer to 84%. See Manjusha P. Kulkarni, “History Repeats Itself: South Asians Once Again not Welcome in the U.S.,” \textit{Huffington Post}, April 25, 2017, \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/history-repeats-itself-south-asians-once-again-not_us_58fefe27e4b06c83622e7007}.

By the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the same California where my parents lived was at the epicenter of the Neo-Hindu movements, which were popular within the counter-cultural sphere. As I said in an earlier part of this chapter, it can well be argued that California, along with New York, is one of the places where it all began, starting with the founding of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1900 by Swami Vivekananda himself. While the Vedanta Society was a well-established institution by the 1960s, the main visitors were still not of South Asian descent. The same could be said about devotees at one of the oldest Hindu temples in the United States, the Palaniswami Sivan Temple, founded, in 1957 in San Francisco, by the American Hindu guru Sivaya Subramuniya Swami—who would go on to establish Hinduism Today and the Hindu Monastery Kauai Aadheenam. Although the temple was primarily an enclave for Western devotees of Sivia Siddhanta, things began to change in the 1970s, as the South Asian population in the Bay Area grew, and the Swami turned his attention to the ashram he was building in Kauai. Over the next decade, the temple increasingly became a major site of gathering and worship for an increasingly wide range of Hindus who had migrated from South Asia, especially those from South India and Sri Lanka. In 1988, in response to the growing number of Hindu immigrant devotees who visited the mandir regularly, the temple leadership relocated to Concord, a suburb in the East Bay. In the 1960s and early 1970s, members of ISKON, or the Hare Krishna movement as they were more commonly known in that era, were often seen on the

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75 The history of this Mandir is particularly interesting because of its transition from a white, American, Hindu-convert led site to one run by South Asian Hindu immigrants, who at the time of this writing now have three priests from India serving full-time. Unlike the specifically intellectually oriented Vedanta Society, the Mandir, which was renamed the Shiva Murugan Temple in 1995, had always held regular puja, wherein rituals and festival observances in the words of one devotee, “seemed right, mostly like we used to do them in India.” My information about the mandir came from speaking with devotees in 1999, 2003 and 2004. Additionally, limited background about the history of the mandir can be found on their website and in temple brochures. The temple has drawn more South Indians than North Indians, although in the early years this distinction was much less evident. “Introduction,” The Shiva Murugan Temple, https://www.shivamurugantemple.org/Introduction.aspx.
streets of Berkeley, in neighborhoods like San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury, and at parks, music festivals, and protests throughout the Bay Area. Some described feeling especially removed from these performances of Hinduness. One woman recalls

feeling a sense of embarrassment…I wanted to crawl into a shell, [or] walk the other way every time I heard, “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” on the streets…I wanted to be taken seriously. I was the first woman in my family to be going to graduate school…. I remember I reached some sort of turning point, I decided I wasn’t going to wear the salwars, kurtas, and saris I brought from home. I went out and bought a pair of jeans and stopped wearing my hair in a braid. It was my way of distancing myself from that type of image of Indians.

This aversion to westernized iterations of Hinduism was not universally felt, but the institutional and public forms of Hinduism that could be found in the Bay Area when Hindus began to arrive in the late 1960s and early 70s were generally not familiar or enticing to these new immigrants. That changed, however, as the late 1970s and 1980s progressed and immigrants began to establish their own spaces, organizations, and institutions. Hindus began to attend to their new diasporic desires, finding ways to realize them through creating forms of Hinduism that were more recognizable, desired and desirable to many of those who had found themselves building their lives in America.

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76 Some Sindhi Hindus were drawn to the gurdwaras, which while having a much longer and well-established history in California were still not in close proximity to where the new Hindu immigrants, situated in the urban centers, tended to find themselves. Catering to the growing number of Sikhs, the Yuba City Gurdwara was established in 1969, and eventually, a Sikh Temple was established closer to the cities with the founding of the Gurdwara Sahib of El Sobrante in 1979. The El Sobrante Gurdwara is notable for its architecture, nestled amidst hills, visibly distinctive and Sikh with arched windows and golden domes. In the case of my family, there were very, very occasional visits to the gurdwara in the early 1980s, which, if memory serves me correctly, only really happened when my grandmother was visiting from India. However, in this regard, and many others, my family was not normative; most likely having to do with the fact that my father was not particularly religious, and my mother was Jewish, raising and educating me as a Jew, (albeit with regular exposure to Indian culture and reverence for the traditions Hinduism and Sikhism).
CHAPTER II: ON DESIRE AND/DIASPORA

(1) THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIRE AND DIASPORA

Diasporas....are....a testimony to the inherent fragility of the links between people, polity and territory and to the negotiability of the relationship between people and place. Diasporas come in many forms....but whatever [their] differences...diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment....More and more diasporic groups have memories whose archeology is fractured. These collective recollections, often built on the harsh play of memory and desire over time, have many trajectories and fissures which sometimes correspond to generational politics....[and] the macro-politics of reproduction [then] translates into the micro-politics of memory, among friends, relatives and generations.¹

The particularities of the desires I document here are inextricably linked to the diasporic experience, and they reveal a significant feature of Hinduism outside of India. Desire is at the very heart of migration, and scholarship on migration has long since used a framework of motivations in order to categorize various types of human movement. Generally, the impetus for a group’s migration is understood to inform the experience of migrants themselves, and understandably so. Migrations that are forced—in which communities have been victimized, sold into slavery, exiled under threat of death or violence—often involve very different material and emotional realities than do those that are voluntary in nature—wherein communities move in order to expand educational or professional opportunities.² The challenges and desires that precipitate and accompany different migrations are manifold, and the distinctions and similarities and between types of migrations have given rise to entire fields of inquiry, including diaspora, migration and transnational studies. To move, especially to places one has not been, always requires acts of the imagination. In the 20th and 21st centuries perhaps this imagining is less


² For example, see Robin Cohen, Global Diasporas (New York: Routledge, 2008). Cohen uses categories to distinguish between different types of diasporas—victim diasporas, trade diasporas, imperial diasporas, and deterritorialized diasporas—but even he recognizes that this framework has significant limitations.
involved than it once was; with television, film, and the internet all providing ever more detailed information about the spaces to which one might travel and relocate. Yet still, to fashion life in a new place requires that one have some abilities to envision or situate oneself in entirely new contexts, and relationships to time, space, institutions, cultural conventions, and people.

By no means is ‘diaspora’ an appropriate word to describe the location (physical, existential, emotional) for everyone of South Asian descent who resides in the U.S. or outside of India. In fact, as a term, diaspora has a number of significant limitations, and its usage is fraught for a host of reasons. Most specifically, it is problematic in that it can evoke narratives of origins, indigeneity, nation-states, and romantic pasts that are rooted less in historical accuracy than in historical imaginaries and political ideologies revolving around conceptions of a spatial center and its peripheries.

However, in the context of this research, the word diaspora remains useful precisely because of its multivalency. In using the word, I do not wish to make normative claims about communal or personal relationships to nation states and particular borders, centers or margins, nor do I wish to suggest that there is a collective sentiment that naturally takes hold of emigrants upon leaving the land of their birth or upbringing. Rather, I employ diaspora because it gestures at the affective and embodied dimensions at work within a nexus of practices and discourses that I recount here. The language of diaspora helps to convey how issues of nationalism, theology, culture, belonging, attachment to language and place emerge as sites of negotiation and contestation within the Hindu immigrant spheres I document.

Such a theoretical framework is helpful because—unlike the language of transnationalism, which first emerged in reference to globalization and particularly its economic processes—diaspora studies has always been focused on questions of identity, difference,
representation and the experience and imaginings of minorities in various and intersecting cultural, religious and political spheres. Early work in the field didn’t tend to problematize the concepts identity or community, especially how scholarship has contributed to producing new types of binaries through a language of home and exile. The field of diaspora studies has also, at times, reinforced troublesome and highly politicized ideas about the integrity of nation states and their populations, effectively naturalizing and essentializing groups and individuals through a metaphorical language, evoking origins as “roots” and the process of migration as one of “uprooting.” However, post-colonial, deconstructionist and feminist theory, as well as an understanding of intersectionality, has moved many scholars to rethink and complicate the discourse of diaspora and the study of identity. In redefining the term, Stuart Hall suggests that diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of ‘ethnicity.’ ... 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.3

In “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” Kim Butler proposes that diaspora studies shift from focus on a particular ethnically and nationally defined group to the “study of the phenomenon of diaspora.” She writes, “Rather than being viewed as an ethnicity, diaspora may be alternatively considered as a framework for the study of a specific process of community

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3 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-37. Stuart Hall’s usage of “hybridity,” like that of Homi Bhabha who is often credited with coining of the term with respect to post-colonial subjectivities, has come under criticism for the way it maintains a vision of identities that are naturalized, essential and distinct through the idea of hybridization, wherein two separate species grow together to produce a combination, a hybrid. The term is especially problematic because of its biological origin. However, while I appreciate the desire to complicate the notion of identities—recognizing that identifications are not stable but amalgamations of experiences, environments, affective responses, socio-political influences, etc.—I think that the language of hybridization can serve as a useful way to describe the fluidity of identifications and heterogeneous factors that are involved in the formation of individual and group identities, particularly among immigrant groups (assuming caveats and awareness of possible pitfalls).
Building upon Butler, instead of a “specific process,” I understand diaspora to be a conceptual tool through which to study a host of interrelated processes through which individual subjectivities and communal and cultural identities are formed, expressed, navigated and represented in both private and public spheres. In this regard, Steven Vertovec identifies common dimensions and “patterns of change” among migrant religious groups, which involve: “organization and mobilization” (the creation of institutions, programming of festivals, cultural events, etc.); a “politics of recognition” (that emerge in efforts to gain legal and/or cultural rights, or “access to public resources,” and in attempts to navigate the expectations and regulations in public spaces, such as schools and workplaces); a shift in gender roles and expectations; the development of particular concerns surrounding generational difference (the transmission and performance of tradition); and the types of “heightened self-awareness” that can emerge as the result of new encounters with and minority positionality within ethnically and religiously pluralistic environments that differ in composition from the “home-countries.” Furthermore, he suggests that the abiding tension in diasporic religious communities between continuity and change is manifest in “socio-religious domains” around issues of identity, ritual practice, “re-spatialization,” (or reorientation with respect to place and also time), and reconfigured relationships involving what types of spheres and activities are considered religious, cultural, secular, normative, public and private. All of these changes, Vertovec argues, have implications for how communities engage in adaptive processes with respect to ritual and devotional practices; the construction and negotiation of global and transnational networks and associations, which are constantly changing as the result of new technologies; the balancing act between localized and regional elements of religious traditions and more universalized dimensions (this is

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particularly evident in the communities I study with respect to linguistic education—i.e. whether families choose to have children learn regional languages and/or Sanskrit—and with respect to the reverence of regionally specific deities or saints); “compartmentalization” (how religion is understood as a facet of life and/or identity); “politicoreligious” efforts and engagements; how people express and experience relationships between the past and the present (how notions of homelands and historical experiences, such as communal suffering or achievements, are related to contemporary experiences, endeavors, and collective memories); and the “trajectories” of identification among these communities, ranging from secularization processes in which religious identities are eschewed all together to more maximalist tendencies, to use Bruce Lincoln’s term, wherein religion encompasses multiple spheres of life and is viewed as the primary determinant for ideology and behavior.

With respect to the Hindu communities who are the focus of this work, all of these patterns and processes are evident to greater and lesser extents. Among these dimensions of migration, it is important to note that the ways in which different Hindu groups and individuals understand their relationship to India varies quite dramatically, even among those who are of South Asian descent. Although my usage of diaspora is intended to signal some link to a common ancestral locale, I also hope to recognize that conceptions of and relationships to the place are by no means homogeneous. That “India” emerges in Hindu American and other diasporic discourse is almost a given, but what is meant by “India” is far from uniform; what is


6 Beginning with reference to Vertovec on the previous page, this is a general summary of his classification of dimensions of change among diasporic religious communities found in Steven Vertovec, “Religion and Diaspora,” *New Approaches in the Study of Religion, Vol. 2: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, eds. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004). Vertovec’s work here draws upon a host of other scholars, who have studied religions in diaspora, and I turn to his work here precisely because he is remarkably efficient at laying out the host of issues at stake in studying the topic.
clear is that the very idea of India is continually in flux in response to political circumstances and shifting attitudes that are generational, regional, and ideological in orientation. Thus, for example, while Hindu nationalist formations are most decidedly thriving in the United States, we are seeing the emergence of other voices, such as Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus, who challenges nationalist ideologies from a progressive Hindu standpoint, and the Bhumi Project, which is a Hindu organization focused on environmental issues, including making Hindu temples greener, as well as working on health care access. These organizations stand as a reminder that there is no monolithic outlook among Hindus in the U.S., although it is undeniable that some perspectives are more dominant than others. As Avtar Brah notes, we must recognize “a homing desire as distinct from a desire for a ‘homeland,’” allowing us to pay attention to a desire for a sense of belonging (in all the ways that it can manifest) without seeing it as an affirmation of nationalist visions. This is particularly relevant in the case of my research, wherein “India” is often an idea that inspires an ambivalence, rather than a clarity, of emotion.

Among the most salient features of Hindu communities in diaspora, are preoccupations with forms of epistemology, embodiment, and identification. Community leaders and parents ask: how will knowledge about Hinduism be produced and transmitted and what are the ways that parents and children can and will embody and identify with Hinduism in the future? Questions about the production of knowledge—what does it mean to be a Hindu, know you are a Hindu, or act like Hindu—are implicitly and explicitly linked through rhetorical and pedagogic

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practices to a politics of representation concerned with what it means to represent Hinduism. As one teenager described it, “as one of only two Hindus at my school, everything I do is interpreted—even if it’s total B.S.—to be what all Hindus do. It is frustrating and messed-up, but I’ve come to accept that it’s my responsibility to represent.”

Parents and teachers are acutely aware of this metonymic process—whereby one Hindu comes to represent all Hindus—and it is often used as a motivational device, a means of articulating the profound responsibility and power that each child has to represent all of India, all Hindus, and Hinduism. Such a notion of representation presents innumerable issues; notably, Indian Hindus can end up (often unintentionally) reifying and simplifying the tradition to various publics using their own ‘authority of authenticity’ as justification. The significance of the recurrent identification of the individual as representative of the whole community is deployed in private familial and communal spheres as a type of disciplinary rhetoric. Often framed in simplistic terms in educational settings—playing on the twin emotions of pride and shame—I have heard swamis, teachers, and parents say things such as, “What will people think if you take drugs? That your parents don’t love you and don’t care about you?” “What if you are rude to a teacher at school? Then you haven’t conveyed our Indian values for respect of elders.” Communicating his expectations, one teacher framed it very clearly when he spoke to a group of seventh and eighth graders at a weekend retreat: “Just don’t ever forget: whatever you do, it reflects on all of us.” Some children expressed that this expectation gave a sense of purpose and importance to their lives and actions: “Basically, it is …[a] reminder that it isn’t all about me. What I do feels more significant and full of meaning and all...[It] makes me want to strive to do better in school, you know….help people, and just be a better person and all.” A teenager of Guyanese heritage—whose family attends a mandir affiliated with Bharat Sevashram Sangha—
said, “One of the Swamis gave a talk once…it’s always stuck with me….He was saying that when we recognize [that] our daily seva [service] is to teach others about Hinduism through our actions, what we want will change…He used the Gita’s idea of ‘not desiring the fruits of actions’ as a way to say that our actions come to be about a bigger thing than just what we want—[they are] about our community, and really Bhagawan.” On the other hand, for some students, such admonitions are met with annoyance, and can, as a few teenagers relayed it to me, inspire rebellion: “Every time I hear stuff like that, I just want to gag and then go out and do something, like get stoned, or even just tell people to f-off. I represent myself, and nobody else.” Other students talked more about how they weren’t prepared or interested in representing Hinduism; some spoke of how they couldn’t even talk about anything beyond the regional customs (Bengali, Telugu, Gujarati, etc.) they practiced in their families and the few things they had learned from bala vihar. One student said, “If I tried to teach people about Hinduism it would just be totally random…it’s not like I’m an expert.”

In his work on identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall notes that cultural identities are always wrapped up in the politics of representation.

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say ‘in our own name’, of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, ‘cultural identity’ lays claim.9

Hall’s point belies a tension between how communities often conceive of identities—as “already accomplished facts,” authentic Hinduness as a product of one’s family background—and how

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many scholars approach identities as social and cultural processes, repeatedly experienced, and articulated through performatively. In this vein, the language of identities has given way, in some scholarship, to the term identifications, signaling the possibility that individuals can have multiple identifications and that these enunciations are themselves social processes. Throughout this dissertation, I will employ both language of identifications and identities. The choice to use identifications is intended to indicate that when I reference identities, I refer to things that are not static or essential, but which shift depending upon context. Therefore, the way people comport, define and even experience themselves not only changes, consciously and unconsciously, as a result of their own actions or volitions, but they are shaped variously by a nexus of social practices and forces—found in schools, parents, and communities, etc.

Yet, as I noted, in many Hindu contexts, discourse about behavior is often founded on a somewhat essentialized, even biological, understanding of identity and conception of Hinduism: Hindu families have a distinct set of values and ways of comportment and therefore children should conform to standards of behavior in order to serve as recognizable models to Hindus and non-Hindus alike. As Nancy Fraser characterizes it,

The identity politics model of recognition tends also to reify identity. Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intragroup divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critique as ‘inauthentic.’ The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of the various affiliations. Ironically, then, the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition: in reifying group identity…The identity model thus lends itself all too

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easily to repressive forms of communitarianism, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchalism.¹¹

The potential for identity politics to become manifest in the way Fraser describes is exemplified by “An Address to Teenagers on Dating,” delivered by Swami Chinmayananda in Pittsburg in 1984. Although the talk is not reflective of the rhetoric that is common among Chinmaya Mission swamis and teachers today, who generally take a subtler approach than their founding Swami to such issues, Chinmayananda’s talk is telling because of how it conveys the importance of right behavior, instantiating a nationalist, communal and patriarchal vision through a discourse of choice, autonomy and identity politics, discursive tropes that are still in play to greater or lesser degrees in a number of American Hindu educational settings in the early 21st century. Furthermore, as will come clear in the chapter to follow, Chinmayananda’s influence in shaping the very nature of diasporic Hindu educational institutions, cultures, curriculum and pedagogies is unparalleled.

In his talk, Swami Chinmayananda employed creative moralizing and identity-shaping tactics. Counter-intuitively, rather than explicitly stating that teenagers should not date, he began by saying that “there is nothing wrong if the parents allow the children to have dates, but it all depends upon what you want from life.” Drawing on examples, he asked the children to consider what they desired for their life, and through rhetorical questions, he asked how one might go about getting it: If you want to be an engineer, you don’t go to medical school; if you want to be a painter, you don’t spend all your time sculpting. The Swami framed the talk around the idea that everything depends upon what you desire. He asked,

What is it that you want in your life? If you want to be only a prototype or the stupid ones you see all around, wasting all their mental and physical energies becoming a nobody. If that is what you want, live exactly as they are doing—in drugs, in keeping dates, drinks, dance, rock and roll—you can, who says no? Your destiny is in your hands. If you want

to ... score really high, then you have to learn to live with self-control. There is no other way. All the men who have made a mark ... were men of self-control. They were fascinated by their goal, and they had always a date with their goal, and not with another girl. Date—you can go! Who says, “no”? Nobody can stop you. Keep your dates, and live only in your extrovertedness, there is no harm and you will be in the majority, no doubt. Because the majority is always fools, in every part of the world.12

The Swami explicitly linked the notion of personal choice and setting goals to a communal understanding of the self, whereby he reminded the children that they were not simply individuals, but members of a national, “ethnical” [sic] group, who are distinct from and potentially superior to average Americans, and other ethnic groups, who he derides for their laziness, lack of ambition and societal contributions:

You want to be great? Or live somehow or other, and feel your body, you can do that. So, it is not for the Bala Vihar, or the Yuva Kendra [the program geared toward ages 18-30] to dictate...to you what to do. All we can do is give you the vision of the higher possibility—then the choice is yours. Since we are all of an ethnical [sic] group of Indians and we are in a foreign country, it is incumbent upon us that we acquire the maximum abilities and capacities, so that we can stay on here, scoring high. We are doing it everywhere in all the universities and colleges, especially in technical universities, .... all the admissions are for the Indians, the Asiatics [sic], I don’t say [only] Indians—Chinese, the Vietnamese, all of them are scoring high. Even in there, those that are scoring high are not the Americans, but ethnical groups...especially the Asians. That is a great knowledge, a great thing! If you also just merge with and try to imitate them, as the Spanish people [sic] or the other ethnical groups here, they have also become third-rate, there is no contribution. They may be earning some money, but no solid contribution to the world, or the history of the country in which you are now living. I, as an Indian, would wish that all you youngsters grow up to be really stalwart people who can bear the burden of this entire nation and its beauty, that would be our contribution! You don’t feel that ambition? Are you third-rate?13

12 Swami Chinmayananda, “An Address to Teens on Dating!!” (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1984), accessed via the Chinmaya Channel, published October 3, 2013, https://youtu.be/GPogg9mcQKs. There are at least two different online videos of this talk, and they were only posted online in October and June of 2013 respectively. The first one has been viewed 33, 937 and the other over 10,557 since the time of their posting. As is quite often the case, I was encouraged to watch this talk not by someone who is involved in Chinmaya activities, but by a woman who attends the Hindu Mandir in Maple Grove, Minnesota and who said she found the talk inspiring. The internet is a profoundly powerful tool, disseminating information to people transnationally, and shaping modern Hindu perspectives in radically new ways. Much more work needs to be done on the role played by virtual media and the use of online sources, and my failure to give it enough attention here is certainly a weakness of this research.

13 Ibid.
Chinmayananda’s talk represents the extreme end of the spectrum with respect to the ways in Hindu leaders relate their status as immigrants living in diaspora, “a foreign country,” to their obligation to be model citizens, who make visible contributions to society. Yet this idea finds strong and subtle echoes in a range of contexts—from the Hindu nationalist and supremacist rhetoric found at Hindu Swayamsevak Camps to the response of Hindu leaders to vandalism at the temple in Maple Grove, MN—and it is directed toward very different ends. The Swami does not, interestingly enough, ever refer to the teenagers and parents to whom he directed his remarks as ‘Hindus,’ but as ‘Indians,’ members of a distinctive ethnic group, and, in this way, he engages in the common practice whereby Hindu and Indian are conflated, especially in cases where to do so makes the identity group appear superior. In the case of Chinmayananda’s talk about dating, not only does his vision of communal identity include a politics of recognition, but he adds theological and gendered dimensions as well. During the workshop, he related a story about a man who everyone in the town thought was “mad,” but for whom he had developed some fondness. One day, as they walked along the riverbank the man stopped and started staring at a large stone. He became completely consumed by the stone, forgetting that anyone else was with him. He took the stone to his workshop—with the help of others who he never even acknowledged were present, as he was so consumed by the vision of the stone. Everyone, including the Swami believed him to be crazy. He stared at the stone for days. Chinmayananda checked on him, and after a few days of sitting and staring, the man started to chisel the stone and some human form began to emerge. After a few more days, not having slept or eaten, the man had carved what the swami described was the most beautiful image of Krishna playing the flute, “almost every part of it was alive.” When he complimented the man on the “beautiful form” he had made, the man became enraged, “Don’t say that I created
the beauty! No, I did not. The beauty was in that stone. I saw the beauty, then I saw the things that was covering the beauty and I chipped off that which was covering the beauty and the beauty that was already there revealed itself. I am not the maker of the beauty, the beauty was laying in the stone… and [just now] you are seeing the beauty that I saw much earlier.” He uses this narrative to convey the idea that the purpose of Bala Vihar and Yuva Kendra is to do just as the sculptor did with the stone, to unveil the “potentiality that is now lying dormant” in each one of them. This vision of an individual’s potential is framed as a communal potential, but it is not possible for everyone. He suggested that those who do not conform to the high standards and expectations are, in fact, the norm and they live life unable to see the real beauty, the higher potential that exists right in front of them, in fact within them. He then framed Bala Vihar and Yuva Kendra as exclusive societies, to which all of them have access, but which will only endure as homes for those who have discipline and can master self-control in pursuit of a higher purpose. He reminded them that they are free to do what they want—take drugs, date, dance, even commit suicide, which he referenced flippantly multiple times—should they wish to be what he calls “a normal, subnormal, or under middling-class type of a person.” But unlike these American children, for whom they should have compassion, he tells the students that they need to recognize their unique privilege as Indians: they have a different destiny available to them and this is connected to the fact that they are loved. American children come from families that, he described, as broken, with divorce and babysitters, in which nobody gives them love. He argued that is why some people keep dogs, why they search for love with “girlfriends” (a word he repeatedly uttered with disdain). “Let the Americans have girlfriends to give them some love,” even if it is temporary or they end up having children as teenagers; Indian children, on the other hand, are “drowning in love,” and they don’t even realize it because they are in it. They have a
greater reward waiting for them, if they can marshal “self-control,” and live by “Sanatana Dharma.”

Embedded in Swami Chinmayananda’s discourse is a politics of recognition and a philosophy of corporate selfhood that is particular to Hindus living in diaspora. Not only must they strive to become contributing members of American society, and be recognized, as a unified group, but they must also recognize their own cultural and religious distinctiveness, which is superior to others. His vision is a racialized and class-based one: Indians are not like other ethnicities, nor should they act like them, they should be successful in accordance with their higher status and class aspirations. As opposed to caste, which is almost never discussed overtly unless it is in relationship to Western representations of it, class aspirations are talked about frequently in Hindu educational settings. The Swami’s talk concluded in an intensely patriarchal tone when he asked “especially the teenage boys” in attendance to write down what they heard and reflect upon it. He told them to think for themselves, to come to their own decisions, and to ask questions about what they really believe and want. He offered a cash prize of one-hundred dollars for the best submission, which he jokingly told the large group that they could “use for all the dates they want.” His humor was received with uproarious laughter. And then, in what initially appears an extremely forward-thinking declaration about gender, but which turns out to be quite conventional in the end. Shaking his finger, the Swami said,

I don’t make any distinction between men and boys, or boys and girls. Boys and girls—the difference is only in your packing. I am not interested in your outer packing. I am interested in your contents…. Boys and girls have the same emotions, the same thoughts, the same aspirations, the same goals, what’s wrong? Physically, anatomically you are different that’s all…. I am talking about your personality. The greatest men and women are greatest because of their minds, the quality of their minds. So, there is nothing special that applies to the girls, and girls don’t need that much of advice because generally, they are more intelligent than boys [to which the audience broke out into applause]. They are more intelligent than boys in the early stages [to which there was more applause]…. In the early stages, boys are more excited. All the excitement, less thinking capacity. Girls
are less excited, and therefore clearer thinking. As life moves on, by the time you become a mother and a middle-aged, your excitement is excitement about the future of children, the future of the family, the future of the old-man and all that, and therefore you become duller. Boys, by the time they reach middle-age, his excitement of the youth is quieted and he becomes sharper. So, I am not applauding the girls, or condemning the boys. It is all facts of life.

This talk reveals a distinctive diasporic Hindu discourse, where group control is wielded through promises of inclusion or exclusion that are dependent upon an individual’s “choice” to perform in accordance with established norms, which are often different for boys and girls. Recognition also functions on a number of planes; Chinmayananda speaks of how Indians as a whole should be recognized by Americans and America, and how individual teenagers are supposed to recognize and discern who they are and who they want to be, which has implications for how they will be recognized with respect to the group. Chinmayananda never suggests that the students consider moving to India, but rather paints a picture of their future in America. However, he asks whether the students will choose to act as Indians, or as Americans. The answer to that question, he posited, involves very high stakes as well as their ability to engage in self-unfoldment, to see and relate to the Divine.

In his work on migration, Peter van der Veer notes that, somewhat ironically, nationalism is actually fostered by immigration and it can function as such for both the nationalism of the native and the migrant. Outsiders, he argues, help to create “social cohesion” among those who are already established in a given place, and as migrants are identified as “strangers” they are more likely to identify themselves as marginal to society. He writes, in a vein that is particularly telling for our times:

Whereas the diaspora of others fortifies a sense of belonging among the established, one’s own diaspora tends to strengthen the longing to be elsewhere. In an interesting manner, the presence of the migrant “other” is used not only in the nationalist discourse
of the established; this discourse, which marginalizes and demonizes the migrant, also breeds nationalism among those who are marginalized.\textsuperscript{14}

This sensibility both produces and is a product of other types of nationalist discourse characteristic of migration experiences. Discourse about the importance of religious and cultural education, pride, self-esteem, and the dangers of both American or Caribbean culture has been a common feature of youth movements in Hindu diasporas. In the case of Chinmayananda’s talk, it is not from a place of communal demonization or marginalization that Indian-Hindu nationalism emerges, but rather it is part of an evaluative process whereby cultural norms and values are compared across time and place, appearing to be selected based on a process of rational discernment. For him, it is the “native,” the American, who comes to be demonized and/or pitied. Marginality is actually a desirable state of being, as long as it is a marginality of superiority and supremacy. Vertovec notes a similar type of diasporic desire and chauvinism in the Hindu youth movement that arose in Trinidad in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He describes the invitation for a Hindu conference held in 1978, entitled “The Caribbean Challenge to Sanatana Dharma:”

Over one hundred and forty years ago our forefathers were uprooted from Bharat Desha and transplanted in an alien environment to supply labor….They brought with them their religion, their culture, their songs, music, dances, their food, their dress—in fact, they brought a way of life, the Hindu way of life! Today this way of life is being threatened, its values are being questioned, its forms of expression are being frowned upon and pronounced irrelevant to the society in which we live. Let us never forget one thing. WE HINDUS HAVE NEVER FAILED HINDUISM IN A CRISIS!...We must mobilise ALL HINDUS in the Caribbean and instil [sic] in them pride and dignity in our priceless cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15} Steven Vertovec, \textit{The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns} (London: Routledge), p. 76.
This Trinidadian movement engaged in an evaluative process of contemporary Caribbean culture and its influence on Hindu youth in ways that are similar to Swami Chinmayananda’s assessment of American culture. In addition, however, it exhibits a nostalgic relationship to past times that has long been understood as characteristic of diasporic sentiment. Here, however, we find a particular kind of nostalgia. Not only does the Youth movement evoke a glorious Indian past, but more so it recalls the heritage brought to Trinidad by their ancestors. In this nationalist rhetoric, indentured servants become role models for Hindu diasporic living, holding onto and guarding traditions that are now threatened by the ‘foreign’ cultural influences of a country they have resided in for over a hundred years. Somehow, the period of indentured servitude, which is widely acknowledged as a time of exploitation, also emerges as a golden age in which people possessed a clarity about their Hindu identities and loyalties, a clarity which is lacking in the present. In contrast to this, Chinmayananda’s “Address on Dating” is characterized by a forward looking-glance, one focused on communal and personal aspirations that are possible precisely because of migration, which is itself framed as wholly positive. Rather than suggest that conservative diasporic expression (a category under which both Chinmayananda’s address and the Trinidadian Youth Movement’s conference would fall) is marked by a “backward glance,” as has been suggested by both Stuart Hall and Gayatri Gopinath, I have found that both conservative and radical diasporic discourses are characterized by engagement with continuities and discontinuities, harmonies and tensions between the past, present and future. Often, we find that Hindu identity is formed through an imagined narrative of coherence, wherein differences within the group—be they based in caste, gender, sexuality, country of origin, class, or reason for migration—are ignored in favor of unity that presumes a type of collective memory and trajectory.
Critiquing such a notion, in her work *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath suggests that,

a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory and nostalgia for radically different purposes [than other, more conservative, diasporas]. Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violence of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles.\(^\text{16}\)

Gopinath makes a compelling case about how diaspora serves as a useful concept through which to talk about various types of displacements experienced by queer South Asians, which are not tied to national borders but to experiences, spaces, and times more broadly construed. Gopinath’s work reveals the push and pull—be it political, cultural, religious, familial, etc.—that is experienced and expressed (especially in film, literature, and music) by queer South Asians as they navigate various realms—queer and non-queer—within South Asia and beyond it. Her emphasis is on the ways in which “heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship and community,”\(^\text{17}\) as well as homonormative visions of the LGBT subject can both function in hegemonic ways to constrain and render invisible or “impossible,” in particular, the South Asian, queer, diasporic, female subject. Discourse like that of Swami Chinmayananda’s on dating is a perfect example of the ways by which heteronormative, patriarchal, and nationalist visions of community and kinship coalesce and are championed in such a way as to render a host of subjects and identifications invisible or seemingly impossible. Yet, what my work has found is that even within Chinmayananda’s own movement, perspectives on these issues are far from uniform. Even within the places that Gopinath names hegemonic, and which often function in just that way, I have also witnessed the expression of other types of desires and watched as

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\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 6.
norms have been creatively challenged or re-visioned so as to make possible subjectivities that would have been rendered as invisible or anathemas in the past.

What I wish to suggest is that, for many modern Hindus living outside of India (queer and not-queer), diaspora isn’t solely the romantic imagining described by Gopinath as the hegemonic homogenizing norm. Hindu diasporic articulations involve both a looking back and a looking forward; they are rich in contradiction, evoking feelings of displacement, memories of trauma, references to violence, nostalgic longing for earlier times, and dreams for alternative futures.

Many of the spaces and discourses I describe here are indeed the hegemonic formations—seemingly heteronormative, and decidedly Hindu and South Asian—that render queer South Asian subjects and other progressive subjectivities “impossible” through practices that affirm, exhibit, celebrate and reproduce normative ways of being Hindu, or assert Hindutva agendas. Yet, what is ‘normative’ in these spaces is also in flux. In the more than seventeen years that I have been documenting Hindu diasporas, I have watched: as women have increasingly sought and taken on the role of priests; as temples and communities have made space for and reimagined the Vedic *vivaha* (wedding ceremonies) in the case of intermarriages, as well as LGBT weddings; as families have learned to be more accepting of lifestyle choices that do not conform to traditional expectations; and as some first- and second-generation immigrants are resourcing Hindu traditions to promote environmental agendas, counter communal strife, champion progressive political agendas, and bring attention to marginalized groups. In her work on the ways in which South Asian public cultures depict queer subjects, Gopinath notes that when queer desires are domesticated, placed in the spaces of the home, in the intimate homosocial relationships that are normative in many South Asian contexts, an opening can be
created that begins to make room for queer South Asian subjectivities in new ways. I would suggest that, in the same way, transformations of tradition, slow though they may seem, are illustrative of new diasporic desires that are creating spaces for other “non-normative” types of subjectivities to be realized.

In his well-known work, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” which was the prelude to his book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argued that a significant “problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization.” He notes that the argument about the trend toward homogenization is strong, drawing our attention to important features of “Americanization” and/or “commoditization,” a process that is now more often subsumed under the larger category of globalization. However, he points out that “what these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one way” or another, be it in the context of art, cuisine, architecture, political thought, or religion. In an effort to complicate our understandings of these processes, he proposes a framework of global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. I might add religioscapes, or as Thomas Tweed has called them “sacroscapes,” to his list. His language of flows is intended as a reminder that these processes of cultural change do not go one-way, nor are they achieved through a single event. These movements of ideas, capital, technologies, and cultures are driven by human desires; at the same time as they are produced, they are reconstituted anew by the desires they have produced. And

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19 Ibid, p. 296.

yet, the language of flows implies a kind of easy and continuous movement that does not capture the often slow and processual shifts in these various ethnoscapes, religioscapes, etc. over time as communities become more established, demographics, and finances change, etc.

Fruitfully, in his early work on the diaspora, Vertovec suggest that the very notion of diaspora is dependent upon how people define it. Therefore, in our studies of communities, we need to consider how diaspora functions: as a “social form (concerned with the extent and nature of social, political and economic relationships);” as a “type of consciousness (involving aspects of collective memory, desire and an awareness of identities spanning ‘here-and-there’), or as a mode of cultural reproduction (relating to the global flow of cultural objects, images, and meanings).”21 In the pages to follow, I hope to illustrate how be it in Hindu educational settings, exhibition contexts, intimate rituals or ethnic stores, spheres of political advocacy, or in the face of hate, Hindus in diaspora navigate a range of social, political, and economic relationships, build upon and produce memories and modes of identification, and reproduce and produce cultural forms.

(2) DESIRE AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Swami Kumar said it simply: “Ultimately, Hindu philosophy teaches, we become what we desire,” when he began his Sunday morning talk for the parents of children attending gurukul classes at the Mandir.

The simplest definition of desire is “wanting.” But to describe intense desires one often speaks of “longing,” or to use the culinary metaphors to “crave, hunger, or thirst.” It is those synonyms for desire that offer insight into the argument, made by many, that “desire” is the most

basic of human conditions. We are born desiring, hungry, thirsty, and we remain in a perpetual state of desire—whatever that is and however it manifests itself—throughout most of our lives. So powerful is the metaphor and actuality of desire that it has animated important concepts in Hinduism, especially within bhakti, Sufi strains of Indian Islam, and Indian Buddhist soteriology; discourses of desire have long been a part of Indian culture. The fact that the human propensity for ‘desire’ is generally understood to be innate does not mean that our specific desires are also innate. Indeed, the very conception and articulation of particular sentiments, needs, impulses, etc, as “desires” is also socially constructed. Religious, political, ethical, and philosophical traditions have all produced many a treatise on which desires are laudable, altruistic, and essential and which, in turn, are sinful, licentious, and unacceptable. It has been the project of families, religious communities, popular culture, and politicians, among others, to cultivate desires as a means through which to create specific subjectivities—the devout, the pious, the citizen, the husband, wife, or dutiful child. Cultivating shared desires is an essential aspect of cultivating communal identity, and community itself. Hindu communities in the diaspora are no exception.

This dissertation aims to explore the means by which Hindus in the United States theorize and cultivate desires in the midst of the larger project of making Hindu subjectivities for themselves and their children. I will argue that the cultivation of desire—while significant in creating any type of subjectivity anywhere—is a centerpiece of making identities for Hindus in the diaspora. From its very beginnings, in reference to Jews, the language and sentiment of diaspora have always been associated with desires. Specifically, there is the longing, which most diasporic communities have cultivated, for the homeland. And for many Hindus, the idea of India as a desired ‘homeland’ is also fundamental, but for them, as throughout history, the
desires associated with diasporic experiences have been enacted in a range of ways and always
been about more than simply place. Hindu parents and pundits are engaged in the development
of other types of desires—moral-spiritual, theological, narrative-historical, “sanctioned”
romantic and familial, gastronomic, and material. Many contemporary practices of Hindus in the
diaspora—educational, ritual, representational, romantic, political, and consumer—revolve
around the inculcation and fulfillment of desires, for both children and adults. I have found in my
fieldwork that desire is a recurrent trope, articulated differently by parents, teachers, community
leaders, married couples, students, young adults, devotees, pandits, and children. Not only do
people express their own desires, but they negotiate, facilitate or hinder the desires, both real and
perceived, of others.

My conversations with parents and community leaders, my review of curricular materials
and organizational agendas, and my observations of classrooms, public performances, and
exhibitions reveal a common discourse of desire in many Hindu and Indian contexts in the
United States, Canada and the U.K. The desires I pursue in the individual chapters that lie ahead
are for the most part so basic that to name them occasions no great surprise. Yet the contours
Hindus often give them, the way they cluster together, and the frequency with which they are
articulated struck me time and time again. As such, they are worthy of attention. Not simply
examining them on their own terms, but also with a focus on how these desires are articulated
and pursued. They shed light not only on the experiences of modern-day Hindus living in
California and elsewhere in North America, but on larger human questions about the
development of religious selves and sensibilities, the shaping of identities, the cultivation of
belonging, and the politics and poetics of nationalism and self-representation. The ways people
locate themselves and are located by others, both consciously and unconsciously, are often
artifacts of desire, and it is through desire that various identifications are negotiated. In this, I do
not equate desire with pleasure, although pleasure may indeed be one of the many things that
people often desire. Desire is something human beings are subject to and subjects of; yet, people
are also agents in the production of desire, its pursuits, and acquisition.

American Hindu subjectivities are my primary interest, and my inquiry is twofold: how
are particular desires produced, and how do those desires work to construct various
identifications, associations, motivations, and engagements? I see this work as a part of the larger
body of research that attends to what has commonly been called the politics of identity. I hope
that by employing the lens of desire I will be able to foreground the affective dimensions at play
in the fashioning of modern diasporic Hinduism. Furthermore, I intend to show that in the
American contexts where I have worked, theories and theologies of desire are being practiced
and produced in tandem with the desires themselves. In some cases, these theories and theologies
are developed and articulated quite self-consciously, through explicit references to classical
religious philosophies and texts. At other times, however, desires may be embodied and
practiced to different degrees and ends without explicit theorization. In such instances, practices
speak, and they are articulated in a host of ways. Both facets—the theorized and the
expressive—are important to take into account if we are to begin to understand the range of
forces at work in the development of subjectivities among North American Hindus.

(3) CONTEXTUALIZING THEORIES OF DESIRE

For the purposes of placing contemporary diasporic Hindu discourse about desire within
larger academic conversations, it is useful to consider some Western philosophical,
psychological, and critical theoretical approaches to desire. Although many of these theories
have been critiqued for various reasons, elements of these conceptions augment our understanding of some of the processes at work in contemporary Hindu articulations. I do not think that desire is a single thing, or that it manifests itself in the same way for all human beings—something that many of the theorists I will discuss seem to suggest. It is therefore natural that it will take a review of several of these theoretical positions to shed light on the various contours of Hindu desiring. As I consider each one that emerges from a European or American point of view, I will mention examples of contemporary Hindu articulations with which they connect. Later we come to a broader consideration of theories of desire that Hindus count as their own, but there too I will describe how these theoretical positions actually inform (or occasionally do not inform) discourse and practice among California Hindus and their counterparts.

(4) Modern Western Theories of Desire

In theorizing desire, it is quite common for Western scholars to begin with Aristotle and Plato. Both of them recognize desire as a kind of force that moves one to action. Yet desire does not work independently; in various ways, each of these philosophers suggests that desire is worked on by, or works in concert with, the imagination, reason, passions and/or discernment, such that it may be ultimately be directed toward that which is good or right. Questions about the nature of various desires have remained a persistent feature of moral philosophy, occupying the work of thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, among others. Moral

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22 Plato, *The Republic 1 & 2*, ed. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1930), p. 237 and p. 276. Aristotle discusses desire in relation to the psychological, biological, and ethical. He sees desire as something that moves a being to action: “It is manifest, therefore, that what is called desire is the sort of faculty in the soul which initiates movement” (De Anima iii 10, 433a31–b1). But in order for the soul to be moved, he posits that the object of desire must be inflected with particular qualities, i.e. it is felt to be good, pleasurable, etc. This is where biology and ethics enter: something may taste good, thus biological knowledge might move one to act; or one might desire revenge, which requires ethical discernment if one is to know if their desire is right or just. See Giles Pearson, *Aristotle on Desire* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Christopher Shields, “Aristotle's Psychology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016).
philosophies regarding desire inevitably grapple with questions about the relationship of desire to various types of pleasure, or, as they are sometimes called, drives (sexual, material, emotional, spiritual, personal, or altruistic). And while much of Western theory about desire focuses on its orientation, as opposed to its origin, the root of desire has been especially important in theological and psychological discourse.

In formulating his conception of human nature, Spinoza classically argued that a fundamental predisposition of the individual is to strive to persevere in its being. He characterizes this striving as desire, “the essence of every being,” and the cause of human actions and subjectivity.23 For Spinoza, desire is the principal human affect. Such an outlook finds corollaries in classical Hindu texts, which are referenced today by the teachers in Hindu settings I studied. Desire is not simply a fundamental human disposition but also a cosmological one. The Rig Veda 10.129.4 famously describes creation as arising from kama (desire): “Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that [desire] was the first seed of mind.”24 As far as human beings, Spinoza’s thought seems to echo the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5-4.4.7: “A person here consists simply of desire (kama). A man resolves [wills] in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve.”25


25 Patrick Olivelle, trans., The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p 121. A theory of the role of desiring in cosmological and theological terms follows. According to the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, the desiring man is one who is caught in samsara, but the “man who does not desire—who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self—his vital functions (prāna) do not depart. Brahman he is and to Brahman he goes.” It is quite common to find these verses used in classroom or lecture settings a prelude to the introduction of a moral framework, particularly through the concepts and values of yama (vows of restraint) and niyama (proper/right conduct).
The conviction that desire is at the very core of what it means to be human has served as a foundation of both Western psychological notions of desire and Indian soteriologies. In chapter four of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes: “Self-consciousness is desire.”26 A key aspect of becoming a self, or becoming aware of oneself is the desire to know oneself. Hegel establishes a concept that is foundational for many theorists who followed him, namely that desire is ultimately about the relationship of the Self to the Other. Central to the act of coming into self-consciousness is the dialectical process whereby one identifies and differentiates oneself from other selves. “Desire and the self-certainty [arising from self-consciousness] obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object.”27 And ultimately, the “essence of desire,” according to Hegel, is not simply self-consciousness, but the process by which the self continually distinguishes and determines itself in relationship to the other—when “self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness”—it initiates the challenge and the “process of recognition.”28

In analyzing Hegel, Scott Jenkins asserts that this identification between self-consciousness and desire implies that “desiring plays an important role in an apperceptive subject’s relation to itself.”29 Much of Hegel’s philosophy of desire is outlined in his discussion of the relationship between master and servant in “Lordship and Bondage.” Not doing his ideas justice, and summarizing these ideas simply, he suggests that the Lord becomes self-conscious as a ‘Lord’ only “once the bondsman’s desire is transformed by its [sic] commitment to serving the

27 Ibid, p. 110.
28 Ibid, p. 111.
lord, thus becoming desire ‘in check.’”30 This is not about the bondsman’s actual desires, but about what the Lord imagines in his own being as master: that the servant desires to serve him, thus allows him to inhabit his role as Lord. While for Hegel desire is a natural and central element of human existence, he appears to suggest that, in relationships where there is domination, some possess the right to desire, while others do not. Interestingly, although not named as such, Hegel’s explication of desire draws our attention to the role of power-relations. We understand that not all desires are realized or recognized as equal. In that an ‘Other’ is central to the self’s desirous process of coming to self-consciousness, the relationship between selves and ‘Others’ generates asymmetrical power arrangements. Hegel further develops this idea, asserting that self-consciousness only becomes genuine through acts of mutual recognition, in which relationships of domination are no longer tenable.31 Recognition, in his schema, “is possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it, only when each in its own self through its own action, and again through the action of the other, achieves…pure abstraction of being-for-self.”32

Hegelian conceptions of desire are particularly illuminating when considering contemporary Hindu efforts to stimulate a particular type of self-consciousness among children, as well as the goals of advocacy groups to cultivate and articulate a collective Hindu self-consciousness, which is dependent upon a dialectical relationship with the ‘Other,’’ variously construed. Such processes of consciousness-raising and recognition are profoundly informed by


31 Kevin Wolfe was instrumental in helping me to understand Hegel and structure these ideas. He also notes that, scholars such as Adorno, Levinas and Bataille challenge Hegel’s concept of “mutual recognition,” positing that rather than recognize the Other as equal, mutual recognition subsumes or erases the Other, as in forms of totalitarianism. See Robert Williams, Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 407.

32 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 113.
shifting power-relationships between self and other. Rarely do we find the idealized “self-consciousness” and recognition about which Hegel was writing. The discourses of differentiation that separate Hindu selves from others are evident in classrooms and camps, in conversations about marriage and sexuality, as well as in political rhetoric and practices involving the representation of Hinduism, as well as the contours and composition of the Indian nation itself.

The work of Freud and Lacan, different as they are, exhibits a profound agreement about how the phenomenon of desire ought to be approached. In both Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, desire is understood as being fundamentally unconscious and as arising from an existential lack—a lack particularly linked to the sexual domain. Sigmund Freud’s primary interest in desires focused on the way instinctual drives (biological desires for food, sex (libido), etc.) were managed and experienced by human beings engaged with and in civilization. Like many of the Hindu teachers I encountered, Freud sought to understand the cause of human suffering; he argues, “what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery” because social life involves the regulation of human relationships and the surrender and repression of individual desires in the service of the communal. “The replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual [in what he calls primitive civilization] knew no such restriction.” Freud argues there is an enduring tension between the individual and others (civilization) for whom one must sublimate and restrict personal desires. This is most intense, he argues, in contexts where civilization, as exemplified by law and power, are the

34 Ibid, p. 42.
“expression of will of a small community—a caste or stratum of the population or racial group—which, in turn, behaves like a violent individual toward other, and perhaps more numerous, collections of people.”

Ideally, everyone who is a part of community should “sacrifice their instincts” somewhat equally in an evolved civilization, but as that is not the case, people can experience the “urge for freedom” in response to societal injustices, but also, according to Freud, simply because the individual has natural desires that resist constraint: “a good part of the struggles of mankind centre around the single task of finding an accommodation…between the claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group.”

Jon Mills, in his work, *Rereading Freud: Psychoanalysis through Philosophy*, offers a neo-Freudian viewpoint that elaborates on the place of desire, in ways that are both dissonant and resonant with contemporary Hindu discourses.

[The] mind is a restless indeterminate immediacy…[that] exists in a state of *disquieted* quiescence. It undergoes upheaval because of certain instinctual, motivational currents pressing for expression as a primordial hunger or longing to experience, to feed, to fill itself, namely, as appetition or *desire*. Here we have something to learn from the idealists: human subjectivity is a desirous enterprise—it yearns, it seeks, it finds. But why do we desire? In other words, what constitutes desire in the first place? Freud finds its source in somatic organizations, and we have a good reason to believe that desire is a natural process emanating from the body informed by evolutionary pressures; but this does not address the ontological status of desire….Mind desires because it stands in relation to absence or lack. Thus drive emerges from a primal desire, the desire to fill the lack….While a particular drive or its accompanying derivatives may be sated, desire itself may be said to never formally stop yearning: it is condemned to experience lack….Desire is teleological (purposeful) activity, a craving—at once an urge and an impetus—an infinite striving, a striving to fill the lack. Absence stands in primary relation to presence, including the being or presence of absence: hence this is why desire remains a fundamental being-in-relation-to-lack.

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, p. 43.
In Mills’ elaboration of Freud, he suggests both ontological and teleological states of desire. This formulation is helpful in elucidating how theorists see desire as both the very foundation or seed of being and the primary motivation or purpose of being human.

Freud’s diagnosis about the relationship between misery and desire finds expression in many Hindu theological and educational contexts, drawing especially on a rich philosophical tradition, most famously expressed in Arjuna’s struggle in the Gita: the choice about whether to do what one desires, driven by personal attachments, or to do what is prescribed by dharma, social convention and law. There are innumerable ways that Freudian ideas diverge from Hindu thought on desire (and other things, for that matter), and this is especially the case with respect to the root of desire. If, for Freud, desire arises from a lack, in much of the Hindu philosophy I encountered, which was primarily advaitan (non-dualistic) in orientation, desire is born of the failure to realize one’s true state of being, which is one with the ultimate. In this formulation, desire still arises as a result of the human condition but is a misrecognition of the pre-existent fullness of the self, not its lacking. The exception to this philosophical outlook is that many contemporary Hindu settings (both advaita and dvaita) regularly draw upon devotional discourses that presuppose a distance between the self and the other (the object of desire, the beloved, the divine). Bhakti discourses, in this regard, focus on the lack, the longing, and yearning that characterizes both the power and nature of desire in the relationship between the devotee and divine. In some cases, this separation is understood to be overcome in an eventual union or merging, wherein the transcendence of difference satiates desire. In other theologies, the perpetual distance between the devotee and divine and the experience of longing that such distance precipitates constitute the very nature of reality. Both approaches to desire and longing are found in contemporary Hindu contexts.
Furthermore, Freud’s assertion that the task of civilization is, in part, to restrict individual instincts and desires (and try to fabricate others through moralizing and rationalizing processes, i.e. a desire to be altruistic) in the service of particular conceptions of communal good, law, morality and responsibility finds parallels in many contemporary Hindu discourses about the direction, sublimation and cultivation of desires.

For both Freud and Lacan, need and desire are distinct; needs can be fulfilled through the attainment of things (food, for example), but desire as such is much more complex and it emerges from a perceived lack. Jacques Lacan wrote: “Man’s desire is constituted [Hegel tells us] under the sign of mediation; it is the desire to have one’s desire recognized. It has as its object a desire, that of the other, in the sense that man has no object which is constituted for his desire without a measure of mediation.” In Lacanian theory, people only understand, realize or recognize their desires through the encounter with the other, the other mediates desire, and constitutes it. Thus, desire can be seen as desire for recognition from the other, a hearkening to Hegel, and/or a desire for what the other desires. According to Roudinesco’s account of Lacan, to understand the centrality of “desire of the other” in defining desire itself means understanding desire as a dialectical process that involves processes of recognition, alienation, and ‘misprision’ [an incorrect judgment of the value of something]. Lacan’s theories are further elaborated by Judith Butler, who argues that:

Desire is the moment of longing that consciousness may be said to suffer, but which is only “revealed” through the displacements, ruptures, and fissures of consciousness itself….For Lacan, then, desire comes to signify the impossibility of a coherent subject, where the ‘subject’ is understood to be a conscious and self-determining agency.

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To simplify her nuanced reading of Lacan, she suggests that when he develops the Hegelian notion that “self-consciousness is desire,” he theorizes the contingency of desire (its dependence on and formation in relation to the other), which, according to Butler, implies the contingency and instability of the subject itself.

I am not taking a psychoanalytic approach to any of the settings I have studied, but the two formulations that emerge from the writings of Lacan and his interpreters are worth flagging because they dovetail so well with theories of desire that play a significant role in diasporic Hindu communities. Firstly, parents and teachers, as we will see, regularly articulate the idea that desire is something that needs to be cultivated through acts of modeling. If others (parents, siblings, community members, etc.) can embody and exhibit what is desirable about being Hindu, then children will desire it as well. Secondly, the desire for recognition, as well as experiences of alienation and errors in valuation all figure prominently in the shaping sentiments at play in contemporary transnational Hinduism, and in the articulations of a corporate consciousness of Hindus, especially as expressed through the agendas and actions of Hindu organizations.41 With respect to the very contingency of the subject, this too arises as a question within Hindu discursive contexts, wherein theories about the nature of the subject, and the processes by which selves and desires are formed shape pedagogic practices.

Many aspects of Freudian and Lacanian theories of desire have been powerfully and, in my opinion, convincingly critiqued. Yet I have found that the ways in which they frame desire as

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41 The nature of the “O/other”—in relation to whom the self comes into being—can be understood differently in these various conceptions of desire. The O/other can be: that which is truly Other, a person/the divine whose deepest thoughts/desires cannot ever be wholly accessed or discerned; a set of ideals—morals, principals, virtues—that remain at a distance and can only be accessed through some kind of inference; or the ‘Other’ can be another person or thing/s with whom subjects find themselves in relationship.
dialectical—a constant negotiation between the self and the other, a striving for recognition of the self by the other that ultimately facilitates a recognition and articulation of oneself, albeit fleeting, are very helpful for the reading of contemporary conceptions and expressions of desire among Hindus in the diaspora.

The most significant critiques of the lack-based conceptions of desire championed by Freud and Lacan emerge from feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Irigaray noted the profoundly gendered and misogynistic ways in which psychoanalytic conceptions of human desire were constructed with an abstracted male body as the norm from which all other bodies, real and imagined, and their attendant lacks were derived and experienced.42 Hélène Cixous’s work in this regard focused on the ways in which understandings of desire are imagined as embodied—understood as fundamentally sexual, sexed and even racialized—in such ways that the very expression and nature of women’s desires, as well as those of others who have been marginalized, have been obscured or ignored altogether. Cixous illustrates that the framing of desire as a lack follows from the objectification of women, who exist as an idea, the alterity that makes the “I” (who is male) possible. In challenging these notions of desire, Cixous understands desire to be manifest at the foundational level of language; to even articulate oneself and one’s desires is already to be “trapped” in a world of representations—words and symbols—that are predicated on binaries, and difference. And yet it is ironically through language, and the act of writing, which she believes may enable a rethinking and framing of feminine desire.43 For Cixous, this reframed desire is ultimately about a type of liberation: a self-writing, an impulse to speak in and of one’s body in a language that is uniquely


one’s own. In her case, this refers to women speaking as women, not in the constrained and oppressive language of men.

There are numerous theoretical problems with the idea that women’s voices are essentially different from men’s, and both Irigaray and Cixous have been criticized for reproducing the very binaries that they seek to undo. However, Cixous’s reconceptualization of desire as realized through embodied self-expression and representation is particularly helpful when considering how elements of Hindu diasporic desires are manifest in new forms of discourse and practice. The embattled desires regarding who represents Hinduism, who writes it, and speaks for it—be it in textbooks, universities or in the public square—are based on an essentialized understanding of Hindu subjects. In debates where Hindus desire to speak and write for and about themselves, there is an implicit understanding that simply by virtue of being Hindu their voices and perspectives are distinctive, their articulations authentic and authoritative. Furthermore, her emphasis on the fact that desire can be manifest in such a way that the Other is objectified, made into an alterity, in order that the desire for self-representation might be realized, is particularly helpful when thinking about the ways in which Others (Western Scholars, Muslims, Christians, “American Culture,” etc.) are sometimes foils, requisite Others against which a desired Hindu subjectivity is constituted.

Not all critiques of Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of desire are feminist. The writings of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari offer theories of desire that are particularly applicable to this research. Each of these theorists seeks to shift the foundation of desire, arguing that desire does not emanate forth from an individual as the result of a primordial lack, but instead that it is generated by the means of production—socially constructed processes of power. Desire is only felt and experienced as a “lack” because social, historical, political
circumstances have made it so. In this way, unconscious desires, for Deleuze are to be understood as distinct from rational interests. Daniel Smith summarizes the Deleuzian theory clearly when he writes,

If you are capable of pursuing...interest in a concerted and rational manner, it is first of all because your desire—your drives and impulses—are themselves invested in the social formation that makes that interest possible. Your drives have been constructed, assembled, and arranged in such a manner that your desire is positively invested in the system that allows you to have this particular interest. 44

Such work to reframe desire not as a response to lack, but as sentiments and drives that are actively produced through a process of sharing in social practices and processes, can also be understood in its economic dimensions—and this group of theorists makes that connection directly. Capitalism, as a system of economic organization and a statement of economic ideals, is built upon the cultivation of desires; social hierarchies and systems of domination are instituted and maintained through the production of lacks and their concomitant desires. For Deleuze and Guattari, questions about the nature of desire are deeply connected to questions of ethics and political philosophy; they ask how “desire can desire its own repression?” and conclude that “our desires” are not actually our own—drives and affects are produced, and changes in desires require affective transformations. 45

Contemporary Hindu subjectivities, theories, and practices of desire, which this project seeks to document, are contingent upon and constituted through what Deleuze and Guattari call

44 Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” Parrhesia, no. 2, (2007). Smith further elucidates this point, in his suggestion that “normally, we tend to think of desire in terms of lack: if we desire something, it is because we lack it. But Deleuze reconfigures the concept of desire: what we desire, what we invest our desire in, is a social formation, and in this sense desire is always positive. Lack appears only at the level of interest, because the social formation—the infrastructure—in which we have already invested our desire has in turn produced that lack.”

assemblages: the social, ritual, political, ontological, economic, and ritual conditions from which they arise. For Deleuze, however, there is another type of desire—a desire for emancipation—that is not grounded in the social production of lack, but in a “generative affirmation of life.”

In his conception of this affirmative desire, Deleuze rethinks the ways in which the Other figures into the constitution of the subject. “If the subject only exists through the assimilation of an external opposition, it therefore is dependent upon this negative relation for its own identity; hence it lacks the power of self-assertion and self-affirmation.”

Drawing upon Nietzsche, Deleuze’s desire approaches alterity differently. Judith Butler summarizes the matter as follows, on behalf of Deleuze:

> Because distinction is no longer understood as a prerequisite for identity, otherness no longer presents itself as that to be…superseded or conceptualized; rather difference is the condition for enjoyment, an enhanced sense of pleasure, the acceleration of forces which constitute what we might call Nietzsche’s version of jouissance. Once the requirement of discrete identity no longer governs the subject, difference is less a source of danger than it is a condition of self-enhancement and pleasure….Desire is thus understood by Deleuze as a productive response to life in which the force and intensity of desire multiplies and intensifies in the course of an exchange with alterity.

Deleuze too has been critiqued, particularly in his articulation of this natural affirmative and emancipatory desire, for undermining his own project, namely, to historicize and contextualize desire by suggesting the presence of an essential human desire that stands beyond the reach of social construction. In multiple ways, however, his theories of desire are particularly helpful in analyzing the ways in which the cultivation of longings is a core element in the production of Hindu subjectivities. Attention to the ways in which power works to create certain desires, and hence subjectivities, and seeing these as distinctly separate from Others, has a

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significant bearing on the research I have pursued. While I am not invested in answering the question of whether there are natural or essential desires or not, Deleuze’s understanding that engagement with difference has the potential to produce desiring subjects whose identities are founded not on a destructive or negative impulse, or fear of the Other—as is implied in elements of Hegelian, Freudian, and Lacanian theory—but rather productive responses to Others will reemerge as a topic of discussion in future chapters.

One of the salient questions in regard to theories of desire involves the question of whether (and if so, how) prohibitions of desires—be they enunciated and enforced in religious, legal, cultural, or communal contexts—actually produce desires through acts of naming them, circumscribing and restricting them. Michel Foucault, the last theorist to whom I pay cursory attention in this attempt at a survey of theories of desire, is among those scholars most deeply invested in the genealogy of desire (as idea and force). In work on the historical and socio-cultural spheres, Foucault does not assert desire as a natural human condition; to the contrary, he sees it as being made possible only as a result of culture itself. Desire as we know it—as it can be discussed, named, and identified by human beings—emerges from the social and law; desire is regulated, disciplined, affirmed, reformulated, and produced in various discursive realms—medical, psychological, religious, and juridical. Throughout this work, I use discourse in two ways. On a basic level, discourse literally refers to things like lectures, and it is commonly used in Hindu contexts to refer to teachings and talks by gurus, swamis, and other teachers, especially when expounding upon sacred texts or philosophical ideas. In this vein, I may refer to discursive products, referring to literature, theological explications, textbook materials, and public speeches and articles. These descriptive uses of discourse fit into the broader theoretical terrain in which I
use the word to refer to socio-cultural processes. Discourse, as Chris Weedon describes it in Foucauldian terms, refers to:

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourses constitute minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases.49

In this regard, discourse and desire are intimately related. For Foucault, desire cannot be understood outside of discourse and as such desire is produced through the very discourses of its repression and emancipation.50

It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together….We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies….Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.51

Foucault’s emphasis on the role of power and knowledge—“Where there is desire, the power relation is already present”52—in producing desire and subjectivities is at the heart of this project. Indeed, what does it mean to produce and desire Hindu identity, community, attachment, belonging, and knowledge for oneself and one’s children? How are desires cultivated in concert

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51 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction, pp. 100-1.

52 Ibid, p. 81.
with the production of particular types of knowledge (through discursive formations), and sentiments in efforts to generate, sustain and strengthen Hindu subjectivities in the diaspora? What theories of desire, the self, and the community are at work in these endeavors and what are their implications? Who shapes and controls the means and messages through which desires are cultivated, communicated, and realized? How do Hindu discourses reproduce and reinforce certain norms and modes of power, and how do they undermine or reinterpret them, particularly as these discourses involve such desideratum as the vision of the nation-state, narratives of Hindu and Indian history, or ideal types of marriage, or enactments of Hindu subjectivity?

In addition to these ways of exploring desire, I hope to consider the way in which the effect of desire in the act of longing and/or its fulfillment—expressed through the sentiment of love—is cultivated as a linchpin in belonging and identification. As Sara Ahmed has articulated the matter:

Love becomes a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal, which takes shape as an effect of such bonding. Love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal. There are of course many types of love (familial, friendship, erotic) …. I want to consider how the pull of love towards another, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object….

Indeed of all the emotions, love has been theorized as crucial to the social bond. More specifically, love has been theorized as central to politics and the securing of social hierarchy. Love has been understood as necessary to the maintenance of authority, in the sense that love of ‘the leader’ is what allows consent and agreement to norms and rules that do not and cannot guarantee the well-being of subjects and citizens….I want to think about love as an investment which creates an ideal, as the approximation of a character that then envelops the one who loves and the loved (“the collective ideal”)….My argument about the role of love in shaping collectives could seem rather banal or even obvious: love, after all, has often been theorized as a sticky emotion that sticks people together, such as discourses of fraternity and patriotism. But I want to make a more complex argument, partly by thinking through how love works in places where it has been seen as more benevolent, such as in discourses of multiculturalism. Some attempts to critique discourses of racial purity—of narcissistic whiteness—are about finding a love that doesn’t assume love for one’s own kind and which does not lead to hatred for others.
But does multicultural love work to expand love to include others? Or does this expansion require that others fail an ideal? 53

These questions—about the nature of love and the ways in which the production of love for oneself, one’s culture, one’s community, and other’s like oneself (in familial, communal, or matrimonial/romantic/erotic formations)—are ones upon which, I hope, this research will shed some light. How does Hindu love, in a host of interlocking relationships—parental, communal, romantic, nationalist, and devotional—function in ways that are both benevolent and disconcerting? What types of relationships are forged and maintained between desire and love in the constitution of subjects?

In pursuing these questions, I am focused on the cultural and religious lives of Hindu individuals and communities. My fieldwork involved a tremendous amount of listening, note-taking and observation. Performances of Hinduism and Hindu identities have a particular character in the United States, involving shifting registers and expressions of desire as Hindus enter and inhabit various domains (educational, civic, explicitly religious, commercial, cultural, and political). Here I work with the understanding, inspired by Foucault, Deleuze, and Bourdieu, 54 that Hindu bodies and identifications have genealogies, coming into being through the interconnected relationships between individuals and others—physical spaces, material objects, narratives, memories, attitudes, ideas and institutions (assemblages). These complex


54 Certainly, there are radical differences about the presuppositions that Bourdieu, Foucault, and Deleuze bring to the table about the very nature of the individual, the way types of power function, or the workings of the “desiring machine,” but they are all useful for understanding how practices—which are naturalized, reproduced in educational, political, familial, cultural, etc. settings—work on bodies to produce states of being, institutional structures, ways of knowing, and identifications. In referencing these theorists, I do not mean to assume as “true” every aspect of their philosophy, but these ways of approaching human processes, especially with respect to formations of identities, help me to better make sense of what I encountered in the field.
relationships, which continually and contextually shift, change and are reordered, work affectively to produce ways of knowing, identifying and acting. Desires are fostered and expressed, emerging in affective spaces and the context of relationships—at mandirs, bala vihar classes, exhibitions, grocery stores, between parents and children, Hindu community leaders and various publics, in contestations over representation and through performances of citizenship. However, these relationships do not make up the totality of forces that produce desires (including the socio-cultural and religious disciplinary norms/limits, and creative/imaginative possibilities).

The assemblages that produce desiring subjects are not stagnant nor singular. Different experiences, even in the same context, have the potential to produce different subjectivities and desires, which can, in turn, be articulated variously and transformed in relationship to social forces. This exploration of diasporic desires will, I hope, shed light on how desires work, are understood, and expressed personally and collectively as part of the process of making embodied Hindu American subjects, who are desirable citizens, devotees, patriots (American and Indian), consumers, spouses, and children.

(5) CONTEMPORARY HINDU THEORIES OF DESIRE

In many ways, Spinoza’s conception of the foundational quality of desire in constituting human subjectivities is consonant with classical Hindu formulations of human desire, especially those that contemporary American Hindu teachers commonly reference. While it is somewhat odd to place theorists like Spinoza and Deleuze in conversation with contemporary theories of desire that arise in American Hindu settings, I believe that it is crucial for us document to how philosophies and theologies are developed, theorized and instantiated by people in the course of their daily life. In some cases, such as those that I include in this section, Hindus in America are explicitly engaging with classical Hindu conceptions and philosophies of desire in contexts
where texts (the Vedas, Dharmashastras, Gita, and Ramcaritmanas, etc.) are studied and
expounded upon, but they are also generating new philosophies, practices, and expressions of
desire at the same time. In other cases, Hindu articulations embodied in various realms—cultural,
social, political, and devotional—are reflective of a host of desires and they often reveal an
awareness of the power of desire and the importance of cultivating particular types of it, as
opposed to others.

(I) THE BEGINNING OF DESIRE: THE BIRTH OF PARENTS, THE MAKING OF
HINDUS & THE CENTRALITY OF CHILDREN

A discussion of desire as a recurrent theme in Hindu diasporic discourse begins with
children, understanding children as both the subjects and objects of multiple desires. Certainly,
there is the classical formulation, repeated in numerous Hindu texts from the Vedas onward, in
which children are framed as the object of desires: progeny as security for their parent’s future.
Children, and specifically sons—as the essential wifely-production and boon from the gods—are
ritual actors who ensure their parent’s place in the next life. In modern formulations, this
discourse on children, while revealing much continuity,\textsuperscript{55} takes on a different tenor and

\textsuperscript{55} See “Children in Hinduism” article on Hinduwebsite.com for an example of the ways in which classical notions of
children and the family are actively perpetuated today. The article begins by quoting a number of Sanskrit
scriptures: “‘When Brahmans know that Self, and have risen above the desire for sons, wealth, and (new) worlds,
they wander about as mendicants. For a desire for sons is desire for wealth, a desire for wealth is desire for worlds.
Both these are indeed desires.’ (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad) /’Through a son he conquers the worlds, through a
grandson he obtains immortality, but through his son’s grandson he ascends to the (highest) heaven.’ (All that) has
been declared in the Veda.’ (Baudhayana Sutras 2-9-16.3) /’The son of a wife wedded according to the Brahma rite,
if he performs meritorious acts, liberates from sin ten ancestors, ten descendants and himself as the twenty-first.’
(Manusmriti 3:37).’ The website goes onto assert the centrality of children within Hindu tradition. Such perspectives
are more frequently espoused among Hindutva communities but are certainly not exclusive to them. Although the
rhetoric found here, which states ideas such as “Orthodox Hindus do not approve of childlessness and consider it to
be very inauspicious,” seeks to instantiate a place of great importance children for children within Hinduism, even
this site recognizes that these attitudes have caused hardships, and that the “Hindu family system is undergoing
radical transformation.” Jayaram V, “Children in Hinduism,”
http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_children.asp. The attitudes espoused here resonate with others I heard,
which celebrate the idea that Hindus have closer relationships with their children than western parents.
emphasis: “children are the future” is the common refrain repeated by Hindu temple leaders and teachers in a variety of contexts, it is the title of day-long parenting workshops and the subject of many a swami’s or board president’s message in temple newsletters. The opening lines in the forward of each of the extensive twelve volume Chinmaya Mission’s *Bala Vihar Teacher’s Handbooks* begins with Swami Tejomayananda’s assertion that “Our children are our joy. No amount of efforts put in or time given to them can be considered enough.” Children, I argue, are a primary, if not the primary, preoccupation of American Hindu institutions and leaders, and this fact, I wish to suggest, plays a particularly powerful role in shaping modern diasporic Hinduism and Hindus.

The way this focus on children is commonly articulated is captured by Shivani Vora’s 2013 *New York Times* blog post, entitled “Raising a Hindu Kid in New York.” Vora begins her piece by expressing questions, concerns, and a personal narrative that I heard repeatedly over the course of my research.

How do you teach your children about religion, particularly your own? Are the parents responsible for this vital task or should they call in some outside help? It is a question I faced as a parent almost five years ago. I am a Hindu who was born in New Delhi and lived in India until I was 8, before immigrating to the United States...Throughout my childhood, Hinduism wasn’t something I formally learned; it was a natural part of my everyday life. My parents did *pujas* (prayers, rituals of worship) with my sister, Aditi, and me every evening in front of the makeshift mandir on top of their bureau in their bedroom....Aditi and I...listened intently to bedtime stories from our mother based on Indian mythology....This slipping away of an integral part of my roots didn’t bother me at all until I gave birth to my daughter...Sometime in her first year of life, I started feeling urgently that she should learn all about her religion. Mahir [my husband] and I started doing a short puja with her before she went to bed, but we felt inadequately equipped to be her sole source of learning and wanted something more.57

56 See the opening of all *The Bala Vihar Teacher’s Handbooks: The Bala Vihar Teacher’s Handbook* (Pierce, California: Chinmaya West, 2007), p. xi.

This wanting something more, ostensibly for one’s children, but undoubtedly also for oneself, can effect tremendous change in a parent’s own associations, outlook, religious practice, and knowledge. As Vora describes it, she realized the classes were “resonating with [her] daughter when…she started recited bhajans (devotional songs) besides the Gayatri Mantra we had taught her. A few months after, she was teaching me the words to devotional songs I had forgotten.” She describes how the classes gave her and her husband “the chance to re-engage with Hinduism.”58 At the core of these sentiments, and the concomitant actions undertaken by parents and community leaders is an understanding about the very nature of children, the significance of children’s knowledge, and knowledge more generally. These Hindu-making endeavors are fueled by desires to cultivate and curate subjects who don’t simply recognize Hinduism and Indian culture59 as their own, but who become its very embodiment.

Faced with this desire to “raise a Hindu kid,” Vora wonders, at the beginning of her piece, how and where she might find help in her endeavor. For her, the answer came in the form of already established classes, which in her case were bala vihar offered by the Chinmaya Mission, but she might also have found what she sought at one of the many Hindu temples in the greater New York area that offer children’s programs.

In fact, while difficult to quantify, I argue that—aside from the normative ritual practices (daily pujas, festival celebrations)—children’s education and programming is the central focus of Hindu American leaders and institutions.60 While in the 1970s and 1980s, temple and institution

58 Ibid.

59 The two—Hinduism and Indian culture—are almost always linked among those living outside of India.

60 I include programs that are overtly religious—Hindu schools and camps—as well as those that are South Asian here because there is a tremendous amount of overlap between those who attend language, or art classes and those who have formal instruction within some form of Hinduism. While there are children who only engage in language or arts studies, and, for a host of reasons, have no exposure to official Hindu educational contexts, for those who
building occupied much of the energies of Hindu American communities, as time has
progressed, programs and agendas that are educational, cultural, and representational have grown
significantly and now comprise a large percentage of what constitutes American Hindu life. I
delineate the details of these endeavors in the following chapter, but to give a sense of the scale,
in California alone, I estimate that between fifteen and twenty thousand children attend some sort
of Hindu or South Asian cultural instruction each weekend. This includes supplementary Hindu
schools, regional culture and language schools (run by organizations like the California Tamil
Academy), summer camps, weekend retreats, South Asian cricket clubs, dance, and music
classes. The same types of curricular and non-curricular programs can be found throughout the
country. In addition, the emphasis of Hindu foundations and organizations on the education and
engagement of Hindu and non-Hindu children and young adults in public schools and at the
college level is another indicator of this focus on youth and education. On college campuses, as
well, we find many active Hindu Students Organizations, Bhangra and Desi clubs, and Indian
political advocacy and interest groups. Such groups and activities are indicative of a burgeoning
movement in North America involving Hindu and South Asian education and association.61

Perhaps it is no surprise then to suggest that children are repositories of desire—where
parents, pandits, and community leaders place their hopes, dreams, disappointments, and
anxieties. While I argue that it is not only the identities and knowledge of children that is at stake
and in formation, I do assert that children are a profound impetus in the contemporary enterprise

61 Furthermore, the Hindu American Foundation, founded in 2003, has increasingly turned its attention to education
and the cultivation of pride and awareness among the “NextGen.” In addition, South Asian dance and music classes,
and cricket clubs can be found throughout the U.S. in communities with a critical mass of immigrants from South
Asia (and this includes states that might seem surprising, such as Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Colorado, Kansas,
Oklahoma, etc.).
of making Hindus, Hindu spaces, and institutions. I hope the pages that follow will convey how and why this is the case.

Like Shivani Vora’s story, and consistent with affiliation rates among other religious groups in America, for many with Hindu heritage, I found a correlation between the experience of getting married and/or having children and increased participation in Indian communal life and in Hindu temple, ashram, or organizational involvement.62 Not surprisingly, children are catalysts for change in the lives of parents—it is impossible to have children and remain unaltered. While many participants attend mandirs, Hindu educational and cultural programming for their own spiritual, cultural, or social fulfillment, the process of entering into parenthood marks a significant shift in attitude and association. The vast majority of parents I spoke with—whom I met in a variety of contexts (Hindu temples, cultural festivals, grocery stores, sari shops, and Indian classes)—talked of the ways in which their desire to affiliate as Hindus was bolstered or even awakened by their entry into parenthood, often emerging as their children grew from toddlers into school-age children. Meena, age 36, from Irvine, CA said:

It is funny until I had children I felt no real need to hang out with other Indian people. Now, though, nothing feels more natural. I just feel connected to these other mothers who bring their children to *bala vihar*, or come to the functions—we all want the same thing—we want our children to—I don’t know—be proud, to know they are Indian…to love our culture and traditions…. It’s really about wanting something beautiful for our children to hold onto….to keep [them] connected. I can’t really explain it but somehow this feels like the right place to be, at least for right now, you know?

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62 I base this primarily on field research, which is not qualitative, not quantitative. This trend, which I have observed consistently, may indeed change if young people maintain connections with *bala vihar*, camps or the like, or become involved in organizations during college. The increased number of youth and young adult programs may change this trend. That said, there remains something distinctive about parenthood, that shifts people’s relationships to domestic life, and community. Many people I spoke with discussed how, in becoming a parent, they didn’t really know how to imagine a family, home, or what it means to be a parent without the presence of certain smells, tastes, rituals, and modes of behavior.
Many women, in particular, pointed to how the solitary space of home life in America can cause an increased desire for community, a need to share company with those who have similar desires for their children. For parents, this type of affective community might be experienced through mommy-and-me music classes, or in playgroups at the park, but for many of them it is the Hindu temple or ashram that offers a place of companionship and collective desire. Parents, particularly mothers, express how taking their children to Hinduism classes allows them to be with people who “want the same thing for their children,” and who “share the same values and dreams for their [children’s] future.” One father said, “the very fact that we are all here on Sunday morning, and not at the mall, or watching football, that is the main point—we want our children to learn about their culture and to be with people who are like them.”

When I began to do fieldwork on Hindu educational sites, my focus was on the ways by which Hindus were creating institutions and developing curricula that marked the emergence of a new type of American Hinduism. What I found in the process of studying those Hindu educational contexts, was a persistent language of wanting. When asked the open-ended questions such as: “How did you become involved at the mandir?;” “What brought you to this camp, class, temple, mission?,” the response is an almost formulaic expression of desire. “I want my children to feel connected;” “I want my children to know who they are;” “I want my children to be proud of their heritage;” “I want my children to learn about Hinduism;” “I want my children to know about their culture;” “I came here because of my children.” “We met the pandit when we got married but we didn’t really start coming regularly until we had our children;” “I wanted to give my children something special;” “I want my children to feel at home with people like us…. marry Indians and raise Hindu children.” “Being involved at this temple or bala vihar, socializing with other Indian families or taking trips to India—these are the only way we can
foster theses desires in our children when we are living in America.” This language of wanting, of desire, is ubiquitous, as is the posture of explanation, justification, and comparison. In countless conversations, this expression of wanting—desiring that children possess specific knowledge, belief, sense of self, or identity—is often followed by the explanatory, “because.” “Because, here in America we have to be careful they don’t forget who they are,” “Because, like Jewish people, we need to educate our children and hold onto our culture,” “Because this will ground them in our ways and make them successful in the world;” “Because I don’t want them to be lost;” “Because I want them to always be proud of who they are.” The faint expression of desire through the colloquial use of "want" in response to these questions is reflective of a communal affect, manifest in networks of desire, and expressed through a range of activities and agendas, which are continually evolving and responsive. The profound efforts—involving personal, communal, creative, and economic commitments—that are involved in the building and sustaining of institutions and organizations (educational, cultural, political, devotional), as well as maintaining ritual and cultural traditions in contexts where such practices are non-normative, emerge as the result of myriad non-uniform desires.

Existentially, parenthood can involve a perpetual state of desire—wanting for your children and their future. Parents see some desires as easily attained, others out of reach, and still others unknown. This desire to have some control over the future, and to direct one’s children’s desires (to eat healthy food, to be kind, gracious, successful, carry on traditions, follow the way of life, and embody the values of one’s family) emerges as a fundamental preoccupation, and it is certainly not exclusive to Hindus. The very presence of such parental desires coupled with the belief that it particular forms of parenting and education have the power to affect a child’s disposition is indicative of an outlook about subject formation. This outlook implicitly
recognizes the profound power of learning, culture, and custom (or, alternatively put, social construction) in shaping individuals, and yet—unlike many scholars who write about the construction of subjects—the perspective that I commonly encountered among Hindu American parents presumes that these educational efforts involve the awakening of a distinctive essence, a quality of identity that is already present by virtue of one’s birth and background. How people understand their desires, and what they try to do in order to fulfill them, is often predicated on working and implicit theology and philosophy of the self, which is made explicit in many of the classroom, camps, conversations, and satsangs I observed over the years.

(II) MODELING THE SELF THROUGH DEVOTION & DIRECTED DESIRE

The explicit theologies of selfhood at work in diasporic Hindu settings, particularly what is understood to be involved in making Hindus, draws upon texts and a vocabulary in which devotion, love, and desire have already been heavily theorized in various Hindu traditions. Diasporic glosses of the Bhagavad Gita, Mira’s devoted desire for Krishna, and the Upanishadic creed of atman (self/soul) as Brahman are only a few examples of the way in which a discourse about the making of good Hindu children and the importance of directing desire has emerged over the past fifty years.

A swami at one lecture for Hindu parents in 2001 in Hayward, CA, spoke of the Gita in this way:

The parent’s job is to be Krishnas to their children. If we drive them down the right paths we are directing them to good choices. But, like Arjuna, they must think for themselves. Here the battlefield is America, our very own Kurukshetra. It is where we battle the desires all around us: the fancy cars; the big TVs and, for the children, all the things that distract them from goodness…What I am telling you parents is: Be the charioteer and make your children desire goodness. Try to help them see how Christmas presents and those X-box things are just distractions from the path of dharma… Krishna tells Arjuna
that having \textit{jnana} [knowledge] is patience and self-control. If we are to expect it of our children then we must show it ourselves…Ask yourself if you need that next indulgence before you buy it. (And looking at one father directly, he said,) Ashok, Do you need that fancy-new car? Show them patience and that will make them patient. Show them self-control and they will be self-controlled. Direct your desires to goodness and they will know goodness…..Even Arjuna didn’t know who he was, what his real obligations were. Our children need reminders too…. Bringing them to the temple, teaching them our ways. This will make them know themselves and want only the right things.

The swami’s discourse went on for over an hour. It was focused on the importance of controlling desires for certain things in consumer and capitalist culture and encouraging desire for the intangible goodness in stories, traditions, mother’s cooking, meditation, recitation of shlokas, respect for parents, and performance of rituals.

In a 2007 class in Fremont, California, after a heated debate among high school students about the Gita’s call that Arjuna ultimately kill and defeat his own family in battle, a teacher offered his interpretation:

It is not that we should be unattached to everything and have no desires. This is not what the Gita is telling us, only that we must attach ourselves to our dharma, we must only desire what is right for us, and that is different for each of us. What Krishna tells Arjuna is \textit{not} really to kill his family, but to fulfill his dharma, to be a warrior…So we are all asked the question, “What is your dharma?”

In the students’ responses to his closing question, it became clear that they understood, and the teacher concurred, that their dharma was two-fold: firstly, to strive for success academically and professionally—to succeed in the scholastic and material world that America had to offer; and, secondly, to be good Hindus, to love their family and follow their traditions. This diasporic dharma involves both material and academic achievement, as well as cultural and spiritual dedication.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{64} The children’s responses included the following, among others: “I must do well in school.” “We have to make money, so we can take care of our parents when they are old. Like Mama and Papa do with Dadi and Dada.” “We
Relating the Gita to his assessment of American material culture and sexual mores, Rameshji, another teacher, argued, these are “not the true essence of a meaningful life for Hindus.” He suggested instead a theology of detachment from “undesirable” desires, utilizing bhakti’s evocations to focus on love of God, through devotion to family, traditions, and the Indian nation.

Anju, a bala vihar teacher in the Bay Area, invoked Mirabai when talking about desires to her combined class of parents and children. She began her lesson by asking the students: “Tell me something you really want.” The children answered: “to go to Disneyland;” “to get a new game boy;” “to have a sleepover with my friend Michelle;” “to get an A on my science diorama;” “To go to India and visit my cousins;” “to get to watch more T.V.;” “for my Baba to get better.” Upon hearing the last comment, she stopped the students, “Do you think there is a difference between getting to watch more T.V. and Uma’s hoping that her Baba gets better?” To her rhetorical question, the children answered with a resounding, “Yes.” She then told of Mirabai who focused her devotion only on Lord Krishna. “Her whole heart was focused. She longed only for Krishna and her prayers to be with him were finally answered. Remember what happened to her?....When we really focus on good things, on caring for family, loving our traditions and worshipping God, then we are rewarded like Mira.” She then had the students take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. On one side, she had them write down “two good desires or wishes,” and on the other side, “two desires that are distracting or bad.” She called these “two

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are supposed to follow the traditions, do puja and all that. And my Daddy says, I should become a doctor or engineer.”

65 While the Chinmaya Mission calls all their children’s educational programs bala vihars, they are not the only one’s to employ this name for Hindu children’s supplementary schools. In the case of this example, the bala vihar I am referring to is independent, run out of people’s homes, and occasionally hosted at a local mandir. I will signal when the bala vihars I refer to are not Chinmaya. If I do not explicitly note that these are alternative programs with the same name, it can be assumed that the programs are run through the Chinmaya Mission. I will also sometimes use the term bala vihar to refer to the general type of supplementary program. When I do so, I will note that as well.
things they should try and stop wanting.” She asked the parents to do the same. Everyone was asked to fold the papers up and keep them in their hearts. They weren’t asked to share them. She told them: “every day we must wrestle with this list, add to it. Sometimes you might move things from one side to the other….This is what being a Hindu is all about, especially here where you need to control the temptations.” Two weeks later, when the class met again, Anju asked them how their list was going and if they had consulted it. She returned to her discussion of the bhakti saints and how all of them focused their desires on God, wanting nothing but to be in God’s presence and to have God as their companion. The children spent the lesson comparing the different types of devotion and sacrifice exemplified by Hanuman, Mirabai, Arjuna, Sita, and Lakshmana. In her discussions of bhakti and devotion to God, she always returned to this question: what should you (students and parents) be devoted to? I surmised, however, that the answer she sought, and strikingly so, wasn’t always or even primarily “to be with God.” She gave students tremendous affirmation when they expressed their desire to come to the mandir, to travel to India, to help people in need, to improve and give back to India, to support parents and care for grandparents, to celebrate festivals, and even to eat Indian “home-cooking.” She likened wanting to be with family and at the mandir to Mira’s wanting to be with God, “you see it is the same thing,” she said, “cling to what we have, to each other. It brings peace.” Her lesson illustrates a fascinating slippage between God and community that is quite common in Hindu diasporic discourse, and which has significant implications with regard to diasporic communities, and the formation and imagination of communities. Echoing theological languages and sentiments, Anju draws upon devotional tropes when talking about culture, community, notions of home, and the nation. In this turn of interpretation, she resembled many other teachers, swamis, parents, and camp counselors I observed.
For example, in honor of Holi, another teacher, at a Bala Vihar class in Southern California, quoted Mirabai’s poem included in the March 2006 *Bala Vihar Magazine* for children:

Dearly beloved Shyam  
Color my chunariya  
Such, that the colour will  
Never leave it,  
[Even if the dhobi  
Washes it a lifetime  
Neither red, nor green—  
Colour me in your own colour  
Such, that it will  
Never leave me in a lifetime.  
Colour me, else,  
I will not return home  
Even if it takes a lifetime.66

After explaining the festival to her class, Kalpana used the bhajan to suggest that the students should model their love for Hindu culture and tradition after Mira’s love for Krishna. In this way: She said: “Let it color us for a lifetime, and help guide us in all of our decisions.”67 The simple transposition of love for God, and love’s potential effects upon the devotee, into love of Hindu culture, ritual, customs, clothing, family, and nation are not uncommon in the classrooms and mandirs of America. She said, “we look a little different—maybe we’re a little darker, or we wear different clothes, eat different food—but it is not so much that we can’t blend in. But don’t you do that! You have to keep our culture and traditions and that takes devotion, just like Namdev or Mira.” In the following classes, she focused on how the children could avoid assimilating too much and how to “keep your difference…be proud Indians and Hindus, when

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there are so many forces pushing us…acting like dhobis trying to wash it away.” The ways in which Mira’s story is retooled in American settings, like these, seem particularly telling. While it is well-established that in traditional versions of the poet-saint’s story Mira pursues of her love of Lord Krishna in direct defiance of familial expectations and cultural and religious norms, in some more modern versions, including the ones I reference here, her story of rebellion is transformed. Her desire for God isn’t framed as a rejection of a patriarchal system of arranged marriage or a challenge of convention in the vein of mystics who forgo material riches in favor of divine love. Much like the Mirabai that John Stratton Hawley describes in his article, “The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration,” about the popular Indian comic book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, the Mirabai in many American classrooms and camps is “domesticated.” In discussing the medieval accounts of Mirabai by Nabdhas (c. 1600) and Priyadas (c. 1712), Hawley writes, “the linchpin of the entire tale of Mira’s life was her defiance of codes of obedience and loyalty that govern the behavior of any Hindu wife….Her rebelliousness was the measure of her conviction” and the sign of her devotion to God. He contrasts these older accounts with the modern comic book version: Rather than challenge norms, Mira fulfills “woman’s dharma,” and is represented as an “ideal Hindu wife,” only ascending to total-single-minded devotion to Krishna once widowed. Hawley argues not only that the comic books use the stories of the saints in somewhat novel ways to uphold notions of virtue and morality—in Mira’s case a domesticated exemplar of wifely dharma—but that they

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68 The series has wide international reach. It is not uncommon to see children in America reading the comics, or for teachers in bala vihar to use it as a part of lessons to engage students. It is quite common, as well, for parent’s and relatives to give the comic book to children here as a way to introduce Hindu stories and Indian history in a “fun” way.

also employ this genre of children’s literature to forward the agenda of “national integration,” holding her up as a saint of India, not simply of Hindus.\textsuperscript{70} In some of these diasporic contexts, as well, Mira’s story is employed to promote a type religious, cultural, and communal integration and identification, while also holding up a model for devotion to God. She is definitely not a rebel, but a devout adherent of dharma.

In the official Chinmaya Mission bala vihar curriculum, intended for children in the sixth grade, Mira’s story is recounted in conjunction with other saints, who uphold values to which the children are meant to aspire. The universal wisdom of Mira’s devotion is conveyed to the children through the story of the Muslim Emperor Akbar, who was so moved by her devotion and bhajans that he “touched her feet, and placed his emerald necklace at the feet of her Krishna,” which, Usha, a teacher in Texas, told her class was one of the reasons that, “India is so special.” Paraphrasing The Bala Vihar Teacher’s Handbook, she said that one of India’s greatest achievements is that “no other country has produced so many saints,” and it is one of the reasons we must be so proud of it. “The saints of India are so holy that it [sic] could be recognized by everyone, it doesn’t matter their religion.” She the related the story found in the official curriculum about King Louis XVI’s son, who was captured by his father’s enemies who sought to make his son wicked by offering him “every temptation that one can think of. [But] every time, the prince would not yield to temptations, he would remind himself, ‘I am the son of a king, I can never fall for temptations.’” As “children of Mother India,” the children were reminded that “our saints and sages are our heritage, our treasure.” They were then asked the somewhat rhetorical question, “Can we ever give in to temptations of the world?”\textsuperscript{71} prompting a

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 120.

discussion about the meaning of the word ‘temptations,’ and how as people get older—especially in junior high, high school and college—temptations increase, and so must their “resolve and faith.”

While the curriculum focuses on sixteen Indian saints—including Shankaracarya, Auvaiyar, Kabir, Tukarama, Mother Teresa, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and the Buddha—all of whom have various lessons to teach, Mirabai’s is held up, in particular, to emphasize the values of being resolute and faithful. Her story is told along with the tale of an old mule, who falls into a well. When the mule’s owner believes that hope to save the mule has been lost, he decides to bury him alive. Rather than accept this fate, every time dirt is thrown on the mule he shakes it off, forming a kind of step-stool, ultimately allowing him to ascend the well and save his life. The Bala Vihar Teacher’s Handbook suggests that teachers encourage the students to ponder how the mule’s ability to withstand “so many blows” is akin to Mira’s ability to sustain herself, despite the pain inflicted upon her by family and society at large; the answer to the question is provided in the outline for the lesson: “Because she was resolute in her goal, like the mule who was firm in saving himself,”72 and she had faith in Krishna alone. Drawing on another tale, teachers are supposed to emphasize how Mira’s ability to recognize what was real stands in contrast to the story of a dog, who crosses a river with fresh meat in his mouth. Upon seeing his own reflection in the water, he misrecognizes himself for another dog and loses his own meat when he tries to grab that of the illusory dog. While “many of us lose the sight of what is real and go for what is only a shadow…. Mirabai knew that Krishna alone is real…..With this understanding, she had no trouble giving up her place or comforts.”73 The two times I have seen

72 Ibid, p. 182.
this lesson taught by teachers, the connection between these two stories and Mira’s was made clearer to the students through the elicitation of personal examples, as is often the case in bala vihar contexts. Students were asked about what the word “priorities” meant, and how Mira’s devotion could be a reminder for them to prioritize things in their own lives.

Furthermore, guided by the teacher, the children offered their own interpretations in response to her question, “what does it mean to stand up for what you believe in, and who you are when people don’t see the value in what you do?” A few of the children told stories about times they have been made fun of for “bringing smelly, strange food to school.” One girl told of a time when she was told to, “go back home to Mexico, or wherever you came from!” when she didn’t stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance for the first few days of school because she had sprained her ankle. Another child said that after they finished a unit on India in their World Studies class some kids on the playground said that he “worshipped idols and was going to hell.” The last student said that he “wasn’t sure what to say to the boys,” and a number of other children seemed to nod in affirmation in their uncertainty about the right response. The teacher seemed surprised when she heard these stories, something she confirmed with me when we spoke after the class. She had not expected the lesson about Mirabai to go in this direction, but she confessed that it didn’t change what she hoped the children would take away from the class; it only made her feel that the lesson was more relevant for their lives than she initially anticipated. In this moment, the official lesson about the exemplary values of Mirabai, which the children should strive to emulate—faith, piety, and seeking the only true jewel (Krishna/Bhagavan), rather than other illusory things\textsuperscript{74}—instead became focused on how, just as Mira’s faith was tested by “evil people who were threatened by her devotion, and criticized who

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p. 134.
the children too were facing “mean people,” who were trying to make them feel bad about their heritage, and teasing them about things that should be a source of pride. The teacher said that these bullies were the “kind of test that life throws your way,” and she told them that they should see this as a chance to move up the ladder of their “Yes, I adopt, I Follow,” exercise, in which each student makes a commitment and charts their progress in the adoption the values that various saints uphold. Like Mirabai, who held onto Lord Krishna, “you must know that God is with you when you hold on to your Hindu traditions and teach about them with pride.” She suggested that Mira’s bhajans were a kind of “P.R. campaign for Krishna” and that, still today, people learn to love God through the example of her devotion. They had the chance to teach their classmates with their own “P.R. campaign, that can help them see that they are the ones who are missing out” on everything, from the good food and celebrations, like Holi, to God’s love. With this, she referenced the fact that Muslims and Shaivites could hear Mira’s songs and recognize the beauty and truth in them. Some, she said, were so moved that they became devotees of Krishna, but most were “deepened in their own faith” through their encounter with her. She charged the students with the task of being “model Miras for the week”; the children were supposed to make sure that they shared something they were proud of about Hinduism or Indian culture with their friends, or class. She assured them that their pride in themselves, and their conviction would undoubtedly be respected, inspire others, and might even stop the bullies. Yet again, we find Mira’s devotion to the divine isn’t simply a model for human devotion to God, but a model for devotion to Hindu tradition and Indian culture as well.

I wish to suggest that this type of discursive move—drawing upon theological language and devotional sentiments—is indicative of a shift in the multivalence of the divine in articulations of American Hindu philosophy and theology. It is evident in the following
interpretations of the Upanishads as well. On a weekend retreat for youth aged sixteen to twenty-one, a volunteer pujari, and teacher at a mandir in the South Bay Area said:

Love is a very powerful emotion. When we say we should love God, what are we really saying? ... That we must love ourselves. What does the Upanishad say? ... What did we study last week? ... (gesturing to one teenage boy) beta [son], you remember? ... Atman is Brahman. Love who you are—this is very important. Love your family, love this family here [as he gestured at all the children sitting in the room and pointed at the hall where some parents were gathered]. And when you feel that need to love, you know, when you are ready to get married, look back to your home and family and remember this here. Turn inward and you will be finding real love. This is what we mean when we say tat tvam asi [you are that]—and don’t forget who you are.

Another teacher in Danville, California, facilitating a class on the Upanishads, targeted to parents, and held parallel to the Sunday morning children’s classes, said:

We have all heard this so many times, “Atman is Brahman,” “Atman is Brahman,” but what does this actually mean to us here and now? To love the self is to love God, which we must be extending, expanding in America to the self in us that is India and our language and traditions.... It is particularly important to give this to our children, teach them that love.... We need it too. When you are content with yourself, Swamiji always teaches, you can come to know bliss. That contentment is what it is to know God.... You know, very few times have I felt this myself, but when I have felt it, it is when I feel at home—like I feel here—and, you know, comfortable with who I am. This is what we have to give to the children: that comfort in their own skin, pride in themselves, is the first step to loving God.

Time and again, I have observed as people have shared teachings about how self-love is an act of devotion. The emphasis in this discourse reveals a markedly different interpretation of the mahavakya than we might normally find in an Advaita Vedanta setting; rather than minimizing the significance of the self—holding up the cosmological notion that atman is not an independent entity to be distinguished from Brahman, the ultimate reality—the distinctive Hindu-Indian self in this adult education course is juxtaposed with other non-Hindu selves, encountered in daily American life. By no means is this the only interpretation put forth in these contexts, or even in this very classroom. In other theological conversations, this Upanishadic
teaching was employed in a more classical way, to convey the idea that all humanity, and existence, are one, and all reality is interdependent. Especially in Vedantic settings, such existential interpretations are blended with socio-cultural ones. Drawing upon philosophical or devotional idioms, parents and children are instructed about the need to focus their desires and devotion on Hindu and Indian traditions as a means by which to better love the self/community, and ultimately recognize and experience God. Educators are clear that the cultivation of self/communal love is not easy. Directing desires so that children, as well as adults, can be moved to cleave to family, Hindu and Indian traditions, communities, and philosophies requires conscious and continual effort on the part of parents and communities.

In November of 2005, the Chinmaya Mission in St. Augustine, Florida hosted “Conscious Parenting Workshops” for parents and teachers. In the account of the workshops in the Chinmaya Mission newsletter, Pujya Guruji (Swami Tejomayanada) quoted one of the most popular sayings of Swami Chinmayananda: “Children are Divine…’[they] are not vessels to be filled but lamps to be lit….Spiritual values are caught, not taught.”

Elaborating on this idea one teacher at the Kasi Chinmaya Mission in Los Angeles said:

You cannot catch a ball if you do not want to, so it is with spirituality. We can help them to really be wanting it but we can’t just give it to them….Do you just throw a ball to your child when they are two and give up if they don’t catch it on the first time? No, you encourage them, you get them excited about the idea of catching the ball. You clap when they get close. You show them how to do it. So, we must do with them. You can’t be lazy about it, it requires life-time training. We are training to run the ultimate religious marathon and we can’t stop our preparations one day and expect that we can pick up where we left off the next. Same when they go to college. Keep throwing the ball and make them want to catch it, make them feel like catching it will be like winning the World Series.

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75 Swami Chinmayananda, Chinmaya Mission West, bi-monthly newsletter no. 110, January 2006,
The importance of directing desires is not only focused on parents, but adults more generally, and such exercises are understood as a critical part of spiritual improvement and realization.

In a Sunday morning adult series on “Finding Spiritual Balance in an Unbalanced World,” offered at an East Bay mandir in 2003 and 2004, the teachers—a husband and wife with two children in high school and one in college—focused almost exclusively on desire. Abhishek began the six-week series with a discourse on Chapter II of *Manusmrti* (The Laws of Manu):

In the *Dharmashastra*, we learn that we can never be free from desire. It is not always good, but neither is it always bad. Kama is inescapable….We are told here, desire is the very thing that makes us study the Veda, makes us perform sacrifice… Even those very laws that tell us to resist our desires…what makes us refrain from the very exact things we desire? It is *desire* that makes us follow those laws. It is our desire to live a truly fulfilled [and Anupama, his wife, added, “and spiritual”] life that helps us to control our desires…. [He pointed to the text in front of him, reading the first few words aloud in Sanskrit, and then offering an interpretive translation,] *Akamsya kriya ka cid hashyate neha*… Nowhere, anywhere in all of creation, not a single thing we do is free from desire; everything we do comes from desire. It is our human essence, the very thing that makes us who we are. Everything we do is the result of desire, so it says….And our challenge must be how we engage with desire, direct it, channel it. What we do with desire defines who we are.

“So that’s it. We can’t escape desire—that’s just being human, Buddhism recognizes this too…..” Anupama interjected. She then said, “In order for us to begin to figure what is good or bad, what part of the self we should nurture and what things we need to let go, I want us to try an exercise, let’s take out your notebooks and write down what your heart desires, what you really want.” She instructed them to be honest with themselves, not to be “lofty” just because they were in the mandir. These lists were not going to be shared but were intended as a personal exercise that they could reflect upon over the next six weeks. A few minutes into the activity, Anupama told the other parents that they might find it helpful to organize their desires into different categories: work, home, family, marriage, spiritual, children, community, etc.
After ten minutes of silent writing, while a recording of the bhajan, “Itni shakti hame dena data”/‘O God, give us the strength, so that our faith never wavers,’ played on a portable stereo in the background, everyone was asked to come back into a circle. Some people continued to write, while others seemed impatient for the exercise to progress. Abhishek broke the silence and shared with the group that doing this exercise was surprisingly hard for him, even though he had planned it himself.

I feel like I know what I should write, but then there are these things I really do want and it feels like a contradiction, you know. I can’t lie here of all places. I do want to make our house nicer and I would like a raise at work, after all, we have two more going off to college in the next few years. But then I think about how privileged I am and I shouldn’t really want more, you know?

A woman in her mid-fifties interjected, “It is true. America makes us want different things than back at home. Some of it is better, but a lot of it is worse. Everything is so money-money materialistic here….Really, the culture makes the desires.” Challenging this perspective, another woman chimed in,

I don’t know about that. I mean which culture? In Bombay, we were always so wrapped up in what we wore: new saris, jewelry….You can’t really think America is more materialistic than India. Just think about every wedding and party. Also the difference between people who have and who don’t—it’s so stark there. So you just feel it more. Always focused on what you have, locking it up in the almari (wardrobe/cabinet)….And then feeling guilty when you go out or see the servant and realizing how much you have. It is just so totally messed up….It is much better here, more balanced. I am able to be more focused on happiness, going to yoga, coming here. Priorities are different… I find I am actually able to let go of a lot of the stuff that preoccupied us in India…. See look at me? I never would have walked out of the house in these kinds of clothes [gesturing at her yoga pants and sweatshirt], but I feel freer here, nobody is going to judge me at the superficial level that they do back home.”

In agreement another woman said, “That seems like the first step, just letting go of some of the superficial stuff, getting centered. I think that is what the whole text Abhishek read at the start is about. I think distance from India is actually helpful for me in that way and the kids enjoy being here, and I didn’t have a place like this community growing up.” Disagreeing, a middle-aged
man jumped in, “Okay true, but, c’mon, what are we telling the kids? Get into this school, get a 4.0, make a perfect score on the SAT, become a doctor, engineer.”

The conversation continued in this vein for a good thirty minutes and was then closed by Anupama, who suggested that everyone think more about their lists over the next couple of weeks, until their next meeting. She passed out the text of the bhajan that had been playing on in the background during the session. Although she knew that most of them already knew the bhajan, she thought that if they looked at it on paper while they sang it, which included some verses that she hadn’t seen before, it “could help [them] all meditate on what was most important and how to keep focusing on the goals and dreams that would lead to spiritual balance.” In particular, she asked them to ponder one verse: “ham na soche m hame m kya mila hai/ ham yaha sochem kiya kya haim arpan,” which she translated, reading from the handout in the following way, “let us not focus on what we have received, but focus on what we have given.” She said that, for her, this bhajan was about “asking for strength from God to have faith even in this world with so much darkness, greed, sin, and attachment.” After some more discussion, that particular class concluded with Abishek returning to the Dharma Sutra passage with which he began: “This seems to be the main challenge to achieving that balance: How can we be free from attachment when it is completely necessary for life.... when we must be attached for the very sake of our children and their spiritual development?”

Over the next few sessions, the class engaged in a number of clarification exercises aimed at “focusing their desire on the truly important things.” These intellectual exercises were accompanied by goal-setting activities. Participants made informal pledges as follows: to take on practices like yoga or meditation every day for thirty days; spend time before bedtime reading the Gita or Puranas with their children; perform daily puja as a family, or make an effort to
create quality time with one’s husband/wife/family; abstain from buying unnecessary things, like clothing; and make commitments to dedicate more time and resources to help others in need.

The discussions and practices revealed both a working ontology and a prelude to an ethics among members of the group, which was affirmed in their repeated references to the Bhagavad Gita 2:62-65. After their customary recitation in Sanskrit, these verses from the Gita were frequently translated by Anupama in the following way: “From thinking about things that stimulate our senses, attachment is born. From that attachment (sangat) desire is born (samjayate kamah). From that desire, all those negative feelings—anger, confusion, uncertainty, unknowing—all is born.” In that desire is the very essence of being, as I heard it described in a range of Hindu settings on more than one occasion, it is not viewed something one could, or even should wish to escape. This ontological fact was interpreted by the class participants to mean that their ongoing spiritual work was to be a process of “driving the chariot of their senses and desires” toward positive things, as one class participant described it. If an individual or, “ideally the couple,” committed to the work of directing desire and striving for detachment from the superfluous and banal then a type of calm, peace, and serenity could be achieved. Most of the participants in this class believed they should strive to find a balance between attachment and detachment; they viewed the work of shaping and directing their desires as having profound implications for their own spiritual and personal fulfillment, as well as that of their children.

Similar discussions of desire animated classes, attended primarily by the children of immigrants from Fiji and India in 2005. Ostensibly, this class for children ages 10-16 was meant to focus on the Upanishads. Often, however, because of the significant age range among the students and, perhaps because of the teaching style of the instructor, the class content didn’t vary much from week to week. The sessions always opened with a short puja, which was followed by
the chanting of the Gayatri mantra. The teacher—a man in his mid-60s, who came from India to the Bay Area to study electrical engineering in 1972—always translated the mantra in the following way before the chanting began.

Now we meditate on the sacred, Om Bhūr Bhuvah Svah, the one who exists from the beginning to the end, and from who all creation comes. Tat Savituh Varenyam, that Great Creator, Sustainer, who we see in and as the Sun. May that divine light, bhargo devasya dhimahi, radiant, shining so brightly every time we greet the day focus us, diyo yonah prachodayat, turn us, moving all of our energies and desires, and inspire us, enlighten our understanding. Our learning today, and our minds every day, may they be honed and blessed. 76

In his relatively consistent and creative translation of the Gayatri mantra, Uncle (as he insisted all the children and I call him, never wishing to be referred to by his name) always stressed the words, “moving all of our energies and desires,” which, to my knowledge, are unique his interpretive translation. As he uttered these words, he often looked directly at the child who appeared the most restless or distracted at a given moment, usually focusing on the student who struggled to stay still in the cross-legged positions (sukhasana or padmasana, which are taught to the four- to six-year-olds in the Sunday morning classes, which included thirty minutes of yoga). Uncle offered the fidgety student the chance to be the first one to pick out an instrument from the assortment of bells and cymbals in the multi-colored basket, and he then asked them to lead the group in prayer. Predictably, at the end of the chanting, Uncle would speak directly to the child who had been previously distracted, and utter some version of, “When you led us in prayer, you were focused… That is what it takes, put the focus on God and all the other distractions and desires just float away.”

76 I observed this class 16 times over the course of two years. The composition of the class changed from week to week, with 10-12 children usually in attendance. The translation of the Gayatri mantra was consistent from week to week. Although the teacher never seemed to consult a sheet of paper, it was as if he memorized his translation word-for-word, alternating the same Sanskrit words and corresponding English translation in the same order, and with the same inflection each time. The meeting site of this class changed after six months when the mandir lost its lease. Devotees began to rotate meeting in various homes for worship and Sunday morning classes.
After the opening puja and chanting, Uncle selected a passage of text for the class to study. Over the course of two years, this selection consisted of only three texts, one each from the Rig Veda, the Ramcaritmanas and the Gita. Uncle was not alone among teachers I observed to spend substantial time on two particular lines from Chapter 10 of the Rig Veda. He chanted each word for the class, pausing so they could repeat after him. He made the point that the Vedas were much harder than anything else and that they always needed to be studied with a guru, even he was “not really a good teacher for this.” He believed that they should try to understand this important view of creation, which “did not have to contradict scientific theories,” and the teaching it offered: “There was not non-existence or existence…Desire was the first thing, the beginning, the seed of all thought. And sages searching their heart with knowledge found the connection between existence and non-existence” (Rig Veda, 10.129). Uncle asked them to think about what this meant. After almost ten minutes of discussion, which seemed to confound the students, about what was meant by “not non-existence or existence,” Uncle encouraged them to think about the second part of the verse, the idea that desire was the first thing. “As human beings,” he said, “[you] all know what desire is.” After the children offered examples of things they wanted, Uncle tried to turn them toward a more philosophical question. “Why,” he said, “would everything, the very creation of the whole universe, begin with desire?”

Reminding the students that they had learned about the purushartha (the four aims in life)—which is a relatively common framework through which students learn about Hinduism’s approach to life—Uncle said, “one’s dharma can only find achievement with kama... and, we

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77 Here, as in many other classroom settings, the students had binders with copies of bhajans, mantras, stories and other texts. In most cases, texts in Hindi or Sanskrit were provided in Devanagari, transliteration, and translation. Although Uncle often had the students read the printed translations, when he offered a translation, he made no distinction between his creative elucidation of the text and the translation. As a result, I would argue, for the children the lexical meaning of these texts was indistinguishable from Uncle’s interpretation.
could say that *artha* [wealth/material things] too is required. These are the aims—the *trivarga* [doctrine that includes dharma, artha, kama].” With this pronouncement, Uncle assessed the faces of the students in the class, which quite clearly had found no clarification from his reference to the passage from Manuśmṛiti they had learned a few weeks prior, he tried a different approach: “Better yet, think about it this way. Without kama, we would all be like couch potatoes without a remote. Lumps of clay, going nowhere, doing nothing.” Then after some serious encouragement from Uncle, Sanjay, the oldest student in the class took “a stab at it,”

I guess it’s ‘cuz nothing can happen without it, right? We wouldn’t get up, eat, talk to people, sleep, whatever. You can’t really conceive of a world without it, right?... So maybe that was true even for God—or whatever the existence-non-existence thing is supposed to be.

It is hard to imagine a bigger or prouder smile than the one that came over Uncle’s face as Sanjay spoke. He said that after such a perfect answer they should all just think about that during their silent meditation. They closed with the mantra, “Aum Śanti, Śanti.”

At a class a few weeks later, Uncle returned to consideration of desire using a more creative pedagogic technique. Breaking with the normal routine, Uncle had placed things in the four corners of the room: a plate of seventeen *mithai* (enough of the traditional South Asian sweets for each person in the class and Uncle); a red envelope, with gold designs and a gold string (which the children would have immediately recognized as the same kind that held money that they received as gifts from family and friends); a large bag of popcorn, four candy bars, and an envelope with four tickets to the local movie theatre; and the little portable cabinet, which was open and contained all the things normally used for their puja.

When the students arrived, he told them not to sit down as usual, but that they should look around the room and pick the things they wanted most and sit next to them. He promised them that they would get whatever they chose and reminded them that they had been talking
about kama, “the first step in understanding who we are in relation to the world is understanding what we want.” The children walked around and inspected the items, only ever approaching three of the four corners and ignoring the devotional items. The students perfectly divided between the movie-going items and the red envelope of money. Only two children chose the mithai. Uncle said that they could all have what they had chosen and that the children should tell the group why they selected the items they did. One girl, who was thirteen raised her had somewhat sheepishly and asked, “Uncle, do you have more envelopes for each of us?” Sweetly, Uncle replied that they could have what was there, there were no other envelopes to be had.

The group of seven, by the red envelope, opened it to find a five-dollar bill inside. The movie group, also comprised of seven, opened their envelope to find four tickets. Uncle asked them to tell the others what they had acquired as a result of the exercise and what they planned to do with it. The money-group determined it was a simple math problem and that each of them would get seventy-one cents to keep and there would be three cents remaining that they could give to charity. The movie group huddled together to figure out what to do; they determined that they should pick numbers from a bowl and each of them would pick one thing in the order of the numbers they selected. This meant, however, that four children got a single movie ticket, one claimed the bag of popcorn, and two others got candy bars. Two candy bars were left over and the group was uncertain about how to proceed, one wondered aloud if it was appropriate to offer the “leftover candy bars during puja,” or if that was somehow disrespectful.

The mithai group was flush with sweets and they decided between the two of them that, as there were just enough pieces for everyone in the class, they would share them with the group. The discussion that ensued was somewhat predictable. Uncle asked the children with one movie ticket how they would be able to use it since he guessed they couldn’t go to the movies alone. He
asked what the children who would get seventy-one cents, when they could make change of the five-dollar bill, were going to do with the money. He asked the children, who by that point had already handed out the mithai, felt. These two children were the only members of the class who didn’t feel disappointment with the end results. All the other children tried to express gratitude, but Uncle pressed them and asked if this was what they were really hoping for and most admitted that they were less excited now than they were when he first told them to pick what they wanted. Quite a lot of time was spent as Uncle philosophized about what the mithai symbolized, how the sharing of sweets among one-another didn’t diminish what they had received, but actually made it richer, making them feel generous and inspiring them to make similar choices next time.

After a long discussion, he said it was time for their puja and, at that point, the students realized that the cabinet was not in its usual place. Uncle told them that it too had been one of the things he thought they might choose, but he understood that it was “a lot to expect from them at their age.” The students were given a short break, and they started to eat the mithai, Uncle said that rather than eat his piece, it should be naivedya (an offering to God). This caused two other children to stop before they had eaten anything, appearing as though they suddenly felt guilty and selfish for not thinking of this themselves, they also said they would offer their mithai. The two remaining candy bars came up again and it was decided that the two children who gave over their mithai, could have the candy bars, which the youngest child mused, “Krishna, Ganesha, and Saraswati [the main deities in their shrine] probably wouldn’t like as much [as the mithai] anyhow.” When they turned to their silent meditation, Uncle suggested that each student try to “visualize [their] heart’s desire….keeping in mind the exercise, and that the things we pursue say a lot about who we are and what our future will be.”
It is not uncommon to observe conversations and exercises like these in Hindu classes and camps for children, or at discourses or discussions for adults. In these contexts, reflecting on personal, spiritual, social, and communal desideratum is understood to be productive, a technology of the self that, when coupled with a change in one’s outlook and/or actions, is potentially transformative. In many ways, discussions and exercises about desires like those that I describe above and the discursive examples I will turn to in later chapters, begin in the form of confessional shared by individuals in groups, written down as part of journaling or spiritual exercises, or seen as things that one should try to transcend part of meditation practices.

Discourses of desire also serve to frame notions of morality and uphold visions of proper conduct. However, because desire is a central trope and a challenge presented in Hindu theology and philosophy, the moralizing discourse isn’t perceived of as simply disciplinary, but as a spiritual challenge with which even the saints and gods—like Sita in the Ramayana or Arjuna in the Gita—had to wrestle. In the chapter on education, I will look more closely at the pedagogic practices and philosophies in Hindu diasporic classrooms to consider how the communal and parental goals of educating about and inculcating Hinduism and Hindu values in the next generation proceed from a belief that, while children need to be taught to love and find belonging in Hindu communities, they already possess Hindu subjectivities by virtue of their social-cultural-familial location. Part of the job of parents and teachers, then, is making them aware of their almost natural inclination toward all things Hindu and Indian, and the inherent virtue that is presumed to accompany such identifications and desires.

In these contemporary discourses, I have not identified a single working theory of desire, but rather many—often conflicting—desires and conceptions of desire emerge in conversations and practices. Teachers and parents often draw upon classical texts to affirm the idea that the
very essence of being human is desire (echoing Spinoza or the Vedas). Many of them argue—often through discourses about what desires should be fostered or discouraged—that desires are socially and culturally produced, noting that the very act of shaping, even manipulating desire, is a powerful and essential way in which selves are made (reflecting, albeit to very different ends and with different philosophical orientations, a limited type of Deleuzian and Foucauldian understanding of the production of desire as the constitution selves).

(III) THE CULTIVATION OF OTHER DESIRES
FAMILIAL, MARITAL, GASTRONOMIC

In addition to these explicit efforts to cultivate spiritual desires, while curbing other desires, additional efforts, both parental and communal, are focused on the cultivation of specific, sanctioned romantic and material desires.

Strategically, many parents and community leaders believe that the placing children’s bodies—especially teenage bodies—in Hindu environments, be it at a camp, a weekly bala vihar, Indian music or dance classes, will help cultivate in them a love for Hinduism, Indian culture, and (perhaps, most importantly) other Hindus. Among those parents of teenage and college-age children with whom I spoke, most were quite forthright about the reality of American dating and premarital sex and felt that simply by putting their children in contexts with other Indians would help to facilitate their falling in love with, and hopefully marrying other Hindus. Few expected that their children would seek an arranged marriage, and even fewer intended to “force it” upon them. However, most parents seemed confident that if their children were comfortable in these contexts, they would be more likely to seek them out when they went off to college and eventually wanted to marry.
Speaking on behalf of a group of parents waiting to meet their children after a weekend retreat for high school students run by the Chinmaya Mission, one parent, Kishore, said:

We know that we can’t control their urges. They are teenagers and they are thinking about love and, unfortunately, about sex. All of our children are in school with non-Indians, but we feel that sending them here, they are with other people like themselves, they come from families with the same values. If they are going to date, I want them to date someone they meet here and the chances are better of that the more we come to the mission or go the temple. This way, my wife and I feel, they are with people who share our values.

Many of the other waiting parents nodded in agreement. Asha, a mother of three, chimed in:

I don’t expect that my son [her eldest, who was on the retreat] will want an arranged marriage, his father and I didn’t have one ourselves. But I want him to love who we are, and feel like he is at home with other Indian people and eating Indian food, then I know when he gets married he is going to look for someone like himself. At least that is my hope.

Another woman, Hema, who was forty-years-old when we spoke, was born in America, and has been a regular at the Livermore temple, offered up this to me privately, on the matter of love and her 15-year-old daughter:

This may seem somewhat hypocritical of me, or odd. I had my share of breaking conventions. Hell, I didn’t even marry a Hindu, let alone an Indian. My parents were really quite fine with it. They are cosmopolitan and have all different types of friends. It’s not as though I was a virgin at marriage, either. I guess this is why it might seem strange that I hope my daughter wants to marry a Hindu. I love Indian culture, I love my religion and as she and my son were growing up, I realized how important all of it was to me. I don’t regret marrying my husband at all but I just want them to feel at home with this part of themselves and, honestly, now that I’m a mother, I don’t need her to be fooling around with guys any sooner than she has to be. My hope is that the Indian guys she meets here, and when she is at camp, have been raised to appreciate some restraint on the sexual level—maybe I am naïve but I can wish, don’t you think? …Can’t I?

Such desires seem to be shared by many of the teachers, parents, and swamis active in American Hindu educational settings. In some contexts, the question of sexuality and desire is brought up directly. Oft-quoted is Swami Chinmayananda’s admonishment that teenagers and the young unmarried should remember that discipline is the true meaning of yoga, and “brahmacharya
means self-control in all areas—eating, talking, sex.” The subject of gendered and sexual
discipline is of great significance, tied to nationalist formations and ideals, in which, as scholars
like Partha Chatterjee illustrate, hierarchical and essentialized notions of normative-sexuality,
gender, the family, and domesticity are held up as part of a larger project. Deviation from these
desires is loaded with complex questions about failure to perform proper Hindu subjectivity, but
it also has been the locus of tremendous creativity and innovation among diasporic Hindus, a
topic I will turn to in chapters to follow.

Turning back to the cultivation of laudable desires, in a class for parents of high school
students held in 2006, Jagati Pansare—a grandmother-like figure for children who attend a more
informal, roaming bala vihar, catering primarily to a few families from Maharashtra, Odisha, and
Chhattisgarh, who have settled in or around Simi Valley—said:

I am certain that if we shower them with Hinduism and Indian things while they are
young, they will relish them when they are without them later. When they go off to
college or into the world on their own, they will find themselves wanting the very things
that they don’t have, all those things that are representing love—community and our
gods, and mama’s food will be sure to bring them back home.78

There is much more to say on this topic of cultivating sanctioned love. It is for this reason that
many parents of college-aged students encourage their children to get involved with Indian and
Hindu groups on campus. Students themselves cite meeting potential boyfriends and girlfriends
as a reason for their involvement in a variety of South Asian and Hindu organizations on
campus. This is also evident in reading Hindu matrimonial ads, particularly those taken out by
parents. Certain Hindu groups, like the Swaminarayan community, spend significant time in teen
programming focused on appropriate behavior of and relationships between girls and boys, as

78 I recently learned that Jagati Pansare died in the Fall of 2016. The bala vihar classes she offered for children and
parents for over 10 years ceased meeting in 2015.
well as expectations for marriage and dating. And the Swaminarayan community is not alone;\textsuperscript{79} many Hindu youth programs (including formal and informal educational settings) include discussion of marriage and family with their high school aged students. Marriage websites, Hindu Speed dating, and modern-arranged marriage matchmaking, and dating services are all flourishing within North American and transnational Hindu communities.\textsuperscript{80}

In the American Hindu discourse of dating, marriage, and love articulated among parents and pandits, as well as among teens and young adults, who are themselves seeking a suitable match, a whole philosophy about the relationship of desire to otherness and sameness emerges. Theories of desire often focus on the importance of the “other” as desire’s object and opposing subject. Desire in sexual, romantic and theological contexts has often seen the “otherness” or “alterity” of desire as an essential aspect of a relationship, be it with God and/or a lover.

From the context of postmodern theology and philosophy, as Leena Taneja has illustrated,

Alterity coupled with the concept of desire offers a powerful way to discuss how relationships of otherness...inform and illuminate the nature of desire and how we understand it. In a nutshell, attention to the other dissolves and liberates desire from the

\textsuperscript{79} See the Swaminarayan Sanstha matchmaking website, FERA, which enables people to meet others who share their “spiritual, cultural, and personal interests” so that they can journey “together in life and sanstha.” FERA: Journeying together in Life and Satsang. \url{https://fera.na.baps.org/#}; Pramukh Swami Maharaj, “On Marriage” at a youth camp in Orlando, Florida in September 2000, reprinted online October 2, 2000. \url{http://www.swaminarayan.org/essays/2000/2210.htm}

\textsuperscript{80} Initially, I had intended to include an entire chapter on the subject of “Cultivating Love: Desiring Hindus and Hinduism,” which explored the cultivation of sanctioned romantic relationships by teachers, acharyas, pandits, and parents and the theories at work in their pedagogic and practical choices about how to cultivate what they deem to be desirable romantic/domestic desires. However, due to space constraints, I have only gestured at the myriad issues here. What I do argue in that work is that Hindu ritual practices of marriage have been retooled, even in the context of interfaith weddings, so as to instantiate Hindu identities and assure a commitment to the Hindu community and Indian nation. Such rituals have become a centerpiece of Hindu marriage rites in the United States. In addition to discussing the rituals themselves, wedding programs, translations and interpretations offered by priests and other officiants, as well as matrimonial ads, all provide insights into new aspects of the cultivation of Hindu subjects in the realm of the romantic. Briefly, in the chapter on education, I reference the fact that desire for cultural, ritual and personal intelligibility is among the many desires that have emerged among young couples and their parents, and it is most evident in choices about how to explicate the wedding and gloss the rituals for themselves and others. I give a glimpse into this research in the Coda.
stranglehold of dichotomous thinking which pits the desiring subject against the desired object, suggesting in part that desire lives and thrives in places of difference not identity, where the subject never meets its chosen object of desire, but remains in exile, a vagabond always in search of that which it cannot possess or own. According to Derrida, desire is a deep, unceasing lack that must remain unsatisfied if it is to have any chance at all. Derrida equates desire with the metaphor of the desert, evoking the sense of loss, displacement, and separation that accompanies the experience of desire.  

This sense of desire, a longing for the other—who may even seem to be perpetually out of reach, finds some echoes in the notion of viraha (the sense of longing characterized by the very bhakti poet-saints whom these American Hindu teachers, often reference in their discourses on desire). However, while Hindu parents and teachers in the diaspora often reference bhakti in their discussions of desirable desires, they make a different philosophical move. They do so not only with their shift in the subject/object of desire—which can be conceived of in terms other than divine (including Hindu tradition, family, connection to India, future spouse, etc.)—but they transform the very nature and attainability of what is desired. In these cases, the subject/object of desire is perceived as sameness, as the self in various forms, and for parents and community leaders, this desire is, hopefully, attainable. This longing can be satiated. The realization of this desire is generally not described as the transcendence of the distance between self and other, which might parallel a bhakti formulation, but it is spoken of as a process of finding home, an experience of comfort and familiarity. To find one’s life-partner is to recognize in the other a likeness of oneself. As a swami said to a group of high school students, at a retreat held in the Santa Cruz mountains:

You may want to wander, to try new things, this is perfectly normal, but after a while, you will find yourself wanting. When you feel that longing, come home…. You will miss the taste and smell of home, you will miss the traditions and festivals. When you come

home, you will find your real self there. And when you get married and make your home a Hindu home, there you will find Bhagavan waiting.

In the Swami’s formulation, God isn't distant, but rather located in the familiar and comfortable feelings, smells, and tastes of “home;” and Bhagavan may come be known in the relationships and tactile experiences found there. Here we find a celibate, unmarried swami offering advice on marriage, and advocating the importance of a domestic life as a means to finding God. In transnational guru movements, like the Chinmaya Mission, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, and Bharat Sevashram Sangha, swamis often ironically play this role of marriage-advocate and guide, along with parents.

Repeatedly, I heard teachers and parents measure their success or failure as “Hindu-makers” based on their ability to instill a type of homing device within children before they leave the ambit of their family to go off to college. For most of the parents I spoke with, eventual separation from home is discussed as though it is a fait accompli when raising children outside of India. Therefore, the cultivation of desires for all the trappings of home and temple, India and Hindus is seen as a crucial step in the cultivation of Hindu subjectivity, and early years are understood as foundational with respect to future life decisions regarding marriage, and family.

Attempts to cultivate sanctioned desires by parents and community leaders are often met with mixed reviews by the teenagers and young adults to whom such efforts are directed. The outlook and desires of younger generations manifest differently. For many, conceptions of love and marriage are different from those of their parents, as are their ideas about sexuality. For those who seek to maintain connections to Hinduism—for both personal reasons and the acquiescence of parents—approaches to the *vivaha* (often reveal other types of desire: those for intelligibility, personal resonance, and self-reflection. These desires are expressed in the material
culture of wedding programs and through the commentaries, reinterpretations of rituals, the incorporation of other readings, cultural and religious traditions into the more conventional Vedic ceremony; these emendations elucidate a set of aspirations about the wedding, that it should reflect the identifications, political, and social positions of the married couple, and/or that it be made culturally intelligible, rather than wholly foreign, to non-Hindu ritual participants and guests. In some cases, this involves the re-visioning of ceremonies for LGBT and interfaith couples, and even for American-raised brides and grooms. I will return to these topics in the chapter on “Cultivating Recognizable Love for/in Hindus and Hinduism.” In that the choice to hold a Hindu wedding ceremony—be it the decision of the couple, family members, or both—is, by its very nature, about conferring sanction, divine and human, personal and communal.

Theologies of desire and strategies to promote sanctioned love are accompanied by consumer and gastronomic cultivation. Culture, in this regard, is a commodity, something to be exchanged, acquired, absorbed and, in some cases, even purchased. Embedded in this discourse is simultaneously a critique of American materialism and sexuality and an embrace of consumerism, globalization and capitalist values. Hindu tradition has long been characterized as a study in contradiction, described through a language of polarities. T.N. Madan, quite famously, argued that, on the one hand, renunciation, the eschewing of social life—material and interpersonal—is idealized in Hindu traditions, while on the other hand, non-renunciation, domestic life—the pursuit of wealth and fullness of relationships—is the preoccupation of the majority of Hindu life, texts, and traditions that detail “values of auspiciousness, purity, and moral equipoise.”

In this understanding, kama, artha, and dharma (duty/law) are understood as interrelated and distinct from the singular pursuit of liberation from attachments, which include material goods, family relationships, love, desire, etc. Patrick Olivelle has described this as the conflict between “ascetic withdrawal or social engagement.” In many formulations, these seemingly contradictory goals are understood to reflect the aims of human beings at different stages of life (ashramas) and, figured this way, the purushartha are not inherently in conflict, a viewpoint that is quite commonly articulated in Hindu diasporic contexts. While sannyasis (renunciants) find their way into this research, in the roles of swamis and gurus, they are far from socially withdrawn, and, as a general rule, they do not advocate a life of renunciation for their students. Bhoga, artha, kama, and dharma are regularly elevated as laudable, indeed ideal, life goals. Popular discourses on the Gita reveal that, ideally, this philosophical tension between the path of moksa and dharma is resolved through detachment from desire and the achievement of desireless or selfless action (nishkamakarma). Yet, while detachment from desire (trshna) is most certainly discussed and posed as a spiritual challenge in many contemporary Hindu contexts, the fact remains that things (food, clothing, ritual items, etc.) actually play significant roles in the shaping and sustaining of Hindu selves and communities.

For example, when people talk about South Asian grocery stores—be they in Berkeley, Cupertino, Edison, or Houston—they often describe how the inevitable and immediate assault of senses produces an even greater longing for particular experiences. Such longing is about the evocation of India, of missing the foods and smells. Markets promise that they will offer a taste of India, a taste of home, of mothers, grandmothers, or servants cooking. These affective sentiments, laden with nostalgia, were expressed by many of the adults I encountered in grocery

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stores; they shared the feeling that their “discovery” of the particular market that carries the best chilis at the best prices, or the ata (whole wheat flour) that seems the freshest will enable them to make for themselves, their husbands, their children, the food that is about being who you are. While it may seem strange to characterize it this way, for some, it appears that there is a very strong “you-are-what-you-eat” philosophy of cooking and parenting, which is manifest in a host of ways.

If some adults are likely to wax poetic about good groceries, for some children a different type of experience can unfold: “It smells funny in here.” “It is crowded.” Spaces like Indian groceries often bring together didactic and desiring impulses. For some parents, bringing children to the market can involve bribery, a means to entice and build, as one parent said it clearly, “positive associations with the foods and culture.” I have also encountered parents who express pride in the fact that their child loves a specific Indian food; the consumption of the food being an ingestion of identity. Additionally, I have watched parents offer endless puris, pakoras, samosas, and kulfi to their children—when similar sorts western foods are viewed as “unhealthy” or “special treats”—simply in order to affirm and instantiate their children’s appetite for things-Indian. Such practices are certainly not unique to the diaspora, the joy of making children happy, and indulging the desires of a child has a long history in India. However, there is a depth of motivation that isn’t present in India: a sense that each time a child consumes Indian food, they are imbibing something that affirms and substantiates their Indian/Hindu selfhood. Some

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84 I have known this feeling myself, a sense that even though my children do not really “look Indian,” their great love of chana masala, Sindhi lolis, chutneys, and mango lassis means something; it is the subtle, yet tangible proof that just as a part of them appreciates this cuisine, they also love part of this culture that is their heritage. In this regard, I am quite certain that my ability to connect with parents personally, as a parent, has certainly changed the nature of my fieldwork and the way that people have spoken to me over the years.
parents make a point of bringing their children to the market with them, believing, as did this mother that:

Even though my children don’t like doing the errands with me, I make them do the Indian shopping with me. They always get to pick a treat at the store—just knowing that they have something special that their friends don’t get to have—a gulab jaman or tikki—makes them proud of who they are. Also, when we are in the Indian stores, it’s one of the few places that is all Indian—its good for them to feel at home. And when we go to India they are familiar with the food and the smells.

Countless other parents speak of how they buy in excess for their children when they go to India or when they express interest in any Indian commodities. “Something comes over me,” said Tara, “when my daughter and I go to India. I let her get as many outfits as she likes. I would never be that way in the States but I feel that her wanting Indian things is so good, such a positive sign about how good she feels about herself, that I don’t really mind.” This strategic parental practice involves the use of material goods be they food, clothes, or comics as both enticement and reward for cultural and religious association. Trappings really do matter. More than simply “putting-on” identity, parents openly discuss how dressing their children in Indian clothes, or giving them Indian sweets or jewelry makes Hindus and Indians out of them.

Material acquisition is also a required part of Hindu religious practice, something not often acknowledged and yet ever-present. No arati or puja can happen without the proper items—images of gods and goddesses, without agarbatti (incense), or a diya (lamp), and thus finding these items and consuming them itself becomes a major aspect of enacting and cultivating Hinduness. This is especially in the case in diasporas, wherein the material goods associated with the practice of Hinduism and India can take some effort to acquire. As Vineeta Sinha points out in her work about Hinduism in Singapore, Religion and Commodification: ‘Merchandizing’ Diasporic Hinduism, the material goods required to engage in Hindu ritual, celebration, education and cultural participation ensure transnational commerce and material
flows between the subcontinent (where many of the items in use are still produced) and the
diaspora, and has led to new forms of localized diasporic artistry and creativity.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore,
she notes that the materials of Hinduism, which in India are generally found in specialty shops,
catering to particular religious needs, can appear like a disorganized array of things when found
on the shelves of grocery stores, but such things are what provide order in the rhythms of ritual
life. It is would be easy to focus only on the lofty philosophical discourses and, even the
carefully crafted curriculum for children, and ignore the stuff—food, clothing, and other goods—but to do so would miss the ways in which Hinduism is materialized, inviting sentiments of
belonging, and avenues for embodiment, as well as opening up conversations about the politics
of representation.

(IV) \textbf{DESIRE FOR RECOGNITION THROUGH}
\textbf{HINDU HISTORY, NARRATIVES \& PUBLIC IMAGES}

Another part of the project of making American Hindus involves the drive to distill
Hinduism and present it in ways that are accessible not only to Hindus themselves but to non-
Hindus, be they school age children or civic leaders. This is evident in the activities of
controversial groups such as the Hindu Education Foundation, the Infinity Foundation, the Hindu
Swayamsevak Sangh, the VHP, and the Vedic Foundation, and among more mainstream groups
like the Hindu American Foundation. It is not only in controversies like the California textbook
debate, that we find this desire to explain Hinduism as a means of preserving tradition,
strengthening community, instilling pride, and combating misconceptions and discrimination, but
practices of representation have themselves become religious endeavors in their own right and

they can be seen at work in mandirs, museums, public school classrooms, festivals, courtrooms and political lobbying. These practices and processes of representation will be explored in chapters IV and VIII.

In all of these explorations it is critical to consider how and when articulations of Hindu identity are responses to and expressions of Hindutva agendas; experiences of marginalization and minority status; multiculturalism rhetoric and enterprises; and transnational politics involving global alliances and motives. And while these factors are central in framing the discourse and practices of Hindus in America, there is something else at work in the narrativizing and historicizing endeavors: the more amorphous experience of finding “belonging” and “purpose,” self-esteem and pride, which many engaged in Hindu educational projects speak of almost incessantly.

Among transnational Hindu umbrella organizations, as well as local mandirs and Hindu and Indian cultural groups, there is a strong desire to put forward and popularize a Hindu narrative, history and “positive” public image. This, of course, speaks directly to the political and to the question of how not only the self but also the “other” is perceived. In other work, I have spent a tremendous amount of time on the insidious ways in which these narratives and groups work, as well as the way in which such narratives seem almost impossible to escape in diasporic Hindu formations. The desires expressed by those engaged in these historical projects is complex, however, involving a need for acceptance and affirmation. Educating Hindus themselves, as well as the “ignorant” and “misinformed” American public about the depth of India’s glorious past and Hinduism’s long and beautiful contributions to everything from science to Sanskrit’s place as the “mother of all languages,” is not simply the nationalist endeavor that it is often understood to be. It is also an infatuation, if you will, with Hinduism, as its history and
contributions have been crafted and narrated. For so many with whom I have spoken, it is not politics which drives them at all, but the fact that they are devoted to and in love with their vision of Hinduism—dangerous as it can often be.  

Ashis Nandy has written about how “mythologization is also moralization,” involving a process of “principled forgetting,” which refers to the “refusal to separate the remembered past from its ethical meaning in the present. For this refusal, it is important not to remember the past, objectively, clearly or in its entirety.” Certainly there is selective remembering, or perhaps we should call it an (un)principled forgetting at work in everything from the California textbook Controversy to the assault on eminent scholars of Hinduism, but because the telling of one’s story, particularly a religious one, always involves creativity and poetry, moralizing and selective forgetting, as well as romantic remembering, it is crucial that we don’t simply view the desire for perpetuating a narrative of Hindu and Indian history solely as an expression of Hindutva groups—which in some cases it most certainly is, but it is also something else as well.

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86 I feel it is important to consider love and the complicated webs of overlapping desires (political, spiritual, communal, material, gastronomic) at work in diasporic contexts. Among a subset of Hindus outside of India, we can witness profound creativity, drive, and industry in making the tradition a teachable set of principles and texts. This is exemplified best by the publication in 2011 of the Chinmaya Mission Bala Vihar Teachers’ Handbook, which is an extensive curriculum for grades K-9, which represents the culmination of many years of work and draws upon forty years of bala vihar programs. And throughout the country, Hindu schools associated with mandirs and other community projects have followed suit in writing curriculum of their own.


88 In this regard, as well as in the educational, romantic and gastronomic endeavors, Hindu leaders have explicitly spoken about their desire to model themselves after Jews, who are generally held in esteem based on an essentialized, and stereotypical image—much like that to which American Hindus are themselves subjected. This is a whole other section.
In the pages that follow, I posit that American Hindu discourse about the nature of identities presupposes a theory of the self in which desires are believed to constitute subjects and cultivating desires is tacitly understood as a means of making or solidifying Hindu subjectivities.

Modern work on identity has offered up critical challenges to essentialism, illustrating the ways in which identity is constructed and produced through various technologies and strategies. Related to this focus on the production of identifications, scholarship has considered the increasingly global and transnational nature of our world, bringing the language of borderlands, hybridity, and intersectionality into discourse about identity. Such work has illustrated the ways in which identities are unstable, constantly being renegotiated, articulated and formulated in various contexts, not only across physical borders but within the same space and time. Herein the emotions of anxiety, ambivalence, fear, and fragility come into play. How, scholars and artists have asked, are these complex selves to negotiate their place, or rather places, in the world? Moreover, how does the production of these identifications (and the “identities” that people who assume them are thought to embody), especially in the context of anxiety and ambivalence, depend upon constructions of “others,” of “difference,” of “inside” and “outside?”

In work on the South Asian diaspora, in particular, recent scholarship has been focused on dismantling the constructions of identity and history articulated by Hindu groups in the United States and in India, not only because of how definitions of Hindus, Hinduism, and Indianness are established, but also because of how Others are framed in this process. It is my hope that in bringing together discussions about the making of subjectivities (and the complex processes at play) into conversation with discourses of desire we can better understand what is at stake for various Hindus in these endeavors.
Most theories of desire—as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter—are predicated upon some notion of “the Other.” Desire is both formed in relation to and directed at the Other. Theorists working on both difference and desire have often suggested that the two are intimately linked. Yet recent work on the notion of difference and the Other has sought to challenge the strict dichotomy between the “self” and the “other” in disciplines such as anthropology and also in the realm of sexuality, where gay/lesbian studies has helped to theorize what it is to want and desire a version of the self. In addition, in modern work on transnational flows and global citizenry, the classic formulation of diasporic longing for a distant but unreachable homeland has been turned on its head, with people not simply finding some semblance of Bombay in Brooklyn, but often discovering that they are more “at home” in Brooklyn than in Mumbai.

In the case of Hindu identity-making in the United States, desire is directed most intensely at an image of the self, fabricated though it may be. It is desire for things and people, Indian and Hindu (oft-conflated), that parents, pandits, and community leaders seek for “their” children. When the object of desire is perceived as sameness, as the self in various forms, a different type of discourse emerges. Desire is not about perceived distance or tension, but about the experience of comfort, about perceived attainability (found in food, consumer goods, regular visits to temples and Hindu classes, and in marriage to another who resembles the self). This is not to say that there isn’t tension involved, especially in the diaspora when many believe there are constant obstacles (distractions, or maya [illusions]) standing in the way of one’s reaching or realizing the self.). In addition, there is tension when the image of self, as expected by teachers, family, and community, doesn’t meet the reality of the subject. And this tension and disappointment have been the subject of a number of discourses offered for parents by Hindu teachers in the U.S. and U.K.
Overall, I wish to suggest that something about modern Hindu practice and discourse in the diaspora resembles bhakti (Hindu devotional) traditions, which have considered desire an important subject of theological inquiry and a significant aspect of religious experience. While the discourse of bhakti is not always overtly used by Hindus in the U.S. to reflect upon their wide-range of educational, ritual, theological, and consumer practices, I feel the language of bhakti resonates and is an extremely useful tool with which to describe trends and movements in Hindu diasporic life.

Among Hindus in the United States, a new type of bhakti has emerged. While Hindu religious leaders and parents are certainly still invested in the cultivation of a relationship with the divine, a desire that children practice and embody devotion to God/s. Based on a study of daily Hindu life in the diaspora, I suggest that the importance of the divine has been minimized with respect to other types of devotion. Parents, pandits, and teachers are deeply invested in cultivating alternative or, some might argue, complementary, types of desire: that for nation/homeland, that for “South Asian” and Hindu material goods and culinary tastes, narrative and historical desire for a public recognition and pride; martial or political desire for Hindu power and ascendancy characterized by Hindutva movements, and that romantic (nuptial and reproductive) desire which is sanctioned by parents and community. Embedded in these is the cultivation of self-love, akin to the “Black pride” and “feminist” movements of the nineteen sixties, seventies, and eighties. Such self-love, when cultivated, will lead, according to parents and teachers, to the desire of desirable desires.

Furthermore, many studies of bhakti focus on the importance of bhakti’s root, bhaj (to share) as a means to convey the importance of community, the sharing of love and devotion for God/s, and the collective longing of bhaktas for that ultimate sharing that happens not only with
God’s but also with fellow devotees, be it in the singing of bhajans, or in the experience of rituals, performance and pilgrimage. Collectivity, in this regard, is characteristic of bhakti traditions. At times the actual subject of desire maybe unreachable and unknowable, but it is the perception of shared desire that helps to create community and purpose. Some may attend a kirtan (the singing of narrative, devotional songs) for the feeling that they get when they are there, others to commune with God, others to show reverence, others because it is simply something to do, but the collective aspect can inspire a sense of purpose that is beyond the self, a communal striving. When speaking to people at bala vihar classes, camps, and regular educational/religious programs, this type of “collective purpose” or “shared goal” is evident. People come because they believe they “share” in their aspirations for their children. And this sharing itself concretizes a type of identity, a subjectivity created not only for children but for parents as well.

There are, of course, many ways in which the resonance between bhakti’s evocations and character and that of modern-day Hindu diasporic practice and discourse diverge, particularly as we consider the subject of desire and its attainability. But my reason for making such a theoretical analogy comes out of bhakti’s ability to help us consider the important forces of collectivity, love, and desire.

As an illustration of this, we may consider a bala vihar curriculum that was produced in 2006. “India my Love” was compiled for use nationally at bala vihars throughout the country and the class entitled: “Hindu Culture, Ageless Guru—India My love” was being taught at a number

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89 Scholars like John Cort have noted that such etymological focus can obscure the wide range of practices and emotions that exist within the field of bhakti. I make this assertion about the characteristic features of bhakti—sharing, collectivity, the importance of community—not to suggest a firm definition of bhakti, but because I believe the language and affective states associated with bhakti, generally, are a useful lens through which to approach some of the contemporary processes at work within Hindu diasporic communities. See John Cort, “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia,” History of Religions 42 (2002): pp. 59-89.
of Bala Vihars already. The title alone, chosen in 2006, bespeaks the discourse I have tried to explore here. In the diaspora, Hindu educators and parents are working to promote the idea that love and devotion are not simply to be directed at God's but at India herself and at Hindu culture. What I wish to suggest, as well, is that for many parents, educators and swamis the desire to cultivate love of self, love of culture, love of Hinduism, and love of India in children in America is itself largely motivated by love.

To suggest that love and not only hatred, fear of the other, and the experiences of marginalization or alienation, motivate Hindu Americans to engage in the perpetuation of Hinduism and in the promotion of Hindu and Indian pride is simultaneously the most obvious and most controversial of conclusions. For those who study Hindu identity and pride, examining the political ramifications, the rewriting of Indian history, and the construction of Hinduism with respect to the Muslim and Christian other, to speak of love and Hindu pride in the same breath raises more than eyebrows. However, somehow, we need to understand this aspect of identity formation as well, the aspect that is about the gift that parents believe themselves to be bestowing upon their children when they educate them in Hinduism and transmit to them a love of their culture (including language, food, music, dance, film, story, and ritual). I use the word gift purposely to indicate the way that parents speak of their process of cultural transmission, something that is extremely valuable and beloved. The full value of which was not completely realized until it was lost or at least harder to attain, and which is now the subject of much parental and communal longing (as well as the inspiration for institutional, cultural, material, religious and technological innovation).

While that fear of the other, fear of forgetting, experiences of loss and cultural alienation, along with multicultural rhetoric and identity politics—which much academic work on Hinduism in modernity has explored—are central forces in the construction of Hindu identity in the United States, we should not underestimate the place of love.
CHAPTER III
HINDU EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES, PEDAGOGIES, AND PRACTICES

To be a Hindu is neither an unchanging, primordial identity nor an infinitely flexible one which one can adopt or shed at will, depending upon circumstances. It is an identity acquired through social practice and, as such, constantly negotiated in changing contexts.¹

To acquire an identity requires education. It can involve learning: social norms, cultural cues, forms of communication, modes of embodiment (including food, clothing, etc.), rhythms of observing and marking time, and styles of engaging with others and the world at large. Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social reproduction is extremely useful for thinking about how various types of educational practices function to produce these identities. His approach, in many ways, is grounded in the concept of cultural and social capital, which he understands as being manifest in embodied, objectified (possessed and recognized throughout material objects) and institutionalized ways. Cultural capital takes its embodied form, according to Bourdieu, through *habitus*.² *Habitus* refers to all the ways that our tastes, our likes and dislikes, our affective responses, and our knowledge of how to navigate various environments and view the world, are integrated into the practices of individuals such that they are often rendered so habitual that they appear to be unlearned, simply natural. In this way, he suggests, cultural and social norms—in the form of such things as class, status, and other forms of knowledge—are reproduced and instantiated in ways that are often socially conservative and hegemonic. He writes, “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.”³

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The process of migration can disrupt the established order and its naturalization. Norms—ways of being, relating, thinking—that were ‘just how things were’ can be exposed and the migrant can become aware that those “things,” which appeared natural, were actually learned. This is one of the many reasons that the study of diasporic communities can be particularly interesting, although migration is not the only reason such naturalized orders can come into relief. There are many ways and contexts whereby the constructedness of the normative social order is exposed. In the spheres where I have conducted research, immigrant parents often recognize that their children’s assumptions about how to engage in the world are different from their own. Generational differences, like those prompted by migration, can result in a similar experience of dissonance that lays bare aspects of culture and forms of knowledge that parents realize they want to, and, in some cases, have failed to transmit and inculcate in their children. Hindu educational environments bear witness endeavors of “making Hindus.” In many ways, these practices emerge as intensely conservative efforts aimed at social reproduction, and yet they are often also extremely creative and innovative, as they undertaken with a recognition that you can’t be a Hindu here in America (or the U.K., Singapore, or Australia, etc.) in the “same way” that you might be one in India.

(1) MAKING HINDUS

In her book, Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture, Sherry Ortner carefully employs the term ‘making’ to illustrate the dual notion that “cultural categories, historical subjects, or forms of subjectivity”\(^4\) are constructed and made and that these same categories, subjects, and subjectivities can construct and make themselves. This distinction between made

and making can appear to be one between passive and active, yet in neither case is consciousness or intentionality assumed. In highlighting these two dimensions of making, Ortner argues that we must consider how human beings act as agents in the creation of their experiences, subjectivities, and worlds—be they institutional or imaginative creations—and that we are attentive to how “cultural meanings and structural arrangements …construct and constrain” people’s agency, and their ability to build and transform their own situations.\(^5\) In later work, she argues that practice theory, focusing on “the dialectics of social life,”\(^6\) offers a way by which to study history—social reproduction and transformation—through tracing the “effects of culturally organized practices,” which are “processual and generally slow; involving the construction of social subjects often from childhood,” including the life practices of both youth and adults.” She prompts us to explore how subjectivities are articulated in intimate and discrete settings, and in relationship to global events and processes.\(^7\)

Not only is such an approach particularly useful when studying the practices of contemporary Hindus as they seek to constitute Hindu subjects, but it is illuminating with respect to how parents and community leaders understand the very nature of the self, and what is required in order for culture to be reproduced and embodied in the next generation. Implicit in these conceptions of the self, Hindus often express working philosophies about the complex and somewhat paradoxical relationship between what is understood to be “natural”—including what Bourdieu would have deemed habitus, but also something more than just that—and what is understood to be “cultural.”

\(^5\) Ibid, pp. 1–2.


\(^7\) Ibid, p. 9.
In describing characteristic features and processes of Hindu diasporas, Steven Vertovec first directs his gaze toward the Caribbean in the late 19th-early 20th century, where Hindu diasporic institutions, schools, temples, organizations and communities were among the earliest, possibly second only to Southeast Asia, to be established in large numbers outside of the subcontinent, enduring over extended periods of time. Hindu diasporas flourished in Indonesia between the 4-15th centuries, and in Cambodia from the 9th-12th centuries. Unlike the Caribbean (as well as Fiji, Mauritius, and South Africa), where Hindu traditions marked the ways of indentured servants, in Indonesia and Cambodia, Hinduism was the purview of royalty, who left historical evidence of their patronage and devotion in architecturally elaborate edifices, artifacts, and manuscripts. The institutions that emerged in the Caribbean—specifically in Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, and Jamaica—and on the South Pacific islands of Fiji reveal much about early 20th century Hinduism. While they were modest in stature, they are no less significant with respect to the wealth of insights they provide about patterns in both historic and contemporary diasporic Hindu formations. Vertovec notes that different migrations of South Asians have precipitated unique developments within Hinduism, an argument that numerous scholars—including Raymond Williams, Roger Ballard, Marie Gillespie, Prema Kurien and Kim Knott, among others—have made about the distinctions between Hinduism on the subcontinent and

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outside of it. In particular, Vertovec is attentive to the ways in which Hindus preserve, transmit, negotiate and express traditions in new milieus.

Between 1838 and 1917, indentured servants hailed from an array of regions, and jatis within India, and they brought a variety of ritual customs, languages, subjects of devotion, culinary and narrative traditions with them. Plantation owners strategically placed Indian servants in heterogeneous regional groups, so as to discourage them from communicating with one another.⁹ Over a relatively short period of time, in response to this diversity and the need to forge alliances, Vertovec argues that “common features of speech, modes of behavior, patterns of social interaction, aesthetics, and other related forms of everyday culture took shape.”¹⁰ Based on the few written accounts that document life in between 1838 and the early 1890s, he notes that many rituals, associated with folk traditions, were still commonly practiced, including animal sacrifice, fire-walking. Hindus celebrated festivals and worshiped regional gods and goddesses at shrines resembling those found in the parts of India from which they migrated—in this way, the heterogeneity commonly understood to be an abiding characteristic of Hindu tradition persisted. However, Vertovec suggests that brahmanical Hinduism took on a new form in the diaspora; while brahman priests retained their ritual roles, they developed new modes of Hinduism that allowed them to focus much less on caste or questions of purity and more on their roles as “repositories of sacred knowledge.” Merchants and members of other castes also played significant roles in shaping Hinduism in the Caribbean. In newly formed public spaces—at village shrines, at household gatherings serving small groups based on kinship or other affinities (situational, ethnic, devotional), and later in schools—he argues, brahmans increasingly served

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multiple functions, serving as gurus, family and community priests, and teachers in official educational settings. Whereas in India, different types of brahmins (i.e. ritual specialists, educators, etc.) have generally been responsible for serving different functions. Different modes of Hindu traditions coexisted in the diaspora as in India—to characterize distinctions between them scholars have adopted a range of terminologies: “official” and “popular” Hinduism; “great” and “little” traditions; “frontstage” and “backstage” practices; Sanskritized and vernacular rites and narratives; homogeneous versus heterogeneous customs; *shastrik* (scriptural, ‘high,’ or fixed religious traditions) and *laukik* (folk, ‘low,’ or fluid religious traditions); and nationalist and regional. With the end of the indenture-system, Indians (Hindu and Muslim) found themselves with new incentives and abilities to create institutions of their own. According to Vertovec, “official” forms of Hinduism became increasingly institutionalized, systematized, unified and dominant in the 1920s. The growth of orthodoxy, in the form of the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, and later the Sanatan Dharma Board of Control, emerged, in part, as a response to the growing presences of Arya Samaji missionaries (members of a Hindu reform group, founded in the last quarter of the 19th century, who promoted a sanitized Hinduism that eschewed “idol worship” in favor of Vedic monotheism). These groups established schools, advocated for rights from the government, and adjudicated disputes among Hindus.11 Since the prevalent forms of Caribbean Hinduism in the first decades of the 20th century revolved around ritual practices focused on particular gods and goddesses, as well as the narrative, devotional and festival traditions associated with them, the Arya Samajis, who advocated a radically different type of Hinduism, faced resistance. Sanatanist organizations managed temples, organized weekly rituals, devotional worship, and large-scale festival celebrations. They also started publishing educational materials,

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curriculum for use in schools, and prayer books, as well as managing radio programs, and holding contests in chanting, sacred knowledge, and arts. Along with this, they created a *pandit parishad* (council of priests) to regulate communal practices and doctrine.\(^\text{12}\) This systematization did not mean that all alternative forms of worship ceased; certainly, domestic practices, rituals (including sacrifice or possession), healing rites, narrative and performance traditions, among others traditions have carried on, but scholars of Indo-Caribbean Hinduism note that by the first half of the 20th century, a more homogenized, standardized and centralized Hinduism became the norm throughout the islands, and this was especially the case in the sphere of youth education, where curriculum, primers, and sacred texts were produced and distributed by Sanatanist organizations, who also organized Hindu summer camps, sports clubs, youth and theatre groups.\(^\text{13}\)

Now, one hundred years since the end of indentured servitude, millions of Hindus have settled all over the world, migrating to the U.K., U.S., Australia, parts of Asia, the Middle East and Africa. We have seen tremendous change—the end of British colonial rule, the rise of globalization and advent of new technologies—and yet, in many ways, the same question that has occupied scholars of late 19th and early 20th Hindu diasporas is salient in studies of contemporary communities today: how has the heterogeneous nature of traditions that are broadly called Hinduism been maintained or challenged in new diasporic contexts? As was the case in early-mid 20th-century Caribbean communities, the realm of education is where we find some of the most intense and successful systematization, and even homogenization efforts at work in Hindu diasporas (and in India as well) in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Somewhat

\(^{12}\) Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*, p. 58.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
ironically, the very process of developing normative Hinduisms—determining and disseminating what and how children should be taught about Hindu traditions in the U.S. and other diasporas—reveals tremendous creativity and innovation. At the same time, however, the syndication of a more uniform set of ideas, materials, and practices can have the effect of ignoring, even erasing, significant differences in and diversity of thought and action. This raises important epistemological questions: Who is producing knowledge? What is the nature of such knowledge? Why are particular forms of knowledge being produced, and to what ends? What types of underlying maps of desire and attachment are setting the course, being drawn, and traveled as a part of these epistemic and pedagogic processes?

(3) Cultivating Identifications Through Educational Innovation

In 1970s America, it was in the relatively humble living rooms and basements of families recently migrated from India that the first Hindu children’s educational programs took place. Meetings varied in length and frequency, with many of the early groups gathering monthly, tri-weekly or bi-weekly. As groups became more organized, weekly sessions became more common, and they are now the norm in most communities not only in the U.S., but also in the U.K., Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Different devotional and sectarian orientations can be found in Hindu diasporic schools, but some version of “ecumenical Hinduism” usually is present. The style and format of these early endeavors were much more informal than the programs that became the norm by the 1990s, and which are now prevalent throughout the U.S. and in urban centers throughout the world. In 1980, the Los Altos, California bala vihar became the first Chinmaya program in the U.S. to rent a school for the weekend programs. As it is recounted, Acarya Uma Jeyarasasingam, who ran the Los Altos program, found the “scene reminiscent of India—a tropical landscape, balmy weather, and happy children
running around in salwar-kameez (traditional clothing) and kurtas (traditional Indian shirt), at home with the sounds of Sanskrit chanting.”14 While home-based educational programs still exist, and there remains a wide range with respect to the level of organization and the standardization of curricula, the growth and development of these endeavors over the past forty-five years, as well as the growth of the Hindu summer camp movement has been truly exponential.15 As of May 2017, I was able to confirm the existence of more than 617 Hindu supplementary schools in the United States, although I believe there to be significantly more than that,16 and I identified over 220 Hindu summer camps.17 I estimate that at least 45,000 students attend Hindu supplementary programs on any given weekend. To give a sense of the scope, we need only to consider a few of the many Chinmaya bala vihar weekend programs alone. As of 2013: 400 children were being served by the Pennsylvania Mission; 2,100 children, at three locations in San Jose, Fremont, and San Ramon, were served by the San Jose Mission; more than


16 I compiled a list of Hindu supplementary schools, which was significantly longer than 617. Through phone calls, visits, contact via email and/or visits to active websites, which indicated current and future programs, I was able to confirm the existence of these 617 schools. Other schools appeared to be active, but I could not confirm, either because websites were significantly dated, people did not respond to emails or calls, and/or I was unable to make a personal visit. I conducted a similar type of process to determine the number of summer camps, and to approximate the number of students attending. I have intentionally underestimated when arriving at these numbers, in seeking to be conservative about the scale of the programs and their scope.

17 In other work, I have explored how these schools and camps are, in many cases, modeled on Jewish religious schools and summer camps. There is a host of reasons for this modeling, many of which are based on conceptions of Jews as a model-model minority with whom Hindus share and aspire to share affinities. These emulative practices are also evident in the development of Indian Community Centers and Hindu and Indian Political Action Coalitions, as well as Hindu Community Relations and Anti-Defamation organizations. There have even been a few “Birthright India” trips for diasporic teenagers and college students to “see India” for the first time, modeled explicitly on Birthright Israel experiences. I should note that these parallels are not simply implicit, but that Hindu leaders and community members are explicit about the Hindu-Jewish parallels they seek to draw.
900 children were served through two parallel programs run by Chinmaya Rameshwaram Mission (formerly the Los Angeles and Tustin, CA Centers); over 900 students took classes at the Washington Regional Center; 2100 were served by the greater Illinois, Indiana, Iowa program, run by the Chicago Mission, which serves an additional 1000 students at two locations in the greater Chicago area; and over 800 students attended the Houston program, which is housed in a 4,000 sq. foot facility, with 16 classrooms, on a seven-and-a-half-acre property.¹⁸ These numbers have only continued to grow over the past four years. It is harder to estimate the number of students who attend camps because they have grown in number, and at a greater rate than supplementary schools.¹⁹ Yet it is also the case, that the lifespan of camps is inconsistent. Some meet for one or two summers and then dissolve, whereas others have continued for fifteen to thirty-eight years at this point. The designation Hindu camping refers to a number of different phenomena, including week-long or summer-long day camps for children, one to four week overnight camps, or retreats for children and families. A conservative estimate suggests that at least 14,000 children attend some form of Hindu summer camp each year.

As has always been the case, there are a wide range of groups who offer these educational programs in the form of schools and camps. By far the two most organized and established groups are the Bochansanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) and the Chinmaya Mission. Both organizations are modern guru-based movements, with tremendous diasporic presence throughout the world. The Swaminarayan community, established formally in 1907, is older and significantly more homogenous than the Chinmaya communities, both with respect to regional background and social class, with middle and upper-class Gujaratis


¹⁹ These numbers have all gone up substantially since that time, but I cite these numbers because they are the official Chinmaya numbers. I know, for example, that in 2017, the Los Angeles Mission served more than 1300 students.
comprising the majority of its members, although these demographics are changing very slowly over time. The Swaminarayan community understands one of its primary goals to be “developing individuals” and “raising tomorrow’s leaders.” As with many Hindu organizations, BAPS articulates that “the solution to securing a promising future is by nurturing our children today.” This nurturing involves education, character building, service to communities, the development of talents and healthy living, as well as the improvement of parent-child relationships through a host of initiatives. With over 3800 centers throughout the world, they are arguably the most established and largest transnational Hindu group in the world, at least by way of institutional infrastructure. However, as the Swaminarayan community still remains relatively insular, with respect to devotees’ regional background and the observance of customs and beliefs that are particular to the BAPS tradition, their reach with respect to Hindu educational endeavors is not as extensive as that of the Chinmaya Mission. I have chosen, therefore, to focus most of my research on Chinmaya schools and on other independent, local, mandir-based and national/international umbrella-based educational groups.

Chinmaya attendees are regionally and devotionally diverse (coming from Vaisnavaite, Shaivite, and Shakta backgrounds), including families from almost every region of India, as well as the Caribbean, Fiji, and Africa. Chinmaya is not as diverse with respect to social status and


21 This insularity may well be changing. For example, the Swaminarayan community established the first Independent Hindu Preparatory Day school in London in 1991. Currently, approximately 500 students are enrolled in the school. Although the vast majority of those attending have Gujarati family backgrounds, some of the Hindu students have family from other regions of India, and there are a very small number of non-Hindus who have attended the school. Added attention to the processes and rhetoric of the Swaminarayan community would undoubtedly enhance this research. The community promotes much more traditional notions of asceticism among its diasporic devotees than many of the other Hindu communities that I have studied. Acts of restraint, giving up various foods and practices are viewed as productive spiritual work, furthering the development of moral character and righteousness. The Swaminarayan community has also been one of the only diasporic groups to encourage and successfully recruit American-born Indian Hindus to become swamis, pursuing an ascetic path.
capital, especially in America, generally drawing its participants from educated, middle and upper-middle class families. However, some centers—specifically those with a higher percentage of Indo-Caribbeans and Fijians, and more recent immigrants among its participants—do have more diversity with respect to social class than others. With centers in twenty-five countries and numerous schools and youth programs (including full time schools in India, and supplementary schools and camps throughout the world, along with over three-hundred centers), and thirty-eight centers and fifteen temples in the U.S. alone, the curricular and philosophical agendas of the Chinmaya Mission have significantly influenced the direction of Hindu children’s education outside of India since the late 1970s. Chinmayananda founded the first bala vihar in Bombay in 1965, with what the movement describes as his “clarion call, ‘Mold the Child, Mold the Future.’” In addition, the mission has nine ashrams in India, one in Sydney, Australia, and one, founded in 1979, in Piercy, California—called Krishnalaya. It is considered the flagship of Chinmaya West and is arguably the most important site of the transnational movement. In 2016, the Movement inaugurated a theme park in Mumbai, honoring Swami Chinmayanda. In some ways, the park resembles the Swaminarayan Akshardham in Delhi, with its rides and amusements.

Founded in 1953 by Swami Chinmayananda, the Chinmaya Mission is a neo-Vedantic guru movement that traces its lineage back to Adi Shancaracharya, the eighth-century Advaitan (non-dualist) theologian. Although the movement began in India and the first center was founded in Mumbai, the Chinmaya Mission’s energies have largely been focused outside of India and directed toward the development of Hindu children and parents in diaspora. Its reach in the realms of Hindu education, especially in the diaspora, far exceeds its reach into other areas of

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22 The Chinmaya Way, *Our Children, Our Future*, (Piercy, CA: Chinmaya West, 2013), p.3. This phrase is repeated in a large percentage of their literature and in other forms of their public discourse.
Hindu life. The Mission has produced countless brochures, books, video lectures, podcasts, online and print curriculum, as well as workshops, classes, and lectures about Hinduism, parenting, and the nature of childhood. In his work on Hindu nationalism, Peter van der Veer notes that the Chinmaya Movement—like the Ramakrishna Mission, whose efforts began fifty-sixty years earlier—propounds “the discourse of modern, spiritual Hinduism,” taking some elements of the “oriental spiritualism’ that was offered as a package to Western audiences and brought back to India.” Arguably, with Chinmayanda, this spiritualism has been brought back to the West, and to other Hindu diasporas; this time, however, the teachings are not aimed at those of American or European descent, but at those with Indian ethnic backgrounds. And, unlike Vivekananda’s Vedanta movement, Chinmayananda’s movement is inflected by a very different aesthetic, along with the study sessions, the environment is rich with ritual and devotional practices that resemble those found in Indian homes and ashrams, and in Hindu temples in the diaspora. In his research into Hindu mission movements in Fiji (specifically, groups such as ISKON and Sai Baba), John Kelly writes that these,

new Hinduisms that have been so successful across the South Asian diaspora…owe much of their shape and style to the conditions of the diaspora…. [However] these Hindu missions are more than virtually commercial suppliers of an ersatz version of an eroding Hindu “tradition.” They address the present as well as the past….they are religious movements engaging with forms of experience and self-consciousness that lie outside the settled world of stable identities, addressing the present from an angle different from that of comfortably national people.

While the case of Fiji—with the history of indentured-servitude and the particularities of post-coloniality—is certainly different from Hindu diasporas elsewhere, Kelly’s assertion here is


important. These movements, as I will discuss further, are not simply trying to reproduce the Hinduism they know from India, they are explicitly focused on what their teachings have to say to those living outside of India, and they are cognizant that traditions must change and adapt in order for them to be relevant and, as one Chinmaya swami told me, “spiritually useful.”

Furthermore, as Kelly notes about communities in Fiji, many of these transnational Hindu movements, like the Chinmaya Mission, have complex and sometimes contradictory relationships to Indian and Hindu nationalism, a topic I will address further.

According to Peter van der Veer, Swami Chinmayananda, who was in his early years critiqued by many “orthodox” Hindus because of “his opposition to caste and gender differentiation in education,” gained widespread acceptance, and his teachings are, even after his death, regarded as “mainstream,” especially among middle-class Hindus in India and abroad.25 With emphasis on things such as “‘individual growth,’ ‘social concerns,’ and religion as a ‘code of conduct’ whereby every man can make a success of life,” and “interest in overseas Indian communities,” Chinmayananda set an example, which “all modern religious [Hindu] leaders seem to follow.”26 As such, it is not surprising that other organizations, including explicitly Hindu nationalist ones, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, and its American wing, the VHPA) and the Rashtra Swayamsevak Sangh (and its international wing, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh), have emulated the Chinmaya Mission in directing special attention to the realm of youth education.27 In addition to these groups, there are other more independent Hindu


26 Ibid. In this section of the book, van der Veer is explicitly talking about how groups like the VHP have modeled themselves after the Chinmaya Movement. But, other groups have done so as well.

27 In fact, Swami Chinmayananda’s relationship to the VHP is quite complicated. He is credited, along with M.S. Golwalker and S.S. Apte as founding the organization in 1964. He is said to have served as the movement’s spiritual leader. According to all accounts I have heard from Chinmaya Mission leaders, and as reflected in their writings and the research of other scholars, the Chinmaya mission disassociated itself from the VHP, and the movement has
camps, and schools that are connected to various temples, communities, and artists (who teach traditional Indian dance or music forms).

In the forty years since post-1965 American Hindu immigrants first began founding mandirs in the United States, the very goals and programmatic focus of these temples have changed dramatically. While the performance of daily, festival and lifecycle rituals still occupies a tremendous amount of energy and attention, the vast majority of temples now feel compelled, as a part of their mission, to offer regular programming for youth. At the bare minimum, mandirs often host dance, music or language classes for children, but more often than not, Hindu temples today house or are affiliated with some form of Hindu supplementary school for children. While many offer their own version of bala vihar, others refer children to the local Chinmaya Mission Bala Vihars, or in some cases, the Bala Gokulams of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. Although Chinmaya Mission programs are the most common, with generally removed any references to Chinmaya’s association with the VHP from its official publications. In the Call of the Conch: The History of the Chinmaya Movement, one of Chinmaya’s official publications, the founding of the VHP is described as a response to his concern that Hindus—especially those abroad—were losing their connection to and knowledge of Hindu heritage. In these accounts, it is suggested that Chinmaya sought to create a Hindu equivalent of the World Council of Churches. See Swami Chidananda and Rukmani Ramani, Call of the Conch: The History of the Chinmaya Movement (Mumbai: Chinmaya Trust, 2001), p. 38). As Lise McKeen argues, there are different stories about the VHP’s origin: in some versions, the VHP is described as Swami Chinmayananda’s vision—he gathered 150 leaders at his ashram in Bombay to strengthen Bharatiya Unity, Hindu faith, and understanding; in other accounts, it was Golwakar—the then head of the RSS—who called the meeting that led to the organization’s founding. See Lise McKeen, Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu nationalist movement (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 101). Chinmayananda never denied his association with the organization’s founding, although by the 1980s it was rarely acknowledged and by the 1990s (following the destruction of the Babri Masjid), it was quite common for the leadership to articulate that they had no political alliances or associations whatsoever. At the end of his life, in 1993, scholar Lise McKeen had a direct exchange with Chinmayananda in which she asked him about his relationship to the VHP. He justified his involvement as a reaction to a call for Christian proselytizing by Pope Paul VI. He called the VHP a “mighty force” and was given an award by them, in Washington, D.C. shortly thereafter. Still, even in that moment, McKeen describes him as saying that, “after I started the VHP, I returned to my own mission as a spiritual teacher of Vedanta” (McKeen Divine Enterprise, p. 102). McKeen suggests that as one devotee put it, “he was a present-day Vivekananda,” who, for forty years, in McKeen’s assessment “had traveled throughout the world building a network of institutions which propagates nationalistic Hinduism among well-educated, upper-caste Hindus” (McKeen, Divine Enterprise, p. 102). My own evaluation suggests that we cannot view the Chinmaya movement as an Hindu nationalism (right-wing Hindu nationalist), although it certainly has nationalist elements. I realize that this distinction may seem subtle to many, but I think it is critical. Unlike VHPA and HSS camps and schools, the Chinmaya Mission does not engage in the same communalist identity politics in its rhetoric, nor does it engage in the same pseudo-militaristic exercises that are commonly an element of those youth programs. I will explore this further in chapters to follow.
Swaminarayan programs following them, there are programs in almost every state, housed at temples, Indian Community Centers, and in rented facilities, such as schools and churches. Most programs meet on the weekend for one to three hours, with some offering supplemental language, dance, music, or textual memorization/recitation classes on weekdays, or during additional times on the weekend. Even when mandirs have no schools of their own, it is not unusual for them to partner with other organizations in some capacity. This means, for example, that it is quite common to find South Indian children—whose families worship at a mandir that is more South Indian in ritual and devotional orientation—attending a bala vihar class that is more North Indian in orientation, depending upon the teachers, or the reverse. A school may offer supplementary classes in Hindi, Gujarati, or Sanskrit, rather than Tamil or Telugu. It is only in larger communities that such programs are able to provide a broad range of language offerings.

In addition to these explicitly religious programs, there are regional associations, such as the Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America, which was founded in 1987 and has numerous regional branches. There are similar Sindhi, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Bengali, and Kannada, etc. associations. Although they are ostensibly regionally or linguistically based, sometimes these groups are de facto Hindu associations as well. This can vary tremendously based on the chapter and the political, cultural, and religious composition and orientation of a given group. Many of

28 The weekend is a particular type of American institution, and immigrant communities have commonly restructured their traditional observance of holidays and rituals to accommodate the American work and school schedule. The Hindu American community is no exception. The weekend is a powerful way that Hindu identification and practice is mainstreamed. Like Christians who attend Church, Sunday school, and Youth Group retreats on the weekends, American Hindus do the same. Furthermore, Being Hindu is something that can be, in some ways, contained—there are specific times and places to “do Hinduism” and they need not conflict with other secular commitments. The desire to avoid conflicts with soccer leagues, for example, is one of the many reasons that I have been told that bala vihars are often held on Sunday, as opposed to Saturday mornings.

29 The California Tamil Academy, which has also established the International Tamil Academy now has 6 branches, 21 affiliated schools in the United States; 2 additional schools that have adopted usage of their textbooks, and started affiliated schools in the U.K. and the United Arab Emirates. They have started an effort to raise 6 million dollars in funds to establish the “first Sangam Professorship in Tamil Studies at Harvard University.” They have also established a “Virtual Academy,” so students who are not able to attend classes in person, may study the language.
these organizations also offer children’s programs and camps; generally, they are focused on language acquisition through the celebration of regional cultures, but that line can blur easily. Most notably, for example, organizations like the Gujarati Samaji often sponsor events for Navaratri and Diwali, and Bengali organizations regularly host festivities to celebrate Durga Puja, but neither one offers programs to celebrate Muslim festivals. On the other hand, there is a tremendous range in programmatic content, and many of the differences can only be discerned on the ground, through meeting the people involved in the organizations and running the balavihars. Only through observing programs and visiting a variety of camps and schools can the actual pedagogical methods and content of the curriculum and message be approached. I note this, in large part, because the vast majority of work that has been done on Hindu education in the United States has thus far been gleaned from materials found on the internet and/or has

In 2003, they received approval from the Fremont Union School district to teach Tamil in public schools in Cupertino and Sunnyvale, and have received the required accreditations. Vetriselvi Rajamanickam’s desire to start the program came when she “realized that teaching young children to learn their Mother Tongue would help them to develop confidence, self-esteem.” Madhu Aggarwal began the Hindi Language Center in 1987, at the same time as the California Tamil Academy was created. Like Rajamanickam, she wrote a curriculum to align with “State and National Standards for World Languages and with assistance from the Executive Director of the California Language Teacher Association, she submitted a curriculum for 4 years of Hindi student, which was approved by the University of California System, and it has been accepted by the Milpitas, Palo Alto, Pleasanton, Saratoga, and Fremont Unified School Systems. Now Aggarwal and other parents are mobilizing and advocating for Hindi to be taught directly in the public schools, working to attain credentials for teachers. For Aggarwal, this work is not simply about Indian culture, but she sees it as “‘God’s Calling.’ I truly believe God has chosen me to do this.” Efforts to advocate for Hindi to be taught in public schools are tied to narratives about colonialism, and a sense among many advocates that “Hindi has been a ‘losing language’ to English in India’s big cities,” and activists like Aggarwal argue that in recent years the California India community has had its, “pride in our culture…awakened.” In other places, such as Edison, New Jersey, where more than 18 percent of the city’s population is Indian American, parents who wish to have their children learn Hindi for credit no longer have to pay to have their children attend an accredited program outside of school hours. In 2009, Hindi language advocates, with a three-year grant from the department of education, were able to begin offering Hindi at one of the two local high schools (See the International Tamil Academy: www.catamilacademy.org; Madhu Aggarwal, “Hindi Goes Global,” Humans of Entrepreneurship: Stories that Inspire, posted by Shashank Saurabh, September 14, 2016: http://humansofentrepreneurship.com/. See Sharon Simonson, “Hindi Proponents Want It Taught in Silicon Valley Public Schools,” Silicon Valley One World, December 11, 2014; Ted Mero, “Learning Hindi in High School,” The Center for Digital Education, January 4, 2009. Many of these initiatives have been made possible because of partnerships with the National Security Education Program, which has provided grants in order that students can learn languages viewed as “critical to national security and in the global market.” (“Here Comes Hindi,” Susan Reese, The Language Educator, April 2010, p. 47).
involved short-term fieldwork at a single camp or bala vihar program. There is great value in reading those materials and looking in depth at an individual site, however, my own experience has been that what is found on the web is not often what happens in the context of classrooms, and there is a profound difference between the goals that one outlines on paper and what is actually achieved. What has been penned as an organizational mission statement does not always translate into the realities of a classroom or program.

(4) Recognizing the Desiring and Intentional Self

On a Sunday afternoon in 2001, approximately 25 young adults, many holding young children in their laps, crowded into the very modest, fledgling mandir, located in an industrial neighborhood in Union City, CA. Balaji, one of the founders of the temple, who had moved to the States from Fiji only a few years earlier, delivered a short talk after the morning’s puja and bhajan singing had concluded. He announced that his talk would address the struggle we all face when we try to discern the nature of our true selves. As a devotionally oriented mandir, I was not surprised when he suggested that, first and foremost, Bhagavan (God) is found in the worship of Krishna, “in the singing of bhajans, we lose our individual selves and become one in bhakti [devotion].” But, he announced that his study of the Upanishads in recent months had made him realize that it is a problem simply to find ourselves in this way. “To focus only on this,” he said, “is selfish, pleasurable, but nonetheless very selfish.” Referencing Chandogya Upanishad 8.7.1, he related the story of Prajapati who is tasked with explaining the nature of the self. After reciting the verses in Sanskrit, he paraphrased the passage saying that “Atman is pure, free from all things—hunger, old age death. But it is not just free from things, it is also something…. Atman is our true desires—satyakama [true desire]—and our true resolve, our true intentions—satyasamkalpa [true intention].” He asked the group what such a definition of atman might
mean, and without giving them any time to answer, he told them that their task was to seek themselves through identifying and knowing their satyakama and satyasamkalpa.

Once we know this self, we are told, all our desires are truly fulfilled. But how do we go about searching out our satyakama, our satyasamkalpa? Some of you [have been] deluded... thinking your desires could be fulfilled through money, drink, sex, what have you...but how quickly we learn those are not true desires but distractions, illusions, delusions.... It is not difficult to know ourselves, we must recognize where to look and we need go no farther than bala Krishna—in whom did the gopis [cow herding women] find themselves? In the face, in the love, in the care of a little child.... So too, heh...we uncover our true selves through our own Krishnas, our own children...How do we know this? The Upanishads teach us to understand our true desires, our true intentions.... When is there more clarity, more truth than when you look at a child, when you look at your own child? You only need to focus on what they need, you become totally irrelevant, and yet also totally full of purpose. You are [he declared with a long pause] nothing, and you are [pausing dramatically again] everything.

Almost as though it had been planned ahead of time, one of the women respectfully interjected,

I know what you are meaning....When I look at my beti [daughter] I stop caring about myself in that way, it is no longer [about] me, but [a] bigger self. My only desire for her besides making sure she cared for physically, is making sure that we don't lose our way, lose ourselves....It is so easy to do that, to forget who we are.... When I think about what is it that I really truly desire, my intention comes clear...the only way to prevent complete amnesia is through our children. And I take the decision—maybe that is my samkalpa, same one you are speaking about, to tell her a story from Ramayana, or sing [a] bhajan.

In many ways, this brief exchange, which lasted no more than fifteen minutes, epitomizes a prevailing sentiment about the process and intention involved in Hindu educational endeavors. In these affective spaces, children, as I have noted earlier, become the most profound repositories of desire and through their education embodiments of it. Although many teachers assert that parents need to cultivate their own spiritual practices, knowledge, and behaviors, most teachers argue that the rationale for committing to doing so ultimately stems from the fact that parents “desire bright futures for” their children, and that a focus on children provides a clarity of purpose akin to devotion to God.
(5) The Growth of Diasporic Hindu Pedagogies and Curricula

It is like this: we have to be *malis* [gardeners]. Some malis are lucky, their gardens grow beautiful wildflowers and they don’t need to do any real work, but here, in America and in England, and I see, even in India, the land isn’t as easy to cultivate as it used to be, or maybe it was never so easy to grow these kinds of flowers! We have to garden in a different way if our children are to grow into the kind of Hindus they should be…. we have to make the ground fertile for them to know our traditions, our beliefs, our culture…. Once we give the ground enough water, enough fertilizer, once we pull out the weeds, then the children will be able to grow naturally into beautiful, wise Hindus.

—Shalini, teacher and mother of bala vihar students

Quite literally, the education of Hindu children in the United States has been about the placing and organizing of Hindu bodies; specifically, it has been invested in placing the bodies of Hindu children in Hindu spaces, and in the vicinity of other Hindus, so that they will, in the words of many a teacher, “know who they are.” In the forward to the book, *Our Children, Our Future*, Swami Tejomayananda, who was the head of the Chinmaya Mission at the time, wrote that “the greatest joy” of a married couple comes when they are “blessed with a child.” A great irony, perhaps, but one that is regularly acknowledged, coming from a swami who has renounced such intimacies and relationships. He notes that parents don’t simply “desire a child,” but they desire a “good child.” Making children “good” he notes is not an easy task and it is a great responsibility, which requires parental grooming. With the exception of “rare” saints, who are good, regardless of their upbringing, all “children are born with their own karma, but despite this, we can mold their present and shape their future.” Consistent with the narrative told in the

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30 The current head of the Chinmaya Mission, Swami Swaroopananda, often references the fact that parents question his ability to give parenting advice since he is a swami with no children. His retort to this is generally comprised of two points: firstly, that he himself was a child, and was parented—Who better do we learn how to parent from, but from our own parents?; Secondly, he always asserts that he has the joy and responsibility of parenting all the Chinmaya children, and in that role, he has special access to their struggles, dreams, challenges, etc. Related to this, it is important to note that Chinmaya Mission Acharyas are all required to have, at least, a college degree before they can take on official positions within the movement.

context of almost every conceivable Hindu supplementary program, Tejomayananda recounts his variation of the trajectory of Hindu education from ancient times to the present, referencing the fact that “in olden times, when children studied in gurukulas, the teacher did all the grooming. Later, in joint families, traditions were imbibed through the process of osmosis.” But today, with the waning of the gurukula system and the “fading away” of joint families, organizations need to step in.\(^{32}\) Metaphors of gardening are among the most frequent descriptions of bala vihar philosophy: Tejomayanada said, “as a gardener helps to grow a plant, by tending and nurturing it, we facilitate the growth of children.” But children aren’t always conceived of as the garden itself, but rather as potential gardeners. Abhinav, a teacher at a non-Chinmaya bala vihar in Irvine, CA said,

> Our curricular goals must be focused on making the children want to be here, if they want to come here now, then they will be capable of recognizing what they are missing when they leave home…. You can’t be a Hindu, unless you want to be a Hindu….We show them the garden and how to tend it, with our puja, and study—the whole of Hindu tradition, our celebrations, the rituals…. When they go to college, they will look out and realize the garden is not there—the garden that brings beauty into their life, the garden that gives peace and quiet, the garden that gives wisdom….and also, [the garden that] gives friends and family and food. They will long to have that again, and they will remember that they learned where to find the garden and how to care for it. And whenever they want it, it will be there for them always.

Abhinav’s outlook captures the desires of many of the teachers I have encountered; most of them are deeply invested in making bala vihar a pleasurable place, different from regular school and certainly from daily life. They also understand themselves to be exposing children to a way of experiencing and seeing the world that is particularly special, offering essential (although often unrecognized) life-skills. While the first Chinmaya bala vihar was founded in Bombay in 1965 and programs have been founded throughout India, there is no question that they have flourished

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
in the diaspora and there is a tacit understanding that the needs that bala vihar fills outside of India are distinctive and profoundly important, not only serving children, but also (and perhaps more so) parents, and teachers.

(I) **THE GROWTH OF TEACHERS CULTIVATED THROUGH CHILDREN**

Motivated by a deep belief in the importance of transmitting tradition to the next generation, bala vihars in the United States closely resemble the kinds of religious educational institutions that we have found in America since the 1790s, and which grew as immigrants—Italian and Irish Catholics, as well as Jews—came to the U.S., with particular interest in transmitting religious and cultural traditions, and languages to the next generation.\(^{33}\) In his work on the education of Catholic children, Robert Orsi argues that,

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\(^{33}\) Initially, Christian Sunday schools were free, supported by churches and philanthropies, and gaining popularity in the 1800s and 1900s. At first, there was no clear distinction between “religious” and “secular” learning, with emphasis placed on basic skills—reading from primers with religious content—and cultivating morality. Not only did religious education in the early years serve as a kind of remedial education, but also as a way to discipline children’s bodies. This was thought to be especially important for the “poor,” whose children were thought to run around on Sundays engaging in undesirable activities. By the 1820s, Robert May is credited with championing religious-only instruction, which became increasingly common from that time forward. This intersects, as well, with the turn toward compulsory “public” education, inadvertently making “religious instruction” a distinctive arena. Curricular content in these religious schools began to focus on the Bible, memorization, and moralization. Within the Jewish community, religious instruction for children was well-established among Sephardic Jews by the 1780s, where schools could be found in the five major cities with large Jewish populations (New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Charleston, Newport). A major turning point was the large waves of immigration in the 19\(^{th}\) century. In the first half of the 19\(^{th}\) century, the German Jews who arrived were poorer, following 1848, those who arrived were more educated. Following the pogroms in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century, groups came from Eastern and other parts of Western Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s, another wave of immigrants arrived from the Soviet-Bloc. Each migration brought with it different languages (German, Yiddish, Polish, Russian) and cultures. A variety of schools formed, and, the evolution of Hindu education in the U.S. follows the pattern of Jewish supplementary education very closely. We have yet to see how regionalism will evolve among Hindu American communities in the generations to come. The Hebrew Education Society was founded in 1849, Gratz Teacher’s College was founded in 1895. With the intense growth of Chinmaya Mission teacher trainings and the development of camps, I do not doubt that we will soon see a Hindu Day School movement. I provide all of this background in this note, primarily because I had hoped to include much more on the history of education in America, but space has not allowed for an in-depth exploration of the topic. I believe, however, that it is important to be mindful not only of the ways in which Hindu education in the U.S. is informed by the history of Indian and Hindu education, it also continues to be shaped by the history and cultures of American religious educational institutions and philosophies. See Lloyd Gartner, ed, *Jewish Education in the United States: A Documentary History*, no. 41 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969); Judah Pilch, ed, *A History of Jewish Education in America* (National Curriculum Research Institute of the American Association for Jewish Education, 1969); Jonathan Sarna, “American Jewish Education in Historical
Adults tell themselves (urgently and usually fearfully) that they must pass on their religious beliefs and values to their children. To this end they organize catechism classes, Sunday school programs, after-school religious instruction, special children’s rituals, and so on. The fear is that without such instruction children will be bereft and alienated on the deepest levels; in the story that adults tell about this exchange, children need religion for their own benefit…. But this is not all there is to this. Children represent among other things the future of the faith… at stake are the very existence, duration, and durability of a particular religious world…. Children signal the vulnerability and contingency of a particular religious world and of religion itself.34

Among the many important points that Orsi highlights is the idea that while religious education is ostensibly for the benefit of children, they are not always subjects in religious life but, in some sense, the material objects, through whom parents and communities work out and express their desires, fear of loss, uncertainty about the future. He writes that the “commonsensical and straightforward nature of this enterprise—we want to pass our beliefs onto our children—naturalizes or normalizes a far more complex relationship.” This relationship, he argues, involves the ways in which “children’s bodies, rationalities, imaginations, and desires” become media in the fortification of religious meaning—not just because the sacred needs to be made present for them, so they may see, learn, and experience it, but the sacred is made materially present through children.35 In Hindu educational settings this is unquestionably the case. Swami Chinmayananda is said to have structured bala vihar, so that children would learn from parents and elders in the community, not only to foster respect for adults within the children but because the act of teaching itself would help parents to develop their own spiritual lives.


35 Ibid.
One example of how children, through their bodies, materially transform affective cultures and experiences can be seen in the observance of such things as “Parents’ Day,” or Mother’s and Father’s Days celebrations and pujas, which have become standard fare at numerous mandirs and bala vihar programs. At Chinmaya and other similar programs, children practice the ritual of washing their parents’ feet, placing such things as flower petals upon them, offering them handmade cards, gifts, chocolates, and fruits, and, in some cases, even performing arati before their parents. The rituals invariably end with the children performing pranama (bowing before, and often touching the feet of, a respected person). As a part of these novel practices, it is quite common for a swami, teacher, or sometimes an older student to give a lecture or speech about the importance of honoring parents. These talks often reference the Taittiriya Upanishad’s Shiksha Valli 1.20, “Matru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava, acharya devo bhava, atithi devo bhava”/ Be one for whom the Mother is God, the Father is God, the Teacher is God and the Guest is God. This ritual innovation always seems to end with hugs and kisses. For the closing prayers and bhajans, the haptic culture is inevitably transformed, with fathers and mothers wrapping their arms around their children, older children leaning on their parents’ shoulders, and younger children sitting in their parents’ laps. Even parents tend to be more publicly affectionate with one another than is customary in most Indian religious spaces (i.e. spouses holding hands, hugging, or touching in some other way). These new rituals sanction affective practices by combining a language of traditional Hindu values regarding honoring parents with American Hallmark holiday customs. While a number of these rituals may be relatively common even within India—children performing pranama before their parents, etc.—

36 My student, Rafadi Hakim, also documented a Parents’ Day Assembly at the Twin Cities Chinmaya Mission Chaska, MN in April of 2012, observing very similar practices. More than once, I have seen parents and teachers recite a complementary prayer drawn from the Taittiriya Upanishad Shiksha Valli 1.42, asking for them to come to study, and continue on the path of study, self-restraint, and peace.
the communal affirmation of the practices as a cultural embrace, also manifests to produce a new culture of physical embrace, and it reinforces familial (or at least parental) attachment to the balavihar, camp, or mandir who has organized the program. These affective dimensions of these educational environments should not be taken for granted, and along with the culturally distinctive smells, clothing, embodied practices, and sounds, the innovations in haptic, kinesthetic and other sensory experiences are part of what helps maintain connections to these religious spaces and those who people them. With Hindu camps, for example, numerous parents have told me about how they credit these summer programs with their newfound love of nature, their first experiences camping, or spending sustained time outside with their children on the beach or taking hikes. Children too, have expressed the ways in which camps bring out new parts of their parents, and also offer them the opportunity to be “totally free” in a way that they never would be around their parents at home.

In addition, teaching itself has been identified as a transformative spiritual experience for adults. At a teacher-training I attended, one of the facilitator-acharyas told the participants that teaching could provide them with the opportunity to experience the kind of sacred grace that can only come when you have gained knowledge and then been able to impart it to a child: “It is a feeling like no other, to have a child look at you with eyes that say, ‘you have opened my world, you have changed the way I will approach everything from now on.’ That is true prasada [the gift of God’s grace].” She then recited the following shloka, upon which Swami Chinmayananda is said to have “opined” often, “svagrhe pujyate murkhah svagrame pujyate prabhuh/ svadeshe pujyate raja vidvan sasrvata pujyate—A fool is celebrated in his own house.

37 It is interesting to note here that the act of looking that she describes here is described through the language of prasada (a gift of grace, generally in the form of food), rather than darshan.
A rich man is respected in his own town, the king is worshipped in his own country, but a wise man is worshiped everywhere.” This sentiment was echoed by Seema Jani, now a teacher at the Chinmaya Mission in Atlanta, who said,

I was a ‘casual teacher.’ This meant that I would prepare every week, but just enough to teach the lesson for the day. I didn’t do as much individual spiritual study. All that changed the day Guruji addressed BV teachers in Ann Arbor. He explained that being a BV (bala vihar) sevak [servant] is a great privilege and a way to grow spiritually.38

Numerous teachers speak openly about the self-worth and pride that they feel as a result of their teaching. Many have “important jobs,” as one teacher described it, “but the greatest satisfaction and sense of fulfillment comes from my chance to teach.” Teacher trainings are a new form of annual retreat that people look forward to attending all year. In 2017, the Chinmaya Mission in Houston’s Bala Vihar Teacher Training was attended by over 190 people on-site and another 150 online.39 Acharya Darshananben, the main author of the Chinmaya Mission’s curriculum, and the director of the training institute, is described as having “weaved her magic” at the training session, reminding teachers of the need to be “mindfully responsible,” in deed and in heart, but also that it is their own “spiritual study and harmonious cooperative effort with discipline” that is the key to success and personal fulfillment.40 For Darshana Nanavaty herself, the act of preparing the Teacher’s Handbooks allowed her to gain “a deeper understanding, insight, inspiration, and appreciation of our scriptures and the values embedded in them.” Each lesson, she notes, is prepared with the intention that both students and teachers will “imbibe the eternal values from our scriptures [and sages] in a very loving and joyous atmosphere.”41

38 Parveen Bahl, Our Children, Our Future: The Chinmaya Way, p. 27.


40 Ibid.

41 Darshana Nanavaty, Acarya Chinmaya Mission Houston, “Preface,” to all the Bala Vihar Teachers’ Handbooks.
Educational endeavors are fundamentally processes of culling. To teach inherently involves making determinations about priorities, what seems most important to convey and what may be left aside. In addition, curricular and pedagogic development is not a universalist undertaking, it is always done with an audience—who may be larger or smaller, more local or more global depending on the context—in mind. Basic teaching methods require that an educator consider the age of the students, their prior knowledge, and background, along with myriad other things that help to determine how, what level, and which ideas should be presented. The creators of Hindu diasporic curriculum have, without a doubt, been mindful of all of these considerations (even if some have achieved greater affects than others). The systematization of curriculum means that representations of Hinduism in diaspora are becoming—as they seem to have done throughout history, be it in the late 19th and early 20th centuries or now—more uniform. In the almost forty years, since the late 1970s and 1980s, and even since the time I started this research in earnest in the early 2000s, the pedagogies employed, and the sheer amount of curricular content have grown dramatically. In the early years of bala vihars, class structure and content was wholly devised by individual teachers, and community groups and varied widely—even within the same supplementary program—from year to year, and, sometimes, from week to week. The lesson plans were often handwritten, and curricular content was not scaffolded in any dramatic ways according to age or grade. The knowledge base and training of the educators ran the gamut from extremely experienced to complete novice. Neelima, who has been teaching in bala vihar programs since 1978, “the beginning,” reflected on the fact that in the early years, when her daughter was a student, they often taught students the same thing year after year.
One time my Ashwini [my daughter] came home and she announced that she was done. She was never going back to bala vihar. She complained that she was learning nothing, they taught the same thing every year, it was boring…a waste of her time. At first, I just thought she was exaggerating, but when I looked into it a little, I realized she was somewhat right—she had been “learning” the Guru Stotram and Hanuman Chalisa [devotional hymns praising one’s teacher/s, and Hanuman, devotee of Rama and figure of reverence in his own right] for the past few years, and every year they did units on the meaning of Ganesh Chaturthi, Shivratri, Holi, Diwali…I had not even noticed, [I was] just happy she was bringing home some nice colored-page, or an art project of a diya for us to hang in the window….None of us had sat down and thought about making sure that we were building their knowledge over the years….we realized that we needed to be more thoughtful, deliberate about things.

Stories like this are somewhat typical. And my own review of curriculum over the years confirms it. As schools have grown and become more organized, the single lessons, written by each teacher independently, and from year-to-year, gave way to more widely distributed carbon-and then Xerox-copies of lesson plans with carefully delineated pedagogic goals. The parent-volunteers running the schools began to develop curriculum, and in the case of the Chinmaya Missions, for example, this was done with the assistance, encouragement, and ultimately financial resources of the Movement. By early 2005, thoroughly organized and collated binders were often augmented or replaced altogether by extensive online resources, including thoughtfully developed curriculum that took child development and age-appropriate pedagogic techniques into consideration. During that period, the Chinmaya Mission Swamis and Acharyas committed themselves to creating a differentiated curriculum, which was published, as a twelve-volume set comprising over 3,300 pages, between the years 2007 and 2015. Although many of the smaller schools, unaffiliated with any particular national or international organizations, still function using an assortment of materials, the publication of the Chinmaya Curriculum has led to the development and dissemination of other curricula online and through organizational channels. Even in the most independent and unconventional programs, it is rare not to find
teachers using online resources and materials produced by some of the more established Hindu educational organizations.

From its inception, the curriculum of Chinmaya bala vihar programs has included chanting, the memorization of mantras and select shlokas from Hindu texts (primarily in Sanskrit, but also, occasionally, in some other regional languages), and participation in pujas, festival celebrations, art projects, and cultural programs. With the exception of the most nationalistic programs, this general format describes, almost universally, the bones of such programs in their formative years. Some programs, especially those that are more self-consciously progressive in orientation, have added seva (service) as a major component of the curriculum. Although all these groups talk about seva, it manifests differently in different settings, including direct community-based work with individuals in-need or organizing around social justice issues, raising money for people and organizations in India or locally, and, especially at mandirs with fewer financial resources, it can involve gardening, cleaning, painting or cooking on behalf of the community itself.

Doing work in or for the community is one way that these programs seek to communicate and instantiate the idea that the individual is part of a collective that is larger than the self. Chinmaya literature, mainly in the form of brochures, parent materials and later parent manuals, in the mid-late 1990s, characterized bala vihar as “part of a comprehensive program of self-development of the individual and the family.” As such, it was emphasized that “in order for the children to benefit fully from the Bala Vihar classes, it is necessary for the Sunday classes to be supported and enhanced by complementary activities at home.” Parents were expected, according to the literature, to “spend a minimum of one hour per week…to work with the child.”

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And even more time spent, “would be ideal and make a tremendous positive impact on the whole family.” When enrolling their children, parents, at many bala vihars, are asked to sign a contract in which they agree to abide by the rules of the bala vihar program, and “ensure they are followed by” their child/ren. Included among the rules, it is not uncommon for parents and children to be presented with guidelines about punctuality and attendance, homework and discipline: “Children are expected to behave respectfully towards their teachers, other adults and other students,” and they are strongly encouraged to “wear appropriate Indian clothing for Bala Vihar” and all related functions. As programs have grown in size, many of the requirements have changed. With programs that serve 100 students or more, many parents engage in “drive-by” participation, which involves dropping their children off while they do groceries, or go to the gym. In smaller programs, this is not possible, as parents are needed to run the classes, and take care of the other tasks involved in running a school. Although the percentage of parent involvement to student enrollment may have decreased substantially over the years, on any given weekend most of the programs are teeming with both children and parents. Often, as well, the more established centers offer parallel devotional or educational programming for parents—bhajan singing, classes on the Gita, Upanishads, or something focused on “self-improvement” or “self-help” (being a better spouse or parent, reducing stress, etc.).

Officially, in the early years, most programs required that children sit on the floor in cross-legged positions. They were also expected to sit next to students whom “they don’t know well,” so as to discourage children who are friends “from talking with one another instead of paying attention to the class.”43 Of course, I have seen these expectations in breach as often as I

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43 These quotes are drawn from multiple bala vihar program brochures. Only some of them have dates, but program locations include Los Angeles, San Diego, the Bay Area, Texas, New York, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Illinois, Philadelphia, and Florida.
have seen them observed. In rare instances, boys and girls are seated separately, although it is always the case within the Swaminarayan Community, and commonly the case in Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh bala gokulams, and at Hindu Heritage Camps. As programs have grown and different spaces—schools, churches, and dedicated bala vihar centers and classrooms have been created—many of these expectations have changed.

In the early years, the front of each classroom space had an altar, and the specific deities included were often chosen by the teachers and were usually based on the class’s curriculum. Therefore, when students were learning about the Ramayana—images of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman might have been added to the classroom altar, but if they were spending time learning about Shiva, the altar might include images of one or many different forms of Shiva, as well as Parvati and Ganesha. When bala vihars took place in family homes, the altars reflected each family’s personal history and devotional orientation.

One parent remembers how she was actually motivated to set up a proper prayer space in her home only because she had agreed to host one of the bala vihar sessions. She realized that she had not taken the time or dedicated the energy to making “a proper one” one. She said, “from that one day when I was cleaning the house and realized that I didn’t have a proper place for puja, to now, the space has grown so much…and it has a very prominent place in our house…I am reminded to do puja almost daily.” Now, it is common for bala vihar programs to have one large auditorium or meeting hall where pujas happen as a group, and class time is generally reserved for other forms of instruction. These large halls are also used for assemblies and special programs—including such things as festival celebrations, performances, or such things as, “Parents Day.” When students practice ritual skills, individual classes often take “field-trips” to the rooms with altars, or occasionally they erect their own as the part of a lesson. And, of course,
in programs that are held in mandirs, the students usually spend some time as a part of each day in the main worship halls.

As in the early years, classes at bala vihar classes begin with the recitation of specific shlokas (verses in Sanskrit and in some cases, other languages as well). Many teachers stress the importance of daily repetition at home because one and a half hours a week is not thought to be enough time to facilitate the ideal kind of memorization and familiarity with the texts that is their goal. Children are encouraged to bring their learning home with them via assurances that it will “make your parents proud if you show them what we did today!” Through incentives (candy, gift-cards, games, and other prizes), many bala vihar teachers challenge students to take the time “every morning and evening to pray” with their parents. More than material goods, programs seek to cultivate children’s self-discipline and devotional dispositions through the promise of parental praise and familial harmony. Binu, a fifth-grade teacher told her class, “when you do puja together, it makes peace in the whole family and it grows love.” However, the cultivation of children’s discipline and desires aren’t the only thing that these programs seek to activate, but those of adults as well. As one teacher put it, “We want these prayers to become natural, not just for the children, but also to the parents.” This cultivation of embodied rituals is explicitly linked to what Swami Shiv Gambhirananda taught that “all parents long to keep their children’s love as they grow.”

A letter that was sent home to third-grade parents at an independent bala vihar in Hayward read:

The children have spent the past four months learning how to the daily morning puja. They know that they should do this after they have said their morning prayer and bathed, but before they have eaten their morning breakfast. If they can, we have told them to go to the garden and get some fresh flowers. We have taught them how to be very careful when lighting the diyo (lamp). Please let them light it, they will be very proud and we have taught them about safety. They know the Ganesha Stotra, Gayatri Mantra, and Guru Stotram, they will recite one or more depending on time. They will place flowers, and

44 This is a quote that was included in the bulletin board poster advertising a new bala vikas in Livermore in 2003.
offer agarbhati [incense] and do Naivedhyam [offering food]. They have learned all of aarti. They are very proud of all they have learned, so please make time for this as a family. Remember that the family that prays together stays together. There is no better way to grow love between parents and children then [sic] showing love to Bhagwan together.

In this way, learning rituals or mantras is never simply about the acquisition of knowledge, but it is wrapped up in messages about the relationship between the embodiment of communal knowledge, love of God, and love of/in families; the pedagogic practices educators employ in these contexts not only foster a longing for this promise of family love and harmony, but they attempt to capitalize on the desire for it in both parents and children.

In this regard, although content varies, there are elements of the message—that there is a relationship between communal identification, knowledge acquisition, and devotional practices and personal fulfillment—that remain consistent. Depending upon the devotional or regional orientations of the program, the specific shlokas or prayers that are taught can change significantly. The Chinmaya Curriculum is extensive, and I cannot explore it in depth in the dissertation itself. It warrants its own attention. Rather, have chosen instead to give a sense of the intended shape of an average Chinmaya Lesson, and I have referenced numerous examples from fieldwork to give a sense of some of the curriculum and pedagogic style. Almost across the board, teachers believe that values- and morals-based education are of the utmost importance. No matter their age, children are frequently encouraged to role-play and ask questions about the ethical and moral implications of the stories they are told. Despite assertions to the contrary, that bala vihar cares most about shaping the child’s morals, the actual curricula have become increasingly content driven, so that children leave the program with significantly more ritual, prayer, and textual study “skills” than in years past. It is important to note that there is variation even within bala vihar programs, let alone between and beyond them. I know of a number of
independent bala vihars that employ Chinmaya curriculum very liberally, drawing on it when they wish and innovating as suits their orientation. To some extent, we even find this type of picking and choosing within official Chinmaya contexts. However—based on my observations and review of curricula—Chinmaya bala vihar classes generally observe the following order:

1. Recitation of the Opening Prayer —“Om Saha Nāvatu, Saha Nau Bhunaktu, Saha Viryaṁ Karavāvahai/ Tejasvināvadhītam-astu mā vidviśāvahai/Om śantiḥ, śantiḥ, śantiḥ,” which is generally translated in bala vihar literature in the following way: “May He protect us both. May He nourish us. May we acquire the capacity (to study and understand the scriptures). May our study be brilliant. May we not cavil at each other. Om Peace, Peace, Peace.”

2. Attendance is taken, and children are supposed to respond “Hariḥ Om,” when their name is called.

3. Each class has “Memory time,” which consists of different texts, depending upon the focus of the curriculum, and that the children are supposed to learn over the course of the year. Examples include:

   a. Kindergarten, Alphabet Safari: Short prayers to Shri Ganesha, Shri Krishna, Shri Rama, Shri Hanuman and Shri Vishnu. They are also supposed to memorize the Chinmaya pledge by the end of the year.

   b. 1st grade, Bāla Rāmāyaṇa: Verses 1, 2, 3, and 14 of the Guru Stotram (verses dedicated to the teacher) and Dainikprārthanāḥ (daily prayers, i.e. those said upon waking, getting out of bed, before studying, and before eating, etc.—they also include 5 verses of the Gita as a part of the Dainikprārthanāḥ).

   c. 3rd grade, Bāla Bhāgavatam: the entire 14 verses of the Guru Stotram, and Daśāvatārastoram (verses praising all 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu).

   d. 4th grade, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Everywhere and My Twenty-Four Teachers: Mahāmṛtyuṇjaya Mantrāḥ (a mantra to Lord Śiva); Śrī Govinda Dāmodara Stotram (verses praising Lord Kṛṣṇa, and highlighting various moments in his life); Śrī Tapovanasaṣṭam (verses to Swami Tapovanatam, Swami Chinmayananda’s guru); and a number of verses dedicated to Swami Chinmayananda himself.

   e. 6th grade, India, Sacred Land (which was called “India My Love” in earlier versions of the curriculum): the Indian National Anthem (Janaganamana); bhajans of Mirabai, Surdas, and Narasinha Metha, as well as a mantra to the goddess Sarasvati (Shuklam Brahmacara…).
f. 7th grade, Yatodharma: the focus of memorization is on the Gita, as well as the mastery of a number of additional bhajans.

The extent of texts, mantras, and bhajans that children are expected to master over their years in bala vihar is quite impressive. Handbooks provide creative and fun ways that teachers can help their students memorize. Although not a part of the normal bala vihar curriculum, children are often encouraged to memorize the entire Gita, and train for Gita chanting competitions.

4. After the designated shlokas are chanted and bhajans are sung, classes tend to turn to the topic of the day, which can range dramatically in content. In most cases, stories from the Puranas, Epics, lives of various saints, etc. are told and children are encouraged through various exercises and Socratic methods to derive a clear lesson from the teachings. The Teachers’ Handbooks make the morals very clear, and, as a result, teachers are more likely than not to summarize or drive-home “the take-away” or “moral” in a didactic fashion. Thus, even when the actual classes are quite open and leave room for children to share their own thoughts—obviously depending upon the children involved and the style of the teacher—the “official” teaching goal is (since the standardization of the curriculum) made quite clear. These topical discussions involve art projects, plays, games, etc.

5. Following the “lesson of the day,” students are led through Likhita Japa (repetitive writing of mantras), in order to quiet their mind and facilitate some type of meditation. In kindergarten, this begins with the children writing, “Rāma” five-times in transliteration, and, as the years proceed the mantras get increasingly more complex and, depending upon the class, are written in Devanagari script instead of transliteration. Children are also encouraged to write down a translation of the mantras in their notebooks. In some classes, teachers also take time to give some instruction in yoga, or relaxation techniques.

6. Classes end with the closing prayer: Om sarve bhavantu sukinaḥ sarve santu nirvayāḥ// Sarve bhadrani pashyantu ma kashchid dukhabhagbhavet// Om shanti, shanti, shanti, “May all be happy. May all be healthy. May all enjoy prosperity. May none suffer. Om, Peace, Peace, Peace.”

7. The Chinmaya Mission also has pledge, which children are expected to learn in the first few years of bala vihar. The pledge is not recited during every session, but rather reserved for special occasions. In many ways, it represents the most overtly nationalistic and—in referencing the community as an “army,” “ready to fight”—most militaristic rhetorical ritual that occurs within Chinmaya’s youth programs in the diaspora. The pledge reads as follows:

We stand as one family
Bound to each other with love and respect.
We serve as an army
Courageous and disciplined
Ever ready to fight against all low tendencies
And false values, within and without us.
We live honestly
The noble life of sacrifice and service
Producing more than what we consume
And giving more than what we take.
We seek the Lord’s grace
To keep us on the path of virtue, courage and wisdom.
May Thy grace and blessings flow through us
To the world around us.
We believe that the service of our country
Is the service of the Lord of Lords
And devotion to the people
Is the devotion to the Supreme Self.
We know our responsibilities
Give us the ability and courage to fulfill them. Om Tat Sat.

The language of the pledge seems a profession of intense nationalism. Through the repetitive language of courage, discipline, sacrifice, and service the children are meant to identify with the collective, recognize themselves as “one family,” and commit themselves to “our country,” and its “people.” Furthermore, such dedication is framed simultaneously as an act of devotion to oneself, and to God, “the Supreme Self.” In this way, the recitation of the pledge and other similarly patriotic activities (singing the Indian national anthem, or learning about India’s “contributions to the world”) create narratives that function as “affective economies,” whereby, as Sara Ahmed writes, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or

45 While the idea that people in the diaspora could make substantive contributions to “their homeland,” however loosely construed, is certainly nothing new. Sikh transnational activism in the 1920s-1940s is often cited as a prototypical example of diasporic nationalism, particularly with respect to the intersecting flows of religious, economic and political capital, forms of knowledge, and communal identification. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the liberalization of India’s economy was promoted, and accompanied, by the rise in power of Hindu right-wing groups of the Sangh Parivar. It became commonplace for India’s politicians and business leaders to talk about India as an “emerging world power,” which included public displays of national autonomy and strength through such things as nuclear tests. The international sanctions that ensued after India’s testing, prompted a redoubling of efforts by the Indian government to increase the financial and political engagement of Overseas Indians (NRIs and PIOs)—involving the promotion of investment in Indian Saving Bonds, as well as a host of public relations and cultural campaigns to promote Indian pride and heritage-identification. Such efforts continue, long after the sanctions were lifted, and, almost across the board, Hindu educational programs began to include some measure of nationalist pedagogy within their curriculum.
bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.” In her elucidation of affective economies, Ahmed focuses on the affects of hate. She argues that rather than hate being a feeling that people possess, fixed in or on something or someone, it is a set of emotions that circulate to produce “differentiation” between some and others. The Chinmaya Mission’s affective economies employ rhetoric, symbols, signs, narratives, and metaphors in the production of subjects who perceive themselves to share particular feelings, spaces, experiences, or attributes. However, what Ahmed names as “affective economies” is not a recognition of shared experiences among individuals who experience emotions independently from one another, and then share in these collective and social emotions. “Rather, the individual subject comes into being through its very alignment with the collective.” Chinmaya’s nationalist pedagogies function as affective economies, in that they utilize evocations of Indian pride, achievement, history, love, “spiritual wisdom,” geography, symbol and song as means to create individual and collective identifications. Like all nationalisms, such “love of nation,” and ethnocentric pride implicitly produces and reifies difference such that the affect of love or pride is naturally born and circulated along with opposing affects, including hate, fear, aversion, etc. For the most part, in Chinmaya contexts, the implicit ‘Other’ isn’t made clear, and the primary affect associated with it is not hate, but pity. Those who do not have access to the moral and spiritual compass that Hindu traditions provide are potentially lost, and certainly lacking. This does not mean, of course, that there is a singular vision of or affect toward ‘Self’ or ‘Other’ that

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48 Ibid, p. 128.
universally present in Chinmaya contexts, but the affective economy does not revolve around or emphasize hate—although there are shadows of it at times—but love and, perhaps, pity.

In this regard, I believe it is important to note that there is a radical difference between the curriculum and patriotic pedagogies employed in Chinmaya programs when compared to the overtly nationalistic ones. The political orientations of those who send their children to Chinmaya programs vary tremendously, and hence it is profoundly difficult to generalize about the ways in which the recitation of the pledge or even lessons about India are explicated, processed or internalized. Chinmaya programs exist in nebulous realm when it comes to nationalism. For example, I have been told my many teachers that the country that is implied in the pledge can actually change depending upon where it is said; In India, of course, it refers to India, but when I spoke with an acharya from Australia, she said that it can also refer to Australia. In addition, in the most nationalistic portion of the multi-volume curriculum, India, Sacred Land, created for use in 6th-grade classes, the materials simultaneously use conventional nationalist rhetoric and revision it.

In moves that are typical of Hindutva curriculum, although different as well, Chinmaya begins its affirmation of India’s greatness through citing the work of “Eminent Scholars,” Max Müller, George Bernard Shaw, George Harrison, Arnold Joseph Toynbee, and Annie Besant. India is described as surviving “all the invasions because she has strong roots,” which Chinmaya identifies as the Hindu scriptures.49 Quoting Besant, the Teachers’ Handbook states, “Make no mistake, without Hinduism, India has no future. Hinduism is the soil into which India’s roots are stuck and torn out of that she will inevitably wither as a tree torn out from its place.”50 Such

49 India, Sacred Land, Bala Vihar Teachers’ Handbook: Grade 6 (Chinmaya Mission West, Piercy, CA, 2013), pp. 16-17.
50 Ibid, p. 16.
sentiments are affirmed by the evocation that “India and Hinduism are one.” Swami Chinmayananda’s “clarion call” is reproduced: “India has always been the *Guru* of the world. This generation has been called upon to lead and guide the world. The time has come, not in killing, not in destroying, not in warfare, but in learning and understanding how to face the problems of the outer world. It is absolutely necessary to study the scriptures and learn to practice the teachings in our everyday lives.” These content choices are unequivocally in line with curriculum produced by Hindutva groups, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu Education Foundation, and the Vedic Foundation, etc. India’s greatness is exceptional, and as Jaspir Puar characterizes this in the context of the United States: “Exceptionalism is used not to mark a break with historical trajectories or [make] a claim about the emergence of singular newness. Rather, exceptionalism gestures to narratives of excellence, excellent nationalism, a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority and its own singularity, ‘stuck,’ as Sara Ahmed would say, to various subjects.” In the case of many diasporic Hindu educational settings, this stuckness is associated with the affect of pride and self-worth, serving as the means of and justification for identification as a Hindu subject.

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51 Ibid, p. 17. This section also includes a quote by Vivekananda that references racial conceptions of Indians and Hindus: “India cannot perish, our race cannot become extinct, because, among all the divisions of mankind, it is to India that is reserved the highest and most splendid destiny, the most essential to the future of the human race.” The vision of racial superiority that is articulated here, not only furthers the elision between Indians and/as Hindus, but it employs the essentialized framing of India and Hinduism as a justification for communal pride. Beyond this one reference, I have almost never heard racial language employed in Chinmaya contexts, such discourse is normally overt only in Hindutva groups. However, the choice to include this language in the curriculum on India for 6th graders is reflective of a more subtle and persistent trope in mainstream diasporic Hinduism, which involves the racialization of Hindus by Hindus themselves, not by Others (as was the case with Bhagat Singh Thind, for example).

Where the Chinmaya Curriculum diverges from normative nationalist materials, however, is in the narratives that follow these expressions of pride and ethno-racial nationalism. The curriculum does not focus on history, it does not discuss Muslim rule or invasions. In discussions of Independence, only Gandhi and Tagore are referenced, framed as models of non-violence, peace, and humility. The interpretation the curriculum offers of Gandhi’s enduring message is that “the only devils in this world are those running around inside our own hearts, and that is where all our battles should be fought.”

This spiritual and personal emphasis on India’s sacred teachings, which are unsurprisingly identified as Hindu, characterizes the bulk of the remaining thirty-six, out of forty lessons on India. The enemies the curriculum continually identifies are always one’s own desires. In discussion of India’s emblems, personal spiritual lessons and meanings are emphasized—the national flower, the lotus, is seen as an emblem for self-discovery and the surrender of ego; the national bird, the peacock, whose feather Krishna wore in his crown, “represents a colorful life.” The emblems are said to convey the messages that one must, “speak the truth to be successful and happy; live like a lotus and be unattached; fearlessly road in the world like a tiger; and make our personality colorful and beautiful like a peacock by living a noble life.”

The focus on leading a moral, devoted and non-violent life, in sync with the seasons and nature is emphasized throughout the curriculum. A collective attachment to imagined and romantic visions of India are decidedly evinced in the 6th-grade materials, but it represents a fraction of the curriculum when compared to other ritual, narrative and moral messages. For example, in My Twenty-Four Teachers, the second part of the 4th-grade curriculum is based on the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavatam—also known as the Avadhuta

53 Ibid, p. 29.
54 Ibid, p. 36.
Gita, which recounts the dialogue between Dattatreya and King Yadu—focuses on the lessons that we must learn from nature and through caring for the earth. In the dialogue, Dattatreya states, “O noble king, I have roamed freely on the earth and I have learned the art of living from my Twenty-Four Teachers,” who are the earth, air, space, water, fire, moon, sun, pigeon, python, ocean, moth, honey-bee, elephant, honey-gatherer, deer, fish, Pingala dancer, osprey, child, young lady (with a single bangle), arrow-maker, snake, spider and larva. In these lessons, the emotions that circulate in classes conjure an alignment of the individual not simply with other Hindus, or Indians, but with nature itself. At times the discursive regime of the Chinmaya curriculum evokes nationalist sensibilities through the narration and enactment of an exclusivist Indian and Hindu communal story. More often, however, I found, that what was articulated to be most valuable in Chinmaya’s affective economy was the guidance, wisdom, ethical compass, and support (in times of joy and sorrow) that Hindu tradition and community offered its devotees.

The emphasis on fashioning moral subjects is exemplified by the way in which the story of the “Churning of the Milky Ocean” is deployed—over three classes in a curriculum focused on narratives about the avatars of Vishnu—to underscore how the psyche works in the production of wisdom, discernment of good and bad, and why the value of perseverance is so important to achieving one’s goals in a moral and righteous way. I have observed this lesson being taught five different times in three different cities; each time the children’s responses, and the examples they offered were slightly different, but the teachers’ messages stayed relatively consistent. After telling the story of how the asuras (demi-gods, who in this narrative are demons in competition with the gods) became more powerful than the devas, as a result of Indra’s pride, arrogance, and ignorance, the children were told how the devas appealed to Lord Vishnu for help

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in setting the world right. Lord Vishnu instructs them to “make peace with the asuras,” and asks them to assist in churning the milky ocean from which *amritam* (an elixir of immortality) will arise. The devas are instructed to throw many things into the ocean, to use Mount Mandara as their churning-rod, and Vasuki (the king of serpents) as their churning rope, and, most importantly, they are told to be “kind and courteous” to the asuras, giving in graciously to any requests, terms, or conditions they make. The devas are told that many things will emerge from this churning, including a deadly poison (*halahala*), but that they should be “diligent, watchful, and careful.” Eventually, in order to help them in the churning, Lord Vishnu takes on the form of Kurma (a tortoise), and one thing after another emerges from the ocean—including poison, magical animals, gems, the goddess Lakshmi, and the goddess Varuni. The asuras, in particular, are depicted as being distracted and losing their focus, as they vie to get the many things that emerge from the ocean. The devas, on the other hand, follow Vishnu’s guidance. Eventually a young boy, Dhanvantari, emerges holding the jar of amritam in his hands. The asuras “were filled with greed…[and] snatched the jar” from Dhanvantari’s hands. They began fighting amongst themselves as to who should get the amritam first, while the devas remained calm, appealing to Lord Vishnu for help. Vishnu appears in the “beautiful and enchanting form” of his avatara Mohini, and the asuras begin to fawn over her, offering her the amritam to give out as she desires. Deceived by their “passion, greed, lust, and anger,” the asuras received none of the amritam. In addition to imparting the concrete information about two of Lord Vishnu’s avatars, the story is used to teach children the following lessons: 1.) They should always be polite, “anything can be accomplished by being peaceful; nothing can be accomplished through

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56 This rendering of the story is a compilation of the tellings I have observed in various classes, and the written version, which appears in the *Bāla Bhāgavatam*: Bala Vihar Teachers’ Handbook, Grade 3 that most teachers seemed to follow quite closely.
anger,” this is especially important when dealing with powerful and evil people;\(^{57}\) 2.) “Success is not achieved through resentment, but through acceptance,” which is why it is so important to maintain focus on their goals. When working toward things, they should not “be afraid of the destructive poison that may come out in the process, nor should they covet the desirable and pleasant objects that might follow,” rather they must strive for amritam (which is generally reinterpreted, in these settings, as happiness and fulfillment); 3.) The churning of the ocean “is symbolic of thoughts in our mind. There is constant churning going in our minds, with good and bad thoughts, the devas and the asuras.”\(^{58}\) It is normal to be tempted to do things like: watch T.V. when nobody is home, even when your parents have told you not to do so; take an extra piece of candy when no one is looking; or cheat “just a little bit” on homework, copying from a friend when you know you can’t be caught. Our minds are all home to asuras and devas, and it is “your choice who will ultimately win.” Thoughts can give rise to self-doubt, tempt us with instant gratification, and produce “vivid images of things we desire.” Sometimes the mind churns and is wise—helping us see what our real goal is and what we should pursue. “As we churn in our minds, many brilliant and noble thoughts…[can] surface. We may achieve great things as a result,” but we can never stop with small accomplishments or rewards, but must persist to reach our ultimate goal of “eternal happiness,” “fulfillment,” and “peace in ourselves, others and Bhagavan.”\(^{59}\)


\(^{58}\) Ibid, p. 197.

\(^{59}\) In a bala vihar version of “The Little Engine that Could,” the story used to illustrate the importance of persistence and self-discipline to the children is about two frogs. One large and powerful frog tempts another littler, but more responsible, frog to venture out from their pond to a dairy, where they have been told not to go. When they enter the dairy, they hear a noise and become frightened, jumping into a pail of milk. They start swimming in circles, attempting to get out. The larger frog becomes tired and is defeated by his inner thoughts, his asuras, which tell him he will not succeed. He gives up and sinks to the bottom of the pail. The little frog, however, persists, maintaining
In between the stories, art projects, games, and didactic explanations, teachers always make time for self-reflection, what is understood as bala vikas (the development of the child). The language of bala vikas is used both in and outside of Chinmaya contexts and is based on a belief that modern Hinduism offers tools to enhance the quality of life, both spiritually and emotionally. This requires that children (and adults as well) develop virtues through self-reflection, and hone their minds to think rationally and pragmatically.

When I have observed children during the churning of the ocean lessons, they are generally very clear about the take-away message and they have all shared their own “asura stories”—the time they hit their sibling out of anger, snuck the iPad into their bed, so they could watch a show when their parents thought they were sleeping or hoped that a friend would lose the Gita competition, since they had already been eliminated. The classes create spaces where young children seem to feel safe enough to share their “demons” and they are rewarded for doing so. One teacher explained that this is the “way that children gain sachin samaj [proper or right understanding]. If we are to expect them to be perfect, and…we are never honest about our failings, they can’t begin to learn the process of determination between right and wrong” required for dharmic living. Jagdish Nair—an articulate eight-year-old boy who asked his mother to please allow me to use his full name, a request she was proud to oblige—offered an interpretation of the picture he drew of the asuras and devas churning the ocean all inside the head of a person, with his rendering of brain matter around the top resembling clouds. He said,

I put the ocean inside our brain because all the time we have neurons shooting messages back and forth, like the way the ocean goes back and forth….I learned all about it in my brain book [a book his mother said they had checked out from the library so many times that it was just cheaper to purchase it than keep paying late fees]….When I do my

hope. He continues to swim and starts to feel “something strange. The milk was getting thicker and thicker and small lumps of butter were beginning to form in the milk.” Once a large lump of butter formed, he was able to “climb up and jump out of the shiny bucket.” The little frog proclaims, “What a big lesson I have learned today…. We should always keep trying and never give up.”
prayers, I am learning how to still my mind…Kashvi acharya said we can discipline our mind. I think that is what Shri Vishnu is doing here [he pointed to his drawing of Vishnu in the form of the tortoise in the middle of the brain]… I guess that is what we are supposed to ask him to help us with every day and what we learn at bal vihar…Mommy says that that’s what dharma is too…I think its brain exercise.

Jagdish’s language about disciplining his mind and seeing dharma as brain exercise, coupled with the standard children’s confessionals—how they have sometimes let their asuras rule them, instead of their devas—is illustrative of a particularly popular Hindu American discourse: children are agents in their own lives, capable of making choices, both good and bad. In these contexts, children are not only affirmed for making good choices, but for illustrating their capacity to reflect upon how they have previously used their autonomy in ways that were less than ideal. While the discourse of self-discipline seems to be universal in Chinmaya settings, the positive or negative evaluation of various choices and students’ willingness to share specific “asuras” can change depending on the particular program. These differences become more evident when teenagers, rather than 3rd graders, are the participants. For example, in one Chinmaya Class in New Jersey, after a student talked about how she made a bad choice to stay at a party where a lot of kids were doing drugs, the teacher responded by saying that, “yes, that is bad,” and then continued to give the students a lecture about how dangerous and distracting dating in high school can be and how it all leads to things like drinking and sex. Whereas in a class in Northern California, I watched Shreya, a senior in high school, who was openly-out as a lesbian, share how she had really made a mistake when she decided not to invite her girlfriend to one of her parents’ Indian parties, even when they had encouraged it, because she didn’t want to deal with all the questions. When she spoke about how much she had hurt her girlfriend’s feelings, the teacher and other students were very supportive and talked about how she could do things differently in the future. The teacher even suggested that Shreya invite her girlfriend to
come to class next week so that she could understand Shreya’s culture better and meet her bala vihar family.

Just as there is tremendous variation with respect to the messages, politics, and affective effects produced within Chinmaya bala vihars, there is a significant range in curricular and emotional desires that fall outside of Chinmaya’s purview. Not only are there programs, as I noted, that are explicitly right-wing and nationalistic, but there are also bala vihars that are explicitly progressive in their orientation. Bal Kendra is one such program. It was started in Santa Monica in 2012 by Mudita Bahadur. Bahadur recently took her children out of a more established bala vihar, not simply or even primarily because it was difficult to drive there, but mainly because of the dogmatic teaching style. Returning to the format of early bala vihars, approximately ten families meet, rotating living rooms, for two hours one Sunday a month. The children and parents learn together.

What is distinctive about the program, which has been featured in newspaper articles, is not simply the choice to return to the less institutionalized environment, but it is the messages they seek to convey to their children. In a lesson was focused on caste, one of the fathers, Berkeley Sanjay, assigned castes to people: One mother was made a brahman. He then told some of the students to pick up their shoes—making them “untouchables”—and then he asked them to go to the far corner of the room. One child didn’t want to go and went toward her mother, who was assigned the role of a brahman. Sanjay stopped the child, telling her she couldn’t do that since people who deal with shoes do not touch brahmans. This intentionally opened up a conversation about the caste system and the injustice of it. One of the students, who had learned about caste in her 6th grade social studies, said she appreciated the chance to go beyond the public-school version (in which caste is framed as the system of social hierarchy and
organization in India), and actually talk about how caste might be good or bad. For these parents, it is critically important that issues like caste do not get swept under the rug, or treated with apologetics. Unhappy with the fact that they experienced what they described as sexism and anti-intellectualism at mandirs and other bala vihar programs, parents like these are invested in creating an intentional educational environment, which fosters pride while maintaining critical thought; They want to discourage children from just taking the tradition and “swallow[ing] it whole.”60 Other similar bala vihars, both within the Chinmaya network and beyond, have stressed social justice engagement, having students volunteer in shelters, and at soup kitchens. Some of the more radical bala vihars have organized their classes to participate in rallies supporting the rights of immigrants, or protesting the Muslim-ban.61

On the other end of the spectrum, there are curricula that combine the ritual, textual, and values-based curriculum that is commonly found in mainstream bala vihars with narratives that malign Muslims at every turn.62 For example, in a 7th-grade textbook focused on Hindu ethics, which is part of a robust supplementary school curriculum—produced independently by an active individual at a very large mandir school—Muslims are mentioned in disparaging ways fifteen times. In a section on “Manifestations of Hatred,” Muslims are depicted as the exemplars of “Religious Hatred,” and perpetrators of “Hinduphobia.” In narratives praising Guru Nanak,


61 The Brooklyn Bala Vihar is another such alternative program, which focuses on seva. It was founded in the Fall of 2013 and is associated with Sadhana. Their program uses the Chinmaya Mission curriculum and adapting it as they see fit. With things like Beach Clean-Up Seva, they connect their environmental efforts with Hindu narratives. For example, they taught the children the mantra, “Samudra Vasane Devi, Parvata Stana Mandale. Vishnu Patni Namastubhyam, Pada Sparsham Kshamashva Me/ Salutations to the Divine Consort of Lord Vishnu, Who is Clothed by Oceans, Adorned by the Mountains. Pardon me, Mother, for Setting My Foot on You.”

62 This curriculum was very graciously shared with me by the author. It was just completed in the Summer of 2017. I was given permission to quote this text, but I have chosen not to name the author or quote more than one or two words, so as to avoid personal reprisals.
Muslims are portrayed as “hypocrites,” who are innocently exposed and shown the folly of their ways by Sikhism’s founding guru. Jabbar Khan is described as “fanatical,” a Muslim ruler who was evil to Hindu and Muslims alike. Muslims are said to be responsible for “ethnically cleansing” Hindus from Pakistan in 1947. While I have not come across content like this often, it does exist, and, with today’s technologies, it can be easily disseminated. What is most troubling and edifying to me is that after many years of the mandir associated with this school, as well as working closely with many people there, I was not aware of the Hindutva slant of the curriculum, or the political sentiments of its author, until the materials were generously shared with me just a few months ago. My own surprise elucidates what I believe to be a more complex and widespread type of ignorance (which I will discuss further in Chapter VII). Was I to bring my concerns about the curricular content to the attention of Temple leaders, and community members, I am quite certain that most of them would also be surprised and dismayed. Although people are aware of the extremely impressive and extensive curriculum that has been produced for the school, most of the active temple goers and board members have yet to read it. I would even venture to guess that most adults at the Mandir will not read the materials, unless they are teaching in the school, and still they are likely to read only the materials they are expected to teach. The examples I cite from this independent curriculum provide only a small window into the nine-volume curriculum, of which the majority is focused on teaching mantras, shlokas, stories about the various Gods and Goddesses, philosophical insights from sacred texts, and daily and festival rituals and observances. With respect to the Hindutva narratives found in the texts, each example (be it about Muslims, India as Hindu, or India’s glorious achievements and contributions to the world) is presented as a statement of historical fact. These narratives are never as something that might be subject to interpretation. Although this curriculum was just
completed in the Summer and Fall of 2017, I have already found material from the book reposted on a Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh bala gokulam website. It is difficult to get a handle on the complex and ever-shifting circulation of materials and ideas, and even more difficult to try and discern the nature and impact of the various and often contradictory affective economies in play in these educational realms.

A turn to a consideration of pedagogic style, rather than curricular content, elucidates a number of things. Much has certainly been written about the Hindu nationalist penchant for public displays, processions and flag waving—and in these moments the Hindutva schools and camps stay somewhat true to form, reflecting their saffron roots. If we look at their educational materials and programs, however, something else emerges as well. Like their non-Hindutva counterparts, nationalist children’s programs, websites, and textual materials draw upon popular educational philosophies about the importance of gearing art projects and narratives to specific age groups. However, although there are some similarities with respect to content by way of Hindu ritual practices and narratives, and the curricular philosophy of Hindutva groups resembles that found in secular and religious classrooms throughout the U.S., there is a marked difference as far as pedagogic style. The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America commonly employ lecture formats, even with relatively young children, that consist of PowerPoint presentations, or use other forms of technology and media to convey their message. Non-nationalistic educational groups, on the other hand, are more likely to use print medium—paper texts and books—and alternative media (including such things as painting, drawing, and ceramics), as well the introduction of sensory stimuli (the use of instruments, dancing, cooking) in their approach to the material. These differences alone seem to reflect a type of spatial difference, wherein technology symbolizes a physical distancing that imparts a
more rootless, colonizing, and universalizing discourse. Furthermore, Hindutva camps tend to show a pedagogic preference for ordering physical bodies through formations in parades and processions, engaging in regimented physical exercise and extremely muscular forms of yoga (as opposed to more meditative ones). At these overtly Hindu nationalist camps and in schools, as well, rituals around the Indian flag, the singing of Jana Gana Mana, India’s national anthem, and Vande Mataram are normative, as are short puja-s before shrines that include an image of the goddess Bharat Mata (Mother India), along with a picture of Golwalkar, the founder of the Sangh Pariwar’s volunteer militaristic wing, the RSS. Pledges of different sorts are commonly recited and rarely do these camps or classes focus on the development of ritual or philosophical knowledge.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{63}\) If we look at American Hinduism in comparison not only with Hinduism in India and around the world but in light of American religious history, then we must note that the very process of explaining one’s religion to others, to oneself, and to one’s children through the development of doctrine and educational institutions, has been the trend of religious groups who came to America since the 1800’s. For comparison, albeit a very different case, between 1880 and 1924, large waves of Jews migrated from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Slovakia. The populations were regionally, culturally, linguistically, and often religiously distinct, even though they were all “Jewish.” Initially, the differences in languages and customs were a great source of tension among these communities—while ostensibly all Jews, unlike Hindus, share common textual traditions, the differences between these groups was vast. Within a relatively short period of time, however, by the 1930’s and 1940’s, these groups forged close alliances, identifying as Eastern European Jews, as opposed to the German Jews, most of whom had come earlier, and even more so they viewed themselves as Jews as opposed to Christians. This is not to suggest that regional differences did not remain, nor that they have no place in American Jewish life to this day, but, in an effort to find a place for their Judaism and a means to educate their children. Some level of universalization and homogenization is inevitable. My curricular reviews and classroom observations invite adjectives like homogenization, universalization, and Sanskrtization. Curricula resemble the courses and the primers on Hinduism written by the likes of Annie Besant and other neo-Hindu reformers, with whom I began this dissertation. They are part of that trajectory that began in the 19th century when “Hinduism” as a religious entity was being defined in western religious terms. The emergence of this type of uniformity indicates the degree to which processes of homogenizing are taking place in the diaspora. And this fact has been a cause of concern for those who note the pattern. Still, we must consider not only the similarities but also the differences. Even in this discourse dominated by broad strokes painting a singular Hinduism, there is still a tremendous amount of variation, creativity, and innovation on the part of teachers. I hope that the chapter that follows conveys both the homogeneities and heterogeneities of American Hindu educational endeavors.
Among Hindu diasporic communities, there is no singular outlook about the proper way one should parent or even the methods one should employ to develop a child’s Hindu identity. However, there is an almost universal attitude about the significant role played by individual adults and communities in shaping a young person’s sense of self, especially when the broader cultural milieu does not afford the possibility of an immersive learning environment (i.e. anywhere but India). In both official discourse and casual conversation at camps, mandirs, and in other educational settings, the role of teachers and parents is viewed as paramount, active, and powerful. The idea that the practices of parenting “urgently” need to be directed toward making children into “moral,” “spiritual,” “righteous,” and “dedicated” individuals is pervasive, and the notion that “the family provides the foundation” is echoed in almost every imaginable setting. Even when practices such as meditation and self-reflection are emphasized as important personal disciplines which must be learned as a part of cultivating a Hindu disposition, they are taught in group settings, where other forms of socialization are fostered and emphasized. In this regard, teachers often speak of how doing yoga alone, or at a yoga studio is not the same as doing it in the context of bala vihar classes or in decidedly Hindu contexts:

It is important for children to see other adults taking the decision to do this practice as a part of lifework, but also as puja-work specifically. For our children, specifically, it should not be divorced, like so many things and families today…from our community rituals. The place should not smell like sweat, but freshly offered fruits and agarbati [incense]…. And children should look around and see people dressed appropriately for worship, not fancy, tight, yoga pants.

In this regard, community leaders and parents see themselves, teachers, and the other Hindu adults, with whom their children interact, as playing active roles in the construction of identity. Ramesh Thakkar—a teacher, and father from Sunnyvale, California—during a one-time Sunday
morning workshop offered for parents with children between the ages of four and seven, expressed this sentiment in the following way:

You cannot be lazy and assume that this [“raising good Hindu children,” as he described it earlier in his talk] will happen naturally, this requires you to be active. You don’t just run a marathon without building up to it. You must run every day, and pace yourself, no? This is what you must do as a parent—get off the couch and get active…. If my uncle, who is a cardiologist, told me, “Ramesh, you have to exercise more if you want to live to see your children grow up and marry,” you know what? I would go to the gym immediately, no stopping at “Go” to collect my two-hundred dollars [referencing the game Monopoly, which had been a theme throughout the workshop]....This must take the priority over other things, no?...There are always distractions, things getting in my way…

Such an outlook resonates with the seemingly ubiquitous philosophy about children and parenting promulgated through programming offered by mandirs and community centers, and by organizations such as the Chinmaya Mission, whose reach in the realms of Hindu education, especially in the diaspora, far exceeds its reach into other areas of Hindu life. While these parenting workshops or discourses often offer what might seem to be predictable advice, there are numerous surprises. The foreseeable elements of these talks refer to notions of propriety, and morality, but more often than not, parents are told to let go of the reins and stop trying to control their children’s lives. Although children are certainly taught values and morals through the study of the tradition and bala vihar, parents— or so many teachers suggest—should teach by their example. In some version or another, acharyas always remind parents that children watch from a young age, so when a parent is rude to a waitress or lies to a friend or telemarketer on the phone,

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64 This class, held in 2005, was not offered in conjunction with any mandir or movement (like the Chinmaya Mission) but was advertised in local grocery stores and with fliers at a few of the local mandirs and the nearby Indian Community Center. The all-day workshop was attended by 42 adults, in addition to me and the teacher.
“children are listening,” “children are watching,” and “then how can you say, be kind, be nice, don’t tell a lie?”

The Chinmaya Mission has produced countless brochures, books, video lectures, podcasts, online and print curriculum, as well as workshops, classes, and lectures not simply to educate children but to educate parents about parenting and the nature of childhood and children. Swami Swaroopananda, who was appointed the head of the Chinmaya Mission Worldwide in 2017, established his career establishing and serving Chinmaya Missions in Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, the Middle East and parts of Africa. In particular, following Swami Chinmayananda’s lead, his primary focus has been on youth education and development. He is well known for his seminars about parenting, which he began offering in Hong Kong and has continued to offer regularly throughout the world. One of his talks, “Practical Tips on the Art of Parenting” is also available for streaming via the Chinmaya Channel on YouTube. Receiving over 116,578 views as of August 2017. In the talk, he encourages parents to be open to talking to their children. Rather than forbidding them from dating, or doing drugs, and seeing friends who do so, he talks about the importance of creating a relationship between parents and children that fosters friendship and communication. Swaroopananda professes that children talk to him openly about these types of things, but are often scared to tell their parents for fear of punishment. He

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66 I am not sure of the details, but somewhat surprisingly Swami Tejomayananda, who had been the Head of the Chinmaya Mission since the death of the movement’s founder, Swami Chinmayananda, stepped down from the position and appointed Swami Swaroopananda. Swaroopananda is celebrated for his demeanor, and his business acumen, giving “holistic management” seminars for executives. Despite being raised in India, and spending significant time as the head of the Chinmaya residential school in Coimbatore, Swami Swaroopananda is extremely well-versed in diasporic Hinduism. He has spent the majority of his career outside of India, which incidentally, the case for Swami Chinmayananda as well. He is described as a “rare voice that blends authenticity and accessibility; theory with practice; logic with heart” (See “Our Leadership,” [http://www.chinmayauk.org/our-leaders/swami-swaroopananda/](http://www.chinmayauk.org/our-leaders/swami-swaroopananda/)).
says, that is is better to just be open, and then you can ask them—is this what you want? If so, then you can take drugs. Invariably, he reports, children want to do the right thing. Somewhat surprisingly, he tells parents not to be angry when children want to marry someone they don’t approve of because that will only cause children to turn away from them. Yet, in the midst of his message, he is very clear that the goal is for children to choose the traditional path, and parents need to guide them.

In such discourses, it is quite common for different acharyas to quote Khalil Gibran’s *The Prophet* children “come through you but they are not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.” When they are trying to tell parents that they need to pull back from “helicopter parenting.” These types of parenting discourses involve a creative moralizing turn, and identity-shaping strategy, in which parents are simultaneously told, “you are powerless over your children’s lives,” and that “you can determine their future through your own actions.” Rhetorically, this is achieved through the paradoxical repetition of phrases such as, “nobody can tell them [children] what to do,” “they are free,” “you can’t control them,” and “they must think about their future,” “they will act properly, if they see you doing so,” “you are obliged to guide them.”

Swami Tejomayananda, in a piece entitled, “Children—Are They Yours?”, argues that “parents only provide material for the physical body,” but everyone belongs to God. He writes, “We need to rethink and…remove the ‘I-ness’ and ‘my-ness’ from life…my child…my father…my mother…my friend….The role of a parent is to provide for the child…a conducive

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67 This type of approach, wherein parents are told to avoid too much judgment and punishment, accepting their children’s autonomy and limiting attempts to control, reveals distinct differences between the messages offered in explicitly nationalistic and Hindutva contexts and those in the broader Hindu community, where things such as inter-dating and intermarriage are summarily discouraged.
environment for its development.” In these professions of advice, the perceived relationship between children’s “natures” and the role of “culture” in shaping them emerges as complex.

(I) THE NATURE OF CHILDREN

Despite this overwhelmingly popular attitude about the role of culture and environment in shaping and molding children, there is an almost paradoxical attitude at work as well. In concert with the sense that children need to be educated and disciplined, there is an equally strong understanding that children are made, by virtue of their birth. As biological and spiritual beings who are created before their encounters with this social world into which they were born, children are already understood to have a sort of nature. In some theological conceptions, this nature is viewed as primordial. Referencing the fact that samskaras (lifecycle rituals) are undertaken while the child is still in the womb, one Fijian parent from Fremont, spoke of how the atman is already shaped by and through the forces of karma, although it is capable of refinement and reformation in each lifetime. She said

we are taught that Wisdom is. It is the sound of the universe. It already always is. Learning is just a process of awakening, coming to know what is already always present in oneself. The samskaras…offer [the] possibility of opening our consciousness to that knowledge, which we come to express in our bodies.

These theological and philosophical understandings of the nature of knowledge are often coupled by a much more pragmatic type of pedagogical approach and understanding. Employing their own version of practice theory, teachers at bala vihars and camps often speak of how living outside of India means that things are no longer just evident or natural, as they “were at home.” Although, as I noted in the previous chapter, wanting their children to “know who they are”

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68 Swami Tejomayananda, “Children–Are They Yours?” Chinmaya Mission Trust. Distributed on a handout for a Parenting Workshop at a non-Chinmaya program in Boston, MA.
presumes that they already are something, they just need to learn and come to possess what that something is, there is a very strong sense that if parents don’t intervene their children will find themselves to be something that they do not recognize.

In this way, many of the Hindu parents and teachers with whom I engaged recognize the passive ways that children are made as social beings in the context of multiple fields of engagement. Such things as capitalism, consumerism, American, Indian culture, Hinduism, modernity, as well one’s own particular circumstances—where you live, who you meet, what you do—are seen to as factors, some controllable and others not, which shape, in the passive-sense, children’s orientations and identities. In this regard, especially in the more nationalistic contexts, Hindu education is understood as both a defensive and an offensive strategy in the cultural war between Hindu morality, reverence, and tradition and American immorality, irreverence, and novelty.

(II) THE VALUE OF CHILDREN

In February of 2003, Radhika, a doula—who grew up in Bangalore, but relocated to Foster City, California after her marriage—hosted a talk for expectant Hindu mothers, at her home entitled, “With Every Birth Pure Wisdom.” She began the talk with the idea that prema (love) is experienced through different ronas (which she translated to the group as “emotional states”). Although she was never explicit, her ideas seem to be built upon Rupa Goswami’s formulation of the various relationships one can have to God, through bhakti. She said, “All of us, ideally, will have access to all of these different ways of relating to God at some point or

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69 To fully disclose my personal relationship to this workshop, I should note that I pregnant at the time and I was looking for a doula. I had seen the posting at one of the temples that I frequented in my fieldwork and I decided to attend. As soon as Radhika started talking I asked if I could record the session. I promised only to use what she said, and not the comments of the other attendees, which is why I can’t describe the scene any more fully than I have.
other in our lifetime. But there is one moment in the life of every parent” she said, where you can recognize the purest state of all of these at once: at the moment of your child’s birth you will experience the purest equanimity, shanta. You will also, at the same time feel that your entire purpose is to serve this being to fulfill her every need, then you know dasya [servitude]….When you look at your husband, in the moment after your child’s birth, you will feel both the deepest kind of sakhyā [friendship]….which is a relationship of equals—you will know that you are responsible together…for the child and for each other…. Of course, in this moment, you will know for the first time what it is to be on the other side of vatsalya [parenthood], and without this transition to the other side you can never really truly reach this knowing….Yes, God is our parent, we have parents, but to be a parent, you experience all the joy and responsibility that comes with it, and then we can understand with deep compassion what God must feel for all His children….and madhurya [romantic love], that love you will experience when you look at your husband and you recall the love that made this child…Don’t let me lead you astray, you will not feel that kind of desire or love for your husband, probably not for quite a while after the birth….but you will feel utter bhakti to your very core in that moment….and all of it you owe to your child….Not only do they give you pure wisdom, but what I meant with the title for the talk, is that they already possess true, and pure wisdom in those little toes, and eyes, and ears…. Radhika’s long discourse on the profundity of childbirth ended with the assertion that we don’t value children enough, and that mothers, in particular, know all this about children, but the demands of society make even women forget it. She recommended that the first stories people should read their children should be about bala Krishna (Krishna as a child), and she reminded adults that “many texts said,” that “we should try to emulate” the pure love and emotion of the child.

In a radically different context, at a one-week summer camp for Hindu families in Southern California, a similar message about children’s natures was conveyed. A story about Krishna’s stealing butter was told to a group of parents who were reminded that this week was a time when they were to feel freer, less constrained by all the rules of work and normal life. They were encouraged to heed the lessons of bala Krishna,
who knows what all children know, that if we find time to play in God’s creation, we find love in every corner, every interaction, every person—and what better place could we be in than right at this ocean?... Look at the ocean. There is more than enough for all of us....Take this. Did the gopis ever run out of ghee [clarified butter]? This is a time, you know, a time to be like children. Let the children be our teachers for these next few days. Watch them as they run, and build sand castles, just be with them. They see what we can so easily become blind to...If we take it—breathe, time, friendship—with love, we will be given it with love...found in the family, with the children, with the husband and wife, the parents...it will be there like the ghi. It is freely given. We don’t need to ask.

The idea that children open parents up to nature itself, is complimented by ideas that, for parents, children act as spiritual, ritual and cultural conduits.

In the Summer of 2004, I visited a small private mandir in San Francisco. Located in a repurposed storage room of a struggling Indian grocery and goods store, the mandir remained open for less than 18 months, just two months less than the short-life of the grocery itself. During June, July, and August of 2004, this room was the home-base of the Sanatana Dharma Kids Culture Camp, comprised of 14 to 27 children depending upon the day. The campers were the children of recent immigrants, each of whom had at least one parent who had worked at call centers in Ahmedabad, Baroda, Pune, or Nagpur. They were all relocated to San Francisco, “poached” by a company wishing to improve customer service and facilitate better protocols for their Indian call centers. Among these families, it was common to hear laments about the high costs of bay area living, but the young couples also spoke about how happy they were to be raising their children in America. A number of the women talked about how excited they were to have come together to make the camp, and how they felt a newfound sense of purpose, and creative inspiration as they tried to “sort out what to teach the children,” “what would be fun,” and “what was important.”

Two of the women, whose husbands had worked at the same call center in Ahmedabad, had decided to go into business together, opening the Indian grocery and goods store when the
storefront below one of their apartments came up for rent. All the parents were young heterosexual couples in their late 20s and early 30s. The majority of their children ranged in age from five through twelve, which was, unsurprisingly, the age range of the campers. Some of the families also had young toddlers and newborns who were in attendance at the family programs, which met on weekends and Thursday nights over the six weeks that the camp was in session.

On the opening Sunday of camp, parents, and children gathered together. Unexpectedly, the turn-out was so good that they filled the small shop and had to relocate the meeting to a nearby park. With attendance greater than anticipated, the parents found themselves scrambling to make sure they had enough adults for the weekday programs, when initially only about 12 children, and the three mothers who had organized the camp, were expected to attend. This was seen as a “very good problem to have,” and the first day of the camp was declared a success by the parent organizers—38 parents and 27 children had come to participate. Most striking about the activities that were chosen for the first day was the emphasis given to the Rig Veda, a text rarely studied in these contexts, let alone serve as the basis for the programming at a Hindu supplementary class or camp. Children and parents were divided into small groups, which intentionally mixed children with parents other than their own. They were given a sheet of paper that included 12 verses from the Rig Veda in translation. The small groups were each asked to read the verses, discern what the passages said about children, and tasked with making up skits that conveyed the meaning of their group’s particular verses. To begin, the groups read the translations aloud; words such as “progeny” and “offspring” were translated for the younger children, and ideas about such things as how the “Dawn” could be both a time of day and a personification of God were explained to the campers, who seemed generally confused about the meaning of the verses.
Before each group performed its skit, the shlokas were read in English by a child, and chanted by one of the fathers, fittingly named Gyaan (knowledge), who was, according to the other parents, “very knowledgeable in Sanskrit.” The skits were creative interpretations of the verses. In one rendering, a couple who longed for a child were depicted as chanting the Gayatri mantra and constantly performing pujas. Their piety was ultimately rewarded when out of the 

*havan* (ritual fire) came *Agni* (the god of fire) himself, played by five-year-old Ritika, who handed the parents a toddler, who just happened to be Ritika’s two-year-old brother. This resulted in uproarious laughter from the group, and Ritika’s parents offered to let the other parents keep their son, as they were sure that Ritika would be quite pleased with that development. Another one of the skits depicted a demon cursing a pious man who sat still, eyes closed in meditation, and chanting “Om Namah Shivaya.” The demon continued to curse him, poke him, and steal the few possessions he had. The pious man didn’t move or even open his eyes when, out from behind a tree jumped Lord Shiva, who was played by one of the older boys. He had run back to the shop, thrown on a kurta, put on a bindi and a paper garland and returned with a small brass image of Shiva Nataraja, which he held in front of his face during the skit, as he gave one powerful stare and uttered a single curse that killed all of the demon’s one-hundred children.

Skits of this nature continued for about an hour, then the group was invited to eat some snacks, which some of the mothers had laid-out on a blanket, while two of the parents facilitated a conversation about what the plays conveyed about the importance of children in the Vedas. For the most part, parents dominated this part of the conversation, while the children ate. As the discussion ensued ideas surfaced about how the Vedas make clear that “children are a blessing;” hymns beseech the Gods to provide offspring, and to protect one’s progeny from harm;
numerous verses are devoted to the protection of the pregnant mother and the warding off of evil spirits who might harm the fetus; true punishment for an enemy who seeks a person’s destruction is the destruction of their riches and the death of their offspring; and children continue one’s lineage, providing parental surety, protection in old-age and the next life. Parents spoke about the idea that children—particularly sons, but daughters as well—are a desideratum; the continuation of a family line is “not simply about ego,” as one parent described it, but an “insurance policy.” Upon hearing this, Neeta, one of the older girls spoke up and asked if “children have to do puja when their parents die in order to pay the gods” to take care of them in the next world. This suggestion was met with pride by the girl’s father, who saw this as an opportunity to discuss how, although parents must care for children when they are young, “as children grow up they must begin to care for their parents, even in their deaths,” actions which, he noted, also help children to fulfill their dharma at the same time.

As the afternoon progressed, most of the children lost focus and many wandered over to the play structure. The parents continued their conversation, discussing how in these earliest of Hindu texts, the value of children is understood as paramount. They reflected upon how the Veda seemed to understand children as a subset of possessions; like cattle, and wealth, children are boons for those who are “good” and “righteous” in this world. However, they are distinguished from livestock and material wealth because of their importance as ritual actors — serving the gods on their parents’ behalf, and whom, unlike other possessions, can and in fact must embody sacred knowledge. It was in this regard that this conversation began to resemble many others that I have observed over the years, wherein the importance of transmitting knowledge to children was articulated as the main goal; as Nitika, one of the two main organizers of the Sanatana Dharma Kids Culture camp, described it, passing on knowledge was the “whole reason” they
started the camp. She discussed how the stakes were higher today, and that if parents weren’t proactive, their children wouldn’t know they were Hindu, so “it is more than the Veda’s idea of children doing rituals for their parents…really we must do rituals for the children, teach them, so they can even just recognize that they are Hindu.” To support this point, Sejal, the other facilitator of the camp talked to the parents about how, in ancient times, it was through the proper recitation of mantras and performance of sacrifice that children were of value to their parents, even though,

It must have been love too, of course…. but today, our focus must, it must be something more than just the memorization, doing-without-thinking, we have to impart feeling by what we do, make them have the feeling as though it was natural. So, challenge is: how to make the knowledge natural, so they don’t know they are really learning all along.

Both Nikita’s use of the language of recognition, and Sejal’s desire to consciously naturalize knowledge that requires instruction reflected common tropes that I encountered in various Hindu educational contexts.

(7) CONTEMPORARY HINDU THEORIES OF LEARNING AND REMEMBERING

In February of 2007, Shalini, a bala vihar teacher in Tustin, CA, asked her students, “do you know what the word Veda means?” At first, a number of students in the third grade eagerly raised their hands, and responded, “the holy books,” or “holiest books in Hinduism,” the last child she called upon said, “Veda is shruti [sacred revelation], what rsis [seers] heard at the very beginning.” The teacher affirmed all of their answers and particularly liked the last response, which she promised they would come back to, but she was looking for something else, and asked, “do you know what the word Veda means in Sanskrit? Where it comes from?” She was met with silence, and told them that it meant wisdom and came from the Sanskrit root vid, meaning knowledge, “but you should know that it also means to observe and recognize, and even
experience and feel, learn and remember.” She explained to the children that when they come to bala vihar they weren’t really there to learn something new: “True wisdom is about recognizing, remembering what is already eternally present in the universe,” at which point she paused to help the kids to understand this idea. She asked them if she had heard of Newton and his experiment with the apple. A number of the children nodded their heads in affirmation, and she asked one young girl to tell the class the story of Sir Isaac Newton: “he was sitting under an apple tree and it [an apple] dropped on his head, and that is how he figured out gravity.” “Exactly!” the teacher said,

So, when he realized how gravity works, he didn’t make up something new…. just recognized what was already there. Gravity was working all the time, but he didn’t realize it, you understand?... Even his whole body, everyone’s bodies are governed by gravity. We can’t move without gravity, but we don’t think about it most of the time…. When we learn about it, it may seem like it’s new knowledge to us, but it has been working on us since before we were even born. Gravity is there, we just don’t see it, we forget about it, but it’s always a part of us…. We can’t deny it...get around it.

The idea that she conveyed to the students is one I have heard repeated in a variety of ways by both parents and teachers. And Hindu traditions and identity are the gravity, not only God. The goal of sending children to programs like bala vihar is both to help children realize something that is already there, already a part of them, and to give them the tools (the sholkas, the stories, the ritual knowledge) to access, embrace and express it. Embedded in this outlook is a working theory of about how subjectivities are realized and cultivated. In this regard, one of the most oft-quoted of Swami Chinmayananda’s sayings—which is also attributed to a number of different religious traditions—“Children are not vessels to be filled, but lamps to be lit,” reflects this idea that the goal of education is to ignite a sensibility. This same idea was expressed by a teacher of thirty years, who taught in a small Hindu school that met monthly in Minneapolis for many years before everyone “left to go to the big Maple Grove temple,” and she moved to Virgina to be with
her grandchildren. In speaking about how experience as a public-school teacher informed her teaching, she recalled how when she came to America and started a Master’s program in education one of the first things that she learned was that, “the Latin root of the word educate means to bring out, or lead out…I always believed this is what our Hindu sages have known from the very beginning. Learning is about asking questions and letting the children find the answers—the model is right there in the Upanishads.” Such philosophy finds a more succinct articulation in the worlds of Shoba, a bala vihar teacher, who may have the record for my shortest interview ever. She stated, “Hinduism is in their bodies — in their blood and bones — it is just our job to awaken it in them.” In these formulations, the cultural is not understood to be an ‘other’ set of constructs that are imposed upon the natural self. Rather knowledge is itself the naturalization of the cultural such that it is embodied and made habitual (be it in the form of ritual practices or philosophical wisdom). At the same time, however, some dimension of this knowledge is imagined as already present, simply needing to be heard and remembered. The question parents face, if they have this outlook about the nature of children and the nature of knowledge, is how do they facilitate self-learning. Bala Vihar is one of their answers.

(I) THE LEARNED SELF

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in most of the formal and information educational settings I studied in my research, the idea that knowledge can only be imparted through some form of instruction, even when it is embodied, was assumed. In fact, in teacher trainings, the notion that teachers take on the important role of parents is commonly conveyed through references to the upanayana ceremony (sacred thread ceremony). At a Chinmaya Mission teacher workshop in Los Angeles in 2007, Poonam Reddy, a veteran teacher spoke of how, even though the “thread ceremony was only meant for boys and the upper castes, the main point still holds true for us in
an environment where we welcome anyone who wants to learn—boy, girl, from any caste background.” The ceremony was to be a reminder that when children learn from a teacher she said, they are

reborn, so the thread is an umbilical cord, and though we don’t have [the] same kind of relationship as gurus did with their students, just imagine….what if we saw ourselves as responsible for giving our students their very lives, if nourishment flowing through the cord is the Hinduism, and they cannot ultimately live on their own if they don’t get it while they are in the womb?70

Harish who taught a parallel program for parents with young children during bala vihar, was fond of saying, “Swami Vivekananda always said, ‘education is the manifestation of the perfection already in a human being’ and so we are not responsible for the perfecting—as that has already been done— just for providing the opportunity for that manifestation to occur.” Hence, despite the fact that children are seen as already perfect, they still require formation. And education is viewed as the means by which children learn how to be themselves.

(II) MODERN AND TRADITIONAL SAMSkaras

REFINEMENT AND CULTIVATION OF HINDU SUBJECTS

The term samskara literally means constructing, putting together, preparing, purifying or refining something or someone. In classical Hindu ritual contexts and frameworks, samskaras refer to lifecycle rites, which usually include between twelve to sixteen rituals, commencing with the pre-natal and culminating with the death rituals. We often think of lifecycle rituals as marking the natural stages in human life, and this is the case in rituals marking birth and death. For the most part, though, lifecycle rituals explicitly work to naturalize things which are

70 The following are among the sources I have heard teachers reference when talking about Hindu ideas of teaching: Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.5-13, Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.1-5, 6.1.2, 3.11.2, 8.15.1.
culturally constructed (i.e. a child’s first haircut, the learning of the alphabet, the solemnizing of marriage, etc.) Classical Hindu discourse around the meaning the *samskaras* reveals a complex understanding of the relationship between nature and culture, and this is especially evident in rituals surrounding the transmission, acquisition, and production of knowledge.

The term *samskara* is related to *samskṛta*, the language of culture, and of sacred knowledge. Metaphorically, the connection between lifecycle rituals and this conception of the Sanskrit language is illustrative. With respect to language, Sanskrit is often spoken of in Hindu contexts as the mother of all language, the language of sacred revelation (*shruti*) and refinement. In that regard, it is primordial, pre-existent. Historically, Sanskrit was distinguished from Prakrit—which is commonly understood to reference the natural form of things, a mother-tongue in that it was the spoken language. In this formulation, the language whose utterance is associated with creation (including the creation of nature itself) denotes a process of refinement. This idea resonates with an outlook about the nature of children that is quite common in the diaspora. On the one hand, their identities as Hindus are viewed as already present. On the other hand, there is a recognition that their natural states require refinement and education if they are to gain awareness, and have the abilities to articulate their true natures in language, be it the language of Hindu story, ritual, song, regional language, or bodily practices.

Rajbali Pandey, in his classic work *Hindu Samskaras*, states that the *vidyarambha* (the ritual of learning the alphabet or letters), which marked the beginning of a child’s education, “was more cultural than natural.”\(^7\) By this distinction between the natural and cultural, Pandey

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argues that it was precisely when knowledge, in this case, spoken Sanskrit ceased to be a natural part of the normative practices of everyday life that cultural rituals developed around the inculcation of children in the language, practices that simultaneously affirmed Sanskrit’s importance, and ensured its transmission. Although now the vidyārambha is considered the first of the educational samskaras, performed when a child is between the ages of five and seven, Pandey argues that it emerges quite late, not until the 7-11th centuries C.E. He suggests that the omission of the vidyārambha from the Grhyasutras and the Dharmashastras, indicates that:

while many of the samskaras originated in the pre-sutra period, the Vidyārambha did not come into existence till very late. Sanskrit was then a spoken language, and the Upanayana [sacred thread ceremony] marked the beginning of primary education. Learning Sanskrit did not require a preparatory training in reading and writing. The education of children began with the memorizing of the sacred hymns without any help of writing….Later on, Sanskrit ceased to be a spoken language of the people….Hence, to preserve the treasure of learning…a preliminary instruction in reading and writing became necessary. Thus, in course of time, the Upanayana could not mark the beginning of primary education…So a new samskara was needed to solemnise the start of the primary education.  

It is Pandey’s claim that when Sanskrit was no longer spoken, natural, and embodied, a samskara—a rite of construction, refinement, and acculturation—was developed, such that knowledge of language and tradition could be passed down. The point, which he makes here, about the relationship between knowledge that has become disembodied and unnatural, and the evolution of socio-religious practices intended to culturally re-naturalize such knowledge finds resonance in a number of historical examples. As scholars, such as Vertovec and Baumann note, Hindu education reform movements flourished in the Caribbean in the late 19th to early 20th century precisely because—among Hindus who came as indentured servants beginning in 1833

and continuing through the first two decades of the twentieth century—certain types of Hindu knowledge had waned and, as such, instruction was required.

A similar process is at work in the contemporary Hindu diaspora. New rituals are developing, which people understand as emerging from markedly cultural needs, as certain types of knowledge have ceased to be “natural”—narrative, linguistic, ritual, and connection to the cycles of time and place. Among many Hindu parents and teachers living in the United States, a complex set of discursive practices has emerged in their effort to develop distinctively “Hindu” and “Indian” subjectivities for their children. Hindu parents and religious leaders have self–consciously created environments in which they seek to inculcate, instill, and bring forth their children’s Hindu identities. And in turn, as they have sought to actively make their children Hindu, they have themselves been remade as Hindu parents in the process.

Vasudha, a therapist and a parent of two young children believes that the samskaras were intended as psychological exercises, “it is less daunting to perform a concrete ritual then it is to confront all the emotions involved in making a life transition. This way, you focus on the details, and through the process you come to a state of emotional preparedness.” This same idea of focusing on the details was reiterated by a number of teachers, who talked about the fact that balavihar was about readying children for Hindu lives through small-steps, aimed at cultural acclimation, which is viewed as significantly more complicated and important in diaspora.

A young and extremely accessible priest-to-be, who left his M.B.A. program in New Jersey to pursue a different “path in life,” described it in the following way,

The samskaras are not perfect rituals that fix everything once and for all… I had parents who had a son, I shouldn’t say his name, but he was acting very poorly like some teenage boys do. They thought that if we did the upanayana earlier than marriage it would have a positive effect and he would stop all the mischief-making. I tried to explain to them that the samskaras do not just make one perfect. These aren’t magic formulas—presto, chango, volià [said with a flourish of his hand]—they help do the work, but more has to
be done as well, both leading up to it and following… Otherwise, they are just meaningless.

For this young teacher, particular ritual moments could only be made meaningful if accompanied by education. His understanding of the making of subjects does not presume that “culture” and rites of cultural refinement work on a person’s raw and unformed nature. Instead, the conception of self in many of these working Hindu educational philosophies not only affirms but stresses the importance of knowledge-acquisition.

(III) **THE NATURE OF CHILDREN HINDUTVA STYLE**

My child thinks that there is nothing that I can teach him. He tells me I learned this in school and that in school, but when I ask him about what he knows of God, of the most important and basic things, he is unable to answer me. I sent him to Hinduism classes so that he would know what is most important about who he is. It is true that in order to succeed here, he needs the grades, and he must learn Maths and Science and English. But to truly succeed, for my child to know true happiness, none of this matters. He must know our traditions, our teachings. He must know about God.

At times, the rhetoric about children’s Hindu nature can emerge as a type of biological essentialism. In such instances, this discourse is accompanied by other forms of nationalist and political about Hindu as a designation and identity that is derived from one’s ethnic, national, racial, or biological heritage. In some of the HSS’s bala gokulam curricular materials, classes and camps, I have seen this turn quickly into discussions about conversion. For example, in a class I observed, Ram, the teacher, read a section on Shivaji from the *Balagokulam Guide* by Yoginder Gupta, who writes:

Shivaji never troubled common people even in enemies’ areas. In his kingdom, women were able to roam around freely even in the mid-night….In those days, Muslims and Mughals used to convert many Hindus by force. Converted Hindus, then, used to get isolated from the Hindu society. Society wouldn’t accept a person who wanted to come
back in the Hindu fold. To change this situation, Shivaji advocated the efforts of re-conversion (bringing converted Hindus back to Hindu dharma).^{73}

After presenting the passage to the class, Ram explained to the children that we are seeing the same things today, with some Christians and Muslims trying to convert Hindus. “But Hinduism is a way of life, it is your connection to Bharat Varsha [India], so you should remember, you should see from this that nobody can ever take it away from you, you have to defend it because, you see, it is just a part of you, who you are.” The next week, this class discussed the importance of ghar vapasi, a program aimed at the conversion of non-Hindus in India to Hinduism. The term ghar vapasi, which literally means homecoming, is used by groups such as the VHP and RSS, who are involved in aggressive campaigns to convert Christians, Dalits, Buddhists, Muslims, and others, especially in tribal areas, to Hinduism. The class ended with a PowerPoint about the different kinds of forced conversions in Indian history, and they talked about Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s campaign to “bring these people home.”

As I noted earlier, In Hindu Swayamsevak Contexts, curricular content tends to focus on the historical, and particularly on narratives about Hindu warriors and battles. In this form of militaristic Hindu education, the notion of invasion by Muslims and the British is mapped onto the way students are supposed to view their own histories, bodies, and identities as Indian-Hindus. In an afternoon program for teenage girls at an HSS Hindu Heritage Camp in New Jersey, the topic of the historic invasions of India was told as a type of personal cautionary tale. Girls were told that one of the ways that foreigners have conquered India was by taking Hindu women, and raping them, and forcing them to marry. This is one of the reasons, the counselors, who were themselves only ages nineteen and twenty, said they needed to be careful about even

^{73} Yoginder Gupta, *Balagokulam Guide* (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh) p. 35-6. I obtained a partial copy of the guide from a teacher in a Balagokulam program in New Jersey, and have seen it used in a balagokulam program in California, but I have been unable to locate any further publication information.
dating anyone non-Hindu. They conveyed that it was important for them, as sevikas (female servants) to stay pure and that this is why “so many Hindu women chose to die when the Mughals came, rather than become Muslims.” The discussion about dating and rape in high school and college campuses was followed by a niyuddha (self-defense) session. In these contexts, it is common for British colonialism and Muslim rule of India to be spoken about in the present tense.

Deepa Reddy argues that “much of Hindutva ideology…takes the form of historical critique,” and that it is important to note its evolution. She argues that in the period before independence, Hindutva could be characterized by its racist discourse and articulations. Post-independence, she asserts, that Hindutva rhetoric is inflected with “humanist emphases,” which were followed in the 1990s by “strident culturalism.”

Despite the fact that it was a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh who assassinated Gandhi, the HSS has claimed him as a hero and turned him into an admirer of the RSS, and the Sangh’s work. They realize that they need to use the language of tolerance, peace, and humanity to convey their goal. And they frame others (i.e. Muslims and Christians) as being the non-humanistic ones. This is why they can’t, in this day and age, especially in the U.S., easily reject or deride Gandhi. In a Bala-gokulam Teacher Handbook, Gandhi is described as having visited a Sangh Camp in 1935. Seeing 1,500 Swayamsevaks in solidarity as Hindus, regardless of caste, he “was greatly impressed,” and in a meeting with Hedgewar (the founder of the organization), he said, “You have built a really marvelous organization. You are silently carrying out the work which I wished to do myself.”

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75 Bala-Gokulam Teacher Handbook (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, United States) pp. 94-5.
In addition, even within a curriculum that repeatedly narrates a story of Muslim domination, forced-conversion, and oppression of Hindus, they also portray Muslims and Hindus as living peacefully, until the arrival of the British. Such messages, which seem to contradict their own agenda or philosophy are not uncommon in the diaspora, in large part because many of the leaders are conscious of the importance of building a positive image of Hinduism. Thus, Hinduism becomes the “emblem of inclusiveness and tolerance,” even within Hindutva circles. It is just inflected differently. In addition, especially among younger members of the HSS and VHPA, there is a heightened awareness about the kinds of ideas that are socially acceptable, so it is not uncommon to hear high school and college-aged students champion peace efforts and question some of the communal rhetoric they are hearing. The pedagogic style, which is generally quite dogmatic and regimented, as well as the content, however, does not encourage dissent, so it is unclear what will happen as future generations, who have grown up in America, increasingly assume leadership roles.

In his speeches to Indians and in India, Swami Vivekananda’s tone and message are distinct from his message to Americans. His conception of the purpose of education as a cultural and social process is commonly referenced in a variety of Hindu settings. My assumption is that Vivekananda’s ideas have made their rounds through the network of Hindu educators, through the internet and elsewhere. I have seen the following quoted as an amrutvachan [nectar/sweet-worthy saying] in the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh’s bala gokulam curriculum, but also in less nationalistic contexts.

Education should be Man-Making education. A negative education or any training that is based on negation, is worse than death. It should be able to create shradha [sic, faith] in the student to all life (parents, society, nation, etc). Education is not the amount of information that is put into a brain and runs riot there, undigested, all life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making, assimilation of ideas. Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.
Vivekananda’s understanding that education was an act of making stands at the very core of these educational programs. If people did not believe that education could work to produce subjects, then they would not invest the kind of time and energy they do, into it.

(8) Making Them Proud, Making Them Hindu

In articulating their desire to educate their children as Hindus, parents speak of the difficulties they face in making their children proud of who they are, in transmitting their heritage and traditions to them. In interviews, parents and teachers continually refer to the idea that they needed to, very consciously make their children Hindu, they needed to construct spaces in which they would be with other Hindu children, hear Hindu teachings, “just hear the Indian languages—I don’t even care if it is Kannada, it probably won’t be … we are one of the only families here. But, still just the sound of Hindi or Panjabi, and of course, the mantras and all, it will just…penetrate, be absorbed.” Another parent spoke about how she felt that the discipline of wearing Indian clothing to bala vihar and the temple helped them to acclimate and embrace the culture.

My children wear Indian clothes to the temple and ashram functions, to bala vihar classes, and to parties. When they wear the clothes and see the other children wearing the clothes, they can feel proud. Sometimes they fight with me: “Ma, I don’t want to wear these clothes—My friends are wearing jeans or mini-skirts.” They can wear American clothes to school, but I tell them that they should be proud to wear our people’s clothes. Before they used to hate wearing them but now they are used-to it and they even like it. Now when friends of ours go to India, my children ask for Indian clothes and things—it makes me proud.

Repeatedly, Hindus in America refer to their own experiences of growing up Hindu as ‘natural,’ and organic, even “easy.” Whereas those of their children must be cultivated deliberately because in many ways these aspects of their identities are in tension with other parts
of themselves. They see the competing games and forces at work on them, altering what type of subject-positions they assume in different contexts, and affecting what seems natural to them. In addition to agricultural metaphors, evoking roots and cultivation, the biochemical metaphor of osmosis is quite frequently employed to describe the different ways parents and children come to know their traditions, and ultimately, as many would have it, themselves. In a video entitled “Why Bala Vihar?”, produced by the Chinmaya Mission in Bentonville, Arkansas in 2014, Swami Sarveshanandaji conveys a perspective about the nature of diasporic Hindu experience that is frequently reiterated by parents and children in almost every type of Hindu diasporic context in which I have found myself:

Growing up in a Hindu community, growing up as a Hindu, we never found it a necessity to grow in a structured way of understanding our own religion. Usually, we learn our religion thorough a process of osmosis. Whatever our elders have done we implicitly follow, copy and start living our life accordingly. But, when we move away from our roots, away from our culture, away from our tradition into far away land, whether it be in U.S. or Australia, or wherever other than India, we find [that] to find our roots becomes difficult. Because the children are growing in two different environments, two different cultures and [from] what I’ve observed these kids, they’re pretty ingenious. When they are home, they behave, talk as if they’re Indian. When they’re out there, they behave as if they’re American.\footnote{Swami Sarveshanandaji, “Why Bala Vihar?” YouTube Video, posted by Chinmaya Mission Bentonville, May 18, 2014, 8:51, \url{https://youtu.be/DuK7ExED1pA}.

Questions about code-switching tendencies or the influence of American culture on their children’s attitudes and behavior is something that parents discuss frequently when they talk about the challenges of raising children in America.

Such a sentiment was echoed by Swamini Svatmavidyanandaji of the Advaita Academy, who highlighted this difference in a talk on Hindu parenting, suggesting that today families are likely to outsource parenting, which she connects to a range of ideas about the difference between India and the diaspora, and the past and present.
In the Hindu tradition, like other traditions, the child also learns the various aspects of the tradition from its parents. We have never had the practice until recently of sending the child to Hindu Sunday school. Whether you call it bala vihar, bala gokulam, so many things are there, purna vidya, …these are all recent developments. We never had the practice of outsourcing the child, in any way, to learn the tenants of the tradition. It is because it is a lived tradition, where the vision and the way of life go together in tandem and the child learns the ways as they are practiced by the parents. So, this is what is makes the Hindu parenting unique and different from some of the mainstream traditions….Even though we may say we have beliefs,…those beliefs always have a reason…we don’t have some kind of blind belief. There will always be some reason. Only problem is, the parents don’t know the reason. And the parents say, our parents did this, so, therefore, we did this, so you also have to do this. And, of course, the child rebels.77

Not only does she suggest that the forms of Hindu schooling that have emerged in the late 20th and early 21st century are novel, she critiques parents for both their style of parenting and their knowledge. The assertion that there is always a “reason” that rituals are performed or customs are upheld is tied to the oft-repeated idea that the Hindu religious tradition is inherently rational, and although most Hindus who grew up in India are unaware of the rationales, one of the blessings of living in America, England, or Singapore, for example, is that people are motivated, sometimes even pushed involuntarily, to learn about their traditions and to take responsibility for being able to answer the questions of their children and others. Swamini Svatmavidyanandaji takes it a step further in her suggestion that it is perfectly natural for a child to rebel in such a circumstance, making it clear that she believes it is a parent’s role to provide answers, and proper education in order to prevent such an occurrence.

Perhaps somewhat ironically, in the same talk where she repeatedly references the trouble with outsourcing parenting and how it goes against fundamental Hindu conceptions of raising children, especially in joint families, she tells the story from the Upanishads about Satayakama, 77 Swamini Svatmavidyanandaji, “Talk on Hindu Parenting,” YouTube Video, posted by the Advaita Academy, September 23, 2014, 30:15, https://youtu.be/iEl5a8fb8_U.
who wishes to go off to learn with a guru. Although such a tale reveals a type of educational “outsourcing,” her point is that the very thing which enables Satyakama to gain admittance to the gurukula is something he learns at home, from his mother—the value of truth-telling. She narrates the story of Jabala, a single mother who was asked by her son, Satyakama, to tell him who his father was. She notes that the Upanishads itself provides us with many different examples of parenting and here we find a model “single mother.” She notes that “in order to have the thread ceremony… you need to have certain way of introducing yourself through the lineage…so he says, ‘Who was my father? Who is my father? What is his name?…because without this bio-data, I won’t gain admission.’” Here the mother “tells him the truth…‘I don’t know who your father is. It could be anybody. But you are my son, we know that much. My name is Jabala,…you can take on my name. Perhaps—here we are talking about retaining the mother’s name and this is the first example, where she says, ‘you will now be known as Satyakama Jabala, my name is your name.’” The boy goes to the gurukul, which she describes as “Open House Day,” when all the students, all the teachers, all the parents are there,” and when he is asked to introduce himself he says, “I know my mother, and my mother says that she worked in so many houses as domestic help and she doesn’t know who the father is, so I don’t know who my father is. But her name is Jabala and she has given me her name, and the teacher embraces the boy,” declaring, “If you aren’t qualified for Vedic teaching then I don’t know who is, this is the true definition of a Brahmana.” The discourse continues as she says that this “very beautiful” Upanishad teaches the “timeless value of truth-speaking.”

Her choice to tell this story is particularly interesting, because, as is the case in a number of the discourses I have attended, even as acharyas tout the values of traditional Hindu family life, through their

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78 The story she relates is drawn from Chandogya Upanishad 4.4.1-5.
examples, they often create openings for acceptance of other ways of inhabiting the world—single mothers, taking a mother’s name. At the end of her talk, Swamini Svatmavidyanandaji articulated the paradox in modern Hindu diasporic and transnational attitudes toward children and parenting. Despite the nostalgic reflection about the days of the joint-family and the Upanishadic gurukul, and her condemnation of outsourcing child-rearing, Svatmavidyanadaji stated unequivocally that we needed bala vihar today, that “we can’t possibly live without it,” and the crisis of modernity, and/or diaspora has afforded Hindus a new opportunity to turn inward and reassess who they are, what they value and who they want to be. And, in her estimation, diasporic children have provided that impetus.

The power of children’s own subjectivities to shape the entire community emerges as a powerful trope. Parents and teacher speak of how the de-naturalization that has come with life in the diaspora has both positive and negative consequences. Purnima, a doctor, and mother of two children, expressed her opinion about what is positive about diasporic life in this regard,

Back home, we knew all of these bhajans and shlokas but we didn’t really think about what they meant. And especially with the festivals, we celebrated this Diwali or Ram Navami but we never really knew the stories, or why we celebrated this when we did. My mother and grandmother said it was time to go to the temple, and so we went. Now the children ask, and we are learning too. We have to choose to do these rituals now, and we take a more active and informed role than back home. I think it is better here, even if it is more work.

In her view, the experience of her culture being marginal, created a heightened awareness about the contours of culture that had punctuated her life as a child in India. The diasporic experience, therefore, has produced a new need for knowledge and a desire for it. Ruhi, a Sindhi woman who was active both at the Hindu temple and at the local Sikh Gurdwara, often volunteering to help make langar, said:

Back in India, I used to think of myself as a religious person, but I wasn’t really. Now I am very religious. I go to the Temple all the time, and the Gurdwara…. I am very
involved here, much more than I could be in India…. There I would just go, but there was no question of being a part of the daily goings-on. That is not accessible to the common person there, and it didn’t matter if I went or not. Here, we are all needed, and our efforts are meaningful. We are creating the place and now I have God in my life all the time.

Another mother affirmed this attitude, saying,

We are more organized in the U.S. and it is better. Nobody goes to bala vihar in India. But when we are away from culture and country you pay attention, precisely because it isn’t so easy, it doesn’t come naturally here…. It’s the opposite here, people are more religious, thoroughly religious, they are doing dance, and singing songs, they are involved in the temples. Now I am going to kirtan all the time, and doing puja almost daily. When in India, and before children, I paid no attention to it. The bala vihar is really good for me, maybe more even then for the children.

While nostalgia has often been understood to be a feature of the diasporic experience, what is interesting here is that the process of looking back—“back home,” “back in India”—often garners a positive assessment of how living in the U.S. has helped a person appreciate and connect with tradition in ways that would have been unthinkable in India. This sentiment was one I heard frequently, and Prema Kurien’s work, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*, documents a similar outlook. For some, however, the loss of a type of unconscious, embodied knowledge is a cause for lament and an experience of loss. In reflecting upon this, a grandmother from Pune who runs a Hindu Culture Club [HCC] in her home two afternoons a week, said:

Hinduism teaches that the body and mind are not separate. This is why by putting on the Indian clothes, sitting in proper ways, learning how to eat with the right-hand, simple things…then learning how to do the arati, and so, this is where we begin in the HCC…. The children just come to feel Hindu, not thinking Hindu… They won’t have to think all the time, ‘Why am I doing this?’ ‘Why am I doing that?’

A recurrent trope in Hindu American discourse is the distinction between ways of acquiring and embodying knowledge in India as opposed to the States, for parents as opposed to children.

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In describing this phenomenon, Vasudha Narayanan writes,

It is never easy to perceive oneself clearly and to articulate one’s faith and tradition to oneself, one’s children, and the community. It is especially difficult if one has had no formal training or education in the field. Many Hindus in this country face such a predicament. Growing up in India and being immersed in the Hindu religious experience does not make one a specialist in it. Yet Hindus in the United States are forced to articulate over and over again what it means to be a Hindu and an Indian to their friends and children, and often feel ill-equipped to do so. Frequently, all a person remembers about a festival in India is the food that was prepared for it; he or she was never called upon to explain Deepavali or Sankaranti, to say nothing of Hinduism.80

This need to explain one’s traditions and practices has served as the inspiration for curriculum, workshops, publications, and exhibitions. Among these innovations were the Hindu American Foundation’s wallet size “Hinduism 2 Go” cards, which were created in 2009, and intended to be at-the-ready answers for Hindus to have with them in the event that they might be assailed by questions from peers, colleagues, or even their own children. The cards define 4 concepts: “Brahman,” “Dharma,” “Karma,” and “Moksha,” as well as defining the Scriptures, and stressing the value of Pluralism. In addressing the nature of the divine, the HAF “Hinduism 2 Go” cards define Brahman as “SUPREME REALITY OR GOD THAT IS: 1.) The all pervading and absolute reality; Beyond description; 3.) Worshiped in various forms, males and/or female, and by many names.” The question of how to discuss Hindu conceptions of God has been a major focus of curricular and educational endeavors, especially those directed at non-Indian publics. Almost universally, the language of a singular God is used and emphasized in such a way that any mention of other gods and goddesses is subsumed or minimized, and described through an understanding of the One being revered in many “forms.” Also, consistent in these type of explanatory educational publications is an emphasis on the notion of Hinduism’s

tolerance or pluralism. The Hindu American Foundation’s educational efforts also involve their publication of a sixteen-page booklet, entitled, “More Short Answers to Real Questions about Hinduism,” an eight-page “Media Tool-Kit” and a seventy-five page book, Understanding Hinduism, which is a republication of a book by Dr. D.C. Rao written for the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. While generally intended in order to educate non-Hindus, I have seen these publications referenced in classrooms, at camps, and at other educational programs. Part of this is the fact that the information is readily available on the web and downloadable for easy use.

Most notable of among these is a small book entitled, In Indian Culture: Why Do We, written by Swamini Vimalananda and Radhika Krishnakumar and published by the Chinmaya Mission. The book appears to have first been published in 2005 and has been reprinted at least six times, generating more than 30,000 copies. I have seen the book in mandir gift shops, in use at various bala vihars (including many not affiliated with the Chinmaya Mission), and I have seen it with children’s books in the homes of numerous Hindu American families. In addition to the contents of the book, what I have found most striking is the fact that it has been reproduced all over the internet, often with no attribution of the source, and copied into word documents and PDFs. It has been retitled as “Hindu Rituals and Routines—Why Do We Follow Those?,” and information from the text has been excerpted on numerous websites, such as the National Hindu Students Forum (UK), as well as converted into narrated videos on YouTube. It has also been

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81 For an example of this, see: “Hindu Rituals and Routines—Why Do We Follow Those,” Sanskrit Documents, sanskritdocuments.org/articles/Hindu_Rituals.pdf, or quoted on multifaiths.com, hinduwebsite.com, quora, etc., and narrated and converted into a video and found on YouTube. For example, each chapter has been turned into a single video, see: Bala Nair, “Hindu Rituals and Routines Why Do We Do Pradakshina Part 11,” https://youtu.be/yeIeKwVeL.
misattributed to Swami Vivekananda on a number of websites, likely a mistake derived from the fact that one of the authors’ names is remotely similar to Vivekananda’s.

Although officially the title refers to Indian culture, the entire text is focused on Hindu ritual practices: “Why do we light a lamp?,” “Why do we have a prayer room?,” “Why do we wear marks on the forehead?,” “Why do we offer a coconut?,” “Why do we do a arati?,” etc. In both the texts and discourses seeking to address these types of questions, the rationales given are theological, scientific, and medical (hygiene, nutrition, longevity, etc.) in nature. Even when history or sacred narratives are referenced in order to establish the origin of a ritual, its connection to the ancient sages or to various gods, or to serve as evidence of its endurance, additional—rationales are always provided.

In the foreword to the book, it states, “Almost every Indian custom and tradition has either a scientific, logical, historical, social, or spiritual significance. Understanding this lends meaning to an otherwise mechanical following of the customs, which are often misunderstood to be mere superstitions that fade away in time.” My sense that this type of book was significant, based on my own numerous encounters with it, in almost every conceivable Hindu educational setting, was reinforced by an article written by Roma Khetarpal first on Masalamommas.com and then on the Huffington Post, “How to Talk to Kids about Cultural Rituals.” Khetarpal writes,

My daughter was five years old when she started questioning the rituals that her grandma followed daily and diligently in our home…. The questions went on and on. At first, they were directed toward Grandma, but when she started to get the universal answer—“Because we are Hindus”—which wasn’t good enough for her…she turned…to Mom! The honest-to-goodness truth is that I didn’t have many of the answers. Often, I would be left scratching my head, thinking, “that is a great question! Why do we do that? How come I haven’t asked?” This is a common dilemma for those of us with a South Asian heritage. Our cultural and religious beliefs are attached to tons of rituals. If we shove them down our children’s throats, they will run away. If we do away with them ourselves, we are dimming the richness that these traditions offer.82

Khetarpal then proceeds to offer a five-point guide to answer the question “What should [Hindu] parents do?” Her first recommendation is to buy the Chinmaya Mission book, *Why Do We*, which was recommended by her cousin in India. In response to her cousin’s suggestion, she bought one-hundred copies of the book and handed them out to parents who attended their annual Diwali party. Her other points include such things as being a role model when answering questions, so as to avoid things that don’t make sense or might come off as judgmental, using the example of the answer her daughter was given to the question, “Why are we vegetarian on Mondays and Tuesdays?” Her mother-in-law’s response involved because that’s what “good Hindus do,” which begged another question about the Hindus her daughter knew who weren’t vegetarian—were they “bad Hindus?” For reasons such as this, she encourages parents to “evaluate family rituals” to make sure they “still align with your current belief system or are outdated,” especially because practices involve time and effort, so only those that “seem valuable and enjoyable” should be maintained. The other two points are derivations of this one. She recommends that people “let go of what doesn’t serve you anymore,” and that they “update family rituals every few years,” by taking a periodic inventory. She argues that things can’t be pushed down children’s throats and that as the first “parental generation to attach the words ‘conscious,’ ‘mindful,’ or ‘aware’” to describe parenting approaches, the same needs to be done with respect to rituals, and she argues that doing so will make it more likely for children to “come to their own conclusions and beliefs,” ultimately embracing the richness and beauty of the cultural traditions and rituals.83 Her belief—that awareness, and consciousness will be the solution to establishing a continuity of tradition across the generations and particularly in the diaspora—finds echoes in almost every educational setting I have encountered. Such a

83 Ibid.
perspective illuminates the ambivalent relationship that has emerged within the diaspora about the value of seemingly “natural,” embodied traditions, and those that must be cultivated and learned.

Bourdieu begins the introduction to his book *The Logic of Practice*, with a quote from Wittgenstein:

‘How am I able to follow a rule?’ — if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following a rule in the way that I do.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’

It is this relationship to ritual and religious knowledge—the inclination for parents to say to their children’s queries, “This is simply what we do”—that Hindu educators have diagnosed to be among the greatest challenges facing American Hinduism; The notion that to perform a custom without knowledge of its deeper meaning is inherently a problem for contemporary Hindus (children and adults) is almost assumed. In this discursive field, actively choosing to continue and/or to adopt traditions from a place of knowledge is viewed as an ideal. This emphasis on active, rational and informed choice is likely not unrelated to western and, particularly American, valuations of the liberal subject, who acts as a “self-owning individual.”

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In research that my student Rachel Foran and I have conducted about the articulations of self among young Somali Muslim women in Minnesota, we have regularly found a similar emphasis on the importance of personal choice as a part of their religious practice and identifications. What I have continued to find among young Somali women in Minnesota reveals a difference from, for example, the attitudes about choice among the women that Saba Mahmood studied in the piety movement in Egypt. As women in diaspora, integrating their Somali Muslim identities with their other identities as feminists, black women, Minnesotans, college students, etc., they articulate their negotiation and subjectivity through the language of agency and choice, while still assuming the language of submission to God.
Most notably, teachers and swamis tend to imply, in their various discourses, that a lack of knowledge about rationales is something relatively new, a feature of modernity. Very rarely, however, do educators ground their reasons for the performance of particular ritual practices in clear textual and/or philosophical historical traditions. Rather, they engage in a creative process through which they are empowered to derive and author thoughtful explanations. This generative process of meaning-making is itself, I argue, an important aspect of contemporary Hindu religious practice. It allows for adults, as well as children, to share in an experience of discovery, wherein practices are laden with a depth and significance that they had previously lacked. In my use of the word lack, I do not mean to suggest that the performance of rituals without such a level of understanding need lack anything at all, only that within the discursive field of American Hinduism it is portrayed to be one.

The very act of filling the void, and finding an answer to a question, make the acquisition and even production of knowledge (especially in the case of those who are devising curriculum, etc.) a deeply personal and empowering experience. The archeology of modern Hindu knowledge, does not, in these cases, expose the fissures or inconsistencies, breaking down long-standing discursive formations through the process of excavation, but rather, I find that these knowledge forms are bolstered engendered through the production of their real and imagined genealogies.

Even though diasporic Hindus often speak of how their new consciousness and knowledge is superior to what it was in India, I do not wish to suggest that there is not also a desire on the part of parents and teachers to naturalize ritual practices, and knowledge. This hope of naturalization desires children who are comfortable with performing rituals, chanting shlokas and singing bhajans, engaging them as parts of the natural cycle of their days. In ways that seem
completely contrary to the desire for actors who self-consciously choose and deliberately adopt, aware parents and educators often speak of this as a mindless embodiment that is free of interrogation and self-doubt. One parent said, “She is so clumsy. She doesn’t know how to roll-out a chapati and she is always making mistakes with arati. I just want Janaki [her daughter] to get to the point where she doesn’t think about doing a puja….it just becomes a part of who she is and what she does.” An Acharya at the Chinmaya Mission in Los Angeles spoke about one of the many goals of bala vihar being that,

Children should not feel as though they are putting on their Hinduism like they put on clothes. They should make the rituals so much a part of them, a part of their whole being that they don’t have to think about it. After some years in Bala Vihar, going to satsangs and pujas, reciting the shlokas, they should just be Hindus, and they should just live and do Hinduism.86

This notion of just “living” Hinduism returns us to the popular metaphor about osmotic ways of knowing. Implicit in those metaphors, “Home” is implicitly evoked. It is conjured by parents often through contradictory conceptions of the place. Sometimes Hinduism is romantically imagined as a kind of scent that one just absorbs through breathing.

Back home, our grandmothers told us the stories. They remembered every detail of the Mahabharat and the Ramayan, they remembered why Ganesh had a broken tusk and what Shiva’s dancing meant. They didn’t need any books! They knew the stories like we know how to walk or speak, these were just a part of their being, of their body. Now, we don’t have the grandmothers here, so we send the children to these classes and we need the books.

As “home” is remembered, religious knowledge and selfhood are imagined to be “natural.” Hence, first-generation immigrants often talk of themselves as “feeling” and “being” Indian and Hindu from birth. And, in a return of the gardening metaphors, it is not uncommon to hear parents frame their own Hinduness as organic. This organic nature stands in stark contrast to

86 Acharya Someshwar Caitanya Chinmaya Kasi: Chinmaya Mission of Southern California.
their children’s, whose Hindu sensibilities and identities, require cultivation, tending, dedicated space and time for growth. As parents talk about what they envision for their children’s futures, their imaginations seem to reflect different affective modes of longing, wrapped up in webs of nostalgic desires and memories, as well as new forms of knowledge, embodiment, and belonging.

(9) Desiring Home

Bala vihars are spaces that are at once full of nostalgia and novelty. They evoke sensory experiences—smells, sounds, sights, movements, tastes—that are often associated with “home.” The specificity of which home is always shifting, and I have found it to be so even within the perception of a single individual. Home is India, a temple or home shrine, a sense of safety or familiarity that comes with “being with people who you recognize, who are like you.” The harkening to an affective and aesthetic notion of home is something I frequently encounter. Most of the time, this “home” isn’t a specific location—despite what Hindu nationalist rhetoric would lead one to believe—this preoccupation in Hindu educational contexts does not seek to facilitate home-comings to India, in fact, the overwhelming presumption is that this generation of American Hindu children will stay in America. The home that bala vihar programs seek to cultivate is really a “homing desire,” intended to affect a longing and desire to be home, as well as the knowledge of how to get there.

As a part of a college send-off for graduates of the bala vihar program, one of the rising seniors, Sunaina, envisioned and took it upon herself to take on a creative project, fashioning

87 Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora, p. 16.

88 Even the name bala vihar itself speaks to the idea of cultivating a “homing desire.” The word bala means children, and the word vihar literally refers to a dwelling, especially one associated with the practice of spiritual reflection or study. The goal is that through education children will come to recognize the vihara as home, and even embody it through the performance of practices and process of self-reflection.
mini altars that each of the fourteen graduates could take with them as they left home.

Converting gift boxes that she purchased at a craft store, she glued sari remnants to the outside of the boxes and painted the insides by hand using gold and red paint. She fastened five very small murtis (images) into the box—four of them were the same for all the graduates: Ganesha, Lakshmi, and Krishna, who she said was there to represent “all forms of Vishnu too,” and Shiva.

For the fifth murti, she chose ones that were special to each of the graduates: a Hanuman for a student who had been responsible for teaching the younger children the Hanuman Chalisa, Ram and Sita for a young woman who had done a project on dharma in the Ramayana for her senior essay, etc. She confirmed that the boxes could be easily packed, closing with the tops-on for travel, and she also made sure that each student received all the necessary items for arati. At the top of each portable shrine, she wrote the following, inspired by Rig Veda 2.38 in English, “You who live in a house, go off to live in many different dwellings in the course of life….going away, as you wish to acquire something new, but you also come back. The desire of all who travel returns to home.”

In her own way, Sunina created what she thought would be a good “visual reminder of home and values” for the graduates heading off to college. In discussing her project, she was quite conscious of the fact that in college, the students would likely have non-Hindu roommates and friends. She thought that these portable altars might provide an opening for conversations about what was important to them, offering an opportunity not only to practice Hinduism but to educate others about it. This gesture of combining worship and representation is something we see in Hindu exhibitionary practices that happen in a range of public settings, often on a much larger scale.
CHAPTER IV
EXHIBITION AGENTS AND AGENCY:
CONTEMPORARY HINDU DISPLAYS & CONSTITUTIONS OF COMMUNITY

This chapter explores the powers at play in contemporary exhibitions about Hindus and India. Based on ethnographic research in the U.S. and U.K., it considers three modes of exhibition—official public; in-situ; and roving-educational/portable— theorizing their impact on modern Hindu articulations, identities, and the publics they seek to address. In all of these exhibitions, different “communities of response,” as Richard Davis calls them, accept, are inspired by, or contest the version of Hinduism that is displayed.\(^1\) Global representations of Hinduism raise questions about the agents of exhibitions and the agency of the things, people, and ideas on display.

Heeding Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s call to pay attention to the “agency of display,” this chapter looks at the rise in Hindu sponsored exhibitions to ask: what does it mean to display oneself?;\(^2\) what is distinct, about exhibiting the religious?; how has collective consciousness about the power involved in representation constituted new articulations of identity among contemporary Hindus?; how has exhibiting itself emerged as a type of ritual practice?; how have the roles of ambassador, spokesperson, tour-guide, and educator emerged as positions of power within Hindu communities?; and how have these positions taken on religious significance for those in such roles? After reading examples of these modes of exhibition, the chapter concludes with a consideration of the ways that displays serve both to constitute communities, with varying and hierarchical relationships to a Hinduism and India that have been


carefully defined, and also to cultivate spaces of perceived creativity, flexibility, and agency with regard to these definitions.

There are significant political implications with respect to these exhibitions. The more political elements of these exhibitions, particularly the HSS “Exhibition on Hindu Culture and Dharmic Traditions,” will be discussed in a different chapter on Hindu history and narrative. The content of the exhibitions and the contest over who is allowed and wields the power to represent Hinduism is an important subject of inquiry and one that needs to proceed from a more general understanding of the burgeoning global phenomena of Hindu exhibitions and exhibitions about Hinduism.

As I have noted throughout the dissertation, distinctions between Indians/South Asians and Hindus are often blurred, in a conflation that stands as a common feature of diasporic Hinduism. Exhibitions only serve, much of the time, to make the distinctions even murkier. The fact that Hinduism becomes a sign for India, especially in diasporic educational and exhibitionary contexts, speaks to the challenges inherent in representation and community-targeted educational endeavors, as well as the ways in which nostalgia and sensory memories function to produce a complex of associations that revision boundaries and distinctions in new and often fluid ways.

(1) Exhibitions: Explored and Interrogated

Scholarship on exhibitions has been at the forefront of discussions about representation of the “other” and the fetishization and reification of cultures. In response to an increased awareness about the power of exhibitions as vehicles for political change and social commentary, expressions of racism and domination, many curators and museums have shifted their agendas with regard to displays of cultures. In addition, awareness of exhibitionary power, articulated in
the desire of communities to “speak for themselves,” has meant that the designation of curator and the venue of display have become, over the past fifty years, increasingly open. This openness has made museums, docents, exhibitions, and curators out of almost every location and person. Hindu spaces and communities have been no exception. One can argue that there has been an explosion of both public exhibitions about India, Hindus & Hinduism and self-representational exhibitions by Hindus, since the late 20th century, both in and outside of India.

Public institutions often frame their exhibitions as celebrations of diversity and correctives to the exhibitionary practices of the past, which failed to include “native” voices from the cultures on display. The problematic and oft offensive representations of Hinduism and India propagated by colonialists, missionaries, Orientalists, and now Western Culture generally, are commonly cited as both rationalization and inspiration by Hindus seeking to paint a different picture of Hinduism for the world, one over which they feel some measure of control.

Vivekananda stands as the paradigm of exhibitors—he was himself spokesperson, discursive exposition-educator, visual artifact, and performance. In many ways, modern exhibits of Hinduism take their cue from Vivekananda, trying to reach multiple audiences (Hindu and non-Hindu) at the same time. New Hindu exhibitors have seized the gamut of media venues and employ political lobbies and grants for the promotion of culture to mount “shows” that can speak

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3 People regularly curate their lives. Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, Instagram posts and Snapchat stories, along with the ability to make your own websites and post on others are a few examples of the ways in which exhibiting has become a type of normative daily practice for many.

to a range of communities and in a plethora of modes (educational, devotional, technological, and political) at the same time.\(^5\)

Here I ask about the motivations for contemporary exhibitions about Hindus and India, often articulated as: increasing cultural sensitivity; allowing for a recognition of the self; the fostering of community-pride, and the promotion of a “truthful” representation, one that humanizes, and in the words of many presenters, “dispels common misconceptions.”

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett calls us to pay attention to the “agency of display.”\(^6\) Her inspires questions. What does it mean to display oneself and to see oneself displayed? What, if anything, is distinctive about exhibiting religion? How has consciousness about the power involved in representation prompted and constituted new articulations of identity among contemporary Hindus? I wish to suggest that exhibiting has itself emerged as a type of meaningful ritual practice. The roles of curator, cultural ambassador, performer, spokesperson, tour-guide, and community educator have emerged as positions of status and power within Hindu communities.

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\(^5\) The installation by Jitish Kallat at the Art Institute of Chicago, which opened on September 11, 2010, to commemorate both the 1893 World Parliament of Religions and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, brings home the enduring legacy of Vivekananda as exhibitor. The site-specific, text-based work, *Public Notice 3*, which intervenes in the existing architecture of the Art Institute, charges the space and Vivekananda’s words through the use of neon U.S. Department of Homeland Security alert colors. In the words of the exhibit description, Kallat “explores the possibility of revisiting the historical speech as a site of contemplation, symbolically refracting it with threat codes devised by the government to deal with this terror-infected era of religious factionalism and fanaticism.” Kallat himself describes the work as “United Colors of Anxiety,” “an experiential and contemplative transit space,” which considers the idea that the World Parliament assembled a “global convergence of faiths—not nations, possibly with the knowledge that in the future it will not “only” be nations that become sole commissioners of carnage.” Kallat understands himself to be resurrecting Vivekananda’s speech in this historical moment as a call for religious tolerance. See Jitish Kallat, Art Institute of Chicago, September 11, 2010, accessed October 26, 2010. [http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/jitish-kallat-public-notice-3](http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/jitish-kallat-public-notice-3). Also see Madhuvanti Ghose, “From Vivekananda to Kallat” in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 36, no. 2 (Jitish Kallat: Public Notice 3, 2011): pp. 9-25.

For heuristic purposes, I wish to consider three sites and modes of exhibition: official public venues (museums, fairs, cultural and ritual festivals, community centers); in-situ (temple); and roving-educational/portable (in classrooms, interfaith contexts, on the internet, and in pamphlets and other publications). In attempting to theorize the impact of these exhibitions on modern Hindu articulations, identities, and the publics they seek to address, we need to be mindful of how different “communities of response,” as Richard Davis has called them, accept, are inspired by, or contest the version of Hinduism that is displayed. Global representations of Hinduism and India raise questions about the agents of exhibitions and the agency of those things, people, and ideas on display.

(I) **MUSEUMS: OFFICIAL PUBLIC DISPLAYS**

In September of 2001, the American Museum of Natural History in New York exhibited “Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion.” According to the curator, Stephen Huyler, the tri-state Indian community was consciously brought in, with “the purpose …to create an exhibition that appeals to their sense of their own culture—where a child of an Indian who has moved here and lived here for a generation or two can show…his classmates…and say, ‘this is my culture!’ …and show it with pride.” This was one of the first in an ongoing trend of exhibits about Hindu themes—held in cities like Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, London, and Paris—which have reached out to local Hindu communities to be part of live displays through the public performance of pujas, bhajans, traditional dance forms and the creation of rangoli or kolam.\(^7\) The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco has made these types of performative exhibitions a standard counterpart to what would have otherwise been traditional


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shows featuring solely “objects of art.” Through bringing in storytellers and musicians, curators seek to “bring to life” the worlds from which the works on display are drawn, and they also offer a display that is not made up of carefully placed stagnant things, but rather is animated by the semblance, real or contrived, of spontaneity and movement. These performances draw in constituencies, as do the interactive art projects and the community programs targeted to families with multicultural education and celebration of diversity in mind.8

Recent scholarship on exhibitions has focused on how traditional museums—like the British Museum, the Met, and the Smithsonian—have transformed their relationships to the geographic and ethnographic cultural territories of their collections. Not only do they seek to collect objects from South Asia, or Hindu traditions, but they wish to collect patrons who will find themselves in the Museum and, in doing so, are drawn back to see, find, and perhaps bequeath more of themselves within and to its walls. This intentionality, on the part of institutions, is exemplified by the Met’s “Multicultural Development Initiative” that has involved recruiting members of different ethnic and religious communities to serve on the Multicultural Advisory Committee, which not only helps to envision the types of events that will draw in members of a given ethnic group but which cultivates financial sponsors for these performances. For the past thirteen years, the Met has held a “Festival of Lights” Diwali celebration in which the story of Ram has been performed to packed audiences and patronized by members of the National Federation of Indian American Associations. These economic motivations for greater inclusion and community-representation should not be overlooked.9

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9 This initiative at the Met, and at many other museums like it, has consciously involved “audience development,” something which is both about reaching a broader audience than museums have done previously, and also about featuring more diversity within the collections, exhibitions and events as a means to draw in audiences and represent various publics.
Exhibitions, like the 1996, *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion*, held at the Smithsonian involved interviews with “Young American Hindus” about the significance of puja and Hinduism in their lives. Reaching out to constituencies and facilitating the inclusion of their voices in the exhibition itself signals a conscious effort to make Hinduism come to life through real people, humanizing what may seem like foreign practices to some exhibition attendees, while also making the exhibit more familiar to Hindu Americans, who might recognize themselves therein, experience pride and resonate with the exhibition’s content and message. To desire that an exhibition should inspire “resonance” in viewers is nothing new, but the idea that one would resonate with an art form or exhibit from the place of identity, rather than from, what has been assumed, an aesthetic place of “wonder” at the grandeur, craft, or masterpiece of the art, as Steven Greenblatt has called it, may well be something new.\(^\text{10}\) Outside of artistic or aesthetic significance, for many there is a joy and pride that comes simply from seeing the familiar (both what is recognizable and also what is understood to be part of one’s ‘family’, heritage, or tradition) on display in an environment wherein the very presence of a thing bespeaks its value.

To further the sense of bestowing value on a culture, religion, or people, museums have also put communities and their cultures on live display, in ways reminiscent of, and yet also subtly distinctive from, the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century displays of culture. Hindus themselves have been asked, in a number of exhibitions, over the past 18 years, to “perform” things such as public pujas, this type of boundary crossing, wherein the exhibition not only holds ceremonial ritual objects, with tags explicating their significance and symbolism in religious or cultural contexts, but is itself the act of worship, links these official museum exhibitions with the in-situ

\(^{10}\) Steven Greenblatt. “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). He discusses the transmigration of objects, ideas, artifacts, narratives and the ways in which they move through “zones” and take shape and meaning by virtue of the context, mode of display, etc.
exhibitions at temples, and the exhibition and expositions found in public festivals and cultural and ethnic fairs.

(II) Multi-Cultural Festivals/Celebrations and Expositions

In addition to the formal exhibitions of what might be understood to present “high art” or authentic culture, multi-cultural festivals at parks, state-fair grounds, community centers and on college campuses involve similar, but more varied and often less prescribed with respect to content and skill, live exhibitions and are often accompanied by portable-take-home exhibits (pamphlets, books, and objects) on Indian history and Hindu culture. In some cases, performances involve a great deal of rehearsal, preparation and precision, such as the college campus “Bhangra Blowouts” (a hybrid form of music and dance that combines Punjabi folk music with other forms of music—pop, reggae, rap, soul, etc.), garbha (traditional East Indian folk dance) competitions found throughout the U.S. and U.K., or the performances of Bollywood or Bharatanatyam dance that accompany campus or public Diwali or Holi celebrations. However, most of the time, these artistic exhibitions are more “amateur” in form and democratic with respect to community participation. Commonly these displays include shy, reluctant, and adorable young children—dressed in “traditional costume”—accompanied on stage lovingly by parents or older siblings who help them recite the shloka, song, or the choreographed dance moves. Performances at multi-cultural fairs in smaller communities or temple contexts, rife with the natural snafus and theatrical interruptions, often evoke a sense of the familiar and authentic, making onlookers (even those for whom the ‘cultural display’ may be foreign) feel more comfortable. As one mother related it,

When these non-Indians see our children dance and sing at the multicultural festival, I think two things happen: they are impressed with our culture, but they also can identify with us. Through our children we become just like them, they recognize what is happening because they have all watched their own children do shows.
At the 2015 India Day Celebration in Lexington, KY, orchestrated by The Bluegrass Indo-American Civic Association, children paraded on an outdoor stage dressed as India’s heroes (including figures like Nehru and Mother Teresa, Bhagat Singh and Kalpana Chawla, Abdul Kalam, Vivekananda, Ambedkar) offering up mini “autobiographical” statements and closing by raising a triumphal fist and reciting the words, “Jai Hind!” This moment provides a small example of the ways in which political and nationalist narratives emerge, sometimes even insinuating themselves, in otherwise seemingly ‘neutral’ and benign displays of culture. In these contexts, definitions of “Indianness” and South Asia are delineated through performative allusions and choices of inclusion and exclusion. In this instance, the choice of “heroes” revealed a conscious choice to reflect the nation’s diversity—including, the Buddhist dalit activist, Ambedkar, the then Muslim President of India, Abdul Kalam, and the Catholic charity missionary, Mother Teresa, along with Hindu scientists, religious leaders, politicians, and activists. At other India day celebrations, I have seen as more subtle gestures, slide almost seamlessly into a decidedly Hindu frame. For example, in 2012, an India Day celebration in Minnesota—which during the first two hours of performances appeared to be carefully orchestrated so as to avoid any type of communalist or Hindu nationalist displays—ended with a middle-aged man, with a strikingly beautiful voice, singing a rendition of all the verses of “Vande Mataram,” praising the Mother as goddess and landscape, who was represented as the nation by a little girl dressed as Bharat Mata in a sari in the colors of India’s flags. At the conclusion of the song, a few of the young children prostrated before Bharat Mata, placing flowers at her feet.
These displays of culture, which frequently involve the conflation of Hindu and Indian, between personal and communal identities and the nation state itself are directed to two different audiences: the non-Hindus who come to taste and view the cultures on display, and the Hindus, who are themselves participating in the event—as exhibitors, presenters, or as spectators, watching their children or community members perform. The dialectical process of seeing involved in the confluence of these two types of participants means that Hindus are not only watching their own children perform, or viewing representations of their culture and/or themselves on stage, or as presented through cuisine or material goods that are for sale, but they are watching as others watch them, seeing themselves as they perceive others to be seeing them. That process, in turn, has the potential to shape not only one’s sense of self, but also the very narratives and representations one seeks to present in the future. In one instance, an onlooker, a middle-aged Indian woman clad in a sari and at an Asian Heritage festival performance in San Francisco turned to me, sighing with dismay after the third group of young Indian girls had ascended the stage to showcase “the Dances of India.” The girls were accompanied, for some of the dances, by amateur vocalists, who offered their interpretations of “Isk Risk” from the film *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* and “Sadda dil Vi Tu” also known as “Ga-Ga-Ganpati” from the film *ABCD: Any Body Can Dance*, which is a song about Lord Ganesh, employing multiple genres including techno-pop and rap in a song that employs at least as much, if not more English than Hindi. Exasperated by the performances, which this spectator said were, “sub-par,” she told me that she was very upset about the display. She wondered who was making choices about which dances to perform, because, she stressed, we were in public and the community needed to be mindful about what Americans might think. She told me that she was going to get on next year’s committee so that she could help make sure that the performances were of “the best, top quality.”
and that they were appropriate and traditional. What she had seen was “very embarrassing” and it reflected “poorly on the community.” In contrast, I have seen community members watch with pride as non-Indians watched similar performances. A number of times, it has seemed like community organizers were significantly more interested in watching the audience than in watching what was happening on stage. At one of these events I was standing next to Arun, one of the organizers who I was interviewing and he pointed over to the audiences at the “Celebrate India” stage and he said, “Look at this….it’s more Americans than us [referring to Indians]. I’m feeling really proud.”

In delineating her understanding of the role that the public realm plays in the development of the human condition, Hannah Arendt writes that the character of the public is precisely that it is “seen and heard by others.” The very process of “being seen” is one of the ways that things, and even the self, become real, and gain significance. “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.”¹¹ For Arendt, the sameness and reality that people would ideally see in public, amongst others, from a variety of perspectives, “different positions,” and with “utter diversity” is the humanity in the plurality. This hopeful gaze as and of humanity, which Arendt champions, is distinct from the desire and “need for public admiration” that she underscores has been, all too often, a feature of the modern age, and itself a means by which human beings often experience a sense of validation, and recognition (albeit fleeting, according to Arendt).¹² Arendt suggests that society has often conflated the public with “public admiration,” something that has been,

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¹² Ibid.
according to Adam Smith, understood as a kind of societal “reward.” In watching community members watch themselves be watched, in observing them watch their children perform and their cultures be consumed by ‘Others,’ I have come to understand that a part of “being seen and heard by others” in venues that facilitate relatively easy paths to “public admiration,” helps to cultivate a sense of the realness of community and one’s relationship to it. As markedly public affairs, festivals and fairs, the mode of viewing and exhibiting is distinctive and it is particularly capacious, bringing in dignitaries, politicians, and community leaders who can further affirm the public’s acceptance, admiration and, even desire, to recognize the particular community/ies—Hindus, South Asians, Indians, “global culture”—into its realm.

In the case of these festivals—such as “Diwali on the Square,” held annually in Trafalgar Square in London—we find also find new forms of ritual practice. Diwali celebrations take place before a mixed audience that includes spectators, participants, doting family members and passers-by. Secular songs and dances, including Bollywood or popular pop, rock, bhangra, and fusion numbers are performed by children, amateurs, and more professional artists. These cultural displays are often combined with rituals (a short arti in front of a temporary altar erected on the stage) and cultural displays that are reminiscent of more “traditional” celebrations in India, including folk-dances, bhajan singing, short lila-esque (ritual plays) enactments of the narratives from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, or Puranas. These often include nationalist references as well, involving the presence of Indian political dignitaries or personalities, as well as the waving of Indian flags. These public ritual festival-exhibitions are also wrapped up with local politics, helping to instantiate political connections, affirm the community’s contribution as “citizens,” and establish the power of particular constituencies, something evinced by the fact that appearances are often made by civic leaders, who sometimes—as in the case of the Diwali
festival in London—sponsor the events. For example, for a number of years, everyone who has performed on the Diwali on the Square main-stage does so with a large banner that reads, “MAYOR OF LONDON” hanging on the backdrop behind them. Every poster or pamphlet advertising the event credits the mayor as well; which is viewed as evidence, as one of the speakers put it, “of how important, how absolutely essential the Indian community is to London, that the mayor has sponsored our Diwali celebration.” These ritual celebrations in cities like London, Edison, NJ, and Sunnyvale, CA, are distinct from other public ritual festivals, like the Tri-State Durga Puja, which, although public in principle, is much more private in practice. For the most part, it is a gathering of Bengalis and their friends and family, along with some other Hindus living in the area, and it does not serve the same type of civic or public performative and exhibitionary purposes as some of these other festivals. It is important to distinguish between these different types of events, because the audiences and the experiences of attendees can be quite distinct depending on context and purpose of the performative-gathering. At these smaller festivals, a different kind of communal affirmation and belonging is affected through shared language, food, dress and rituals that are fostered in an atmosphere of homogeneity, as opposed to the heterogeneity characteristic of public exhibitions and festivals. In most of these contexts, a balance exists between large-scale productions and events, and smaller, more intimate exhibitions and presentations that happen on the periphery, sponsored by vendors and community organizations.

(III) ROVING/ITINERANT EXHIBITIONS & PRESENTATIONS

A common feature of modern folk and cultural festivals is the booth, where festival visitors can go to learn about different community organizations, register to vote, find out about opportunities for the Chinese boy-scouts or the Pakistani cricket club. Often, they will encounter
civic leaders campaigning for office, and will be offered the opportunity to purchase samples of food from local ethnic eateries. Religious organizations are among the most commonly represented at these types of fairs. It is common to find a line-up that includes children and other ethnic groups performing cultural dances, and songs on stages, while others pass out or sell literature and goods, or offer free magnets, and key chains.

There are numerous examples one could draw upon here, but I wish to offer up one particular example because of what it highlights about the relationship between diasporic exhibitionary practices and the politics of representation. In 2006 in Irvine, at two different festival contexts, the same Hindu poster exhibition was on display; first at the Kumba Mela Celebration, an event that drew thousands of people, mainly Hindus on the eve of the anniversary of 9/11, and then one week later at the Irvine Global Village Festival. The "Exhibition on Hindu Culture and Dharmic Traditions" began as part of a year-long, global, celebration of the birth of the Hindu Swamsevak Sangh’s guru, Golwalkar. The thirty-poster show was continually on display in a number of venues between 2006-2010. Exhibitions have been held on hundreds of college campuses, of every type—public and private—in every region of the United States. The exhibition was mounted on Capital Hill in Washington, D.C., at the New Jersey State House, the Texas State Capital, at numerous public libraries, cultural festivals, and Hindu gatherings. These exhibitions have drawn members of Congress, state representatives and other dignitaries, to celebrate, in HSS’s words, “India’s contributions to the world.” The poster exhibition is also available in book form and is sold when the exhibition is on display as a type of portable take-home exhibition, and it is viewable online as well. The itinerant exhibition is commonly accompanied by an altar, which usually depicts Hedgwar, Golwalkar, and Bharat Mata, and a docent, who is available to answer questions offer explanation. Framed as a roving
educational exhibition and presentations, this can be placed into context with other modes of
exhibition and display.

Every week, Indian/Hindu educational organizations in the U.S., and U.K., like the
California based *India in Classrooms*, send volunteers to teach about Indian and Hindu history in
elementary and secondary schools. Equipped with power points, artifacts of Indian art and Hindu
culture, Indian food and music, these volunteer educators serve as cultural ambassadors of
Hinduism and bring what is touted as “authentic” Hinduism and Indian experiences to children in
the classroom.

The political implications of these representations, and their specific content, cannot be
overlooked, especially with regard to the didactic stance that many of these exhibitions take. It is
the natural exhibitionary process of deliberate selection, wherein the curator chooses what
features of Hinduism, and the nature of the narratives woven to make Indian and Hindu history
accessible to non-experts (be they children, members of the interfaith or civic communities, or
other Hindus) that results in a construction of a particular brand of Hinduism. The discursive and
physical Hindu communities that these representations presume are continually reconstituted
through these presentations.

Those organizations with global Hindu agendas—such as the Hindu Swayamsevak
Sangh, or the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha—are among the most active in utilizing these forms
of dissemination and self-representation and they are often very clear to articulate that their
principle motivations for these public exhibitions are two-fold: to correct the commonplace
misrepresentations of Hinduism and India and to foster pride and unity among Hindus
worldwide, especially among those living outside of India. There are profound political
implications to these representations, especially with regard to the assertion of memory and the
articulation of history. As we know well, these representations convey messages about others, and not only do they seek to create a narrative and paint a picture of the Hindu community but they often implicitly and explicitly create a master narrative about Muslim, Dalit, Christian and other South Asian communities through selective inclusion and exclusion.

Through these explorations, I wish to consider how the practices of self-representation among these types of global and political Hindu groups are part of a much larger trend within contemporary Hinduism. Whether it is Mona Vijaykar’s India in Classrooms’ active approach to addressing what she sees as pervasive “negative stereotypes” about Hinduism and India among American school children, and church communities, or the MN based, multi-faith, multi-ethnic, Ragamala Dance Company’s, desire to bring cultural diversity and appreciation of Indian and Hindu narrative and artistic forms into classrooms and communities, these live exhibitors view themselves as active agents, shaping and crafting the impression of India and Hinduism that is left with the students, teachers, and audiences.

Ivan Karp describes museums and exhibitions as “contested arenas, settings in which different parities dispute both the control of the exhibit and assertions of identities are made in and expanded through visual displays.”13 Whereas museum installations usually seek to offer a cohesive vision and message created and structured by the curator, festivals can offer a more public forum in which, at times, competing cultural displays and perspectives can produce and dispute meanings and messages. Realizing the potential for disputation, as well as the power of formal public exhibitions and more open festival contexts, many Hindu groups have chosen to host their own festivals, train their own teachers, and host solo exhibitions in public venues, so

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13 Karp, Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display, p. 279.
that their message is not—at least in the exhibition space—perceived of as contested or even contestable.

(IV) VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS

Virtual exhibitions represent radically new cultures of display, including those found on museum, educational, temple, and other Hindu websites, as well as PowerPoints of the roving (downloadable) variety. These multi-media displays take viewers into the world of Hinduism and India. While we may be hesitant to think about the medium of PowerPoint as a mode of exhibition, many Hindu leaders have seized upon the internet and technological media as a primary vehicle through which to disseminate their vision. The use of screens as a means to exhibit and instruct is becoming more and more common in museums themselves, as well as in classrooms, devotional, and professional settings. While not the same as live exhibitions, they represent a significant site of self-representational display. Video, audio, and even in-person presentations about Hinduism by “real live Hindus,” often accompany these downloadable PowerPoints, full of carefully crafted “facts” about Hinduism, replete with images, and video clips.

The easy access of virtual exhibitions or downloadable presentations extends both the field of potential audiences and exhibitors. One mother, in Texas, neither a teacher nor a curator, told me about how she used the PowerPoints she found on the internet, which, in her words, were “full of great stuff, about all the gods and goddess and holidays,” to teach her daughter’s public-school class about India. She said she used the PowerPoint to “teach all the facts” and then brought in some little murtis, saris, and Indian food to share. She also performed a brief puja in front of the class to illustrate what she had been talking about. She noted how she added in her own family stories to make it personal, and talked about the importance of observing a Lakshmi
vrat (a fast in honor of the goddess Lakshmi) for women in her family and how it has brought them good fortune for generations.

As I noted in Chapter III, the very nature and use of virtual and technological media itself transforms how people relate to the information and images they receive. In some cases, the rise of new technologies has produced whole new spheres of devotional practice, and work on the topic of Online and Virtual pujas has explored the many dimensions involved in this. While I did not encounter individuals who participated in Online or Virtual pujas, a large number of people spent a significant amount of time in forms of self-edification and the internet stands as a significant source of material. Many Hindus I spoke with have favorite blogs. They visit and revisit websites to learn more about their traditions, finding recipes and explanations about the hows and whys of celebrating festivals. And, most significantly, they listen to online talks by various teachers about Hindu texts and traditions, and spiritual matters. These forms of transnational Hindu articulations are mainly in English and tend to be Vedantic in orientation.

(V) IN-SITU EXHIBITION—THE HINDU TEMPLE AS MUSEUM

Alongside, these displays of Hinduism in classrooms and fairgrounds, Hindu temples are themselves sites of exhibition. The in-situ tour, which Barbara Kirschenblatt Gimblett classifies in her work on the exhibition of Jews as “objects of ethnography”—provides the impression that the viewer is penetrating the “interior recesses” of a community. When the community, as in the case of Hindu temples, invites the viewer in, it is in a benign mode in which the face of


Hinduism offers the impression of a panoptic view through the form of hospitality. The host welcomes the guest into a private, intimate, or personalized, and, in this case, “sacred,” and devotional world. While there has been much work scrutinizing the unwanted gaze Western tourist at the Oriental subject, this gaze, invited, and self-consciously orchestrated by Hindus themselves, raises a different set of questions for us to consider. In speaking about their achievements, members of mandir boards and active volunteers

Each Saturday and Sunday at the Hindu Mandir in Maple Grove, MN, volunteer docents await visitors to the temple—Hindu and non-Hindu alike—and offer tours, discourses on Hinduism, and pamphlets to anyone wishing to learn more. Such in-situ exhibitions have become normative in the life of many Hindu temples. Some, including the Swaminarayan Mandir in London and the Vishnu Mandir in Richmond Hill, Ontario have even built museums on temple grounds. The Swaminarayan Mandir in London has a standing exhibit called “Understanding Hinduism,” which in their own description is “a permanent feature spread over 3000 sq. ft. on the ground floor and covering the origin and beliefs of Hinduism through visual effects, paintings, tableaux and traditional craftwork.”16 The Canadian Museum of Indian Civilization—which was first called, and is still called in some literature, the Canadian Museum of Hindu Civilization—was established in 2003 as a part of the Vishnu Mandir in Richmond Hill (a neighborhood in greater metro Toronto) Ontario, is according to its literature, “the first museum dedicated to giving visitors a multifaceted look at Hinduism’s many contributions to philosophy, the arts and science. Visitors, regardless of their own cultural heritage, will leave with an awareness and appreciation of the magnificence of one of the world’s oldest, living

civilizations.” When they began, its main stated objective was to “engage, educate and entertain visitors of all ages, specially our school and university students.”

The experience at the museum is intended to be full-body, engaging all the senses. They have created The Cosmic Theatre Experience, a 45-minute “fulldome film” and panel exhibition, focused specifically on the “compatibility between Hindu philosophy, mythology and the Vedic teachings with the current theories of physics and astronomy.” This exhibition has affective resonances with the Creation Museum located in Petersburg, Kentucky in its apologetic desire to reconcile Hinduism with science, and champion the inherent rationality and historicity of the tradition. In addition to the museum’s exhibition on the beauty and glory of Hindu temples throughout time, and the fifty-foot Mangal Murti of Hanuman, which was unveiled on July 2, 2016, “extending Canada day celebrations,” its main focus is “peace,” which includes a “Peace Park” and a “Wall of Peace,” with 7 busts of leaders and symbols, including the Buddha, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Jesus, Lord Mahavira, and, fascinatingly, the only living person represented in the “Wall of Peace” is Nobel Prize winner, Ang San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, in addition there is a Jewish Star, an Om Symbol, and a Crescent and Star. The Peace Park performs multiple functions, bringing Hindu exhibition into the public square, while simultaneously displaying Hindu community as model citizens and patriots. The Peace Park, which was dedicated on October 2, 2010—World Peace Day and Mahatma Gandhi’s Birthday—features a 12 foot-tall, more than 15 ton, Memorial to the Fallen Soldier, carved out of black and red granite from India. The monument, which is next to a statue of Gandhi in the park, includes a large Maple Leaf, and two large slabs of granite. One is carved with the poem “When Peace

Doves,” by a Fallen Soldier, and the other details that the memorial was “dedicated by the Indo-Canadian community to the Canadian Armed Forces…[who] ‘sacrificed their lives so that we may live in peace.’” It then acknowledges that the monument itself was “donated to the Canadian Museum of Hindu Civilization” by three couples, whose names are listed. Such a display is indicative of the ways in which some exhibitionary practices move from interior, and seemingly more private realms—inside a Hindu temple—to public spaces—such as a park. This movement is reflective desire to find ways to represent different aspects and subjectivities of the Hindu community. Here they employ the languages of multiculturalism—speaking as the Indo-Canadian community in one case, and as Hindu scientific rationalists in another—in their desire to display Hindus and Indian culture in a favorable light. Founded by Indo-Guyanese Hindus, the mandir gets “several thousands of visitors per week” who come from every region of India, as well as “people of Indian origin”\footnote{Incidentally, this type of subtle utterance is quite common and it is a means of racial/ethnic-coding, “Indian-origin” signals authenticity and belonging, at the same time as it marks the type of difference I discuss further in Chapter IV, wherein the most authoritative and authentic voices and perspectives are almost implicitly understood as those that come directly from India. Only secondarily, do those Hindus of Indian-origin from the Caribbean lay claim to their authority as Hindus, and this is the case even in mandirs that they have founded, such as the Vishnu Mandir in Richmond Hill, ON, and the Hindu Milan Mandir in Farmington, MN, among others where I have done fieldwork.} from South Africa, Guyana and Trinidad,” according to one of the active temple members. The museum, which charges a nominal eight-dollar requested donation for entry, is not yet getting much traffic, but the content is a involves a combination of things that is not all that uncommon, but which are, for many, understood to be in opposition with one another: an intense Hindu nationalist narrative, and a strong emphasis on the values of Peace and non-violence.

In May of 2010, when the Hindu Society of Eastern Washington received eleven new murtis from India, they held a public exhibition of the “sculptures of gods and goddesses,” as they called them to the press, offering informational tours and talks, performances of Indian
Classical and folk dance, drum demonstrations, a photo exhibition of ancient Indian temples, and food. Temple leaders deliberately noted the monetary value of the images, costing almost $50,000 dollars, and to point out that while the images were new they were done in the “Hoysala/ancient style dating back thousands of years.” The impetus for the exhibition according to Sri Naidu, a temple leader, was "to impart some awareness to our community (about) Hindus."¹⁹ Devotees at the Hindu society called the exhibit, an “expression of pride,” especially in light of the small size (only 200 families) of the community itself. It was noted by the local newspapers and emphasized by temple leaders that the “sculptures have artistic value apart from their religious meaning,” a value that Tanisha Ramachandran’s work—on the transformation of the Hindu murti in the Western imaginary from lude or pagan idol into museum-worthy art—helps us to place into historical context.

Weekend tours are commonplace at Hindu Temples throughout North American, the U.K., and Canada. Some temples are more active about cultivating tours—regularly inviting political and civic leaders, dignitaries, and members of the interfaith community—to come see and experience Hinduism. Festival celebrations, consecrations, and daily pujas, in addition to their traditional functions, are often also performances of Hinduism for outsiders.

These tours and in-situ temple exhibits and presentations serve multiple functions: firstly, Educating non-Hindus visitors and controlling the impression that they leave with by personalizing Hinduism and Hindus, and, in many cases, reiterating, tour after tour, a loose script; secondly, they instruct Hindus about their own history and customs “by reminding them what they believe or should believe,” and fostering communal and personal pride; thirdly, for the tour-guide/docent these performances, in which they inhabit the position of a Hindu authority,

offer a means of religious expression, connection and identification. One tour guide described her role, saying, “I’m the talking-type, not the praying-type, and... I find so much spiritual fulfillment doing this... it is how I connect to God.” The sense of empowerment and connection that many presenters/exhibitors feel was reiterated to me over and over again. In addition, women have—as is the case in many diasporic contexts—found in these roles, access to new types of religious authority, leadership and improvisation.

These turns in exhibitionary behavior, mode and location prompt us to consider how these practices of exhibition constitute new rituals, new modes of religious experience and discourse which should not be understood simply as “representative” of something else but as themselves religious endeavors and practices. Through repetition of what constitutes Hinduism and Indianness, be it in tours, classroom lectures, interfaith demonstrations, exhibitions, public performances, these very ideas are continually affirmed, established and produced through the discursive practices of exhibition.

(VI) THE AUTHORITY OF AGENCY AND THE AGENTS OF AUTHORITY

The agent of exhibition, who is also the subject and object of exhibition, assumes a stance that involves a willingness to be both open and exposed to the questions and gaze of outsiders, and the potential judgment of others. For in these contexts—the in-situ of the temple, or the festival performance—the ‘objects’ on display are in fact not really objects but live displays, performers,20 who often (although not always) see themselves as both the agents of the exhibition and the principal interpreters of the culture on display. As interpreters—the tour guides, classroom visitors, or performers (who often give lengthy explanatory introductions or

20 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage, pp. 48-58.
running commentaries), take on what was once the role of docent or folklorist. As cultural experts, they are charged with the task of explaining the context, cultural significance, or origin of the customs or narratives on view.

In this capacity, as cultural guides, these living exhibitors are quite unlike the “living museum” of Williamsburg, wherein the guides are impersonators, playing out the fantasy of authenticity, assuming as Karp notes, “both the costumes and personas of the people who occupied these historical settings.” Hindu cultural ambassadors, however, while often dressed up and engaged in performance, are valued precisely because they are “authentic,” living representatives, not simply representations.

Modern Hindu exhibitions—in all of the contexts in which I am discussing them here—are engaged in the act of translation, interpreting and bringing, in this case, their version of Hinduism to life. The reason that their translation is deemed trustworthy is precisely because the exhibitor has asserted a position of authenticity, at the same time as he or she entertains a fantasy about what a real Hindu might be. The fantasy is not simply that of the outsider, in meeting a real Hindu and seeing living Hinduism, find aspects of their stereotype shattered, but it is also the fantasy of the guide/exhibitor, whereby he or she gets to make Hinduism and India what they imagine it to be and wish it was. The dynamic tension and interplay between the real and the fantasy is, we might argue, a feature of much of religious life. Whether the Hinduism and Hindus portrayed in the exhibition ever really existed, may be much less significant than understanding the “devices at use in the display” and “the story spun by the exhibition” and exhibitors. With the power to craft one’s own image, and that of one’s community, the agents of exhibition

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21 Karp, “Festivals” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, p. 280.

understand themselves to have newfound agency, and with that new modes of power and authority. As one temple-docent said it: “I have never been a proud person. I am not an expert on anything, but suddenly here, at the mandir, things I knew just from childhood, I don’t know, like stories about Shri Jagannath, or that pradakshina (circumambulation of the deities) goes clockwise)…these are real things I knew that I never knew I knew, and now I am the one training all the other mandir tour-guides.”

There is a natural comfort in gazing within Hindu traditions, which is not understood to violate, but to denote reverence and respect. While I do not which to suggest that objectification and exoticization is not an element of the gazing, I wish to highlight that among Hindu exhibitors the act of seeing, by virtue of its centrality as a mode of devotion and ritual, is inherently understood as a powerful and potentially transformative act, something that instills reverence and creates connection between the seeing and the seen. Contemporary Hindu exhibitions are, therefore, able to build upon a pre-existing ritual vocabulary and the rich valences already present in the practices of darshan, which may, in some cases, allow these exhibitionary practices to be invested with power than in other traditions, where the very act of seeing does not carry the same weight as in Hindu traditions.

These displays are not simply pointing towards Hinduism, pale representations of practices enacted to show outsiders, but they are themselves rituals. Modern exhibition practices, are for many the bread and butter of their Hindu lives. Describing and defining Hinduism sustains them, and through the reiteration, these are constitutive utterances, one way by which their own sense of self, and communal identity, is reaffirmed, established and engaged.

The practice is one of distillation, producing a public Hinduism for consumption, that is packaged, arranged, and ordered. Hindus engaged in these practices of self-representation are
inherently also engaged in practices of objectification and reification, which, in part, involves objectifying the self. This process of self-objectification involves a different type of gazing, by which one—if I am to stretch the use of the ritual terminology—enacts a type of darshan, which is directed back towards the self, towards an idealized vision of Hinduism and a Hindu community. Through this process not only does the exhibitor create and illuminate Hinduism for and to others, but this becomes a mirror by which one reflects at the substance of one’s self. And the acts of storytelling, performing and displaying Hindu and Indian history and achievements is a collective and communal narrative process, whereby a sense of self bespeaks a vision of the community, made all the more “real” through the act of exhibition.

(2) Exhibition as Ritual, Authority, Discipline and Desires

In thinking about both the agents involved in shaping and conceiving of contemporary Hindu exhibitions, and the agency of the displays themselves, I wish to suggest that three types of processes are at work. Firstly, the act of exhibition is itself a new mode of ritualized, meaningful practice for many Hindus. Rather than exhibition only offering a representation of Hinduism, it gives birth to new representatives of Hinduism. The act of telling the story, of performing Hindu/Indian culture becomes not simply something that is directed outward at the audience, exhibition-goer, or the temple visitor but it becomes a means by which the interpreter, exhibitor, tour-guide, or storyteller sees themselves. This process allows the “author of the display” to look at themselves anew, and to gaze back at the image of Hinduism, both imagined and real, that they have described and enacted for the other. That act of gazing, I argue, can become a kind of devotional practice in which individuals pay homage and show reverence, not simply through retelling the stories of the gods, honoring the symbolism of the images or beliefs
they have explicated, or performing the customs and rituals that they have demonstrated for a public audience, but also to they can, in some way, show reverence to an image of themselves.

Through the act of exhibition, their engagement in a self-reflective practice can facilitate a type of darshan of the self. Through this process, individuals come to be constituted as a part of something larger than themselves, becoming representatives, and constituents of the community of Hindus. At the same time, in their “agency of display,” it is possible that they also understand their role in constituting the very nature and substance of the community and Hinduism, a realization that some of those I have spoken with find extremely empowering: “We have the responsibility and power to shape how people see and understand Hinduism, this is true not just for non-Hindus who visit the mandir, but for our children too.” This is the case, as well, for Hindus who visit these exhibitions about Hinduism. In this way, modern exhibitionary techniques often involve a type of katha—storytelling in which a narrative, and interpretive commentary is woven for an audience that is both public and community. The repetitive utterances, concepts, images and words of these exhibitions are powerful and constitutive beyond their specific (lexical) meaning, evoking and pointing (often consciously) to larger concepts and connections that are to be felt by exhibition goers/participants.

Secondly, I wish to argue that these exhibitions constitute an assertion of authority, which in some cases—such as the traditional museum and/or classroom—involve a shift wherein expertise is recognized to reside not in the museum professionals or classroom teachers, but in the Hindu subject, the “authentic” representative of culture. This authority is not only something that is recognized by non-Hindus but also by other Hindus, who are seen as potential audiences, authenticators, and artifacts at the same time.
Thirdly, these exhibitions represent and reveal disciplinary modes; in the exhibition, Hindus not only provide epistemic categories through which others can perceive and understand them on “their terms.” The “their”—naturally being a source of much debate, but they also illustrate something to Hindu viewers about how they should look and feel or what they should “know” about themselves.

Exhibitions offer up idealized and stylized visions. To many curators, and I would argue that this is particularly the case in modern displays of Hinduism, when an exhibition achieves its goal it is manifest as a representation of desires: what the viewer sees is what the exhibitor intended for the viewer to see, what is understood is what the exhibitor wanted the visitor to understand, and what is left up to a visitor’s own interpretation, is what the exhibitor wanted to be more open-ended. And although many contemporary curators have sought, quite consciously, to recognize and celebrate that the exhibition viewer’s gaze is not totally under curatorial control, nor does the curator wish it to be, it is the idea of disciplining and directing the viewers perspective which is most alluring about the exhibitionary model for contemporary agents of Hindu display.

There has been much scholarship about the ways in which museums are spaces that order and control bodies, bodies—which under the watchful eye of security guards, move within a system of clearly defined rules about what can be touched, how and from what distance objects can be viewed—regulating people not only through social norms but actual alarm systems. While many of these modern Hindu exhibitions create a sense of freedom, even encouragement, to engage, taste, feel, question, and have fun, at the same time, these exhibitions can and often do constrain.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{23}\) Norms are also delineated through this process as well; Sometimes these contexts involve evaluation and judgment about how people are dressed; what the languages they speak and to whom; and their comfort they exhibit
These examples help to illustrate how these new modes of exhibition and practices of representation are at once a powerful means by which carefully defined and constructed images of India and Hinduism are disseminated to Hindu publics, as well as general ones. Hindus, in particular, often become invested, and even implicated in a specific Hindu narrative that serves to constitute aspects of their identities through association with and ownership of the exhibition discourse. At the same time, while we need to understand this as an example of the workings of a new type of disciplinary practice whereby certain narratives and images dominate over others, this democratization of the authority to speak and represent Hinduism, particularly with respect to women, has also cultivated new spaces and modes of creativity, flexibility, and agency among those who have, until now, never seen themselves as or been seen as authoritative or qualified representatives.

In these modern exhibitions authority is claimed through asserting a possession of knowledge, established by insider skills and experiences, material resources and access, and ultimately through identification, ownership, and assertions of the “real.” To exhibition visitors, these displays do not simply convey authoritative knowledge that comprises the content of the exhibition, but more importantly, they convey the ownership, identification, authenticity, and desires of the agent of display.

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with particular cultural forms (folk dances, puja practices, recitation of shlokas, the singing of bhajans. A group of young women in their late twenties told me about how much they hated having to perform at these festivals because afterward, all they heard was how they could have performed, behaved or comported themselves differently.
CHAPTER V:
MATERIAL DESIRES AND BELONGING IN AMERICAN HINDU CULTURES

In the fields of business and marketing, “branding” is considered a sub-field all its own. A brand is comprised of the experiences, evocations, and symbols associated with a product, entity or service. Naomi Klein argues that brands are essential components of our global economy functioning as “cultural accessories”\(^1\) and material expressions of “personal philosophies.” Brands are understood to have both psychological and experiential components, involving expectations, and bespeaking value, attitude, and, in some cases, even ethics and ideology. “Attitude branding” involves value-based marketing in which a product is purposefully linked to a set of feelings and associations that have nothing to do with the good or institution itself; we need only consider the assertion that when you drink a Coke, you help the world to “sing in perfect harmony,” ultimately, bringing world peace; when you “Join the Army,” you will “Be All That You Can Be.” The terminology of branding does not simply have modern marketplace associations; to be branded is to be named and possessed by another. A brand is a mark placed on an animal by a human being to denote ownership. It is the symbol, the *Scarlet Letter*, or the “C,” for Coward, that those with power in a society use to control and mark a person’s place in the world. All of these elements of branding find parallels in the world of religious identity politics and production.

In the United States, religious traditions and communities have developed their own “brand identities,” which, while evolving, allow members of the community and those outside of it to recognize the material and symbolic characteristics of belonging. The idea that value systems and experiences are consciously and unconsciously linked to material goods and

\(^1\) Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000), p. 16
institutions is well established in religious and migration studies; scholars have illustrated the power of objects and experiences to evoke nostalgia for and attachment to conceptions of home, nation, and family.

(1) MATERIAL LANDSCAPES OF AMERICAN HINDUS

This chapter examines the experiences, associations, and objects that animate the material landscapes of American Hindus, considering how specific Indian and Hindu capitalist enterprises (small groceries, restaurants, clothing stores) engage with Hindu religious endeavors, institutions, and educational strategies. I seek to ask how material goods are used to produce feelings of belonging and particular types of desires, and how families and communities produce desires that allow people to find belonging through the stuff of material culture. How, in turn, do associations with Hindus, Hinduism, India, and Indians come to be desirable commodities for some South Asians in the diaspora? I consider the consumer practices of American Hindus with regard to Indian food, goods, and clothing and explore the “you-are-what-you-eat-and-wear” discourse of parents and pandits. In this element of my research, I seek to examine the relationship between belonging and brand (as Hinduness itself), exploring how identity, association, and authenticity are bought and conferred. Utilizing interviews and observation, I wish to probe the “value” awarded to goods and gastronomy by Hindu Americans, and the roles that they play, in concert with more overt “religious” practices and spaces, in shaping and generating affective spaces of value, and experiences of belonging among American Hindus and Hinduism.²

² Contrary to this positive sense, material goods have also been awarded intense value when they are understood to denote offensive representations of Hinduism, be it Hindu gods on lunch pails or toilet seats, images of Rama on shoes, or in representations of Hinduism in film or academic scholarship. The sense that material goods and images have the power to damage a community’s image in the larger world and simultaneously harm a community’s own perception of itself, is paired with an understanding that material objects and food have the power to create positive
It is hard to get a definitive number of South Asian shops in California, not all of them are listed in directories, and there are a whole host of shops that serve dual purposes: fixing computers and selling fresh parathas and chutneys out of the back of the store to a select few who are in the know. Temples and masjids also often have some sort of shop attached to them, selling books, ritual items, music, films, even clothing, jewelry and foodstuffs. According to one recent listing, there are approximately 478 Indian, Pakistani, Desi, Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Fijian groceries in California and 964 Indian, Indo-Pak, Bangladeshi, Indo-Caribbean restaurants. Based on another list, the number may be closer to 267 groceries. Many of these are found in the midst of concentrated neighborhoods. In some cases, shops are spread over a single city street, whereas in others a neighborhood may spread out over many blocks. These larger neighborhoods are destinations, particularly for those who live in more suburban locales, where there may be only one grocery that serves their needs if that. Berkeley, San Bruno, Milpitas, Sunnyvale, San Jose, and Fremont/Union City are just a few of the cities in Northern California with concentrated “Little Indias.” In Southern California, there are smaller groupings of shops in Northridge, Los Angeles, Tustin, and Anaheim but the destination par excellence, for those who wish to engage in serious shopping, is Pioneer Boulevard in Artesia.

A number of cities in the United States have large enough South Asian communities to support multiple neighborhoods, allowing for defined regional, linguistic, caste, class, and religious distinctions within the South Asian population. This is most certainly the case in places like California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois, as well as in Pennsylvania, Florida, impressions and effect favorable self-perceptions, particularly among children. I briefly examine this side of perceived “negative” representation in the form of images (shoes, toilet seats, in films, etc.) in later chapters.

This is based on numbers from Indiafoodsguide.com, accessed October 23, 2009. Other sources, such as sulekha.com, indians-abroad.com; indian-pakistani.net, indianweb.com, thokalath.com, and garamchai.com give a range of numbers. An average from these is closer to 300 but Indiafoodsguide had the most comprehensive list, and I have verified a large number of the entries and noted that a number of others were missing.
Michigan, Maryland, Virginia, Georgia and Ohio. The growth in population over the past forty years has meant the growth, not only of South Asian religious, educational and cultural institutions, corporations, political lobbies, professional associations, but all types of commercial establishments as well. These institutions, big and small, often work in concert with one another. Still, even in smaller communities—Minnesota, Wisconsin, Oregon, Kentucky, Washington—the quest for cultural and religious goods can also take on a special significance, wherein new rites of consumer and culinary pilgrimage emerge in families and communities. Driving long distances for the “only acceptable biryani” is not an uncommon weekend activity in many South Asian families.

Scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history have looked in depth at the role of food, consumer practices, neighborhoods, and commodification in shaping ethnic and cultural identities. The language of globalization has been central in much of this scholarship, attentive as it is to the transnational flows of goods and people. Religious Studies has considered the commodification of the religious and the marketplace of spirituality. However, even as scholars have argued against this very tendency, scholarship often persists to draw lines separating the “religious” realm from the “secular.” This is notable in work on the Hindu diaspora because scholars of religion have often focused on the goings-on at temples, and domestic rituals but not on how these spheres are deeply connected to the marketplace of South Asian goods and gastronomy.

For a number of years in my research for this dissertation, I was focused almost exclusively on what might be called “overtly religious endeavors,” and while I was always interested other aspects of South Asian diasporic experience, it was not until I stood, waiting with a group of parents at the Chinmaya Kasi Mission in Anaheim, California, that I realized
how the pedagogic strategies that were being employed on children behind the door of the classroom, were inextricably linked to the grocery shopping and cooking of these children’s parents.

On Sunday morning in 2005, a large group of parents, who had attended the Gita class run parallel to the bala vihar classes for children, waiting for the children’s class to end. Another group of parents seized the opportunity to use these morning hours, free of children, to do errands. As we waited for the children’s classes to end, a mother entered the vestibule, carrying bags full of good smelling food. One of the mothers turned to the bag-laden woman and asked her what she had acquired. A flurry of conversation ensued as she admitted to buying fresh, ready-made food for the week, from one of the nearby groceries. The bags and containers were then opened for inspection, curries and biryani were smelled, and ingredients on frozen foods were discussed and scrutinized. There were approving clucks, and others, who stood on the sidelines, admitted that they too bought from the local grocery. Some said that they preferred to go to India Sweets and Spices, and others drove even further to Patel Brothers, which they swore was “higher quality.” Accompanied by head shaking indicative of the high quality of the prepared food, one working mother, who I later discovered was a doctor, shared phone number for the “Gujarati dadi (grandmother)” who makes roti for her on a weekly basis. “She also makes very nice chutneys, so I don’t ever do that anymore, but we have fresh for every meal.” A whole other conversation ensued about the best places to get South Indian food and the relative merit (crispiness, thickness, quantity and quality of filling) of the dosas (South Indian crepe made with fermented rice flour and black gram) and sambar at the place run by “the people from Madras” versus the people from Trivandrum. The discussion continued as the door was opened and the children spilled out. A number of families then made their tirtha (pilgrimage) and drove
the 12 miles to lunch together at Udupi Palace in Artesia, which many of them had just argued
had the best dosa in all of California. Along with ritual visits to temples, families engage in
rituals of consumption, such as the weekend errands to get the requisite Indian groceries, or the
trips to lunch at a local chaat house or dosa place, or to acquire the latest Bollywood film or
some new Hindu serial that the relatives in India have been talking about. Such activities serve as
alternative educational strategies, strengthening communal attachments. People habitually move
between these spaces with a relative seamlessness, indicative of the ways in which the
commercial is ritualized and rituals are commercialized in much of American Hindu life.

(2) COMMERCIAL AND RITUAL IMBRICATION

If we are to look simply at the question of publicity and patronage, it is impossible to
escape the intense relationship that exists between Indian shops and Hindu sites. In almost every
Hindu temple newsletter, one finds advertisements for local groceries, sari and jewelry shops.
Temple functions—in honor of festivals like Diwali, Gaṇesh Puja, Navaratri, and the like—are
often sponsored by local restaurants and groceries. Food at these events is sometimes provided
gratis by caterers, groceries, and restaurants in exchange for free publicity on Temple websites or
newsletters. At one temple in the Bay Area, a bidding war ensued over which restaurant was
going to get the contract to provide food for the temple’s annual fundraiser, estimated to cost in
the neighborhood of thirty-thousand dollars. In the end, the restaurant that offered to donate
everything, won the job, a large tax-deduction, and most importantly, a prominent place—noting
their “generous contribution”—on all of the event publicity. In other cases, Indian-run businesses
in America have often sponsored charities in India and been prominent donors in the
construction of local Temples and community centers. These relationships, between the
corporate and religious, are not exclusive to the diaspora, nor to the Hindu community, and we
can track see similar processes at work in India as well. These flows of capital are, often consciously, navigated, by all sides, to develop specific communal loyalties to organizations and businesses.

Shows of public sponsorship are combined with another type of subtle marketing. The vast majority of Indian groceries, even those run by Jains, Sikhs, Christians, and Parsis, carry Hindu ritual items, books, and devotional objects. Certainly, this makes sense from a business standpoint. As one shop owner told me, pointing to the mūrtis, books and puja items in his store:

These things never go bad, not like this food, which I am always having to throw away. I can buy it very, very, cheap in India and sell it for a lot of money here because—nowhere else to get it. I don’t need to sell a lot of it, but you would be surprised at how much demand these days.

Here, rather than being solely in sacred contexts like the Hindu temples in the U.S., these items (as one would find them in India), are mixed in with the mundane, given a few shelves all their own but with no more prominence, or even less, than the newest Bollywood films available for rent. The pragmatic place of these items in groceries acts to mediate between different realms of association and identity for many customers. Through the act of seeing a commercial display, the consumer is invited to participate in religious activity. Natasha, a woman in her late thirties living in Redwood City, told me:

Honestly, I am not a religious person… My parents weren’t really religious, they were hard-core lefties from their Berkeley days, how else do you think I ended up with a Russian name? (If I were a boy I was going to be named Karl!)…Anyhow, even though I didn’t get much of it growing up, I actually observe the holidays with my kids because of what I see in the stores. I go into Milan or, like today, into India Spice and I see the Holi powders or the diyas and I remember, ‘oh yeah, that would be fun, we should do that.’…I don’t know a lot but I bought one of those books on Indian festivals at the store and so I look it up and we do a little at home….We’ve even gone to the temple a few times when I get really inspired.
Another first-generation woman in her thirties said that, after “a bunch of trips” to different grocery stores, she realized that even though “every Indian store had all you could ever need for a puja,” she didn’t have anything in her own house and, in fact, she never had. Until then, these were things that she “vaguely associated with” her parent’s home and now that she was an adult, with a family of her own, she felt it was time for her to possess them as well. She didn’t actually buy anything much for her home altar at the grocery, but she credits their predictable and persistent presence in the store with making her ask her mother to help her get what was needed for a shrine at home and “opening up a whole new part” of her relationship with her mother about how home rituals are done.

In these types of moments, the commodity—murti, holi powder, rakhi—becomes the key that an individual requires in order to engage with the cultural and through which to enact religiosity. You need to purchase the goods in order to create the ambiance necessary for the experience. In some cases, the darshan—if you will—of objects evokes an impulsive “inspiration” in which people celebrate festivals that may have otherwise gone unmarked, or which may have been unfamiliar or not customary for one’s family or community. These aesthetics of commodification allow culture to be bought, evoking religious participation and identification through the act of commerce.

Parents also talk about how children’s questions about things that they encounter at the market have not only inspired them to observe holidays or cook special foods associated with the season but also provided pedagogical opportunities. I have heard numerous stories of how a child’s interaction with or even observation of the material objects for sale in groceries and shops has transformed family practices and customs. The simple question, “What is that?” when seeing a display of dolls for a Navaratri kolu (a South Indian custom of celebrating the nine-night
festival with displays of figurines, murtis, and dolls), can inspire the observance of the festival. The interrogation is a prelude to consumption, the consumption an inspiration for ritual practice.

Gender plays an important role in these contexts because it is often the women who regulate the domains of cooking, dressing, and shopping. In my own research and in that of Purnima Mankekar on the role played by Indian groceries, women often articulate how they view cooking as “integral to their roles in the family and to their constitution as national and gendered subjects—indeed to their identities as Indian women.” ⁴ The belief that food and particular recipes are one of the essential ways to keep Indian culture and identity alive in America is continually referenced not as revelation but as the most obvious of facts.

Storekeepers talk about how they are often approached by these young American Indian women and college boys, not just their American customers, about how to make specific foods. One shopkeeper, Nanki, in Milpitas said that “after twelve years of giving out recipes and advice for free” she realized she should make her own cookbook and offer classes for these women. She put up a handwritten sign on the bulletin board above the Indian newspapers, which said, “Learn to cook Authentic Indian food for your Hindu Home,” and within a week she had thirty people signed up. Her classes were so popular that she couldn’t keep up with the demand and stopped offering them after a few years because they “took so much energy that her store was suffering.”

Mankekar also points to this type of Indian shop-pedagogy, passed down from one “authentic, knowing” generation to another, who is marked “by their appearance and their accents,” as second-generation, but who ‘naturally’ ‘want to eat Indian food because, despite how they might look or sound, they are, after all, Indian.” ⁵ This type of naturalization, wherein

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⁵ Ibid.
Hindu and Indian identity are discussed as though they are inherent subjectivities, as opposed to constructed ones, is reinforced constantly in casual comments and practices—note the “authentic Indian cookbook” for a “Hindu home. The continual conflation between Hindu and Indian is hard to escape. And while this conflation points to and feeds intense political rhetoric and ideologies, it indicates something else as well: the ways in which, for American Hindus, distinctions between “religious identity” and “cultural identity” are murky, to say the least.

(3) GASTRONOMIC AND TACTILE PEDAGOGIES

“Attitude,” value-based, branding, when a product is linked to a set of feelings or associations that have nothing inherently to do with the good itself, is another factor that plays into these amorphous conceptions of identity. In India and throughout the globe, products (as some of the other papers on this panel show) are often marketed with religious imagery. Lakshmi’s form is found on bars of soap and mehndi powder, the Golden Temple is the favored brand of ata sold in the United States. Images of Ganesha and Shiva are found on frozen foods, basmati rice, and agarbathi. More than a marketing strategy, the actual packaging of these products and the smells of the stores is something that parents point to when talking about what it means to shop Indian when living in America. One mother said, “I just like my daughter to see all the things in the store. Even the fact that when you walk in, there is Ganesh and not some Christmas decorations, you know…and the food and Hindi films. In one place, she can see everything we need to keep our culture.” Among patrons and shopkeepers alike there is a tacit understanding that shops offer a whole gestalt, not just individual items. A number of parents said that they felt as though trips to the Indian grocery made their children familiar with the smells of India and, even when they complained about these very smells, they would eventually become normal and even comforting to them. Mankekar mentions this same refrain in her
research on Indian shopping in California. She notes that for many, “Indian grocery stores felt familiar in a foreign land where Indians are marked as alien by the smells we embody,” and those smells are not just food but the actual smells and “press of people.” She writes,

Through the products they offer, their sights and smells, Indian grocery stores enact the semiotics of the familiar in complex ways. The visual clutter is only one part of the sensory stimuli they provide. The dominant impression...was their distinctive smell. If to other communities, these stores represent sites of (olfactory) alterity, to many Indians... they represented spaces of familiarity.6

A few mothers mentioned that they buy products that they associate with India (like Maggi Noodles, digestive biscuits or Parachute oil) not only nostalgically because they are reminders of home, but also so their kids will recognize these as their own foods and smells when they visit India and see their relatives. One mother shared:

It was so embarrassing when I brought my son to England to see my older brother and sister-in-law and he wouldn’t eat any of the food. He just wanted macaroni and cheese. I was so embarrassed, I can’t tell you…. Even the cookies, which aren’t really Indian, those glucose biscuits we all love to dip in tea, he said they tasted “yucky.”

For her, the attitude of her son toward Indian food... was a reflection of her ability, or lack thereof, to raise a good Indian boy. The subject of children’s eating habits, with regard to their South Asian palates, is frequent fodder for parenting conversations at Hindu temples, Indian community functions, and other gatherings and the consumption of Indian food is viewed as a sign of authenticity and a measure of success in the inculcation of identity7 (Hindumommy.com

6 Ibid, p. 90

7 The role of food in the articulation of ethnicity and culture is, of course, nothing new. In her research on the earliest South Asian immigrants to the U.S, in the late 19th and early 20th century, Karen Leonard notes that even when Punjabi Sikhs married Mexican women in large numbers and children were “socialized” by their mothers to speak Spanish and practice Catholicism, they still identified as “Hindus,” Sikhs and “half and halves” through their food and funerary practices. Sundays were special days in the community when Punjabi men and their family would gather to “talk, play” and enjoy a meal of “chicken curry and roti.” The food was one of the main ways in which Punjabi men transmitted their culture to their wives and children and, according to Leonard, to this day, even when ignorant about much of their Punjabi, and Sikh heritage, these descendants of immigrants (who call themselves Hindu and East Indian,) still hold onto cuisine as one of the main ways through which to express their ethnicity. As tensions between the pioneers and the post-1965 South Asian immigrants emerged over the veritable Americanness or authenticity of the community’s Hindu-ness or Sikh-ness, food remained, according to Leonard, a place through
and Indusladies.com are two blogs that have numerous conversations about these types of topics. Even pandits discuss the importance of food when raising Hindu children. In discourses on the *Gita*, for example, pandits have suggested that mother’s cooking, Indian clothing, and comics are “desirable desires” to be encouraged among American Hindu children, as opposed to “undesirable desires,” like video games, American music, junk food and other toys.\(^8\)

Bribery is also a key component in these gastronomic pedagogies of identity making. Many parents proudly shared how trips to the grocery store or restaurant were rewarded with kulfi, mitai, lassis, candies or other treats. “They should associate this with sweet things. I always get my children a sweet at the Indian store and then they like going there, they even ask to come with me…. You know, I even heard Swami Ishawarananda, when he came from India last year, talk about making our culture sweet and that was why he always gave all the children extra candy when they came for darshan or just for the children’s program.”

There are interesting gender dynamics and dimensions too, including the division of labor—who does the groceries—and how people experience the act of shopping itself. One

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\(^8\) An example of how a compromise between what is perceived of as “traditional Hindu” ideas and western ones can be executed occurred at an HSS camp. One of the camp counselor’s was inspired by an article she read in *Balagokulam*, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh’s children’s magazine, which suggested that when celebrating your birthday, you should decorate the cake with the word “Om” or the verse, “jivat sharadah shatam, May he live a hundred years,” and you should end your party by lighting a diya. This way, it was suggested by the camp counselor, “you will feel Hindu inside, as you eat the sweet cake. That is actually why we give sweets as part of all of our holidays.” Another swami at the Hindu Temple in San Jose offered a similar interpretation when talking to kids about Ganesha. He said that the reason that Ganesha has ladoos and a “big belly full of Indian food” is so that we will remember that everything that we do when we are being Hindu is sweet and should be sweet. “You get sweets every time you come to the temple, and when you eat Indian food at home, you are like Ganesha, it is all sweet, and when you eat this food you remember that you are Hindu inside and out and that God is with you inside and out.”
afternoon, when I was speaking with a woman about her thoughts on the grocery store, her husband chimed in and offered his perspective:

She likes to talk about the food and the smells, that’s all fine, but I am in international business and you know, while I absolutely hate the service that I get at these Indian stores and restaurants—they really know nothing about basic customer service and even quality control, you see how dirty it is? And have you seen the dates on some of this stuff?...[But] its good for our boys to get comfortable with this kind of thing. I travel all over the world and everywhere isn’t going to be this kushy-clean America. You need to be able to roll with it. If they feel comfortable with our Indian insanity and rudeness, they can handle anything—that’s what I say.

Arijit Sen, a professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is in the midst of researching many of the same stores in California that are frequented by those with whom I spoke. His work focuses on how the organization of the spaces themselves communicates cultural clues and promotes and/or discourages different types of interactions among the customers and between the customers and shopkeepers. Through mapping out the layouts of stores, he has noted how some shops have put up spatial barriers in parts of the store, so that only those who belong, and who possess specialized-insider knowledge are permitted entry. In addition, certain shops are laid-out to make types of surveillance easier, with the cash register located in the middle of the shop so that every aisle is viewable from the counter. This is particularly important, storeowners mentioned, because when “the wrong type of people come in” they can make sure that they don’t steal. These types of spatial clues work in tandem with other types of signs that indicate belonging and distinguish notions of “insiders” from those perceived to be “Other.” In these contexts, such things as race and class become important identifying factors, a means by which to discern one’s place or out-of-placeness. Perceived race

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is coupled, in many cases, with attention to language and regional background—North Indian or South—and presumed religious or caste backgrounds. When credit cards are presented, it is not uncommon to hear, “Oh, Khan?” from a shop-owner. Or an increased level of respect when Mrs. Krishnamurthy is identified. Who is welcomed in various spaces shifts dramatically based on these subtle codes of recognition.

(4) THE DISCERNING EYE: THE OFFICIAL, AUTHENTIC BRAND

Even the name of a shop and its patronage denote signs of belonging. South Asian restaurants and groceries employ a communal code-language by which a store name bespeaks nationality through the use of the hyphen (“Indo-Pak,” “Indo-Pak-Bangladeshi,” “Indo-Caribbean”). The name acts as a guide for "insider" consumers helping them determine which brand of shop matches their own identity. While there is often slippage in the nomenclature of identity, with the conflation of Indian and Hindu, there are also increased distinctions as well; a Gujarati grocery may be privileged or granted “authenticity” by a specific community, while other products or establishments are deemed ersatz.

One shop owner from Fremont, who asked not to be identified, told me that his grocery was one of the first shops to add “–Pak” to its name. He said,

I was so annoyed all the time seeing ‘Indian grocery store this’ and ‘Indian restaurant that.’ We Pakistanis need the same groceries—when did pickle and dal become ‘Indian?’ I made my store Indo-Pak and you wouldn’t believe the business I got. All of a sudden everyone from Pakistan starting coming to me and also I carry halal now and my business is very good.

10 When the words Fiji or Caribbean are added to the names of shops, it is almost always an indication of the shop-owner’ descent. While people from India will shop in these stores, they tend to cater to Indian and non-Indian Caribbean and Fijian populations. Indo-Caribbean and Fijian populations came in the 1980’s and 1990’s and their shops often carry less expensive clothing and specialized Caribbean food-stuffs, as well as the standard Indian fare. They also tend to be located in distinctive neighborhoods that are less affluent than some of the Indian shops.
Some shop owners are explicit that they have changed or chosen the names of their stores specifically to attract a larger pool of customers. Whereas, in other cases, stereotypes, about class, caste, and religious difference, are at work to promote the opposite effect. Some proprietors were quite open about their prejudices and unabashedly shared how they didn’t want to attract certain communities (like Bangladeshis, or Caribbeans).  

These modes of discrimination and division, like those that fall along community and caste lines, are hard to track quantitatively but, in speaking with shop owners and customers, and observing the flow of patrons, it is quite clear that such sentiments are in play in both social and consumer practices.

In work on immigrant placemaking, a number of scholars have noted that the existence of things such as ethnic groceries, clothing, beauty and goods shops can destabilize “existing meanings and identities of place,” literally making new spaces and normalizing the possibilities for different cultures, communities and identity-groups to not only express themselves but also to be woven into the very landscape of cities, taking up place in buildings and (to some extent) insisting on some level of cross-cultural understanding. In contrast to that, however, I would suggest that practices of placemaking can also reinscribe difference and distinctions, creating literal spaces where inequities and social hierarchies that existed in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, or the Caribbean, for example, can be reinforced and retooled in the diasporic context. Sometimes it is the very skill of discernment that is passed onto children in the next generation, and it too is part of their cultural and religious education.

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11 In my research, I have been privy—to my surprise—to these kinds of proclamations. In many cases, shop owners indicate no hesitancy to reveal their assumptions about different types of people—“Sindhis,” “Gujus,” “Punjabis,” “Sardarjis,” “Muslims,” “Americans” — and the varied ways in which they treat them depending upon their background. Others are not as overt in the ways they distinguish (and often discriminate).

On a micro-level, the ability to discern the “real” from the masquerading imitation is itself a mark of belonging. In fact, engaging in a discourse of critique—discussing which store has fresher spices, or which store owner is more honest, or sells better quality jewelry—is all part of a community’s development of their brand identity. The choice to patronize a particular merchant can be read as a sign of loyalty or betrayal, depending upon one’s perception and place within the community. Not only do adults perform their skills of discernment in front of one another, but they also teach them to their children, through ritualized critique sessions that follow the consumption of food, or visits to shops.

These distinctions are reinforced in other ways as well. It is not uncommon for shopkeepers and restaurant proprietors to note someone’s race or appearance and to change their language and their product-offerings based on their visual perceptions. Many times, I have watched as shop owners have revealed a previously hidden box of fresh dhania (coriander) or chilies from behind the counter upon simply being greeted in Hindi or Telugu as opposed to English. Different prepared foods are mentioned when someone “looks” South Asian, or is wearing Indian clothing.

The superficial nature of these codes was pointed out by a group of women of South Asian descent, who were all born in the U.S. The vast majority of them only “put on” Indian clothing when they are doing what they called “Indian things,” which included going to the temple, “some family functions and parties, and on occasion when they “just felt like it.” Day to day, however, they wear what they all referred to as “regular clothing.” One of these women, in her early thirties, commented that she gets treated totally differently when wears Indian clothing to do groceries. She said:

I am conflicted about it, actually. Part of me felt like, I guess I should put on a salwar to do the groceries, its so much nicer and they pull out all the stops and it just more pleasant,
and the other part of me felt like forget it, this is who I am. Give me the same damn service… I am giving you the same money!"

Another woman commented about how she had shopped in the same store for many months and had been treated really well, no matter what she was wearing. But when she walked in one day with her white-American husband and blond-haired, blue-eyed kids, the manager suddenly started talking to her totally differently and treating her like she was an “outsider.” According to her he even said, “Oh, I didn’t realize you were American...how do you know our culture so well? You must have been studying for a long time? No?” Another American-born desi in his late twenties said that he often gets told by people in the community—at restaurants, Indian groceries, at big parties where there are Indians he doesn’t know very well and at temple and Chinmaya functions—that he doesn’t “look Indian.” He said, “whenever they say it, which happens a lot…I guess because I don’t really wear Indian clothes and my Hindi isn’t that great…I feel like they are trying to say: you aren’t really one of us. Like, you’re a poser or something. I don’t know how to explain it, really, but it always feels bad.”

Age too plays a role, one store owner told me that she always saves “the good sabzi [vegetables]” for all the “dadis because they know the difference between the quality and “they get difficult…and take a lot of time touching, and touching everything many times if they don’t find what they like.” She felt it was just easier to give them the good stuff right away. These material-bodily-clues are read as a way of determining a person’s place within the community and his/her right to participate. Ultimately, this type of discernment is a way by which the “rightful” ownership of “Indianness” and “Hinduness” is unofficially regulated and it is how children are subtly instructed in how to belong to and live in the brand of Hinduism and Indian-ness that is acceptable to their family and community. Festivals also provide opportunities for
making distinctions, whether people buy the religious items for sale in a given store, greet one another with the customary felicitations, or take the free calendar that has been put out by the local mandir or masjid. These social and cultural cues are among the ways that relationships that extend beyond the shops’ milieu are forged.

Many shops offer more than simply goods for purchase. At Laxmi Sweets and Spice in Tustin, CA, Sanju Jain, co-owner of the shop with her husband, is also a realtor and her father-in-law, Suresh Jain is a Notary. They seek to tend to all your household needs: food, entertainment (videos and music) and even housing. One customer said that when she realized that Sanju was a realtor, she “was so relieved.” They needed to sell their house and, since she buys all her groceries from the store, it was as though she was keeping the “business in the family.” “If I am going to trust Sanju with what I feed my children, I can certainly trust her to help me with our house.”

The building blocks—economic, religious, and social—of American Hinduism are located in myriad places, including grocery stores, sari shops, and Hindi movie theatres where South Asian newspapers are found, and where advertisements for local pujas and temple functions are taped to the windows. It is there that the right ingredients for the special prasada (offering of ritual food, which is then consumed by the devotees), or the best quality mehndi (henna) are found. Groceries and jewelry stores are not simply sites of procurement but of production as well, providing publicity for the community and financial sponsorship for pujas, festivals, and the publication of Temple calendars. Not only that, as the sites of upanayana (sacred thread) and vivaha (marriage rituals), South Asian restaurants are transformed from

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13 I do not have any quantitative evidence on this but I have noticed that while some Pakistani and/or Indian-Muslim-owned stores carry things for Hindu festivals, the same is not true with respect to Muslim ritual items at most of the Indian-Hindu-owned groceries.
simple commercial venues into consecrated spaces in the rites of identity production. It is natural to make a distinction between restaurants and mandirs in our studies of space, but restaurants, hotel halls, and community centers are often sanctified and become associated with the conferring of identity and the enactment of religious ritual. In these spaces haptic, visual, and auditory codes—what has been called the biometrics of social life and communication—not only allow people to navigate such spaces, but to inhabit and own them, enabling them to move between different spheres, “crossing and dwelling,” and establishing boundaries of insider and outsider in the process of doing so. Thomas Tweed argues that religious traditions have the potential to do just that—facilitating experiences of “crossing and dwelling”—as they produce “cartographies of desire,” maps that not only can direct people toward existential aims, but often to more mundane, but nonetheless significant, goals, involving the way the body engages in social spaces and navigates social limits.14

(5) EXEMPLAR(Y) SHOPPING: MATERIAL PEDAGOGIES AND BRIDAL BELONGING

Countless parents speak of how they buy for their children in excess when they go to India or when they express interest in Indian commodities. “Something comes over me,” said Tara, “when my daughter and I go to India. I let her get as many outfits as she likes. I would never be that way in the States but I feel that her wanting Indian things is so good, such a positive sign about how good she feels about herself, that I don’t really mind.” These strategic parental practices involve the use of material goods—be they food, clothes, or comics—as both enticement and reward for cultural and religious association. Trappings really do matter. More

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than simply “putting-on” identity, parents openly discuss how dressing their children in Indian clothes, or giving them Indian sweets or jewelry makes Hindus and Indians out of them.

One soon-to-be-bride, Maddy (an Americanized version of Madhu that she had “insisted on being called” since she was a child), born and raised in California, said, “I’m not sure if I wanted a Hindu wedding so I could shop, or if the shopping made me want a Hindu wedding. But it all seemed to go together—getting married meant I was doing the Hindu-thing.” This type of sentiment was echoed over and over again in sari shops and jewelry stores. Even in the cases of “mixed” marriages, wedding shopping is a central aspect of most preparations. Young women often express how they had no interest in Indian clothing or jewelry until it was time for their marriage and how, in the words of one Los Angeles woman, this was the first moment she really wanted to “claim her Indianness.” A number of brides, whom I interviewed, in a range of contexts—such as Indian clothing and jewelry stores, as they viewed the embroidery on saris and langhas (a traditional South Indian skirt) or the details on a wedding set—spoke of how their parents had referred to this moment throughout their lives, and how the shopping for their weddings (whenever they came) would mark an important rite of passage. These feelings are, of course, not unique to the South Asian diaspora, but what is different here from in India is the ways in which parents understand the shopping trips themselves as a measure of their success or failure to raise “Hindu enough” children. One mother from Irvine, California said it plainly:

I was so worried that she had turned her back on everything we taught her of our culture. I knew long ago not to expect that she would marry an Indian boy but when the time came and she told me she wanted to wear a langha and have mehndi, I knew that we had done something right.

This mother marked marriage as the moment when her daughter, “let Hinduism back into her life” and it only “got better when she had children.” Another woman, Kaavy, described the
shopping trips that she took in preparation for her daughter’s wedding as “opening a door that had long been closed” to anything Hindu. Living in Southern California, after finding “nothing in Cerritos,” they flew up to the Bay Area to what was, according to her, the “best wedding shop in California,” Sari Palace in Berkeley. After that trip, where they bought clothes for the engagement party, her daughter was open to a pre-wedding shopping-trip to Mumbai, a place she had expressed no interest in visiting since she had left for college. This trip, according to Kaavy, changed their whole relationship and it was then that her daughter started to realize that everything she learned in bala vihar “wasn’t as boring as she had always thought.” Kaavy actually credited the beauty of Indian clothing with the fact that her daughter remembered how important Hinduism was to her. She said that these Indian things were “the key to herself… because of the gold and the clothing, she felt a Hindu ceremony was the right thing to do.” In a less overtly materialistic narrative, one young woman talked about how she had never really seen herself as beautiful growing up in America. Not being the kind of India who could “rock the Bollywood beauty-thing,” she had always felt out-of-place and a bit awkward. When she got engaged though, she said, “for the first time in myself, I was able to look in the mirror and feel really beautiful.” She talked about how her American friends had fawned over her, saying she had never looked so gorgeous. They loved all the Indian clothing, and jewelry and it made her feel “happy, a little proud, but really just more at peace with who I am, and ready to embrace it more.” These types of stories actually cross class and regional lines, even though the ability to take trips to India solely in order to shop does not.

Not only is it parents and children who articulate the power of the material in the making of Indian and Hindu identities but, as I noted earlier and explore in elsewhere in the dissertation, bala vihar teachers and community leaders often articulate a theology and philosophy that
clothing, food, and Indian things actually have intrinsic value in the development of children’s religious and cultural identities.

(6) RHETORIC & TECHNIQUES TO PROMOTE “BRAND” IDENTIFICATION & BELONGING

Just as eating Indian sweets and food was seen as a stepping stone in the development of Indian and Hindu identity, clothing too is understood to have an important role. One Sunday morning, before the festival of Rakhi, a teacher at an informal class for fourth- and fifth-grade Hindu children, held at a community center in Sacramento, California, explained the origins of the holiday. Having already studied the Mahabharata for a few weeks, the children knew about the bond between Krishna and Draupadi. The teacher said: “Do you know why Lord Krishna took care of Draupadi when the bad Kauravas tried to take away all her dignity by pulling off her sari?” The children came up with all sorts of answers, saying: “God is always there to protect you,” and “God always stops bad people,” but none of them had the specific answer that she was seeking. After listening to their thoughts for a few minutes, she told them how “Draupadi cared for Krishna when he was bleeding by taking a piece of her sari and wrapping it around his wrist like a band-aid that keeps a wound protected and clean. Lord Krishna never forgot her kindness and swore that he would protect her and keep her pure like a brother protects a sister.” Of course, there are many other stories associated with the rakhi (a string bracelet that represents a brother’s obligation to protect his sister) and why sisters must tie a bracelet on their brother’s wrist but she said this was the most important one because “it teaches us how we have to protect our beautiful Hinduism.”

She then gave the children a rakhi challenge. Just as sisters should tie a rakhi [on their brother’s wrists and wear them until they fall off, she said: “you should wear your Indian clothing to school every day, as long as rakhis are on your brother’s or father’s wrists.” She told
them to ask their regular school teachers to allow them to share stories about their “Hindu heritage and our traditions.” “Teachers always like this, don’t worry,” she said. The reason Lord Krishna protected Draupadi, she said, “by making her sari never-end, was so that she would never be ashamed.” So too, they should “never be ashamed of who” they were. They should remember, she instructed, that, like the sari, bhakti has no end and by wearing Indian clothing and bringing Indian sweets to classmates, they were “protecting” their “heritage, like a brother protects his sister, and like Krishna protected Draupadi.” But also, she said, “when you wear Indian clothing, you are protected because it keeps you pure and you can’t forget who you are.” Then she had all the students willing to take her challenge sign-up on a piece of paper— incidentally, all twelve students signed it.

While this teacher’s association with the donning of Indian clothing as the means by which children could display their pride and protect their heritage is one of the most overt expressions I have encountered, this pedagogic philosophy is frequently reinforced by parents, pandits and bala vihars in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In Hindu educational classes, there is an expectation that it is preferable for children to wear Indian clothes when they attend. Mothers often speak, with pride, about daughters and sons who like to wear Indian clothing. Parental approval for clothing choices, and culinary likes and dislikes often goes hand-in-hand with pride over high marks in school or extra-curricular awards.

A similar pedagogic approach was employed in May 2004, in the basement of a relatively new Danville track home at an informal retreat called, “Day to Day Dharma” for Hindu children ages 6-10. The retreat was organized by a number of families who occasionally attend the Livermore temple. The main activity revolved around the use of Barbie and Ken dolls. The teacher, Meena, handmade Indian outfits for each of the dolls and had the children do an exercise
in which they were asked to play with the dolls and change their clothing (from Western to Indian), and their behavior, depending upon the different contexts in which they were placed.

In order to execute this lesson she had turned six different Barbie houses into spaces in which she thought the children might find themselves: a mandir—complete with a gopurum (the towers typical in South Indian temple architecture), murtis, and plastic shoes lined-up outside the door; an American house; a school classroom; a sports field/swimming pool; an Indian store (on which she had fastened a sign that read, “India Sweets and Spices”); a flat in India (she used a Barbie townhouse that even had an elevator to do this one and it was complete with a set of grandparents, servants, other family members, and a puja alcove). The upshot of this was that she had each child explain, as they played, how they should behave in different circumstances. She asked them to go through the day pretending they were different people in their family. She reminded them that the mothers should do morning arati and how they should “do their prayers.” She also spent time teaching them the proper ways to greet elders, and encouraged the children to “show respect” to their parents by touching their feet every morning, upon waking, and every evening, upon going to bed. To illustrate this, she told them that “even Lord Rama, who knew everything and had total power to do anything he wanted, did what his father asked and went into the forest for fourteen years…Just because it was his father and for no other reason.” She then held up a picture-book Ramayana and pointed at the image in which, as she put it, “even the Lord touched his father’s feet to show his total respect and love.” During the activity, the girls were significantly more engaged than the boys, and a number of the boys had their Ken dolls get

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15 It is a source of tremendous sadness that this was before I had a mobile phone with a camera, and, unfortunately, I only had an audio-recording device with me that day, and so I have no pictures of the converted Barbie-houses. She told me that she made them over the course of five weeks.
Meena “tsk-tsked,” but saw this as an opportunity to talk about respect and proper behavior, and how it was especially important for the boys to remember this.

Meena directed most of her instruction to the girls, especially when she talked about the importance of dressing appropriately. She asked the girls to go through the western clothing to get rid of things that “no self-respecting Indian girl should wear…. Because in India, this dressing-problem is not a problem.” The pile of rejected clothes included two mini-skirts, a bikini, a crop-top, short-shorts, a spaghetti-strap tank-top, and a strapless dress. As each item was evaluated for its “modesty-factor,” as she called it, she spoke to the girls about how their bodies were made by God, and they needed to remember that they are “on-loan from God, so they need to stay pure.” Career Barbie’s work clothes—a suit, a dress with sleeves, pants and a collared blouse—were all deemed “appropriate” for school, college, or work. As an aside, to the boys, she told them that, “as they grew up, they should remember that girls and women are Shakti, each one is a Devi (goddess) and you have to treat her with respect, and not doing dating and that other stuff.” The desire to inculcate moral values within the children was inextricably linked to relatively rigid conceptions of gender, and the structured play was an extremely effective disciplinary practice. During the session, the girls seemed to accept and understand the rules Meena was establishing. A number of them said that their favorite part was sorting of clothes into the “good” piles and “bad” piles, and they liked the “Indian clothes better,” because they were “pretty,” and “fancy.” The session concluded with a short puja and a drawing, in which five winners would be chosen and allowed to take home the converted Barbie houses; Meena kept one for her daughter. The children were asked to write their names on pieces of paper, which only the girls chose to do. Meena’s last word of advice to the parents was that they should take each of the children to buy a new Indian suit, so they could “practice the dharma of modesty and
respect in their everyday lives.” Although the session devoted more time to “free” play than most classes or camps I have observed, through this, Meena constructed an environment in which “serious games,” as Sherry Ortner calls them in reference to social life, were practice in and through games themselves. About the “making and unmaking of gender,” Ortner writes, we need to see how games function to produce

inclusions and exclusions, multiple positions, complex rules, forms of bodily activity, structures of feeling and desire, and stakes of winning and losing….It involves as well the question of how gender games themselves collide with, encompass, or are bent to the service of, other games, for gender is never, as they say, the only game in town.16

In Meena’s dollhouses, a number of games were in play, along with gender, including those involving Hindu morality and theology, as well as rules regarding diasporic Indian comportment, and capital consumption. Although at a number of points Meena took on a didactic tone, most of the four hours involved more quiet and subtle forms of instruction, moving a doll’s hand, or reminding a child to take off the doll’s shoes. Throughout the play, Meena would nod her head in affirmation or quietly utter an approving “good,” or stroke a back or a shoulder when a child was “doing the right thing.” Ortner argues that the “idea of the serious game signals a range of points every schoolchild knows: that games are always in some sense contests, even if only with the self; that games always entail including some people and excluding others; that in most kinds of games, some people get to be (or are forced to be) “It” and others not; and so forth.”17 At the same time, Ortner reminds that the game isn’t always fixed, and hegemony is never complete. In just that vein, one of the younger girls—who had seemed a model of Meena’s virtue, answering


17 Ibid, p. 20.
every question and following all the rules with her doll—surreptitiously slipped two outfits from the “bad” pile into her pocket before Meena threw them all in the trash.

(7) Materiality Made Sacred

While it is not unusual to think of clothing as something superficial, it is important to acknowledge that in the realm of Hindu rituals such an assertion does not inherently have salience. Dressing murtis is a central part of ritual life in Hindu temples and in many home shrines as well. For example, in her book, *Fabrics of Indianness: The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities*, Sinah Theres Kolß, devotes an entire chapter to the practice in modernity. And in *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India’s Art*, Vidhya Deheja emphasizes that the act of dressing images is a central feature of premodern Indian art, as well as ancient temple ritual practice. Kolß argues that dressing the deities is a “part of conspicuous consumption, which influences the status of the specific temple as well as its community through the display of wealth and cultural capital.”18 Yet, the act of dressing is also a sign of Hindu authenticity among this New York Guyanese community. Since deities are the very embodiment of Hinduness, they must wear the most authentic clothing, which is given as a ritual offering.19 Donating clothing for the murtis also provides community members with an opportunity to contribute something that is understood as a true gift to the Gods, something that can only be received by them. Kolß also quotes a number of pandits who speak of how bringing back, or purchasing clothing and ritual items for the murtis directly from India is superior to buying them in a regular shop


19 Ibid.
because by virtue of their origin they are “already sanctified.”

Furthermore, the beautification of the murtis is understood not only to facilitate worship, directing the devotees focus and gaze to the deity, but, Kolß argues, it provides access to blessing, spiritual, and social power through modes of imitation: “In this sense, to wear Indian Wear is conceptualized as affecting the (human) wearer for he or she bears resemblance to the deity.”

In that regard, the process of beautification of murtis, also develops a set of standards for human beauty, affecting their “own self-perception.”

Is it possible, then, that making and purchasing clothes for murtis takes on a new kind of significance in diaspora because to wear these clothes—identified with authenticity, devotion, and God/s—is special precisely because it isn’t culturally normative?

I have observed very similar practices around the dressing of murtis at a number of temples where I have conducted fieldwork. Especially in the less wealthy temples, it is quite common for women I speak with to talk about the pride they take in making the clothing and dressing the murtis. Jigna stated that the “time that I am given to be alone with God is such a gift. I am here in the mandir and I feel like it is truly karma yoga, it is my greatest seva.... I can do it with so much love…. It is both like god is my child, who I can care for like nobody else, and a queen or king, and I am the lucky servant.” She also spoke of how the act of giving to God is a model for our lives, in which we should give generously without holding back, “if we can begin with material things, Swamiji always said, it will be easier to do it spiritually. It is a practice for relating to [the] ones we love....[it’s] easier to start with the Lord.”

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21 Ibid, pp. 182-4.

22 Ibid.
In their book, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John and Jean Comaroff point out the challenge that we all face when examining trends and discourses in how culture is commercialized. They write:

While it is ever more blatantly merchandised across the world, the conceit persists that cultural identity is inalienable; that insofar as it inheres in human essence, it defies commodification. Scholars have been strangely slow to dispel this fantasy. Not only have they shied away from exploring the economic dimensions of identity formation (Halter 2000:12). They have tended to take for granted that culture is the bona fide expression of collective geist.23

They point out that while the commodification of culture has been the subject of numerous studies, implicit in the term itself is the idea that to commodify is to lessen or, in the words of Adorno, to take a culture’s “unique character” and reduce it to “interchangeable sameness.”24 This, they say, is a reflection of the fearful modern refrain that “difference is vanishing,” or being, to use the words of Romila Thapar, “syndicated.”25 This trend is easy to identify in our own commentaries if we reflect on our use of the term “commodified” to denote a pejorative. From another perspective, we can see how this notion of culture as both innate, on the one hand, and commodifiable and constructable, on the other, is used by Hindu communities in America to pedagogic ends.

With this in mind, how can, or even should we, try to reorient our understanding of cultural commodification to be a part of cultural expression and perpetuation, rather than simply


24 Ibid.

its reduction, or materialistic cheapening? While at the same time, how can we scrutinize and try to understand how such commodification of culture results in stereotyping that has racial, religious, gendered, caste, class and other implications? Must we not see understand these practices of consumption as part of a larger system in which capital is moved across the globe in ways that benefit some radically more than others?

Developing a taste for Indian food and things is understood by parents, pundits, and community leaders as a useful pedagogy by which to transform “ABCD” (American-Born-Confused-Desi) children into “good Indians and devout Hindus.” Building upon notions of culture as material signs, Hindu Americans have capitalized on the commercial, making the role and language of the marketplace undeniably important in the development American Hindu life and cultivation of Hindu identity. In this way, the commodification of Hinduism and India, when done by the “right people” for the “right purposes,” in the “right context,” is seen not simply as acceptable but as something to be embraced, and understood as potentially sacred. There is much more to be explored about the roles of gender, memory, nostalgia, the prejudicial dynamics at work in these social and commercial contexts. The realms of the specifically religious and the consumer are working in tandem, and not only on a subconscious level, to build up specific communal associations and identities.

If Coke promises world peace and the U.S. Army offers personal fulfillment, what then do Indian goods and gastronomy offer to South Asian Americans? In association with other Hindu-making enterprises, the acquisition of material possessions and the consumption of “authentic” cuisine offer a way to perform difference and identity in a milieu in which such acquisitions and edibles are not commonplace or the norm. While these types of associations with food and clothing, for example, are certainly at play in significant ways within South Asia,
it is precisely because of their existence in the midst of another, foreign/diaspora, culture that these procurements function to signify belonging and identification with a specific brand of ethnicity, religion and culture. And it is because of their potential to brand that they gain significant value in the diasporic context, becoming not simply things but tools in the promotion of a theology of desirable desires, and a philosophy of Hindu and Indianness.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that “the much-vaunted feature of modern consumption—namely, the search for novelty—is only a symptom of a deeper discipline of consumption in which desire is organized around the aesthetic of ephemerality.” This aesthetic of ephemerality transforms modern relationships to the body that, Appadurai suggests, produces “practices that involve a radically new relationship among wanting, remembering, being and buying.”26 While his assertion is compelling, what are we to do with the fact that, in many ways, the desires of Hindu diasporic communities are organized around an aesthetic, not principally of ephemerality, but rather continuity, even eternality? Through acts of consumption, modern Hindus are negotiating not only their relationship to places and things but also to conceptions of time, people, and community.

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26 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 84.
Since the mid-late 1990s, the voices of the self-appointed defenders of Dharma have become increasingly louder. This is especially the case with respect to questions about the representations of Hinduism in public and educational spheres, where contestations over content have been the most intense. Around these issues, in particular, there has been increasing tension between certain viewpoints expressed by North American Hindu advocacy groups and the approaches of and conclusions drawn by the academic community that studies Hinduism. At times, it seems that a gulf has emerged between communities and perspectives. The primary issues at stake involve who possesses the right to represent Hinduism and Hinduism’s history, and what such representations should look like. These debates are ultimately contestations about the desirability and stakes of various narratives—the details, contours, depictions, contexts, criteria, definitions, and images of Hindus, Hinduism, India, and Indian history.

In the fall of 2008, I was involved in organizing a panel called “Representing and Misrepresenting Hinduism in North America” for the American Academy of Religion Conference (AAR). After I posted an announcement about the panel on RISA-L (the listserv for the Religion in South Asia section of the AAR), I received a string of anonymous emails, which became increasingly personal and harassing as the conference neared. The emails suggested that the panel, and the composition of it—including scholars presumed to have non-Hindu backgrounds—was itself an act of misrepresentation. All of this was said with no real knowledge

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1 A version of this chapter was published in Zavos 2012.

2 The panel was sponsored by the North American Hinduism Consultation of the AAR and was held in Chicago, IL and included papers by Tanisha Ramachandran, Leena Taneja, Richard Mann and myself. Leslie Orr presided.
of the panel’s content, the topic of my paper, or the actual backgrounds of the panelists. The irony that the critics sought a type of authenticity and truth from the panel when their own criticism was based on a lack of truthful information was not lost on those of us involved.

Although the emails produced in me more anxiety about giving a paper than I had thought possible, I tried to look on the bright side of getting hate mail; how often does fieldwork come right to your door, let alone right into your very own computer? No need to make appointments, no driving and getting lost on the way to new locales, no recording or transcription required. While I cannot go so far as to thank these people (whoever they are) for providing material to augment my research, I will admit to having learned something significant from the experience.

As I read the emails, I noticed something. It is the same thing that I have seen in much less aggressive attacks on scholars of Hinduism, and those who produce materials that involve Hinduism more generally, be it within higher or secondary educational settings or more public and consumer ones. I am hesitant, of course, to make any connection between cowardly bullies who sent untraceable emails attacking my right to speak and made assumptions about my ethnic and religious background, and those who have leveled their criticism of scholars, educational materials or depictions within public culture in much more civil and respectful ways. However, I want to suggest that the extreme perspectives that arrived in my inbox are found as shadows in the outrages over scholarship and debates over representation that have come from more reasonable critics. Such protestations are a notable and prevalent articulation of sentiments found among North American Hindus. Although such sentiments may not be representative, they are powerful and they shape communal and public discourse in important and abiding ways.
My sense of the connections between different types of complaint—be it in my inbox or in the public square—was further supported by the presence, at the conference session, of a man who called himself a journalist. All things considered, those of us who had worked on the panel were relieved that he was the only person of his type in attendance. The AAR organizers had, in fact, ordered security for the session because of things that had erupted in previous years over similar issues about the representation of Hinduism. This man did not spout the rhetoric of the emails, but he did come with an agenda that was not all together distinct from that articulated in them. He asked a few aggressive questions, but what was most illuminating was that he handed out free copies of Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America to anyone who would take it. The book’s primary agenda is emblematic of a larger trend in contemporary Hinduism, both in the diaspora and in India, which involves asking and trying to regulate who and what represents Hinduism and how such representations are perceived by non-Hindus and Hindus alike.

(1) THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Endeavors such as the publication and distribution of Invading the Sacred emerge from within larger milieu in which we have become, since the late 1960s, increasingly aware of the power of stereotypes and the politics of representation. In Representation, Stuart Hall reflects on Said’s assertion that conceptions of the ‘Oriental’ were developed out of “a detailed logic

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3 Conference organizers were especially concerned because of incidents that were well-known in the religious studies community; and people feared anything like the vitriol which Professor Wendy Doniger faced when attacked by critics, even having an egg thrown at her in London in 2003, when she spoke in an academic setting about the sexual dimensions in the Ramayana. Critics of Doniger only became louder after her publication of The Hindus: An Alternative History, in 2009, a topic I will return to later in this chapter.

governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections.”\(^5\) He suggests that there are not only “strategies and practices” at work in racialized, “otherizing” representations, but also in the contestations of these representations. Counter-representations often involve taking the meanings embedded in a specific representation, “reappropriating” them, and turning them into new ‘positive’ meanings and representations through practices of “trans-coding.”\(^6\) Some trans-coding strategies, according to Hall, include: reversing stereotypes; the substitution of ‘positive’ images for ‘negative’ ones; and the contestation and complication of these representations from within.\(^7\) Each of these strategies can be seen in contemporary Hindu responses to both scholarly and popular representations.

In reversing what are perceived of as prevalent stereotypes—that Hindus are idol-worshippers, Hindu widows all commit sati, Hindu women are oppressed, India is a country of slums and poverty beset primarily by the caste system, and that all Hindus are passive, having been dominated by waves of foreigners throughout history—many Hindu advocacy groups have sought to promote an alternative, although often equally singular and stereotypical image: Hindus really believe in one God, with many manifestations; Hindu women are more valorized, powerful and liberated than their Western counterparts, goddess worship and Indira Gandhi’s role as Prime Minister are cited as choice examples; Indian companies regularly make it to the Fortune 500 list\(^8\) and Hindus are among the most successful entrepreneurs, as evidenced by the

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\(^{7}\) Ibid, pp. 270-5.

fact that Mukesh Ambani, Dilip Shanghivi, Lakshmi Mittal, Azim Premji are among the wealthiest people the world; Hindu history is full of great warriors and rulers, and the world is indebted to India for spiritual, philosophical, scientific and mathematical wisdom. These representational reversals are employed by Hindu groups seeking to substitute ‘positive’ images for ‘negative’ ones. In such cases, pride is a primary goal and, in order to foster it, not only are the binaries between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ often maintained, but an idealized and fetishized image is put forth. With respect to the idea that a reversal of stereotypes can emerge through the shifting of representations from within, one of the most striking examples emerges in the case of caste rhetoric. Within the public discourse of Hindu American organizations—whether in temples, educational contexts, or statements by advocacy and political action groups—caste is “reappropriated,” referenced as something that is truly a pure and unproblematic ideal: everyone is equal; it’s simply that different people have different roles to play. This ideal was corrupted over time, particularly by foreigners like the British. Apologetics of this type, which I discussed briefly in Chapter III, feed into an extremely complex political rhetoric linked to forms of structural domination and discrimination within India and beyond, yet when expressed in the context of diaspora there is also an added dimension. In the United States, reversing prevailing attitudes about caste, through reappropriation, is about pre-emptively educating and/or defensively correcting negative perceptions of Hinduism and Hindus by both non-Hindus and Hindus. In the face of inquiry and criticism about caste, new rhetorics seek to redeem Vedic and brahmanical texts and traditions and Hindu history more generally.

Hall suggests that in counter-representations, we may also find examples of strategies that place themselves within the ‘complexities and ambivalences of representation,’ playing and struggling with these representations to accept “the shifting, unstable character of meaning’ and representation.” These strategies have been at play not only among Hindu groups but also among academics, who have begun to look at their own image and the impact of their scholarly productions more closely.

(2) DISCOURSE IN CONTEXT

In the mid-1990s, scholarship on South Asia in the fields of religion, history, and anthropology became progressively focused on tracing genealogies, an endeavor deeply linked to work in post-colonial studies and post-structuralism. In this regard, studies of Hinduism took on a new emphasis in which categories long taken for granted were scrutinized and called into question and in which Hinduism itself was historicized and deemed, by many, a 19th-century innovation. In a process of self-reflection and historical inquiry, scholars have been increasingly concerned with how Hinduism has been presented and misrepresented over time. Furthermore, the scholarly community has been forced to consider the cultural, civic and political implications of their representations. A critical turning point for scholars of South Asian religion was the communal violence that erupted in India in the mid–1980s, and then again in the early 1990s. The violence has continued and the community of scholars who study the religions of India has had no choice but to pay greater attention to ethical considerations. Wherein older methods of religious studies sought a “non-judgmental” approach to religious belief and experience, such attempts at scholarly distance are today not simply seen as passé or unrealistic but they are, quite frankly, dangerous. We know all too well that what we assert about the history of a place or

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religious practice can impact what is taught in the classroom, how land rights are adjudicated in a courtroom, or how political and civil rights are interpreted by governments. A challenge that has emerged from our focus on historical constructions and power-relations is that the boundaries that once upheld a pretense of scholarly objectivity and protection are now less defined and desirable. Boundary-breaking, as well, is the fact that those of us with South Asian heritage have increasingly emerged as Western academic scholars of South Asian religion—the perceived distinction between scholar and subject, West and East, has been disrupted. And as such a sense of perceived alliances has also been challenged.

At the same time—be it coincidence or part of the cause, or most likely some of both—a plethora of Hindu organizations, websites, and publications were created for the express purpose of representing Hinduism and India both to Hindus themselves and to the world at large. These umbrella organizations can increasingly be found throughout the globe and in India as well. John Zavos’ work on the negotiation of public space by Hindu organizations in Britain and Prema Kurien’s work on American organizations both point to the power of multiculturalism in shaping these debates. Zavos suggests that multiculturalism should be understood metaphorically “as a kind of ‘language-family’ through which religious identities have been presented meaningfully in a range of public contexts.”10 He does this, in part, to capture the “connected plurality” that exists within the wide range of multiculturalisms, which he describes, drawing on Stuart Hall, as “conservative, liberal, pluralist, commercial, corporate,” etc. Each of these multiculturalisms, Zavos notes, mediates diversity in distinctive ways. Initially, the idea of the multicultural that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s sought an approach and philosophy whereby cultural groups

could be “integrated into a mainstream public sphere dominated by the principle of universal individual citizenship” in ways that still allowed for “particularistic cultural practices.”\textsuperscript{11} This concept of multiculturalism became, according to Barnor Hesse, “increasingly unsettled from the late 1980s onwards,” emerging as a “contested frame of reference” in a culture that was “uncertain about (its) national and ethnic futures.”\textsuperscript{12} The idea of multiculturalism continued to develop in a host of ways, including the emergence of the “stylized milieu in which racism and cultural barriers are transcended,” where cultural difference can be a commodity, a set of distinctive neighborhoods, and the celebration of culture through the “ubiquitous mela,” which Gargi Bhattacharyya calls “heritage multiculturalism.”\textsuperscript{13} Another development in multiculturalism that Zavos traces is the way in which multiculturalism has increasingly been deployed by various groups in political and public contexts, as a means by which to compete and vie for resources and recognition. One of the important things that emerged as a by-product of multicultural discourse has been the popularization, politicalization, and institutionalization of the idea that there are such things as discrete, bounded cultures and communities that can be “represented” to begin with. As such, multiculturalism can implicitly and explicitly involve contests over whose culture, or in this case version of Hinduism will prevail as the representative.


Although the multiculturalisms advocated by Hindu umbrella organizations speak in different registers depending on whether they are in Britain or the U.S., especially because different types of governmental and non-governmental organizations have emerged in each country as a growth of multiculturalism, there is still more in common between them than not. In the case of political advocacy, in the 1990s, in particular, we began to see religion used in new ways as a tool in the “assertion of minority rights,” as a way to control how “the community” will be represented, and by whom. It is this last iteration of the language of multiculturalism that has been the lingua franca of North American and transnational Hindu advocacy groups.

(3) DISCIPLINING THE VOICE(S) OF HINDUISM

Of great concern to the founders of these Hindu umbrella and advocacy organizations is the idea that Indians and Hindus should have the opportunity to speak for themselves, to present their own stories, and to give voice to their own texts and histories. Such organizations have been focused on two main goals: firstly, that of disseminating what they deem ‘authentic,’ historical, and glorious Hinduism to those who have long misunderstood the complexity, richness and ‘truth’ of its teachings; and secondly, defending Hinduism from a Western culture that has exoticized and commodified its sacred symbols and customs. Furthermore, Hindu groups, in places like North America, the U.K., and Australia, have sought a more prominent voice in civic, political, academic and cultural life, wishing to shape the perceptions of Hindus and Indians by both those within and outside of the community.

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14 This idea has been taken new heights (or lows, rather) with Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. (2014), and the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act—which employs ideas about how religious rights should be granted to a corporation (adhering to a religion), in the same way, that they would be granted to an individual, who is part of a distinctive religious culture.
It is crucial to note that the politics and perspectives of individuals in these newly formed Hindu organizations are actually quite varied, as are the politics and perspectives of those in the academy. It has become somewhat common practice, among many who study the Hindu diaspora, to paint all ‘Hindu umbrella’ organizations with the same brush, representing all of them as Hindu nationalist groups of the Sangh Parivar. I am sensitive to such readings because I believe it is this same type of sweeping generalization that has been used to attack scholars of Hinduism, as though all scholarship that is non-Indian in origin is suspect, and as if anything remotely critical of Hindu narratives is an offense. In reality, it is only a nuanced look at these organizations, their motivations and their impact that will allow us to do the scholarly work to which we aspire. It is not uncommon for us to look at the political implications of specific organizational narratives without considering the affect and desire that are being tapped, cultivated, and mobilized by such articulations. And often we ignore the motivations driving individuals who may only be tangentially connected to these organizations, but who, at the same time, make the success and strength of such organizations possible.

Another dimension of this is that some groups wish to assert not simply that Hindus have a voice, but that Hindus are the only people who can have a voice. This, naturally, results in an essentialist enterprise. The problem is that it is not simply origin or birth that gives someone the right to speak, but their adherence to a particular narrative of Hindu history. There are myriad ways in which groups engage in “gate-keeping,” so as to discipline Hindus and non-Hindus alike who present narratives that diverge from the “desirable.” For example, Sadhana, a Coalition of Progressive Hindus, has faced critique, and intimidation through comments on their blog, and the founders have been (and continue to be) personally maligned and sent critical emails by those who have appointed themselves Dharma’s defenders seeking to regulate not only representations
of Hinduism by non-Hindus, but also representations of Hinduism by Hindus themselves. In an effort to limit any dissent among Hindus, critics have questioned the right of particular groups and individuals, who have aligned with positions that are deemed unfavorable, to “represent them.” The fact that progressive Hindus or Hindu organizations affiliate with groups that gatekeepers have deemed unacceptable has been said to “put a black mark on [their] ‘charitra’ [which these individuals translate as ‘character’ or ‘conduct’].” The internet is a particularly active place for this type of intra-communal policing; its accessibility, the potential for anonymity (although many of these individuals and groups actually seek recognition), and the immediacy of the medium make it possible for criticisms to be shared widely and swiftly to large audiences.

However, the internet is not the only place such sentiments are expressed. In 2015, a group convened in Fremont, CA to discuss the fact that the media were misrepresenting Hindus and Hinduism, and that Bay Area liberal Indians were “stirring up anti-Hindu feelings” by talking about the lynching in Dadri of Muhammad Aklaq. He was brutally murdered in 2015 by a mob of Hindus who had purportedly heard rumors that he had stolen and slaughtered a cow. Aklaq’s killing is part of an ongoing spate of Hindu violence, which began in 2010, targeting Muslims and Dalits under the banner of the gau raksha, cow-protectors. One of the attendees at the Fremont gathering listed off a bunch of names: “Listen to this,” he said, “Chatterjee, Banerjee, Gupta, Radhakrishnan, Srinivas, Viswanath, Mukherjee…all these people have been

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15 For fear of personal reprisals, I have intentionally left out the names of the specific organizations and individuals in this work, as the goal is not to create a battle over words, but to document sentiments, and the power dynamics involved in such utterances.

16 Between 2010 and 2017, there sixty-three cases of violence have been attributed to cow protection. Twenty-eight people have been killed, and twenty-four of them have been Muslim. “24 Out of the 28 People Killed in the Name of Cow Protection Since 2010 have been Muslims,” India Times, June 28, 2017. https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/24-out-of-the-28-people-killed-in-the-name-of-cow-protection-since-2010-were-muslims-324756.html.
Hindu blaming.” According to the man who read the names, it was significant that these were Desis who had held a small vigil to mourn the ongoing communal violence and the disconcerting rise of Hindu nationalism in India. The man continued, “these are good Hindu names, but look at them—converted, Muslim-lovers…they’ve totally given up their association.” In this circumstance, the consensus in the room seemed to be that to speak out against acts committed by Hindus was de facto to renounce your right to claim Hinduness, should claiming it be something you wished to do. This type of response—delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion—is a common practice among Hindu advocacy and nationalist groups in their efforts to combat perceived attacks on Hindus/Hinduism.

Public critique and ridicule emerge as another form of response, as can be seen in a piece written by Vishal Agarwal in 2014 on the website Hindu Review: The Hindu Perspective. In “Hating Hindus as a Fun Activity,” Agarwal responds to the release of Introducing Hinduism, a book by UCLA Professor Vinay Lal.\(^\text{17}\) Not only does he engage in personal attacks on Lal, calling him “an apologist for the Taliban and Al Qaeda” and “silent on the ethnic cleansing of 200,000 Hindus in Kashmir,” but he is particularly concerned with the way Lal characterizes caste, dowry, beef-eating, the sacredness of the cow, and Hindu violence against Dalits and Muslims. Furthermore, Agarwal critiques Lal’s assertion that worship of Devi (the Goddess) does not inherently “translate into respect for women in Hindu society.”\(^\text{18}\) In order to discredit Lal’s work, in a fashion typical of such critics, Agarwal attacks his character and authority, depicting him almost as a traitor. When those of Hindu and/or Indian heritage voice unpopular


\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
opinions, it is not uncommon for Dharma’s defenders to summarily erase the authenticity of their ethnic or religious background. Defined by the narratives to which they subscribe, people can be easily stripped of their authority and right to speak for/as Hindus or about Hinduism.\textsuperscript{19} Agarwal argues that “Indian Marxist historians like Romila Thapar have perfected the art of ‘Hating Hindus in an Academic Manner’…[but] Lal’s book breaks new ground,” with cartoons and the like it makes “Hatemongering against Hindus… a Fun Activity.”\textsuperscript{20} In referring to Thapar as a “Marxist,” Agarwal reproduces a common practice in the ‘art of discrediting’ viewpoints or scholarship—calling someone a “Communist,” “Leftist,” and/or “Secularist” is intended as a type of identity-replacement, such voices are not possibly “Hindu,” or “Indian,” but something else altogether. Overt critiques of Hindu or South Asian organizations and individuals, including scholars who diverge from the acceptable narrative, are not the only way in which Dharma’s defenders control the voices of Hindus and in Hinduism.

The complexities of who has the right to speak are further complicated by questions of class, origin, caste, education, as well as gender, sexuality, etc. This type of control can be subtle, often embedded in historic cultural and structural inequities, and imbricated in a host of communal and personal perceptions. For example, in my work at Fijian and Indo-Caribbean temples, I regularly hear temple-goers, even teachers of the bala vihar classes, engage in self-deprecation. One day, when I asked Mina from a temple in San Bruno, CA to tell me about the story she had related to her class about Sita and Rama, she told me,

You know, I don’t know so much. I have not even been to India. Probably you should ask one of the pandits, he is from India and he knows the story better. This is only the story

\textsuperscript{19} The Wilson Quarterly volume cited in the first chapter documents elements of this extremely well and did so as these voices first began to surface in earnest in the United States. Now, almost twenty years later, those voices are only stronger and more organized and, with the internet, their platform is substantially larger than it ever was.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
my mother told me in Fiji, but she had never been to India either. Probably I got it all wrong.

Even when I tried to convince her that I wanted to hear her story, that I wasn’t interested in right or wrong, she wouldn’t tell me her version, and she insisted that I go with her to the pandit instead so that he could relate the moral of the story to us. I note this because the pandit himself told Mina that she could and should tell me the story, but to Mina her version seemed inauthentic, derivative, and inferior because it didn’t come from India. This is not to say that members of the Fijian community have no pride or sense of worth, but that their own sense of who is truly a ‘Hindu’ is wrapped up in ideas about the relationship between India and authenticity, which can be easily translated into Hindu nationalist positions. Of course, gender and official versus unofficial authority (layperson vs. pandit) were also at play in this moment, but it is the way in which knowledge is regulated through self-disciplinary practices among the Hindu Caribbean and Fijian community that I find most interesting. There is no Indo-Caribbean or Fijian community in which I have spent any significant amount of time where I have not encountered an implicit understanding about the hierarchy of knowledge with its pinnacle residing in India, and within those who are most closely associated with it.

The ways in which the voices of Hindus and Hinduism are disciplined in the diaspora involve forms of public opprobrium and shaming (often on the internet or in print), informal pronouncements and practices of communal excommunication, types of learned and internalized deference to particular forms of knowledge, and the valuation and instantiation of certain types of power as opposed to others.21

21 Power is often ceded in these contexts to those Hindus who are male, and born and raised in India. This also includes pandits, swamis, or community members who have spent significant time in India or studied with “real Indians.” I have, on numerous occasions, seen well-respected Guyanese pandits and swamis—in the middle of teaching or answering a question—defer their authority to someone they have never met before, and whose
It can be tempting to focus on the most extreme types of disciplinary practices and articulations of Dharmic defense—hateful emails, communalist protestations, or the rhetoric that suggests that all Hindu religious endeavors are inherently chauvinistic, oppressive, and anti-Muslim. Those who study the Hindu right-wing are often quick to argue that all the Hindu advocacy groups involved in debates over the history of India taught in public school classrooms, or those who signed petitions complaining that the Public Broadcasting Series “Story of India” had “missed the mark” because of its portrayal of the Aryan Migration Theory, subscribe to the same unified Hindutva ideology and agendas. It is clear that much of this discourse supports Hindu right wing agendas and how it does so needs to be carefully documented and interrogated. It is also clear that many of the umbrella organizations, especially those with global and transnational networks, support and promote Hindutva agendas in India and the diaspora. However, we must also ask, what else, besides a Hindutva agenda, is at stake when Hinduism is represented, marketed and/or historicized for various publics? For example, when Reza Azlan’s series “Believer,” which aired in March of 2017, depicted the Indian Aghori sect engaging in cannibalistic practices, many Hindus were enraged that the show had engaged in background they know almost nothing about, simply because they are “from India.” Caste is also often an unspoken marker of distinction within Indo-Caribbean and Fijian communities.

22 When we look at the founding of Hindu advocacy and anti-defamation organizations in North America, we need to see not only the very important role played by the political forces in India and the communal strife that continues to swell therein, but we also need to contextualize these developments within American history. Many of these organizations emerged after 9/11, in partial response to their sense that Hindus were under attack and that Hinduism was being misunderstood and conflated with Islam. A number of scholars have noted that the voice of certain factions of the Hindu American community grew stronger, more chauvinistic, anti-Muslim, and aggressive in the wake of September 11. Most have attributed this to the growth in power of Hindu right-wing groups throughout the world at this same moment, but I believe it was also about fears born in America as well. In the first four months after 9/11, according to Human Rights Watch, hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs and those perceived to be Muslim or Arab rose by 1700%. In the four months of 2001 that followed the airplane bombings, two of the three murders that were ruled to be directly related to the anti-Muslim, anti-foreign sentiment of 9/11, were of South Asians, a Hindu and a Sikh who were mistaken for being Muslims. I raise this example because I believe that as anti-Muslim sentiment in America rose, Hindus in America were moved, in part, by fear to present their own images of Hinduism to the public and to draw distinctions between Hinduism and Islam.
sensationalist representations of Indian religion, capitalizing on stereotypes and exoticizing discourse. The desire to curate a sanitized and Sanskritized version of Hinduism for audiences in both India and abroad is a decidedly nationalist project with significant political implications for India. However, what do we make of those people in the diaspora who find such depictions offensive for reasons other than Hindu nationalist political allegiances? Similar types of debates have erupted over questions about the appropriation and/or “ownership of yoga,” and they have ensued over the representation and commodification of Hindus and Hinduism in film, television, and the marketplace. In of these cases, it seems critical to ask what desires, fears, beliefs, investments, and emotions are at play for the publics who participate in, and engage with these debates or in advocacy efforts? Additionally, why do relational and contextual readings of Hindu texts and practice by scholars, in particular, elicit a feeling among many that Dharma is under attack?

(4) Contesting Histories

As has been well established, writing history is one among many discursive strategies that are employed in identity construction and nation building. It is used to establish authority and support truth claims. We are more than willing to see how these strategies function among groups such as the Hindu right, to establish and authenticate communities, and I think it behooves us to look, as well, at how the writing of history in the academy is itself a discursive formation from which new discourses and even new identities and communities, unintentionally or intentionally, are constructed.

23 The US-India Political Action Committee, for example, released a statement that linked the representation to hate-crimes: “With reports of hate-fueled attacks against people of Indian origin from across the US,” by characterizing Hindus as cannibalistic is, implicitly, dangerous. Representative Tulsi Gabbard, tweeted that “CNN didn’t just throw a harsh light on a sect of wandering ascetics to create shocking visuals—as if touring a zoo—but repeated false stereotypes about caste, karma, and reincarnation that Hindus have been combatting tirelessly.”
 Those who write history possess the power to name experiences and to control representations. For this reason, political struggles often ensue when historical narratives are revised. Both the Indian National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and California Textbook Controversies remind us of the significance of historical discourse and the grave political consequences that can emerge when distinctions between church and state, parochial/private and secular/public education are blurred. So too such controversies serve as a reminder that historical narratives can distort how communities, nations, and religious traditions are seen both by themselves and others. Memory making and history writing are especially powerful tools within identity politics. Conjuring collective memories through rituals and rhetoric is a relatively common means by which religious communities reconstitute themselves anew in different times and places. Collective memories that reference sacred narratives and mythological time when compared with those that reference documentable and relatively recent historical events can inspire different types of debates. The scholarly community has, for a long time, been aware of the power inherent in representations of history. Relatively new, however, is the awareness of this power among Hindu groups living outside of India. To illustrate this, I will turn briefly to consider recent rhetoric involving Dharma’s defense and Hinduism’s history in three different contexts.

(I) **Voices in the California Textbook Controversy**

When the debate over the adoption of certain narratives in California textbooks ensued from 2005-2007, it did not simply galvanize groups identified with Hindutva causes, but many Hindus—without specific political agendas or anti-Muslim sentiment—were moved to engage because of their personal relationship to and investment in telling India’s history was tapped. Certainly, these sentiments were fueled by the political campaign waged by umbrella
organizations, like the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Education Foundation, but the agendas of these organizations cannot fully account for the phenomena. Excellent work has been conducted by scholars such as Jaffrelot, Bhatt, Mukta, Prashad, Kurien, Chaudhari, Reddy and Kumar on the structures and leadership of Hindutva organizations. Therefore, my attention is on the individuals and communities who engage personally—and often with little attention to the larger political implications with respect to American, Indian, and transnational issues—with the messages and mobilizing efforts of these advocacy groups.

Aparna Devare, in her work *History and the Making of a Modern Hindu Self,* argues that the introduction of western ideas about history and religion to India during the colonial period had a profound impact on a number of Hindu nationalist and reformers. Their response to history, she notes, has profoundly shaped aspects of modern Hindu nationalism today, with its emphasis on historicity and veracity. Drawing on a number of scholars, she writes,

> As Michel de Certeau argues, historical writing can only take place with the “death of the past,” which is seen to exist autonomously from the present. According to him, this makes the past amenable to “objectification,” while only the present can be “alive”….The historian constantly seeks to place the past within its “own context” or to contextualize, “which often means to dissolve the veneer of transcendence in which sacred texts were wrapped.”

Hindu nationalists do not believe religion and history are in conflict. They among history’s fiercest champions. Devare notes that Savarkar, the “father” of Hindutva, was himself deeply invested in what he viewed as an historical project. His Hinduism was not outside of history, as he was not interested in the sacred texts or myths, but rather in a racialized, ethnic and “secular” vision of Hinduism. Modern Hindutva movements owe their embrace of history to Savarkar, but unlike him, they are invested in reconciling history and religion. They seek this reconciliation

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precisely because not to do so would be, for them, to allow the “death of the past,” as de Certeau suggests. Relinquishing the power to historicize Hinduism has come to be seen as a threat not only to the Hindutva argument that there has been an enduring ethnic and racial relationship between Hindus and the land of India since ancient times, but it calls into question the very veracity of their sacred narratives. Much of the tension in modern debates over Hindu history emerges from the question of whether it is possible, as scholars maintain it is, to engage and study religious narratives critically as artifacts of history, but not necessarily as accurate records of it. Wrapped up at the very heart of these debates over history—pitting pasts verses presents, truths verses fictions, the transcendent verses the ordinary—lie fundamental questions about how people experience history, define their relationship to it and within it, and view the purpose of recording and recounting it.

All of these debates over and questions about history have erupted and driven the controversies about the adoption of social studies textbooks in public schools. The California State Board of Education reviews educational materials every six years for the core subjects. In 2005, the history-social science textbooks were under evaluation and, as is standard practice, the Board of Education made the proposed textbooks available for public commentary and review. In response to the ancient civilizations textbooks, in particular, a wide range of religious organizations—Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Christian—weighed in and independently proposed edits. Initially, two organizations, the Hindu Education Foundation and the Vedic Foundation, were particularly active in responding to these edits—calling the textbook representations of ancient Indian history and Hinduism “demeaning” and stereotypical. In addition to these two foundations, numerous other groups (the Hindu American Foundation, Friends of South Asia, as well as academics from throughout the country) began to mobilize on
both sides of the conflict. In California, the conflict resurfaced again in 2013 and erupted even more recently and intensely in 2016 when the state adopted new curriculum guidelines for K-12 History and Social Science. As time has gone on, ever more organizations have entered the debate. The reason California’s process is viewed as so significant is that the public-school system there represents the single largest in the country. As of 2016, it was estimated that the state served more than six million students and spent well over 400 million dollars in textbooks each year; California is seen to set the standard for the nation with respect to the guidelines and frameworks used to select curricular materials.26

When the controversy began in 2006, it involved public forums, legal battles and numerous media campaigns, and the controversy has been replicated, to greater and lesser degrees, in Texas, New Jersey and Florida. Parallel debates and legal battles have ensued in India, Canada, and the U.K. over the writing of Hindu history.27

The proposed edits focused on a number of different things found in the textbooks, but the most egregious misinformation and stereotypes colored much of the debate. For example, one textbook incorrectly explained that Hindi is written in the 18 letter Arabic script; another textbook, when discussing the practice of vegetarianism among some communities, titled the section, “Where’s the Beef?”; and yet another, when talking about the monkey-hero-devotee-deity from the Ramayana, Hanuman, placed a caption under a picture of monkeys, and instructed the student to, quote, “Look around—see any monkeys?” The textbook explained that Hanuman was a “monkey king, who loved Ram so much that it is said he is present every time the


27 In 2006, the Hindu American Foundation and California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials both filed suits against the State Board of Education. CAPEEM filed another similar suit in February of 2016.
Ramayana is told.” The textbook implied that Hindus, in the past and still today—for lack of imagination, intellect or credible religious convictions—simply worshipped the cows and the monkeys around them, the same way other religions worship God. Needless to say, these depictions of Hinduism caused quite a stir, but they were also, once the critiques were raised, summarily edited out. These more inflammatory representations in textbooks, however, set the tone and tenor for the ensuing debate and galvanized the support of many Hindus in California—including those with no specific political agendas, or anti-Muslim sentiment. These individuals were moved to engage because of their complex personal relationships to and investments in telling India’s history. Although their sentiments were likely triggered by the political campaign waged by umbrella organizations like the Vedic Foundation, the Hindu Education Foundation and the Hindu American Foundation, many of those I spoke with were not invested in, nor did many know about, the larger political agendas associated with these organizations. Furthermore, most of those signing petitions and attending rallies do not see the connections that most of the academics and activists opposing the edits draw between what is taught in sixth grade California classrooms and politics on the ground in India.

Aside from requests to address the most offensive and absurd characterizations, some of which I have delineated above, the main energies in 2005 and still today have been directed toward debates over the following substantive issues:28

1) **Representation of the history of the Indus Valley Civilization** (which is often referred to as the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization by advocates, who believe the name gestures at its Hindu character, and references the Sarsvati river whose historical existence has). In specific, concern over the representation of Aryans. While

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28 All the information here was gleaned from primary source documents (without clear attribution), which were distributed at Board of Education meetings and circulated among activists, community members, and academics between 2005-2006. I have also added in some additional information from the 2016 debates into this list. Whereas in 2005, Hindu advocacy groups proposed over 150 edits to the framework, in 2016, the number was 600, more than one-third of the suggested edits for the entire framework, even though less than one-tenth of the content deals with the Indian subcontinent.
scholars generally agree upon migration theories, advocates have been profoundly invested in a narrative of Aryan indigeneity, which is critically wrapped up in Hindutva ideology and rhetoric. Such narratives feed into the rhetoric that Hinduism is native to Indian soil and synonymous with the ancient and enduring Indian culture and traditions.

2) *Representation of the treatment of women.* The proposed and adopted textbook stated that in ancient India “men had many more rights than women,” advocates wanted the text to read, “Men had different duties (dharma) as well as rights than women. Many women were among the sages to whom the Vedas were revealed.” Others wanted an even more affirming statement, the following was published in the supplementary curriculum, produced by *Hinduism Today*, for use by educators, “Women have always been held in high regard in India. Some of India’s foremost religious and political leaders are women. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female form.” In the debates, the representation of dowry deaths, and sati have often been referenced, although they were not at issue in the textbooks in question.

3) *Representation of caste.* With respect to the treatment of caste, there has been a range of perspectives. A good number of advocates think caste should not be taught at all, arguing it requires cultural competency and nuance. Others think it needs to be compared to other hierarchical systems, so India is not vilified. Still, others want it represented as a simple benign system of labor differentiation. Questions about the representation of caste are among the most complex and heart-felt in this debate. Others believe that as caste is a part of the ancient texts, it is important, for historical accuracy, to represent it as one of the ways in which the ancient Indian social system was imagined and organized. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, because of the fact that caste has been a tool of oppression throughout Indian history, a number of groups have argued that caste must be presented as an enduring system of structural domination, with ancient roots.29

4) *Representation of Hindu approaches to the Divine.* Advocates have sought to address concerns about representations of idol-worship, and polytheism. The vast majority of advocacy groups desire some type of statement about Hinduism as ultimately monotheistic.

5) *Representation of Muslim presence and/or rule in India.* In some instances, advocates wanted textbooks to stress the history of Muslim invasions, temple

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29 Countering the advocacy of the Hindu Education Foundation and the Hindu American Foundation, groups such as South Asian Histories for All (SAHA), founded in 2016, the Ambedkar Association of California, and numerous South Asian Studies academics have been strong advocates regarding the inclusion of caste. Sadhana and Hindus for Justice have also entered the debate, advocating for histories that don’t “erase or minimize” caste oppression. In addition to this, many Sikhs have argued that Guru Nanak, as the founder of Sikhism, “challenged the authority of the Brahmins and the caste order.” Although it seemed that groups like SAHA had achieved a victory when the final curricular framework was outlined in 2016, by early 2017 it appeared that the HAF and HEF edits had been largely adopted.
desecrations, and forced conversions. Desire for perceived parity in representation of periods of Hindu rule, peace, and prosperity. As ancient civilization textbooks, the colonial period is not part of the standard content, however, in other debates among community members and advocacy groups, as well as in battles over other textbooks, these issues have come up repeatedly.

6) *The naming of the region.* In 2016, this issue was added to the on-going list of concerns. Suggestions were made that the designation of “Ancient Indian Civilization,” which is easily confused with the nation of India, be replaced by the more generic geographic term, “Ancient South Asian Civilization.” (In response to this, spearheaded by Suhag Shukla, the Hindu American Foundation began a #DontEraseIndia social media campaign.30

I am not going to delve deeper into the specificities of the debate around these contestations of history. A number of scholars have done this work already. Rather, I wish to approach the issue by attending to the perspectives I heard from Hindus living in Northern and Southern California, both before and after the 2005-2007 controversy. In particular, people shared with me their perception of Hinduism’s history and its place in shaping their religious experience and identity. These voices represent a perspective I heard echoed by the writers of diversity and awareness curricula for public schools, non-Hindu & Hindu religious organizations and advocacy groups, teachers in Hindu children’s programs, and by devotees and pandits at temples and Hindu centers. I have continued to hear very similar perspectives from community

30 I did not do my own fieldwork on this issue, and therefore only have information based on accounts from social media, newspapers, listservs, etc. I am not discussing the details of this incident here, but I do feel the following quote, from a New York Times piece on the 2016 controversy, are emblematic of one dimension of the controversy, and are therefore worth quoting here. “Vidhima Shetty, a high school freshman, told the committee that using the term South Asian would be akin to asking her to change her name, ‘Names are what define us as people; they represent character and personality,’” she said. “The board is confusing our cultural terms with geographical terms. By removing India as a term from the textbooks this leaves Indian-American children with no ethnic or cultural identification to turn to. When we acknowledge ourselves as South Asians, us Hindus are forced to re-identify ourselves as something we are not.’” Jennifer Medina, “Debate Erupts in California over Curriculum on India’s History,” New York Times, May 4, 2016. On November 9, 2017, California Board of Education president stated that they had the “longest [meeting] in the history of the State Board of Education.” An estimated 500 people were present, 470 of whom were there to discuss the South Asian related material in the textbooks. See Aria Thakar, “The latest Skirmish in California’s Textbooks War Reveals the Mounting Influence of Hindutva in the United States,” Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture, February 7, 2018.
members, activists, and public-school teachers in this most recent flare-up of the debate, although their voices are not included here.

In 2007, when responding to the debate over distinctions between Indian and Hindu history and Vedic traditions and Hinduism, Anju, a teacher and mother in Los Angeles, told me:

I am not stupid. I know we didn’t always use the word Hindu or that what we call Hinduism today is the same as what our religion was at the time of the Vedas or when Mira and Ravidas and the other saints were alive, but it is all my heritage, and my connection to God is tied to all these people, from the first words of the Vedas to the teachers today. Why do people want to take that away from me? Why take it from my children? It is their pride and their lineage.

Anju’s insistence that while the terminology of Hindus and Hinduism is modern there is still historical continuity from the Vedas to the Hinduism of the present was at the crux of the controversy. While many of the suggested edits were connected to larger political agendas and projects which seek to conflate Indian and Hindu history, and whitewash the complexities of caste and gender inequities, many of those who became invested in the textbook debate did so because they wanted a ‘positive’ history of Hinduism and India, one that reflected their own understanding of the story, to be told in their children’s classrooms.

In 2004, Bani, a public-school teacher and diversity education consultant in Fremont, CA, spoke about her frustration that academics emphasize the sectarian divisions between Hindus and the “strife between groups” because she wanted children to learn another type of narrative as well, one that she believed Hinduism could offer. She said:

It is God’s beauty in this history. I am a pacifist. I want you to know this because I hate these people who spit out all this hate like it was chewed up supari…. When I talk about this history don’t think, please, that I am one of them…. I don’t want to seem like one of those people. My family is Bengali and when I grew up in Calcutta we mostly worshipped Kali-Ma and when we moved to Hong Kong and then came here, we started to spend more and more time with people from other parts of India and we came to appreciate everything, even many South Indian customs and devas (gods) I didn’t really
know about. I feel connected to all of it, it is all of it a way to praise God….Why is it bad to say all of this is Hinduism? Why do people want to say, oh all the variety and division in India is real, and what we do, appreciating every aspect of the tradition, finding God in everything, why is that a new bad Hinduism? I think it is just the opposite. Instead of thinking—as I was raised—that just by being Bengali we were better Hindus, I am more open and I judge less.

Prithi, a temple-goer in Fremont, CA, explained that she became involved in the textbook debate because, as a feminist, she was disturbed by the thought that public school children would only see Hindus as oppressive to women and lower castes. She argued that the textbooks just “pick and choose” histories based on convenience. “If the chapter on Ancient Rome has something on social divisions, then the chapter on Ancient India has to as well.” She felt that other “true” stories could be told, but that the textbooks focused on the same “old male-dominated” ones. For her, history isn’t simply about the past, but is “a blessing for the future.” She said:

It is what helps me to breathe every moment, to get up in the morning and praise God as women have done for centuries. Without the history, it would just be mindless, empty, made-up, ritual. Our history gives our beliefs, our puja, even our very lives meaning.

It might appear obvious that the goals of writing and teaching history in public-school classrooms are radically different from the belief and life meaning purpose described by Prithi. For her, the stories we “choose” to tell about history have the power to shape our future, and therefore we should recount the stories “we want to repeat, rather than focus on all the bad things.”

Amritha, another teacher, this time of an informal living-room Hindu Sunday school in Pleasanton, CA told me:

I understand that there are some things people say that are really horrible, making out all Muslims to be evil rulers and such. We ignore that….What I teach the children is the wonderful stories of our gods and goddesses, and the beauty of our beliefs. It is so important that our children know that we are not just all about worshipping in temples,
which is, of course, very, very important, but our sons—in particular—find a lot of connection to the fact that we have long traditions of science and maths. We have some curricula that quote Einstein and Mark Twain speaking of the great knowledge and teachings of India. Our civilization didn’t only come from the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians—who our children learn about in school—but it also came from us, from our Indian Heritage. What is the problem with teaching this to our children? I don’t see why this shouldn’t be a part of what is taught to every child about our history. Should they only learn about the poverty and the corruption?

In classroom presentations, on podcasts, and in conversation, North American Hindus’ attachments to the proud history of India and its contributions in the fields of language, art, science, and mathematics emerge as more than solely a communalist strategy. In other work, I have explored the new constellation of concepts, values, and practices defining Hinduism that are found in curricula, public relations materials, and temple discourses. The magazine *Hinduism Today*, which has become a major voice in the promotion of a global Hinduism and leading advocate in the textbook debates, has responded to these educational crises by producing *The History of Hindu India*, comprised of a number of glossy and well-laid out supplements to public-school textbooks and lesson plans, a streamlined delineation of “Nine Core [Hindu] beliefs,” and a number of other accessible books and videos on Hinduism. And a broad

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31 The magazine describes their “Global Mission,” in the following way:

*Hinduism Today* was founded January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy with the following purposes:

1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages;
2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism;
3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism;
4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion;
5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance;
6. To publish a resource for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma.”

Published on the website on February 22, 2008:


assortment of Hindu groups has been routinely mobilized to join advocacy efforts. In December of 2014, when *Hinduism Today* continued its campaign to speak to a range of Hindu groups throughout the state of California—including the Hindu American Foundation, the Dharma Civilization Foundation, Chinmaya Bala Vihars, and gatherings at BAPS Swaminarayan Temples—they stated that they provided “thousands of parents and children…[with] an overview of the narrative revision process and what was at stake for the Hindu community. The warning was simple: ‘What you are trying to achieve though years of children’s classes can be wiped out by four weeks of public-school classes on India and Hinduism.’” This dramatic representation of the gravity of the situation, while hyperbolic when compared to what I heard from parents and teachers, reveals an underlying fear and anxiety that was decidedly present in the interviews I conducted.

The perspectives of the teachers and mothers I cited earlier both produce and are produced by the modern conceptions of Hinduism propagated by organizations like *Hinduism Today*. They are wrapped up in the hope that children will imbibe these depictions of India’s proud history and assimilate them into their own identities and stories. The desire to impart these narratives to Hindu American children is complicated by the hotly contested line between how to define the distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ history. Among many people I spoke with over a period of twelve years, I continually noted a persistent desire that historical and public representations of Hinduism resonate not simply with their personal conceptions of the tradition, but also with what they sought their children to know about themselves and their heritage.

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From an academic perspective, the goal of intentionally writing history to reflect our desires seems absurd, as much as we may recognize that it may well be impossible to do otherwise. Yet, for a parent or pundit who seeks to foster a religious and cultural connection to a collective past within a child, such an endeavor may make sense. This may be especially the case in a minority and diasporic context where geographic distance and cultural norms make such connections harder to foster.

We need only look, I believe, at ourselves to gain insight into this basic idea; as a feminist and mother of a daughter, I want my daughter to have a positive self-image, to see beauty in herself, not in images of Barbie dolls or anorexic models in magazines. I have tried to limit, as best as I can, the messages that she gets about how women’s bodies should look, and I have tried to make her appreciate the idea beauty isn’t simply physical. I feel similarly about teaching my children about their South Asian heritage; I want them to love the food, the languages, the art, the stories, and the rich history that is theirs as well. This has involved sweetening their association with India through mango lassis and kulfi, and exposing them to the particular stories and music that I love, in the hope that they will love them as well. This does not mean, of course, that I want them to be blind to the complexity and messiness of South Asian history, or to the richness that is found in the history of others. Nor do I want them to be uncritical about the ways injustice and violence have been a part of their ancestors’ histories. However, the desire to selectively cultivate associations and attachments, pride in one’s history, religion, and ultimately self, is what, I believe, motivated many of the Hindus who became engaged in the California textbook controversy. A more nuanced understanding of the many desires at play within this controversy will, I hope, help to transform how the debate proceeds in the future.
VOICE IN THE EMAILS & INVASING THE SACRED

While I am hesitant to draw any connection between the perspectives of those people who have been involved in debates over the representation of Hinduism in public-school textbooks, and the abusive individuals who wrote vitriolic emails to me, in the hopes that it will help shed some light on the underlying motivations, desires, and fears that are at play in the defense of dharma against the historicizing of Hinduism, I will take the risk. The emails were sent from IP addresses throughout the country and came from a range of, subsequently defunct, email addresses, such as ‘dharmadefense@sanatanaworld.com; hindustothereternally@hindustothere.net; and hindususindia@hinduswithgod.com.’ A selection of them is quoted here.

We will have no more of people like you. Hinduism is TRUTH! Hinduism has lasted 8000 years and you can not destroy it with your lying representation! Hinduism ki jai! [A pairing of words, English and Hindi, that I have not seen before].

Mrs. Shana Sippy: Again we will hear these supposed scholars of Hindu Dharma trying to say that our Hinduism is a invention of the British. It is time that these Academy people knew that our religion is 8 thousand year old and will survive their attacks as it survived all the others before.

Ekam Sat. There is only one Truth. There is only one God. The Vedas are One. Hindus are One.

Hindus speak for Hindus. Why do you keep saying that our Sanatana Dharma was invention? Why do you question the true history?35

Among these emails certain refrains appeared:

1) A persistent sense that Dharma is under attack and in need of defense.

2) Anger and anxiety about the possible suggestion that Hinduism was ‘invented,’ and the implication that historicizing Hinduism inherently calls into question the veracity of Hinduism’s ancient teachings.

35 For additional examples of these emails, please see the Appendix.
3) A belief that “Hindus” should be the only people to represent Hinduism.

4) An assertion that Hinduism is an ancient tradition and that it has always survived attacks throughout history.

5) A focus on the notion of the singularity of truth and the desire for that truth to be acknowledged and affirmed by Western scholars.

When I consider the refrains in these emails, it is impossible to ignore the discursive resonances with a wide range of Hindu groups and endeavors.\textsuperscript{36} At the risk of psychologizing, the assertions that India’s glorious past and Hindu Dharma’s longevity need protection bespeak a lack of confidence, more than sixty years after India’s independence, and when its growing economic and technological power enable it to command prominence globally. Somehow, however, among certain Hindu groups, the collective constructed and oft-repeated memories of colonial and Mughal rule inform rhetorical and emotional responses as if they had happened yesterday. The constant remonstration that “Hinduism is 8000 years old and can survive attacks” seems to reveal some type of anxiety about the fragility of Hinduism, and the damage that can be done to it through acts of “misrepresentation.” Why else would a panel at the American Academy of Religion Conference be perceived as a threat or worthy of attack?

Along with the concerns we find in the emails, others—expressed by groups like the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and Hindu Human Rights group (HHR)—focus on the idea that Hinduism and Hindus need to be protected in civic and commercial contexts. Such concerns are not confined, of course, to North America. In 2005, in response to the images of Lord Rama

\textsuperscript{36} For examples of this see the writings and projects of the Hindu American Foundation; India in Classrooms; the Vedic Foundation; the Hindu Education Foundation; the Hindu Anti-Defamation League; the Hindu Forum; and the Hindu Human Rights organization. This sense that dharma is under siege has increasingly emerged as a trope both in the diaspora and within India.
on shoes manufactured by Minelli, one thousand Hindus gathered to protest in front of the French Embassy in London. Shelia Maharaja, the spokesperson for HHR said: 37

Bathed in the afternoon sun, Hindus from all walks of life joined us in a growing Hindu awakening to make it known that we will no longer stand for defamation of our sacred Lord Rama and the persecution of Hindus anywhere in the world. 38

Blog postings and commentary about the rallies tended to emphasize the feelings of Hindu collectivity that emerged during the protest. Maharaja, and other Hindu leaders such as Ramesh Kallidai, of the Hindu Forum in Britain, viewed the shoes as a symbol of much larger problems involving discrimination against Hindus in France, in particular, and the ‘negative’ public representations of Hinduism and ‘misuse and abuse of Hindu icons,’ in general. 39

In order to combat misrepresentations, Hindu groups have employed a number of strategies, including institution and organizational development, political activism and lobbying, the creation of an increasingly large number of supplementary Hindu schools, educational programs and temples, and the sponsorship of scholars, conferences and the commission of texts which support their agenda. The text, Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America, is one such example of a Hindu community response to perceived “misrepresentations.” The anthology, edited by Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas, and Aditi Banerjee, is the outgrowth of desires to rescue Hinduism from the hands of scholars whose work threatens “authentic,” emic readings of the tradition. The length of this chapter does not

37 This topic has been explored in depth by Tanisha Ramachandran. See Tanisha Ramachandran, Representing Idols, Idolizing Representations: Interpreting Hindu images from the Nineteenth Century to the Early Twentieth century, Ph.D. diss., Concordia University (Canada) 2008, and “A Call to Multiple Arms! Protesting the Commoditization of Hind Imagery in Western Society,” Material Religion (2014) 10/1: 54-75.


39 Ibid.
afford me the opportunity toprobe the nuances of *Invading the Sacred*, but overall the work suggests that scholarly interpretations disregard the “original” and devotional intentions of scriptures, showing no reverence for the sacred customs and gods of Hinduism. Most notable is the belief that psychoanalytic, gendered, and queer readings of Hindu texts, images, and practice, defame the holiness of the tradition. The authors describe “a powerful counterforce within the American Academy [that] is systematically undermining core icons and ideals of India Culture and thought.” They state their goals as seeking to interrogate

How do these images of India and Indians created in the American Academy influence public perceptions through the media, the education system, policymakers and popular culture? Adopting an impartial stance, this book…uncovers the invisible networks behind Hinduphobia, narrates the India Diaspora’s challenges to such scholarship and documents how those who dared to speak up have been branded as dangerous.40

Along with the critiques found in the book, we can note the flurry of activism to counter Aryan migration theories, which are felt to threaten the very origins and glory of Hinduism’s past.41 These efforts to defend Dharma have been decidedly transnational in nature and the extensive breadth of the debate is well illustrated by the participation of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha in the global discourse about scholarship on Hinduism and their association with the text, *Invading the Sacred*.

The Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha (HDAS) was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 2002 to act as ‘the apex unifying body that provides leadership, guidance and a collective voice for the Hindus.” In a resolution of February 2008, the HDAS expressed their concern about the “Distortion and Denigration of Hinduism by academicians,” stating that some

40 Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas and Aditi Banerjee, *Invading the Sacred* promotional materials.

Western scholarly works about Hinduism “are extremely ill-informed or purposely distorted...[and] denigrate things sacred to Hindus.”

These works do not remain within scholarly circles but find their way as recommended readings in schools and colleges in the US; besides giving a completely wrong picture of what is Hinduism and what their deities stand for, they impact the young minds of Hindu children and young adults in a deeply injurious manner—destroying their self-esteem and pride in their own tradition and cultural roots....TV media in India is dominated by non-Hindu interests, pseudo-secularists and Abrahamic religious leadership/institutions; the result is that Hindu youth does [sic] not get a correct picture of what Hinduism is and what is its stand on many contemporary issues amidst virulent propaganda against Hindu Dharma.42

The resolution covers a range of issues including addressing who is a Hindu, guidelines on temple governance and entry, statements on conversion and ghar vapasi (literally, homecoming, but translated as ‘re-conversion’), the preservation of Hindu manuscripts and documents, and the proper conduct of acharyas (religious teacher). In addition, the HDAS resolved that:

The book, Invading the Sacred, which exposes in a scholarly setting these developments, should be widely distributed to encourage large-scale readership; an adapted Summary version in different languages should be put out in the country and liberally distributed.43

They call for the creation of departments and curricula of Religious Studies and seek to encourage support for ‘brahmacharis and brahmacharins’ to enroll in Ph.D. programs, in India and abroad, to help develop authentic Hindu positions on history and contemporary issues, and expose and correct the “colonial constructs and colonized mind-set.”44 The HDAS endorsement of Invading the Sacred and call for the cultivation and financial support of Hindu scholars of


43 Ibid. The many who came to the panel identified himself as a journalist. He distributed the text liberally at the 2008 AAR, fulfilling the goal of the HDAS in this regard.

44 I do not want to minimize the complex political power and agendas of the HDAS with respect to a range of domestic and international issues, but in this context, I am focused only on their rhetoric about defending Hindu Dharma and controlling its representation.
Hinduism is emblematic of an increasingly significant trend over the past 20 years, in which Hindu umbrella organizations seek not simply recognition by the scholars in the academy, but also an authoritative voice and privileged place within it.

(5) AUTHENTICITY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: DANAM & OTHERS

The case of DANAM, the Dharma Association of North America, is yet another example of a Hindu organization that has emerged in relation to and out of scholarly discourse. Like the vast number of organizations that have been born to represent Hinduism in schools, in the courts, in the public sphere, DANAM was founded, in 2002, both to speak to the academy and offer an alternative to it.45 Rather than simply walking away from the academic world, comfortable with the idea that academic and religious communities have different aims and might disagree, DANAM choose to remain engaged, holding its annual conference in the same place and time as the American Academy of Religion. The founders were inspired, in part, by their desire to address the dissonance which they perceived between scholarly representations of Hinduism and their own lived experiences, wishing to build bridges between scholars and practitioners of ‘Dharmic traditions.’ DANAM lists nine primary objectives, among them addressing ‘issues pertaining to Diaspora followers of Hindu Dharma as minority communities’, and empowering ‘members of the association to present the traditional Hindu Dharma in ways that are authentic to normative and historically accurate lived experience of the Hindu tradition(s).’46 This aspiration

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45 The panel, “Defamation/Anti/Defamation: Hindus in Dialogue with the Western Academy,” held at the 2001 American Academy of Religion Conference in Denver, CO. marked a significant moment in the discussions between the academic and lay community. The panelists’ remarks are available online at http://www.barnard.edu/religion/defamation/index.htm, accessed October 21, 2008.

for authentic representation is reiterated as a ‘unique feature’ of the organization, in which scholars will “provide authentic [emphasis mine] Dharmic representation of Sanatana Dharma and other Dharma traditions.” Many of the scholars involved in DANAM would certainly problematize the discourse of authenticity and normativity that is expressed in the mission statement. Yet, the underlying goal of DANAM—that scholarship should resonate with the experience of and representations deemed appropriate by practitioners—raises a host of complex questions for both the scholarly and Hindu communities. A consideration of DANAM’s original mission also helps to illuminate some of the desires at play and persistent tropes in the debates over public representations of Hinduism.

In the midst of a long conversation about the great significance of history in Hindu theology and philosophy, Kumar, a teacher in children’s programs and active member of a temple in Sunnyvale, California, argued passionately for changes in the textbooks and told me:

Knowing how long Hinduism has existed gives purpose to my life. All I am hoping is that we can pass on the authentic history—it is proof of the eternal truth that is Hinduism. It is like that story, you must be knowing, about the mango….The King asks the Guru to tell him about the truth. The Guru says: “Ah, wise King, how do you tell someone who has never eaten anything sweet what a mango tastes like?” When the King struggled and failed to describe the mango, he asked the Guru, “then, how would you explain it?” With a big smile and laugh, the guru handed the King a mango and told him, “take a bite, that is what sweet is.” It is like the truth, you see?

For Kumar, this story is proof that there is only one truth. There is authenticity and everything else. His belief, which was shared by many of the other teachers and parents in attendance that day, was that the truth is like the mango, you know it only when you experience it. Because the Western academics who wrote the textbooks, as perceived by Kumar, did not have personal experience with Hinduism or India, they couldn’t know the truth. Their viewpoint simply needed correction by those with a larger, more experienced, “authentic” perspective. Kumar explained

47 Ibid.
that these scholars have never tasted a real mango, so their descriptions of Hinduism “fail to convey the Truth.” As is common in Hindu classrooms in the diaspora, Kumar then referenced the axiom, “Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti, the Truth is One, Sages call it by Many Names,” in order to suggest that while people might talk about things differently, there can be only one Truth.

However, perhaps it is all in the interpretation. We could note that a mango tastes different to everyone. In fact, some mangos are a soft-juicy-sweet, others a hard-sour-sweet, some aren’t sweet at all. Each one is an authentic mango but they are not all the same. North American Hindu organizations have, as of late, focused more on the ‘One Truth’ part of the axiom, and much less on the multiplicity of many sages or many names.48

(6) RHETORIC IN SCHOLARSHIP

To be fair, however, it is not only the Hindu community who insists that everyone taste and appreciate the ‘real’ mango. The desire for resonance, for acceptance of certain authentic narratives, is not limited solely to North American Hindu groups. These desires can be found among the best post-colonial, deconstructionist scholars of religion as well. In very different ways both groups—and there is overlap and movement between them, of course—hold up authentic visions of Hinduism and history.

The academy wants—and I believe Hindus in North America are responding to this desire on our part—to suggest that the Hinduism that emerged in the 19th century, and the ‘monolithic’ Hinduism that has increasingly taken center stage in global movements, in Great Britain and North America, is somehow inauthentic and a misrepresentation when it is compared

48 This is also evidenced in the articulations of theology that are common in the Hindu diaspora where God’s oneness, as opposed to multiplicity is emphasized in temple discourses, public relations campaigns, textbook edits, and Hindu curricular materials.
to the more authentic, more sectarian, regional articulations found in India. At the very least, many scholars wish to suggest that those regional, local, and sectarian iterations of Hinduism are more benign, favorable to the Hinduism that is found in the diaspora. Scholars have focused on the ways in which modern Hindu articulations are ‘homogenizing’ and ‘totalizing’. The reason for this scholarly emphasis has everything to do with contemporary politics, in which religious minorities in India have been under attack and in which the boundaries between national and religious identity, and secular and religious realms have been threatened by the intense climate of communalism.

Ironically, however, so focused on the way in which our scholarship may be interpreted and used, we too have become invested in our own authentic narrative about how and when Hinduism emerged and what constitutes the ‘real’ and nuanced Hindu traditions which do not threaten the type of political, physical and cultural fallout that we fear most. We have no choice but to be mindful of the political implications of our scholarship, but we also need to consider what types of ‘truths’ and conceptions of the authentic we are holding onto in order to support our agendas. While we cannot find ourselves in the business of demarcating the difference between ‘real’ Hinduism and that which is ‘fabricated’ for other purposes, we can try to understand the range of agendas, investments and desires at work in these different articulations.

For example, rhetoric about the defamation and distortion of Hinduism often resembles the language of those who evoked narratives of Hindu humiliation and domination by ‘foreign powers’ in their campaigns to destroy the Babri Masjid or incite riots against Muslims. Some might be tempted to argue for a rhetorical continuum on which we place those who write emails and those who massacred Muslims in Gujarat. Yet, as much as we need to note the linkages (and they are significant), we also need to note the difference between those who protest about shoes
with images of a Hindu god on them or raise concerns about the representation of Hinduism in textbooks, and those who engage in horrific physical violence. Noting these differences may enable us to understand the various motivations at play, and find the space to address reasonable and important concerns about Hindu representation. It will also, hopefully, help to illuminate what representations we need to counter and when and where we should promote alternative narratives.

Just as certain members of the Hindu community in the U.S. seek to be affirmed, to have their points and history acknowledged, and to find resonance between their perspective and that found in academic representations, the academic community wants affirmation and acknowledgment of the narratives we seek to tell. We often believe, just as many Hindus groups do of theirs, that our reasons are justified and, ironically, *even* in our historicizing/deconstructionist frameworks, that our narrative is more accurate and closer to the truth than that of others. Still, we hope that in pursuing the goals of scholarship—to carefully curate and represent knowledge, to sift through sources, think about context, nuance, and the implications of our language and arguments—we can make contributions to our fields.

Scholars of religion have, for generations, offered up a different perspective from that of the churches or religious teachings they have studied. There has been a longstanding tacit agreement among North American scholars and practitioners of Christianity and Judaism that what is said in the academy need not, and in fact, probably should not, be the same as that which is said from the pulpit or in Sunday school. What is taught in churches or synagogues about Jesus’ miracles or Moses parting the waters is not what we expect to hear in University lecture halls. The endeavors of religious education and secular critical education are decidedly different, as are the lessons we are to draw from them. However, in the case of North American Hinduism,
over the past 15 years, there has been an increasingly strong desire for resonance, agreement, and ‘accuracy,’ on the part of both sides.

The desires have emerged, in part, because of the intense public and political issues at stake, be it in public school classrooms, in the funding of academic centers and endowed chairs in universities, or at sacred sites in India. Obviously, with the vivid images of communal riots, trains set on fire, and religious monuments destroyed in our mind, we, as academics and concerned individuals, cannot watch our words and interpretations too carefully. However, while I believe that there is very little chance of dialogue with Hindu fundamentalists who send hateful emails, and even less so with those attack and murder Muslims and Christians, I do believe that we can and indeed must find some way to escape the representation/misrepresentation paradigm. The discourse does no justice to anyone and leaves us in a conundrum of binaries.

(7) **THE DESIRE FOR RESPONSE AND (SELF) RECOGNITION**

In *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie writes,

> A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he is unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk; not all mutants survive. Or, consider him socio-politically: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehood invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves.

> A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he’s managed it. Playing God again, you could say. Or you could come down a few notches, and think of Tinkerbell; fairies don’t exist if children don’t clap their hands.49

Here Rushdie writes about the endeavor of immigrants to fashion themselves, and the on-going struggle to understand who they are in relation to the past and present. It is a process of making selves, which, I want to suggest, stands at the very heart of many of the tensions around

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censorship (the control of content) and the defense of Dharma, and everything in between. When we think about these concepts we find ourselves in radically different spheres of thought—censorship discourse exists only in contexts where free speech is a value and the concept of defending Dharma, as an embodiment of one’s traditions and self (which I believe shares some qualities with the notion of blasphemy) exists only in a world where some ideas, texts, languages are valued and revered, or seen as distinctive and sacred. To this dichotomy, I would like to add yet another sphere of thought, prominent in cultural and performance studies, which recognizes the power of speech as a mode of action—especially, as it is a mode of representation, and means by which subjectivities are constituted.

In her book, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler argues that to acknowledge speech as powerful means that when speech is injurious it demands a response, inviting social and cultural critique. And while in many ways, the advocacy work of Hindu organizations functions as—and in fact is—a move toward censorship, the sentiment of injury that is precisely what is moving many individuals to a position of social critique. Despite my profound disagreement with many of the edits, and the political motivations behind and implications of many of them, these controversies prompt us to think about what it means when speech is injurious, or potentially injurious. Especially in the context of classrooms, what is the responsibility of those who write, who teach, who publish, and sit on school boards? Where do we draw the line with respect to our obligations to reflect and/or represent those about whom, and who we teach in ways that are somewhat recognizable? And, on the contrary, what is our obligation to make people see things in and about themselves that they do not and would not have recognized otherwise?
In the context of hate speech, one often assumes that there is a clear victim, an injured party or parties. What is most difficult and troubling about these particular examples of contestation over history and representation is that there are real injuries on all sides. That lack of recognition alone—based on an assumption that one’s utterance of injury is inherently complicit with a larger, nefarious, Hindutva agenda, seems itself to be a significant part of the problem. For, in discussing Mari Masuda’s work, Butler notes, that injurious speech,

is understood not only to act upon its listener (a perlocutionary scene), but to contribute to the social condition of the one addressed (and, hence to become part of a process of social interpellation). The listener is understood to occupy a social position or to have become synonymous with that position…By virtue of the social position he or she occupies, then, the listener is injured as a consequence of that utterance.  

What seems critical to underscore, then, are the dynamics of power and the types of harm done. The desires for recognition and the power of self-representation that have emerged in the contestations I document here are made more complex by the fact that South Asian Hindus in the American context are minorities, often subordinated and maligned, in a predominantly Christian and white culture. However, Indian-American Hindus are not just victims of speech but themselves active and powerful interlocutors in public and political conversations both here and in India. The narratives they seek to change in order to address issues of discrimination, shame and derision in America need not be seen as synonymous with a revisionist narrative that marginalizes and maligns those in India with far less power to speak.

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CHAPTER VII
THE NATURE OF ENGAGEMENT: SENTIMENT, INTERPRETATION AND ENTANGLED POLITICS IN HINDU SPACES

Much has been said about the role of Hindutva in America, the strength of transnational ties and the importance of the Hindu diaspora in feeding the international movement of the Hindu right.1 It is profound, in fact, how pervasive Hindutva actually is. In doing the research for this dissertation, I have been struck time and again how easy it is to stumble, quite literally, upon the Hindu right. A simple web search on any topic related to Hinduism reveals how readily anyone can have an encounter with these organizations.

Throughout the U.S. you can find Hindutva’s presence in Hindu temples, Indian groceries, college campuses, Hindu magazines, websites, and youth camps. Still, I will suggest, with some trepidation, that there are places in the diaspora where the Hindu right has yet to make deep inroads, it is these places that this chapter seeks to examine. How are we to understand sites where Hindutva’s presence is unclear? How are we to interpret the spaces in between the far right and left? How are we to interpret the promulgation of Hindu values, Indian nationalism, ritual involvement, even a global Hinduism, when those who promote such goals claim no affinity with the Hindu right, and, in many cases, even express clear disdain for the ideologies of Hindutva? In exploring this question, I wish to consider what we might define as three spaces,

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1 Bhatt, Chetan & Mukta, Parita, eds, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 23 no. 3 (Routledge Journals: Taylor & Francis Ltd, May 2000). This vast and indispensable volume, dedicated to “Hindu Nationalism in the South Asian Diaspora” serves as a vast resource of work on the topic. For the most part, the journal is devoted to primarily to two types of questions. Firstly, that of causation: why has Hindutva been so successful in the diaspora? Authors have pointed to the experience of racism, and/or the culture of “ethnicities,” “identities,” and “multiculturalism” that has encouraged a type of Hindu expression and identity that differs from practices and articulations within India; Secondly, that of methodology: how has Hindutva made such inroads? What are the reasons they have been able to market themselves to a diaspora audience and how have their practices emerged as normative and mainstream? In all these cases, however, the normalizing has still been understood (for the most part) as a clear and definitive expression of Hindutva, this is one of the things that I seek to question, to some extent, in this chapter. See bibliography for other work on Hindutva (McKean, Jaffrelot, Matthew, and Prasad).
those where Hindutva is present; Hindutva is absent; and those ambiguous spaces where we find resemblance but not congruity with Hindutva.²

By Hindutva, I refer to an ideological and political orientation. The word Hindutva, literally meaning “Hinduness,” was most notably employed by V.D. Savarkar in his prison writings, published first in 1923 under the title Essentials of Hindutva, and then in 1928 under the title Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?³ In defining the term, Savarkar wrote,

The ideas and ideals, the systems and societies, the thoughts and sentiments which have centered [a]round this name are so varied and rich, so subtle and powerful, so elusive and yet so vivid that the term Hindutva defies all attempts at analysis….Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be by being confounded with the other cognate term Hinduism, but a history in full. Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva….When we attempt to investigate into the essential significance of Hindutva we do not primarily—and certainly not mainly—concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious

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² Certainly, scrutiny of the word Hinduism is itself required in any endeavor to understand what is in and out of Hindutva and what one includes in the propagation of Hinduism in the diaspora. While my research is not quantitative, of those people I have spoken with in mandirs, camps, classrooms, and community centers, Hinduism is a word that most are quite comfortable with. Unlike in the academy, in the mandirs, groceries and Sunday school classrooms of Northern California, the terminology of “Hinduism” does not evoke that construction of the 19th century with complex colonial and post-colonial roots but rather a rich set of traditions that find their roots in India and transcend time and space, allowing a diverse set of individuals (South and East Asian, Caribbean, Fijian, and American born) to find meaning in Hinduism even in their American homes. The subject of Hinduism’s construction has been explored in depth by a number of authors, (see bibliography). The use of the terms Hindu and Hinduism themselves force the question: what is that distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism. For some in progressive circles, the co-optation of “Hinduism” by the right has made it hard to find any such space. Others, like Ashis Nandy, has argued that the two are at odds, and he fears Hindutva’s victory. (Nandy, Times of India, 1991).

Just as scholars like Bhatt, Mukta, Chatterjee, and others have cautioned academics not to use the terminology of Hinduism, Hindu identity or world religions in such a way that they feed into the Hindu right, and, in so doing, further the reification of categories that are much more fluid and complex than Hindutva rhetoric might indicate, so I would add another caution. As Chris Fuller and others have pointed out, while in India, it is certainly the case that the term “Hinduism” or even the “neologism,” as he calls it, “Sanatana Dharma” “does not translate any pre-modern Indian word without serious semantic distortion, and it still does not correspond to any concept or category that belongs to the thinking of a large proportion” of ordinary rural people, I would argue that this fact is increasingly not the case among second and third generation “Hindus,” in outside of India, and even among many in urban India. For them, Hinduism, and Hindu identity are very real terms, which I believe any scholar of religion or anthropology must take seriously. Christopher Fuller, The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 10.

Savarkar’s concept of Hindutva was founded on the idea that Hindus constituted a distinctive race, bound together by a common origin, a love for a “common fatherland,” a “common blood,” and a “common” heritage in Hindu culture. The form of ethnic nationalism that Sarvarkar championed became the foundation for many Hindu nationalist groups that came after him. As the ideology has evolved, gaining prominence through mainstream political parties in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the term has come to include a wider range of perspectives and political agendas. The Sangh Parivar—the BJP, VHP, and RSS—have been among the most powerful proponents of modern Hindutva ideologies and politics. The political program to equate Hinduness with Indianness represents a major dimension of Hindutva movements. Such a platform, often couched in a rhetoric of Hinduism’s magnanimous embrace and openness to any traditions or peoples deemed indigenous to India, has profound implications for minority groups and rights (especially those of Muslims, Christians, and Dalits). In the diaspora, we find what is often called “Soft Hindutva” characterized by a gentler, more subtle, nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes Hindu pride, and the celebration of national cultures and languages. Hindutva groups, as noted in the previous chapter, have a particular investment in controlling the historical narrative, especially as it relates to the presence of Muslims and Christian missionaries within India. Organizations, such as the VHPA and the HSS, are the most active and noticeable Hindutva groups within the U.S., but depending on the chapter leaders and the population the nature of the rhetoric and the local agendas can change quite dramatically. This chapter seeks to

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5 Ibid, p. 91.
explore some of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which Hindutva is present within American Hindu contexts.

While politics are certainly part and parcel of cultural, religious and educational practices, overt discussions and expressions of politics are minimal when compared other types of activities found amongst the South Asian community in Northern California. Therefore, to find and interpret Hindutva in this context is to grapple with issues of nomenclature that defy simple definition and to engage in a sifting project, in which determining what is in and out of Hindutva is at once quite simple and very elusive. Of course, any endeavor to put lived experiences into neat little boxes is somewhat problematic but the purpose here is simply heuristic: to ask the question, how, in light of what has emerged in recent scholarship about Hinduism and Hindutva, can we begin to contextualize these modern expressions of Hinduism in the diaspora?

(1) On the Nature of Presence

In profound and active ways, the most notable presence of Hindutva in Northern California may be seen at the Hindu Temple and Community Center in Sunnyvale. Founded in 1994, the twenty-four-year-old Temple truly crosses all regional and sectarian lines, with temple founders and trustees hailing from all the major regions of India. The mandir, until quite recently, had five pandits: two from Punjab, two from South India, and one from U.P. According to Temple officials, their membership is “over five thousand and growing daily.”

One need not look hard to find Hindutva’s presence at this Temple. From its inception, all the youth education has been outsourced, if you will, to the HSS, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (the RSS’s international wing). The HSS, in its reformulation of itself for American audiences, has expanded its youth program, called Balagokulam and has modeled their American
programs on the Chinmaya Missions success with their bala vihar programs. In California alone, there are over fifteen balagokulam/shakha chapters. Of these fifteen, nine are in the Bay Area. According to Hinduism Today, in 2005 there were 90 HSS chapters in the United States and over 15,000 families participating in weekly and annual events. Although I think these numbers represent an overestimate, there is no question that involvement in the organization continues to grow.

On September 9th of 2005, six hundred children from the Sunnyvale Temple’s balagokulam performed Ganesh puja, with 1500 family members watching. The proceeds from the puja were all donated to victims of Hurricane Katrina. In this, and in many other ways, the balagokulam branch of the Sangh has managed to market itself in such a way that many who send their children to its programs have no idea of their association with the RSS. Not that this association is hidden, but simply the change of name to the HSS from the RSS and the increased distancing as a result of the name balagokulam, their curricular and cultural emphasis, and their location in many “mainstream” Hindu sites make their Hindutva nature less visible and recognizable as political or right-wing. Balagokulam seems, to many, relatively normative. For example, the choice to make the proceeds of the puja a donation to Katrina victims marked a move to the center and made participation in the event as much of an exercise in American patriotism as in Hindu nationalism and religious practice.

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6 There are over 73 Balagokulam Sangh chapters in the United States, this does not include additional HSS chapters, but only the youth and teen educational programs. In 2002, the HSS created Balagokulam Magazine for children in the United States. They reached over two thousand subscribers, expanded their readership to a number of International locations in the English-speaking world, and have decided to go completely digital, making the magazine both free and accessible to the largest possible audience.


8 The curriculum of balagokulam, while retaining marked differences from other Hindu children’s educational programs—such as the emphasis on the nationalist history of India, use of the Saffron flag and a few other RSS
(I) HINDUTVA’S MATERIAL PRESENCE
CALENDARS, TEXTS, PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Moving from the clear presence of the Hindu right in the guise of *balagokulam*, there are many more places where Hindutva’s presence is much more amorphous and, because they have garnered less scholarly attention, it is those places on which I am focused here. By Hindutva as present, I also want to consider temples, classrooms, and groceries, in which Hindutva materials are present. It is easy to be blind to Hindutva’s presence but once you start looking, particularly at publishers (something that we must admit, is not common practice for most), it is hard to miss.

In considering presence, for example, I wonder what we might make of a text used in a bala vihar class in Sunnyvale about Lord Ganesha which, unbeknownst to the instructor, was produced by the VHP in the 1990’s? The content of the text resembles a wide array of children’s books on Ganesh—it raises no eyebrows—which is why it was used by this teacher, who is herself politically conscious and opposed to the Hindu right. Still, this text was published by the leading proponent of Hindutva in America. Hindutva is certainly present here but is it actually at work? What does it mean that almost all of the temples associated with the Council of Hindu Temples of North America, and the Council itself, have some link on their website to notable Hindutva organizations?9 What does it mean when people use a copy of the Bhagavad Gita that

notables like the Prarthana, shloka/vow—is almost identical to that found among a variety of Hindu children’s programs. In fact, a number of sites have actually de-emphasized and removed the “saffron flag” elements when offering instruction to younger children. While I cannot give quantitative data on this currently. In speaking with a number of HSS balagokulam members, I have noted the absence of such practices. In many ways, this removal is indicative of the HSS’s desire to become more mainstream and in ways, perpetuate their message through more subversive means.

9 For the Livermore Temple, for example, under their Youth and Education section, they direct visitors to the HinduKidsUniverse site, which is linked to the larger Hindunet.org. What does it mean to visit a website like freeindia.org to read up on the goddess Lakshmi? Do we assume that the web-surfer had any knowledge of the site’s link to the Hindu right? See Mahalingum Kolapen and Sanjay Kolapen, *Hindu Temples in North America: A Celebration of Life* (Hindu Univerisity of America, Council of Hindu Temples of North America, and Titan Graphics and Publications, 2002). It is a coffee table book, filled with pictures of temples throughout the United States. On the homepage of VHP America, the text is featured—not only can you buy an individual copy but seventy are available for a discounted bulk rate. What does it mean when this book is seen in temples throughout the Bay Area, when it is
they found in the drawer of a Patel motel, which had been distributed as part of the initiative of the Hindu Mandir Executives’ Conference, whose founders are active VHPA members and whose organizational agenda is wrapped up in Hindutva politics? Does it make a difference if the devotee used a motel-Gita that had come to the hotel via ISKON’s Pancajanya distribution project instead? These questions are of particular significance because Hindutva organizations are especially involved in the production of Hindu material goods, especially educationally oriented ones.

Consider what it means when Devika, a mother of three and occasional youth group leader for teens at the San Mateo Mandir made a collage using the pictures from the VHP “Women Architects of Sanatana Dharma” Calendar, which according to her “was never ordered but arrived like a little blessing one day in the mail.” She described her collage as having been made for the teenage girls at the mandir to teach them about these “strong and independent women” “who would never have allowed themselves to be ordered around by men, who would not have let men beat them or hurt them and who not only fought for their own rights but that of India as well.” After removing all the words written by the VHP and taking out pictures of the women she didn’t know, she added to these images her own words: “EDUCATION FOR WOMEN!” “NO ABUSE!” “STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS!” ” WOMEN LEAD AT HOME AND IN POLITICS!” “HONOR YOURSELF, RESPECT AND LOVE YOUR BODY for YOU ARE GOD’S HOME!” “FEMININE POWER!”

A year after I first met Devika and encountered her running this program for girls, she invited me to the Temple to be a guest at a new group she started for women who were in

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found displayed on a table in the Livermore Hindu Temple, or on the coffee table of the Vadhwni family in Danville, CA, who are extremely active in who bought it from the VHPA site, not really knowing what the VHPA is? What does the promotion of this text by VHPA mean when it is found in these and other places? Does its very presence or purchase signify Hindutva at work?
abusive relationships. I did not expect, when she invited me, to see the calendar repurposed again, this time in a new form, as inspiration for these Hindu women to leave their husbands. Devika had found the website ordered extra calendars before the year was over so that she could repurpose them for activities such as this. Each woman was given a picture from the calendar, along with the description or biography that had been included alongside the images (among the figures were included the Rani of Jhansi, Indira Gandhi, and also, Goddesses, such as Durga and Saraswati). Devika asked the women to think of the attributes that these women possessed and told them to make a collage of words surrounding their figure: Strong, Powerful, Smart, Learned, Creative, Wise, Shakti. When the session was over, the women who wished to do so shared some of their ongoing struggles and why it was hard for them to leave their husbands. Devika turned to them with great compassion and sincerity and said, “You need to channel her [pointing to the collage that each woman had made]...Ask yourself would she stand for this? Would she want you to care so little about yourself that you should be treated this way?” Devika’s transposition of the VHP calendar into a call to leave abusive husbands and empower teenage girls was not anticipated when the VHP sent this free calendar to the mandir. In ways, Devika’s use of a Hindutva commodity actually subverts or, at the very least, reinterprets Hindutva’s intended message. She read their message not as a call to Hindu nationalism or even Indian pride, but as a way to build the self-esteem of girls and women, and yet, even in her repurposing of the material, Hindutva is also oddly present, finding its way into the education of this unsuspecting teacher and her students.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) Devika showed me this collage in the mandir in March 2005. She had made it for a youth group program for teen girls and incorporated education about Domestic violence into her session.

The same 2005 VHPA Calendar, “Women Architects of Sanatana Dharma” was touted by a Pandit in Milpitas as a nice tool for “teaching these very distracted Hindu American boys that Hinduism is a religion in which women are revered, respected and not the equal of men but even their superior.” While a detailed analysis of the content of the calendar propounds an attitude towards women that many may not find favorable, it is odd to find the text being
As I noted in the previous chapters, the realm of children’s education has been a significant focus for many Hindu groups in the diaspora. In particular, the topic of representation of Hinduism to children—both Hindu and non-Hindu—as in the case of the textbook controversies, has garnered tremendous attention. In fact, most of the major cultural and political issues that Hindutva groups have promoted in India find some form of expression in Hindu educational spheres in the diaspora. As discussed, Hindu history and its representation in textbooks are hotly contested issues. Relatively small organizations, like India in the Classrooms, have focused their efforts to change the way India, Hinduism, and Indian history are taught in American classrooms primarily through offering support to public school teachers, as opposed to lobbying or advocacy efforts, although those are a piece of their work as well. The ‘India in Classrooms’ materials are slick, well-written, and very easy for teachers to adapt and utilize. It is no wonder that a teacher in a San Bruno public school uses materials from this organization to correct the “problematic and simplistic representation” of India and Hindus in the old textbooks that her school still uses, despite State guidelines. As this teacher put it: “this stuff is really great because I have a lot of Indian kids in my class and I hate to teach them stuff that is racist.” Many of the materials found on this site and others like it provide ideas for art projects and information about the diversity of languages, traditions, and geography of India. Lessons often focus on a celebration of culture—discussion of clothing, demonstrations of songs and dances, discussions about and, when possible, sampling cuisine, stories about Gods and Goddesses, and discussions of various festivals and regional customs. However, most of the educational resources also include PowerPoints or worksheets that convey historical narratives that include “facts” about the Indus Valley Civilization and Aryan indigeneity, equate India with Hinduism and describe used to support aims that were not its intention. There are ways, then in which Hindutva’s objects and text are subverted or at least reinterpreted in ways that counter Hindutva’s aims.
Hinduism as inclusive of Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. The inclusion of these ideas, even when peripheral and subtle, belies another agenda, not obvious to most consumers. Hindutva educational productions of this sort and those developed during the California Textbook Initiative, spearheaded by the Educator’s Society for the Heritage of India, provide just a few examples of the inroads that Hindutva is making in the public-school classrooms, as well as the ways in which Hindutva narratives are packaged, even buried beneath other types of benign and relatively uncontroversial messages.

Another dimension of this is what Ingrid Therwath has described as “cyber-Hindutva,” whose “epicenter” she asserts is in the diaspora and America specifically. Through carefully tracking the traffic and online “nodes” of Hindutva’s message, she has identified qualitatively, what I have encountered quantitatively, that not only are the “territorialized yet universal claims” finding large numbers of followers in America, but the ways in which they have reshaped their online discourse make there ideas significantly more palatable and evasive. Not only is this the case in overt political spheres, but, as I noted, we find it more subtle ways in educational and cultural realms as well. Such seemingly benign Hindutva interventions are also evident in the widely-distributed textbook addendum, which I discussed in the last chapter, produced by Hinduism Today to serve as a corrective to the controversial textbook representations in California public schools and elsewhere throughout the country.

(II) SITES OF AMBIGUOUS AFFILIATION: HINDU STUDENTS COUNCILS

Hindu Student’s Councils offer an example of a wholly different sort, one which is very important to address. Put in context with other South Asian and Indian campus organizations, as

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11 Ingrid Therwath, “Cyber-Hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web,” Social Science Information 51, no. 4 (2012): pp. 551-77. She also asserts, most persuasively, that new “strategies of discretion” have been developed to “evade the gaze of authorities.”
well as with Muslim campus groups, the HSC, in the words of Arvind Rajagopal present a “gray area” in the developments of the Hindu right, although others would disagree. Although it was initially founded in 1990 with the support of the VHPA, the group officially became independent in 2003, debatably disassociating itself from the Hindutva organization. Most HSC chapters make a point of minimizing political issues. They are mainly social and religious in their programming and offer many students on campus a way to participate in rituals, celebrate holidays, study texts, and socialize with others who share their backgrounds like their Jewish, Christian, and Muslim counterparts. Additionally, for those coming from religious homes or those who want to marry someone Hindu, these groups offer an outlet unavailable to them in other organizations—as Lalitha, a junior in college described it, “I hoped it would provide me with some kind of acceptable dating pool.” Although it didn’t work out as she initially intended—she has been dating an African American Muslim for the past two years—Lalitha said she has made some of her best friends in the group and enjoys celebrating the holidays and choreographing dances together.

Most students I have encountered have no knowledge of the history, affiliations, or associations of the HSC with Hindutva groups. Many learned about the groups from tables on campus walks during orientation, from friends, and/or through fliers advertising events like Navratri and Diwali celebrations and parties. For some, the Indian food alone was a major draw. Ashok, a student at UC Berkeley told me: “I just missed having mom’s cooking, even though I never really wanted Indian food when I lived at home. When I saw the email saying: ‘Indian food will be served,’ I was hooked. Then I made some friends there. Mom and Dad were happy too.” In other circumstances, however, HSC chapters are quite active in political issues, India advocacy, promoting particular historical narratives, and even bringing VHPA and HSS speakers
and organizers to campus. Graduate students from India, as well, are often involved in the organizations at larger universities, and the dynamics can change in those instances as well.

In addition, what these groups do needs to be put in more than just the context of Hindu extremism, but also needs to be placed in an American historical context. Like other ethnic, religious and immigrant groups, Indian and Hindu Americans have tried to address issues of representation, which has become a greater issue since South Asians became an increasingly targeted minority post 9/11. Many of these groups have worked to create contexts in which they can engage in that classic project of cultural transmission. As numerous scholars have pointed out in research about Hindutva in Britain and the US, the discourse of tolerance, diversity, multiculturalism and ethnic studies has been particularly conducive to use by Hindutva’s proponents. Furthermore, the idea of “cultural transmission” often presupposes a bounded group of immigrants with common religious and ethnic experiences, which never actually existed in the home country. Nonetheless, the collective endeavors by multiple Hindu and Indian organizations to create identity and community in the US cannot be denied, or simply deemed a fabrication when it has become, for so many, a reality.

(2) ON THE POSSIBILITY OF ABSENCE

While many Indian and Hindu articulations in the United States perpetuate, participate or feed into Hindutva, this is not the case for all such expressions. There are three types of Hindutva’s absence I wish to consider: absence—in the most concrete and material sense—signifies places where Hindutva’s ideology seems to be countered and in which alternative versions of Hinduism and/or Indianness are promoted. What often serves as the greatest proof of Hindutva’s absence is marked political opposition to the Hindu right, and even more commonly,
the absence of Hinduism itself. Of course, we might argue that Hindutva is present when its message and activities become a source for disputation. The second type of absence that I wish to consider occurs in Hindu contexts that have intentionally constituted themselves as working against Hindutva ideologies, carving out a sphere of Progressive Hinduism. Thirdly, I wish to look at decidedly Hindu sites wherein Hindutva’s global character and political agenda are not obviously present. Lastly, I wish to consider absence of knowledge, the absence of awareness on the part of, I daresay, the vast majority of people I have encountered while doing fieldwork, that anything in which they are participating might be construed as having political, let alone Hindutva, connotations or agendas.

(I) INDIAN COMMUNITY CENTER OF MILPITAS SECULAR ITERATIONS AND ABSENCE

It would seem that the spaces where Hindutva is most obviously absent are those where religion is also seemingly absent. The Indian Community Center, founded in 2000 in Milpitas is just such a space of definitive absence, founded as it was to be a space in which Indians in the Bay Area, regardless of religion, caste, class, or region could gather. The ICC was modeled

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13 Groups like Friends of South Asia (FOSA), the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), Chhaya CDC, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), Sakhi for South Asian Women, Alliance of South Asians Taking Action, South Asian Sisters, Yoni Ki Baat, Trikone, DesiQ Documentation Project, and Maitri are examples of South Asian progressive groups many of which define their missions as working against Hindutva ideologies, as well as other Conservative and Neo-Liberal political platforms. As non-Hindu groups, however, their relationship to Hinduism and Hindutva ideologies is different than those groups who are creating decidedly Hindu spaces and projects that are distinct from Hindutva. I will look at only one “secular” organization, the ICC to serve as an example of a non-Hindu site. As a self-described non-religious organization, it is also not overtly political, making it distinct from the political groups I site above.

14 The first ICC in the United States was founded in 1966 in Cleveland. Interestingly, their mission statement is very focused on ideas of American integration. It states that their purpose is: “to organize events that promote the rich cultural heritage of India in greater Cleveland; to facilitate ongoing dialogue with civic leaders regarding issues of importance to Asian Indian families in the region; to facilitate the mainstreaming of Asian Indian families by creating a platform for the community’s active participation in the civic life; to collaborate with local organizations to promote goodwill and understanding between diverse communities; to partner with business groups that promote ties between India and US firms and foster economic development” [emphasis mine]. The language here, founded by those who came in 1965 is telling. With an emphasis on citizenship, engagement with civic leaders and in civic life, the organization’s gaze is, in many ways, directed outward. Their Seva [service] projects involve feeding the
explicitly on Jewish Community Centers, offering fitness programs, childcare, summer camps, senior programs, film festivals and classes for the community. The ICC runs a successful preschool and an afterschool program. There are currently over 1500 children enrolled in its various classes. At times, in fact, the ICC has had a direct affiliation with the India Progressive Forum and other organizations that define themselves against the agendas of Hindutva. They offer Indian dance classes, music classes, and language classes, but no formal religious training is done here.\textsuperscript{15} What remains complicated about the question of absence at the ICC emerges from the fact that the preschool and after-school programs do seek to create “pride in our heritage” through programs that explore Indian identity, mark festivals and engage in “dramatic interpretations of Indian tales and mythology.”\textsuperscript{16} Food served in the school programs and camps is all vegetarian, and in addition, one of the many camps that the ICC offers is Gandhi Youth Camp, which while promoting the values of non-violence, and peace, as well as religious ecumenicalism, also has many components that are religious in nature, and which promote Indian nationalism.

The ICC has a number of sister organizations, including regional ones— like the Maharashtra Mandal of the Bay Area and the Bay Area Telegu Association—as well as Professional groups like the alumni associations of Aligarh Muslim University and the IIT hungry at local churches and hosting programs on Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day. In many ways, this organization is much more “secular” in its orientation than the ICC, which was founded later, in an area with one of the largest and densest Hindu populations in the country. See: “Home Page,” Federation of India Community Associations of Northeast Ohio, \texttt{www.ficaclevand.org}.

\textsuperscript{15} There were a whole set of classes offered when the center opened, the first called ‘gurukul’ on Indian stories, folklore, etc. This class did have explicit Hindu content, although it was not billed in such a way. The class title was then changed to Indian Folklore and Mythology. Attendance was low for these classes and their costs, according to a professional at the ICC, to run the course were higher than other venues and so they discontinued them. These offerings pointed to a blurring of that “secular” line which the ICC is intent upon maintaining.

\textsuperscript{16} “The ICC Preschool Approach to Learning,” Indian Community Center, Preschool Informational Materials.
Foundation of the Bay Area, as well as a variety of South Asian cultural and social service organizations.\textsuperscript{17} The center is used by South Asian Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Muslim and Christian groups, and community members from a range of racial, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. It views itself as definitively secular, and many of the regional organizations—such as

To suggest that this space marks Hindutva’s absence is no surprise. There are many secular South Asian organizations that can fit such a bill. Just as the HSS’s endeavors mark one end of Hindutva’s diasporic presence on a spectrum, the ICC may mark the other extreme. Sites like the ICC are instructive in that they represent another form of immigrant expression only blocks away from Hindu temples and organizations touting Hindutva’s message.

The loudest critics of Hindutva’s message, however, have generally not been found at the ICC or at Hindu Temples, but it much more secular arenas—college campuses, and in left-wing organizing and artists circles. As Matthew and Prasad have argued, “the contradictions left exposed by Yankee Hindutva” have inspired “the ideological and organizational growth of a Progressive movement of Indian Americans.”\textsuperscript{18} In this regard, organizations that take an explicitly anti-Hindutva position tend to be South Asian and not Indian or Hindu in nature. However, while these groups are tremendously important, they still do not offer a Hindu alternative to Hindutva.

\textsuperscript{17} Bay Area South Asian domestic violence organizations, such as Maitri, Aasra, My Sahana, and Narita are alternatives and often clear opponents of the Hindu right. Trikone, a gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender South Asian organization, also presents an alternative to Hindutva. The same could be said of countless art and cultural organizations, which cross Muslim/Hindu borders. None of these, however, are overtly religious or Hindu in character.

(II) SADHANA AS ABSENCE AND A VOICE OF PROGRESSIVE CHANGE

That is changing with the voice of Sadhana, a Coalition for Progressive Hindus, which was founded in 2011. Their statement, “A Hindu Apology for Caste and Untouchability,” sets them apart from almost every other Hindu organization I have encountered in America. They have received a tremendous amount of support from people and derision as well. In the Statement they, “acknowledge the inhumanity and oppression of the caste system and the fact that it continues to be legitimated by many of our traditions and practitioners.” Most notably they state,

We must cease all defensive and apologetic justifications of the caste system and especially those that explain the system as a creation of foreigners or as a response to foreign presence on the subcontinent. The fact is, as early as 400 CE, the practical manifestations of caste, including physical segregation and prohibitions on socializing and intermarriage were firmly in place. We Hindus are not exempt from the corruption of affirming self-value by devaluing and exerting power over others. We must take responsibility for the physical and psychological violence of caste practices.”

Sadhana, which they translate as faith in action, has been vocal about a host of social justice issues beyond caste discrimination, such as: the environment (Project Prithvi), immigration rights (including working to make Shaanti Bhavan Mandir in Queens, New York the first Hindu temple in the U.S. to declare itself a sanctuary), and promoting gender equity, healthy relationships, LGBTQ rights, as well as addressing matters such as domestic violence and substance abuse (Project Samaanata). Sadhana’s decision to be a loud and public Hindu progressive voice is changing the landscape and language of what is said in Hinduism’s name.

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http://www.sadhana.org/dismantling-caste/.

20 Much more needs to be said about the organization’s history, mission, and trajectory. I hope to provide a more sustained treatment of Sadhana in future research.
Much of the work on Hindutva’s growth has focused on the tension between global and local Hinduism and the correlation between larger transnational Hindu movements, often guru centered, and Hindutva’s ascension and, in many cases, infiltration of mainstream Hindu articulations in the diaspora. The association between globalization and Hindutva, therefore, has left many—including a large number of scholars, with a preference for “traditional,” “sectarian,” “regional,” and “local” forms of Hindu expression. Such feelings are somewhat reasonable since many fear the resemblance borne to Hindutva that many modern, transnational forms exhibit. However, in the diaspora, it is difficult, if not impossible to have Hinduism without some level of global transnationalism. Most temples are linked to others in India and have links to other national and regional organizations. Any attempt to educate about Hinduism to children here involves some distillation and engagement with a discourse of Hinduism that resembles the rhetoric of Hindutva. To simply purchase books, puja, or cooking supplies is often to engage in a material exchange of transnational capital and global economy. In short, global Hinduism is hard, if not impossible, to escape. Still, I wish to ask can we consider more localized Hindu expressions as sites of Hindutva’s absence?

In one San Mateo Hindu temple, one finds a very different type of Hinduism than that encountered at the large-scale temples in Fremont, Livermore, and Sunnyvale. Here, in a converted church building, the two-room mandir, found quite literally on the “other side of the train tracks,” is attended by a small community of worshippers. While relatively drab and non-descript from the outside, the small mandir comes alive, awash with bright color as soon as you enter. The walls are painted a bright yellow and colorful murtis line a quarter of the room, which comprises a large altar. The mandir was established in 1996 and was founded by an English
speaking pandit from Fiji. Most worship (in the form of devotional music) and discourses are offered in Hindustani (often in Fijian Hindi) and English and Sanskrit is employed, as is customary, in ritual practices. Interestingly, it is more common to hear Hindustani spoken there now than in the early years of the mandir. This is likely the case because more Fijian Hindu immigrants have started attending the mandir, changing the demographic. The demographics of this mandir seem particularly significant because the majority of the devotees received their educations in Fiji and while they work for High-Tech firms, many tend to do so not as managers but as technicians. In addition to the Tech industry, a large number of devotees work as medical technicians, or in pharmacy jobs. While I do not have firm numbers on this, based on my observations at the mandir, and at the homes of some of the devotees, the mandir draws participants from lower-middle to middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds.21 This is consonant with the data that indicates that while the vast majority of those who migrated in the 1970s and 1980s were granted immigration rights because they met “professional and educational criteria,” many of those coming since that time qualify for admittance “on the basis of family reunification” rules.22 Over time, the founding Swami has brought in other swamis to assist as pujaris (ritual specialists) and teachers.

While their temple aspires to do some international and national work, its main efforts are extremely local in nature. The Mandir’s mission statement, which was printed in a brochure that was distributed in 2007-2008 and on was posted their website, stated:

1) To cultivate spiritual awareness.

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21 I should note that most of my research at this mandir was conducted between 2000 and 2007, with the most intensive period being between 2003 and 2005. I have returned a few times since then, maintained some personal relationships with mandir attendees, and have also followed the mandir’s evolution via social media.

2) To help the needy.
3) To adopt, love and care for children.
4) To train and sponsor more priests, preachers, and volunteers to serve the world.
5) To establish and run orphanages in Fiji and possibly Guyana and Trinidad.
6) To offer regular prayers in hospitals, jails, prisons and juvenile homes.
7) To build a temple in New Mexico.
8) To build a temple in Las Vegas.
9) To build an ashram in Vrindavan.
10) To extend the existing temple in San Mateo.
11) To expand our reach to the public.
12) To develop and cultivate the understanding of Hindu religion amongst young children and teens.

In particular, this mandir is differentiated from other mandirs by its self-help programs, the brainchild of the founding pandit. He has made a point of reaching out to people “of all backgrounds” and especially Hindus who are “not in such favorable positions.” The fact that three of the twelve points in their mission statement focus on social justice issues (helping the needy, working in hospitals, with the incarcerated, and in juvenile homes, and establishing and running orphanages) makes this mandir unique within America. Furthermore, the mission statement about adopting, loving and caring for children was specifically intended to include children who are in foster care, or who have been orphaned, and is distinct from their goal to “develop and cultivate the understanding of the Hindu religion” among youth. The Swami runs Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, does counseling for families and individuals in crisis and offers regular counseling and assistance to those in prison and jail, including helping former prisoners after they are released. The mandir offers, free of charge, “with donations requested,” assistance with filing documents for court, legal issues of immigration and other services (including assistance with restraining orders, shelter, food, and clothing assistance). Swami Indravijay Narayan Ji Maharaj (Swamiji Maharaj, as he is affectionately called) often speaks of how,

Most Hindu communities here don’t want people to talk about their problems, about the daughter who is using drugs or the son in jail. I am here to talk to everyone. I tell people,
“Even Lord Krishna got in trouble when he was a child, God loves us even though we are not perfect, even because of it.”

Like other temples, regular pujas are held daily and for festivals and the swami performs the general samskaras lifecycle rituals and offers classes on the Gita and other scriptures. When I used to visit this mandir in 2004 and 2005, it was not uncommon to find Swamiji Maharaj sporting a saffron lungi (a traditional Indian sarong) and a 49ers cap in the back room changing his youngest daughter’s diaper. He described how he watched his daughter while his wife taught at a school in Union City, but he also counseled people about their marriage problems or helped them to fill out a tax form at the same time. At one point the swami had erected a number of beds on the wall opposite to the altar to serve as a shelter for the homeless, and he has worked on creating a retreat center specifically focused on rehabilitation for those with addiction problems, and/or those who have recently been released from jail or prison. He has said that he has always been focused on how to help those who are struggling with “issues of the heart and soul” since he became a swami. This mandir, which doesn’t affiliate with organizations and whose building offers no splendor, is attending to less global concerns than many of the mandirs in the Bay Area, and when it does look beyond its local environment, and beyond the U.S., it seems to set its eyes on the Fijian community and what it can do to help them there. As a result of this, the larger politics of Hindutva seem to be absent. In this assessment of absence, I am only guessing. Simply because I have not seen the global aspects of this mandir, the institutional

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23 The same might be said of another localized temple, the Sanatan Mandir, in San Bruno, which doesn’t even have a website and in which most of the devotees are from Fiji, and Trinidad and the Pandits are from India. Many devotees struggle with their limited Hindi to even communicate with the Pandit but they are proud of his Indian origins for he has a type of “authenticity” which many of them admire. A number of these devotees have never traveled to India and their experience of the mandir is very different. Many of them share, with Hindutva proponents, an idealized view of India, even more so—in some cases—since they have never even been there. In an interview in 2003, Pandit Ramaswamiji of San Bruno, California, said it is “a crime to allow [the] BJP to dictate the terms of Hinduism and Hindu celebration. They preach hate and we do not, but, of course, we sound like them sometimes. We are all Hindus and we all revere the same gods.”
affiliations, nor the use of Hindutva materials, does not necessarily mean that it is any more or less involved in the Hindu-right’s projects than any other spaces, especially those in which there is a different type of absence, that of cognition.

(3) Questions of Knowledge: Interpreting Absence and Intention

In the novel, *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot writes, “ignorance gives one a large range of probabilities.” And so it is the case among Hindus in America. How are we to interpret ignorance, or rather an absence of knowledge on the part of so many people who imbibe, encounter, and even utilize the materials produced by the Hindu right? Certainly, the fact that the Hindu right has succeeded in making their message so accessible to anyone who does a simple web search is indicative of their far reach into homes, mandirs, classrooms, living rooms and even public schools. However, we must ask where do we situate intentionally in our interpretation of practice? Where can we locate difference, if we believe there to be one, between those who actively seek to promote Hindutva’s message and those who are simply eclectic in their gathering of texts and resources about Hinduism? How do we position those who go to the classroom, or the mandir for personal reasons, to “teach their child a little bit about where they come from,” as Kumar said, or “for some spiritual quiet,” as Jagdish put it, and yet they engage in activities that support, or in some cases are even sponsored by, the Hindu right?

What does it mean when Shelia, mother of three, in her living room bala vihar class of fifteen students in Danville, passes out coloring pages she happened to print out from some “nice website” she stumbled upon, she “can’t remember the name now,” but it has “so much lovely stuff for teaching Hinduism to children.” Only as I scanned the text, looking for a source, did I

notice the small print in the far-left corner were the words balagokulam.org. When I asked her what she knew about the organization she said she knew nothing really but that she did order a copy of the magazine for her son: “it looked like something he would enjoy and maybe get him interested in reading some Indian things instead of that Power Ranger stuff he is so obsessed with.”

(4) REALMS OF IGNORANCE AND RESEMBLANCE

There is often a disjuncture between people’s practices and their associations with larger political agendas. The discrete intentions and experiences of people’s lives are always more complex than the trends of which they are a part. Illuminating work has been done on the cause of Hindutva’s success and their methods to create normative Hindu organizations on college campuses, through the internet and in temples. Studies that examine the reasons of their success tend to focus on causation and methodology. While there really is no ambiguity, in my mind, about the Hindu right and the threat it continues to pose, there is ambiguity about how the intentions and actions of individuals will affect the end result and transform Hindutva’s message.

In further reflections on ignorance, George Eliot questions,

It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance?...Who having a practiced vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of the means whereby sequences may be compelled...precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction?

The relationship between knowledge and ignorance is quite powerful in many of the contexts I have studied. I suspect that the same is true among religious communities generally, and even in our daily lives. We don’t, and can’t, possibly know all the genealogies of the things

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25 Interviews and class observations with Purvi, San Rafael, CA February 2002. Interviews and class observations with Shelia, Danville, CA May 2003.

26 George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, p. 188.
we consume and engage; in contemporary transnational and technological contexts, where things are often unmoored from their source, a preponderance of ignorance seems all the more likely. It is even more difficult to discern the nature of things, and their relationship to political ideologies when we encounter qualities that resemble Hindutva, but which are clearly not identical to it.

In these spheres, wherein we find versions of Hinduism resembling those perpetuated by the Hindu right, but which are themselves not necessarily linked to such ideologies. We need ask not only what is similar to Hindutva articulations but what, if anything, is different about the nature, character or content of such articulations? Can we consider the intentions of these articulations and whether intentions differ from outcomes? Most notably, as I have suggested earlier in the dissertation, the Chinmaya project has resembled, fostered and, at times, even complied with that of Hindutva since its beginning. And yet, it is difficult, when one actually studies Chinmaya’s diasporic endeavors to find much of it there. In its discrete context, the emphasis of the Chinmaya Missions is on spiritual teaching, devotional practices and Puranic, Epic and philosophical texts, as opposed to the histories of invasions and communal strife that are so popular in nationalist arenas. While I have not generally observed Chinmaya missions to speak in the language of history or hatred, there are most certainly profound resemblances at times, and in some missions more than others. As an international organization, technically based in India, ties to Hindu nationalism seem stronger there. For example, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, issued a 10-rupee coin in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Swami Chinmayananda, celebrating his contribution to Vedic culture. Swami Tejomayananda, then head of the Mission, met with Modi and praised him for his release of the coin and support of Chinmaya’s work.27 In these types of displays, and in other contents in which the Chinmaya

Mission overtly promotes their goal of “Hindu unity,” they resemble Hindutva much more than when families that are active in the Brooklyn bala vihar, who are also among the founders of Sadhana: The Coalition of Progressive Hindus, work to make Shaanti Bhavan Mandir, the first Hindu Temple in the United States to declare itself a legal sanctuary. Or when the same parents, who send their children to bala vihars that use the Chinmaya curriculum, issue a powerful statement condemning caste, and Hinduism’s role in perpetuating a system of oppression and discrimination well before any foreign intervention could be blamed for its distortion.

Among the most complex resemblances I have encountered between Hindutva’s proponents and “average garden-variety” Hindus, are bibliographic and curricular ones. The texts that parents, teachers, and camp directors throughout the country use to teach Hinduism to children, there is significant overlap between various groups of different political persuasions. And even when the texts themselves are different, the general content and curriculum are strikingly similar. Most notably, almost every major American diasporic Hindu group draws upon *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) is no exception. The VHPAs recommended “Youth Books suitable for the instruction of children” are predominantly comprised of the comic book series, which according to Mrs. Vrushali Kene, a VHPA chapter president and teacher are “some of the best texts to engage our youth.” In addition to the comics, they recommend Rajagopalachari’s *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, stories from the Upanishads as well as videos from *Amar Chitra Katha* about the “Patriots of India,” and about the life of the Buddha. Certainly, these texts are not all that Hindutva organizations use to teach their children. In fact, curricular materials such as those produced by the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh leave no doubt in my mind about their orientation and agenda, which vilifies Muslims and foreigners and tells a particular version of history that is entangled with the
most vitriolic communalist politics in India. However, the fact remains that the vast majority of
books that many of those who are aligned with Hindutva use to educate their children are readily
accessible to anyone who walks into an Indian market, and they are used by various people to a
range of ends. The right is not, for the most part, drawing their resources from a unique well;
they have built upon and in fact emulated other Hindu organizations and educational ventures
that preceded them.

Based on a review of curricular materials from a range of educational settings, unaffiliated or
independent bala vihars, Gandhiji and other independent camps, mandir children’s programs, as
well as the definitively Hindutva materials from balagokulum (HSS) and VHP curricula, there is
a striking similarity in what children are taught. When Hinduism is boiled down to teachable
concepts for children, the essential curricular core, with some variation, I have observed
throughout the country is as follows:

1. Instruction about and celebration of major festivals (Diwali, Holi, Navratri, etc.)
2. Shloka and bhajan recitation.
3. Study of Epic and Puranic Stories, particularly narratives about major figures in the
   Pantheon, as well as folk narratives from which moral lessons can be drawn.
4. Study of core Gods and Goddesses, their narratives, and iconography.
5. Centrality of the Bhagavad Gita as a text of recitation and study, among children as well
   as parents.
6. Instruction in some form of yoga and/or meditation.
7. General discussion of the relationship of the One to the Many with respect to the Divine,
   as well as clear explanations about the role of images in Hindu worship and the
difference between Idol-worship and revering the Divine through images, in which God
has generously made Divinity manifest.
8. Study of Saints and Heroes of India, and it is in this area where we often find the most
distinction, not only with respect to the selection of saints and “heroes,” but also the
stories that are told to go along with them.
9. Instruction in the vocabulary and practices relating to basic ritual practices, as well as instruction in the proper postures for particular pujas, arati specifically, and the proper way one should comport oneself in temples and homes, with elders and teachers.

10. Although many languages are used. English is by far the most commonly employed for most instruction. Sanskrit is used for ritual purposes and instruction in regional languages tends to come as a secondary practice and, in many cases, is an optional component of the instruction.

The emergence of this type of uniformity indicates the degree to which processes of homogenization are taking place in the diaspora, and while it raises cause for concern, we must consider not only the similarities but also the differences. Where the VHP and HSS add a tremendous emphasis is in their attention to historical narratives of India, the “heroes” of Indian history, and the glories and wisdom of Vedic science and mathematics. These represent little in the curricula of most other groups. While Chinmaya Mission courses are taught predominantly by women, the HSS groups remain male-dominated. The HSS continues to engage in overt nationalistic exercises, utilizing the Indian flag, and paying homage to Bharat Mata and Golwalkar (as noted in Chapter III). Additionally, there is a clear undeniable rhetoric of hatred and exclusion in the HSS and VHP materials. These Hindutva contexts are the places of “foreign religions and invaders,” and of “Muslim onsloughts.” This rhetoric is not a part of more “normative” Hindu expressions in the diaspora, even though there are undercurrents of it in

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28 Although not a part of any formal bala vihar curricula I have ever seen, some bala vihar teachers make reference to the Indus Valley civilization, especially when raised by public school students who raise it as something they learned about India in their social studies classes. None of the teachers I have observed teaching students under the age of eleven have ever suggested that the Indus Valley has any link to the Vedas, none have mentioned Indo-Aryans. So, how then is the Indus Valley Civilization brought up? It is mentioned simply as an example of the greatness and depth of Indian history, the ancient brilliance of Indians to build cities, have money, and religious traditions. Certainly, because these children are in classes about Hinduism there is some associative link to Hinduism being made here, but the full rhetoric of Hindutva is absent. Does such association lay a foundation later for children to buy into the narrative of Indian History which claims a link between Indus Valley and the Vedas? Does this place all of Indian history on a continuum which begins with Mohenjodaro and Harrapa and leads to the great age of Hinduism? Of course, the fact that Indus Valley is even mentioned may well be a product of Hindutva’s ability to permeate normative Hindu discourse and this may well be cause for alarm.
many places. Certainly, the drive to create “Hindu identity,” Hindu centers, and websites, and to promote education about Hinduism and India is at the top of the Hindutva agenda in the United States, but much of this drive is also present among those who seek to worship God, study Hindu texts and traditions, and pass traditions onto their children.

(5) PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Is what makes something a party to Hindutva the explicit rhetoric of exclusion or hatred? Is it the attempt to erode the secular institutions of the state of India through asserting its “true” Hindu character, or is it the goal to create a worldwide Hindu movement? Is the physical presence of one text enough to define a whole institution as Hindutva? It is in this regard that defining what is in and out of Hindutva seems particularly difficult. The fact remains that as Hindu organizations in the diaspora continue to build their infrastructure, just as other ethnic and religious groups have done in America’s past, much of what they will teach their children about Hinduism will resemble aspects of Hindutva’s discourse. Such education and institution building may lay the foundation for a larger movement of Hindutva in years to come, and it will likely shape the politics and ideologies next generation of diasporic Hindus in significant ways. However, global Hindu movements cannot be understood as synonymous with Hindutva. The increasing strength of the language of Hinduism and Hindu identity as adopted by average American citizens makes such an assertion too broad and, in ways, surrenders the unassuming and, often ignorant, individual swiftly and unabashedly into the hands of the right.

While we are witnessing the steady growth of secular organizations which offer an alternative vision and challenge to Hindutva, even by their very existence. What is not yet vibrant, but is certainly nascent, is a large-scale Hindu religious movement in the diaspora that has articulated itself in opposition to Hindutva by way of a religious framework. Sadhana is one
such organization, but it is currently small, relatively new (only founded in 2011), and its active members are concentrated in New York. Still, its presence is growing, especially via social media. Until more organizations and efforts like Sadhana become more normative, for those seeking something besides the secular, I think Hindutva will be more or less present in a wide array of Hindu organizations and articulations in the U.S. and the diaspora.

Where I believe scholars need to be careful is in their tendency to paint all such articulations as right-wing expressions simply by virtue of association. The inroads made by the VHPA and the HSS over the past ten to twenty years into the normative realms of Hindu religious life in the diaspora mean that even when Hindutva isn’t present, the movement is still able to grow through its well-organized articulations that make a point of not speaking in the language of politics. Hindutva in the diaspora is truly insidious. However, even as Hindutva grows throughout the United States, there are also many spaces left where we have yet to know what type of politic and agenda will actually arise, and how children will interpret and integrate what they hear and learn in generations to come. When Hindu organizations, with some Hindutva tendencies among their leadership, promote the values of peace and love, acceptance and understanding to children, will the two history lessons that vilified Muslims be the thing that shapes their sense of Hinduism exclusively and eternally? I would like to think not. This does not mean, however, that we should be unconcerned about the type of history being taught or the messages—implicit and explicit—that are conveyed to children. Assuming that—through the practices we internalize, learn, reject, and transform—we are both made and making, passive and active in the constitution of our subjectivities, it is too early to know what many of these iterations of diasporic Hinduism mean for the future.
As noted throughout the dissertation, there is no doubt that Hinduism is being reified and strengthened in ways that support a Hindutva agenda, drawing upon Hindutva narratives and rhetoric, but Hinduism and its iterations are also adapting at the same time. Much like other immigrant communities have redefined and reimagined their traditions as a result of migration, Hindus are doing the same. As another generation of American Hindus comes of age, we will have a better idea about how the resemblances and presences of Hindutva in their upbringings have impacted the larger and ongoing politics of hatred and communalism.
CHAPTER VIII

DESIRING ACCEPTANCE: THE PRACTICE OF STRATEGIC CITIZENSHIP AND
MODELING MORAL VIRTUE IN THE WAKE OF DIVINE DESECRATION

The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our
clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the
apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of
appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: He is the hidden face of our
identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity
founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A
symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, The
foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises…‘The foreigner
comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all
acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities’

—Julia Kristeva

So often when we talk about acts of temple desecration, we tell stories about cycles of
violence, about retribution and punishment. But there are other, more hopeful, stories to which
we should listen, and which serve as a counterpoint to the narratives of nationalist conflict that
figure so prominently in contemporary work on South Asia and its diasporas. In this case, it is a
story in which physical violence, enacted quite literally upon Divine bodies and the body of a
temple—the community’s realization of a dream through the creation of a sacred site—was
responded to through a discourse that eschewed violence, while simultaneously engaging in
discipline.

On the evening of April 5, 2006, while still under construction, two young men broke
into the Hindu Society of Minnesota, located in Maple Grove, a suburb twenty miles Northwest
of Minneapolis. Along with the generalized destruction of the body of the temple, whose walls,
ceilings and windows were bashed in with baseball bats in over a hundred places, the young men

dismembered, decapitated, and smashed eleven of the fourteen murtis which had been handcrafted by artisans from India and were in the midst of being consecrated.

Every space has a story, and this is especially so with respect to those spaces that are considered holy. Stories of sacred spaces are often told and retold in order to inscribe an historical narrative and reinforce communal and individual attachments to that very place. A number of scholars—Vasudha Narayanan, Diana Eck, and Aparna Rayaprol—have illustrated how, even outside of India, sacred landscape is manifest for and by Hindus seeking to erect temples. Such practices are famously documented in the diaspora as far back as the 12th century with the construction of Angkor Wat, which lore has it was built in a single night as a result of Indra’s divine order. In more recent times, we need only look to the 1976 construction of the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburg, which was built with sacred topography in mind at the confluence of three rivers in the Penn Hills. Temple leaders broke ground on an American landscape mirroring that found in India. Constructed where the Allegheny, Monongahela, and the underground Ohio Rivers meet, harkening back to the sacred site of Prayag, where the Ganga, Yamuna, and subterranean Saraswati Rivers come together, and situated amidst hills, just as the Seven Hills of Tirupati, the Sri Venkateshvara Temple was the first of many U.S. temples that were more than just edifice, but symbols of the status and rootedness of the Hindu community on American soil.

(1) A SACRED LANDSCAPE IN MAPLE GROVE, MINNESOTA,

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“BY THE GRACE OF LORD VISHNU!”

In a similar fashion, after many years of searching for a site upon which to build, temple leaders finally settled upon the Maple Grove home for the Minnesota mandir, and it was, in their words, ordained “by the grace of Lord Vishnu;”⁴ that they found city administrators sympathetic to the project, and a parcel of land that met the requirements of the Vastu Sastras–located at the highest point of elevation in the area, with a freshwater stream running through it on the northern end. Only on that sacred landscape could they begin the long and complicated process of transforming a soybean field into a mandir, facing challenges from zoning ordinances to the construction of basic roads, sewage and irrigation facilities. “When we found the land [it] felt,” in the words of a community member, “as though God himself had granted all of our wishes.”

Following the sacred architectural texts, the temple building was constructed with its main entrance and the major shrine to Shri Vishnu, in the form of Varadaraja, facing toward the east, allowing for “the light of a summer sunrise to shine on the face of the central deity during special festivals and celebrations.”⁵ Modeled exactly upon the image found in Kanchipuram, and touted as the “first of its kind” in the U.S., the form of Varadaraja was intentionally made, “as a sign of immense respect,” one inch shorter than the image that stands at the center of the Perumal Temple in India. Indian geography, architecture, iconography mark a baseline in the referential

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⁴ Interview with devotee and reiterated in the Temple’s history. Unless otherwise specified, all references to the perspectives of Hindu Temple devotees are drawn from interviews I conducted myself over the period between 2009 and 2016, or which were done by my students, Colin MacArthur and/or Tyler Mixa (exclusively in 2010). Because of the public nature of these events and the desires of many temple attendees and leaders, most are referenced by name. However, when I use the term “devotee” or “worshipper” in the generic, I am quoting someone who wished to remain anonymous. I have not used pseudonyms in documenting this chapter. Colin MacArthur and I also developed a Case Study for the Religious Diversity in MN Initiative (http://religionsmn.carleton.edu/) about the Hindu Temple Vandalism incident, and I draw on that here. In particular, I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Sane who shared his experiences and perspectives with me and with my students. He also shared images, transcripts of ceremonies, which have proven invaluable. Many others, including Professor Rambachan, also took the time to share their viewpoints and sentiments and, for their willingness to do so, I am grateful.

and authenticating practices common in many Hindu diasporic Temple communities. In Maple Grove, for example, as another means of evoking holy sites in the homeland, and honoring the diverse regional and cultural heritages of the devotees who attend the mandir, the main prayer hall is designed to include 21 shrines, each modeled after a different temple from throughout India’s many regions. Shilpis were brought from India in order to construct “an authentic Hindu temple,” from outside-in, with gopuras and “every shrine of worship…. represent[ing] a proportionate human form in perfect harmony with the central icon.”

Architecturally, the construction committee\(^6\) sought an exclusively Indian aesthetic, that would still meet the community’s typically American,\(^7\) and modern desires (a theatre and large social hall space—for performances, weddings, and other events— classrooms, gift shop, boardroom, library, and kitchen), and the needs demanded by Minnesota’s winters (more space for coats, boots, as well as a significant amount of indoor space so that large-scale rituals and functions, which would normally be held outside, could still occur). Culturally, and even ritually, however, the temple leadership has always sought ways to instantiate its deep connection to the state and landscape of Minnesota. This is exemplified by their “Kshetra Geetam,” which they translate as “Temple Song,” but which literally means song of the land, and their “Kshetra Mangalam” (a mangalam is a prayer, which often concludes arati, wishing auspiciousness to those in attendance). The song, which was written to conform to traditional Indian music styles, is set to Ragam Saraswati (a particular melodic mode of classical Indian music that evokes

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\(^6\) The Construction Committee was comprised of Dr. Shashikant Sane, Byron Byraiah, Swami Palanisami, Umesh Singh, and Narender Venkata; the Shilpis were brought from Chennai by Padmashree Muthiah Sthapathi.

\(^7\) These spatial features are decidedly American addition to the architecture of “conventional” religious institutions, whose design traditionally reflected the fact that they were dedicated to worship as their primary function. This Zelinsky argues that this American “uniqueness” in spatial design and usage serves to strengthen narratives of American exceptionalism. See Wilber Zelinsky, “The Uniqueness of the American Religious Landscape,” Geographical Review 91, no. 3 (2001): pp. 565-85.
specific emotion/feeling), and *Talam Adi* (the particular meter, time and structure of the song, evoking the mood/energy-level). Written by Sriram Pidaparti and dedicated to Sri Vishnu and the Hindu Temple of Minnesota, the lyrics of the song, which is written in Sanskrit, but which has been transliterated into a number of regional languages, means, as per the Temple’s translation:

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I worship and bow in respect to
Sri Varadaraja Swamy (Sri Vishnu) who is the Lord of Bhoo devi and Lakshmi,
One who made the City of Maple Grove as His auspicious abode.
One who liberates us from sins as He is kind and compassionate.

One who resides in the divine Minnesota Temple, bestows bliss in both worlds (this material and that spiritual), and is realized by devotees. One who is in the refuge to many kinds of seekers, and fosters tolerance and peace.

One who shines with splendor along with deities such as Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and Subramanya, and is worshipped by way of thousand names (Vishnu Sahasra Nama) such as Sri Rama, Krishna, and Govinda!!
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When the song was premiered publicly for the first time, at one of the Temple’s opening celebratory events following the vandalism, the presenter emphasized that the song points out the core values of Hinduism, which she defined as “inclusiveness, peace, and tolerance.” She also noted that it recalls that Lord Varadaraja has made his home in Maple Grove, at this temple specifically. The “Kshetra Mangalam,” performs a similar function as the song through its integration of the particular locations of Maple Grove and Minnesota into a customary prayer for auspiciousness. The piece was also written by Sriram Pidaparti and set to the Raga Bhairavi. It praises the various Gods and Goddesses,

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8 Sriram Pidaparti, “Kshetra Geetam,” Hindu Temple of Maple Grove, Minnesota (2007). The premiere of the song in 2007 can be viewed here: “Kshetra Geetam (Temple Song),” Hindu Mandir MN Video, on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/TEcMGKda0e4](https://youtu.be/TEcMGKda0e4). As of October 2017, it had been viewed over 10,000 times. In the video documenting the premiere of the song, the camera cuts between the performers (who include young children and adults) and a puja before Sri Varadaraja, the Temple’s main murti, to whom the song is dedicated.
And can be translated to mean, Lord Ganesha, the God of [removing] obstacles, Lord Varadaraja, Holy form of Lord Vishnu, May Auspiciousness be victorious, and auspicious be auspicious. Holy Goddess, your wife, Bhudevi, please grant victory to auspiciousness, and auspiciousness to auspiciousness in Maple Grove, your abode, in the place of Minnesota. The Temple leadership and community has intentionally tied itself to the physical landscape of Minnesota, and specifically the city of Maple Grove in numerous ways, and their regular performance of the “Kshetra Geetam” and the “Kshetra Mangalam,” is a means by which such sentiments are repeatedly instantiated. The community’s sense of belonging—their loyalty, Americanness, and Minnesotaness—have been thoroughly affirmed and vernacularized at once. This has also been done through overt displays of patriotism. Like almost every immigrant or minority-religious house of worship in America, the Hindu temple proudly flies an American flag, along with the customary flags associated with Hindu Temples, a sign that signifies Americanness to Others, while the Sanskrit prayers that incorporate local spatial references reinforce that message internally, to the community itself.

Situated amidst farmland and new housing developments in a wealthy suburb that is over ninety-four percent white and predominantly Christian, the Temple—touted as the largest in North America at 43,000 square feet—is a destination for the estimated 40,000 Hindus who live in the Greater Twin Cities metro area, as well as for Hindus from other parts of the state and

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throughout the upper Midwest. While the Temple has been continuously expanding its use of the 10 acres of land to include such things as a community vegetable garden, it still has hopes to develop more with the building of a multi-generational Hindu residential complex and senior living facility, Maple Grove is currently a destination, as opposed to home, for most of the temple-goers, although that is changing slowly over time. With its enormous facility, including classrooms, a large auditorium and performance space, and full kitchen, it hosts many community and cultural events. The Temple has established a strong Hindu American Temple School (HATS), with its own curriculum, and the Hindu Youth of Minnesota (HYMN) group. In addition to the daily and festival pujas, the Temple offers regular yoga classes, which are open to the larger community, and in 2009, it established an outreach program that is focused on helping the homeless and poor (through work in shelters and food-banks, clothes, toy, and food drives), as well as fund-raising for places around the world that have been struck by natural disasters (i.e. Haiti, Uttarakhand, Chennai, Nepal). In 2016, in addition to the same type of national and international projects they facilitated in the past, the Temple leadership organized a 9/11 Service Day and blood drive to pay “respects to the victims of 9/11,” and engaged in volunteer work with children at the transitional facility Mary’s Place in order to “inculcate the values of self-confidence and good citizenry.” One participant in these Temple activities, Manju, spoke of how “doing these things communicates to the larger community that we are good people, good citizens, good neighbors…the kind of people you want to have living by you, people you can respect.” According to Mandir leaders, because the general Maple Grove community has perceived those who frequent the Hindu Temple as “outsiders,” navigating the relationship between the Temple and the larger Maple Grove publics has always been extremely important. The leadership has been conscious of this since the time of the Temple’s founding, and their
consciousness about the importance of public relations played a significant role in how the Mandir board decided to respond to the crime of the vandalism, which they “knew” also involved representing the “Hindu community” to the Twin Cities at large.

(2) BODIES IN PAIN: EXPERIENCING THE DESECRATION

The Hindu Mandir of Minnesota has a long history; it was founded in the late 1970s by a small group of families who met weekly in one another’s homes to study the Gita, celebrate festivals and perform pujas. They wanted “a place where they could connect with one another, where their children could learn about religion and culture, and their identities, as Hindus, could be preserved.”

In February of 1979, the Hindu Society of Minnesota purchased its first property—a church built more than one hundred years earlier and located in Minneapolis’ Northeast neighborhood. As they describe it, their first puja was held before modest framed pictures of Lord Rama’s family, Krishna, Ganesha, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Mahadev, but within a year the building had been renovated and the first murti, Sri Ganesha, was installed in 1983—a gift to the Mandir from Drs. Kumud and Shashikant Sane. That same year the Mandir instituted a week-long Hindu Youth Camp, which has expanded significantly since that time. More murtis were installed and further renovations were completed and by the early 1990s, the Hindu population in Minnesota had grown so much that the building did not have enough capacity. In the late 1990s, the Temple leadership began to search for an appropriate location and in December of 1998, they finally found an 80-acre plot of land that met their desired needs.

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10 “Temple History” on panels in an exhibition located in the downstairs foyer below the worship hall. “Temple History,” Hindu Mandir of Minnesota Exhibition.

11 1835 Polk Street NE, Minneapolis was the first home of the mandir. It was purchased with the assistance of three families who made the $15,000 down payment.
Members of the community came together to make the purchase possible, with the down-payment coming from one couple, Asha and Mahendra Nath. In 1999, they performed a *Bhumi Puja* (a ritual honoring and consecrating the earth), additional rituals were performed, including another Bhumi Puja in 2001 and a *Sudharshan Homa* (fire ritual) in honor of Lord Vishnu was conducted. Festival pujas—Sita Rama Kalyanam and Sri Krishna Mahotsava in 2002 and 2003 respectively—were also conducted. On October 4, 2003, on Vijaya Dashami—a festival, also known as Dasara and celebrated at the end of Durga Puja and Navratri—the temple broke ground and formally began construction.\(^{12}\)

Despite this long history, since April 5\(^{th}\) of 2006, the Mandir’s story has been inextricably linked to that of the vandalism, which has become a, if not the, defining moment in the Temple’s narrative. Only a few weeks before the first Kumbhabhishekam was scheduled to take place, the “mettle of the Hindu Community was tested.” As Shivanthi Sathanandan—a former temple trustee, and director of the temple’s public relations during the vandalism until December of 2009—conveyed it, the vandalism “made us cognizant of the importance of community support...[and] changed the way we approached every single event or milestone we had at the Temple” from that time forward.\(^{13}\)

When community members first set eyes upon their vandalized Temple, they were, in the words of one devotee, “horrified.” One woman described the sight, saying, “it was like someone was piercing my heart for real. For a moment, I thought I was having a heart attack.” Anantanad Ramabachan, Professor in the Religion department at St. Olaf College, repeatedly spoke of the intense “pain” that the vandalism caused specifically because, in his words, “it was not only an

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\(^{12}\) Ibid. I believe that they are planning to put much of this history online, although it is not currently available via their website.

\(^{13}\) Sathanandan stated this in January of 2010, but events as recent as 2016 confirm that this has been borne out.
act of violence…[but an] act of desecration.” Byron Byraiah described the incident as feeling “like someone broke into your house and essentially cut off the heads and limbs of family members,” a sentiment and image he has evoked numerous times when speaking of the vandalism and which was echoed by other temple members, who said they felt as though violence had been committed upon their own family. One devotee said that simply upon hearing about the desecration of the murtis, that she felt as though someone was “pulling her [own] body apart,” and, hesitatingly, she described it as a “rape.” Another middle-aged devotee, too shy to be named here, painted the following image of the scene when describing what she encountered after the desecration:

Many of us here are so very lucky to have homes, to be able to decorate them with furniture and art, and beautiful things, and we would feel personally violated if someone were to rob us, and even more, though, if they were to trash our homes. Can you imagine? But this space, our Temple, is, for so many of us, more than a house. This is a place we built together, these are our finest things, here we have everything that matters and this is where all of us come together to feel connected. This is where our children come to learn about who they really are… And this is where we find God….Can you imagine? This is where our prayers come alive, bhajan singing, pujas, our Pujaris live here now! These murtis, you have to realize, were everything for us, our hope, the beauty of our home traditions, a way to bring India here…. To desecrate this place, this is so much more than a home invasion. This was a very disturbing moment, totally unsettling…I almost don’t know how to describe it. It was as though someone was trying to kill my hopes, to defile our gods and spit on our prayers. There are no words for this kind of pain that I felt when I saw the mandir. No words. I felt ill, like I was physically sick….It was a long time ago now, three and a half years, but if I think about it, that feeling, it comes right back.

One middle-aged man said, whom I encountered a Sunday in 2012, standing alone at the memorial garden, reflected,

I wasn’t even in Minnesota when this happened. We only moved here in 2010, but when I saw the pictures of the gods laid out and broken on the floor, even I feel this sensation. Maybe it is just anger, but I feel this weight in my limbs and I can’t help think, “is this what they would have done to us if they found people in the building?” If you can do this to something so holy? No respect, none at all for god, then you certainly don’t respect human beings. It pains me in my body to think
this….I don’t know why, but I just come here sometimes before I go into the Temple.

These descriptions of the physical violence and bodily pain, which are still a vivid part of the private narratives of temple members, stand in stark contrast to another, public, discourse that emerged as dominant among temple leaders, which emphasized their future aspirations for the community and their pride about their laudable and virtuous response to the crime.

(3) EMBODYING FORGIVENESS & MORAL VIRTUE

Temple rhetoric and literature regularly affirms the notion that nothing happens without a reason, “cognizant” of the role played by “the divine GRACE.” In the aftermath of the vandalism, a number of Temple leaders viewed this an opportunity to reflect on the type of people and community they desired to be. Dr. Sane spoke of how this required careful religious “discernment,” as the community had to reflect on its image and “who they hoped to see in the mirror looking back at them.” From the beginning, the Temple’s emphasis was on what the incident could and would say about the Hindu community, as opposed to what it communicated about the vandals. After the fact, community members often speak of how the vandalism served as a challenging spiritual exercise, which ultimately has changed how they approach the world and their interactions with others.

Anju, a devotee at the Temple said, “In that moment, I felt total despair, but when I look at the new ones [she pointed at the murtis], see those ones that survived [and she walked over and stood before the Shiva and prostrated. She resumed talking once she stood up.] I feel hopeful again and proud of all that the Temple has accomplished.” In later conversations, Anju spoke of how the vandalism has been a lesson in her daily life and a reminder of how she should act with family members. “So often, I can feel myself getting tremendously angry when my daughter
disagrees with me, or my son leaves his backpack in the middle of the hallway. When I am mindful, I stop and think: if we can forgive those who did such to our temple, why should I not find the ability to do that with those I love.” Anju echoed the philosophy of the mandir in saying that forgiveness did not imply that she would not teach her children to do things differently in the future, in the same way, the Temple sought to teach the “boys who had completely lost their way.” Arpit Panda, who grew up at the Temple and wrote a piece about the incident before she left for college described her experience of the vandalism in a similar way,

I have learned to forgive. Life does not come without its challenges. A number of misfortunes can happen to people and we come across lots of people who might hurt us in some way or the other. But, it is always important to forgive and to keep looking ahead. When I heard the news about the temple being vandalized a couple of years ago, I was angry that some misguided people could desecrate something that the community had worked so hard to build. Yet, the conciliatory manner in which the temple dealt with the miscreants and the spirit of forgiveness that it promulgated left an indelible impression on me. I vowed to always forgive, no matter what.14

Dr. Shashikant Sane, who is one of the founding fathers of the mandir, a revered teacher, and trustee of the Temple, was instrumental in guiding the Temple in its response. As the board chair during the time of the vandalism, and the leader to whom many public matters were often deferred, Dr. Sane was and has remained, insistent that a response other than anger and hatred needed to prevail. In one conversation about the incident, he said,

The devotees in the temple were obviously upset. It was an emotional drain on the people. Anytime during the fit of anger, emotional excitement, we don’t think rationally. But at that time, you have to control emotions. Take a timeout. Take a deep breath….analyze the situation...What we have is the present...where we make the right choices to make the future better for everyone.

You have to let it go, I’m not obliging...the vandals. Selfishly, I’m helping myself. But at

the same time, you want to make sure the community is healing. But also helping the people who themselves did the inappropriate action.

Eight days after the vandalism—after law enforcement agencies began a thorough investigation, and local and national media had covered the incident—the Temple leadership organized a community forum, which was attended by six to seven hundred people. They invited numerous speakers, civic leaders, and members of other faith communities in an effort to discuss the implications of the crime for the larger community. In this context, an internal tension about the proper nature of the public discourse and appropriate punitive actions arose. Dr. Sane’s position, which was shared by others, was that the Temple community needed to transcend the pain and emotionality of the event to focus on other Hindu values. Other community members, however, desired acknowledgment of the intensity of the physical violence and the pain that was inflicted and expressed frustration that the vandalism had not been classified as a “hate crime,” a designation, or lack thereof, that remains significant even in the discourse to this day.

Dr. Sane argued that both the news media and certain members of the Hindu community, who he suggested had victim “complexes,” sought to deem it as a racially or religiously motivated biased crime because it sells newspapers and fans the flames of difference and hatred. Professor Rambachan, on the other hand, warned his fellow Hindu community members against “an unwillingness to admit and be challenged by the reality of prejudice in our midst,” claiming “we cannot ignore the exclusivist tendencies and the discomfort with diversity that are also a part of the American story.” Rambachan called on community members to reflect upon their (including his own) previously “rosy” impression of community relations. In this way, he sought to acknowledge the pain of the attack and help the community realize their vulnerability as a collective body. Quite strikingly, the internal debate about how to respond to the vandalism was relatively short-lived. Over and over again, Hindu Temple leaders reiterated in public forums, to
civic leaders, law enforcement, in front of officers of the court, and to the press that Minnesota was their home; they loved Maple Grove and were proud to have chosen to have built their Temple there.15

A few days after the forum, during which a tremendous outpouring of support from the greater Twin Cities interfaith and civic community was expressed, the Temple decided, under the leadership, and with the financial support of Drs. Shashikant and Kumud Sane, to offer a ten-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and successful prosecution of the vandals. Three weeks later, Tyler William Tuomie of Andover, MN, and Paul Gus Spakousky of Orono, MN, were arrested, after a person who identified him/herself as a friend of theirs made a report to the police. Both young men were charged with three felonies: one count of burglary in the third degree, and two counts of damage to property in the first degree.

Once caught, under the leadership of Dr. Sane, a determination was made that the Mandir should ultimately assume a public position of forgiveness, acting as “model citizens,” in the

15 Other research I have conducted about Somali Muslim communities in MN suggests that the Hindu temple’s response is not as unique as it might seem. In December of 2009, in St. Cloud, MN, the Somali Muslim community was targeted with a number of incidents of vandalism. In specific, offensive cartoons (depicting the Prophet Muhammad engaged in lude acts, among other things) were posted outside of the masjid and Somali owned businesses. At community forums in the wake of the attacks, Somali Muslim community members repeatedly stated their love of Minnesota, how happy they were in St. Cloud, how they felt safe and at home here. When the perpetrator was caught, community leaders made a concerted choice not to retaliate. Instead, they sought to enact the posture of what they understood to be model citizens, who were deferential to authority, appreciative of all they had and did not create conflict. Although in the case of the Hindu temple, the level of damage was profoundly more significant materially, in both cases, the desecration laid bare not only the vulnerability of what each community held as sacred but their own physical and bodily vulnerabilities as a community. The striking parallels between these two communities’ responses speak to a larger phenomenon about minority responses to violence. Post-traumatic communal discourse can itself produce new types of subjectivities among the injured. In the wake of the violence, for example, the Hindu community was able to gain a measure of control in the face of the attack, by seizing their power to frame the narrative. In the past two years, I have been working on considering the Maple Grove incident in comparison to three others in which minority groups were the victims of hate crimes—Somali Muslims in Minnesota, Sikhs in Wisconsin, and Jews in Kentucky. I argue that specifically in contexts wherein a community’s social position, power, and sense of security are tenuous, a collective ethos and narrative about the model citizenships are strategically produced, in ways that become central to communal self-perception and modes of public and civic engagement.
words of one temple tour guide. While the choice to take this position was not unanimous, once decided upon, the community came together, supported the plan, and took on the discourse as their own with tremendous pride.

It is worth noting, that in the police documents—which were not made public and about which Temple leaders do not know the details—it was clear that the young men did not simply stumble upon the Temple without motivation or animus, or, as the Temple website recounts it, plead “guilty to their heinous acts of ‘Stupidity,’ as they described” them.16 According to the report written by Detective Seidenkranz, a friend of the vandals reported that the night after the incident took place, Burke and Tuomie referenced the Temple by saying they “were just building like a Satan’s temple,” but that the police shouldn’t classify it as a “hate crime” because Paul Gus had attended a Christian school and you wouldn’t want his actions to be linked to Christians.17 The fact that this incident may have indeed been motivated by hate only serves, in the opinion of many within the Hindu community, as greater proof of the power of forgiveness and the practice of non-retribution. This position was not simply about the cultivation of a private disposition or a form of personal spiritual acceptance, but it was a courageously and strategically public one as well.

The case was prosecuted by Hennepin County District Attorney, now Senator, Amy Klobuchar. The vandals were found guilty. According to court records, “the maximum penalty …for this crime…is imprisonment for 5 years and/or a fine of 10,000.00. The minimum sentence required by the statute is not less than 60 months.” Before the judge ruled on the sentence, Dr. Sane, on behalf of the Temple, requested that the judge be lenient, and eschew the cultural norm


of “eye for an eye,” “allowing them to pursue the life of productive citizens,” and keep them from becoming “hardened criminals.” He also requested that their sentence involve spending significant time at the Mandir, including studying Hinduism. This last request signaled a significant departure from sentencing norms, in that the state does not normally mandate religious education as a part of restitution and rehabilitation. However, very little about how the incident proceeded was normative, and the sentencing was no exception. The young men were encouraged to enter a plea of guilty, and Hennepin County District Court judge Kevin Burke sentenced both to thirty days in jail, five years of probation, two-hundred hours of community service at the temple, attendance at a Hindu Society course, and required attendance at a meeting with the victims at the Temple, and payment of $96,254 in restitution (which would cover less than one third of the estimated $300,000 in damage, not including the significant delay that this caused in the opening of the Temple). Both Tuomie and Spakousky were involved in alcohol-related offenses after the vandalism and before the sentencing, and Judge Burke also ordered them both to receive a chemical dependency evaluation. In his decision, Judge Burke filed a memorandum to explain his sentencing choice to grant the defendants a work release, which allows someone who is serving a sentence to work outside the place of incarceration, or other public work venues that have been approved by the court. Judge Burke wrote,

The defendants conduct merits the denial of work release. However, this is National Crime Victims’ Rights Week….The victims in this case have, since the inception of this senseless act, been role models for this community. The Temple’s call for a combination of accountability, as well as compassion, would make it singly inappropriate for the court not to try to sentence in accordance with the ideal that the Temple leadership not just preaches but practices.

The way in which the community—in the courtroom, in the media, and in their own internal discourse—established the actual value of the murtis also emerged as a part of their public narrative and discourse was complex, particularly because of the ways in which the murtis could be viewed as “idols” by others. Seeking acceptance and recognition from the non-Hindu community, law enforcement, the court officials, community members in Maple Grove, and politicians, Hindu Temple leadership emphasized the physical labor of the shilpis [ritual artisans] and the specialized artistry and skill, passed from generation to generation, involved in crafting these images of the divine.
As ordered by the court, on August 27, 2006, Tuomie and Spakousky returned to the Temple, with their parents. They were dressed “appropriately,” and came in a manner that temple leaders described as “contrite.” Upon their first return to the Temple after the incident, “the vandals,” were transformed into “the forgiven,” into Tyler and Paul, as they are now referred to by many of the Temple’s leadership. Approximately fifty members of the Temple community gathered in the Temple auditorium and, as instructed by Dr. Sane, Tyler and Paul were literally greeted with hugs, embraced by each attendee as they entered the hall. The young men were offered a meal, and they then publicly conveyed their apologies, stating that their actions had been “stupid.” As the community gathered to welcome the young men into the mandir, members offered their forgiveness and expressed their gratitude to Tyler and Paul for coming back, as it would allow them to close a difficult chapter in the Temple’s life. They also described the pain that the men’s actions had caused, inflicting more than just physical violence, but violating the sacred through the desecration of their temple and the destruction of the murtis. Mandir leaders also repeatedly articulated the importance of the Hindu values of non-violence and forgiveness.

(4) HINDUS AS PUBLIC MODELS OF MORAL VIRTUE & CITIZENSHIP

The incident was covered widely in local and national media. The Hindu Temple began to get a tremendous amount of attention, and Temple leaders were featured speakers at interfaith and community-wide events.19 The Kominas—a Brooklyn based Muslim punk band (who performs what they call Punkistani)— heard about the incident and decided to hold a concert, on

19 This is still happening today. On September 16, 2017, on the night of Selichot (literally meaning “apologies”), which falls the Saturday evening before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, begins, Temple Israel in Minneapolis, MN, invited Dr. Sane to teach the community about the meaning and process of forgiveness.
June 17, 2006, at the Galapagos Art Space to benefit the Mandir. When they wrote the Mandir to inform them about the concert, Vaddu Chari, then the Temple treasurer wrote them a short thank you note, beginning with the words, “Salam Aleikum Basim Mian.” Band leaders were so moved that they posted the following on Sepia Mutiny, a South Asian online forum and blog:

He said Salam Aleikum to me! I can’t get over how cool that is. As Indians, Pakistanis, Bengalis, Sri Lankans…just as a huge diaspora, there’s a lot we can do to reinforce the ties to our des [land]. Especially nowadays when hostility regarding outsourcing, Islamophobia, and Johnny Appleseed’s own American bigotry has been piled on the shoulder of every Desi in America.20

In this case, South Asian diasporic solidarity was inspired by the incident, while in Minnesota many local Christian communities praised the temple for their displays of mercy and goodness. At a community-wide interfaith event in early 2007, an individual active at his Presbyterian church said, “I can think of no better Christian than the Hindus at the Temple in Maple Grove. We should all look to them when we are wondering what does, ‘Turn the Other Cheek,’ really mean… It’s a reminder that there really is one God who looks down on us all, and we should not judge people because of the way they worship.” This response was, in many ways, what the Temple leadership hoped for, only they sought to have forgiveness recognized as an essential Hindu value rather than a Christian one. Yet the fact that Christians could see values shared between the traditions, and that Hindus could be recognized by others as exemplars were exactly what many of the Hindu community members had desired to be the outcome.

Over the course of two years, the young men came regularly to the Temple, worked there, and studied Hinduism and “the value of tolerance” with Dr. Sane. It is with great pride that leaders of the mandir noted that the court, as well as civic leaders, have repeatedly referred to the

Minnesota Hindu community as “ideal citizens.” Congressmen, Senators, State Legislators, and the press have all been brought to the Temple and told this story of moral virtue and model citizenship. In turn, the community has had their response reflected back to them through public accolades, and the praise offered by many of the same civic leaders who they invited into the Temple. While a number of devotees spoke of how assuming this position of forgiveness was difficult for them, many described how the act of forgiveness was transformative and pushed them to put their values into practice,

I struggled with my demons. Gandhi said that ‘forgiveness must be unconditional.’ I understand that love is unconditional, but forgiveness is harder. He taught that it is not so hard to forgive those we love, and he is right. But forgiving our enemies is a true test and doing this has been very challenging…. But I didn’t just do it for myself, although it was the most powerful spiritual practice I have tried. I did this for my children and for the Hindu community—this way we could model for Minnesotans the best of what Hinduism can be, we could teach them by our example.

This Gandhian discourse effectively shifted the focus away from any public discussion about Hindu “idol worship”—conceptions of gods as/in images, from the murtis as both physical objects and divine bodies to moral values and virtues that were readily comprehensible to a non-Hindu public. The community was well aware that, murtis, when rendered as idols, have long been a symbol for all that is depraved, pagan, base within Hinduism.

(5) *Vigraha Samadhi*—Memorializing Murtis: An American Ritual of Mourning

To destroy a murti has long been understood as means to attack the very foundation of Hinduism, the Hindu body politic, and, in many cases, Hindu bodies themselves. However, customarily, murtis that have been destroyed and desecrated lose their status as objects of reverence, for the divine is not contained by the stone, even when the stone is a residence of the divine. The Mandir’s attachment to and ritual practices surrounding the desecrated bodies marks
a departure from normative Hindu practice in ways that are illustrative of both the particular circumstances in Maple Grove and a prevalent sentiment and disposition within diasporic Hinduism.

On Memorial Day, May 25, 2009, the Hindu Temple of Minnesota held a ceremony, which was described as being, “in accordance with the ancient scriptures of the Hindu religion.” The Temple had officially buried the eleven partially consecrated murtis that were desecrated and damaged during the vandalism. The ritual ceremonies were officiated by the temple pujaris, and Dr. Sane and Professor Rambachan both spoke. In attendance, were many community members, the “forgiven”—Tuomie and Spakousky, as well as civic leaders. The site of the burial was later dedicated as the sacred location for the Hindu Temple of Minnesota’s Smruti Udyaan, Garden of Remembrance, which is intended to serve as a community garden for meditation, prayer, and reflection. Temple leaders articulated their sentiments in the following statement, made at the dedication:

This Memorial Garden will serve as a permanent reminder of the feeling of unity that was inspired within the local community following the vandalism. This Memorial Garden fondly called as Smruti Udyaan, or the Garden of Remembrance will remain located on the Temple premises, but will be open always to the public and will artistically symbolize themes which are central to the Hindu religion namely Truth & Non-Violence (Satya & Ahimsa), Forgiveness & Forbearance & much more (Kshama & Kshanti), Love & Compassion (Prem & Dayaa).21

By choosing to create a memorial garden for the murtis, as opposed to immersing them in water as is generally deemed more preferable and certainly more common, it has created a permanent space that enables a physical pilgrimage (devotees often walk there to sit, contemplate, and memorialize). The burial marks a very distinctive shift in normative ritual

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21 Although I was in attendance at the event, the actual texts of the speeches and statements were provided to me by Dr. Sane, and I have maintained their capitalization and punctuation style for that reason.
practice around murtis, although it is not technically a burial ground. Although the markers on the ground do not have any words on them, as might a typical grave, they still serve as powerful reminders. The fact that the murtis were buried and a garden of memorial has been dedicated to them belies the tension inherent in the community’s response, as does the name chosen for the ritual itself, Vigraha Samadhi. Speaking to somewhat contradictory ideas, the name of the ceremony suggests that the vigraha, literally “form, body, or murti,” has achieved samadhi, a state of heightened consciousness, equanimity, or liberation (moksha) from life itself. The affective dimensions of the rituals the community created are best characterized by the tension present in the language that they employed to describe them. The memorializing of the murtis was coupled with the dedication and consecration of the Smriti Udayan (memorial garden), to be a permanent physical place wherein the forms, their divine manifestations, and/or vandalism could be remembered. At the end of pujas, devotees (in both temples and homes) usually perform some type of visarjana ritual. Depending upon sectarian theological differences about the very nature of the material image, visarjana may be interpreted differently, either marking the end of the period of ritual offering, or, more commonly, functioning as a kind of “dismissal” of the deity, who has graciously made a home in the image. However, when a murti has been desecrated the performance of visarjana is not conventional ritual practice.

We may be able to understand the Vigraha Samadhi to have functioned as a kind of visarjana. Although those images are no longer worshipped, in the case of the MN Temple, the murtis have remained physically and psychologically a permanent part of the temple body and

22 There are numerous complex theological approaches to the question of how the Divine actually assumes residence in the image. In many cases, the divine is understood to be wholly resident in the form, while still transcending it.

23 I have struggled to find information that points to a general consensus about the proper disposal of desecrated images. A number of leaders in the Maple Grove community assert that it is agreed upon that images should be immersed in water, but when water is not available then burial is acceptable. To my knowledge there is no “murti burial ground,” and no custom of visiting desecrated images.
landscape. On Memorial Day 2010, one year after the Vigraha Samadhi ritual, with American flags waving, the community invited dignitaries, including Senator Klobuchar to come and speak and pay their respects at the murtis’ graves. As Dr. Sane put it, the murtis, the devas’ physical material bodies had “done their work, and served their purpose.” They could now leave this earth, and their presence in the memorial garden would not only be a reminder of the violence, but it would be a call to specific Hindu values, and, as the newspapers described it, a reminder of the “Maple Grove temple’s exceptional forgiveness of the two men, for whom it pursued…redemption.”

In a vein similar to Dr. Sane, Professor Rambachan also shared his reflection about what the garden should symbolize:

The consecration of this garden of memory signifies, in a special way, the closing of a deeply disturbing chapter in the history of the Hindu tradition in Minnesota. When the history of Hinduism in Minnesota is written, the events that bring us to this moment will be among the most painful. In describing these tragic events, I hope that historian will focus more on the response of the Hindu community and not so much on the acts of destruction. A community, and especially a religious one, is defined not by what is done to it, but by how it chooses to respond. We do not control what others do to us, but we control and are responsible for our response.

The Ramayana compares the difference between the unrighteous and righteous to that obtaining [sic] between an axe and a sandal tree. The axe that chops the tree returns saturated with the tree’s fragrance. The sandal tree does not waver from its nature. In the face of violence to our sacred murtis, the Hindu community stood faithful to our ancient and enduring values. Our response was two-fold. First, we responded with resolve and firmness to go forward with the completion of our temple. There was no wavering or hesitation. Second, and even more important, we responded with compassion for the two young men who committed dreadful acts. Recognizing that their actions were rooted in deep ignorance that expressed itself in ill-will, the Hindu community sought their rehabilitation and education.

This effected, what we hope, is a genuine transformation that makes them better human beings and citizens. My hope is that this garden will serve all religious communities in

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24 Although I attended the event, and have my own notes and recordings of these speeches, I have chosen, at times, to quote from this article, because they confirm and clarify my own poor-quality recording from the day. Kelly Smith, “Groundbreaking to be Held for New Garden at Hindu Temple in Maple Grove,” Star Tribune, Minneapolis, October 16, 2015.
Minnesota as a place where disputes may be resolved peacefully and reconciliation promoted. Let it be a place where the inspiring story of the Hindu community is remembered. When we sit and walk here, let us find the wisdom, love, and will to be kind to those who are unkind and generous to those who are uncharitable.

In his reference to the metaphor of the axe and the sandal tree, Rambachan seeks to reinforce the vision of the Hindu community that he believed was evident in the community’s response to the vandalism, but which he also understands to be an aspirational vision for the future—it is those elements of the community he hopes will endure. The reality is that like any community there is not only one Hindu perspective or approach to the world in Maple Grove, despite the powerful public narrative that suggests otherwise. In fact, in the Temple, there are those who are writing curriculum that is emblematic of the most hateful elements of Hindutva, and there are those, like Rambachan, who are pursuing progressive Hindu causes at every turn. Telling the story of “the community’s response” as though it was completely unified, reveals one of the ways that Temple leaders have tried to use the vandalism, and all the many public rituals and memorials surrounding it, as a way to hold up an idealized vision of Hindus and Hinduism for themselves, but also, and maybe more importantly, for others as well. Through his reference to the fact that it was the Hindu Temple community who taught these boys how to become “better human beings and citizens,” Rambachan strategically holds up Hindus as exemplary models of citizenship in contrast to the white, American-born Christians who are normally presumed to be the standard bearers.

Home to numerous mega-churches and large evangelical community, redemption may not have only been achieved for the men—whom Dr. Sane still meets for lunch each year—but also for the Hindu community. In an awkward political moment, the Maple Grove mayor, Mark Steffenson, was quoted as saying that, “In the end, as strange as it seems, the event turned out
great for our community; it brought attention to the Hindu community.” Senate Klobuchar, who has her own personal relationship to the vandalism incident—when reflecting on the Mandir leaders’ choice to continue to expand the garden, “which will soon bloom over” the burial grounds of the statues—said, “This peace garden will be living proof that kindness and compassion can change lives,” and the forgiven, “will always serve as a reminder of the transformative nature of education, forgiveness, and grace.”

For Temple leaders, who continue to describe the experience as painful, the desecration was also a “teaching moment.” Education was understood to have happened on a host of levels. Not only did Hindus personally and communally discipline themselves to practice the value of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in the face of violence, but they modeled the behavior for their children. The Hindu community continues to reiterate the narrative in a host of ways—through rituals, recounted on Temple-tours and in temple literature and histories, in lessons for children, and as a focal point for meditation sessions held in the garden. The broader Minnesota community, too, continues to proudly reference the vandalism and the Hindu community’s response. Interfaith and civic leaders claim it and Maple Grove Hindus as their own, embodiments what it truly means to be “Minnesota nice.”

(6) REMEMBERING THE VIOLENCE, REPETITIVE UTTERANCES: CONSTITUTING A MODEL RELIGIOUS MINORITY & BODY OF CITIZENS

In her book, *Martyrdom and Memory*, Elizabeth Castelli writes,

Even the most private memories are preserved in language, which renders them social entities rather than the products of individual consciousness. Memories are processed through language, which provides the conventional and customary meanings that then refract back onto the memory. Through retelling—whether

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
narrative, performative, representational, even liturgical—memory accrues meaning through discursive and embodied repetition.\textsuperscript{27}

The memory of the vandalism at the Maple Grove mandir is repeated in innumerable ways, and it has indeed accrued tremendous meaning in the process. Until recently, when the Hindu Mandir of Minnesota began a redesign of its website, the site included detailed descriptions about each murti installed at the temple (and I expect these descriptions will be reinstated when the new site is complete). After telling the story of each deva or devi—why Ganesh is the remover of Obstacles, why Sri Jagannath is made of wood and is flanked by his siblings—descriptions of the murtis who survived the vandalism ended with references like the following:

Many devotees may not know that prior to our first Kumbhabhishekam in June 2006, our temple murthis were destroyed and disfigured as a result of vandalism. Lord Shiva is one of the few murthis, unaffected by this vandalism. The murthi did not have the slightest disfiguring mark. May Lord Shiva continue to protect us and our community!

Our murthi of Sri Subramanya was unaffected by the vandalism of 2006. May Lord Subramanya continue to protect us and our community!

Lord Varadaraja in His magnificent glory stands at a majestic height of 8 feet 7 inches. This height is slightly less than Sri Varadaraja in Kanchipuram temple. In April 2006, our temple was vandalized and many of the murthis were destroyed and disfigured. Lord Varadaraja is one of the few murthis which did not have the slightest disfiguring mark. May Lord Varadaraja continue to protect us and our community!

For devotees, these murthis take on a particular kind of power, having faced destruction and survived, they are associated with protection, recounted in explicit ways that are distinct from the murthis that did not survive. This type of repetitive utterance about the vandalism—on the website, in the temple history, literature, in narratives of temple leaders, on tours of the temple, given each Saturday and Sunday, and at every public temple functions where community and

civic leaders are present—is telling. The narrative bespeaks something about the enduring embodiment of the act of desecration itself. At once, pain and pride are experienced in the retelling of the story by devotees. When they pray before different murtis, some devotees do not only take darshan of the Divine, but they also engage in an act of smriti (remembrance) that references the vandalism, conscious that a particular deity has endured, they view its presence in the temple with a special significance. Ironically, perhaps, the very creation and physical placement of the Smriti Udayan necessitate that the first and last thing that visitors to the Temple see is the memorial garden, the site of the burial. In some way, therefore, the ritual may not have enacted visarjana—a letting go—but instead it may repeatedly inspire collective memories among the mandir’s devotees—facilitating a holding on.

The community continually repeats the narrative of the vandalism and the physical and emotional pain that was inflicted upon them. They have materialized these memories with a dedicated burial ground for the murtis. At the same time, the Temple leadership has developed a well-worn and known discourse that celebrates their ability to have transcended the bodily-material violence in the service of higher values.

In 2015, when talking about the murtis, Dr. Sane was quoted as saying, “You can imagine burning a cross to the ground, how a Christian would feel….To us, they’re like martyrs.” In his use of the word martyr, Sane conveys a powerful dimension of the way the story of the vandalism has been told. It is, in part, precisely because the murtis became martyrs that the story of forgiveness has gained its power. As Deities, the murtis can’t be martyrs, but as material embodiments of what is most important to the Hindu community, they have become martyrs through the act of repetition and memory.

28 Smith, “Groundbreaking…” Star Tribune.
This repetition is significant. As a mode of performativity, these practices (narrative, ritual, liturgical, etc.) enact, what Judith Butler describes as, "the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena”—identities, communities, affects and emotions—“that it regulates and constrains.” The way in which the discourse of the vandalism is performed by temple leaders and in temple literature has functioned to constitute the body-politic and devotional-body of the temple, which is itself comprised, through retellings of the vandalism story, of a constellation of bodies (the murtis, shilpis, the body of the temple itself, vandals/the forgiven, the social body of the temple, the community of Maple Grove). Through these narratives, the Hindu community itself has emerged as an entity—both a model religious minority and body of citizens.

In her book, Precarious Life, Judith Butler writes, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what is to have lost (somebody). Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved.” Experiences of loss can be understood and processed in myriad ways. Butler writes that part of our experience of loss can emerge from our “exposure to [the] possibility [of loss], if not its realization.” And, “This means,” she writes,

that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

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29 I use “performativity” here, as Judith Butler has used it, to signify the ongoing reiteration of the utterances.


32 Ibid.
Ultimately, the desecration of divine bodies led to the development of a temple body politic and a public discourse about Hinduism, wherein emotions of pain and violence were to be referenced and publicly eschewed, in favor of a discourse emerging from the Hindu values of reconciliation, repair, and forgiveness.

When I first began doing research at the Hindu Mandir in Maple Grove, in 2009 and 2010, the community members would not speak of the incident without the permission of Dr. Sane, the party-line about the vandalism was highly controlled to produce a narrative, and set of regulatory norms by which the discourse of forgiveness was established for the public and for the temple body as a whole. At the same time, the mandir leaders’ descriptions of the physical damage to the temple body and to the divine bodies were coupled with a valuation of physical labor by the *shilpis* (the artisans) who toiled on each image with care. The bodies of the forgiven were disciplined through a type of didactic embrace and instruction, and the temple community was disciplined (at times perhaps even constrained) in its speech regarding the event. This discipline has been referenced, by community members themselves, as a type of practice, a yoga of sorts that worked to instill a particular outlook and collective consciousness, helping them to remember that their anger, rage, and pain, should be replaced by other higher emotions. Time has changed things a bit, and the politics of discourse at the temple has loosened up to some extent. Dr. Sane is no longer a gatekeeper in the same way, but the story itself is still told in a disciplined and almost formulaic way, and devotees continue to reference the power of the experience in transforming their own sense of self, and more commonly, transforming the way Minnesotans have come to see the Hindu community in Maple Grove.
“The forgiven” were disciplined, not simply through the powers of the judiciary and law enforcement, but more so (and this was at the request of temple leaders), through their required bodily presence at the temple, and literal embrace by temple members when they arrived. The “forgiven” were disciplined through a mandated order to help to repair the damage and to listen and learn about Hinduism from temple leaders. It was a didactic discipline, as well as a regulatory and directive one. Temple leaders speak with pride about how they helped to rehabilitate the boys, even helping one of them to go to college. But, even more than ten years later, Tyler and Paul are still disciplined in some ways. Their names and stories are referenced repeatedly. Every time the temple is written up in the newspaper, or covered on television, the vandalism is mentioned and so too is their act of transgression. Tyler and Paul too engage in repetitive utterances, telling reporters and community leaders time and again about how fortunate they were for the community and their response. At the Vigraha Samadhi, Tyler said, “This is closure from what we did. These icons meant so much to them.” With the temple’s help, he said that he and Paul have turned their lives around, “I think, if this situation ever happened to me, or the Hindu society and Dr. Sane weren’t so forgiving, where would I be?” Still ten years later, he came again to serve as a symbol of the temple’s generosity and a living reminder of the ideals that the community upholds. Without the continued reference to the acts that gave rise to the forgiveness, the temple’s “martyrs” and the memories of their own righteousness disappear.\(^{33}\)

Maple Grove Hindus experienced the vandalism as a profound realization of the community’s vulnerability, making them uncertain about their abilities, in a predominately white and Christian suburb, to be seen as good neighbors. In the wake of the violence, the community’s

\(^{33}\) The irony, to some extent, is that this form of restorative justice means that the young men never escape the act of vandalism committed in their youth, but they are constituted publicly through repeated references to their transgressions.
response was an act of strategic citizenship, positioning them favorably within the public domain. For many, though, the temple’s response also marked a powerful turning point in their own psychic lives. The act of restorative justice involved facing, and physically engaging the perpetrators, and the pain they caused, in a way that required community members to acknowledge their humanity. In that respect, the temple has effectively included ‘the forgiven’ as members of their community—recognizing that they need them, as a demonstration, to tell their own story, and constitute themselves. In the face of the vandalism, their own suffering yielded “an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability, and dependence,” which Judith Butler suggests can be resources if we wrestle with them ethically.34

While the events that occurred in Maple Grove, Minnesota are certainly unique, the Temple’s response was partially an expression of collective desires that I have seen within Hindu and other immigrant communities throughout the United States. Desires for and struggles to secure public acceptance and recognition have long preoccupied minority and immigrant groups, shaping their choices about how to comport, and represent themselves. I do not discount the genuine desires that community members expressed to act righteously and embody what they understand to be core Hindu values, but I also think that their decision to respond as they did involved calculations about how Others would perceive them—not as brown idol worshippers, but as exemplars of moral virtue; the community’s profound spiritual act of forgiveness was simultaneously a strategic act of citizenship, constituting the religious community as social and political subjects through their alignment with irreplaceable values.

CONCLUSION
DIASPORIC DESIRES REVISITED

I began this dissertation with the assertion that Hindu bodies and identifications have genealogies, coming into being through a variety of relationships between individuals and others and in relationship to physical spaces, material objects, narratives, memories, attitudes, ideas and institutions (assemblages).

These complex relationships, which continually and contextually shift and are reordered, work to produce ways of knowing, identifying, and acting. Desires are fostered and expressed, emerging in affective spaces and the context of relationships—at mandirs, bala vihar classes, exhibitions, grocery stores, between parents and children, Hindu community leaders and various publics, in contestations over representation, and through performances of citizenship…. The assemblages that constitute desiring subjects are not stagnant or singular. Different experiences, even in the same context, have the potential to produce different subjectivities and desires, which can, in turn, be articulated variously and transformed in relationship to social forces.¹

Just as American Hindu subjectivities are produced in and through a complex matrix of affective spaces, politics, and poetics, so too is American Hinduism. In an attempt to shed some light on the varied dimensions of these productions—diasporic Hindu subjectivities and Hinduisms—this dissertation has explored a wide range of contexts. It may seem that the processes at play in Hindu educational environments, or in exhibitions at mandirs, state houses, and public festivals may have little in common with one another. Or, that what happens in grocery stores and sari shops is a far cry from the public debates over representations of Hinduism, and the teaching of Hindu and Indian history in schools. In all these settings—through engagement with others, participation in pedagogic and intellectual exercises, rituals of devotion and expression, acts of consumption and representation, performances of citizenship and civic duty, and contestations over history, authenticity, and authority—Hindu subjects and communities are repeatedly

¹ See pp. 107-108.
recognizing, making, and remaking the very contours of Hinduism and Hindus in diaspora. In each case, desire plays a significant role.

As I hope this dissertation has made clear, the word desire does not denote a single emotion, practice, or state of awareness. Indeed, it is the multivalency of the word ‘desire’ that enables it to serve as a useful framework for exploring the aspirational and affective dimensions in Hindu diasporic life. Inflected in a range of ways, desire can be an outgrowth of love, affection, anxiety, fear, hatred, and/or devotion; it can be personal and communal, public and private, proactive, reactive, or both. I have sought to consider not only the spheres in which explicit discourses about desire are used to convey and construct notions about what it means to be a Hindu living in the contemporary diaspora but to consider the ways in which desire serves as motivation. It is desire that inspires parents and community leaders to create Hindu educational programs, curriculum, and camps for their children. Myriad desires are present among those who advocate and mobilize around issues of the representation of Hindus, Hinduism, and India, be it in public schools, the academy, or civic life. Desire, in these instances, is not only aspirational—driven by what people want their children to know and find meaningful, who they want them to feel kinship with, or how they want Hindus to be perceived—but it is generative, propelling effort and action, institution building, political agendas, and forms of communal- and self-scrutiny, discipline, and circumscription.

Desire tends to imply some type of movement, a measure of striving, moving toward, reaching, or looking beyond, and it is often characterized by longing. While it is difficult to make a hard distinction between the language of desire and that of longing, I would like to suggest that longing refers to the state that arises between one’s recognition of desires and their actual, or even potential, realization. Longing is, as the bhakti theologians and poets articulated so well, a
significant and formative state unto itself. Longing does not simply describe the feeling that accompanies desire; although associated with desire, longing has its own distinctive qualities. Whether aspirations are directed toward self-improvement, the pursuit of justice, adherence to pious models of living, or spiritual enlightenment, many religious traditions have employed the language of striving and longing. Longing for and working toward a certain vision of liberation, salvation, peace, or sensory experience may be the very thing that distinguishes a practitioner of one religious tradition from those who practice another.

My argument here is not that the centrality of desire and longing are new features in the cultivation of religious subjectivities, only that contemporary forms of American Hinduism are responding to and cultivating new forms of desire and longing as a result of being in the diaspora. In other cases, the types of desires we find in the U.S. and other diasporas—to be morally good, to respect parents, to study sacred texts, to marry within certain delineated parameters—are very old and find parallels within Hindu communities in India. However, for Hindus in the diaspora, the investment in, challenges, significance, and strategies of inculcation are distinctive as a result of the specific time and place in which they are being pursued.

In the process of making of Hindu subjectivities for children, many Hindu educators have been quite clear about their goals. Attempting to impart large amounts of Hindu knowledge in supplementary programs would be folly in only one to three hours per week. What is possible and, indeed, preferable—to use the metaphors of gardening that are favored so much—is to plant seeds of desire, a fundamental step in the creation of Hindu subjects. These seeds are intended to grow longing—through enough exposure to Hindu narratives, values, people, sounds, senses, and experiences—children will be able to leave home, to engage in and with the non-Hindu world readied, embodying a well-established longing to act as a compass that directs their emotions and
desires as they age and make decisions on their own. Even a faint longing can serve as a “homing desire.” As one mother articulated it,

Look, we know the world is a very exciting place. We have chosen to be here in America precisely because there are so many opportunities, and the diversity is wonderful. We don’t want to say, ‘don’t explore the world, don’t make friends with those people.’ That is not our values. We want them to explore…. We just want them to have tasted enough, experienced enough, so that deep inside something calls them back home eventually, at the important moments in their life…. Hindus have always been explorers, have always talked to and learned from other people and circumstances…. Just think of Gandhi. Going to England and South Africa was [the] very thing that allowed him to come home, made him want to make it better in India. He saw the world differently because of what he learned in other places, from other people…. We also want that for ourselves and our children. We have all sorts of friends, they should learn from all the religions and different people. But Gandhi came home…. And for our children, we don’t mean home is going back to India. We mean going back to their Hindu roots, [they will] make it richer because of what they learn outside, that’s what keeps the tradition alive. But for that to happen, they have to want to come back…. [The] only way that can happen is if they had that taste I was talking about. Here [at camp], we just whet their appetite, we can’t give them the whole meal.

Throughout my research, it became apparent that many of the founders of bala vihars and Hindu camps, swamis and parents believed that if children do not develop an appetite for Hindu and Indian wisdom, culture, company, tastes, and things then the future of Hindu tradition and cultural continuity is made vulnerable. Hinduism needs Hindus to perpetuate it, and yet, in the diaspora, the future of Hindu subjects cannot be taken for granted. Parents and community leaders articulate the need to secure the future through the production and education of the next generation with the understanding that Hindu identity needs to be constructed, developed, and carefully curated.

What I have argued here is that for immigrants, separation from India, and from more immersive forms of Hindu living possible in India can give rise to new forms of longing, for ways of engaging, speaking, feeling, eating, moving, storytelling, worshipping, celebrating, and thinking. We might understand this as a new type of bhakti, wherein the very cultivation of and
association with longing is a part of devotion in itself. For example, bhakti movements have traditionally drawn on the life-stories of poet-singer-saints to inspire their own devotion. Although someone singing Mirabai bhajans has likely not had a personal relationship with God akin to Mira’s exceptional experience, to sing of her feelings, to express her longing for Krishna has the potential to engender feelings of desire, connection, and belonging shared with others who sing of her love. In a parallel way, I would suggest that Hindu parents and teachers seek to translate their own experiences of longing to their children, ultimately sharing these sentiments with the next generation. Some of these desires are based in nostalgia, but many others are newly formed as the result of the experience of migration.

In that longing—the taste that leaves you wanting more—is understood to be formative, it becomes important to cultivate it carefully, a perspective that is clear from the frequent discourses about desirable desires offered by swamis, teachers, and parents, which I discuss in Chapters II and III. Desirable desires are cultivated among children and parents through play, fun activities, sensory experiences (trips to the ocean, walks in nature, the consumption of literal and figurative sweets, and the recounting of narratives). As I noted, contemporary Hindu educational settings often include discourses on desire, drawing on texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Puranas, or the Upanishads in order to construct ideals, as well as models for self-improvement and self-fashioning. In these contexts, the tension between desirable and undesirable desires is a frequent subject of discussion. Such discourse does not advocate askesis and other types of renunciation but tends to emphasize a this-worldly conception of “family values,” calling for one to direct desires toward good-ends, rather than to forgo them.² The circumscription of

² The Swaminarayan community is the exception to this. BAPS is engaged in active and successful recruitment of sanyasis among second-generation Hindu Americans. This is still exceptional even in the Swaminarayan community, where children are still expected to pursue careers, marry and have children.
undesirable desires can be both explicit and implicit. Depending upon the context, these undesirable desires are delineated in a variety of ways and contexts. In some cases, this is expressed through psycho-theological language and the advocacy of practices that stimulate ongoing personal and spiritual accounting believed to lead to self-improvement. This was the case when parents and children were encouraged to log their transgressions, and set personal goals for themselves and their families. Undesirable desires, on the other hand, are often framed in terms of improper conduct, through the classification of behaviors that manifest in social, romantic, and familial relationships, and/or through one’s participation in particular socio-cultural practices. Discourses admonishing teenagers and young adults to marry Hindus, and abstain from pre-marital sex and drugs characterize explicit disciplinary approaches. Overt lectures about desire are often complemented by cautionary tales, the moralization of sacred narratives and derivation of applicable life-lessons from them, role-playing, and other forms of pedagogic activities. Desire is disciplined and directed, guided by techniques and explained through philosophy.

In the contexts of exhibitions, which I discuss in Chapter IV, not only do issues of representation—related to those I discuss in Chapters VI and VII—emerge, but we see the ways in which the articulation of the self, the very acts of exhibition and display have become, in their own right, forms of religious and devotional practice in the diaspora. The act of explanation—telling the stories of Hindu Gods, sharing the meaning of ritual practices or festivals—is an act of self-constitution. Through the agency of display, exhibitors are able to make Hinduism what they want it to be. Exhibition allows desires not simply to be expressed, but, in some cases, fulfilled. Like the genre of children’s books, which parents use to augment their explanations of the rationale behind Hindu customs, the reiterative performances of Hinduness and Hindu tradition
place the power of meaning-making into the hands of Hindus who, under other circumstances, may not have had such a role outside of the diaspora. The performativity of exhibition ensures that, even in settings where there is a large measure of conformity and continuity, space exists for variation, slippage, creativity, and innovation.

Seeing their tradition from a distinctive and new vantage point, exhibitors are able to ascribe significance to customs and provide emphasis in their narration and display of traditions, often curating the tradition and catering it to answer or correct their own anticipated assumptions about their audience. This enables individuals, as well as communities, to claim authority, power, authenticity, and belonging. Viewing exhibitions, too, can be quite powerful. The presence of Hindu symbols, stories, practices, histories, and performances in public squares, government buildings, museums, festivals, schools, and performance venues can foster pride, processes of self-reflection and affirmation, and the sense that one’s community and culture have arrived and gained acceptance within the wider culture.

Desires are predictably involved in the realm of the material. In Chapter V, I discuss how the cultivation of material and sensory desires is a part of instantiating and building Indian and Hindu subjectivities through forms of identification with cultural products, the development of discerning tastes, and experiences of embodiment. Longing for and associations with food, smells, sounds, clothing, etc. serves as a way that people are beckoned into spheres of belonging and identification, through forms of recognition, familiarity, affinity, and even knowledge. The essential materiality of Hindu ritual traditions elides easily with cultures of ethnic consumption among American immigrant communities, and the imbrication of Indian and Hindu traditions, for many, means that the process of making Hindus is, in many ways, also about making Indian-
Americans as well. As such, clothing and food can serve as markers of association, and performative signs of moral and cultural conformity, with particular gendered implications.

Consumption is a way to participate in a material culture wherein desires for, and the acquisition of the authentic are simultaneously acts of identification and the confirmation of one’s rightful claim to it. Commercial environments can themselves be summoning grounds, diyas on display in a shop may invite the celebration of Diwali, the Holi powder on a shelf may activate memories of festival celebrations, calling forth desires to participate in rituals or enjoy traditional foods that might have otherwise been forgotten in the daily rounds of diasporic life.

At times, it will be fond memories of celebrating a holiday or the wisdom of an ancient teaching, the comfort felt within a community or the calm brought about by a meditation practice that draws one into participation and identification. At other times, as I hope this research has shown, it may be the gaze and judgment of others, the feeling of being an outsider in a predominantly Christian culture, an urge to defend traditions that are misunderstood or derided that awakens a desire to engage and identify as ‘Hindu.’ Ien Ang suggests that this type of identification can be “experienced as provisional and partial…[and] must be constantly (re)invented and (re)negotiated. In this context, diasporic identification with a specific identity…can best be seen as forms of ‘strategic essentialism.’”3 ‘Strategic,’ in his definition, suggests identification “for the purpose of contesting and disrupting hegemonic and majoritarian definitions of ‘where you’re at,’’ and ‘essentialist,’ references the positioning that “allows diasporic subjects, not to ‘return home,’ but, in the words of Stuart Hall, to ‘insist that others

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recognize that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power.”

As I noted in Chapter VI and VII, scholars of Hinduism have become increasingly aware of the importance of interrogating the politics behind the promotion of various historical narratives (i.e. involving questions about Muslim presence in India, and the nature of Muslim rule) and theological positions (i.e. interpretations of caste, or attitudes toward conversion). Furthermore, since the destruction of the Babri Masjid, and in light of the ongoing nationalist and communal rhetoric and violence that sadly has characterized Indian politics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we are more attentive to the significance of tracing transnational participation and financial investment in various Hindu right-wing causes and organizations working both inside and outside of India. I am well aware that my exploration of how various groups engage with ideas and causes associated with the Hindu right, or my account of the presence or absence of Hindutva in mandirs or on college campus, may seem unrelated to the question of desire and my concern with the affective dimensions of constituting subjects and American Hinduism. However, desire and sentiment are largely what I have sought to emphasize in these chapters. I believe that it is crucial that when we consider the politics of religious identities and modern nationalism, we need to be particularly conscious of the sentiments that are tapped by such associations and movements. For good reasons, scholarship has often been so focused on the politics of hatred fostered by Hindu right-wing groups that other elements of these groups, which inspire involvement or make the agendas of such groups compelling to people, are often ignored or obscured. My intention in drawing out those other dimensions is not intended to serve as an apologetic. I do not wish to minimize the harm that such nationalist

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4 Ibid.
movements do, but rather to help us unearth some of the factors and attitudes that characterize engagement with such groups so that we can have a more nuanced understanding of who and why people are involved.

It is not uncommon to encounter a discourse of contamination with respect to individuals or groups that are remotely associated with Hindutva politics. More than once, I have been told that anyone who practices Hinduism in America, goes to temples, or participates in any organized religious functions is supporting Hindutva. This attitude seems to suggest that all diasporic Hinduism has been tainted. However, as I hope my fieldwork has illustrated, in the messy lives of individuals, things are much more complicated than that. Participation in rituals, engagement with religious organizations or groups, and involvement in political causes can be inspired by a host of things and can fulfill a range of desires. Especially outside of India and away from the immediacy of Indian politics, involvement in Hindu Students Councils or advocacy over the representation of Hinduism and India in California textbooks may well be motivated by or fulfill the type of desires I discuss in earlier chapters. We also find that nationalist issues and framing can take on new types of salience in the diaspora in the context of minority and multicultural politics. For example, apologetics regarding caste may seem to be a compelling edit in an American public-school textbook when parents are encouraged to consider how non-Hindus, as well as their own children, might perceive of Hinduism with the limited knowledge of a sixth grader. The importance and implications of Hindu chauvinist and nationalist agendas are often subsumed under, hidden, or altogether absent from the rhetoric because of the presence of other diasporic concerns, as well as the knowledge that certain ideas do not play well in America. Embedded in many of these contestations we find evidence of love and hate, the presence of other desires that reveal what people want Hinduism to be, how they
hope their children will see Hinduism and India, and what types of ideas and people should be included and excluded from the community.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I turn to the intersection between various types of diasporic desires—political, civic, communal, and spiritual. In the case of vandalism at the Maple Grove temple, community leaders sought to simultaneously inspire a communal response informed by “Hindu values,” while also cultivating a public image of the Hindu community as model citizens. Temple leaders provided comfort to the community through asking them to embody righteousness as a response, the desire to enact virtue not only served spiritual ends, in the minds of the Mandir’s leadership, but it served political ends as well, as an act of strategic citizenship. Through their public act of forgiveness, their modeling of virtue, the community transformed its standing in the town and the state of Minnesota as a whole. The desire for public acceptance was accompanied by and fostered spiritual desires among community members, and enabled them to constitute their own self-image anew, transforming the community’s story about itself, their rituals of remembrance, and the values of Hinduism that they emphasize when representing Hinduism and the mandir’s history to the next generation, as well as to non-Hindus.

My hope is not only that this work sheds light on processes at work within contemporary Hindu communities, but that it also helps us consider larger questions about the development of religious selves and sensibilities, the shaping of identities, the cultivation of belonging, the poetics and politics of representation, and the negotiation of public and civic spheres. There are many more directions this research can go, deeper explorations of the curricular and educational realms await, as does a more sustained treatment about the ways in which modes of exhibition, consumerism, and the processes of globalization are transforming the experiences and practices of American Hindus. Many questions remain about how debates over the representation of
Hinduism in public schools and the public square will unfold. We have yet to know how these educational endeavors, and their various formations, will change the shape of Hinduism in the years to come. All of that beckons further study.
Coda
Cultivated Longing & The Changing Shape of Desire Among American-Born Hindu Desis

To write a dissertation framed by the concept of desire without including a sustained focus on the realm of the romantic seems a tremendous shame, for the romantic is where the language of longing and desire is most at home. Hindu educators and parents are profoundly invested in cultivating particular types of romantic longing and desire as an essential part of their project. The limitations of space did not afford me the chance to devote the time I would have liked to the realm of the romantic, but I include a brief discussion here in a Coda, along with some reflections about the experiences about two other American-born Hindu desis. My hope is that this cursory treatment sheds some initial light onto the types of Hinduism this next generation is claiming and creating, and how the very nature of desires may be changing in light of their experiences.

I have heard a number of talks and attended camp programs where it was argued that the maintenance of Hinduism and Hindus is, after all, dependent upon the production of Hindu families. The rhetoric surrounding marriage and the affective cultures of weddings, with the pageantry and imagined Bollywood backdrops, all work to produce vivid pictures of Hindu weddings in the minds of children. I have never met a Hindu child at a bala vihar or temple, over the age of five, who couldn’t offer a description of a Hindu or Indian wedding. The seed of desire surrounding weddings is planted very young, in both Hindu girls and boys, although it is certainly emphasized more with girls.

Monika and Vivek were both born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. After attending prestigious colleges back east, Monika was attending law school at U.C. Berkeley with the intention of pursuing environmental advocacy, and Vivek was working for a socially
conscious start-up, while he was getting his M.B.A. at Stanford. They attended Hindu supplementary schools when they were growing up, and their families were involved in their respective mandirs, but the two were not particularly involved in Hindu life during college or after it.

For Divali in 2005, both Monika and Vivek agreed to accompany their parents to a big community-wide function. Neither one of them was excited about the event, but “it was just what you have to do sometimes when you come from an Indian family.” Halfway through the night, Monika and Vivek found themselves staring at their iPhones, and sitting in the lobby of the hotel just outside of the hall where the festivities were taking place. They struck up a conversation, bonding over how they had to leave the “Diwali Showcase” because they couldn’t bear to hear “another middle-aged man get up and croon some Bollywood number at the top of his lungs.” Ironically, though, as they described it, their whole relationship unfolded like some predictable Bollywood romance. They were both dating other people at the time, neither of them Hindu or Indian, and they didn’t even exchange phone numbers on the night that they met. About six months later, after they had each “randomly” gone through break-ups, they ran into each other at a burrito place in the Mission. They ended up hitting it off, “and the rest,” as Vivek always tells the story (and I have heard it at least four times), “was history!” Their parents were really happy to find out they were dating each other, because, according to Monika and Vivek, they had “resigned themselves to the fact that we were probably going to marry white people.” Neither one of them had ever dated another Indian before they started dating each other. When they “finally” got engaged the families were thrilled, and Monika and Vivek’s mothers immediately started to negotiate how they were going to accommodate their respective Bengali and South Indian wedding rituals.
Monika and Vivek knew they wanted a Hindu wedding, and “before we could do anything, our parents found these two priests and they were all excited about how the ceremony was going to go.” After meeting the priests, however, they felt like the whole ceremony would be “really empty” if they went along with their parents’ plans. The pujaris didn’t speak very good English, and they only wanted to “talk about all the ‘svahas’ we were going to have to say during the interminable rituals.” Vivek and Monika talked about how their Hindu identities were important to them, but they were “intentional people,” and they didn’t want to “just do things by rote,” they wanted to “believe in” what they were saying and, at least, understand it. Monika said,

I may not do a lot of Hindu rituals or stuff, and most of my friends aren’t Hindu, but from the time I was young, I imagined myself having a Hindu wedding. The fire, the mantras, the saris—that’s the only picture I’ve ever had when I envisioned myself getting married…. And we are excited to have a Hindu home. It feels really important, and I want our marriage to be blessed by all the Gods. I feel like marking this moment in a sacred way is really important…. I remember that when I was really young, my mother would tell me stories about Shiva and Parvati, and the book had these pictures from different temples in India. One of them was of the carvings, I think they are in some temple-caves,¹ of kalyanasundara—I think that is what my mother called it—the totally beautiful wedding of Shiva and Parvati. I may be imagining it, but I used to think that all the gods and goddesses were guests at their wedding. And that’s what I’ve always wanted, to feel like the Gods are there at my wedding. But I somehow think that I won’t feel their presence or warrant their blessings if I don’t know what I’m saying, or what I’m doing. I’m marrying Vivek intentionally, and I want to ask for the Gods’ blessings with the same kind of intention.

For that reason, the couple decided they wanted to find someone to perform the wedding ceremony who would make it “meaningful” for them. They referenced the weddings they had attended of their peers, some of whom had written their own vows, or had family members and friends offer personalized blessings and read poetry. They explicitly didn’t want “a Christian-

¹ I believe that she was referring to the caves in Ellora, in Maharashtra, where a carving of Shiva and Parvati in this form is found.
style” wedding, but they did want to find a way to incorporate something more personal into this ritual that Hindus had been performing “since the dawn of time,” as Vivek characterized it. They also talked about how they didn’t just want to have an “exotic Indian wedding,” where all the guests talk about is how pretty and colorful all the clothing and jewelry are. Not only did they want to understand the rituals, they wanted their guests to as well. Eventually, Monika and Vivek met a “white man who had converted to Hinduism and had become a pujari.” He understood what they wanted and was happy to work with them to find ways to make the traditional *vivaha* (wedding rituals) reflect their values.

When Monika and Vivek went to inform their parents about their decision to have the American pujari perform the ceremony, the news was received poorly. Their parents couldn’t seem to understand why they would have “this person” perform their marriage, and their choice raised a host of issues surrounding authenticity, race/ethnicity, belonging, perception and recognition. As they described it, both sets of parents assailed them with questions about the pujari and his qualifications: who had he studied with; how much time he had spent in India; where he had learned Sanskrit, and did he even know how to pronounce it properly; could he actually perform the *vivaha*; why had he become Hindu, what had happened in his own family that he “left his religion to runaway” and become Hindu; was he an ISKON type. Monika and Vivek didn’t have the information to answer most of their questions, nor were they concerned with the questions their parents were raising. What information they could offer did not appease their parents. The rationales that they marshaled—that they liked him, that he was young and understood them in a way that the other pujaris didn’t, that “he was genuine,” that “he had embraced the traditions and immersed himself in Hinduism voluntarily,” and that he wanted to work with them to make a ceremony that reflected who they were and what they cared about—in
no way compelled their parents. Instead, they only responded with other queries: what would
their friends and family think when they saw him; didn’t they realize it was an insult to their own
pujaris; what problem did they have with Indians anyhow, they were both Indian—it would be
different if one of them was American, but this choice didn’t make sense. Their parents
wondered if they would even recognize the rituals he performed, and they argued that it would
make them feel uncomfortable to defer to him during the rituals. Vivek’s mother pointed out that
when his sister had gotten married to Sam (who was American and white), “it was very helpful
for everyone, herself included, that the pujari knew exactly what he was doing.” He had helped
the families “know what to do when,” so, how, she wondered, could this pujari possibly make
them feel comfortable? Neither family was brahmin, but the parents wanted to know if it was
even valid for this, obviously, non-brahmin man, “who called himself a pujari,” to perform the
ceremony; Monika’s father wanted to know if the marriage would be recognized as real. In
recounting the story, Vivek and Monika both spoke about how they had never heard their parents
really talk about race, or even caste, in this way before. They had always thought their parents
were “really liberal.” Their families socialized with lots of non-Indians, and they hadn’t seemed
scandalized in any way when they were themselves dating non-Indians. They had both happily
welcomed non-Hindu and non-Indian in-laws into their families before. Monika’s parents had
been so accepting when her cousin Arju married a woman, and her own parents had refused to
attend, that they not only hosted the ashirbad (a Bengali pre-wedding ceremony in which the
bride and groom’s—in this case brides’—relatives bless the couple through rituals such as
festive rice-showering, and the presentation of gold jewelry), but they also paid for the whole
wedding and found a gay-friendly pujari to perform it. For Monika and Vivek their parents’
responses seemed out of character.
Monika’s and Vivek’s parents didn’t view their aversion to a non-Indian pujari as racism, the way their children did. They viewed it as an aesthetic preference, ‘it just wouldn’t look, sound, or feel right.’ According to Monika, this was really the first time that her parents had even thought much about “white Hindus,” and they weren’t sure what to do with them. Vivek said, “It struck an emotional cord for them—I didn’t know it was even there. I found it really disturbing to hear my parents talk like that.” The couple wasn’t swayed by their parents’ objections and they stuck with their decision to have the pujari they had chosen perform the ceremony. Monika worked with him to create what they called a “varadaan” (a giving-away of the groom) to balance-out the traditional kanyadan (which is usually translated in American Hindu wedding programs as the ritual in which the bride’s parents “give her away”). At the wedding itself, Monika and Vivek distributed their own rendering of the now ubiquitous and traditional wedding program, which explained all the Hindu rituals in detail, and the pujari stopped numerous times throughout the ceremony to provide explanations and interpretations of the rituals. The couple not only recited the traditional mantras, but they also selected verses from different texts to read to one another at various junctures throughout the ceremony. As has now become customary, they glossed the saptapadi (the ritual seven-steps that couple takes together), interpreting each one to symbolize a different value they hoped to embrace in their lives together (caring for one another, building a life dedicated to fulfilling each other’s dreams, caring for our families, caring for the environment, sharing our blessings with those in need, fighting for justice and equality, working for peace).

After the wedding, Vivek said that their parents “ate crow, which, let me tell you, is a big deal for my stubborn vegetarian father.” Monika’s mother said, it was “most beautiful and meaningful Hindu wedding” she had ever attended, and, although she had been terribly worried
about what they would think when they saw the pujari, all the Indian friends were “very impressed.” Her father said he had been worried that “the next generation was not going to keep the rituals,” but that he was pleasantly surprised that they weren’t just keeping them, “but updating them to make them even more beautiful.” Monika and Vivek still talk about how the best revenge is that now their parents regularly recommend their pujari to friends whose children are getting married.

While Monika and Vivek’s story is far from typical, and many family wedding conflicts do not end so harmoniously, they are not the only desi couple I have encountered who chose to have an American born white pujari to perform their wedding because they wanted it to be both meaningful and intelligible. And now, as a handful of British- and North American-born desis are becoming Hindu chaplains and pujaris, Hinduism is being articulated and performed in new ways, speaking in a language that many second and third generation Hindus find desirable, compelling and reflective of theirs, as opposed to their parents, “values and concerns.”

In the case of marriage—as Monika and Vivek’s story elucidates—the struggle over ritual and representation can be especially complex. The prospect of a wedding often prompts larger questions about religious authority and authenticity, race and ethnicity, caste and class, representation and recognition, issues that animate much of contemporary American Hindu discourse. Not only do these ceremonies often require the negotiation of familial and personal desires, but, like the performance of many non-Christian religious rituals in the U.S., Hindu

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2 Questions about how caste should be negotiated, as well as tensions over the performance of same-sex marriages, have recently arisen at a number of American mandirs. At one mandir, a debate has ensued over whether or not knowledgeable and active members of the temple, who are non-brahmin, can go through the training to perform ritual functions (such as abhishekam), which have until now been reserved for brahmans. Although the temple board has officially stated it does not observe caste distinctions or discriminate between devotees, the request from a temple member who is Chettiar has challenged this assertion and, as with questions about LGBT rights to have marriage rituals at the Temple, generational divides are quite stark. Those born in the U.S. are almost universally for abandoning all caste differences at this wealthy and traditional Temple, and those born in India are divided.
weddings can involve a distinctive type of cultural mediation. Different from bala vihars, public-school classrooms, festivals, museums, and the public square, wedding rituals at once sanctify an intimate relationship and they are a public exhibition. It is likely that not all the spectators will be Hindus, and it is often the case that neither are all of the ritual participants. Even among Hindus themselves, there are regional, generational, and personal differences; the desires, intentions, and knowledge that people bring to the table vary dramatically. It is in this context, that the wedding program has emerged as a new requisite feature at almost every Hindu wedding in North America. More than anything, these programs are expressions of a desire that is manifest in the arenas I have explored throughout this dissertation: the desire for intelligibility.

Whether it was the sentiments that arose in the context of temple vandalism, the contestations over the representation of Hinduism in textbooks, the narratives presented at temple tours, the pursuit of the perfect sari, or the inculcation of religious knowledge, the stakes are simultaneously personal and communal, public and private. They are outgrowths and expressions of complex desires for intelligibility, longings to recognize oneself, one’s children, one’s story and one’s environment, while simultaneously being recognized by ‘Others.’

3 I have gathered over a hundred programs from various Hindu weddings, and wedding websites. These programs reveal the many ways in which Hindu traditions are being revisioned in the contemporary moment, as well as fascinating and subtle differences in the practices of meaning-making among Hindu Americans. Most notably, for example, the interpretations ascribed to the saptapadi often include nationalistic proclamations, in which the couple “promises to dedicate themselves to the Hindu rashtra” (nation). While I don’t have the space to expand on this here, this single ritual innovation is indicative of the ways in which traditional ritual practices are transformed by other desires and political agendas. In turn, as these wedding programs circulate on the web—via pujaris, and through personal relationships—the affective political and poetics circulate as well. I have been at multiple weddings where extremely liberal couples, found themselves standing before the fire as a pujari (unbeknownst to them) explained that the step they had just taken was to be symbolic of the commitment they were making to the Hindu nation. Yet again, this illustrates that not every ritual in which people participate means what it may appear to mean at face value. In ritual contexts, especially, people often say and do things that do not reflect their personal politics or ideologies. At the same time, this type of ritual engagement also confirms the concern that many have expressed about how Hindutva ideologies are circulating quite freely and easily (and even unrecognizably for many) in contemporary global and diasporic Hindu circles.
Recognition can be sensorial, as was the case for both Monika’s and Vivek’s parents and for themselves. Their parents sought a sensation of belonging that they associated with particular sights and sounds, including embodied and racialized ones. Monika and Vivek wanted to experience all the affective dimensions they associated with an Indian wedding—the food and clothes, rituals and garlands—but, as is no surprise, their desires were not the same as their parents. They not only longed for the rituals to be intelligible as Hindu ones, but they also wanted them to be intelligible as their own, reflective of their personal commitments, values, and sentiments. Although they were undoubtedly constituted by the desires inculcated in them by their Hindu families and communities since they were young children, they are also constituting Hinduism and their Hindu subjectivities anew, inflecting the rituals and interpretations of the tradition with their own desires.

Among first-generation immigrants, the language of desire often has a quality of novelty. Now—because they are living in the diaspora—they want their children to learn, feel, believe, know and embody particular things, things they had not been as attuned to when they lived in India. Many parents, teachers, and Hindu activists not only identify the origin of their desires, but they articulate them in the form of rationales that are explicitly tied to the diasporic milieu. Being in America is the explanation for why Hindu supplementary education is necessary. The representations—viewed to be inaccurate or unfavorable—of Hinduism in textbooks, academia, popular culture, or in various public environs serve as the demonstration and justification for why it is so important to try to control the narrative. In these ways, Hindu desires and subjectivities are often powerfully constituted against Others, at the same time as they are constitutions of the Self.
Love is an especially important aspect of the cultivation of longing, it is one of the most powerful ways in which “homing desires” seem to be produced. The discourse of love—of self, of family, and of community—is ubiquitous. Through practices and various media (inspiring bala vihar lessons, compelling stories, comic books, and art projects that animate imaginations, meditative practices, the singing of bhajans, and the celebrations of lifecycle rituals), by way material objects (jewelry and saris), delicious food (gulab jamun and dosas), through passionate political activism that articulates its case by way of self-preservation, and through public displays, education and acts of generosity and citizenship, there is a powerful affective economy at work among diaspora Hindus.

As Sara Ahmed argues, the very same emotion—love—that can motivate a parent to teach a child about the culture they love, to pray that they live a fulfilling and meaningful life, can also have another side. She writes that,

Love becomes a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal, which takes shape as an effect of such bonding. Love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal.  

Certainly, animus toward others is one of the things being produced through transnational Hindu discourses of self-love, but it is not only ‘Others’ who are failing the ideals that one generation or group is promoting for another. Among the second-, and even third-generation of Hindu Americans, desires are not simply articulated as novel, but as the very things that constitute the self. A few days before he was going to compete in the local Bhagavad Gita Shloka Recitation Competition, I spoke with six-year-old Ravi. Earnestly, he told me, “this is what I’ve always wanted…for as long as I can remember….I’ve wanted to win the Gita competition my whole

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life. I followed up with him about the matter of his “always” wanting to win the competition, and asked if there was something specific that made him really want to win. He replied, “Nothing. I’ve always wanted it for my whole entire life. Akash [his older brother] won when he was seven and my parents made a big party. I’m gonna have that.” Proudly, he told me that “everybody at bala vihar calls me ‘little Gita Guy,’” because, during practice, he had been able to chant more than any of the high school students. In a similar way, in speaking about her visions of marriage, Monika talked about how even when she was dating non-Hindus, she “always assumed” that her wedding would be a Hindu one, “that’s the only thing that would feel authentic to who I am.” Renuka, a graduate student at UC Berkeley, described her relationship to Hinduism as something that grounded her. She said that she often finds that during the semester she loses sight of what’s important when she is under a deadline, or things are especially challenging at her lab. In those moments, she said,

> I just wish I could be on one of the retreats I used to go on …I try to bring a little bit of that into my life when I’m feeling really stressed. [I] try to take some time—not enough—to meditate, chant, read the Gita or Bhagavatam…It gives me perspective and it reminds me what I really want out of life, what my priorities are, and who I am…I find peace in remembering that.

For this second generation, affective desires are often described through a language of “who I am.” The desires don’t have clear origins, although there is generally a recognition that they were shaped as a result of one’s cultural and religious upbringing. Even when people identify moments of origin, these desires are just a part of how they see themselves. Ravi said that everyone knew him as “Gita boy,” his desire to win the competition couldn’t be disaggregated from how he understood himself.

In many ways, parents and communities have succeeded in cultivating longing in the next generation. The achievement is witnessed in Ravi’s desire to win the Gita competition and his
identification as “Little Gita Guy;” it is apparent in Monika and Vivek’s assertion that a Hindu wedding was something that they had always imagined for themselves. The achievements in longing are evident in Renuka’s description of remembering who she is when she engages in Hindu practices. Although the Hindu parents and communities are actively producing desires, and in these cases, they may have well “succeeded” in cultivating Hindus through the cultivation of enduring longings and affective associations, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is a reminder that our desires are never our own, not only are they produced, but they are also transformed. What these achievements in cultivating longing also illustrate is that the very nature of desires morph as they are embodied and assumed by different people.

It remains difficult to predict how desires are changing, and what will come of the longings that constitute a new generation of Hindus. It is clear that the forces of global capitalism and nationalism are particularly strong in Hindu diasporic formulations, but so too are those grounded in moral and spiritual convictions—be it the small voice of Sadhana, the lessons from bala vihar that sent a powerful message about the pursuit of social and environmental justice, or the new articulation of Hindu theology that makes the case for LGBT inclusion. Hindu diasporic endeavors to instill homing desires, cultivate a disposition of longing, and affective skills of recognition among the second and third generation are clearly working. The growth in Hindu institutions and presence in public discourse is undeniable. Yet, in the process of constituting the next generation of Hindus, the very nature of diasporic desires is changing, as is the shape of contemporary Hinduism.


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APPENDIX

I have included small sample of the emails I received in reference to the AAR panel I discuss in Chapter VI. I received ten additional emails before the conference, with a similar tone but with more abusive language. I have not included them here. The emails stopped after the AAR conference.

From: unityforhindu@hinnation.com
Date: October 18, 2008 9:27:22 PM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Hindu Unite!
Hindus Unite! HINDUS SHOULD BE THE ONLY ONES TO REPRESENT HINDUS!

From: globehindu@dharmpeople.net
Date: October 21, 2008 4:33:48 PM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Protect the Dharma
Dharmo Rakshati Rakshita!
We will protect the dharma to our last.

From: dharmadefense@sanatanaworld.us
Date: October 23, 2008 2:18 AM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Inventing the Invention
why are all you sying that te oldest live religion is not real? You invent the invention!
you invnet yourself as representing Hindus. who are you?

From: hindudefender@ushindudefender.us
Date: October 23, 2008 9:27:46 PM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Hindus speak for Hindus.
Why do you people keep saying that our Sanatana dharma was invention?
Why do you question the true history?

From: hindujana@eternalhinduknowledge.net
Date: Oct. 23, 2008 11:58 PM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Mrs. Sippy, Did yhou know?
Ekam Sat
There is only one truth.
There is only one God.
The Vedas are One.
Hindus are One.

From: Hindukijai@sarvehindukijai.us
Date: October 24, 2008 12:19:55 AM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Hindu Protection
Mrs. Shana Sippy:
Again we will hear these supposed scholars of Hindu Dharma trying to say that our Hinduism is a invent of the British. It is time that these Academy people knew that our religion is 8 thousands year old and it will survive their attacks as it survived all the others before. You can not attack us for Hindus are strong.
Hinduism ki jai!
To: shana@sippys.net
From: hindustogethereternally@hindustogether.net
Sent: Oct. 26, 2008 1:22 a.m.
Subject: DEFENING Hindus
We will have no more of people like you. Hinduism is TRUTH!
Hinduism has lasted 8000 years and you can not destroy it with your lying representation!
HINDUISM KI JAI!

To: shana@sippys.net
From: sanatanaji@hinnation.org
Subject: Stop Defaming Hindus!
If you are a white Christian, as I suspect, who are you to judge what a misrepresentation of Hinduism really is? But if you are Hindu, which I doubt, what I say to you is that with Hindus like you, we don't need enemies! We will fight your kind and stop you from defaming us anymore!

From: hinduusindia@hinduswithgod.com
Date: October 26, 2008 9:17:28 PM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: Speaking for Hindus
Dear Mrs. Sippy,
Is it true that you are married to a Rabbi? This is what I have learned about you from some of my friends who are looking into the background of your panel speakers. If you are a Jew, you should understand how important it is for minority religions to speak for themselves and to have their own rights to represent. I was surprised to learn this about you because you should know more than a Christian lady.
The Jews always want to speak for themselves. Why are you trying to speak for Hindus? What gives you the right?

From: SriRamaArmy@RAMHINARMY.us
Date: October 27, 2008 8:00:45 AM CDT
To: Shana Sippy <shana@sippys.net>
Subject: We know where you live
Mrs. Sippy,
WE KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE. STOP ATTACKING HINDUS.
YOU INSULT US.
REMEMBER WE ARE AN ARMY WITH SRI RAM AT OUR SIDE.