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**Hindus in Canada**

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## RIIM

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# **Hindus in Canada**

by

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## **Abstract**

Hindus generally have been positively received in Canada. This has been helped by the fact that the first major group of Hindus came to Canada as part of the large influx of South Asian professionals who arrived in Canada as independent immigrants in the 1960s. This article examines their experience in urban Canada in terms of: (1) Migration History and Current Situation; (2) The Changing Experience of Hindu Worship and Ritual; (3) Strategies of Adaptation in Sacred Language and Education; (4) Public Policy Issues; (5) Women and (6) Relations with the "Old Country." Living in Canada's major cities has meant changes in important ritual areas such as marriage and death. Traditional family and home-centered worship has had to adapt to a busy and fast-paced lifestyle. In recent years, political influences from India have exerted strong influences. Hindu writers have exerted strong voices in Canada's debate over multiculturalism.

## **Introduction**

Hindus, generally, have been positively received in Canada. This has been helped by the fact that the first major group of Hindus came to Canada as part of the large influx of South Asian professionals who arrived in Canada as independent immigrants in the 1960s. Canada was short of qualified professors in the rapidly expanding universities of the day and had vacancies in other professional areas such as teaching, engineering, and medicine. Well-qualified Hindus filled many such positions and were gratefully received into Canadian life for the contribution they made. The fact that many in this first large group of Hindus were educated, upper-middle class persons who spoke English fluently enabled them to fit into Canadian society fairly smoothly and to be generally appreciated by the host culture. Later groups of Hindu immigrants did not always receive as positive a reception.

In this paper, we will examine the migration history and current situation of Hindus in Canada; the changing experience of Hindu worship and ritual; strategies of adaptation in sacred language and education; higher education; public policy issues; issues particular to women, and relations with the “old country.”

### **III. The Migration History and Current Situation of Hindus in Canada**

Canadian Hindus have brought a variety of ethnic backgrounds and histories to Canada. The earliest Hindu immigrants were Punjabis. A small group of mainly males from farming backgrounds, they came to Canada to make enough money to enable them to return home and buy farm land. They arrived along with the first wave of Sikh migration to Canada reaching the coast of British Columbia between 1900 and 1908. As the numbers of South Asians swelled to some 5000 (mostly Sikhs) by 1908, they – together with the

Chinese and Japanese immigrants to southwestern British Columbia – began to be perceived as a threat by the relatively small Anglo-Saxon population of the lower mainland. Up to this point they had been accorded full British citizenship, including the right to vote. But the British Columbia legislature in 1908 removed that privilege denying Hindus and all South Asians municipal and federal voting rights and excluding them from serving as school trustees, on juries, in public service, holding jobs resulting from public works contracts, purchasing Crown timber, or practising the professions of law and pharmacy. Through the “continuous journey” legislation of 1908, the federal government effectively banned further South Asian immigration by requiring South Asians to purchase a ticket for a through passage to Canada from one’s country of origin. Since no shipping company covered both the India–Hong Kong and the Hong Kong–Canada legs of the trip, the purchase of a continuous ticket was impossible, effectively cutting off immigration to Canada (Buchignani and Indra 1985). Although in the 1920s a few wives and children were allowed to join husbands already living in Canada, the South Asian community remained basically static until the 1950s. The whole South Asian community was constantly referred to as “Hindus” by the Canadian public of the day, even though they were mostly Sikhs.

The first large group of Hindus came directly from Uttar Pradesh and surrounding regions in northern India. They were Hindi speakers who were largely urban middle class in background. They came as part of the large group of South Asian professionals who arrived in Canada as independent immigrants in the 1960s. During this same period, some Tamil Hindus from the Madras area came to Canada as teachers. Bengali Hindus began to arrive during the 1970s. Also during the 1960s and 1970s, Hindus arrived in Canada from former British colonies that were achieving independence and discriminated against South Asians. Thus, substantial numbers of Hindus and Muslims arrived in Canada from East Africa, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, and Trinidad. While Hindus from East Africa tended to be professionals and business people, those arriving from the other areas were mainly blue-collar workers (Buchignani and Indra 1985).

In Canada, Hindus spread themselves across the country settling mainly in larger cities. According to the 1991 Census, the major concentrations of Hindus were as

follows: Toronto 90,140; Vancouver 14,880; Montreal 13,775; Edmonton 5,815; Ottawa 4,780; Calgary 4,155; Winnipeg 3,105; Kitchener 2,815; and Hamilton 2,800. The age breakdown of Hindus in the major cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver is given in Table 1. In all three cities the bulk of the population is in the under 15 years and 25-44 years categories. Thus, it is very likely that the Hindu population will grow significantly through childbirth, with continued immigration as an extra addition.

From the religious perspective, this demographic pattern raises the problem of how to effectively pass on the tradition in the midst of a majority secular and materialistic culture. A typical pattern seems to be that the children of the immigrant parents frequently attempt to distance themselves from the Hindu traditions, which are so different from their peers in the secular host community. Young people of the third generation, however, are often much more interested in identifying and rediscovering their own religious tradition. As families become established and prosper, many seek to bring their aging parents to Canada to join them and recreate, to some degree at least, the traditional Hindu extended family.

## **II. The Changing Experience of Hindu Worship and Ritual**

Unlike Sikhs, Hindus do not have a unified set of beliefs and practices that are shared by all believers. Nor is their religion as heavily focused on a community temple with weekly congregational worship. Hindu religious practice is more individual in nature and centered at home in the family. This was especially the case with regard to orthodox Hindu practice in India. A Canadian Hindu immigrant from a South Indian Brahmin family describes life at home in India as living from ritual to ritual:

The household had priests . . . dedicated to (it). They would come and remind us that your birthday is on so-and-so date or there is a particular constellation appearing in this time of year or there is an eclipse here or you have to perform certain ceremonies for departed souls in your family. We'd fix a time and he would come and do it. From birth I was very attracted to rituals, so every day I used to spend about three to four hours watching and listening to them. We started, my sister and I, at about 4:30 a.m. In the prayer hall we had pictures of the various deities and we used to take a wet

cloth and clean each one. I would make a lot of sandal paste and then we used to anoint these pictures. . . . the priest was there so we used to sit . . . till about 6:30. (Goa et al. 1984, 97)

Others talk of chanting Hindu scriptures (*Veda*, *Upanisad* and *Gita*) with a father early in the morning so that the texts were easily learned by heart at a young age. The women would make daily offerings of food to the gods, bless the images with holy water and set aside a portion from the table for wandering holy men and for the family cow. A grandmother would pay homage to the image of her *guru* tucked away in her bedroom. The family might relate to the deity of a particular temple and would join everyone else in the village or town for seasonal or festival *pujas*. What happened to this richly textured religious life when the Hindu immigrants arrived in Canada?

Being used to having religious ritual focused on the home, Canadian immigrant Hindus at first felt no pressure for a public place of worship. By 1970, though, Hindus were extending their individual worship to include group prayer services held in people's homes, especially if a visiting teacher from India was passing through. Such meetings, however, often remained ethnic-specific. In the 1970s, secular issues surrounding marriage and death in Canada led Hindu groups to begin thinking of erecting temples. In Canada, unlike India, marriage or death rites are public occasions, and a Hindu community without a temple has no place in which to celebrate them. This need drew diverse groups of Hindus together in the larger centres, and buildings were constructed. One of the first was the Vishva Hindu Parishad of Vancouver which, in 1974, "opened a multi-use temple with a generalized program of worship as well as opportunities for specific Hindu religious and ethnic groups to use its facilities" (Buchignani and Indra 1985, 190). As Hugh Johnston observes: "The members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, who have been raised in many local Indian traditions, have made practical compromises to create a religious community in Canada; and they have created a place of worship which is as much a church or gurdwara as it is a temple" (Johnston 1988, 11). Worship is congregational, Sundays, 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m., with people arriving and leaving on time in Protestant fashion, unless there is food in the kitchen below provided by a family, Sikh style.

Permanent multi-use facilities now also exist in Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto. In other locations, Hindus depend on temporary arrangements such as renting the halls of Christian churches for their religious celebrations. Unlike the Sikhs, for whom the fundraising to build a gurdwara meant an appeal to a single ethnic community, Hindus have had to span many different ethnic and religious groupings in order to raise the required funds. This has often been a difficult task, requiring diplomacy. Once a temple is established, its use is allocated by time to the various Hindu groups. General prayer services and religious lectures designed to serve all usually occur on Sundays. Individual families book the temple for marriages, funerals, and other special occasions. As Buchignani observes: “This multi-use concept is a brilliant solution to the difficulties posed by divergent Hindu practice and belief” (Buchignani and Indra 1985, 190). It has helped draw Hindus together so that Hinduism has an organizational basis upon which to be recognized as a formal religion within Canada. Toward this end the Vishva Hindu Parishad of Vancouver in 1983 organized a national conference to develop the constitution for a Hindu Council of Canada (Buchignani and Indra 1985). The Vishva Hindu Parishad has also been active in Hindu student associations in Canadian universities. Not all Hindus have been satisfied with this unifying approach. In Toronto, where Hindu numbers are sufficiently large to make such a development possible, various ethnic groupings have established their own institutional organizations and obtained their own buildings.

Milton Israel reports that there are now more than fifty Hindu temples and organizations in Ontario, most in the Toronto area. The oldest Hindu temple there, the Prarthana Samaj, was established in 1967 when a former church was purchased. Immigrants from Trinidad and Guyana purchased a building on Yonge Street in 1981 that became their temple — the Vishnu Mandir. A new temple was built in 1984 that attracted India-born Hindus in large numbers, enabling a full-time priest to be brought from India. Sunday services attracted 250 people and continued to grow necessitating the tearing down of the newly built temple to construct a larger one, which opened in 1990. It draws six to seven hundred people to a Sunday service, which is followed, Sikh style, by a congregational meal sponsored by a family. Temple staff numbers six priests from India

and one from Guyana, Dr. Bhupendra Doobray, a cardio-vascular surgeon, who preaches the sermon. The service proceeds in Sanskrit, Hindi, and English. A variety of images are present in the temple and the front altar holds statues to the gods Durga, Hanuman, Ganesh, and Rama, with discussion underway regarding the possible inclusion of the Buddha and Lord Mahavira of the Jains. The eclectic nature of this very successful Hindu temple is evident; however, some of the original Guyanese members have broken away and established their own ethnic temple. The large congregation is now planning to build a senior citizen home and a cultural centre (Israel 1994). While extremely successful, the Vishnu Mandir temple continually debates to what lengths it can go to accommodate a wide variety of Hindus with their various ethnic backgrounds and images, and yet keep the involvement of the traditionalists. Other temples, such as that of the breakaway Guyanese group, have no desire to reach out to other Hindus, but concentrate on maintaining the traditional approach to worship of their ethnic community.

This is also the practice of the Ganesh temple established by Tamil immigrants from South India, South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia, and refugees from Sri Lanka. The emphasis of this group is on the purity of the building and its rituals from a Tamil perspective — such as the festival to Lord Murugan, the patron God of the Tamils. Building of the Ganesh temple complex, which also contains a senior citizen facility, living apartments for priests, a wedding hall, and cafeteria, began in 1984 and is still continuing. Rather than adapting to a Canadian congregational style, as the Vishnu Temple has done, the Ganesh temple attempts to faithfully recreate South Indian Hindu worship in Canada. Around the large hall are fourteen altars where *murtis* or images of individual gods such as Ganesh, Shiva, Durga, and Murugan are installed, each with “their own space where individual worshippers may come and pray, alone or with the mediation of a priest” (Israel 1994, 57). Thus, several activities involving different worshippers, priests, and gods may be going on simultaneously reproducing the general cacophony of sound typical of a South Indian temple. Unlike the Vishnu temple, Sunday is not a special day at the Ganesh temple. Festival days, however, are special, and then ten to fifteen thousand people may attend (Israel 1994).

A third example of the variety of Hindu practice in the Toronto area is provided by the Arya Samajis. Followers of Dayananda Saraswati, they reject the use of images in worship and instead focus on a simple Vedic fire ritual, which any member of the Samaj can perform. They also reject caste. Arya Samaj followers came to Canada mainly from East Africa and the Caribbean as well as from India. In Toronto there are two Arya Samaj communities, which are part of a North American network with congregations in more than seventy cities, including London, Windsor, Calgary, and others in Canada. Ethnic differences separate the two Toronto groups. One group is composed of primarily Hindi speakers from East Africa or India and conducts worship in Hindi. The other is made up of immigrants from the Caribbean who do not know Hindi and conduct their services in English. Both groups, however, chant the Vedas in Sanskrit. The first group owns its own house and land while the second group rents church halls for its Sunday services. Although ethnic and language differences continue to separate the two groups, a campaign to raise funds for the building of a Vedic Cultural Centre on the property of the first group may yet succeed in uniting them (Israel 1994).

The Toronto area, with its large concentration of close to 100,000 Hindus, offers a magnification of the patterns that exist in more or less developed form in other Canadian cities. While a multi-use temple with Canadian Protestant-style congregational worship may be satisfactory in communities with smaller numbers of Hindus, ethnic and sectarian differences seem to manifest themselves once the population of Hindus becomes large enough to support such divisions. Ethnic languages play a major role in such separations, and it is an open question as to how successful these first generation communities will be in passing on their languages to their children.

Another aspect of Hindu religion that was present in India, and which has assumed increased importance in religious practice in Canada, is the role of the guru. Scholars have concluded that the enlightened guru is the dynamic sacred centre of Hinduism — that the guru's interpretation of scripture, tradition, and experience is more sacred than the sacred texts or rituals themselves. In India, renaissance gurus such as Dayananda, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo played a central role in the continuity and change of Hinduism in response to new challenges. Is this also true for Hindu families that have taken up residence in

Canada? A Canadian field study suggests that the answer is “yes” (Goa, Coward, and Neufeldt 1984). In addition to attending the temple, serious Hindu families carry on traditional patterns of daily devotions in their homes. One room is set aside for worship and an altar with images installed. Along with the deities one would find in the temple, photos or images of an individual's or family's guru often occupy centre stage on the altar. The guru's images dominate the altar, receiving prayers, and focusing the *mantra* given to the family members during initiation by the *guru*. These devotional acts, accompanied by the offering of holy water and fruit, all to the statue of the *guru*, have replaced the traditional cycle of worship associated with the *Panch Devta* or five deities. The role of the guru has been to restructure traditional *puja* and ritual of village India to meet the challenge of modern life both in India and Canada. Almost all informants reported that the guru dramatically restructured the ritual practice of the household, especially in Canada, so that it would work to free one from the rat-race of Canadian life and give one a spiritual basis.

The ritual pattern associated with death has also undergone change to accommodate to Canadian life. Unlike India, death in Canada usually occurs in a hospital. Following initial arrangements with a funeral director, a priest or lay priest is contacted.<sup>1</sup> Family and friends gather around the body at a funeral home with the necessary facilities for cremation. Following a welcome and eulogy, the priest conducts the ritual for the deceased. An invocation to Lord Vishnu may be offered followed by a *mantra* from the *Upansiad*, “from the Unreal lead me to the Real; from Darkness lead me to the Wisdom Light; from Death lead me to Immortality. Oh Peace, Peace, Peace” (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 1, 3, 28). The ritual actions associated with the funeral have accommodated to Canadian practice. In India or Africa the body would have been carried to a pyre, covered with *ghee* — clarified butter — and a mixture of spices called *samagrese*, “fed” with water and rice balls, and offered gifts as a sign of devotion and thanksgiving. By contrast, in Canada, *ghee* is placed on the body, a drop of water put in the mouth, flowers are offered and the body laid in a casket. Funeral home facilities do not allow for the *Havan*,

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<sup>1</sup> The following description is drawn from participant observation in Hindu funerals in Edmonton and Calgary in 1982, first reported in Goa, Coward, and Neufeldt (1984).

with its rhythm of *mantras* and offerings to Agni (fire), the god who bears the dead to the eternal realm. The *mantra* alone remains. The physical contact with offerings, the ritual linking of the *Havan* and the funeral pyre with the eternal is now expressed through a mere token gesture. The pyre is now a high-technology furnace making the *ghee* irrelevant as an aspect of ignition and conflagration. The natural symbolism of *ghee*, with all its surrounding imagery from hearth and table to pyre (see Douglas 1978), is broken and, with it, the immediacy of symbolic connections “showing” the integration of the deceased with the divine.

After the funeral service, the body is pushed on a trolley to the cremation furnace, usually accompanied by family and friends. There it is raised mechanically and placed into the furnace. The traditional practice and symbolism in the old country is quite different. The body would be personally shouldered by a circle of intimate friends. It would be deliberately placed on the pyre, and the preparations visibly made. The eldest son would come forward, take the fire from Agni’s *Havan*, and ignite the pyre while all were present. The final integration of the dead person's body/soul with the cosmos was engaged with conscious intent and full family participation.

The Canadian restructuring of the Hindu funeral to accommodate funeral directors, the law, and the technology associated with cremation has made the experience much more abstract and removed from the mourners than was the case in India. While the theological ideas informing the meaning of the ritual remain the same, the symbolic participation of the bereaved in the physical experience of cremation is to a large extent broken. No longer is the physical burning of the bare body by fire (Agni) actually seen. Now everything is abstracted and hidden. A casket rather than a body is what is seen — all of which disappears from sight to burn inside a closed furnace where the flame of Agni cannot be seen and experienced. The eldest son does not physically light the fire.

The danger in all of this is that the theological meaning of the *mantras* of the funeral service may lose their intimate connection with the physical events of death and cremation in the devotee’s experience. When the body and the fire are not seen, it takes an act of imagination to connect what is happening inside the closed casket and hi-tech

furnace with the reintegration of the person's body/soul with the divine cosmos through the bright fire of the god Agni. The ritual loses some of its immediate symbolic power to interpret death as moving from the transience of the body to the unity of all creation in the Divine. By accommodating to modern North American funeral practice, Hindu rituals surrounding death are experiencing some of the same loss of power and meaning that has afflicted the Christian funeral service during the past few generations.

### III. Strategies of Adaptation in Sacred Language and Education

Restructuring is also evident in the Canadian Hindu experience of the learning and practice of sacred language and text in daily life. We have already mentioned that in Canada there has been a shift away from traditional practice and toward practice prescribed by a *guru*. Whereas in India sacred language and text were learned easily at a young age and served to structure one's perceptual and cognitive experience throughout life, in Canada, by contrast, little of this happens in the natural way that it did in India. In India, especially in upper class families, sacred language and text were learned passively. From an early age one heard it over and over again as part of daily activity until the texts and *mantras* were internalized and became part of one's consciousness. The parents and grandparents taught children through daily household worship. In addition, the surrounding culture was suffused with the same texts and chants so that the learning took place, as it were, by osmosis. A good description of this process was offered by one respondent:

My father was a great scholar in Sanskrit and right from the age of four or five he used to let us get up very early in the morning and teach us all these scriptures — *Upanisads*\* and *Vedas* — and all the religious chants. He would make us repeat it a number of times, almost by rote. We didn't know the meaning of any of those things at that time.

We had a number of occasions when we would chant them outside the house too. Suppose you go to a temple where there is a *puja* taking place and they usually chant these *mantras* too. If you have already got them by heart at home, you feel free to join with the rest of the people there . . . you simply become part of the proceedings and have a place for yourself. If you know what you are doing and can join in and do it as well as they do, you

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\* Editor's note: The scholarly tradition spelling.

are accepted straightaway, nobody even questions who you are or what you are, you just go into the *sanctum sanctorum*.<sup>2</sup>

By this traditional pattern in India, passages from the *Vedas*, *Upanisads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, etc. were first committed to memory by oral repetition at home and in the community. Through repeated rehearsal they became the underlying structuring pattern of one's mature consciousness. Learned by heart in one's youth, the remainder of adult life and especially old age would be spent in studying the meaning of these texts for life. Ritual chants such as the *Gayatri* were learned in the same way and assumed the same function in consciousness.

In Canada, everything has changed. No longer do the children rise at five in the morning to chant Sanskrit texts with parents and grandparents. In many instances, even if the children did rise at that hour, they would not find the adults doing their chanting. Some adults confess that they now do their morning chanting while running for the bus or while walking or driving to work. Gone is the more leisurely pace of India. It has been replaced by the Protestant work ethic. Within the home, it is difficult to find a time either morning or evening when the whole family can gather for worship. Saturday is sometimes set aside for family devotional practice. Often the absence of grandparents or other members of the extended family further reduces the power of the family to transmit the sacred tradition. Outside the family, Hindus live as a minority group in a secular, materialistic culture and so the contextual reinforcement of family practice, experienced in India, is simply absent in Canada.

In the face of these difficulties a new practice, introduced by gurus, is appearing. It responds to the complexities and time problems of Canadians by simplifying home worship into a pattern which, in essence, consists in chanting a guru's name or *mantra* 108 times, two or three times a day (Goa, Coward and Neufeldt 1984). Whereas in India, where practice involved both traditional Sanskrit texts chanted in rituals *and* observances relating to a guru, in Canada much of this is collapsed into one simple flexible and efficient practice — chanting the guru's name or *mantra*. This has several distinct advantages: (1)

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with C. G. Balachrandran, Calgary, Alberta, March 18, 1982.

it is easy and quick to learn — as opposed to the years of practice needed to memorize Sanskrit chants in India; (2) the sacred language is retained —the guru’s name or *mantra* is still in Sanskrit but can be easily memorized and chanted even though the person knows no Sanskrit; (3) the time and place of the chanting can be adjusted to suit whatever lifestyle one adopts in Canada — for example, in a public place, or in one’s office, it can be done silently, making regular spiritual practice possible in the constant change and fast pace of Canadian life; (4) it can be learned easily at any age; and (5) it fulfils the same spiritual role of keeping the mind controlled and focused on the divine as the traditional home rituals — the guru, through name and *mantra* opens the channel to the divine just as the learning of sacred texts and their ritual practice did in traditional approaches.

While the *guru mantra* may prove effective for Hindus living in Canada, it does raise questions. The very simplicity of the approach and the “blind faith in the guru” that is required, may well produce a Hinduism with more dependence upon a priestly group (i.e. the gurus) than was the case in India. If Hindus no longer learn their scripture and ritual in childhood, the possibility of home religious practice independent of the guru may be largely lost. And without the foundation of daily worship at home, temple worship may rapidly become a shallow shell of what it once was. The important function of sacred language and text shaping one’s consciousness from early youth and providing the mental structures through which all of life is perceived and given meaning may be lost. This will leave new generations open to experiencing their Hindu religion in a very nominal fashion — as a source of rituals for key moments of life such as naming, marriage, and death, but little else. Just as many Canadian Christians are basically secular people, so also a secular Hinduism may develop in second- and third-generation immigrants.

Dependence upon a *guru*, however, may be one way of attempting to continue daily worship in the modern Canadian context. While many families go to great effort to set aside one room of the house as the worship room and devoted mothers make a sincere effort to teach the full *puja* tradition to their children, the pace of Canadian life and the pressures of the surrounding secular society inevitably seem to result in simplifications of the *guru*-type. One respondent comments: “my mother, even in Windsor, Ontario, where

we made our home, had one room dedicated for prayer, just as I have here in Calgary, and we continued all the rituals. Today I have reduced rituals very much because in 1976 our entire family got a *guru* who initiated us into the *mantra*.”<sup>3</sup> While the *guru* urged the family to continue with their traditional practice and to chant the *mantra* given by the *guru* as well, the simplicity and ease of doing the latter meant that it rapidly came to predominate. More and more time was spent with the *guru*'s *mantra* and less with the traditional rituals. The *guru mantra* practice, being more flexible in that it could be done anywhere and demanded no ritual materials, seemed better suited to modern Canadian life. It gave one a way of “unwinding” from job pressures and helped one to see through new problems clearly. Thus, for many Hindu Canadians, the *guru* has become important not only in helping them to adjust to a new life situation, but also in fulfilling the function of ritual — replacing observances which had been important in the homes of parents in India, or first generation mothers in Canada.

While the *guru* has always been a part of traditional Hinduism in India, especially as an instrument for philosophical, religious and social change (Miller 1976-77), in Canada the role of the *guru* seems to be expanding. For many, the *guru* now becomes the heart of Hinduism, or Hinduism personified, allowing Hindus in Canada to feel that they are still Hindu in spite of the fact that they no longer engage in the full traditional patterns. Even if they were inclined to a full-scale ritual life requiring the services of specialists, in most Canadian cities and towns such specialists are simply not available on a regular basis, and the time constraints and complexity of Canadian life also do not allow it. All of this has produced a new heightened significance for the *guru*. In India, to be Hindu may well have involved having a *guru and* engaging in traditional family and community rituals including scripture recitation in Sanskrit. In Canada, to be Hindu, for many, means simply to have a *guru*. This now may become almost the exclusive point of identification, a single ritual which provides a sacred centre and a sense of belonging. The *guru* is not merely the connecting link to Hinduism: he or she becomes the sum and substance of it – the ritual, the *mantra*, and the scripture all in one. It also makes the tradition easy to pass on to

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Srinivas Doraiswamy, Calgary, Alberta, 18 March 1982.

children, as only the *guru's* name or *mantra* needs to be learned. There is no need to go through the difficulties of learning a sacred language, such as Sanskrit, and the vast array of Hindu scripture and commentary.

As noted earlier, however, the danger is that such a simplified practice may prove too shallow for those wanting to experience the philosophical, esthetic, and religious richness of the full Hindu tradition. This has led some to put a great deal of effort into the establishment of temples and/or cultural centres where languages can be taught along with music and dance. Classical Indian dance is taught in most centres by semi-professional teachers. The Canadian South Asian community is now large enough to attract professional artists from India on tour. In most cities the cultural calendar is quite lively. In large cities like Toronto, there are also Indian language television programs. But everywhere, in large or small centres, videos and cassette tapes are playing a significant role in making Hindu culture and religion easily available in the midst of the secular, materialistic, Canadian milieu. Of course, the taste of the individual family dominates. On entering a home one may be greeted by a barrage of Hindi films and film music (no less materialistic than their Hollywood counterparts), by the meditative sounds of Ravi Shankar playing a classical raga on the Sitar, the family's *guru* giving a lecture or leading the singing of *puja*, or by the sight of the whole family (all ages) engrossed in one of the TV episodes of the Mahabharata. Technology is effectively bringing India into Canadian Hindu homes.

#### **IV. Higher Education**

Enrichment is also added at the university level. The formation of the Shastri-Indo Canadian Institute in 1968, with most Canadian universities as members, has done a great deal to foster intellectual exchange between India and Canada. This was especially so in Religious Studies Departments where books from India on Hinduism (as well as Jainism and Buddhism) were placed in the libraries using Indian government rupee funding. The primary scriptural texts in Sanskrit were purchased along with translations. This library resource supported the teaching of Sanskrit language and Hinduism to Canadian students

interested in Indian religion as well as to the children of Hindu immigrants who wished to formally study their own religious tradition. The Shastri Institute brought Visiting Professors from India to speak in Canadian classes and offered research fellowships for Canadian faculty and graduate students wishing to study in India. All of this intellectual activity is important in itself, but it also allowed the immigrant Hindu community to see its religious ideals strongly represented in Canadian higher education.

Indeed, the Hindu community has worked to further highlight its presence within the university milieu. In the mid-1980s Canadian Hindus took advantage of a federal government matching program to establish a Chair of Hindu Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. This Chair and its first incumbent, Dr. Krishna Sivaraman, have helped to give Hindu studies in Canada a high profile. The opportunity to study Hinduism in depth (including its sacred language Sanskrit; its texts, philosophy, history and ritual) exists at the universities of McGill, Concordia, McMaster, Toronto, Manitoba, Calgary, and British Columbia. At McGill, McMaster, Toronto, and Calgary, B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. programs can be completed. This is important for the Canadian Hindu community in two ways. First, it ensures that many university-educated Canadians receive good teaching about Hinduism. Second, it enables intelligent intellectually minded young people of the Hindu immigrant community to pursue the study of their own tradition to the highest level of knowledge. To this extent the “banks of the Ganges” are present in Canada.

As a professor of Hinduism for some twenty-three years in Canadian universities, I can think back to many students from Canadian Hindu families who first took Hinduism courses because of a sincere side interest or because they assumed it would be an easy A (it wasn't), and became so engaged in the study that they switched majors and some went on to win fellowships and complete PhDs. I think of one student now completing her Ph.D. with a feminist thesis on women heroes in the *Mahabharata*. An undergraduate English major when she first enrolled in my Hinduism course, she quickly became so fascinated with studying her own tradition that she switched into Religious Studies and learned Sanskrit. Born into a serious but not pious family, she studied Indian classical dance with a local teacher while in high school and university. Apparently following the expected course of an upper class Hindu daughter, her life at university both pleased and

challenged her family. Although pleased with her sincere commitment to studying Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures, her family found their plans for an arranged marriage thwarted when she fell in love with and married a Canadian Anglo-Saxon male student whom she met in my Hinduism class. Her family have since come to accept this Canadian interfaith marriage and their new grandson, on whom they dote. Their daughter's feminist scholarly analysis of Hindu scripture may prove to be a harder challenge for them to accept. Not only has the Indian immigrant community brought Hinduism to Canada, but the intellectual study and development of that tradition is now flourishing here — and in some areas providing the lead for world Hindu scholarship.

Throughout my years of dealing with Hindu university students, I have noticed a difference between the males and females. While the boys show little difficulty in adjusting to Canadian life, with the girls the situation is often more difficult. Mothers sometimes expect their daughters to follow in the footsteps they trod growing up in India: no dating, staying within the extended family, and an arranged marriage. Mothers who have stayed at home to look after the family have often adapted less to Canadian society than the children who have been at school, or the husband who has been out at his job. This can result in severe tension in the family, especially between mother and daughter.

## **V. Public Policy Issues**

The tensions within families induced as a result of attempting to live a Hindu religious and cultural life in Canada have parallels at the level of public policy. Pluralism in the form of multiculturalism is an established part of Canada's public policy (*The Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, 1990). As citizens of a liberal democratic country, Canadians of European Judeo-Christian heritage have traditionally shown enthusiastic support for religious ethnic events such as interfaith days, folk fairs, crafts exhibits, and dance performances. Yet as Canada's diversity grows and the size of its immigrant communities expand, tensions arise over such matters as immigration patterns and religious issues, like the wearing of turbans in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Islamic dress in schools. While Canadian Hindus do not find themselves in the public eye to the same extent as

South Asian Sikhs or Muslims, Hindu voices have been strongly present in the lively Canadian debate over Multiculturalism. A senior editorial writer in one of Canada's national newspapers, *The Globe and Mail*, is a Hindu; and the Canadian Hindu author, Neil Bissoondath, has written a non-fiction best seller, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), attacking Canada's public policy. "Multiculturalism," says Bissoondath, "with all of its festivals and its celebrations, had done — and can do — nothing to foster a factual and clear-minded vision of our neighbors. Depending on stereotype, ensuring that ethnic groups will preserve their distinctiveness in a gentle and insidious form of cultural apartheid, multiculturalism has done little more than lead an already divided country down the path to further social divisiveness" (77). Following the publication of his book, Bissoondath was taken to task in a front page *Globe and Mail* story by Sheila Finestone, then Canada's Minister of Multiculturalism. In response to her claim that he was threatening the fabric of Canadian society, Bissoondath argued that the official encouragement of ethnic and religious diversity as multiculturalism may be threatening a core Canadian way of life — the old Canadian way of life that originally attracted him to Canada in the first place and that he characterizes as "a cohesive, effective society enlivened by cultural variety: reasonable diversity within vigorous unity" (224). He cites another Canadian Hindu writer, Bharati Mukherjee, in support of his analysis. In Mukherjee's view, Hindu and other immigrants leave their old countries and come to Canada to be Canadians — not to be labeled as a religious ethnic or a member of a multicultural community. "Whether or not I preserve my cultural background is my personal choice; whether or not an ethnic group preserves its cultural background is the group's choice. The state has no business in either" (220). Both Bissoondath and Mukherjee instead direct attention to the manifestations of racism in Canadian society. Clearly, Hindu voices are strongly engaged in Canada's policy debate over multiculturalism.

Another public policy area that has led to a focus on Hinduism is Health Care Ethics. Canada's recent Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies raised questions about the view of Hindu ethics on such issues as time of ensoulment, prenatal diagnosis for genetic disorders, abortion, artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization (IVF),

sex selection, and the use of aborted fetal tissue for research. The Commission wished to be sensitive to the views of each religion in Canada in drawing up its recommended Canadian guidelines. The Commissioners recognized that religious opinion constitutes a major source of ethical viewpoints, even among generations no longer actively practicing the religious faith of their parents or grandparents. Although very much a minority religion in Canada, the views of Hindu ethics on these difficult questions relating to the New Reproductive Technologies were included in the Commission's documentation and policy analysis (454-458). This proved especially helpful to the Commissioners in their dealing with the use, by some Canadian South Asians, of sex selection technologies to ensure the birth of sons (usually in US clinics).

Yet another area of public policy that can be problematic for Hindus in Canada is the way self-identity is conceptualized and enshrined in Canadian law. Typical of a modern liberal democracy, Canada in its Constitution assumes that the self is the autonomous, isolated, individual. However, for many South Asian Hindus, self-identity is more collective than individual. Rather than the "I-Self" which typifies most North American life, Hindu experience is much more the collective "We-Self" of the extended family. This difference has important implications for situations involving issues of consent in health care ethics. While the Canadian health care system and Western medical ethics teaching assumes that the ethical agent is the autonomous individual, in South Asian Hindu culture it is frequently the collective "We-Self" of the extended family that functions as the decision maker in matters of consent. This difference, which Hindus share with immigrants from many other traditional cultures and religions, is just now being recognized by medical ethics scholars and health care professionals (Coward, 1997).

## **VI. Women**

Women in first-generation families frequently take the responsibility for maintaining the family altar in the home and passing on the daily home worship traditions to the children. Girls as well as boys are encouraged to continue into post-secondary education with the result that many become professionals employed outside the home. Thus the role of

mothers in maintaining home worship may well change in second-generation families; however, this has yet to be thoroughly studied. The pattern of marriage in the second and third generation also seems to be changing with the desire of mothers to have their daughters follow the arranged marriage tradition receiving considerable resistance from their Canadian-born daughters. Canadian-born Hindu women who continue into university frequently evidence a desire to engage in a critical feminist reading of the textual sources and history of their tradition. In this they are not different from many of their contemporaries in India. With regard to issues of self-identity, Hindu women in Canada — be they young or old — continue to manifest a strong collective self-identity and sensitivity to all the family duties and responsibilities that brings. Older women, mothers of first generation immigrants who later come from the old country, are sometimes lacking in English language ability. If everyone else in the family goes out to work, they may find themselves in a lonely and alien situation. A current major research project (The Metropolis Project on Immigration and Integration of Immigrants in Canadian Cities) is engaging in ethnology studies to examine the experience of such women in Canadian South Asian immigrant communities.

## **VII. Relations with the “Old Country”**

Close ties are usually maintained between Hindu South Asians in Canada and India. There are frequent visits “home” to see members of the extended family. Money is sometimes sent to help those still in India. India is still a favoured place for the finding of partners in arranged marriages. Some first-generation immigrants plan to retire in India. Touring gurus, professional musicians and dancers now make regular circuits across Canada and receive strong support from the Hindu communities. Such visits play an important role in the passing on of religion and culture to succeeding generations. They also attract participation from members of the host culture. Officers of the Indian High Commission and its regional consulates make frequent visits to the South Asian communities thereby helping to maintain cultural and political links with the “old country.” In the educational domain, the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute has provided fellowships enabling many

Canadian South Asian Hindu students to return to the “old country” to study language, history, religion or culture. South Asian faculty members in Canadian universities have been awarded sabbatical fellowships to do research in India — often coinciding with arranged marriages of their children in India. The Shastri Institute's Visiting Scholar program has brought some of Hindu India’s finest scholars to travel across Canada speaking both to university students and to community groups. In all of these ways, Hindus in Canada have nurtured and maintained close connections with the “old country.”

In this century, Hindu political movements in India have established themselves and begun to reach out to diaspora communities for support. One of the leaders of these movements was Vir Savakar (1883-1966) who, in his writings and speeches, exhorted Hindus to “hinduize” India by overthrowing Nehru’s “secular” government and “militarizing” Hinduism (Klostermaier 1998, 143). In his essay on “*Hindutva*”, Savakar distinguished *Hindu-dharma* (Hindu religion with its many *sampradāyas* or denominations) from *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness” or the common sociocultural substratum of Hindu India). The resulting political movement required that all Indian citizens accept India as their holy land and that they abide by the Hindu ethos. Savakar, however, conceived of *Hindutva* as compatible with the spread of Hindu people into communities scattered around the world (McKean 1996, 80).

In 1980, Savakar’s ideas were given political embodiment in India when a number of splinter groups formed themselves into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP became a Hindu nationalist movement with media events that reached out to diaspora communities — events such as the *Rama-sila-yantra*, a public collection of bricks for the new Rama temple to be built in Ayodhya that eventually led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992 and the worst Hindu-Muslim riots since Independence. The religious theme currently used by Hindu political parties is *Rama-rajya*, the perfect rule of God on earth as described in the *Ramayana*. While Gandhi talked of *Rama-rajya* as the living of God’s highest moral standards on earth, the BJP often seems more interested in political power within both India and the communities abroad.

Another development from Savakar's thought is the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) the "Hindu World Association," which was founded on the anniversary of Krishna's birthday, August 29/30, 1964 in Bombay (Klostermaier 1998, 146). Its organizers included several *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang* or RSS members. Organized along paramilitary lines, the RSS takes as its mission the regeneration of Hindu society. The VHP aims at reawakening Hindu consciousness and achieving worldwide cooperation among Hindus. "It also attempts to articulate a kind of universal Hinduism, to modernize Hindu tradition, and to give political power in India back to the Hindus." (Klostermaier 1998, 146). The VHP is liberal in its membership and includes not only those born into Hinduism, but everyone willing to follow the values evolved in Bharat or pre-Muslim India. With World Conferences in Allahabad and its headquarters in a modern suburb of Delhi, the VHP, through its various worldwide programs, has become a major influence among Hindus everywhere, including those in Canada. Although conservative in its ideology, the VHP is modern and progressive in practice. This combination is well-suited to the taste of many Canadian Hindus.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Hinduism is alive and well in Canada. The major large immigration of Hindus to Canada occurred in the 1960s and '70s, led by well-educated English-speaking professionals who were well received and made important contributions to Canadian society. Hindus have settled in the major Canadian cities, with the largest concentration in Toronto. Living in Canada has meant changes in patterns of worship and ritual. Canadian law regarding marriage and death has prompted the building of temples and a shift from home-centered to temple-centered Sunday workshop — Protestant style. The rich and complex ritual life of India has been replaced, in the lives of many Hindus, by a simplified *guru*-centered ritual suited to the fast pace of Canadian life. Canadian law regarding cremation, and the culture of funeral homes, has dramatically changed the ritual experience of death, making it more abstract and less powerful as a religious experience.

The lack of a leisurely extended family life in Canada, with a family priest in attendance, has produced a dramatic change in the learning of sacred text and language. Whereas in India this happened quite naturally as a part of daily family and community life, in Canada this is not the case. As a result, the scriptural texts and languages are often not learned and passed on from one generation to the next. Simplified *guru* mantra chanting is one attempt to respond to this challenge. But Hinduism and its sacred language and texts can be studied at many Canadian universities — an opportunity being taken up by some students of immigrant Hindu families. Such teaching also ensures that the Hindu community in Canada can see its own tradition fully represented at the highest level of Canadian education, namely, the university. In terms of influence from India, the BJP political party, and the VHP religion/culture movement have both exerted strong influence in the Canadian Hindu communities, especially the VHP.

Finally, brief notice was taken of the engagement of Hindus and Hinduism in issues of Canadian public policy. Hindu writers like Bissoondath and Mukherjee have been major voices in the important debate over the national policy on Multiculturalism. Also, the Hindu worldview and its ethics have been given serious study by the recent Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies. An issue yet to be dealt with in Health Care Ethics is the Hindu collective experience of self-identity and the problems this presents for South Asians generally in matters of consent in medicine and law.

With the bulk of its community in the youth and under fifty adult age group, the Hindu community will continue to grow, both through reproduction and immigration. Building on the firm foundation established, Hindus will both contribute richness and diversity to Canadian society and find their religion challenged by the secular materialism of Canadian culture.

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