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Janet Elizabeth Gunn

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

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**Hindu Women, Lived Religion, and the Performance of Gendered Narratives:
Canadian Examples**

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

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***Hindu Women, Lived Religion, and the
Performance of Gendered Narratives:
Canadian Examples***

Janet E. Gunn

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Ph.D. degree in Religious Studies

Department of Classics and Religious Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

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■ ♦ ■
Canada

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Abstract

The lived religious experiences of Hindu women, and the interpretations of these that they bring to bear on their own lives and those of their children in diaspora, have largely been overlooked in the study of Hinduism, resulting in a significant lack in our understanding of the lived religious experience of Hindus. This dissertation responds to that lack by paying attention to women's daily embodiment of religious narratives in Canada. I investigate participants' household devotional activity in dialogue with their experiences of temple worship, all with a view to revealing performances of religious narrative in quotidian diasporic experience. Hindu women's daily interactions with the Divine are presented as a site of dialogue between orthodox norms and the imaginative, creative element inherent in the lived experience of religion. It is shown that women's devotional lives are a key site for the articulation of daily, experiential Hinduism in which individual actors, while constructed *by* culture in their role as appropriately devout wives, mothers and daughters, operate within a field pregnant with the potential for active constructions *of* culture.

The study reveals three primary conclusions:

1. The performance of religious narratives is an important part of the majority of participants' lives in Canada.
2. Religious narratives of auspicious womanhood, while considered important, are flexibly interpreted and deployed by participants.

3. The desire to provide children with a rootedness in tradition does not correlate to the desire that one's daughters embody that tradition. The majority of research participants are (or were) concerned to educate their children about Hindu religious narratives, but are not concerned that children continue traditional practices in their own lives unless they wish to do so.

Troubled by the characterization of women's religious practices as both marginalized and marginalizing, and unsatisfied by the generalization that in adhering to religious roles Hindu women are mute subjects of patriarchy, this study shows that women's engagements with tradition are spaces of dialogue; generative loci of multiple and significant meanings for themselves, for their families, and for the Indo-Canadian Hindu community. This elastic process of meaning-making need not be interpreted as subversive of tradition, but is more fruitfully presented as *constitutive* of the religious life-worlds of Hindus.

Acknowledgements

*"Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not
– the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or
perhaps he does not know" (Rg Veda 10.129)*

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the University of Ottawa, whose generous funding has made this research possible.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the women who so graciously welcomed me into their worlds of meaning. These are your stories, your creations, and it is your astonishing creativity and intelligence that makes them worth recounting.

Many thanks to my academic mentors, whose feedback and support have been invaluable throughout this process. Special thanks are due to my thesis advisor Anne Vallely, as well as to Paul Younger, Corinne Dempsey, and Karen Pechilis for their ongoing interest in this project and for the examples set by their own work. John Cove has been both an academic mentor and a good friend throughout this process – hey, Jimmy.

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Chapter One

Introduction

"You who lift mountains, I have some light. I want to mingle it with yours." (Mirabai)

*"A specific identity has meaning only in relation to other identities"
(Langellier and Peterson, 2004: 127).*

Aims of the Study

Theorists (e.g. de Certeau 1984) have argued that everyday life is where we can see the actual production and transformation of structures and cultures..., [that] generalizing analyses and abstract theories tend to 'freeze' or 'freeze-frame' culture, as well as places and concepts. ...But culture is not a frozen set of rules that people merely enact. Nor do all peoples in a culture abide by the same cultural principles or concepts: the activity of people is heterogeneous, contentious, emotionally charged, and often surprising (see Bakhtin 1981). Our activity is always potentially culturally transformative and historically relevant. In other words, culture is as culture does. And culture only does through active, living human beings. The discourses that are culture may come out not only in words, but also in the way a person walks, where they choose to walk, how they wear their hair, how they dress, how they worship, etc. All of these everyday activities are part of the heterogeneous and always-changing discourse that we call culture (Mines and Lamb, eds., 2002: 4).

This dissertation takes the everyday religious lives of Hindu women as its starting point for understanding the significance of gendered religious narratives in diaspora.¹

¹ Diaspora is a contentious term. In its most specific use it refers to peoples dispersed around the world but identifying as a collectivity rooted to their ancestral land and tied also to their countries of resettlement. More broadly, it can indicate "a type of social consciousness that locates individuals in multiple cultural and social spaces" (Levitt & Waters, 2002: 6), or a mode of cultural production (i.e. the formation of cultural subjectivities that travel). Because 'diaspora' does set up an opposition between a desired-for homeland and a somehow temporary 'host' country, many prefer to use the term transnationalism, emphasizing "the process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders" (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc, 1994: 6). I do use the heuristic device of 'diaspora' throughout this dissertation, primarily because it is a term regularly used by the study's participants themselves without any negative connotations. I do not intend to convey any sense of Indo-Canadian

Through their everyday engagements with the sacred, Indo-Canadian Hindu women enact cultural roles, but they also shape them. Some such engagements take place in the household, where in tending to their household shrines with *puja* (ritual worship) each morning and evening, women engage in the bodily performance of the religious narrative that casts Hindu women as dutifully prayerful, performing their *dharma* (religious duty) in accordance with the models established by Sita, Parvati, Lakshmi and so many other paragons of womanly virtue.² These performances are variously interpreted by their actors, and it is in these ruptures and convergences between tradition and innovation that we may begin to understand the significance of lived religious experience for Hindu women living in Canada. How important is the performance of these religious narratives for individuals as they seek to establish and maintain personal and communal identities? In what ways do these narratives establish a restrictive path, and in what ways do they permit creative engagement with culture? If, as Mines and Lamb assert above, “culture is as culture does”, what might we learn about Hindu culture in Canada through an examination of women’s daily engagements with tradition? I begin my attempts to answer these questions with a vignette (in which I raise still further questions).

families as unequivocally longing for a return to their imagined homeland or as in any sense not ‘belonging’ to Canadian society. For further discussion of this term see Chapter Three.

² I take *puja* and other daily engagements with tradition to be active performances through which individuals express the self and, in doing so, contribute to meaning making. See also Novetzke, who writes of *bhakti*, the communities or “publics” it establishes, and the process of “poetic world-making” undertaken by these publics through their performances (2008: 262). Even when devotional acts are performed in solitude, argues Novetzke, “these things all take place in the context of some audience; if no one else, one can be sure that at least God is always watching” (2008: 256).



Figure 1. Sunday Archana, Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir

Sunday service is in full swing at the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*, a small Hindu temple in the Canadian city of Ottawa. I am sitting amid an amiable clutch of women, our *dupattas* (long scarves) mingling as they pool on the carpeted floor. Despite the lively nature of the priest *Panditji's* talk, our group is preoccupied – comparing and admiring one another's bangles, earrings, and *salwar kameez*, passing around hand lotion and whispering about the Mexican cruise from which Nirmala and her husband have just returned.³ Around us children are playing, either quietly in their mother's laps or more busily zigzagging their way through the crowd, dizzily landing in any one of a sea of welcoming laps. A teenage daughter sits behind her mother massaging her lower back with her feet, occasionally leaning forward to giggle something in her ear. A smaller girl, perhaps four, studiously combs her mother's hair. I am surrounded by smiles, laughter, and loving touches, and the Goddess Durga appears to be basking in the glow of this love, reflecting it back upon the congregated devotees.

³ All informants' names are pseudonyms.

But although the goddess is present, and we are thus in her presence, none of this buzz seems to be related to the *archana* (worship) taking place at the front of the temple. Is anyone paying the least bit of attention? Why are they here? Is the temple simply a place to come together and enjoy the company of one's community? How does the experience of meeting the sacred in this particular space differ from the more intimate environment of one's home, where there is often no-one to catch up with but oneself? In diaspora, does the Hindu temple operate more as community centre than sacred space? If so, what are the consequences of this for the lived experience of Hinduism in Canada? After the *archana*, I try to bring the conversation away from our enjoyable chatter toward my research questions: What is the significance of your household shrine? Is the temple somehow a different sort of sacred space? Do women experience Hinduism differently than men? How is Hinduism different in Canada than in India? Is your household devotional practice an important part of maintaining your Hindu identity here in Canada? These pages are the result of that and many other such conversations.

Why do the private religious lives of Hindu women in Canada need to be studied? Early scholarship on Hinduism tended to focus on the classical tradition, texts, and temples, the institutions through which orthodoxy is largely sustained, leaving readers with a partial, and often elitist, impression of the religion. Only recently has the attention of scholars been directed toward the uniqueness of religious worlds inhabited by women, and to the significance of the lived religious practices of laity. This recent work focused

on contemporary lived experience permits us to better grasp the significance of the Hindu philosophy and practice in the day to day lives of adherents. In turning away from textual analysis toward the interpretation of practice, contemporary scholars of Hinduism have revealed the human, relational characteristics of the tradition. Lawrence Babb (1975) and Christopher Fuller (1992) each emphasize the reflection of human social relationships in the structure of the Hindu pantheon, while Diana Eck (1985) stresses the importance of *darshan*, the transformative exchange of vision between deity and devotee that lies at the heart of devotional Hindu practice. Paul Courtright (in Waghorne & Cutler, eds., 1985), brings our attention to the intimate, loving nature of the relationship between devotees and deities, and to the articulation and advancement of this relationship through daily ritual praxis. Ethnographic studies of women's religious practices like *vrata* (votive fasts) and other calendrical observations, which often happen in courtyards and kitchens, have moved beyond the margins of the classical tradition (see, for example, Pearson 1996 and Pintchman 2005). Such studies, each of which is addressed in greater detail below, have undermined the normativity of the once apparently monolithic Brahmanic tradition, highlighting alternate and oppositional takes on what it means to be Hindu. Undeniably, the constraints of classical Hinduism and its normative models are shattered by the devotional tradition of *bhakti*, in which orthodox norms of purity and pollution give way to the sole requirement of a genuine love for God.⁴

⁴ The term "*bhakti*" connotes both a series of historical movements and the more general constellation of practices that make up Hindu personal devotion. Christian Lee Novetzke clarifies: "A common scholarly convention interprets *bhakti* to mean 'personal devotion,' or a sentiment of intimacy with a deity... [and] a 'movement' of social protest against caste, class, religious, or gender inequities. Historically, no single social movement has cohered around the term *bhakti* or its sentiments. Instead one finds innumerable religious communities, practices, bodies of texts, and so on, that invoke *bhakti* as their generative

Today, the dominant form of ritual activity is *bhakti* or devotion to a deity. Stemming from the Bhagavad Gita and gaining strength from an anti-Brahmin, anti-Vedic movement starting about A.D. 700, *bhakti* and associated ritual forms such as *puja* (devotional ritual) do not require the services of a priest. Women, then, can have direct access to the gods through *bhakti* and *puja* (Wadley, 1977: 121).

The present study aims to shed further light in these still largely dim corners, providing some balance to the prevailing discourse of patriarchal Brahmanic orthodoxy. Daily engagements with tradition remain largely overlooked, resulting in a significant gap in our understanding of the lived religious experience of Hindus. This dissertation responds to that lack by paying attention to women's performances of religious narratives in their daily lives. In this I follow Dorothy Smith's call for research to be done "from the standpoint of women," taking "the everyday world as problematic" and beginning from women's ordinary, everyday experience (1987). While not yet sufficiently researched, the central role of Hindu women's quotidian religious activity has long been acknowledged:

The significance of rituals performed by women in Hinduism cannot be overestimated. Although largely unrepresented in published manuals in Sanskrit, underrepresented in the more available ritual booklets in regional languages, and not generally discussed by the male priest of village or urban institutions... women's religious activities are nevertheless understood to be the cement that holds together Hindu society at its basic level, the family (Knipe, 1991: 134).

Scholars of religion must peer into the complexities of this and other examples of domestic imaginative work if we wish to understand as fully as possible the place of religion in human experience. Happily, much recent academic work has emphasized

principle. ...In practical terms..., *bhakti* resists confinement to any particular action or utterance" (2008: 257-8). In this study the term *bhakti* is used to indicate the former of these two common understandings.

the importance of paying attention to the ways religion emerges in the daily lives of believers. One example of such a study is Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's ethnography of a female Muslim spiritual healer in Hyderabad, India, *In Amma's Healing Room*, in which the importance of bringing local expressions of lived religion within the realm of academic legitimacy is made clear (2002). Because religious experience within such frameworks is negotiable and creative, studying it reveals the importance and instrumentality of religion in lives of individuals and groups in ways that the study of texts and universalized abstractions does not. Such projects are made richer by the fact that these colloquial expressions of tradition are not entirely detached from their orthodox forms. The two are intertwined in an expansive web of meaning, sometimes converging quite closely and at other times taking sharply divergent tacks. As stated above, this study presents Hindu women's daily expressions of devotion as a site of dialogue between orthodox norms and the imaginative, creative element inherent in the lived experience of religion. These dialogues, taken together, constitute the performance of religious narratives: they take up, and at times contest, the patterns provided by mythological role models. The performance of these narratives is one means by which the women in the study daily construct their identities as Hindu women in Canada.

Mirabai, whose words open this chapter, stands as a powerful example of a woman who rejected marriage and normative understandings of Hindu womanhood, spending her life instead composing poems and songs of her passionate love for god. She is a devotee par excellence, for *bhakti* is centered on the loving and reciprocal relationship

between devotee and deity. Indeed, *bhakti* turns the philosophical urgings of renunciation and withdrawal from society on their head.⁵ It not only celebrates, but *necessitates*, emotion and attachment. This characterization requires careful attention, as "emotion is first and foremost a social construction and hence must be examined in cultural context" (Timm, 1991: 61). What, then, is "emotion" for Hindus? While Western understandings of emotion tend to devalue it as the opposite of rationality, for the *Bhakti* poets, emotion was understood not "as a subjective entity buried within the individual human psyche [as we in the West understand it,] but as an expression of dynamic relationship" (Timm, 1991: 71). The ascetic impulse of Upanishadic sages is replaced by an aesthetic celebration of relationship. Human relationships serve as the templates for these intimate connections with a personal Divine in which the gods become close confidantes and family members. Each deity has a history, a personality, and one's relationships with these sacred personalities are not seen as radically separate or different from one's relationships with humans. Four stances may be taken toward the deity by a *bhakta* (devotee): the relationship of servant to master; of friend to friend; of parent to child; or of lover to beloved. These stances produce feelings ranging from awe and humility to solidarity, affection, ease, and playfulness; to love, joy, and parental concern; to passion, longing and desire. Through these relationships, "ordinary (*laukika*) human emotions are transformed into something extraordinary (*alaukika*)" (Timm, 1991: 68). Passion, desire, longing and sorrow are divinized.

⁵ Intellectual/philosophical rationalization of *bhakti* often stresses its consonance with the path of renunciation, citing Krishna's counsel in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which he advises Arjuna that the best way to 'renounce' is by throwing over all one's attachment to God through sincere *bhakti*. The key is that a passionate attachment to God remains.

Unlike the path of knowledge, which traditionally requires a high birth, a male body, and a willingness to renounce society, the sole requirement of the *bhakti marga* is to "experience and to enjoy life given by, and most importantly, dedicated to," one's chosen deity (Timm, 1991: 65). "The fullest expression of bliss and enlightenment occurs not in some rarefied context of pure consciousness or as the result of ritual acts of renunciation, but instead during the householder stage while one is married, raising children, and earning a living" (Timm, 1991: 66). Upanishadic norms of rigorous study and withdrawal from the world are rejected – the ascetic is given over to the aesthetic.⁶

The *bhakti marga* is, for all that, a path of pragmatism. Proper treatment of the deity ensures that grace will be bestowed upon the worshipper, and devotees bring their concerns for success and happiness in this and future lives to their interactions with the gods. Ultimate salvation is rarely the primary concern of daily *puja*. Rather, devotees enter the sacred space of their household shrines each day in order to improve, or ensure the ongoing success of, their daily worldly entanglements. Health, wealth and happiness are core objectives of the *bhakti marg*: "No bad dreams, lots of good power, good health, good wealth... whatever you want, God is going to give you" (*Panditji, Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*, personal communication). Selva Raj and William Harman have identified an "indigenous South Asian strategy concerning human collaborations and interactions with sacred figures" (2006: 5). According to this scheme, "collaborations and interactions are intended to bring about either profit in this world or improved soteriological status vis-à-vis the sphere of the supernatural. Whether deities

⁶ Charles Taylor notes that the affirmation of the ordinary often carries within it an implicit critique of elite understandings of what constitutes the good life (1989: 23).

are helping folk in this world or whether folk are achieving enhanced status in the world of the deities, people are dealing with deities, and vice versa" (Raj and Harman, 2006: 5).

Nor is the path of devotion one that necessitates the denial of the body. As discussed more fully below in Chapter Two, "*bhakti* needs bodies" (Novetzke, 2008: 261). *Premsevam*, loving devotional service of the deities, is and must be an embodied performance: the gods require waking, bathing, clothing, feeding, and entertainment and these actions must be physically performed by devotees. "Love requires service, the concrete expression of devotion and care. Thus *seva* [devotional service] is a bodily affair" (Timm, 1991: 69). Gavin Flood has remarked that *bhakti* "emphasize[s] the expression of emotions, rather than their control through yoga, and emphasize[s] the body as a sacred locus of the Lord in the world" (1996: 133). John Cort describes the sensuality of the devotional path in vivid terms: "*Bhakti* is understood to involve the encouragement of desire for a relationship with God and the maximization of religiously oriented sensory experience" (2002b: 721). And David Kinsley's characterization of this path leaves no doubt of its emotional impact on devotees: "Devotion is ardent affection, zealous attachment, piety, dedication, reverence, faithfulness, respect, awe, attentiveness, loyalty, fidelity, or love for or to some object, person, spirit, or deity" (1987: 321-322).

Puja

Anthropologists and religious scholars alike describe popular, devotional Hinduism as based upon practice rather than belief (see, for example, Babb 1975; Eck 1998; Fuller 1992), such that “any effort to uncover the assumptions and principles underlying this religious system must seek them in ritual activity” (Babb, 1975: 31). If we are to look at Hindu *bhakti* we must look at *puja*, for this series of actions performed in the welcoming and serving of the Divine lies at the heart of all Hindu devotional practice.

Paul Courtright, in a piece entitled "On this Holy Day in my Humble Way: Aspects of *Puja*" (1985), brings attention to the intimate, loving nature of the relationship between the devotee and the deity, and to its articulation and advancement through daily household worship. Courtright provides a treatment of daily household ritual and its significance for the *bhakta* as a locus of meaning construction. He writes: "*Puja*, the basic formal means by which Hindus establish relationship with their deity, embodies the very reality that it seeks to adore. Or put another way, "*pujas* create or invoke their own worlds of meaning" (1985: 33). Moreover, he argues, with Akos Östör, that "*pujas* are 'legitimate forms of analysis' and should not be reduced to simple functional vehicles for determining social status and relationships". *Pujas*, he argues, "must be treated as distinct religious and symbolic units which require an analysis that seeks to understand the elaborate and ingenious worlds of meaning that flow in and out of their performance" (1985: 34). This study is a response to Courtright's call insofar as it approaches household *puja* as one among several daily encounters with, and performances of, religious narratives on the part of 37 Indo-Canadian Hindu women,

and probes the significance of these encounters in diasporic processes of meaning-making.

The elements that typically compose *puja* are carried out with varying degrees of elaborateness in different contexts: it is a crucial part of temple worship, performed with exacting detail by Brahmin priests, and appears in extended form in week-long calendrical festivals. But the notion of *puja* is also fully present within the condensed symbol of *namaste*, the greeting of both gods and humans with palms pressed together. Its central importance to every major, formal religious activity, as well as to the smallest devotional gesture, means that *puja* can be understood as Hinduism's core ritual, one that might serve as a window through which Hindu cultural meanings and values can be perceived and are created.

Puja performed in the home is particularly revealing in this regard. Domestic worship yields unique insight given its everyday nature: it is neither an extraordinary nor a subversive practice, nor does it necessarily reflect a tension between rarified sacred experience and the mundane lives of participants. Rather, the worship conducted each day in the home is embedded within, and finds expression through, the rhythms of daily existence. Domestic *puja* both validates and gives meaning to the daily activities of Hindus, particularly to those of the women who are most often involved in its performance.

What are the cultural meanings embedding Hindu household ritual? What cultural values are expressed by these meanings? Worship may be motivated by an entire spectrum of human concerns, including a desire for balance between routine life and religious activity; pragmatic concerns such as the well-being of family members; or by a wish to achieve liberation in unity with the Divine. Each of these motivations centers on relationship. Reciprocal relationships are central to Hindu devotional practice, and find expression through the core ritual of *puja*. Christopher Fuller argues that “all symbolic interaction with the gods and goddesses of popular theistic Hinduism is about relationships among members of Indian society, as well as between them and their deities” (1992: 8). Moreover, relationships with the gods are experienced as fundamental to people’s lives. Ritual interaction with the Divine is necessary because the gods are powerful: they control the world and the lives of everyone in it. Actions of offering and serving appear prominently in *puja*. Akos Östör reports that “the most common account of *puja* given by the people themselves is based on an analogy between the service of a deity and the treatment of a guest” (1982: 8), an attitude described by Fuller as one of “respectful honouring” (1992: 71). The gods and goddesses are understood to travel from their Himalayan home to become physically present in the images on the home shrine. Such a long trip and such auspicious guests require a great deal of hospitality on the part of the welcoming family indeed. But this attitude of honour is often complemented by a less formal, more familial and affectionate approach. Devotees do treat the gods on their domestic shrines as honoured guests, but they also employ:

the entire range of intimate and ordinary domestic acts as an important part of ritual, [sharing with the gods] common, affectionate...family

activities [that are] symbolically powerful because of their very simplicity and their domestic nature: cooking, eating, serving, washing, dressing, waking, and putting to sleep. These are precisely the acts which ordinary people have most carefully refined through daily practice with loved ones in the home (Eck, 1998: 47).

In the context of the Hindu household, the shrine is in many ways the sacred centre of the home. The deities on the shrine are residents of the house, sharing the daily routines of family members. Morning and evening rituals marking the beginning and end of each day for human and Divine alike, and each family meal is preceded by food offerings to the gods. But because the household altar is sacred space, its significance always extends beyond the mundane activities it encompasses. To interact with the gods here is to move away from the contingent, entering into a non-ordinary space. Amalia Mesa-Bains writes that among Catholic Latinas, the home altar occupies an "intermediary space... where the individual communicates through this intermediary space with the Divine, where the celestial is always present in the everyday lives of people" (hooks and Mesa-Bains, 2006: 120).

Shrines are places of power, transformation, and communication, "sites of mediation where the ambiguity and unpredictability of [human] relations are harnessed to generate meaning" (Mather, 2003: 23). Because they are portals of communication with the gods, access points to a transcendent reality, shrines permit individuals to participate in a higher stratum of existence. Mundane realities can be transferred into a new interpretive framework. It is in this way that the household shrine can serve as a site for the negotiation of daily struggles, including familial relationships, and as generative

locus of meaning-making for women. Having performed prescribed acts empowers women to inhabit their worlds of intimate relationship with more self-confidence and more of a sense of possibility than they possessed prior to enacting the ritual: having performed *puja*, one now feels that the problem has been (as Catherine Bell suggests) shifted onto another plane. Such ritual performance provides “something tangible to ‘do’, and a framework of hope for change and healing” (Flueckiger: 116). An individual can thus walk away from *puja* transformed, and carry this transformation with her into her dealings with family members and in her broader approach to the challenges of life. This is clearly demonstrated by the narratives of the women in this study, as many explicitly tell of the power of their devotional entanglements to transform, or make bearable, problematic life situations, and all speak of the strength and calm generated by their prayers.

In contrast to temple worship, the performance of *pujas* at home allows women to hold complete authority, as they are qualified to complete the entire process without the need for priestly intervention. This is tremendously significant in that, in a religious landscape otherwise formally and publicly populated and controlled by men, domestic *puja* and other household rituals allow women a space to create relationships with the sacred on their own terms, presenting an opportunity for individuals whose identity is formally based upon relationships to others within the household to take active control of events within the domestic sphere. The daily performance of religious narratives through devotional activity at the home shrine is one area of life in which some Hindu women

may become active agents of their own positive constructs rather than being entirely passive recipients of an identity constructed from the outside in.

Home shrines are most often populated by three types of gods: *grama-devatas* (village deities), *kula-devatas* (family deities), and *ista-devatas* (personal deities). While the *ista-devata* is a matter of individual preference, the village and family deities are inherited. In general, when a woman moves to her husband's home upon marriage, she maintains the relationship with her *ista-devata* but adopts the *grama-devata* and *kula-devata* of her conjugal family, leaving those of her father's house behind. In theory, the only household god or goddess that a woman will have an enduring relationship with is thus her chosen *ista-devata*, but in practice this study shows a great degree of flexibility in this regard. The shrines of many research participants are populated by *murtis* given to them by fathers, mothers and siblings as well as by senior female in-laws, and several icons have been added by the women themselves according to their own desires. In fact, the only occasions on which this tradition was invoked by research participants were to explain that it is one they do not follow.

As photographs throughout illustrate, the shrine itself may be quite elaborate but is often a simple structure – a shelf or table located in the main room of the house, or perhaps in the kitchen, a bedroom, or converted linen closet. Pictures or small statuary of the household gods are permanently installed on its surface, where they await ritual attention. In an Ottawa study that preceded my own, Radhika Sekar reports that amongst her Canadian Hindu informants, “household shrines to family deities are

maintained where the women of the household light a daily votary lamp" (2001: 196).⁷ No matter what their level of participation in official religious activity at the local temple, all of Sekar's informants tend home shrines populated by as many as ten family gods, generally in the form of framed pictures, and a lamp that must be lit daily "since it signifies the presence of god in their homes" (2001: 197). Sekar's study was primarily interested in the development of institutional religion in the Ottawa Hindu community, and its brevity on matters of household practice is supplemented by this research.

Female bodies bring purity and pollution into perilous intersection in the sacred spaces of both household shrine and public temple. Hindu notions of the sacred are "influenced and structured by the binary principals of purity and pollution" (Mazumdar, 1994: 43). As such, men and women never have the same relationship to sacred space, whether it be public or private. When this sacred space dwells in the midst of domestic space, women are the ritual specialists, the experts. Yet the bodies of these ritual specialists, by virtue of their menstrual cycles, are always actively or potentially polluted and polluting, and therefore doctrinally relegated to the margins. This is, of course, not unique to Hinduism, and contributes to the unique flavour of female religious engagement in many cultures. "In diverse cultures... women are excluded from much of the formal religious domain, yet experience a well-developed religious life that is

⁷ Radhika Sekar provides a glimpse of the dynamics involved in reconstructing transnational Hindu identities in her paper "Authenticity by Accident: Organizing, Decision Making and the Construction of Hindu Identity" (1999). Her work traces the development of the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton, outlining some of the sectarian tensions that arose as the temple set out to establish itself as the institutional centre of Hindu community and ritual practice in the Ottawa area. Sekar's description of the sterile atmosphere enforced by the temple's board of directors, and the correlating lack of comfort and closeness to the deities experienced by some devotees, pointed me to a potential increase in importance of household ritual for Hindu families in Canada - and provided a significant jumping-off point for the research presented in this dissertation.

intrinsically and often indistinguishably intertwined with their 'profane', day-to-day, female activities" (Sered, 1988: 129).

The middle eastern Jewish women of Susan Sered's study *Food and Holiness* embody this dynamic, as their "ritual and...everyday lives cluster around the center of this continuum: it is difficult to pinpoint any times, places or activities that are wholly sacred or wholly profane" (1988: 130). Sered's work provides a useful reference point for the present study. As it is for many Hindu women, the religious world of Sered's informants:

is essentially domestic in the sense that it is centered around symbols, myths, rituals, institutions, and theology that are used by the women to safeguard the health, happiness, security, and well-being of people with whom they are linked in relationships of caring and interdependence. ...For these women, and for many other women like them, a major aim of religious ritual is to involve God in networks of interpersonal and interdependent relationships (1988: 130-1).

For the women who participated in Sered's study, "relationship is sacred because maintaining relationship correctly is what God wants humans (and particularly women) to do" (1988: 130-1). This concern is manifest in a "diffuse religiosity" in which women interpret each of their daily household activities as a *mitzvot*, a sacred obligation and an expression of devotion. She writes: "For these women time, space, life, death, love, and tradition are potentially sacred. ...I see cooking as but one aspect of the religious mode that permeates the women's lives, but that can rarely be pinned down within particular sacred spaces or sacred times" (Sered, 1988: 130). The fact that the women of Sered's study bear sole responsibility for the household obligations that they interpret as devotional acts "means that it is the women who are the ritual experts, the guardians of law and tradition, the ones with the power to *make or create*, not simply to participate"

in religious tradition (1988: 135, emphasis in original). Through their mundane and yet profoundly devotional activity, "women become partners with God" (Sered, 1988: 136).

The present study reveals a similar dynamic at play among its participants.

This interior mode of engagement with religion has not, as yet, been sufficiently addressed by scholars of religion. Like Robert Orsi, and like myself, Sered asks:

Are major portions of human religious experience invisible to researchers? The notion that the sacred may be fully embedded in everyday domestic life leads to a major re-thinking of how to go about studying religiosity. Once we begin looking for religion within the profane world rather than outside of it, we begin to discover realms of religiosity that are not limited to those times, people, places, objects, and events that seem extraordinary; we begin to see religion as potentially interwoven with all other aspects of human existence (1988: 137).

The imbrication of sacred and mundane in household worship takes on increased meaning in diaspora in part because temple visits are less convenient, less personal, and thus less frequently undertaken. *Puja* at home provides an important sacred space within which women can retain or devise adaptations to elements of worship most meaningful to them, nurturing relationships with divine personalities in largely personal ways.

The concept of *puja* is somewhat flexible in meaning. It may be used to refer to the simple ritual act of placing a flower on an altar, or to describe an elaborate series of highly prescribed actions lasting over a period of hours, days or even weeks. In all cases, devotees are required to purify their bodies in preparation for worship – daily household *puja* is ideally conducted in the morning, after bathing but before ingesting food or expelling waste, at the time of the day when participants are most ritually pure.

In the course of *puja* at the home shrine, *murtis* may be treated to any combination of sixteen traditional *apacara* (ritual attentions).

In its fullest form, the gods are first welcomed into the home, invoked into the *murti* on the shrine, and offered a seat at its centre. They are then given water to wash their feet, and offered a towel with which to dry them. The gods and/or goddesses are then presented with oil and turmeric, to be rubbed into the skin. Goddesses are offered red lacquer with which to paint their feet, black *kajal* (kohl) with which to paint their eyes, a mirror, and a sacred thread to prepare themselves for worship. *Aarti*, the honorific offering of light with a camphor flame or oil lamp, is then performed. Offerings of incense, more camphor, flowers, sandalwood, silk garments, and both raw and cooked food are made. In practice, the flexibility of this process allows for any or all of these offerings to be substituted by oblations of water, in accordance with time constraints and with the level of material wealth of the devotees (Babb 1975; Östör 1979; Fuller 1992; Eck 1998). In addition to these basic elements, deities may be honoured with the smearing of various substances such as vermilion paint, sandalwood paste, or butter; and protected from the irritation of heat and flies by the waving of a fan. Such actions, while performed for the ostensible purpose of enhancing the comfort of the deities, need not 'make sense' in practical terms. For example, "to wash an idol one may nevertheless pour a greasy, sugary, perfumed mixture all over it, and in South India this on occasions has become a complete fruit-salad" (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994: 185). Devotees may then circumambulate the shrine, and *bhajana* (devotional hymns) are often sung. All of these actions are performed for the sake of the comfort and

enjoyment of the deity, as the gods place themselves in a position of willing dependence upon their devotees for “nurturance and caretaking” (Eck, 1998: 48).

Household *puja*, as construed within this study, can thus be summarized as a flexible series of ritual actions, performed daily in the home, in which each of the gods on the domestic shrine is treated simultaneously as both an honoured guest and adored family member. The completion of these actions constitutes an embodied performance of religious narrative. Offerings made by the devotee to the deities are symbols of domestic relationships – of hospitality, and of marital and filial affection. Relationships between humans and the Divine are further characterized by reciprocity: at one level, the ‘respectful honouring’ aspect of *puja* may be eclipsed by pragmatic deal-making as, for example, the goddess Lakshmi might be promised a new sari in return for bringing wealth into the home. Despite the pervasiveness of a discourse that denigrates religious practices involving materialistic bargaining (often associated with lower castes whose level of education is assumed to be low) in favour of the spiritual goals of *moksha* (attainment of liberation from *samsaric*, cyclic existence) and of selfless devotion, worldly concerns are actually quite common motivators of ritual activity, and often “necessitate rituals of appeasement rather than the performance of spiritual exercises designed for *moksha*” (Sekar, 2001: 159).

The reciprocal nature of the human-Divine relationship is also expressed through *puja* offerings themselves: in the process of delighting the senses of the deities, those of the devotees are rewarded as well, and the proper performance of the ritual ensures the

continued well-being of both the gods and the human family. The relationship is further articulated as the offerings, after having been presented and left in the presence of the deity for a ritually suitable period of time, are returned and distributed amongst the devotees as *prasad*, no longer ordinary food or cloth but now imbued with the divine power of the deity. This act strengthens the relationship between devotees and deities, bringing the worshippers closer to the Divine while at the same time supporting the hierarchical characteristics of Brahmanical Hinduism, insofar as eating the deities' leftover food is understood to express the human devotee's humble subordination to the gods (Babb 1975; Fuller 1992).

As illustrated above, existing scholarship conceptualizes popular Hinduism as based on practice rather than belief. Further, the Divine is represented as thoroughly and immediately present in the physical elements of the visible world: "The day to day life and ritual of Hindus is based not on abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the Divine in the substance of the material world" (Eck, 1998: 11). Scholarly consensus presents the primary characteristics of popular Hinduism in the following general terms:

1. It is fundamentally based on reciprocity;
2. Relationships between humans and the Divine signify social and familial relationships; and
3. *Puja* is the central ritual of popular Hinduism, through which all of these relationships are expressed and negotiated.

Along with these foundational assumptions, I have adopted Christopher Fuller's perspective toward popular Hindu practice, including domestic *puja*, as a social and cultural construct, "created and recreated in and by a collective ordering of experience" (1992: 7). Paul Courtright's approach to *puja* as a distinct symbolic unit of analysis, introduced above, can be most fruitfully pursued by situating that unit within its broader cultural context. The suggestions and conclusions I present are rooted in the assumption that Hindu women construct meaningful worlds for themselves through their simultaneous constructions of Hinduism. In performing narratives of Hindu identity, women are actively creating – and tweaking – that Hindu identity. Importantly, these meaningful creations are characterized by relationship. These relationships flow between people and gods, among the gods themselves, and among various groups of people, and they find multivalent expression through the ritual actions of *puja*.⁸ If we read Hindu interactions with the Divine as symbolic of familial and societal relationships (see also Babb 1975), we can see the ways in which the relationships Hindu women form with the gods and goddesses of their home shrines become generative of their self-conceptions as devotees, wives, mothers, friends, and so on. In the context of the Hindu diaspora, these relationships take on new significance as women actively engage in processes to both adapt and preserve normative aspects of Hindu culture and to balance these with the integration they desire for themselves and for their families. These processes are particularly important concerns for the participants in this study as

⁸ A crucial aspect of this process is *darshan*, the ritual exchange of vision between deity and devotee considered essential by *puja* participants. Diana Eck has articulated the now classic model of *darshan* as fundamental to lived Hindu practice. She argues that "the central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the layperson, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity" (1998: 3). This transaction, in which the deity gives *darshan*, and the devotee takes it, is one of the strongest expressions of relationship between the parties.

they characterize themselves, more than the men in their lives, as the custodians of religious and cultural convictions following immigration (see also Rayaprol 1997; Pearson 1999; Sekar 2001).⁹ But household *puja* is also unmediated and self-monitored, and sacred authority lies with the individual performing the ritual: "The devotee functions both as the agent... and as the authenticator of [the *puja*] having been suitably executed" (Raj and Harman, eds., 2006: 4). Because of this, women's household ritual permits a space within which idealized relational identities can be surpassed or partially subverted, as female devotees construct and express unique and positive identities through their relationships with the deities on the household shrine.

Living up to tradition? The Pativrata and Gendered Experiences of Hinduism

In India and in Hindu communities worldwide, adult women face a culturally specific notion of self. As noted above, Sanskritic texts and Brahmanic orthodoxy characterize female bodies as inherently polluted and polluting, and thus force women into the margins of religious life. Menstruation and childbirth are ritually impure, making dangerous vessels of the bodies that contain and expel the products of these processes. Bodies in this ritually impure state are unfit for admission to the realm of the sacred, effectively excluding women from roles as ritual specialists and full participation in temple worship (with important exceptions, as we will see below).

The linked concepts of *shakti*, *stridharma* and *pativrata* are key to understanding the normative conceptualization of Hindu womanhood. In an orthodox, traditional Hindu

⁹ See pages 52 and forward, below, for a critical analysis of essentializing Hindu women as culture bearers.

family, a female is surrounded by males who control her behaviour. The normative discourse, based in textual tradition and expressed in the social and domestic authority typically held by men, holds that women are ritually impure, polluted, and potentially dangerous. This cultural ideal is supported by Hindu cosmology, which attributes to women a divine power or energy known as *shakti*. *Shakti* has the potential to be terribly destructive if left unchecked, or, conversely, beneficial to the family if properly controlled.

The idea of *Shakti*, on the one hand, is that of a supreme female deity representing the creative energy (*shakti*) of the universe, and on the other hand, she is the protective Mother or Devi. As characteristic of all Hindu deities, *Shakti* has two aspects. As cosmic energy she is formless, boundless, and beyond time, but as the Mother she has numerous forms and names (e.g., Kali, Durga, Uma, Sati, Parvati, Tara, Chandi, Chamunda, etc.) by which she is affectionately worshipped by the devotees (Holm & Bowker, eds., 1994a: 71).

According to ideal models, family relationships are such that a woman's *shakti* is carefully contained and directed towards constructive ends - the well-being of her father, husband and sons. Such a dutiful woman is known as a *pativrata*, a woman who religiously performs her vows. The 'wife who maintains her vows', the *pativrata* is responsible for the religious and physical well-being of her husband and children, and it is through her devotional activity that this responsibility is met. Transnational *pativrata* face the added responsibility of passing on Hindu tradition to the next generation, immersed as that generation is in the variably multicultural and secular Canadian context. One of the key aims of this study is to probe the depth of that responsibility as it is perceived by community members themselves. How, for example, do research

participants respond to the type of model here put forward by anthropologist Colleen Yim?

One is religious if one has good *samskaras*, or manners. For the upper castes, *samskaras* are literally life-cycle rituals. ...[For others,] *samskaras* also carry the meaning of good behaviour as dictated by the community. Knowing how to behave properly will result in being able to fulfill your *dharma*, or duty, which in turn will facilitate the goal of religious acts which is to bring peace and happiness to your home. The woman is an assistant to her husband and household. Knowing proper *samskaras* will allow others in her household to fulfill their *dharma* as well as transmit good *karma* to them as they perform *vrats* or fasts, rituals and daily tasks on behalf of the family (2008: xvi).¹⁰

In practice, women's performance of *puja* for the good of their children often eclipses ritual activity on behalf of one's husband. Ila, a participant in this study, remarked: "Wifehood doesn't matter, but I think motherhood is very important. Raising your family with traditions, values, and rituals." The ethnographic record reveals that Hindu women often frame their motives for ritual activity in terms of familial relationships, explaining that votive rites are observed primarily to maintain one's auspicious married state but also to ensure the well-being of one's sons, daughters, and grandchildren. "All of these goals are crucial to the religious path of women...for the maintenance of happiness in the home is both a woman's *dharma* and also (although almost incidentally) her opportunity for liberation" (Leslie, 1991: 6-7).

The concept of *stridharma* denotes the *dharma* or religious duty of a woman. This duty is broadly conceived: "In the Hindu world... *dharma* may be rendered as 'religion' but it

¹⁰ Although this characterization is presumably accurate for the scheduled caste women among whom Yim conducted her research in Delhi (2008), it will be shown that the model does not transfer entirely intact to the Canadian context. Only one of 37 research participants in the current study identified her role as that of "assistant to her husband and household" (see Chapters 2 and 4).

is also natural law, social law, social structure, right order, ethics, and ritual obligation. ...[the term encompasses] deeply held traditions and values which shape our ways of life, our ways of thinking and our hopes for change” (Eck & Jain, 1986: 3). *Stridharma* dictates that female devotional activity be largely geared toward the successful fulfillment of this role, as females are prescribed to undertake votive fasts for the benefit of their male family members. According to Brahmanic ideals, then, women’s religious activity should revolve around the home and the family, whereas men’s rituals are aimed primarily at general prosperity and at the world outside the house itself (Pearson, 1996). Twenty-three participants in the present study expressly indicated that these Hindu narratives of womanhood were relevant to their own lives, although most did not draw a link between these and the necessity of directing their devotion entirely toward the wellbeing of their husband, let alone the requirement to treat him as a living god. Rather, they explained that these narratives have been present throughout their lives and have, in various ways, shaped the ways in which they understand themselves as individuals and as women.

Although from an *etic* perspective women’s acceptance of these narratives may appear to force them into roles of selfless submission, it is also possible to interpret this role in a positive sense when considered in the context of Hindu cosmology. Fuller writes that “quite apart from any real power and influence that they may in fact have, women do, as wives, personify auspiciousness and, like goddesses, they possess a ritual power upon which men (and gods) partly but significantly depend” (1992: 24). Whether or not this symbolic empowerment has any beneficial impact on the lived experiences of Hindu

women, however, remains largely an area of debate (see, for example, Falk and Gross 1989; Leslie 1991; Trawick 1992; Hancock 1995; Harlan and Courtright 1995; Kapadia 1995; Pearson 1996; Nabokov 2000, Pintchman 2001).

In the lived experience of religion, of course, resistance to and subtle manipulation of such norms exist, and several studies reveal the authority accorded to women as ritual specialists in the domestic arena, emphasizing the potential for the subversion of hierarchical norms that accompanies such authority. Devotional practice is particularly rich with the potential for such transformation because "religious imagery mediates subjectivity and opens up spaces for improvisation. ...[In taking on the role of ritual specialist in the home,] women attempt to alter the horizons of the thinkable and the doable through the very discourses and practices that define womanhood as the anchor of Hindu tradition" (Hancock, 1999: 25).¹¹ This study contributes to these attempts to understand the dialectic between the ideal and the real, ultimately decentering this dynamic. By focusing on lived religion, it is made apparent that for the women who participated in this study there is ultimately no static ideal that is being strived for – rather, auspicious Hindu womanhood is being continuously created in dialogue with the exigencies of daily reality.

These gendered bodies also house historical subjects. Hindu women have historically been conceptualized and constructed as weak, passive, and silent victims. This discursive strategy was deployed, for example, by imperial Britain, which infantilized

¹¹ See also Gold (1998); Hancock (1999); Harlan & Courtright, eds. (1995), Kapadia (1995); Knott (1996); Leslie, ed. (1991); McDaniel (2003); Nabokov (2000); Pearson (1996); Pintchman (2005); and Raheja (1988).

and essentialized Indian women as submissive and mute in order to legitimize their own presence in the country: the British would reform 'the "degenerate and barbaric" social customs of the Indian people' (Chatterjee, 1989: 622). Later, during the Hindu nationalist movement, women were again put in the service of discourse, now being exalted as the keepers of tradition, exemplified through feminine values, morality, and propriety – attributes of the *pativrata*, the ideal wife who maintains the duties of devotion and sacrifice toward her husband set out for her in the eighteenth-century *Stridharmapaddhati* (see Leslie 1989).

Crucially, these models of the ritually dangerous, the muted and infantile, and the uber-moral Hindu woman do not work. They neither capture nor convey the realities of Hindu women's lives.

Clearly, religion plays a key, yet complex and ambiguous, role in maintaining gender inequality. It 'authenticates' a particular understanding of reality, usually reinforcing existing social values, giving them preternatural authority. In so doing, it can serve to naturalize sexual inequalities. But it can also be a liberating and creative force in women's lives, a source of great strength and pride, and a tool with which to create competing discourses. Its dual, controlling/enabling nature – much like gender identity itself – presents a challenge for scholars who have traditionally focused on religion as a constraining force (Vallely, 2002: 16).

Ethnographic research has clearly shown that many individuals prove these models to be tangential, at best, to their personal engagements with Hinduism. Chapter Four will explore these ruptures, situating the narratives of participants in this study within the context of recent scholarship that has brought the powerful and creative religious experiences of Hindu women to life.

As noted above, in *puja*, relationships between devotee and deity are often modeled after family and social relationships (e.g., indulgent mother toward adored son, dutiful wife toward respected husband, householder toward honoured guest). By embodying the ideal Hindu woman through the faithful maintenance of these relationships, and by carving out a particular space in the home within which these ideals are daily enacted, the identities of female devotees *are* in some ways shaped by their roles as household ritual experts. They reproduce cultural norms (e.g. woman as spiritual caretaker, her identity and actions constrained by relationship to others) in fulfilling their responsibilities at the household shrine. From this perspective, it appears that culture constructs these women. But they may also, in their daily interactions with the sacred, actively shape those very roles. Through their creative encounters with God, women complicate the meanings typically associated with gendered cultural norms, moving beyond patriarchal ideals in crafting their own complex worlds of meaning. In transnational contexts in which communities are engaged in actively reimagining tradition, women's positions as cultural vanguards means that these shifts have a real impact on the 'tradition' itself, with the result that women's household devotional lives actively contribute to the construction of culture. For many second generation South Asian Canadians, observations of their mothers and aunts 'living' Hinduism every day constitute their only sustained exposure to their religious heritage, and so these personalized practices come to stand for the entirety of what they understand to be tradition.

"Away from the watchful eye of others - of the religious literati, of men, and of neighbours - the daily rhythms of life provide interstices for private religiosity. They also

open a fascinating space through which to explore cultural, religious, gendered and diasporic identities” (Anne Vallely, undated personal communication). This study aims to explore the extent to which the religious practices of its participants are understood by themselves to be either marginalized and marginalizing; the extent to which, in adhering to religious roles, these same individuals consider themselves to be mute subjects of patriarchy; the extent to which the women's religious worlds can be understood as spaces of dialogue - generative *loci* of multiple and significant meanings for themselves, for their families, and for the Indo-Canadian Hindu community; and, finally, the extent to which these religious worlds must be understood as only one of several compartments of life experience making up an individual's tool kit for constructing, maintaining, and/or adapting identity in diaspora.

Structure of the Study

This exploration of the significance of intimate devotion in the lives of 37 Hindu women in two Canadian cities, Ottawa and Toronto, will unfold in five chapters including this Introduction. Chapter Two presents research results along with the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. Here, the parameters of this small-scale, person-centered, qualitative study are outlined, and raw research results are presented in table format. A brief summary of these is followed by critical reflection on the method employed. Finally, the chapter considers theories of gender performativity, narrative, and identity in dialogical relationship to religion, ritual innovation, and culture. This framework sets the stage for the bulk of the dissertation that follows, anchoring my interpretations of gendered engagements with religious tradition in a local setting.

Chapter Three sets Hinduism within its historical and sociological context as a migrant religious tradition in Canada and explores, via three case studies, the role of the Hindu temple as both religious institution and community centre in Canadian cities. The core tension of adaptation and preservation, found at the heart of these temple communities, necessitates new ways of understanding ‘tradition’ in diaspora. This brief examination of temple worship is necessary in order to understand the ways in which household devotional practices in Canada are, and are not, unique. Of particular interest in investigating participants’ relationships to the temple as a place of worship is their emphasis on the importance of personal narratives inhering in the *murtis* on household shrines as sources of increased devotional sentiment and ritual efficacy. Chapter Four presents some of the stories of the women whose religious lives shape this project. Here I report in fuller detail on the significance of devotion in their lives, as related to me in open-ended interviews, and bring interpretation and analysis to bear on these conversations. The data presented in table form in Chapter Two are here brought to life and analyzed in richer detail, and situated within the context of existing scholarship on Hindu women's religious worlds. Finally, “Duty and Desire”, the fifth and concluding chapter, summarizes the arguments and findings of the study, and introduces its limitations and concomitant possible directions for further inquiry.

Chapter Two

Interpreting Gendered Performances of Religious Narratives

"Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be... an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973: 5).

"Women negotiated womanhood in the ways that they ate, dressed, and cleansed themselves; womanhood was written on their bodies as they menstruated, had sex, and gave birth; it was imagined in the speech, silences, gestures, and accoutrements of ritual" (Hancock, 1999: 138).

Project Scale and Findings

This is a small-scale qualitative study based on participant-observation and in-depth interviews. Regular, participatory field visits to temples and households in Ottawa and Toronto were carried out over a period of seven years (2002-2009). Open-ended interviews were conducted with 37 women in the cities of Ottawa and Toronto. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 86; have been resident in Canada over a range of just one to more than forty years; hail from various regions of India and the worldwide Indian diaspora; and represent a range of surname *gotras* (caste designations). They represent the entire spectrum of marital statuses, with 26 participants being married, two widowed, eight single, and one separated. Twenty-nine participants are mothers. While I did not specifically address socio-economic status or household income with participants, I can comment briefly that the group consisted of three young university educated women on their way to professional careers; 30 middle aged women of varyingly comfortable means who have lived in suburban Canada for 20 years or more; and two women who have arrived only recently, under traumatic circumstances, for

whom economic struggle is a stressful reality. It should be noted that the degree of comfort to which the women appear to live is often tied to financial statuses of their husbands or parents. The importance of religious narratives in participants' daily lives might be expected to differ in accordance to which of these three categories they inhabit. This question is beyond the scope of the present study, but represents a possibility for future research (see "Limitations of the Study" in Chapter Five). Table A, Respondent Profiles, below, presents particulars of individual respondents.

Table A: Respondent Profiles, alphabetically by pseudonym

	<i>Pseudo-Nym</i>	<i>Age on date of interview</i>	<i>Length of time in Canada (years)</i>	<i>Place of birth or ancestry</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children? Male or Female?</i>	<i>Surname Gotra (caste group)¹²</i>
1.	Aditi	86	42	Gujarat	widowed	1 son 1 daughter	<i>Kshatriya</i>
2.	Bharati	40	40	Delhi (parents)	married	2 daughters	<i>Kshatriya</i>
3.	Bijli	48	42	Gujarat	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>

¹² These indicators of caste are based on the surnames of the participants. I do not intend a scientific analysis by caste but simply include the information so as to provide as holistic a picture of the research group as possible. No participant raised caste as a significant element in their lives (religious or otherwise), and for that reason I have not taken it to be a category of analysis. It is possible that one's *gotra* affiliation might be expected to impact the religious traditions within one's familial background and, by extension, in one's daily engagements with those traditions in diaspora. Again, this is beyond the scope of the present study and may be a topic for future research.

	<i>Pseudo-Nym</i>	<i>Age on date of interview</i>	<i>Length of time in Canada (years)</i>	<i>Place of birth or ancestry</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children? Male or Female?</i>	<i>Surname Gotra (caste group)</i>
4.	Deepti	42	10	Guyana	married	1 daughter 1 son	<i>Bania (Vaishya)</i>
5.	Divya	66	38	Delhi	married	2 daughters 1 son	<i>Kshatriya</i>
6.	Draupadi	40	16	Guyana	married	1 daughter	<i>Bania (Vaishya)</i>
7.	Gita	53	33	Chennai	married	2 daughters	<i>Vaishya</i>
8.	Ila	66	40	North India	married	1 daughter 1 son	<i>Kshatriya</i>
9.	Janini	50	32	Chennai	married	2 daughters	<i>Vaishya</i>
10.	Jayanti	68	40	Delhi	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>
11.	Jyoti	55	38	Bombay	married	1 daughter	<i>Kshatriya</i>
12.	Kaajal	67	36	Pune, Maharastra	married	1 daughter	<i>Brahmin</i>
13.	Kala	68	38	Calcutta	married	1 son 1 daughter	<i>Vaishya</i>
14.	Kalpana	65	40	Dehradun	married	3 sons	<i>Kshatriya</i>
15.	Kamini	58	35	Zambia	married	2 sons	<i>Kshatriya</i>
16.	Lalita	26	26	Toronto/ Guyana	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>

	<i>Pseudo-Nym</i>	<i>Age on date of interview</i>	<i>Length of time in Canada (years)</i>	<i>Place of birth or ancestry</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children? Male or Female?</i>	<i>Surname Gotra (caste group)</i>
17.	Mohini	47	20	Gujarat	married	1 son	<i>Bania (Vaishya)</i>
18.	Nirmala	65	59	Gujarat	married	2 sons	<i>Bania (Vaishya)</i>
19.	Parvati	55	40	Varanasi	married	1 daughter	<i>Brahmin</i>
20.	Poonam	26	26	Toronto/Punjab	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>
21.	Preeti	35	28	Guyana	married	2 daughters	<i>Bania (Vaishya)</i>
22.	Prema	52	20	Chennai	married	1 son	<i>Brahmin</i>
23.	Pushpali	45	27	Delhi	single	none	<i>Brahmin</i>
24.	Radha	47	25	Mauritius	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>
25.	Raj	68	37	Guyana	married	2 daughters 1 son	<i>Kshatriya</i>
26.	Rashmila	57	25	Chennai	widowed	1 son 1 daughter	<i>Vaishya</i>
27.	Sarmila	23	23	Toronto/Chennai	single	none	<i>Vaishya</i>
28.	Saroj	50	2.5	Delhi	widowed, remarried, separated	2 daughters	<i>Brahmin</i>
29.	Savita	67	30	Uttar Pradesh	married	daughter	<i>Vaishya</i>

	<i>Pseudo-Nym</i>	<i>Age on date of interview</i>	<i>Length of time in Canada (years)</i>	<i>Place of birth or ancestry</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children? Male or Female?</i>	<i>Surname Gotra (caste group)</i>
30.	Savitri	33	5	Bombay	married	1 daughter	<i>Vaishya</i>
31.	Shalini	65	40	Delhi	married	2 daughters	<i>Brahmin</i>
32.	Sonita	36	1	Bangladesh	married	2 daughters	<i>Vaishya</i>
33.	Surya	50	16	Gujarat	married	2 sons	<i>Vaishya</i>
34.	Tara	59	27	Guyana	married	1 daughter 1 son	<i>Vaishya</i>
35.	Urmila	40	15	Gujarat	married	2 sons	<i>Vaishya</i>
36.	Vasudha	28	28	Bombay	single	none	<i>Kshatriya</i>
37.	Vimala	59	35	Delhi	married	2 sons	<i>Scheduled Caste</i>

Participants were asked to reflect on the importance of household devotional performances in their lives as Hindu women in Canada, and on the relevance of traditional Hindu gender narratives to their own lives. A cursory summary of the results of these interviews is presented in Table B, to be interpreted and analyzed in depth in the chapters that follow.

Table B: Research Findings Summary

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
1. Have a household shrine	32	5

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
2. Perform <i>puja</i> and/or <i>vrata</i> regularly at home	32	5
3. Regularly attend temple(s)	24	13
4. Prefer household worship to temple attendance	12	25
5. Prefer temple attendance to household worship	10	27
6. Express no preference between household and temple worship	15	22
7. Spoke of household devotion as important in maintaining identity in Canada	31	6
8. Spoke of temple attendance as important in maintaining identity in Canada	30	7
9. Consider Hindu narratives of womanhood (e.g., <i>pativrata</i>) relevant to own life	23	14
10. Consider Hindu narratives of womanhood (e.g., <i>pativrata</i>) important to daughters(/-in-law)	15	22
11. Described gender relations in terms of patriarchy/inequality	16	21
12. Described gender relations in terms of equality	32	5
13. Spoke of religion as an avenue for actively maintaining tradition	31	6
14. Spoke of religion as an avenue for actively adapting tradition	4	33
15. Participates in <i>puja</i> (performs <i>aarti</i>) at temple while menstruating	2	35

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
16. Performs household <i>puja</i> while menstruating	2	35
17. Identified (without prompting) other issues as more important than religion in adjusting to life in Canada (e.g. economic pressures, racism, etc.)	10	27
18. Identified (without prompting) other factors as more important than religion in maintaining identity in Canada (e.g. food, music, clothing, etc.)	8	29
19. Emphasized (without prompting) "freedom" in religious life	35	2

Immediate analysis of the data in Table B shows that while a sizeable majority of participants maintain household shrines and use these shrines regularly (32 of a total of 37 respondents), this only slightly exceeds participation in institutional worship, and is not necessarily preferred. Twenty women expressed no preference for either household or temple worship, identifying both as equally important to their personal religious lives and to the ongoing life of the Hindu community in Canada. Twelve women indicated a preference for household worship over temple attendance. The most commonly cited reasons for this preference were the inconvenience of getting to and from the temple, and dissatisfaction with the atmosphere at the particular temples people had attended (participants complained that the service is "cold", it is too crowded, there are too many rules, one feels distant from the *murtis*). Even those respondents who do not attend a *mandir* regularly did acknowledge the temple as

important, but tended to emphasize its role as a community centre rather than as a place of worship.

The ten women who expressed a preference for temple worship over household *puja* unanimously cited the heightened devotional sentiment created by the presence of a large group of worshippers. In the words of Savita, age 67 and in Canada for 30 years:

It's like going to read a book at the library. It gives you the atmosphere, the ambience. It also helps to have fellow worshippers, to go there, to be part of the community, part of the Hindu community. We are a part of all kinds of communities, but on that day when we go to the temple we are part of the Hindu community. So it gives you that feeling of belonging, that feeling of togetherness, the feeling of unity, which is very important.

Aditi, 86 years of age and in Canada 42 years, indicated that she felt she learned more at the temple than in her household devotional practices because "it is beautiful to listen to the learned men read the scriptures". She was alone in drawing this gendered causal link between an increased quality of connection with the sacred at the temple and the presence and activity of men there, and I speculate that this perspective might be related to her comparatively advanced age.

Variables 7 and 8, "spoke of household devotion as important in maintaining identity in Canada", and "spoke of temple attendance as important in maintaining identity in Canada", show that religious activity both in the home and in the temple is clearly considered to be important in the maintenance of a Hindu identity for the majority of respondents and for their family members here in Canada, with 31 and 30 participants, respectively, assigning importance to the home and the temple. A recurring theme in

participants' narratives about the importance of their household shrines is their function as a repository of *personalized* links to tradition in contrast to the generic *murtis* (iconic representations of the gods) present in local temples. Gita, for example, has lived in the Toronto area for 33 years. When she arrived from Chennai, her household shrine was the first thing she set up. "I brought the things with me from India, and since then I've added to it, or there have been gifts my parents have given me, but the original shrine – a lot of it came from India. So it sort of brings a piece of home with me." These sentiments were echoed by many, but Prema, originally from Chennai, who moved to Toronto from Africa in the late 1980s, best exemplifies them. Stories she related about her shrine are rich demonstrations of the personalized narrative histories embedded in household worship. Every *murti* and ritual implement on her shrine has a family story attached to it, and she prizes each item more dearly because of that. When she and her husband moved from their suburban home into a smaller condominium, Prema had to make choices as to which items would be featured on the shrine, and made these decisions on the basis of the sentimental value she assigns to each of them. This sentimental value often also increases the perceived efficacy of the icon, as the concentration of *bhava* (devotional sentiment) that has built up in it over the years makes it more receptive and powerful than less storied icons. Prema walked me through each item in affectionate detail, beginning with a set of four calendar prints behind glass (see Figure 3):

...This is the picture my mother gave me. This whole picture, my mother gave me when I left India to go to Africa for the first time. That was 1980. So this is very sentimental value. This is Murugan, this is Siva's son; and this is Balaji, at Tirupati, this is Vishnu – this is the form of Balaji – on my in-law's side and my side too this is our very favourite deity; and this is, everywhere you go you have this, Lakshmi Saraswati and Ganesh. Any household you will see this. My mom, I

don't know why she picked it up, I have no clue. She just gave this. When she framed it for me it was a different order than this one. And we had to go to New York, because Kumar was taking a course at that time. We were living there for 10 months. And I said I need a temple, a little bit. So I took this picture. And the glass got broken when I went. I felt so bad. So I said OK, I went to the side road and looked for a framing guy, and he said OK I am going to fix it. I paid, in 1980, I paid nearly \$75.00 to frame this. And he put shatterproof glass in. And he changed everything! I told him don't change it, but when he framed and he gave it, this is how it came [with the images in a different order than they had originally been]. Now I can't ask him to... so I said forget it, it's ok. Maybe there is a reason Murugan came first. I don't know. Anyway, since then, it has been like this. So. This is very, very sentimental value for me.

Janet: And you've had that everywhere you've lived?

Prema: Everywhere. Yes. In Africa too. Maybe the position is different, but yes. From 1980 this has been going with me wherever I went. And then this one also, this I wanted to buy, because my favourite god is Ganesh. So I *love* Ganesha. So I bought this, when my mother was alive, and I wanted that so me and my mother we went and I chose this. And only Ganesh was there. And then after some time I wanted to add Lakshmi and Saraswati. I mean in my mind I wanted to buy Lakshmi and I was looking for the same kind of silver statue, and it never happened for a couple of years, or maybe more than a couple of years. My younger brother, when he came to visit me, he brought this at random and it matches - it's the same size! From India he brought this Lakshmi to me – I think maybe we were in South America at the time. So he got this and he gave it to me. So for some time only Ganesh and Lakshmi were there. So after some time I said Oh I need Saraswati too, so when I went, I think it was for my dad's 80th birthday, my elder brother he was asking, Prema, what do you want, I want to get you something. So I said ok, you get that Saraswati because there is that place I want to fill. So he bought this one for me. So that's how this is complete.

And this is Venkateshwara, also my younger brother he got this for me from Tirupati. And this one, somebody gave it to me, I don't know who. And this one, is very important to me. My mother in law gave me this, for one of the anniversaries or, I can't remember what it was. And this one is also very important for me, because we bought this, like so many of this one, for my dad's 80th. So we gave it to all the children, grandchildren were given this, and all the cousins, like you know, a token of.... So that is also important.

And this is also very, very, important – Saraswati – because my dad worshipped this. You know back home we have this, you know, the Goderich bureau? You know these iron bureau, we call it, the Goderich cupboard? And then he always keeps this there and he always prayed. This one I had my eye on for a very long time. After my dad passed away, my elder brother had this in his house. So I kept thinking, how to ask, how to ask. I was feeling kind of bad, but I had to ask. So

one day me and my brother were alone, and I was a little – I didn't want to ask in front of my sister in law. So I just casually mentioned, there is one thing I wanted to ask you. And he said "What, what is it? Come on." I said "I am really wanting this." He said "That's all? You want this? Take it!" And he gave it to me just like that. I said, you know, I will keep it for some time, and then maybe, you know, if I am happy, maybe I will bring it back for you or maybe your son. Because it was dad's. And he said "Don't bring it back, this is yours. Keep it. And you give it to your son". That's what he said. So this has been with me for about nine years now.

And this god, this is Hanuman. This is also Hanuman, this is also Hanuman. My husband is very fond of Hanuman. There is a temple in Chennai in the street called Mosque Street. Can you imagine, Mosque Street!? And there is this Hanuman Temple and a guru is there and he has been very helpful for us whenever we go with any problems and we tell him the problems and he always prays for us. So this is from that temple, they sent this to us on Hanuman Jayanti. They are always sending me pictures of this – I have loads of these – I have nowhere to put them. This is the story.

And that one, another friend brought that one to me. And this one, I am also a favourite of Lord Murugan. Ganesha and Murugan. You know they are Shiva and Parvati's children, Ganesha and Murugan. Ganesha is the elder boy, and Murugan is the younger boy. So that one, I like the frame and I like the picture. I don't know, I just like it. I bought that one, actually, that picture. So I said ok I want to keep that. And this one is a mould of sandalwood from Tirupati – see, in Tirupati, he has Lakshmi here. Can you see, the Lakshmi? That also my younger brother he gave for our 25th anniversary, or something like that. For some function. Maybe when I turned 50. I can't remember.

Janet: You haven't bought anything in Canada for your shrine?

Prema: No, because I already have so much. And all of these are like sentimental value – they came from my mother, my father, my brothers, my mother-in-law, so why would I go and look for... so I did not buy anything at all. To be honest, that thought never came in my mind at all.

...And this is the *sindur* [red powder with which devotees mark their bodies after *puja*]. I always put it here [points to her sternum] so my bra is always marked with this! [laughing].

Janet: Where do you get this [*sindur*]?

Prema: This is from Chennai. I have loads of the stuff. When we go I get it. The temple used to send it to us by mail, but they don't do that anymore. Because after 9/11, any powder, they say it... you know... it looks a bit..... But I have

enough, it can last a long time. And then friends, when they go, they ask hey, what do you need, and I will say I'm running low on this or that, so....

This is my husband's, you know, when he does the prayer, this is for counting. This is called a *ruthratcham* [string of wooden beads for meditation]. You know, my sister in law got it for him from Haridwar. This is mainly for the men, they do this. People who lose their, they become widow, they will wear this. But my husband is alive, so I am not supposed to do this. But things are changing, even women pray with this these days. This is all kind of, you know, shedding all your...what is that... you know... [Janet: attachments?] Attachments, yes, that's the word I was looking for. I am always, constantly translating in my head. I went to Tamil medium school, and I only learned English as a third language. Tamil, Hindi, and then English. So always I am struggling for words some times.

Janet: You've had all of this with you everywhere you have lived...

Prema: Yes, I've carried it. And I pack this, I will not allow the movers or anyone else to pack it. And I open it, and then I have to decide.

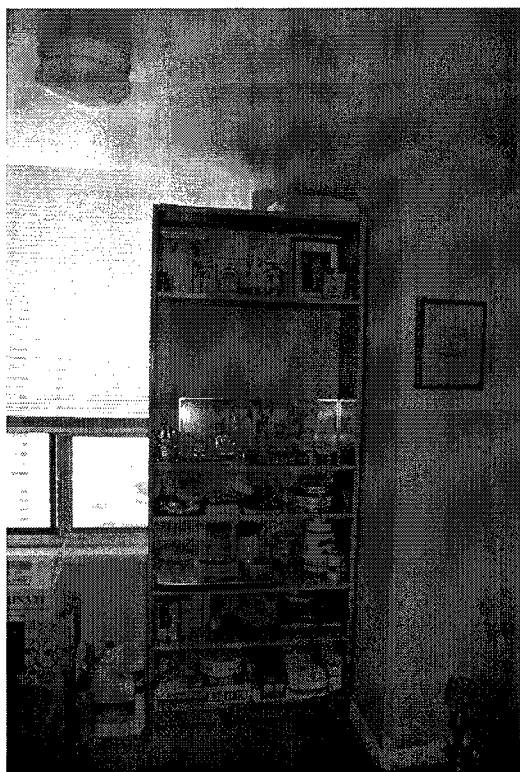


Figure 2: Prema's home shrine – note presence of cooking supplies on lower shelves.



Figure 3: Prema's home shrine, detail



Figure 4: Prema's home shrine, detail

In addition to highlighting the importance of a personal connection to the *murtis* that populate her shrine, Prema's narrative introduces various interesting aspects of diasporic religious practice, many of which will be addressed in greater depth below. Among these: the potential impact of extended family members on the composition of one's shrine (for instance, Prema did not want to ask for the Saraswati *murti* in front of her sister-in-law and so waited until she and her brother were alone); the ongoing relationships between devotees in diaspora and temples in India (such as the Hanuman *mandir* on Chennai's Mosque Street that continues to send images every Hanuman *Jyanti*); the gradual loosening of restrictions placed on women's ritual practices ("But things are changing, even women pray with this these days"); and the cooperative efforts of members of the Indo-Canadian community to ensure that they use their return trips to India to help keep the *puja* rooms of their friends and neighbours well stocked.

In apparent contradiction to my hypothesis that household devotion might serve as a site for the negotiation and reimagination of orthodox values, only four respondents explicitly indicated their religious activities to be an avenue for adapting traditions that no longer resonate with their personal values (with, for example, 35 maintaining taboos around menstruation), while 31 explicitly emphasized the importance of embodying and performing religious narratives as a means to maintain tradition. Individual respondent narratives, however, muddy the waters of this apparently unambiguous position, revealing that many women do in fact exercise considerable flexibility in their interpretations and performances of orthodox roles. This suggests that while the use of

religion as a *consciously-deployed strategy* for challenging normativity may not be demonstrated by this study, the push-and-pull dynamic between tradition and innovation is here illustrated and remains a vital and inherent aspect of daily lived religion. Personal devotion by its very nature is dialogical, as individuals receive dogma and doctrine and shape these idiosyncratically in accordance with the exigencies and rhythms of their constantly changing lives. Very often this process of personalization is so subtle that the individuals do not themselves readily identify it as disruptive of tradition (or are able to rationalize its conformity in some way). Most women who described themselves as maintaining tradition through their daily devotional activity did in fact depart from orthodox norms in various ways, but did not consider these deviations to be significant, let alone transgressive. This is affirmed in the overwhelming emphasis on the freedom offered by Hinduism to its adherents: 35 respondents spontaneously and repeatedly described their religious activities in terms of freedom (e.g. "Whatever we decide to do comes from the heart; we are very free"), while only two women spoke of their religious lives in negative or restrictive terms.

Interestingly, while a majority of respondents (23 of 37) spoke of the *pativrata* ideal as relevant to their own lives, only 15 (well under half) felt that their daughters and/or daughters-in-law (present and/or future) should be expected to embody this ideal. While guided by these narratives in their own lives for various reasons and to varying extents, all of these women emphasized that their daughters are (or will be) free to choose whether or not they wish to follow their examples. This resonates with the repeated characterization of Hinduism as "free", guided more by personal choices than

by socially-enforced rules – a characterization that may seem to be at odds with textbook representations of Hinduism in general and of women’s roles therein in particular. While there is a clear desire that tradition be maintained among younger generations in Canada, it is also clear that for over half of the women who participated in this study, the future of that of tradition need not include adherence to the *pativrata* ideal. In general, respondents described traditional Hindu gender categorizations in positive terms, with the majority invoking a discourse of “different but equal”: Husbands and wives “do different things” when it comes to religion – they perform narratives appropriate to their gendered identities – but all of those things are understood to be accorded equal value. While 16 respondents expressed dissatisfaction at the presence of patriarchy and inequality in their tradition, many indicated that things had greatly improved in recent decades and were continuing to do so. Others expressed a pragmatic acceptance of their marital realities:

In some cases it may look like a subordination of the female on the outside, but I do believe for any marriage to work there has to be some subordination. Not in a bad way, but for any marriage to work it cannot be so cut and dried like a 50/50. There has to be a slight balance going this way or that way. In most cases, women are stronger and can take more. So we tend to say, you know what, ok. But it doesn’t mean that you are subordinate to the man, just that you are looking at it from the perspective that I want this relationship to survive and to become a healthy one. You are not subordinate, you are strategic. As long as there is a mutual respect for one another, if the woman has to give in a little more, it’s okay (Kala, age 68).

Does this indicate a lack of critical engagement with gender roles among Hindu women? Have these respondents internalized the narratives of patriarchy that have historically determined their roles? Certainly feminist critiques have been leveled at the social importance accorded to figures such as Sita and Lakshmi as ideal women,

paragons of Hindu wifely virtue and femininity (see, for example, Aggarwal 1985, Erndl 1997 and 2000, Herman 2000, Hess 2001, Kishwar 1997, Murphy and Sippy 2000, Nilsson, 2001, Richman (ed.) 1991, 1999 and 2000, Robinson 1985, Srinivasan 1987, and Sunder Rajan 1993). The notion of unquestioning wifely submission to the dictates of a husband understood to be a living god is undeniably sexist, as is the idea that a woman's worth comes directly from her status as a wife. But how do these notions, variously accepted or challenged as they may be, impact women's lives in practice?

One participant in this study, Saroj, has experienced serious hardship and trauma as a direct result of these religio-cultural models, first being ostracized by her in-laws when widowed as a young mother in India, and later subjected to physical and psychological abuse in Canada at the hands of a domineering second husband. Still today she speaks of her role as a wife as one of duty, repeating over and over the importance of performing her *dharma*. The other 36 participants have not had (or did not report) first hand experiences of this kind. None – including Saroj – can accurately be described as silently submissive. Many spoke of these ideas as “ancient” or irrelevant to their personal lives (while often simultaneously embodying them through their practices, such as the observance of menstrual taboos – such women speak of themselves as equal but still act out the understanding that their bodies are polluted). As with all cultural narratives, those of Hindu patriarchy are deeply ingrained - even in rejecting them one draws attention to their importance. “We think through and with these images; so do our neighbours. They have been for the culture as a whole, even for ‘secular’

participants in culture, profoundly influential in thinking about women" (Eck & Jain, 1986: 4).

A critique of gendered cultural narratives requires the serious acknowledgment that they exist in all cultures. To portray Hindu women as existing in a geo-cultural bubble of subjugation is to engage in a type of feminist imperialism and cultural essentialism that claims solidarity with Indian women while simultaneously depicting their culture as backward. Are, in the end, Hindu role models of femininity more damaging or pernicious than Western ones? How different is Lakshmi from Barbie? Vilifying Hindu cultural narratives without acknowledging their place in a global context of similar understandings presents a distorted view of Indian women and does nothing to further our understanding of gender narratives in lived experience.

In her article "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism", Uma Narayan warns against the drawing of essentialist contrasts between restrictions borne by "Third World" cultures and freedoms enjoyed by Western women. She writes: "analyses that trace women's subordination to their confinement to domestic roles and the private sphere can constitute problematic essentialist generalizations if they ignore that the links between femininity and the private sphere are not trans-historical but have arisen in particular historical contexts" (1998: 86). Approaching Hindu women as timeless ahistorical subjects acting out automatic responses to 'ancient' cultural norms does nothing to further our understanding of their daily lived religious lives as these shape and are shaped in response to the contexts of

the moment. Further, Narayan argues, "profound similarities between Western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women, [have been] systematically ignored in [the] construction of 'Western Culture'" (1998: 90). Scholars owe recognition of this to their research communities, and here I attempt to present as holistic a rendering as possible. This study is concerned with a small group of Hindu Indo-Canadian women not as specimens of Hindu culture but as examples of individual women living and shaping selfhood in multicultural Canada. This does not imply the straightforward 'maintenance of tradition'. Essentialist depictions of culture tend to portray traditional norms of womanhood, and practices that oppress women, as touchstones of 'cultural identity', equating women's compliance with such norms as the 'preservation of culture'. I have been careful to avoid such categorizations in this study. While I do inquire as to the relevance of religious role models in Indo-Canadian women's attempts to maintain Hindu identity in diaspora, I do so with an eye to the possibility that these models may be rejected or tweaked in order to be as adaptive as they are preservative.

Overstating the significance of traditional Hindu models of femininity may be further compounded by overstating the importance of religion at all for these women. Variables 17 and 18, concerned with the relative importance of issues aside from religion in both adapting to Canadian life (economic pressures, racism, etc.) and in maintaining a sense of identity here (food, music, clothing, movies, etc.), deserve analytical attention in this regard, as they indicate that for a significant minority of respondents religion is not the

key element in either maintaining tradition or in adapting to life in Canada. Ten of 37 respondents indicated that racism and economic pressures were of greater concern than religious identity in their ability to adjust to life in a Canadian city. This does not preclude religious activity: among these ten, several were quite active members in their temple communities, and regularly engaged in *puja* at home. Eight women considered language, food, music, movies and clothing to be more important than religion in the maintenance of Hindu identity in Canada, and were most concerned about providing an atmosphere in which their children would be exposed to these things. This raises the question of how one separates religion from other aspects of culture: language, food and adornment are each intricately bound up in religious identity, just as religious narratives permeate our understandings of language, food, and adornment. There has been a tendency amongst Western commentators to overstate the importance of religion in Indian culture; to romanticize the Hindu tradition as one of ascetics and gurus, eliding the realities of lived religion as these interact with other cultural categories. Indeed there is a great degree of overlap, as has been demonstrated by sociological research:

One study of Punjabi homes in Southall, London, at the end of the twentieth century, discovered that most have very large video collections, often between 50 and 100. Of these nearly 70 percent were Indian films, representing the pure entertainment end of the spectrum. Others enabled experience of religious tradition, such as those of the television version of the *Mahabharat*, seen earlier in India and Britain. When viewed in Punjabi homes these were often used as a mode of worship, accompanied by incense and *puja*, and people refrained from eating while they were being shown. Such resources supplement what is available in diaspora public space, particularly in Hindu temples or in the gatherings addressed by visiting religious leaders and holy persons (Brown, 2006: 151).

Cultural categories do sometimes bleed together such that, as we see above, watching a film and performing worship can be identical activities. And engagements with religious tradition are a genuine touchstone for many Indo-Canadian Hindus. But we must be careful not to read religion into every aspect of South Asian experience. Scholars concerned with Orientalist historiography have long connected the characterization of India as 'mystical' and 'inherently spiritual' as a discursive device that silences non-Western cultures, casting South Asians as inherently antithetical to reason. "Indian philosophy, we are frequently told, tends toward the mystical and the otherworldly and thus does not maintain the high standards expected of Western philosophy as the pursuit of truth through the exercise of pure rationality" (King, 1998: 28-29). Such a Eurocentric view permits scholars to pursue essentialist portraits of childlike victims trapped in a land without time – and does nothing to help us understand the significance of religious narratives in the daily lives of Hindu women living not only in a constantly-changing India but across the world.

Reflections on Method – Context and Perspective

"On Thursdays," said a nonchalant Kalpana, "we worship the banana plant". We were standing in the living room of her four bedroom suburban home and Kalpana was giving me a guided tour of the various ritual implements and sacred objects located throughout. It was my very first interview with her, and I was trying awfully hard to 'get everything right'. We had been throughout the house to see her many shrines - exactly what I had come for, and was nodding along enthusiastically, happily noting to myself that everything I had expected to see was abundantly present.

And then Kalpana mentioned the banana plant and its weekly worship schedule. It was at this point that I was jolted out of the realm of pre-conceived notions and into the world of lived religious experience. My training had provided me with the tools to expect various manifestations of popular religious practice when visiting the homes of devotees. But standing in a grand suburban home in a Canadian city on a November evening, the notion of worshipping a banana plant struck me as delightfully incongruous. Why? After all, worship of natural elements such as trees, plants, rivers and stones is a very common Hindu practice. For me, the sight of this tropical plant, looking quite ordinary as it sat without finery, awaiting its next *puja*, made India seem further away than ever. But for Kalpana, the banana plant is a manifestation of the Divine - it is a little piece of sacred India residing right under her roof. And on Thursdays, that little piece of India becomes particularly charged with sacred power.

What Orientalist assumptions underpin my reaction to this event? Why did I find the worship of a banana plant "charming", even "funny", in these circumstances? What does this encounter reveal about the Othering process that is so often inherent in the project of studying religion? Kamala Visweswaran (1994) writes that "fieldwork... propagates a doctrine of difference and distance by separating the notion of home as the ultimate domain of intellectual activity from the image of the field as a transformative but temporary space, generally confined to remote or peripheral locales" (cited in Aggarwal, 2000: 19). This notion of 'home' is important. In this scenario, my informant's home and my own were in many ways too similar for Kalpana's to function

as a transformative, remote and peripheral locale. The familiar and the strange were not sufficiently differentiated.

Encountering Hinduism in a Canadian suburb has challenged my unexamined notions of the religious studies researcher's role in ways that were both necessary and unnerving. Analytical categories failed me in my attempt to adequately frame the experience of standing in Kalpana's living room, talking about the banana plant's special day. And I worried that if I had had the same conversation in the hut of a farming family in village India my reaction would have been entirely different. There, I would have expected difference, Otherness - it would have been what I had come looking for, and it would have fit. But on that particular evening I had arrived, notebook in hand, ready to observe and talk about household devotion in diaspora. For whatever reason, the notion of this family's weekly worship of a banana plant purchased at the local supermarket struck me as odd. But of course it is not odd – it is lived Hinduism in diaspora, and it fits. It is I who was out of place in that scenario.

No less so when attending any of the temples that constituted the field sites for a portion of this study. Awkward at my own intrusion and painfully aware of the intimate nature of the questions I wished to ask, my uncertain and at times apologetic presence there was always in danger of being appropriated and redirected by stronger personalities. Because these diasporic temples are frequent hosts to interfaith groups and student visitors, the regular attendees have become accustomed to curious, ill-at-ease onlookers, and have become quite adept at welcoming and educating them. Temple

congregants quickly formed their own opinions about my research and assumed motivations for my presence among them. Most of these led to a stance of amused tolerance tinged with a suspicion that, although persistent, I must not be very bright, since I kept turning up week after week while the other visitors that periodically appeared rarely did so more than once. Some were delighted at what they perceived to be my attraction to the Goddess, and repeatedly assured me "she is just the same as your own God", assuming me to be Christian. Others among the women with whom I spoke most often had a clearer idea of my research project and my reasons for being there, but persisted in assigning primary importance to their impression that I would make a good match for their (older and often divorced) sons. In all cases my efforts at building relationships were blunted by the passing of at least seven days between each encounter. I was a student visitor who turned up once a week with her notebook, to be welcomed with polite patience and warmth, but rarely intimacy.

Field research in the Hindu communities of Ottawa and Toronto blurs the conventional boundaries of home and field site. Because in neither city is there a localized Hindu community, tied for instance to a particular neighbourhood, my forays into the "field" took me to all parts of these cities. This can be disorienting – or perhaps better, dis-*"orientalizing"*. In the end I determined that such *"dis-orientalization"* is crucial to reaching a more honest position vis-à-vis the individuals and communities to whom I brought my questions. The various confusions it presented - regarding the roles of informant and researcher; the sorting out of hybrid cultural identities – turned out to be generative ones. By foiling unwitting attempts at tidy categorizations, these encounters

necessitate an acceptance of the multiplicity and fluidity of lived religious identities and experiences in diaspora.

And yet this presents a certain methodological conundrum. In her arguments for writing against culture (1991), Leila Abu Lughod urges us to sidestep reification by grounding our research in the particularities of women's lived experiences. One of the challenges of research encounters such as those I have experienced is that they do not permit long-term exposure to those particularities on the part of the researcher. I did not live with the women who form the subject of this study. The particulars of their lived experiences were partly observed in candid moments, but largely related to me in narrative form, during interviews. Given these limitations, how does the researcher 'get at' the multiplicity and vitality of lived religious experience? Can we ever presume to do so? Or must religious experience be reduced, for example, to psychoanalytic compensation, or to a by-product of cultural materialism, rendered in the process an empty vessel best suited to contain theoretical notions cooked up by academics? If it is possible to explore the daily lived religious lives of individuals, and to produce scholarly work that is worthy of the uniqueness of the experiences touched upon, how is this achieved? Although its aim is more and more the opposite, many continue to argue that "anthropological discourse is distancing; it imposes on the diasporic subject the flat weight of being an object of a knowledge exercise. She is always the native informant and powerless to change the narrative" (Moorti, 2003: 372).

But isn't this a cynical view? Isn't the narrative almost entirely shaped by the words of the 'native informant'? Yes and no. The researcher ultimately holds the pen, the academic credentials and expertise, the creative authority. While the informant may supply the material - infusing the final product with its immediacy, its life - her words are ultimately manipulated by the scholar. Following Anne Vallely, who in turn invokes anthropologist Michael Jackson, I understand the 'field' to be a space "of interactions and intersubjectivity, and treat my work as a product of my participatory experience" with the women who participated in this study (Vallely, 2002: 26). And yet, what does it mean to approach a community looking for answers to questions of my own making; questions born of academic study rather than full participation in that community's life-world?

Case studies are one way of eroding the divide between self and other set up by traditional social science research (Abu Lughod, 1991). I agree that "it is only by looking at culture at the level of individual lives that 'cracks of resistance' to dominant ideologies are revealed. ...The case study provides a window into the ways individuals interact with, and their experiences feed back into, the social construction of gender and dominant ideologies and models for action" (Flueckiger, 2006: 24). This small-scale qualitative study is based on discussions with just 37 women.¹³ My decision to concentrate on the specific, immediate circumstances of these individuals is intended to reveal the idiosyncrasies, contradictions and improvisations that constitute every day meaning-making. In this I follow Catherine Bell, who argues that "to analyze specific

¹³ See Appendices D and E for the research instrument used to structure these open-ended, in-depth interviews.

instances is to foreground individual agency, observe the ways individuals manipulate and negotiate with tradition to create meaning of their own circumstances, and understand culture-making as a dynamic process" (Bell, cited in Flueckiger, 2006: 25). In my commitment to highlighting the personal religiosity of these women as it both converges with and departs from orthopraxy, I also follow Renato Rosaldo, who argues that "a focus on non-order directs attention to how people's actions alter the conditions of their existence, often in ways they neither intend nor foresee. Insofar as it is concerned with how people's actions alter their forms of life, social analysis must attend to improvisation, muddling through, and contingent events" (1989: 103).

But where are these improvisational events located, and what access do I have to them? The 'field' is contested terrain, and particularly so in the context of transnationalism. Transnational projects make more obvious the limitations of 'cultural' generalizations, as both researcher and subject negotiate hybrid identities. Throughout my research I was assigned multiple identities by members of the community, and none of these quite matched the role I assigned myself. Likewise, I came looking for particular personages and locales, and did not always find them:

Diaspora...provides a different kind of 'field' site from those of past anthropological preoccupations. Situated within and across a range of nations, Indian diasporic lives come to embody a set of disconnections between place, culture, and identity. Necessarily, then, in both subject matter and methodology, [fieldwork in diaspora] reworks and revises a classic premise of ethnography: that visiting and observing a place yields primary meanings about people, their experiences, and their cultures (Shukla, 2003: 4).

Despite these dangers of identifying a particular place, a particular 'field', as the sole locus of meaning for Hindu women, all research has to have a point of origin. In the case of this dissertation work, that point of origin was the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton, where I began sporadically attending Sunday *pujas* in January 2002 with the aim of making contact with research participants and establishing rapport and trust. From this temple, the 'field' expanded to include the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* in September 2006, and from there, immediately thereafter, to the homes - and the home shrines - of individual research participants, where open-ended individual interviews were conducted. In August 2008 I shifted the focus of my research to the city of Toronto, working with the South Asian Women's Centre, an organization that offers various resources to newly-arrived South Asian immigrant women of all religious backgrounds, visiting the *Lakshmi Mandir* in Mississauga, and spending time with various members of the Hindu community in their homes.¹⁴

Because my research took place in my city of permanent residence, I spent short, intermittent chunks of time with the participants in this study, as opposed to being immersed full-time in the daily rhythms of their community for a year or more, as the traditional anthropological model would prescribe. This raised many questions and challenges in terms of establishing and maintaining relationships. How does the researcher establish a stable presence in her research community, and how does she

¹⁴ Interviews took place at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton, *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* (Ottawa), *Lakshmi Mandir* (Mississauga) and in private homes and public places throughout Ottawa and Toronto, as was convenient for research participants.

initiate and sustain relationships with busy research participants who see her perhaps once a week for an hour or two?

Person-centered qualitative research allows for, but does not guarantee, an exploration of the daily, lived experiences recounted by individuals without requiring that these be put at the service of one given theoretical framework or another. Reductive conclusions remain, of course, entirely possible. David Hall defends his *Lived Religion in America* project with the claim that "while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practices and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women" (1997: vii). The laity has been overlooked in the study of religion, he argues, and this situation must be reversed. Hall, a religious historian, directs his readers toward the symbolic anthropological approach most commonly associated with Clifford Geertz for an exemplary body of work that aims toward an understanding of the messy, multiple and contradictory meanings and experiences that constitute individual lives. Robert Orsi, also working within the *Lived Religion in America* school, encapsulates the central idea in the following words:

Workplaces, homes, and streets - as well as churches, temples, shrines, class meetings, and other more immediately recognizable sites of religious activity - are the places where humans make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into, and, in turn, it is through these subtle, intimate, quotidian actions on the world that meanings are made, known, and verified. "Religion" is best approached...by meeting men and women at this daily task, in all the spaces of their experience. [The concern is with] what people do with religious practice, what they make with it of themselves and their worlds. ...Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life (1997: 7).

If religion exists in moments of religious experience (as it does), and if those experiences are enmeshed in the fabric of individual, daily existence (as they are), then the study of religion *must* include the study of daily, lived experiences on the part of religious individuals as they interact with other individuals and with the religious institutions that shape their practices. But how do we accomplish this?

The analytical language of religious studies, organized as it still is around a series of fixed, mutually exclusive, and stable polar opposites, must be reconfigured in order to make sense of religion as lived experience. A new vocabulary is demanded to discuss such phenomena, a language as hybrid and tensile as the realities it seeks to describe (Orsi, 1997: 11).

One of the tasks facing scholars of lived religious experience in their project to convey the vitality of their object of study is the development of this new lexicon. While useful in framing an argument, reifications and false dichotomies are liable to freeze onto the page meanings better apprehended as flexible and multivalent. By whose sanction does an academic come to speak for a group of people, often an entire culture? Power and authority are strong forces in this enterprise, and ones that require careful attention, particularly when the focus of study is a marginalized group (in this case, a group marked by both gender and visible minority status). While I recognize the seriousness of these concerns, I am confident that, at its best, person-centered qualitative research is both a dialogic and a transformative process. Such research is grounded in a type of relationship: researcher, participants, and to a less direct extent, readers, are engaged in an open-ended dialogue. It is through this circulation of ideas - not through the author's act of inscribing words on the page - that knowledge is produced (here I invoke Bakhtin's dialogism, in which meaning is understood to be produced at the intersection

between the speaker's utterance and the interlocutor's apprehension and interpretation of it). While the implicit imbalance of power between researcher and research participant can be neither ignored nor erased, authority can be redistributed such that parties involved in the process are able to speak clearly and in their own words. I have made every attempt to achieve this balance in the present study.

A frequent critique leveled against this method is the lack of generalizability of localized studies. What is the point of accumulating these small analyses of life within such particularized settings? In what way does this contribute to the understanding of religion as a human universal? Can we extract broad meanings from the study of a particular group of people in a particular locale? In response to this, Geertz (1973) has argued that it is only when we have accumulated a number of just such localized studies that any type of comparative project becomes meaningful, or even possible. At the very least, each individual study can be seen as an incremental improvement in our understanding of the ways in which culture and human behaviour intersect, and these are surely important achievements, even if incomplete.

One ethnographic school does specifically aim to move beyond localized studies. The method of symbolic interactionism emerged from the University of Chicago and is represented by George Herbert Mead (1934), Herbert Blumer (1928, 1969), A. Strauss (1993), and Robert Prus (1996, 2005). "As part of a broader pragmatist (also humanist, constructionist, or interpretivist) tradition, the [approach]...focuses on the ways that people engage the world as minded, deliberating, interacting, and adjusting agents"

(Prus, 2005: 10). For symbolic interactionists, social structures are to be found within the processes of interaction. Working from this basic assumption, scholars who employ this approach extract “generic social processes” (GSPs) from their ethnographic studies in order to broaden their ultimate relevance to the study of human behaviour. Typical GSPs include: acquiring perspectives, achieving identity, doing activity, developing relationships, experiencing emotionality, and achieving linguistic fluency (Prus, 2005: 19). By abstracting such information from ethnographic literature, symbolic interactionists argue that they are able to provide a generalizable portrait of human knowing and doing entirely based on qualitative measures.

The emphasis is not on what people should or should not do but more centrally on *what* people actually do and the ways in which they go about these activities. In contrast to those adopting structuralist approaches, the interactionist concern is not why or what makes or causes people to do things. Instead, the interactionists ask *how* people enter into the process or developmental flows of human group life as minded, intentioned, adjustive agents. The objective is to learn about the ways that people, as reflective beings, live and interact with others in the broader community (Prus, 2005: 13, emphasis in original).

While I reject their continued insistence on the analytical usefulness of carving experience up into labeled categories such as “GSPs”, I do share with social interactionists a wish to foreground the dialogical relationship of human relationships and the behaviour of individuals within those relationships – a relationship also evinced by Bakhtin’s work.

Person-centered qualitative research and writing is a dynamic, meaning-making process, just as is the embodied performance of religious narratives. Just as Hindu women create meaning in and through their devotional activities and encounters, people

who write and read academic treatments of these activities create meaning in and through their textual encounters. We need to recognize and welcome fluidity in both of these processes. In demonstration of this I turn to the *Ramayana*, that epic told and retold countless times in countless ways – a fundamentally non-unitary, constantly shifting cultural product, in which the most varied discourses exist in fluid, multivalenced oppositional relationships - as a model for our broader attempts at representing the lives of religious subjects in academic contexts.

I am convinced of the validity of this model, and am so because it brings the speaker/author into dialogue with the subject/text and its listeners/readers. Researcher, participants, the monograph itself, and its multiple audiences are in relationship, and meaning is produced through the interaction of these multiple – and equal – voices. These pages, the final written product (or utterance, in Bakhtin's terms) exist at the intersection of the research participants' specific intent and my own active response, which are in turn linked to one another through prior speakings and anticipations – every utterance is multivalent, and meaning is always multiple. No single interpretation is privileged, but rather each floats alongside the other. It is the myriad voices of this dialogic universe that are intended by Bakhtin's term 'heteroglossia'. Avoiding emphasis on narrowly defined cultural norms and explicitly celebrating diversity, heteroglossia focuses on the production of meaning through dialogue.

In this model, alterity and difference are to be celebrated, not treated as an analytical crisis. As scholars we need be neither deterministic nor nihilistic. We do not have to

say either/or, or not at all. Rather we can, and should, say both/and. A woman's motivations for performing religious narratives may both contest and at the same time comply with the patriarchal norms of Hindu wifehood. Equally, the fact that I am not a Hindu woman, that I am approaching the question of female Hindu religiosity from the outside, does not automatically disqualify me from the attempt, because it is through dialogue – both with other academics, with the body of literature upon which I build, and with a number of Hindu women themselves – that the ideas I here advance become meaningful.

Research interviews are in themselves narratives. Importantly, these "narratives are not neutral representations of truth out there, but are ...analytical resources to examine the participants' way of sense-making, constructing identities, formulating and reformulating the significance of their experiences" (Bamberg, ed., 2004: 47). Dynamic, positioned, and reflective of inconsistencies in research participants' own interpretations of their life experiences, the dialogues that inform this study are "biographical narratives and sites for agency. They are themselves modes of action" (Hancock, 1999: 143). "Having capacities to act in meaningful, reflective, or deliberative manners, people... invoke agency in developing their activities and engaging in interchanges with others. The objective is to examine the ways in which people as living, breathing, thinking, acting, interacting, and adjusting essences, deal with the particular situations in which they find themselves" (Prus, 2005: 10). Thus my conversations with research participants throughout the course of this study have constituted a poietic process of fashioning and reporting on identity in and through the "multiple sources, both near and far, that give

rise to the self" (Bamberg, ed., 2004: 304). Some women reported on traumas quite recently endured, while others reflected on their experiences from a comfortable distance of several decades, and still others looked back at just over two relatively privileged decades of life in Canada as the country of their birth. It is to be expected that each woman's comments on her experiences will be greatly affected by the immediacy of the events being recounted. Moreover, as researcher I may indulge in external, theoretical interpretations and each research participant may choose to agree, disagree, or dispense with altogether, those readings. As long as she recognizes something of herself in the text, our interpretations can float together, the relationship remains sound, and – most importantly – the conversation remains open. As an academic attempting to represent others, "I can mean what I say, but only indirectly, at a second remove, in words that I take and give back to the community according to the protocols it observes. My voice can mean, but only with others – at times in chorus, but at the best of times in dialogue" (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 12).

If the academic study of religion can somehow get at the vitality, confusion, vibrancy, and the sometimes even banal nature of lived religious worlds, if it can come closer to understanding religion as it operates in people's lives, if it can connect the prose of academic discourse to the passion of the researcher's desire to understand and the research participants' lived experience, then surely our picture of religion as a universal phenomenon will be enriched in a way that is badly needed. I remain convinced also that such an attempt - to observe, to chart, and to understand the religious practice of everyday people - can best be fulfilled through fine-grained, sensitive and

compassionate person-centered research. The experiences that are the subject of scrutiny in this study are deeply rooted in human relationships characterized by the dialogical production of meaning. Its method does no violence to this generative interplay, as the researcher and informants, through the relationships they develop, produce and negotiate meanings in dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

Religious worlds are inextricably social worlds, characterized by interaction and relationship. In social interactionist terms, "things only become known and made meaningful within the context of community interchange... [and thus] it is only as participants in the human community that people learn notions of 'what is' (and 'what is not')" (Prus, 2005: 10). These relationships are often oppositional, as the sacred is a "space of activity, engagement, ambivalence, and doubleness" (Orsi, 1997: 12). Thus, activity that takes place within religious worlds is well suited to analysis from a perspective that understands meaning to be constituted in the dialogue between self and other. Bakhtin evokes an understanding of the human self as a position from which meaning is made, a living intersection at which one is continually being addressed and issuing utterances, or responses (1981). The act of conceiving and expressing these responses is what constitutes human existence, and in performing these acts the self authors both the world and him or herself within it. This is not an exclusively discursive process: Judith Butler (1999) has shown that the weight of a person's gendered body behind a speech act, or any other type of bodily performance, impacts the force of that performance. Thus, although Bakhtin was concerned explicitly with speech acts, in this

study I expand his notion of utterance to include the embodied and gendered performance of religious narratives as an equally significant means of entering into dialogical relationship with one's interlocutor. This shifting conversation partner may be at once an individual, the concrete local community of which one forms a part, the more amorphous global community with which one identifies, and/or that thing which we call culture: the multiple and flexible webs of significance spun by, and inhabited by, human groups and individuals (Geertz, 1973: 5). Women who engage in religious activities in their homes are performing various religious narratives: that of the devotee, who daily turns to her lord for succor and strength, and that of the *pativrata*, who upholds her religious *dharma* in all that she does. One's embodied performances of these narratives contribute to a dialogue of meaning making and identity construction. In turn, these dialogical relationships with individuals, with groups, and with tradition actively shape one's world. Thus meaning-making is a shared process. Monica Böck and Aparna Rao argue that "relatedness, whether in the sacred or profane spheres, is based upon sharing *per se*. Doing things together – whatever these may be – lays the foundation for relationships, and the emotions that arise from common experience" (2000: 20). In the words of one research participant:

Being part of a community at all times is an important part of Hinduism, because one of the basic tenets of Hinduism is that the god who dwells in you dwells in everybody. So isolating yourself was only for the grand *rishis*. It's not for the everyday person. You need to be reminded that the same god who dwells in you dwells in the other. How are you going to be reminded if you never see people? Of course that's not restricted to the community in the temple, that's everybody. So it is important to be engaged with the community, to interact with people, with all kinds of people, so that you are constantly reminded and so that you are tested in your faith, to see: Do you really believe this? Do you practice this? This belief that you have that god dwells in everybody, the exact same god. You know, it isn't "God dwells in all the people that I like" or "God dwells in all the people I agree with". No. He dwells everywhere, and you need to expose yourself to that to see

if that belief is firm, or is it superficial. Is it your Sunday behaviour, or is it your always behaviour?

This shared production and reproduction of meaning, whether exercised to reproduce normative *dharma* such that expressed above, or to effect innovation in one's practices, is a hallmark of intersubjectivity. In this sense, Geertz's notion of culture as a web of meaning can be recast as a *web of relationship*.

Embodiment

This web of relational meaning is constructed, populated and traversed by individual human bodies, and so theories of embodied performance are central to this study.¹⁵ As Novetzke argues,

the publics of *bhakti* in South Asia require 'embodiment,' the human as medium. ...The manifestations of *bhakti* [are] not only in performance through song or literacy, but also through all those actions and bodily displays that make up *bhakti* in the broadest sense...: pilgrimage, *puja*, *darshan*, the wearing of signs on the body, and so on. Embodiment, then, is not so much a technique of *bhakti* as its very epicenter: *bhakti* needs bodies (2008: 261).

A brief summary of theories surrounding embodiment will help to elaborate my own position on meaning-making through embodied activity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964), exploring the phenomenology of embodiment, understands the body to be an intentional

¹⁵ Despite my focus on the role of the body in constituting one's religious identity, I am conscious that overstating the embodied nature of religious experience denies other, perhaps more deeply felt, aspects. Participants in this study often identified primarily with the spiritual or cerebral elements of their religiosity. For instance, Poonam related: "I take a largely philosophical approach to my practice... the idea of *paramatma* [the God within] is particularly meaningful to me". And again, "Most of what I consider my devotion is my personal relationship with God, as in my belief in Its existence and Its control and observance over my life. *Puja* happens to be one manifestation of this, but it's not the only manifestation. I considered myself as much of a Hindu when I didn't take part in weekly ritual as I do now". The devotional sentiment of *bhava* cannot be contained entirely within the embodied nature of devotees. Devotional practice is often a physical act, but attention also needs to be paid to the fact that informants spoke repeatedly of its meaningfulness for their souls.

embodiment of consciousness: my body *is* me, and *expresses* me. Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the internal and immediate nature of our relationships with our bodies: in touching an external object, we cannot help but also touch ourselves. Our experiences of the world are thus always intimately tied to, and shaped by, the experience of our own bodies. In relating to others, we are inextricably enmeshed in our selves.

Critics insist that these phenomenological bodies need to be historicized and situated (see, for example, Butler 1999; de Certeau 1984 & 1997; Foucault 1980; Fraser 1989; Grosz 1994; McNay 1992). These theorists argue that far from being islands unto themselves, socially constructed bodies are the "effect of practices, discourses, behaviors, which construct/produce the body as a culturally recognizable feature of social relations" (B. Turner, 1997: 19). While we as actors may have phenomenological control over our bodies, we are not in control of them socially. Phenomenologists assert that we have intimate rulership over our bodies, but the acts they describe are things like picking up a pipe, a glass, or reading a book. This explanation does not capture the situation of, for example, women under patriarchy who in a very real way do not have control over their bodies because they do not have autonomy to make decisions about the use of those bodies in sexual and reproductive work (a reality for many South Asian women in Canada, including some participants in this study). Embodiment must therefore be examined in its context of social, reciprocal relationships.

Already in 1935, Marcel Mauss characterized the human body as a set of social practices: a fleshly unit of potential made social through the collective performance of

bodily techniques, basic bodily activities that are both learned and culturally-shaped. For Erving Goffman (1959), too, the body was constituted by social practice. He stressed the intimate tie between our identities and our vulnerability to the physicality of our bodies, and thus the subsequent need to control our bodies in public life. We think of our selves as our bodies, and of our bodies as our selves. Because of this, to lose control of one's body is to have lost control of one's self. Our bodies must thus be continually produced, maintained, and presented in daily life.¹⁶ To put this in Bakhtinian language, our bodily utterances must be made to conform to the expectations of our interlocutor in order for them to be received as meaningful. And to translate further into the sphere of lived Hinduism for Canadian women, one's bodily performance of religious narratives – whether those be through daily household *puja*, appropriate dress and adornment, or other expressions of one's auspicious femininity – is expected to match up with some yardstick of tradition.

Michel Foucault's characterization of the subjectivity of docile bodies to structural domination is further illustrative of this dialectic, calling our attention to the unequal power structures within which our embodied experiences take place. In direct opposition to Merleau Ponty's insistence on the phenomenal, lived body, Foucault sees the body as a product of knowledge/power (1979, 1985, 1986). He and other proponents of social constructivism tell us that the body has a history. Bodies and gender are historical, social categories produced by multiple and unfinalizable discourse. Within this universe of discourse, Foucault proposes that we employ

¹⁶ Ernest Becker (1973) and Maurice Bloch (1992), too, are concerned with vulnerable human bodies. For Becker and Bloch, the physicality and inevitable decay of our bodies are the root cause of all human imaginative activity as we attempt to transcend our animal natures.

'technologies of the self', or techniques by which we are able to effect operations on our own bodies, thoughts and conduct. In this way, individuals are able to "transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on", all the while still operating within the confines of discourse (Carette, 1999: 162). A constructivist approach to embodiment asserts that the gendered human body is map of power relationships, a problematic text to be deconstructed. To critique the text of the body is to critique societal power relations. The danger here is that living bodies and lived experience fall away as the bodily text and its associated roles and identities become the focus of inquiry. Constructivism is most useful when put into conversation with a phenomenological emphasis on biological and physiological realities.

This study takes into account both the phenomenology of embodied performance and the socially constructed characteristics of Hindu women's bodies as metaphor. Participants in this study experience the world through their physical bodies (assemblages of social constructs as they may be), and this impacts the ways in which they engage that world. Each of their performances is a gendered, socially-constructed, historically-contingent, embodied act shaped by knowledge and power relations: they perform themselves through the media of their socially-interpreted and symbolically-laden bodies. In Hinduism, as has been noted, "bodily transactions of worship generate a sense of familial relatedness. Through the sensory transactions of worship, people create a sense of belonging and connection (among family members and between persons and deities...). This 'us-ness' is grounded in morally-laden, material

transactions and is critically linked to cultural representations of femininity" (Hancock, 1995: 82). It is also central to this study.

Narrative, Relationship, and Identity

The everyday performance of narrative has consequence. All people employ narratives daily in order to make sense of experience, to express and/or claim identity, and to participate in culture (see, for example, Bruner 1987; Joy, ed. 1997, and Ricoeur 1976). Jerome Bruner emphasizes the transformative nature of narrating our lives along cultural lines, arguing that we in fact *become* the figures we construct through narrative. Writing and re-writing a life story or life script is an interpretive process for every individual - an ongoing process of integrating various aspects of the self and experiences of the self-in-the-world. In other words, "we find the sense of life through articulating it" (Taylor, 1989: 18). Beyond making sense of experience, narrative actually permits us to reinterpret and to shape experience. Through voicing and performing narratives, individuals participate in crafting the world they inhabit. "Performance is an important site where imagination and reality meet and transform each other. Narratives, products of both imagination and reality, affect the contexts in which they are performed, and in turn shape participants' social realities" (Saunders, 2007: 208).

Importantly, these articulations are embodied: we are the narrators of ourselves as embodied actors. They are also intrinsically tied to social relationships. Recalling Bakhtin,

the individual...is permeated by the social... [and] the process of constructing the self...involves the hearing and assimilating of the words and discourses of others (mother, father, relatives, friends, representatives of religious, educational, and political institutions, the mass media and so forth), all processed dialogically so that the words in a sense become half 'one's own words' (Stam, 1988: 119).

Beyond the crucial relationship of devotee to deity, a second important set of relationships to be considered is that between humans and others within one's own family. Kin networks and domestic religious practice intersect in significant ways, each affecting and imparting meaning to the other. Suzanne Hanchett describes *pūja* as "a configuration of elements whose totality expresses meaning for family life" (1988: 3). She describes the myths and rituals at the heart of South Indian folk festivals as "symbolic formulations which express and define the concept of family. ...[They] present ways of thinking and feeling about the family that supplement concepts available through language or day-to-day practice" (1988: 2). Through ritual, devotees are able to express intimacies of familial relationships that might otherwise go unspoken in daily living due to the constraints of cultural propriety.¹⁷ Further, "participants in rituals are believed to be influenced not only by deities/spirits and by their own ritual actions, but also by each other" (Hanchett, 1988: 37), thus setting up a situation of reciprocal responsibility in devotional practice. These familial relationships can be understood in both positive and negative ways - household religious practice may be a vehicle for the expression of intimacy and affection in the midst of an otherwise formally-structured network of relationships in which such emotions are necessarily muted, but it might also

¹⁷ Social conventions dictate, for instance, that spouses do not openly demonstrate affection toward one another but maintain a suitable formality in their relations. This extends beyond physicality into language. Many Hindu women, for this reason, do not refer to their husband by name, simply referring to him as "him", or as "the children's father".

serve as a way of negotiating troublesome relationships characterized primarily by subordination.

Orthodox conceptualizations of Hindu womanhood locate marriage as the central element of religious identity. The state of being married (*saubhagya*) is highly auspicious, and in order to maintain this state the Hindu wife is tasked with a set of ritual duties intended to ensure the long life and well-being of her husband and children. This is an ambiguous space to occupy, as wives straddle "the deep and pervasive split between the destructive and threatening sexual potency of women as wives, on the one hand, and the beneficent, procreative, and positive capacities of women as mothers, on the other" (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 27). As noted above, the 'good wife' is one whose *shakti* has been tamed and channeled into generating and caring for her family. The ideology surrounding Hindu marriage exemplifies the normative discourse, but it also provides some of the strongest examples of female resistance. Hindu marriage, steeped in tradition and ritual regulation, is an arena for both the perpetuation and the subversion of power relationships, both between men and women, and among women themselves.

A traditionally structured Hindu household is composed of a joint family "in which sons, sons' wives, and grandchildren all live with the parents" (Wadley, 1980: 95). Relationships of significance within the family include (but are not limited to) those of married women with their husbands; mothers with their children; and women with other women in the household. The latter is significant in the context of social hierarchy:

although grandmother, mother, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters and granddaughters may live in the same home, it is typically the senior woman of the house who conducts daily *pujas*. In the Hindu context this is usually the eldest married woman in the home whose husband is still living. The state of marriage, and thus the married woman herself, is held to be highly auspicious. This gives a married woman a certain amount of ritual status, and makes her relationship with her husband important in the context of her religious life:

The *dharma* of women is summarized in the role of the devoted wife (*pativrata*) whose duties and devotions are directed solely towards the well-being of her husband. ...By fulfilling this ideal role, a woman will be led along a path of righteous conduct and moral perfection (McGee, 1991: 78).

In Canada the extended family household is rarely preserved, and women may find themselves operating outside these traditional patterns of relationship. Participants in this study live in nuclear households. Relationships with daughters and daughters-in-law do, however, remain important and are discussed in greater detail below.

In their study of Hindu marriage in North India, Lindsay Harlan and Paul Courtright adopt a Dumontean perspective, placing emphasis not on individual identity but instead approaching persons as “interdependent parts of society, parts organized in terms of hierarchically ranked castes” (1995: 5). For example, kinship terms, commonly used in Hindu families instead of personal names to address or describe others in the household, are interpreted as functioning to “subsume individual personality under designations of familial roles, responsibilities and privileges” (Harlan & Courtright, 1995: 8). Harlan and Courtright argue that power relationships are thus made explicit through the use of language.

Marriages are carefully arranged because they affect the status of the entire family: “Social status and human capacities are embedded in the very bodily substances themselves, especially blood” (Harlan & Courtright, 1995: 6). Children are believed to literally inherit the purity or pollution inherent in the blood of their parents, and it is the responsibility of a new wife to maintain the “blood purity” of her husband’s family through her appropriate, chaste behaviour (Harlan & Courtright, 1995: 6). The auspicious potential of a new wife – encapsulated in her ability to bear sons and to ensure the well-being of her husband – can offset to some extent her potentially dangerous sexuality in the eyes of her conjugal family. This auspiciousness is “transferred through ritual exchange”, and the young woman’s inherent impurity along with it, in the marriage ceremony (Harlan & Courtright, 1995: 7). Raheja’s explication of gift exchange provides further insight into this transaction:

It is said to be the “right” (*hak*) of the donor to give, and the “appropriate obligation” (*pharmaya*) of the recipient to accept *dan* and the inauspiciousness it contains...the giving of *kanya dan*...removes “evil” (*pap*) and “danger” (*sankat*) from the family of the donor” and places it in the home of the husband, where it is harnessed and neutralized by the auspicious married state (1994: 81).

In the idealized scenario of a new wife’s entry into her husband’s family, she must respect senior family members and her husband, not demanding too much intimacy from him or otherwise upsetting his bond with other family members. At the same time, she must cut her ties to her natal family. The conjugal family wields power over the bride, and attachments to her natal family may threaten the balance of this relationship. A critical view of this norm is expressed in women’s songs that “set forth alternative

perspectives on the transformation” from daughter and sister in one’s natal home to wife, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law in the conjugal unit. These subversive commentaries “strike at the very heart of patrilineal kinship in north India and its pronouncements on marriage and female identity”, undermining the power relationships that dominate the lives of married women (Raheja, 1988b: 20). Two competing perspectives are presented in women's folk songs – that of the sister and that of the wife. Both are critical of the *pativrata* ideal and the characterization of a woman’s presence as treacherous to both natal and conjugal kin. Paradoxically, “the women portrayed in these songs seem always to be at odds with one another, and yet groups of women, neighbours and kin of many kinds, sing these songs in unison, as if in ironic acknowledgement of their common plight” (Raheja, 1988b: 99).

In *Siva and her Sisters*, Karin Kapadia presents a study of low-caste rural groups in south India in which the tradition of close cross-cousin marriage ensures the prominence of matrilineal affines. In theory, this social structure gives women high status. Yet Kapadia observes that, even under these circumstances, “the female attitude toward marriage and affinity is highly ambivalent” (1995: 13). This ambivalence stands against the backdrop of the dominant, male discourse on the subject, which portrays “marriage and affinal relations as a sphere of happiness and harmony” (1995: 13). Kapadia focuses on the apparent futility of the modes of critical expression available to women. She writes that the “hidden, muted discourse of women...is revealed in their saying, “Kinship burns![but goes on to report that] this view is seldom spoken. Rather, it is a weak alternative discourse, voicing frustration and fear.

Only at crises does it come into the open, and even then, it is only spoken between women" (1995: 43). From Kapadia's perspective, the rejections and challenges of authority voiced by the women amongst whom she studied do not result in any experience of power or control by them. Rather, they seem to underscore their subordination.

In his treatment of South Indian kinship systems, Anthony Good draws attention to remarkable similarities between the kin structures of humans and those of the gods. In South India, the goddess Parvati is understood to be Vishnu's sister, and Siva his brother-in-law, a divine family mirroring the bilateral cross-cousin marriage pattern favoured by Tamil humans (marriage with an MBD or FZD) through which important affinal relationships between in-laws are established. Good looks to the religious lives of Tamil Hindus for an understanding of human kinship behaviour: "Famous myths and festivals dealing with divine fertility, sexuality and kinship provide a rich cultural resource through which South Indians debate the morality and practice of human kinship, sexuality and procreation" (2000: 273-4). He notes that the nature of the relationship between deity and priest (or, in the context of domestic worship, deity and devotee) is similar to that between the ideal Hindu wife and her husband – one marked by dutiful subservience and respectful honouring. In Good's terms, the "priest's relationship to the deity is one of wifely servant... Worship is above all a rite of hospitality, and its performance enacts the behaviour of a dutiful wife towards her husband and his guests" (2000: 276).

Margaret Trawick's ethnography *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* raises the importance of emotion within the realm of kinship, arguing for the centrality of feelings in Hindu perceptions of both kinship and life more generally. Trawick grounds her discussion upon the assumption that all kinship systems, including those of Hindus, are above all linguistic constructs through which social rules are established. She urges us to remember that "the establishment of social 'rules' is itself a practical act, a political strategy carried out by particular agents and designed to legitimate a particular social order" (1992: 136). Trawick asserts that Hindu marriage patterns uphold the hierarchical social structure found throughout India, and undermine both the natal family unit and the individual.

Drawing on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Trawick argues that just as kinship is a linguistic construct, so is the self "linguistically constituted" (1992: 145). Further, the self is in a perpetual state of incompleteness, defined always in relation to other selves. The always-incomplete individual can only exist within the framework of language, culture, and social authority, and is constantly striving to appropriate this larger framework in order to become whole, complete. All actions of the self, including ritual and the performance of other cultural narratives, are motivated by this desire for wholeness – and these actions constitute the process of constructing the human world. If we apply this rubric to the daily engagements with religion that form the subject of this study, devotees can be understood as attempting to complete themselves in two ways: directly, through their concrete interactions with the deities on the household shrine, and obliquely, through the performance of various narratives in their execution of relational

responsibilities. Daily lived religion thus becomes a means of constructing an entire universe of meaning.

Good's analysis of kin alliances in Tamilnadu suggests the possibility that South Indian humans and gods may be understood as existing together in a network of relationship, ordered by the principles of kinship. This has direct significance for the importance of domestic *puja* as a process central to the construction of relational identities. Similarly, Trawick's exploration of emotion and the importance of reaching beyond the limits of self in order to become whole is suggestive of *puja*'s cultural importance - devotees interact (and transact) with the gods as *both parties* attempt to become complete. The fact that the process is never finalized means that they are always interdependent, *puja* is forever necessary, and the intensely emotional relationships that often develop between deity and devotee inform human relationships as well, constituting the fabric of human life. Several participants in this study spoke of their relationships with the gods as necessary to their own sense of full personhood, sometimes comparing the gods to caring and protective parental figures, and sometimes as divinized versions of themselves.

In navigating these realms of relationship, culture is taken to serve as a sort of narrative pool from which an array of possible identities can be selected and embodied.¹⁸ For

¹⁸ Much of the literature on religion and modernity supports this dynamic. Individuals in modernity "have a more heightened reflexivity that accentuates this dialogue between praxis and poesis" (Anne Vallely, 2008, personal communication). Peter Berger (1979), for example, addresses the modern situation with its multitudes of religions, philosophies and paradigms, declaring that we live with a heretical imperative ('heresy' is based on the Greek verb *hairein*, which means 'to choose for one's self') as we are all now required to *choose* our religious beliefs rather than merely accepting a surrounding orthodox consensus. Even when one chooses 'traditional' values, he or she becomes heretical, because in the process of

Indo-Canadian Hindu women, those possibilities often include the cultural narrative of the *Ramayana*, in which Sita appears as ideal wife, or any number of stories surrounding the desirous effects of fulfilling one's role as *pativrata*.¹⁹ In the *Ramayana*, a powerful and pervasive narrative of devoted wifedom, the heroine Sita suffers years of imprisonment in a foreign land, is doubted and banished by her cruelly unsupportive husband, and yet remains unswervingly devoted and faithful to him until the day she takes her own life. I paraphrase a standard version of this narrative here because it is so central to normative Hindu notions of ideal womanhood:

Sita is found in a furrow of the earth by King Janaka as he is plowing the field for a sacrificial ritual, and thus she is termed daughter of the earth. Her birth is magical – she is referred to as *ayonija*, one not born of a

intentionally choosing any set of values (even the traditional ones), alternatives must be considered. Knowing that alternatives exist is the essence of heresy. Charles Taylor, too, in *Sources of the Self*, explores the "tentative, hesitating and fuzzy" moral frameworks of modernity, describing an array of largely unexamined ontological "background pictures" which we "assume and draw on in any claim to rightness" in defending our moral stances against those of others (1989: 8-9). He determines that no single framework "forms the horizon of the whole society" any longer. "No framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework tout court, can sink to the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact. This basic understanding refracts differently in the stances people take" (Taylor, 1989: 17). Thus Taylor writes of a disengaged self, one forced to step outside of totalizing frameworks of meaning in order to behave according to rational, self-conscious choices.

¹⁹ For Hindus, the *Ramayana* is a living text, told and retold in written form as well as in ritual and performance traditions throughout the world. The stories encompassed by *Ramkatha* have been much discussed in western academia as well - first through the lens of so-called "authoritative" versions, such as those of Valmiki, Kamban, and Tulsidas, and recently with increasing interest through multiple tellings that express other, more particular, truths. Attention has been paid, for instance, to regional *Ramlila* performances and their local significances. The unique and multivocal meanings generated within women's *Ramayana* folksongs have provided another point of entry into the tradition. Ethnographers researching these songs have reported that "when women meet in a group of their own... and sing about events close to their life experiences, new forms of the Rama and Sita story emerge. [The singers] do not question the divinity of the characters, but they emphasize their human aspects and frailties" (Nilsson, 2001: 141). They sing of the importance of women's ritual lives, stressing the efficacy of regular *pūja* and fasting, reaffirming their belief that goals can be attained through these performances. Different tellings of the myth are seen neither as totally individual stories nor as divergences from the 'real' version, but as the expression of an extraordinarily rich pool of meaning. Women's songs may contest or subvert the role model of the ideal wife set up by the authoritative version of the narrative, but their critique is always shaped and informed by prior speakings and the "already said" of the male, normative discourse. In turn, the normative tale becomes informed and shaped by these oppositional expressions. The *Ramayana* tradition exemplifies Bakhtinian polyphonic discourse, demonstrating as it does "the coexistence...of a plurality of voices which do not fuse into a single consciousness but rather exist on different registers, generating dialogical dynamism among themselves" (Stam, 1988: 128-129).

womb, indicating the maternal powers of self-generation that are deeply rooted in the Hindu goddess tradition. Shortly after her marriage to Prince Rama of the Kingdom of Ayodhya, the prince is exiled for fourteen years to the forest, and Sita sacrifices a life of luxury in her nuptial home for the hardships of forest life when she chooses to accompany her husband. At the end of thirteen years of exile, Sita is captured through an illusive trick of the demon King Ravana, who wishes to avenge Rama's mocking rejection of his sister's sexual advances. She spends the next eleven months as a captive in Ravana's island kingdom of Lanka, known for its abundance in every kind of material luxury and for indulgence in sensual excess. Rejecting Ravana's lustful overtures and his offer of material pleasures, she passes tortuous months in Lanka as the epitome of ascetic womanhood, meditating exclusively on Rama. When Rama finally wins the war against Ravana, he does not wish to take Sita back, since she has been desired and touched by Ravana. To prove her integrity, Sita is forced to leap into a sacrificial fire. She emerges unscathed, her purity validated by the gods, and Rama accepts her once again as his wife. They return to Ayodhya and there take up the throne. Eventually, however, Rama banishes the pregnant Sita to the forest after hearing rumours that again question the sexual propriety of her relationship with Ravana. Cast out of the kingdom, Sita finds shelter at the hermitage of the sage Valmiki, who brings up her twin sons, becomes their guru, and is later credited with the composition of the original Sanskrit version of the epic. At Valmiki's insistence, Rama once again summons Sita to prove her purity publicly, but instead of undergoing a second trial by fire and returning to Rama, Sita prays to the earth, her mother, to receive her back again. The earth splits open and Sita descends into the depths on a throne of snakes. Rama is left to rule the kingdom for another ten thousand years with her golden image by his side.

The importance of this narrative lies not only in the details of its content but in the fact that Sita is often understood within Indian culture as having lived and died as the ideal Hindu woman. In normative cultural discourse, she is held up as the role model of perfect womanhood.²⁰ To a certain extent this widely-taught and recited myth can serve as a starting point for an exploration of gender roles in Hindu culture:

The values and images of culture, the myths and stories it tells about reality, and the images and attributes with which it envisions the Divine are of fundamental significance to the role, status and image of women in that culture. Whatever the

²⁰ There are countless invocations of this ideal. See Phyllis Herman, 2000, for one particularly interesting treatment of Sita as *pativrata* through culinary responsibilities.

divine, transcendent or revelatory nature of a religion may be for women and men of faith, its language is human language. A culture's religious traditions *are* its forms of expression, its processes of meaning-making, of image-making and of creating an ordered world, a cosmos (Eck & Jain, 1986: 4, emphasis in original).

Certainly, the ideal of the chaste wife, faithful and dutifully obedient to her husband, is a powerful and ubiquitous theme in Hindu culture, but it is a theme with many complications. Each of the women who participated in this study was asked to reflect on the relevance of these ideals to their own lives. Their responses present interesting data for interpretation: 23 of the women interviewed said that they work to emulate Sita or other role models of the *pativrata* ideal in their religious lives and in their marriages, but 15 were clear in expressing that they do not wish to pass these values on to their daughters or daughters-in-law (see Variables 9 and 10 in Table B, above).

Many respondents made clear their understanding of Sita as a strong woman able to compensate for the weaknesses of her husband Rama, tweaking the normative discourse while at the same time aspiring to fulfill their own version of it. "This is the task of cultural and religious image-making: What is a woman supposed to be? What is her image of herself? How does society absorb and react to both sets of images?" (Eck & Jain, 1986: 4). In order to fully grasp the significance of Sita as contested role model, it is important to recall the notion of *stridharma*, which can be loosely translated as a code of conduct specific to women. The correct performance of *dharma* ensures the proper functioning of the cosmos, while neglecting one's *dharma* leads to chaos and social disorder. Essentially, the doctrine of *stridharma* dictates that throughout a woman's life she is responsible for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of her husband

and sons through her own devotional activity. A crucial aspect of this *dharma* is unswerving devotion to one's husband - the common saying *pati pratykha devatha* translates as 'husband is the living god.' These are the traditional values adhering to the Ramayana narrative, and they contribute to an ethos to which all Hindu women are exposed, to one degree or another, throughout their lives. Sita and Rama are characters deeply familiar to Hindu individuals: the immense popularity of the narrative means that, for many, "they are like our family, we grew up with them" (Murphy and Sippy, 2000: 2). Twenty three of the participants in this study echoed this normative discourse, while fourteen did not, some describing its associated values as "ancient" or "backward". No difference between Canada and India was postulated by participants in this regard, as they compared their own experiences with those of family members in South Asia. Rather, the split tracked roughly along generational lines, with women aged 50 and over tending to speak in support of the *pativrata* ideal and younger women against it. This concurs with the findings of Anne McKenzie Pearson (1999), who reports a shift in the motivations and interpretations ascribed to traditional behaviors among younger generations of Indo-Canadians. • A representative response from a younger participant in the current study:

We learned the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as part of our growing up. Grandmothers would tell us stories and there were always lessons on that in our textbooks. So we learned most of that. Even as children we questioned some of it, and we were told, don't argue. Don't talk like that about God. So we let it go. But as you grow older you begin to question and today we know these are only stories and we do not relate to the values of the Ramayana as we used to. For example, Rama is my favourite god. As a young girl I had blind faith in him. But today I feel that how did he fulfill his duty as a king to teach dharma to his people? He didn't fulfill his duty as a husband to his wife because he did not have faith in her. And on top of that it was cowardly of him to send his brother to take her to the forest. However much your love may be that you don't have the heart to do that, but... so you lose faith in those things. You try to rationalize but questions are

there and you realize that these are just mythologies. The women of India today feel that the *Manushastras* were written by men for men – we do not believe in it and we do not prescribe to those ideals.

But one's encounter with orthodox ideals is not an 'all or nothing' scenario, forcing outright acceptance or rejection. Sita has many manifestations, and the sheer multiplicity of narratives comes closer to revealing the significance of Sita in the lives of Hindu women than does the unidimensional classical ideal. The following poem by Bina Agarwal (1985) stands as a representation of just one of these alternate tellings:

Sita Speak

Sita speak your side of the story.
We know the other too well...

Your father married you to a prince;
told you: be pliable as a bow
in your husband's hand.
Didn't you note
Ram *broke* the magic bow?
They say you, ideal daughter,
bowed your head in obedience
as you were sent away.

With your husband you chose exile:
suffered privation, abduction,
then the rejection -
the chastity test on scorching flames,
the victim twice victimized.
Could those flames turn to flowers
without searing the soul?
They say you, devoted wife,
questioned him not
and let him have his way.

Your brother-in-law, so quick to anger
on his brother's behalf, left you,
mother-to-be,
alone in the dark forest,

exiled again.
 His brother's command!
 Some citizen's demand!
 Was injustice to you
 not worthy of his anger?
 You, loving sister-in-law,
 bore this too in silence
 and let him go away.

The sons you nurtured with such love
 amidst nature and the wild woods,
 sons with the prowess to challenge
 their father's army,
 were disarmed with a word.
 Unhesitant they joined him,
 heirs of his land. Their lineage accepted
 yet your purity still doubted!
 You, fond mother, stopped them not.
 Bowing to the test, palms folded in farewell,
 you bid the earth beneath you to give way.

The poets who wrote your story,
 with such sympathy for those
 who questioned your fidelity,
 proclaimed: women, like beasts and *shudras*,
 deserve a sound beating.
 How could such verses bring you glory?
 Yet they recited them as holy, and
 unchallenged got away.

Sita speak!
 You who could lift the divine bow in play
 with one hand,
 who could command the earth with a word,
 how did they silence you?

Literally hundreds of thousands of versions of Sita's story exist, and are continually being retold and reinterpreted. In Agarwal's poem above, Sita is held up as paradigmatic of a strong independent woman and as the deeply wronged wife of a seriously flawed husband. She can be, and has been, related to as a divorcee, a single mother, a battered woman. In each of these multiple guises, she is a means through

which Hindu women might understand their own lives and the models that inform them. This poem is an example of a female narrative that reveals an awareness of flaws in the 'ideal' presented by the normative discourse. Many such forms of expression exist, and each provides opportunity for women to express their criticisms and explore their own strengths (see Harlan and Courtright 1995 and Raheja and Gold 1994 for detailed treatments of this topic).

It is a truism that within Hinduism the role of the good wife is “the only religious path open to women” (Leslie, 1991: 12). Although there are some significant exceptions to this rule, it is characteristic of the traditional, and dominant, Hindu ideology. Who are the role models for this feminine ideal? What do they mean to the women who participated in this study? Twenty-three of 37 participants indicated that the *pativrata* ideal is meaningful in their own religious lives, and 31 of 37 feel that religion and religious role models are important in the maintenance of tradition in diaspora. Only four participants explicitly identified religion as an agent of change. Interestingly, while the vast majority of women identify with the role of the *pativrata* in their own lives, well under half (15 of 37) felt that it was important for their daughters to pursue this model. Specific figures such as Sita and Lakshmi were not as readily identified with as was an abstract sense of appropriate behaviour for women at various life stages, despite the fact that the epic heroine Sita is perhaps the most popular embodiment of the perfect wife. Interpretations of Sita’s importance as a role model vary. She has been used to support the patriarchal norms of male dominance and wifely submission, certainly. But she has also been used to demonstrate the strength and independence of women as compared

to the fallibility and untrustworthiness of men. As in other instances of play between normative and subversive discourses, the distinction between acceptance and rejection of the traditional image of Sita is not clear-cut. "Many responses to the tradition have been more complex than straightforward rejection. Research has uncovered counter-traditions, subversive, ironic, and critical treatments of *Ramayana* themes in women's, folk, low-caste, and dissenting literary cultures" (Hess, 2001: 17). Even in the traditional presentations of the *Ramayana*, throughout her ordeals and her literal trial by fire, Sita "shows a healthy sense of her own worth" by standing up to Rama in his less than ideal treatment of her (Hess, 2001: 6). She complies with the requirements of the patriarchal society in which she lives, but does so on her own terms with passion, power and courage.

These characteristics of feminine strength are demonstrated by other mythical role models as well: In her description of the Bengali Vaisnava *padavali kirtan*, Donna Marie Wulff relates that Radha is portrayed as strong and in control of events, superior to Krishna who appears vulnerable and powerless. Wulff reports that both men and women singers present the characters in this way in their ritual performances, although "the women singers seemed to take special delight" in the characterization of Krishna as subservient to Radha (in Hawley and Wulff, 1996: 234). Lakshmi, on the other hand, is widely regarded as the ultimate *pativrata*, as beautiful as she is devoted and attentive to her husband-god. "Lakshmi can be seen as an uncompromised symbol of the Brahmanic view of femininity; she possesses independent and full power [as a goddess]

while being fully dependent and subordinate to her male lord [in her role as Vishnu's consort]" (Robinson, 1985: 187).

Julia Leslie's discussion of the sister goddesses Sri (Lakshmi) and Jyestha (Alakshmi) provides a compelling example of opposing mythical role models for Hindu women. In this account, the auspicious presence of Lakshmi in the home is sought after and ritually secured by women through the application of cow dung paste to the walls and floor each morning, and in the placement of ritual diagrams at the threshold. Jyestha is Lakshmi's single, ugly and inauspicious sister. Although a goddess in her own right, she is rarely worshipped. "Where the image is recognized", Leslie writes, "it is feared" and propitiated daily by all "good" wives to prevent the inauspicious presence of the goddess in the home (1991: 114). In Jyestha, women are presented with a negative role model – 'this is who you should *not* emulate' – tied to the underlying suggestion that Jyestha represents women's true nature, or at the very least what women will become when not properly attached to a husband. Of course women do not blindly accept the messages presented to them by these role models. As the results of the present study show, and as Sandra Robinson makes clear, "instead of consigning their powers and efficacy to male agents as Brahmanic consort goddesses do, women in devotional Hinduism exercise their powers themselves for purposes they themselves choose" (1985: 209). Although those purposes may often correspond with the ideal of the devoted householder, they are equally often born of the woman's own sense of self-worth.

Pativrata Possibilities

I note above the importance of recognizing that although the normative discourse is often described as “masculine”, it is not specifically confined to men but variously shared by women. The claim that upholding virtues such as chastity and devotion to one’s husband – i.e. fulfilling one’s *dharma* as a woman – gives women “social power” and “self-respect” (Caplan, 1986: 55) is borne out by the research results of this study. However, it is also clear that active fulfillment of this role does not necessitate that all women have uniformly internalized orthodox Brahmanical values. Hindu women, to varying extents, are free to make choices about the ways in which they will negotiate these aspects of their lives, manipulating their circumstances in creative and subtle ways. They may simultaneously accept and reject the normative discourse and its consequences for their lives, subtly criticizing and subverting it while at the same time living within it and themselves perpetuating it. This is made clear by the examples provided by the participants in this study. Although most women described themselves as maintaining tradition through their daily devotional activity, each did in fact depart from orthodox norms in various ways. Interestingly, they acknowledged these deviations without considering them to be transgressive. This suggests that ambiguous responses to normativity do not so much represent consciously deployed strategies of subversion as they do the natural and inevitable idiosyncrasies of lived religious experience.

The literature provides us with some tools for thinking about *pativratahood*. Sandra Robinson enumerates the various positive functions of women's *vrata* performances:

for her, they are a creative outlet, they encourage socialization, they are both practically and ideologically effective. Further, she emphasizes the importance of the fact that in the performance of *vrata*, women hold complete religious and ritual authority, as they are qualified to complete the entire process without the need for priestly intervention (1985: 208). Despite these empowering characteristics, Robinson concludes that “while *vratas* are *of* women and *by* women, they are not *for* women” in that their ultimate function is to secure the happiness and well-being of others (1985: 200).

Anne McKenzie Pearson disputes this view, arguing that in addition to helping a woman to ensure the well-being of her family (and in a real sense *because* of this function), *vrata* provide women with a sense of independence and self-worth. Pearson sees women’s *vrata* as vehicles by which women are able to gain a degree of control over their lives, carving out spaces of personal autonomy in which they directly determine the use of their own time and energy. She writes: “Although the wife is performing the *vrata* for her husband’s well-being and long life it is she who is being celebrated. Her fast for his sake is an actualization of her protective and life-enhancing power” (1996: 162). Through the observance of *vrata*, for example, women exercise control over their bodies through the intake of food, altered sleep patterns, and abstinence from sex. Pearson points out that *vrata* also provide opportunities for female community-building, as women are temporarily freed from their domestic routines to perform the rites together in a social setting. In these gatherings, “women in their togetherness find meanings that may be comforting, supportive or subtly critical of normative values and expectations” (Pearson, 1996: 169). The spiritual fulfillment that women gain from their performance

of *vrata* may also be a comfort to them, a “source of strength” in facing the challenges posed by their daily circumstances (Pearson, 1996: 188). Turning to Canada in later research, Pearson again confirms that through such devotional activity women take on the important role of “primary conservators and transmitters of the South Asian family’s religious heritage” in diaspora – a responsibility that doubtless carries with it some sense of importance, and even authority (1999: 427). Anthropologist Colleen Yim opens her ethnography with the sentence: “When thinking of a Hindu woman, the most common picture is of someone who is oppressed rather than the main teacher of a world religion” (2008: xv). And yet, as she goes on to demonstrate, Hindu women do serve as teachers all the time, passing knowledge from generation to generation. For some of the women in this study, that teaching role is undertaken quite deliberately, while for others it slips in as a part of natural daily household rhythms.

Aparna Rayaprol's ethnographic study of the *Sri Venkateswara* temple in Pittsburgh is a further valuable addition to the body of literature on women's experiences of Hinduism in diaspora. Rayaprol addresses the function of religion as a symbolic resource in the reconstruction of diaspora communities, describing a situation in which Hindu women are taking lively responsibility for the maintenance of Hindu culture, both religious and otherwise, within their community. Working from the assumption that “it is common among immigrant groups to engage in identity-formation through religious expression,” she argues that “for the Hindu immigrants to the United States, religion forms the context within which they seek to maintain their identity and also socialize their children” (1997: 20). Importantly, Rayaprol finds women to be leaders in this process, and reports

that her female informants draw “emotional fulfillment and autonomous power from their work in establishing and maintaining community networks” (1997: 20).

Rayaprol points out that coming to a new country often entails a diminishing of one's social circle, leading to a sense of isolation. However, she notes that her research participants were able to overcome this loneliness through the construction of networks of their own via their involvement in the temple – a process enhanced by an empowering sense of freedom stemming from the lack of extended family relationships that may have constrained them had they attempted similar activities in India. This is supported by Sikata Banerjee, who writes:

For most women, regardless of background, education, and language skills, life in Canada is often quite bewildering and lonely. They are used to drawing on large social networks composed of multi-generational, extended families and childhood friends. ...Urban centres including Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver and Montreal provide temples, stores, and cultural associations that can substitute for the social sustenance provided by family and friends (Coward & Banerjee, 42).

Concerned with Hinduism's patriarchal structures, and with the ways in which these structures are negotiated by her female informants through their religious involvement, Rayaprol cautions against dismissing women's primary identification with their families as 'false consciousness', instead defending their adherence to patriarchal norms as conscious choices. The negotiations achieved by the women in this study, too, do not constitute a jettisoning of tradition, but rather a subtle critique that manipulates webs of relationship while leaving them, for the most part, intact. Rayaprol's findings require that we reconsider the false dichotomy between public and private religious spaces so often underlying treatments of women's religious lives. She argues that women are actively

introducing values associated with the feminine domesticity (i.e., those that foreground the significance of relationship) into the public sphere through their involvement at the temple. In fact, Rayaprol locates the sacred space of the diasporic temple in some ways on the threshold between public and private spheres, postulating its function as a "second home" where *de facto* private relationships are articulated through the development and maintenance of fictive kin linkages (1999: 136).

We use social and cultural tools in this process of constructing our selves, but these tools are neither necessarily nor entirely deterministic. In daily performances of religious narratives, culturally-sanctioned acts are executed by actors who bring an array of polyvalent moods and interpretations to their performance. Multiple meanings are imagined and produced through this activity - some of these are empowering, some harmful, and some are invested with greater authority than others. In this polyphonic context, the stories people in the margins tell themselves about themselves when communicating with the Divine are just as meaningful (indeed, perhaps even more so) as the authoritative doctrine conveyed in the same performance. In drawing on and testing the limits of these theoretical models, this study furthers the attempt to understand the performance of religious narratives in a way that has relevance to the lived experience of religious individuals.

Gender

The use of gender as an analytical category is necessarily crucial to this study in its focus on the religious lives of women. Gender shapes human experience, the structures within which that experience takes place, and the biases and assumptions a scholar brings to the analysis of that experience. Women's religious lives, roles, and thought can differ from those of men in significant ways. But they are also similar in many ways, and to overstate the differences is to set up a false dichotomy that inhibits a nuanced understanding of lived religious experience for both men and women and contradicts the spirit of shared meaning production exemplified by Bakhtin's work. Indeed, Leslie Orr argues that male and female spheres of religious activity overlap significantly. She writes: "If we want to differentiate male and female religious behaviours and purposes, it seems that we can best do this by thinking in terms of different colourings and shadings, rather than different positions or different perspectives on the meanings of their religious activities" (2007: 122).

Whatever the similarities in men's and women's lived religious experiences, it can safely be said that female voices have traditionally been silenced, or at the very least excluded from mainstream dialogue within institutional religion, and that women have been and in many contexts continue to be excluded from the role of theologian, ritual specialist, or otherwise officially-sanctioned member. Indeed within my own fieldwork I witnessed several attempts on the part of men to silence their wives in the midst of our conversations, accusing them of 'misrepresenting Hinduism', as in the following exchange:

Husband: "That is her Hinduism! If I talk about my Hinduism, you don't need a place [for worship]! That is not Hinduism! Those are her scriptures! Her books! Come now and I will tell you about my books, my scriptures! I can get 2 dozen people, well educated, and they will tell you the same thing!"

Wife: "I'm not talking about Hinduism, I'm talking about the place of *puja*, where you put the *puja* things!"

Yet despite this position on the margins, where one's practices are denied the legitimacy of orthodoxy, obviously "women inevitably have some kind of religious lives, even if these consist only in responding to male-defined ideals and expectations" (Falk & Gross, 1989: xv). Traditionally, the role of woman has been centered around motherhood and domesticity (see, for treatments of this in the Hindu context, Pintchman 2005, Raheja & Gold 1994, McGee 1992, McDaniel 2003, and Pearson 1996). For some extraordinary individuals such as female renunciants, religious experience does provide alternatives to this role, but more often it offers only support and validation for the feminine responsibilities of parenting and wifehood. Although operating within the normative religious worlds of men, women's religious expressions are thus often connected to the domestic sphere, tied to concerns for family wellbeing and focused on the significance of relationship. This web of relationship is flexible, however, and religious practice can be used in its manipulation. It is often possible for women, through their religious lives, to "continue to be wives and mothers but effect reversals in former and often oppressive family structures" (Falk & Gross, 1989: xvii). And, as Diana Eck and Devaki Jain have noted,

religion is both a problem (or the problem) where its structures of dominance have oppressed women, as well as a solution where its vision of liberation or equality has generated powerful movements for social change. The same religious tradition may be both a problem and a solution. ...Hindu affirmation of women's

power (*shakti*) may be sources of strength even when much of the tradition compromises women's equality or power (1986: 2).

The entirety of this dissertation is shot through with considerations of the ways in which gender affects one's experience of Hinduism. I raise these issues in this discrete section in order to specifically situate some key themes of classical Hinduism within the context of gender theory and its surrounding literature. Normative Hindu discourse, based in the textual tradition and expressed in the social and domestic authority typically held by men, holds that women are ritually impure, polluted, and potentially dangerous. In Hindu cosmology, a woman possesses power which is threatening if uncontrolled by men. Because of her ritual impurity, she is inferior, subordinate to men. In marriage, a woman is to be devoted to her husband, even in the face of abuse either from him or from members of his family. Nor can she rely on the loyalty or affection of her husband. She "accepts the patrilineal assumption that her husband's natal ties take precedence over the conjugal relationship, and accepts, in consequence, her subordinate position" in her husband's home (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 121). Further, because her sexual chastity is imperative to the proper maintenance of kinship lineages, it must be controlled.

It would be an oversimplification to portray the normative characterization of women as entirely negative (indeed, 32 of 37 respondents in this study rejected interpretations of Hindu women's lives as characterized *entirely* by oppressive patriarchy, and 16 spoke of Hindu gender relations in terms of equality). This raises the observation that although this normative discourse is often described as 'masculine' or 'male', it is not specifically

confined to men but is shared by women to a large extent. It is widely held in female circles that upholding virtues such as chastity and devotion to one's husband (i.e., fulfilling one's *dharma* as a woman) gives one "social power" and "self-respect" among one's peers (Caplan, 1986: 55). Neither is the subversive discourse that challenges patriarchal norms specifically feminine – such generalizations are convenient but obscure the complexities of lived experience. Indeed, echoing Leslie Orr's comments above, Ann Grodzins Gold argues that "women's worlds and worldviews should not be treated as separately construed and separately analyzable from men's" (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 38). Rather, these manifold perspectives exist together as dialogical realms of discourse and practice, complementing and opposing one another in a continually changing kaleidoscope of experience – one that is generative of rich and multiple meaning.

The relationship between religion and normativity is complex. Religious ideology and practice can function both to enforce norms, supporting the power of the already powerful; and to subvert them, giving marginalized groups opportunities for expression. These functions are not mutually exclusive, and nor do they represent static modes of experience; rather, they "slide together" in unexpected and constantly shifting combinations (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 182). This duality is true of Hinduism more generally, in which ideology and ritual practices carry within them both the potential for the enforcement of normative, patriarchal discourse and also opportunities for the critique and subtle subversion of that discourse by those on the margins. The range of experience and interpretation between these two extremes of mute acceptance and

explicit rejection is widely diverse and always multivalent. Women, as one such marginal group, may simultaneously experience various combinations of both oppression and empowerment through the beliefs and practices associated with Hinduism, reproducing but also resisting forms of domination in their everyday encounters with religion. In considering such a finely nuanced relationship as that between religion and normativity, I follow Gloria Goodwin Raheja's recommendation that we

view culture not as a single totalizing discourse but as a universe of discourse and practice in which competing discourses may contend with and play off each other, compose ironic commentaries on or subvert one another, or reflexively interrogate a given text or tradition or power relation... [thus yielding] multiply voiced, contextually shifting, and often strategically deployed readings of...social practices (1994: 3).

In training our gaze on Hindu traditions from this perspective of “universes of discourse and universes of practice” (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 18), we might come closer to understanding the complex role of religion in the everyday lives of adherents.

When female voices do break through, what results? The dominant discourse may be somewhat undermined by a current of oppositional narratives, but in practice it still holds great sway over the lives of most women who participated in this study. Because normative values are often internalized, the view of the world that women construct for themselves may not be so very different from the one constructed for them and imposed upon them by patriarchal society. In this way, it may seem to some observers that “women themselves tend the flame of patriarchal traditions, taking care that inequality be maintained” (Mitter, 1991: 11). Here again we approach the difficulties of portraying

Indian women as childlike victims of both subjugation and false consciousness. Sherry Gorelick issues a helpful corrective to this:

The difficulty with the concept of false consciousness is not... that it asserts that people may have an imperfect understanding of their own conditions. Nor does the solution lie in asserting that their understanding is perfectly valid, as if the nature of the world were merely a matter of opinion (cf. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1983; Fisher 1984, on relativism). The difficulty with the concept of false consciousness lies in the implication that (a) there is a true consciousness that is known and complete, and (b) the researcher-activist knows it, and the participant does not (1991: 468).

Paying attention to the necessarily partial nature of our understanding of human experience, and acknowledging the standpoint of the research participant as one of expertise in her own experience, is thus a minimum requirement of person-centered qualitative research. Subtle areas of discord between ideology and practice do exist and “it is the small deviations from the norm which may be crucial... [as, for example] the way the apparently negative is transformed into something positive and powerful” (Leslie, 1991: 3). Thus it is possible that social conventions such as dowry, *purdah*, and even *sati* may be interpreted positively by Indian women. While each of these institutions is imposed by a patriarchal tradition, women are able to maneuver somewhat within these established parameters, creating meaning that validates their experiences. Hindu women, to varying extents, are able to make choices about the ways in which they will negotiate these aspects of their lives, subtly and creatively manipulating their circumstances. The majority may not see themselves as victims “but as active agents in the creation of their own identity” (Leslie, 1991: 3). Indeed it is a claim of this study that women are active in constructing these edifices of culture: the narratives of over half of its respondents present no real critique of orthodox norms.

Although from the perspective of Western feminist theory these choices may appear oppressive, or seem not to be choices at all, to persist in conceptualizing Indian women as voiceless victims is patronizing and harmful in its own right. In denying women a voice, we perpetuate the male discourse and we miss half of the story (perhaps the most interesting half). Anjali Bagwe writes: "Very few stereotypical notions about [Hindu] women are borne out by the grassroots reality. Rather than being passive acculturated creatures silently suffering the yoke of an oppressive system, village women are creative and mature individualists" from whom academics can learn much (1995: 207).²¹

The importance of hearing what women have to say about their own lives cannot be overstated. Hearing, listening to, and not explaining away the perspectives of Indian women is crucial – and only very recently recognized and attempted. Western academics, including feminist scholars, have until recently tended to adopt a patronizing, colonialist attitude, totalizing and simplifying the experience of women in the developing world and exaggerating their position as victims. Chandra Mohanty has protested against this, arguing that "such representations...define and maintain postcolonial relations between the first and third worlds by positing, implicitly or

²¹ The question of individualism in the Indian context is a subject of some contention in recent scholarly literature. Traditional theory, typified in the holistic approach of Dumont, holds that a Hindu, whether man or woman, considers him or herself not as an individual but in relationship to the family, community, *jati*, and cosmos – that he or she is a participant in a "complex socio-religious context" and makes choices within this context (Menski, 1991: 53). This view has been criticized for portraying a mythical civilization in which Hindus are robbed of the notion of selfhood, preventing an accurate understanding of Indian society (Appadurai, 1986). Indeed, many of the arguments touched upon in this study have at their very center the idea of women's agency as individuals, their sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and the act of self-definition – a process in which Raheja sees a synthesis of the holistic and the individualistic in "an ongoing negotiation of personhood and relationship" (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 20).

explicitly, the moral superiority of the West and the moral degradation of the 'patriarchal' third world" (1984, cited in Raheja & Gold, 1994: 8). The importance of seeking out, and paying attention to, articulate female agents is clear. So what are these voices expressing?

Raheja and Gold hold that women's voices present "a poetic discourse on power and the possibility of women's resistance to patrilineal authority and patrilineal pronouncements on female identities" (1994: 26). The poetic nature of this discourse means that we must not just ask questions of women and listen to their answers, but that we must listen to the words of women *in context* as they express themselves to one another. "If we record only women's responses to our own questions, we may all too quickly come to the conclusion that they cannot speak subversively or critically, that their voices are muted by the weight of male dominance and their own acquiescence in the face of 'tradition'" (Raheja & Gold, 1994: 20). When Raheja and Gold listened to the stories and songs of women, told and sung by women of their own accord, they did not hear the muted words of disenfranchised victims, but strong voices full of criticism, self-worth and humour. It is crucial to "see women as the active agents of their own positive constructs" and not only as victims both silent and oppressed (Leslie, 1991: 1). Equally important is to remember that women do not share a single voice, but express many varying attitudes and opinions concerning the multiple and shifting realities of their lives. To assume that women share a uniform perspective, even if it is one critical of normative patriarchy, would be to continue to misunderstand and to misrepresent.

Whitney Kelting's *Singing to the Jinas* adds to our understanding of the complexities of women's lived religious experience.²² In her interpretive study of Jain women's creative encounters with tradition, Kelting presents a uniquely feminine theology, developed and transmitted through narrative. She describes the creative tension between received ideas of orthodox, textual sources of Jain theology (in which women are either ignored or understood negatively) and personal understandings developed through the collection of vernacular texts and devotional literature (which portray women as devotees *par excellence*). She describes a process in which women's reimaginings shape, in a very concrete way, the orthodox tradition, arguing that Jain women work out their own answers to their own unique theological questions through their daily ritual performances of *puja*. Women's praxis represents their knowledge and interpretation of tradition, and their power with respect to that tradition. This study does not report from a perspective of resistance, but one of women's inherent authority in conducting certain practices. Kelting's work raises important questions for the present study. To what extent is this valorization of female religious activity in danger of not only glossing over but redoubling the marginalization of its subjects? To characterize women's ways of being religious as expressive of uniquely feminine values may lead into a kind of second-order subjugation of women and their practices. At the same time, to ignore altogether the significance of those practices in the lives of individuals does a disservice to the sophistication and agency of the women in question.

Religion has the potential to act as a powerful vehicle of social norms and, as such, to

²² This important contribution to the literature on Indian women's encounters with religion is covered in more detail in Chapter Four. I include reference to it here simply as an example of an ethnography that successfully sidesteps stereotypical notions of submissive, voiceless Indian women.

enforce authority. But it can also provide a forum for the criticism of those norms, to varying degrees. In applying these possibilities to the dialogue between Hindu women, authority, and religion, the relationships that emerge are seen to be complex and continually shifting. It is no longer understood to be sufficient for academe to patronizingly observe that Hindu women are oppressed by the patriarchal nature of their religion and society while ignoring the voices of the very women we seek to describe. Linda Hess has eloquently observed that “as researchers increasingly shed the assumption that Brahmanical male discourses must obviously and naturally represent Hinduism and as they turn their attention to previously dark spaces, previously silent voices, a stunning reality presents itself. Those spaces were never really dark, those voices never silent” (2001: 21). There is much to learn about Hinduism from the women who live it. As we open our minds to these previously ignored voices, convenient categories fall away and the picture becomes infinitely more complicated. ‘Oppressed’ and ‘empowered’, ‘victimized’ and ‘liberated’ - these are distinctions drawn by outsiders. Many of the women who participated in this study simultaneously accept and reject the normative discourse and its consequences for their lives, subtly criticizing and manipulating it while at the same time living within it and themselves perpetuating it. The creative and infinitely subtle ways in which they negotiate the social realities of their tradition present real challenges to the existing body of theoretical tools with which we approach the study of culture, society and the individual.

Ritual Innovation

Although this study is not explicitly concerned with the mechanics of ritual activity, focusing instead on the importance assigned by women to religious narratives enacted through such activity, it is worth noting some observations on the dynamic between ritual innovation and its perceived efficacy among lay practitioners in diaspora. With the notable exception of *vrata*, the women in this study exercise a great degree of flexibility in their household ritual performances, and this elasticity is not seen to detract in any way from the potential efficacy of the *pujas* performed.

For these women, *pūja* works because the doing of it effects a shift in their conceptual framework – performing *pūja*, in whatever way one has established as “normal”, if not normative, takes one’s problems and puts them in a new frame of reference in which the gods now share, or entirely take on, responsibility for providing a solution. Participants in this study deem innovations or deviations from orthopraxy to be irrelevant to this process.

Of course *pūja* itself is a supple term, and it is widely understood that its performance will vary from one person to another. Its performative messiness is not a problem. As Selva Raj and Corrine Dempsey point out, “this ‘mess’ seems only discernable from the backdrop of institutional, universalizing formulations of identity, boundary, and authority, not from the perspective of the practitioner” (Raj & Dempsey: 2002, 2). Flexibility and variety in the conglomeration of traditions we consider ‘Hindu’ are well established hallmarks, but I take household practice to be particularly well suited to this dynamic of

ritual innovation, as it provides a more private and personalized ritual arena than does temple worship. Drawing on the work of various ritual theorists and complementing my own observations with those of other South Asian scholars, this section briefly posits the question “What makes ritual work?” in the face of substitutions, inexperienced performance, and various violations of orthopraxy among Canadian Hindu women in their household ritual praxis.

Fritz Staal has famously argued that ritual performance is:

self-contained and self-absorbed. The performers are totally immersed in the proper execution of their complex tasks. Isolated in their sacred enclosure, they concentrate on correctness of act, recitation and chant. Their primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual. ...Ritual, then, is primarily activity. It is activity governed by explicit rules. The important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or say. In India this has become a basic feature of all religion. (1989: 115-117).

But then, he also said that “It does not pay to ask elephants about zoology” (1989: 117).

Such disregard for the interpretations that ritual actors bring to bear on their own performances is an outmoded approach that does little to help us in our efforts to understand the importance of religion in daily life, and it is this type of scholarship that the present study aims to move beyond.

Staal continues: “To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value; but whatever value it has is intrinsic value” (1989: 131-2). For him, this leads directly to “extreme conservatism” in the preservation of ritual sequences (1989: 134) as “unchanging syntactic structures” (1989: 140). Similarly, Roy

Rappaport takes “ritual to denote the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (1999: 24).

Staal, and to a somewhat less dogmatic extent Rappaport, posit a rigidly preserved sequence of ritual acts that must be performed faithfully and then have any number of meanings attached to them. *Pace* Staal and Rappaport, I have observed the opposite: the meaning and intention underlying the performance of household *puja* is fixed – that being the intention to engage in reciprocal communication with the gods – but the ritual itself is open to substitutions, omissions, and reversals that have no impact on its perceived efficacy. This observation seems to align more closely with Jonathan Z. Smith’s characterization of ritual as “a focusing lens, a call to pay attention”. Smith argues that ritual is a “means of performing the way things out to be in conscious tension to the way things are, in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things” (1982: 63). For Smith, “ritual is about thinking, or about thoughtful consideration; it is about acknowledging and remembering the messiness and dangers of life through performing their opposite” (Klassen, 145). Rather than emphasizing the routine and repetition identified as hallmarks by Staal and Rappaport, this view shifts our focus to the ritual participant’s conscious engagement with a ritual time and space of power and possibility.

Catherine Bell would prefer that instead of speaking of ‘ritual’ we speak of ‘ritualization’.

She suggests that we:

abandon the focus on ritual as a set of special practices in favour of a focus on some of the more common strategies of ‘ritualization’, defined as a way of acting that differentiates some acts from others. To approach ritual within the framework

of practical activity raises, [she] suggest[s], potentially more fruitful question about the origins, purposes, and efficacy of 'ritualized actions' than are accessible through [other scholarly] models (1992: ix).

It also raises the possibility of asking elephants about zoology, and of asking Hindu women about their own practices: focusing on daily lived engagements with tradition rather than 'high' ritual necessitates broadening our understanding of what counts as religious activity, and opens the floor to lay practitioners previously silenced.

Importantly, for Bell, "the features of formality, fixity and repetition are not intrinsic to... ritualization or to ritual in general. ...Ritualization could involve the exact repetition of a centuries-old tradition or deliberately radical innovation and improvisation" (1992: 90-91). Here I quote Bell at length:

If ritual is interpreted in terms of practice, it becomes clear that formality, fixity, and repetition are not intrinsic qualities of ritual so much as they are a frequent, but not universal strategy for producing ritualized acts. ... Since practice is situational and strategic, people engage in ritualization as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances. Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or 'the dead weight of tradition' (1992: 92).

Drawing largely on Bell's framework, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw present a theory of ritual as "a quality which action can come to have" (1994: 64). They argue that their object of study, Jain *puja*, carries no inherent meaning, nor do the individual actions that combine to make a *puja*, but individuals performing it take a "ritual stance" toward their actions. From this stance, any given act may be assigned a number of meanings, generally drawn from a cultural pool, by any one ritual actor. It is the

ritualized attitude of the action performed that makes it a ritual performance. Fred Clothey has recently made a significant modification to Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory of ritual – while Humphrey and Laidlaw suggest that formal rituals are “primarily a matter of following certain ‘constitutive rules’ and that meanings are ascribed later; people ascribe meaning to specific ritual actions after the fact”, Clothey observes that rituals are in practice of a dialectical nature, so that “reasons and rules are interwoven”. He further notes that this “interaction of rules and reasons takes on specific connotations when performed on behalf of expatriated communities” (2006: 161). Orthopraxy, then, need not determine the manner in which a *puja* is carried out. Efficacy need not be tied to a particular series of ritual actions but rather to the interpretations, beliefs and desires of the practitioner.

This view fits nicely with Robert Orsi's characterization of lived religion as emerging “in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life” (1997: 7). Orsi argues that people “do not merely inherit religious idioms, nor is religion a fixed dimension of one's being, the permanent attainment of a stable self. [Rather,] people appropriate religious idioms as they need them, in response to particular circumstances. All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life” (Orsi, 1997: 7-8).

A growing body of scholarship has documented the innovative and transformative ritual work of Hindu women. Much of this work has focused on “what Hindu women do with their rituals to shape their worlds as agents acting in pursuit of their own desired ends...

exercis[ing] initiative, ingenuity, and resolve in creating and sustaining female-centered traditions and practices that are uniquely meaningful to women's experience in Hindu culture" (Pintchman, ed., 2007: 13-4). The instances of innovation I have observed among participants in the current study appear to be tied to three factors: first, a degree of inexperience and lack of knowledge about ritual practices on the part of ritual actors distanced from orthoprax 'tradition'; second, the lack of availability of 'traditional' offerings even in the event that the devotee does know what is prescribed by that tradition; and finally, a pervasive readiness to approach domestic *puja* creatively as long as one's underlying intention is correct.

Amid these observations, *vrata* appear to offer an interesting exception to the willingness to proceed in ritual without knowing the rules or prescribed sequences. In this study, fasting rituals have stood as an exception to the ease with which substitutions and omissions are accepted in household practice. Interestingly, the most commonly reason participants cite for not keeping fasts in Canada is an uncertainty about proper practice that is widely interpreted to render the ritual ineffective and thus best discontinued altogether – an attitude not expressed with regard to household *puja* performed apart from fasts. Those women who do continue to observe, for example, *Karva Chauth*, spoke quite emphatically about the importance of maintaining tradition in their observance (stressing, for instance, the importance of younger female family members attending the home of the eldest woman to conduct the *puja*).

Anne Pearson writes that:

Vrats are composed of a number of recurring elements whose particular content and arrangement gives each vow a distinctive stamp. The same *vrat*, however, may be observed differently by different families even of the same caste in the same locale. No doubt incoming *bahus* [daughters-in-law] may help to introduce variations to the practices of an extended family even while they attempt to conform to those practices. Women of urban and nuclear families may feel freer to make modifications 'for convenience' or to suit the exigencies of their situation. This is certainly the case among Hindu immigrant women in North America, many of whom want to continue or restart the observance of *vrats* in their new cultural environment. Nevertheless, even within these parameters of change, there is a marked continuity of form in the observance of *vrats* among women... The basic constituents of a *vrat*, elaborated in centuries-old texts, all continue to be found (1996: 167).

This apparent distinction between the willingness to incorporate innovation into quotidian worship but not into fasting practices remains unresolved and is an intriguing question for further research.

I am arguing that it is the intention and the belief of the devotee that make daily household *puja* efficacious, even in the face of substitutions and "incorrect" execution, because the point of the *puja* is to set up a space in which you can have a conversation with God about your troubles – a conversation you come away from feeling lighter, because you have shifted the issue onto a different plane – that of faith. Having effected this shift, it is the devotee who deems the ritual correct and complete.

How much of this freedom to innovate has to do with geography? The manifold experiences of constructing, maintaining and adapting tradition in diaspora may well be instrumental forces in determining the flavours and textures of household ritual there. Dempsey has noted that, at the Rush Temple in upstate New York which served as the central focus of her study, "women are free to do the otherwise impossible in *Aiya's*

temple because it is not in India" (2005: 114). Similarly, in the words of some of my participants:

In India it was easy to lose yourself in the form, because everybody around you is doing the same thing, you would be doing it more by habit. You really don't have the opportunity to examine, whereas here I have to make a conscious effort, especially knowing that my daughter is married to a Catholic and my son is married to an Indian who is quite agnostic. There it was more superficial I think. You didn't have the chance to struggle over it and keep it and want to do it, and here I feel I am more mature and I can see that I can pray without any sense that I am practicing something which has no meaning, so it's like something you want to do and it helps you toward some kind of calmness.

- and -

For one thing, Canada is such a wonderful place. Sometimes I almost feel that my spirituality has increased, and has gained focus in my life because I live here. In India, I would have been in the company of people all the time. I would have had a lot of influences. And I may or may not have had the opportunity to grow my way. In Canada, I was given that opportunity. I was far away from influences. I was far away from anybody lecturing, anybody criticizing, anybody encouraging a certain path. And I think that distance, and the isolation to a certain extent from other Hindus, allowed my husband and I to develop our spirituality in a way that was personal to us.

Despite whatever freedoms diasporic practice might permit, I want to be clear that these freedoms are enacted within a general sphere of accepted practice. Innovation is balanced with the proper orientation to the purpose of the ritual act – an intimate connection with the Divine which facilitates life events. In this we can see Suzanne Langer's characterization of even flexible ritual as a "disciplined rehearsal of right attitudes" (Langer, 1942: 153), and of the interplay between rules and meaning that Clothey points toward. At the Rush Temple, too, Dempsey saw that "breaking with convention helps devotees find their way to divinity. The naughtiness and irreverence

of play underscore and are intensified by strains of serious, hard-won devotion” (2005: 146).

Innovative ritual practices ‘work’ for those who perform them because they are felt to forge sufficient links to a tradition practiced by previous generations of women in order to bring about desired ends. Participants in this study spoke of approaching their rituals with the correct intention and devotion, making do with the materials on hand and introducing substitutions and amendments as needed. They came away from these performances feeling that their concerns had been shifted onto the gods’ plate along with whatever offerings they were able to make, and did not report any concerns that inexpert performance might have thwarted their efforts. These women demonstrate Selva Raj and William Harman’s observation that “tradition learns to accommodate itself to changing circumstances, demands and requirements. ...Faithful lay members of traditions will take steps to make a tradition meet and fit their own needs, often despite officially sanctioned instructions by the professional guardians of that tradition” (2006: 2). The particular contribution that this dissertation offers to the ongoing scholarly conversation around ritual innovation is its glimpse into the peculiarities of women’s daily household engagements with tradition in diaspora. The study also raises the as yet unresolved question as to whether the distinctions observed between a comparatively cavalier approach to daily *puja* and a more rigid stance toward calendrical *vrata* are peculiar to the women who participated in this study or are found in other communities as well.

This chapter has set out the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the study, and has begun to link these to the research findings presented. The next chapter builds on this foundation by elaborating the unique context of Hindu temples in the Canadian diaspora.

Chapter Three

Hinduism in Canada: Temples and Households

This chapter examines the establishment of an Indo-Canadian Hindu community. The history of Hindu migration to Canada is briefly reviewed and the importance of institutional infrastructure to community identity is introduced. Case studies of three Ontario temples provide insight into the challenges presented by the process of establishing a diasporic religious community. Finally, the chapter looks beyond the reaches of the temple to consider the importance of household worship in the process of adapting and maintaining tradition in diaspora.

Canada as Hindu Diaspora

As alluded to in the opening pages of this dissertation, 'diaspora' is a contentious term. It connotes a sense of liminality and exclusion, suggesting that those who dwell within diaspora really 'belong' somewhere else. Within the Canadian context Paul Bramadat has expressed these concerns most cogently, compelled by his interest "in the problematic understanding of Canadian identity that [he] believes underlies the common use of the term" (2005: 14). Bramadat worries that Canadian identity has come to assume European Christianity as normative, and that this assumption is revealed by our use of terms like diaspora. He argues:

Implicit in this word is, of course, the notion that there is a preferred place of residence and then there is the place one currently lives; there is the authentic home... and then there is that place that is one or more steps removed from the authentic home... Such a way of framing and discussing ethnic and religious phenomena is based on a binary worldview in which one is either in the 'real' ethnic or religious homeland, or has been, in some sense, for whatever reason,

dispersed from it. Ethnic identity, understood in this light, is a primordial force, an immutable sense of the way one is that is closely related to an immutable sense of the place one belongs. ...The notion of diaspora ceases to be a useful heuristic device and it becomes (or is revealed as) an unintentionally exclusionary way to distinguish between people who really belong here... and people who are just visiting for a long time (2005: 14).

I fully acknowledge the cautions raised by Bramadat and have no intention of portraying Hindu Indo-Canadians as foreigners, outsiders, or long term visitors. And yet, despite the extensive literature debating the relative merits and pitfalls of the term, no workable substitution has emerged (Bramadat suggests speaking of individuals and groups with “multiple geographical attachments” – a phrase whose “clumsiness will help us to denaturalize Christian or European power, and to encourage people to see Canada as a work in progress” (2005: 16).

Steven Vertovec outlines three meanings of diaspora, noting that the concept can be employed to refer variously to a social form, a type of consciousness, and a mode of cultural production (2000: 142 *et passim*). Floating within this constellation of meanings are indicators of social relationships, ways of life, political orientations, and economic strategies. Vertovec emphasizes the “dual or paradoxical” nature of diasporic consciousness, wherein individuals develop multi-local orientations, looking back to an imaginary homeland while simultaneously looking to ground oneself in a (perhaps equally imaginary) present. This dynamic is a factor in the establishment of diaspora communities as it “stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others, both ‘here’ and ‘there’, who share the same ‘routes’ and ‘roots’”(2000: 147).

I have chosen to retain use of the term diaspora throughout this study primarily because it is a term that research participants themselves employed regularly and without negative connotations. For this reason, and to avoid undue clumsiness, I employ Judith Brown's usage of the term diaspora to indicate:

groups of people with a common ethnicity; who have left their original homeland for prolonged periods of time and often permanently; who retain a particular sense of cultural identity and often close kinship links with other scattered members of their group... and who maintain links with that homeland and a sense of its role in their present identity. This avoids any essential notion of compulsion and victimization, (though compulsion may have been present in some cases), recognizes the many reasons and contexts for migration, and emphasizes the transnational nature of diasporic groups. It is also analytically useful as it points to different aspects of such migrants' lives and helps us conceptualize their experience, in particular social forms, connections and relationships, senses of place and self, and the ongoing process of evolving culture in new contexts (2006: 4).

As Bramadat points out, writing and thinking about diaspora requires that we also grapple with the term 'ethnicity'. What does it mean to speak of Hindu ethnicity in Canada? Here I adopt Janet McLellan's definition of ethnicity as "an expression of people's primary ties outside the nuclear family, ties that incorporate racial and national origin, as well as religious and cultural identity" (1999: 192). Like McLellan, I take ethnicity to be an "adaptable and transitional" expression of social identity as groups and individuals deploy ethnic heritage as a type of "cultural capital in constructing and redefining Canadian identities" (1999: 192). Significantly, ethnicity is not a static category or social location but rather an "adaptive response in which ethnic identity comprises recreated and symbolic expressions of selected cultural patterns" – it is not "representative of a total immigrant culture" (1999: 193). Recognition of the inherently supple nature of ethnicity is crucial:

The inadequacy of earlier theoretical models of ethnic or religious identities is the assumption that these identities are embedded within an empirically defined, bounded, or somewhat self-contained ethnic community within a nation-state. Ethnic and religious identities in Canada today are influenced by their position in a system of social stratification within the state and the global theme. Both positions are in constant transformation (McLellan, 1999: 204).

It is also useful here to adopt Christian Lee Novetzke's concept of "publics". Novetzke conceives of a public "as a social unit created through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena" (2008: 259). These elastic publics are entirely contextual, shrinking, expanding and shifting in varying circumstances. To speak of Hindu ethnicity – or Hindu publics – then, is to invoke one of various useful fictions or shorthands which posit one of a number of ostensibly coherent Indo-Canadian identities. These multiple identities, nested within one another like Russian dolls, may be strategically deployed when, for example, differences of region, language, caste and gender are obscured by the pragmatic need to establish a stable sense of community in the face of the majority Canadian population (as when establishing a multi-purpose temple meant to transcend communal and sectarian identities in order to present a unified institutional image of a 'Hindu community' to Canadians); to distinguish one Indo-Canadian group from another (as when Gujaratis wish to make clear their distinctiveness from, say, Tamils); or to differentiate between the views and practices of first and second generation migrants, to suggest just a few possibilities. Though the contours of these publics are shifting, various concepts key to identity may remain relatively stable in each. For instance, in each of the iterations presented above, "*bhakti* can be integrated into ideas of what it is to be 'Indian'..." (Novetzke, 2008: 260).

How have these publics been constituted? The first wave of Hindu migrants to Canada consisted of Punjabi farmers who arrived along with the approximately 5,000 first Sikh immigrants between 1900 and 1908. This group was primarily male, and their objective in coming to Canada was to earn money – by working on the railways, in forestry and in lumber mills – to be spent on farmland upon their return to India.²³ This was an uneasy time. Rising numbers of South Asian, Chinese and Japanese immigrants in British Columbia were a concern to the Anglo-Saxon population, and in 1908 legislation was passed to revoke the previously full British citizenship enjoyed by Indian nationals. This effectively excluded the Canadian South Asian population from all federal processes, including voting and public service. The 'continuous journey' legislation, also passed in 1908, made legal immigration to Canada from India impossible as it required a direct passage from India to Canadian shores – a voyage that no shipping company offered. The pioneer Hindu community in Canada was effectively frozen at this point, unable to grow naturally as a result of its 'bachelor society' composition. "Although in the 1920s a few wives and children were allowed in to join husbands already living in Canada, the South Asian community remained basically static until the 1950s" (Banerjee & Coward, 33).

In the 1960s a new stream of Indian migrants began to arrive. These migrants included urban middle-class professionals from Uttar Pradesh and its environs; Tamils from

²³ "For most of the first generation of migrants there remained a powerful 'myth of return', a vision of South Asia as the place to which one would eventually return after a sojourn abroad, as one's real and final home. ...Only gradually did this assumption about a final return give way among first generation migrants to a gradual acceptance of permanent migration, of learning to be at home abroad" (Brown: 59).

Madras (now Chennai); Bengalis; and Hindu residents of the former British colonies in East Africa, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana and Trinidad. Another wave of immigration followed the outbreak of civil war in Sri Lanka, as some 500,000 Sri Lankan Tamils fled to Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France and Switzerland. There are now an estimated 400,000 Tamils in Canada, making it the largest Tamil population outside Sri Lanka. These migrants experience a relationship with Canada much different from that of their forebears. As Janet McLellan notes, the “relatively recent institutional structure of multiculturalism now encourages the view of ethnicity as meaningful and positive in Canada” (1999: 4). She writes: “newer... communities have not faced the same pressures to accommodate. Through multiculturalism, the retention of strong ethnic and religious identities has been encouraged, enabling recently arrived [migrants] to gain acceptance quickly as individuals and as members of a minority group in [Canada’s] multiethnic and multireligious context” (McLellan, 1999: 6). Multicultural policy also encourages the development of infrastructure insofar as “the touted value of respecting a people’s cultural distinctiveness encourages ethnic associations to develop programs and social networks conducive to the maintenance of social, political, and cultural traditions (McLellan, 1999: 4).

While Indo-Canadians are spread nation-wide, their population tends to concentrate in larger cities, most notably in Toronto. 2001 Census figures indicate the following geographic distribution of individuals who identify as Hindu on the survey:

Table 3: Hindu Population by Major Canadian Cities, Statistics Canada 2001.

Toronto	191,305
Vancouver	27,405
Montreal	24,075
Ottawa	8,150
Edmonton	7,830
Calgary	7,255
Hamilton	3,910
Winnipeg	3,605
Windsor	1,885
London	1,450
Victoria	765

The majority of this population (at the time of the census) fell into the under 15 and 25-44 age categories – a youthful group. "This demographic pattern raises the problem of how to effectively pass on the tradition in the midst of a majority, implicitly Christian, secular, and materialistic culture" (Coward & Banerjee, 2005: 34). While, like other migrants, Indo-Canadian Hindus turn to religious tradition (among other things) for support in navigating the adjustments and adaptations made necessary by life in Canada, it has been observed that second generation Hindu Canadians (i.e., the children of parents who have immigrated to Canada) tend to pull away from so-called 'tradition', preferring instead to integrate with mainstream Canadian society. The children of this generation, however, exhibit a push back toward their roots and are "often much more interested in identifying and rediscovering their own religious and

ethnic tradition" (Coward & Banerjee, 2005: 34). The comments of Sarmila, a 23 year old participant in the present study, demonstrate this dynamic, while at the same time muddying to some extent the fixed boundaries set out by the model:

I've never found my [Canadian/Hindu identity] to be a 'versus', but I think that's because my parents were very ready to integrate us. We never speak Tamil at home; that was a decision that they made – they didn't want any type of boundary to separate us from being Canadian. And my brother and I are annoyed now that we don't know Tamil...

But I never really even noticed it [a tension between being Canadian and being Hindu], and we are very lucky to have such an open-minded Indian community here. I lived in India for eight months, 4 years ago, and that was a really interesting time because I'm considered Indian in Canada but when I was in India I was considered a foreigner.

My mother is more religious, I guess, than my father. Like, my mom does pray at home, but it's not anything that's pushed on us. It's more just exposure; we never have sit down discussions about religion at all. My parents have just said if you ever choose to fall upon it, go for it, but if not... From what I understand from my friends my parents are really liberal though.

Maybe they have instilled things that I'm not even aware of. I take a Ganesha with me when I go away to school, that my mother gave me. She likes me to take it with me and I like it too, but that's as far as it goes for that. Home prayer, no, I mean we do, it's just something that I don't even think about, but yeah, before we go away, before something major, we do go to the temple. I don't think I really do it for me, I know that it's not important for me. Maybe it will be important to me later. I don't fast, and I do eat meat. So I guess I find it interesting, and I see myself maybe calling upon it later in life when I have the time to reflect. I mean I guess I would say I was Hindu, though, if somebody asked me. But I couldn't spell out exactly what it is – probably more just like osmosis (Sarmila, age 23).

Sarmila's reflections do bear out the observation that first generation migrants are more likely than their children to incorporate traditional elements of Hindu identity into their lives. What they do not show, however, is a deliberate 'pulling away' on the part of the second generation so much as a conscious strategy on the part of their parents to enable this group to make their own decisions about religion. In fact, this study reveals

a clearly expressed desire on the part of mothers to allow their children to adapt to life in Canada as easily as possible, balanced by an equally clearly expressed reluctance to pressure children to perform traditional roles. Sarmila's mother, Kala, was very clear: "They did not choose to live in Canada, we did. We chose to come here and so we need to make it as easy for them as possible to integrate". I will return to the significance of this finding below (see also Anne McKenzie Pearson's 1999 study of intergenerational dynamics among Hindu women in Ontario for a discussion of this dynamic).

The religious lives of early Hindu Canadians were based in the home, as no community temples were available for public worship. Not until the 1970s did communal prayer meetings begin to take place, often in the homes of community members and occasionally in temporarily rented halls. It was concerns over the rituals surrounding marriage and death that eventually prompted the need for public multi-use temples:

Marriage or death rites were public occasions, and a Hindu community without a temple had nowhere to celebrate them. This need drew diverse groups of Hindus together in the larger centres, and buildings were constructed. ...Hindus have had to span many different ethnic and religious groupings in order to raise the required funds [for these temples]. 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. [This multi-use framework] has helped draw Hindus together so that Hinduism has an organizational basis upon which to be recognized as a formal religion in Canada (Coward & Banerjee, 2005: 35).²⁴

²⁴ Interestingly, such umbrella organizations as the Hindu Federation of Canada (<http://www.federationofhindutemples.ca>) make good use of a web presence to achieve the same ends of recognition as a *bona fide* religious community in Canada.

Increasingly, these new temples took on the role of community centres, providing language and dance classes along with opportunities for weekly communal worship. In addition to their important role as *loci* for the fostering of ethnic identity, religious institutions in diaspora also serve the purpose of preserving traditional relationships of authority, acting as “a forum through which traditional cultural forms of respect and recognition are maintained [along with] traditional forms of respect within the family structure and within the community” (McLellan, 1999: 193). Such facilities now exist in most major Canadian cities, although many are located in somewhat remote suburbs and other outlying areas that require significant travel in order to attend. As numbers grow and regional and sectarian communities become increasingly able to support their own institutional organizations, temples specific to particular communities emerge. This is particularly visible in the Greater Toronto Area, which boasts over 300 formally organized public places of Hindu worship, thus providing a great deal of sectarian diversity and choice for temple goers.²⁵ The establishment of temples within the community is tremendously important in creating a shared sense of belonging in diaspora, particularly for those who are involved in the process from the early stages. Active involvement in the construction of a temple can cement human relationships as well: “A built environment can attain very high salience in people’s identities because physical settings become associated with the bonding of people” (Abrahamson, 2006: 10). This entails building, both literally and figuratively, a space within which one’s religious and cultural identity can find expression. Importantly, the process is not a simple transposition of past realities to a new environment:

²⁵ This is a somewhat loose figure and accurate numbers are difficult to obtain, in part because new temples spring up with remarkable frequency. I have drawn this number from the website www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2007/4-6/53-55_canada-youth.shtml

As Hindus from all over the world – India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Uganda, Tanzania, Trinidad, and Guyana – came to Canada, their rituals and ceremonies provided support as they traversed an unfamiliar cultural terrain. However... they did not unpack their religion like a piece of clothing and don it, unchanged. Rather Hinduism transformed itself as individuals adapted to the Canadian cultural context (Banerjee & Coward, 2005: 30).

Several studies have pointed to the importance of religion as a symbolic resource used in the construction and reconstruction of Hindu communities in diaspora – one that may function as a means to construct, preserve and reinforce a somewhat reified identity as “the creation and maintenance of transnational family, political, cultural, and social networks ...reflect a revitalization of ethnoreligious identities” (McLellan, 1999: 8).²⁶ The temple is a primary social location for this collective process of identity preservation and reinforcement, a process that often leads to heightened religious consciousness and activity in the new country. An important part of this endeavour is the perpetuation of traditional patterns of relationship within both the family and the community (see, for example, Rayaprol 1997; Dempsey 2005). As families perform themselves, they imagine and reproduce a group identity. As mentioned above in the discussion of 'publics', no concrete boundaries circumscribe this group. Rather, identity construction is a reciprocal process of communication that establishes boundaries which distinguish 'us' from 'them'. As a result, traditional norms and values of Indian or Hindu culture may be expected at times to be perpetuated, and perhaps even exaggerated, in the diasporic setting. Temple ritual tends to reflect this reified group identity, as practices from all over India are incorporated and generalized (Vertovec 1991; Pearson 1999;

²⁶ See, for example, Brown 2006, Clothey 2006, Coward *et al* 2000, Coward and Goa 1987, Coward and Banerjee 2005, Dempsey 2005, Fuglerud 1999, Israel 1987, Kanungo 1984, Levitt and Waters 2002, Murphy and Sippy 2000, Naidoo 1984 and 1987, Pearson 1999, Rayaprol 1999, Saunders 2007, Sekar 1999 and 2001, Shukla 2003, Srinivasan 1994, and Vertovec 1997 and 2000)

Sekar 2001). Harold Coward and Heather Botting have remarked upon the congregational and scheduled nature of Hindu worship in Canada, contrasting this with "life at home in India," which is described as "living from ritual to ritual" (1999: 38). Paul Younger elaborates:

Canadian Hindus tend to describe their memory of the 'homeland' setting as a situation where culture and religion were not distinguished. They recognize that in some sense they share in that heritage, but they tend to emphasize that very little of that heritage is carried forward into their life in Canada. They particularly emphasize that their present participation in a 'temple community' is totally new. Indians from India are fascinated by these traditions because their own fragments of memory have not yet developed that level of coherence (unpublished paper, 2007).

Let me turn to an example of a festival day in Ottawa in order to illustrate some features of this dynamic.

The Pervasiveness of the Sacred: Rama and Sita's Ottawa Wedding Day

On Saturday, April 8, 2006, I attended the wedding ceremony of Shri Baghwan Rama (*Sita Ram Kalyan Mahotsav*). I arrived at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton shortly after 10 a.m. to find the parking lot half full and proceedings well under way. Immediately upon entering the temple there were signs that this was a special day: garlands of silk flowers had been hung along walls and across thresholds, and computer-generated *mandalas* and portraits of Sita were posted here and there. Heading out of habit toward the principal shrine area, the *mahamandapa*, I was intercepted by a woman who asked whether I was present for "the wedding that is going on". I said that yes, I was, and she replied that it was "happening downstairs". The *Gita Bhavan* is a large room in the basement of this temple, where devotees gather to share

prasad (consecrated food offerings in the form of a communal meal) following regular Sunday *pujas*. It is also the location of the *havan* (sacrificial fire) and accordingly the ritual space in which weddings, death rituals, and Vedic recitations are carried out.

Downstairs I found the *Gita Bhavan* to be about half full. The usual pattern of male/female segregated seating was loosely followed, although not as closely as during Sunday events in the *mahamandapa* upstairs. This laxity did not reveal a complete disregard for gender conventions, however: while a handful of married couples, and some small clusters of women, were seated on the men's side of the room, no men positioned themselves on the woman's side. The division between these "sides" was marked by a long white sheet (normally used as a sort of tablecloth to protect the carpet during communal sharing of *prasad*), today scattered with rose petals. Children ran and jumped freely back and forth across this barrier, as well as in and out of the room, throughout the long proceedings. I took my place on the women's side and turned my attention to what was happening 'onstage'.

Seated on the large raised dais were six adults: the priest, a middle-aged man performing the role of 'master of ceremonies', and two middle-aged couples who were seated on either side of Lord Rama's *murti*, an embellished coconut, and the implements required for the ritual taking place. The couples were taking instructions from the priest in making various offerings - this primarily consisted of pouring water, rose petals, or rice onto and around Rama and the coconut. The priest kept up a constant recitation of Sanskrit verse, often at breakneck speed but occasionally

faltering. Several times consultation appeared to be necessary and the recitation was interrupted momentarily while the priest checked the text, corrected an error and then continued. The Sanskrit chanting was interrupted frequently by instructions to the sponsoring couples, uttered in English, and by explanatory announcements made by the emcee/host to the audience as to what was currently taking place and what would happen next. As this was unfolding on stage, people in the audience maintained a lively level of chatter amongst themselves. At times the hum of conversation in the room became almost as loud as the official ritual action. Eventually the priest took up a microphone – whether this was done in order to compete with the rising noise levels around him or simply because a working microphone was only found and made available at that particular juncture, I do not know. Twice during these proceedings rose petals were distributed to the devotees seated in the audience, held for some time in the right hand, and then reclaimed. These were then offered to the coconut located directly in front of Lord Rama by the participants seated onstage. A plate of yellow *rakshas* (pieces of thread approximately five inches in length) was removed from the shrine and distributed to the assembled devotees by the onstage participants. Women were to tie this on their left wrist, and men on their right. I was instructed to get a neighbour to help me with this. The woman sitting next to me offered to do mine and asked that I tie hers. She fastened the *raksha* in an elegant, looping knot. Knowing that I'd never be able to produce anything other than a simple knot, I apologetically asked her if this was alright, and she said that yes, any way of doing it was fine. I remain unsure as to whether she was just putting up with my ineptitude (she had little choice, after all) or if in fact the manner tying is truly unimportant.

After about 45 minutes of *sloka* (Sanskrit verse) chanting punctuated by offerings, this segment of the ceremony came to an end, and the emcee/host announced that we would be forming a procession to travel upstairs, fetch the bride, and bring her back to the wedding ceremony. This occasioned a short break in which chatter and conversation took over almost completely while the ritual participants moved around on stage making adjustments and preparing for the procession upstairs. During this pause I was approached by the temple president, who informed me that this was a typical "South Indian Andhra Pradesh wedding ceremony", and that the ritual events I'd witnessed to this point portrayed the departure of Lord Rama from his home town. Despite the South Indian flavour of the day, many in attendance were Gujarati or otherwise North Indian.

I was invited to join, if I wished, the procession upstairs to collect Sita, but was welcome also to stay behind as "many people will just stay here with Lord Rama to wait". I chose to join the bride-fetching party, as did about two-thirds of those present. By the time we made our way upstairs, Sita was virtually out of the *mahamandapa*. The bride was present in the form of a small brass *murti*, planted firmly in the middle of a large woven basket of uncooked rice grains. A small piece of red fabric was wrapped around her shoulders. This basket was carried by two men flanked on either side by women carrying oil lamps, all singing and chanting quite loudly. Festive music was being played at moderate volume on a small portable tape player. In marked contrast to other events I'd attended at this temple, silence was not required during this procession –

indeed there was a great deal more smiling and talking going on than I had witnessed there to date. The mood was mildly festive – certainly relaxed in comparison to the temple's usual atmosphere: The president, known to me by his somewhat stern demeanor and his desire for a strictly controlled atmosphere in the *mahamandapa*, was in fact not paying the least bit of attention to the proceedings but proudly dandling a baby girl in his arms and chatting on the steps while the action happened around him.

Eventually Sita and her entourage made it back to the stage in the *Gita Bhavan*, and audience members were requested to "please find your seats". Chanting in Sanskrit resumed and the ritual participants took their places, now joined by two other men whose job it was to hold up a curtain (a piece of green sari fabric) between Sita and Lord Rama. This continued for several minutes, with further offerings being made both in front of and behind the curtain. At one point the emcee/host interjected a brief recitation that included the words "Ottawa", "Gatineau" and "Rideau"– this was later explained to me as an important emphasis of the fact that this ritual was taking place "here, in Canada". The ritual reenactment of Rama and Sita's wedding is as much a story participants "tell themselves about themselves" in the here and now as it is a celebration of a mythical event in long ago and far away India (Geertz, 1973: 448). The Ottawa, Gatineau and Rideau rivers are linked, through this narrative, to the river Ganges and to the sacred geography of India. One woman expanded on this afterward:

In India we use this word *punya bhumi* – sacred land. And in India I feel that. I feel when I go back I need to touch that land and put my hand to my head, because that is *punya bhumi*. But, we went to the Canadian Rockies last year. And when we were in the Rockies and driving between Banff and Jasper, we saw that sacredness right here. And you know, Nova Scotia's Cape Breton, the Highlands, the glaciers, the ocean on either coast – to me that is just as sacred.

...Yes, the land of India is very sacred based on the fact that the Ramayana took place there, and the Mahabharata took place there, and based on the fact that our childhood was there. But honestly, 35 years later, for me this land is just as sacred.

When I went to Nova Scotia we went to the ocean, we stepped in the water, dipped our hands in the water, and I put it to my forehead. No different than what I would have done had I gone to the Ganges. You know, so to me, this is home, and all nature is nature, but I think even more than the Alps – even though the Alps are higher – the Rockies did something to me. Because it's the mountains in the home, right? So more than the waters anywhere, the waters in Nova Scotia did something for me. So all nature is the hand of the Divine, but for me that land of Canada is just as sacred as the land of India.

The festive tape-recorded music continued to play throughout the rest of the proceedings, adding to the general noise level. At a certain point the level of audience chatter decreased and several men rose, moving to the front with digital cameras, signaling an approaching climax in the proceedings as well as effectively blocking the view of virtually everyone seated on that side of the room. The moment they wanted to capture turned out to be the removal of the curtain between bride and groom – an action met by some mild excitement throughout the room. The next pivotal moment appeared to be the garlanding of the two *murtis* (which prompted another flurry of photography on the part of several male audience members). The garlanding was ostensibly performed by each of the women onstage but was an opportunity for much fussing by all present on the dais, who spent a great deal of time making sure the garlands were arranged to their liking. One of the female sponsors made her way around the room touching Sita's wedding *thali* to the chest of every woman present (with the exception, this time, of me), and then asked another woman near the stage to do the same for her.

Just prior to the exchange of garlands, the process of distributing, holding, and collecting offerings had been repeated, by women only, with yellow grains of rice. These were intended to be offered to the bride and groom after the exchange of garlands. The rice offering, however, did not go entirely smoothly, as several women in the audience were missed by the person responsible for collecting the rice. The result of this was that when the woman returned several minutes later with further rose petals, this time to be held by the audience members until the final offerings would be made by each of us to the murtis directly, several of us were still clinging uncertainly to our rice grains. This was the case with at least the half-dozen or so women seated around me, and was perhaps more widespread than that. The "mistake" didn't appear to pose any serious difficulty however. I was simply told that I "should have given these back when Sita and Ram got married [i.e., when the garlands were exchanged], but it's okay, you can give them at the end" along with the rose petals I was at that point being instructed to take and hold. The women responsible for distributing and collecting both petals and grains of rice carried out this task with brisk efficiency, pragmatism, and, at times, hurried concern - the mood was not one of reverence but rather of getting the job done. Similarly, when the silk flower garlands that had been put up above the central ritual scene broke free of their masking tape and hung limply from one side, the response was not to try to fix the garlands but rather to unceremoniously tug them down and place them in a heap on the side of the stage. This did not appear to cause any concern among the participants.

Armed now with both rice grains and rose petals, I sat trying to concentrate on the ritual sequence unfolding on stage. It seemed that we'd been there an awfully long time, and I was beginning to find it difficult to be as attentive as I should have been. I was not alone in this – by now, kids were in high gear, running and shouting all around the room, and many women were unabashedly carrying on conversations all around me. The smell of food was also beginning to waft out of the kitchen, located just beside the *Gita Bhavan*, and I don't doubt that this had some effect on everyone's powers of concentration. At one point a tray containing a small amount of each dish to be served later was brought to the shrine for offering and consecration. Shortly, the chanting did come to an end and two of three women sang *bhajana* dedicated to Rama and Sita. This was followed by an announcement by the emcee/host that we were now to approach the married couple ("Come up with your families"), and to offer the flowers we were holding. *Bhajana* continued as people somewhat haphazardly formed two or three "lines" in order to approach the stage. I was approached in line by a woman who explained to me that I was to throw my offerings "near the gods" and that then the priest would offer me some water "which you can drink, actually". The atmosphere at this point was somewhat confused and entirely relaxed, with much visiting and chatting going on. Eventually I found myself in front of the *murtis* and I could see that the brass images were now entirely covered by the garlands, rose petals, rice grains, and that a shawl had been wrapped around the back of this entire assemblage. There was a great deal of fruit as well: two entire cases of bananas, several coconuts, and several mixed bowls of apples, pears, bananas etc. Following the actions of those in front, I made my offerings and moved toward the priest who was standing at the rear of the stage

dispensing water from a silver urn with a small brass spoon. Each participant accepted this in his or her right palm in turn, drank it (mine actually dribbled all down the front of my *salwar kameez*, a mistake that I was sure everyone noticed), and stepped down off the stage.

Next came the announcement that Sita and Ram were to be taken in procession around the temple exterior before being installed in their shrine in the Mahamandap. It took some time for the priest and several men to get the *murtis* seated in their palanquin, and general visiting and milling about took place in the interval. Eventually, the couple was up and away, carried by several men out of the *Gita Bhavan*, up the stairs and out the original front doors of the temple, which now open onto the front lawn. Several people donned coats and shoes to follow the procession around the temple, while others hung back in the warmth of the temple lobby and watched what they could of the action from the windows. *Barfi* (a traditional Indian milk sweet) was distributed to those of us who joined the procession outdoors. This segment was conducted, I thought, with some verve – marked by more spirited chanting and the occasional outburst of "Jai!" (victory!) as we made our way around. Some made the trek around the cold, muddy lawn in bare feet, and some in white socks.

Once inside, the procession came to a rest and everyone assembled to watch a *dandiya* dance performed by a dozen or so boys and girls in highly festive dress, followed by the brief and warmly applauded appearance of mini Rama, Sita and Lakshman child actors complete with crowns, bows & arrows. The palanquin then

continued into the *mahamandapa* and completed a full circumambulation of the shrines before coming to rest in front of the permanent Rama/Sita/Lakshman shrine, where the temporary *murtis* were placed. *Aarti* was performed, following which the devotees performed several *pradakshinas* (circumambulations) and full prostrations. This, shortly after 2:00 p.m., marked the end of the ritual events and the host invited everyone to return to the *Gita Bhavan* for *Mahaprasad*, a shared communal meal prepared by the families who had sponsored the day's events. Several participants lingered to leave offerings at the Rama/Sita/Lakshman shrine and/or to spend a moment in front of the other shrines in the *mandap*.

This festival day revealed three points of interest:

1. The reification of a united Hindu identity that surpassed the sectarian and regional identifications of those present;
2. an explicit move to link the sacred space of India with Canadian geography; and
3. various modifications and ritual innovations necessitated by the Canadian context.

As discussed in Chapter Two, such innovations are not felt to reduce the efficacy of the rites performed, but rather serve as a bridge linking the traditional practices of India with the realities of diasporic worship. Similar trends have been noted among other migrant communities in Canada. For instance, “many of the symbolic traditions, ritualized practices, and religious beliefs among Asian Buddhists in Toronto have been invented, constructed, and formally instituted in recent years” (McLellan, 1999: 9). As Banerjee and Coward have observed,

Hindus living in Canada cannot visit the Ganges at dawn, but many have a small pot of Ganges water on their home altar to help with morning prayers. Many of the same images... will be present on the home altar, ...[where] the family may gather, or pray individually, using the same chanted prayers or mantras and the same repetitions of OM as are said in India. Hindu temples have been built in many Canadian cities, providing places for family and the whole community to gather on ceremonial occasions. Cremation takes place in funeral homes rather than on the banks of the Ganges. So, in many ways, the sacred practice of Hindus in Banaras goes on in modified form in the Hindu diaspora here in Canada (2005: 32-33).

Three Canadian Hindu Temples

Festival days like *Sita Ram Kalyan Mahotsav* bring many members of the Hindu community out to temples for celebrations such as the one described above. On a weekly basis attendance is less robust, with a small core of dedicated families in regular attendance. Judith Brown writes of “tasks” that migrant communities must execute in order to establish a sense of stability in diaspora. “These ‘tasks’ are vital for establishing new homes and communities and taking advantage of new opportunities; for negotiating the way through the challenges of living in a different society and culture, and for retaining what are seen as essential links with kin and wider groups which share culture norms” (2006: 7). As already noted, one such task is temple-building, as the establishment of a temple provides a tangible symbol of permanence and community. This section provides a glimpse into the operation of three Canadian Hindu temples: the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton, the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*, also in Ottawa, and the *Lakshmi Mandir* in the Greater Toronto Area.

When I began research in 2002, the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton was the only *mandir* in that city. The first Hindu temple in Eastern Ontario, it has until recently been

the sole religious institution serving the approximately 8,000 Hindus who live in the Ottawa region, as well as acting as a community and cultural centre with its lending library, classrooms (used for both Sunday school and yoga classes), and large basement hall. The site, previously a cornfield located in an increasingly suburban area to the south of the city, was purchased in 1984. The \$4 million dollar structure, financed entirely by community donations, was officially consecrated on October 10th, 1989. Figure 5 below demonstrates that this temple largely follows the strictures of traditional Indian sacred architecture (albeit with slight modifications to account for the Canadian climate, such as snow load). The result is a striking building that stands as a visible marker of the Hindu presence in this city, and a significant alteration to the mental landscape of Canadians.²⁷



Figure 5. Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton's grand exterior (photographs of interior not permitted).

Not insignificantly, the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton shares the characteristics of many other multi-use temples in Canada in that it is as much a community centre as it is a place of worship. Classes are offered in yoga and in classical dance. The Temple

²⁷ Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, in their 2005 *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, write of the visual impact that temples, mosques and synagogues have in marking the otherwise predominantly Christian landscape of Canada as multi-religious space.

Board organizes and hosts lectures on a variety of both religious and secular topics of relevance to the Indo-Canadian community, such as information sessions on diabetes, coping with death and funerals outside of India, and so on. The temple has also facilitated the participation of the Indo-Canadian community in municipal and provincial volunteer activities. For example, on the second Saturday of each month, a small group of temple regulars participate in *seva* (devotional service) by assisting in a local soup kitchen.

On a typical Sunday, the visitor to the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton is likely to witness a period of *bhajana* singing, followed by group reading from the Upanishads (booklets in English, Hindi and Gujarati are provided to congregants). This is followed by *archana*, during which the *pandits* perform *puja* and devotees approach for *prasad*, and by *pradakshina* – the circumambulation of the entire *mahamandapa*. Finally, all assembled share in the communal meal of consecrated food served in the basement.

Despite its place of prominence in the ritual and communal life of Hindus in Ottawa, this temple does not meet the needs of all community members. Devotees complain that it is beset by a remote location and a formal, sterile environment. *Pandits*, brought from India on non-renewable contracts of one year periods, are not permitted to speak with devotees and are effectively confined to the remote temple building. Strict rules concerning silence and cleanliness are enforced by the Board of Directors (see Appendix A for the full list of regulations). "We strive," one member of the Board of Directors likes to say, "for an atmosphere of pin-drop silence". In this aim the Board

members operate as elite gatekeepers of orthodox tradition, alienating many visitors in the process. Offerings of messy substances, like milk, are strongly discouraged, and when these do appear they are quickly whisked away by the priests, safely sealed within their plastic packages, never coming into contact with the deities for whom they were intended. This significant truncation of the ritual process leaves devotees feeling unfulfilled, as the necessary exchange of offerings and grace has not been allowed to take place.

Janet McLellan notes that as diverse religious groups settled in Canada, “ethnic communities who adhered to non-Christian religious belief and practice were obliged to adapt dominant Anglo-Canadian patterns if their religious institutions were to survive and grow”, a phenomenon she describes as “structural assimilation” (1999: 5). Indeed some elements of Protestant Christian worship seem to have been incorporated into temple services at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton: children are continually ‘shushed’ and are corralled in the basement for Sunday school style classes - ostensibly for educational purposes, but also for the explicitly expressed aim of preventing them from disrupting the *archana* taking place above. In response to my persistent questioning, representatives from the Board of Directors consistently downplayed the ritual elements of Hindu practice and emphasized instead Upanishadic meditation and study of sacred texts. This is consistent with the “accommodatory strategies includ[ing] organizational change, doctrinal reinterpretations, structural adaptations in religious ceremonies or festivals, and expansion of leadership opportunities” observed by other scholars of religious diversity in Canada (McLellan, 1999: 197).

Many of the women I spoke with over the course of my fieldwork expressed dismay and frustration with the conditions at this temple. Several indicated that they do not regularly attend because they find the mood “cold” and, as a result, “don’t get good *darshan* there”. The crucial exchange of vision between deity and devotee, commonly identified as the very core of Hindu devotional ritual (Eck, 1985), is here thwarted by imposed formality and an atmosphere of impenetrable difference between the devotee and her object of worship – an attitude not at all conducive to *bhakti*.

In December 1997, an alternative was established. After years of operating in basements and temporary venues, the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* opened its current location in July 2006. Smaller and more congenial, this temple has found its largest appeal among those families discouraged by the atmosphere of the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton. Staffed by a very jolly and talkative *pandit* (who was in fact released from his duties at the older and larger temple for breaking the rules about talking with devotees), the *Durga Mandir* prides itself on a warm and loving atmosphere in which the gods and devotees, young and old alike, spend time together cultivating and savouring *bhava*. “This *mandir* is like a small family!” gushed a regular devotee. Messiness is not a concern here: coconuts are regularly smashed; milk, sugar, honey and other delights poured over the *Shivalingam* (the aniconic form of the god Siva most commonly used in ritual worship).

Babies and toddlers range freely around the space and their participation in ritual activities is met with delight from parents and *Panditji* alike. Absent too is the emphasis on Upanishadic study and reflection. This-worldly concerns are not only apparent but celebrated, with *Panditji* regularly promising devotees that "anything you want, the Goddess is going to give to you - lots of health, lots of wealth, whatever you want"! *Bhukti*, or worldly boons, are more often invoked than *mukti* (*moksha*). A representative comment from *Panditji*, directed at the children in the room: "If you do prayers everyday in your house, god is going to give you lots of candy and toys – toys from Toys R Us! So that's why you have to learn and do prayers every day in your house" (field notes, Feb. 4, 2007). *Panditji* also provides advice to the women present concerning necessary adaptations in *vrata pujas* here in Canada – suggesting, for instance, that the poplar tree be used instead of the peepul for a particular rite. He counsels parents in no uncertain terms that it is their responsibility to teach their children, but is aware that they may not have the religious education to do so themselves. He says: "So you don't teach any wrong thing, call me and ask first" (field notes, Feb. 4, 2007). No participant in this study has ever taken him up on this offer, however, preferring as noted above to discontinue *vrata* if they are unsure of their correct performance.

Despite its marked contrast to the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton, as the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* works to establish its presence in the community, an increasing concern for regulations is emerging, and the routinization of charisma in this sacred space may yet lead to a diminishment of the immediacy and spontaneity of religious encounters similar to that exhibited by the larger and more established temple (see

Appendices B and C for highlights of the temple's webpage, <http://www.durgatemple.ca/main/index.php>, and a Wikipedia page set up by board members). Postscripts to weekly services lately contain pleas for donations to help finish the building, and remind congregants that “an atmosphere of *shanti*”, peaceful worship, is preferable to the friendly pandemonium that now characterizes the space. The establishment of the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* as a separate temple community, and the subsequent dynamic of its increasing institutionalization, are perhaps indicative of the growing Hindu community in the city of Ottawa, as “the formation and maintenance of religious or ethnic identity by immigrants and refugees involves competition within particular ...communities. The creation and redefinition of particular ethnoreligious identities and institutions involve an ongoing struggle among political, religious, and ethnic factions, intensifying the transformation process and further modifying identities” (McLellan, 1999: 7).



Figure 6. *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* exterior, detail.



Figure 7. Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir exterior

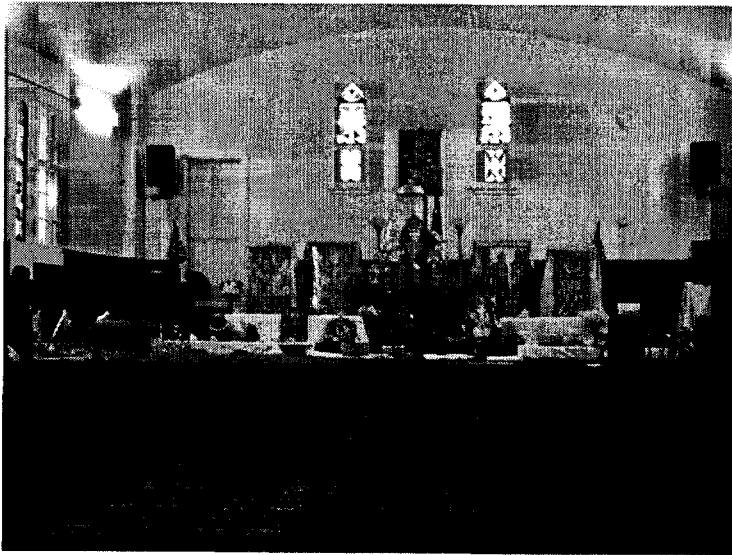


Figure 8. Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir interior. Note stained glass windows remaining from the building's earlier incarnation as an Eastern Orthodox Church.



Figure 9. Pandit Ravindra Narain Panday Ji performs puja before a radiant Durga at Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir.



Figure 10. Female devotees honouring the deities at the Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir.

A third case study rounds out this section on Hindu institutional worship in the ‘field site’ defined by this study. The *Lakshmi Mandir* currently occupies an unused unit in a suburban strip mall in Mississauga, on the west side of Toronto, while it awaits the completion of its new home across the parking lot (see figures 12 and 13). The temple

has been active in this general location for over seventeen years, based in an adjacent building set to be demolished in order to make a parking lot (Figure 11). Although the temple has approximately 200 members on its official list, only 30 are present on any given Sunday. Temple organizers attribute this low attendance to the temporary location and anticipate a return to more robust numbers when the new building opens in 2009. In the meantime, several large *murtis* stand behind caution tape in anteroom, in various stages of repainting. A simple, small shrine with brass *murtis* is in use in the *mahamandapa*, along with a small *Shivalinga* off to one side, placed above a large plastic bucket to catch the milk, honey and other offerings poured over it. The atmosphere is very makeshift and casual, with little of the formality exhibited by more established institutions in the city.

Temple leaders explain that their priority is to educate youth and to increase the involvement of young people in temple activities. They hope, for instance, to install basketball nets outside the new building, in the effort to make the temple a full-service community hall and drop-in centre for youth. "I'd rather they were spending time hanging out here than getting into trouble on the streets", said the Board President. Children are always actively drawn in to weekly services, with the Pandit calling upon them to officiate as *pujaris*, to sing *bhajana*, and to play the harmonium. Sunday school classes are emphasized during announcements, and parents are repeatedly encouraged to bring their children with them to the *mandir*.

The *Lakshmi Mandir* is quite self-consciously in the process of re-defining itself and its role in the community. The *pandit's* son announced one Sunday: "We are looking for ways to improve things in the weekly service – looking to incorporate more meditation, more chanting, more worship... to get people more involved." He then led a guided breathing meditation, which he described as "a fundamental aspect of our Hindu culture". Following the meditation he took several minutes to explain that the beneficial effect of meditation on oxygen intake and cell reproduction is a "fundamental principle of Hinduism". I would suggest this is an example of a not-uncommon strategy to make traditional ritual practices attractive to modern devotees through the use of scientific discourse.

The board also has aims to expand the social service aspect of the temple and is organizing various community outreach projects. Many members, for example, volunteer regularly at a homeless shelter. "Hopefully," I was told, "we will become more of a cultural and community organization, serving those in need. This *mandir* is not just a place to come to do *puja* – it is much more than that – it is an organization to serve the community." See Appendix E for this temple's mission statement and plea for assistance, advertised on their website <http://www.lakshmimandir.ca/>.

There are growing pains associated with this reinvention, and repeated calls for help and volunteering in organizing *pujas* are heard. "Nobody has yet stepped forward to help with this" is a frequent refrain, and people regularly fail to follow through on their existing volunteering commitments. On one Sunday morning *Panditji* was pleading for

assistance in setting up the altar and in cleaning up afterward. On that occasion there was no *prasad*, as the family who had signed up to bring it did not come to the temple that day. Two women had to go out to buy milk and flowers before *puja* could begin. *Panditji* was visibly frustrated as he exclaimed "I need participation!" to the assembled devotees. On another occasion, volunteers who had offered to help put up the drywall in the new building failed to report for duty, with the result that a contractor had to be hired – an expense the temple board members felt they could ill afford.

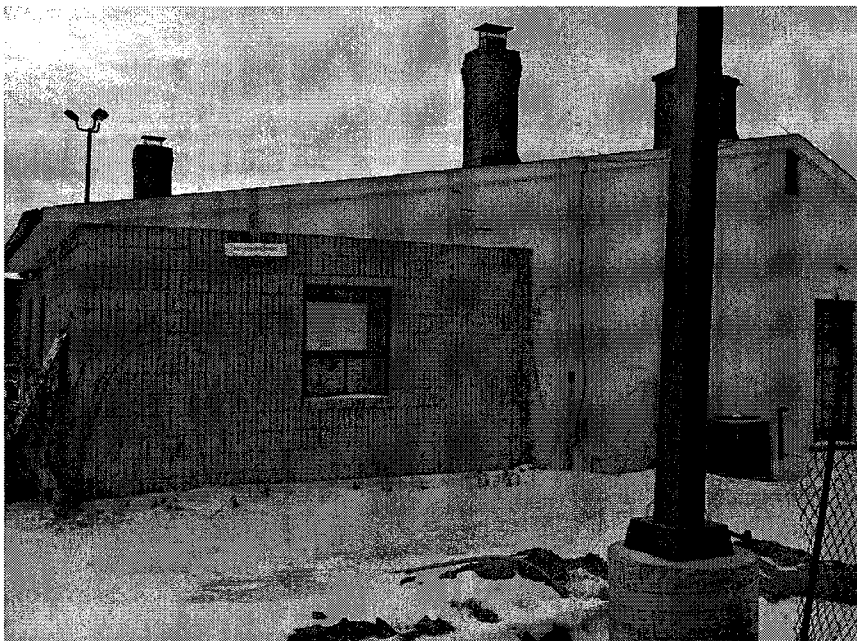


Figure 11. Lakshmi Mandir's old building, slated for demolition.



Figure 12. Lakshmi Mandir's temporary storefront location.

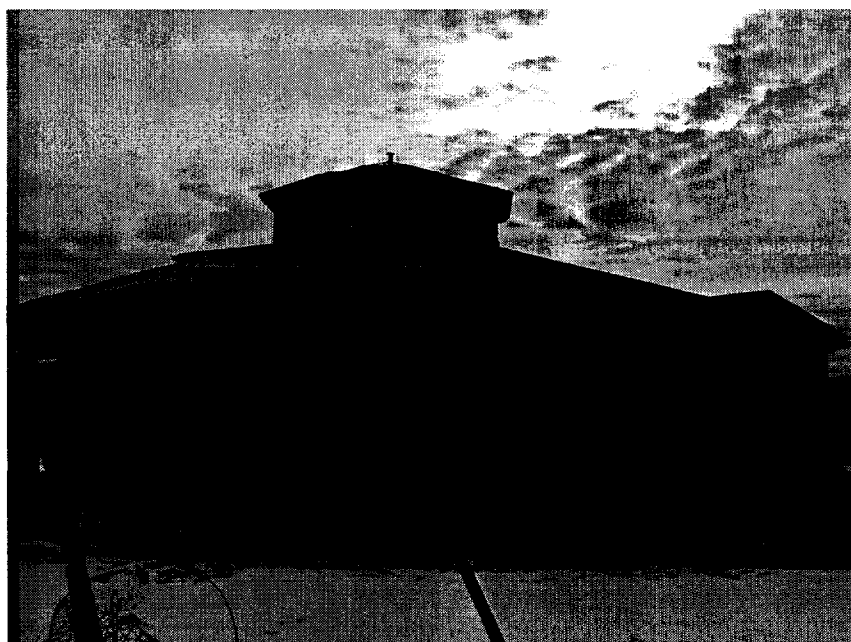


Figure 13. Future home of Lakshmi Mandir, scheduled for 2009 occupancy.

These three examples illustrate the challenges faced by diaspora temples in various stages of transition. In each case the Board of Directors expresses the desire to establish an institution that serves not only its attendees, ensuring the involvement and

education of youth, but the surrounding community as well. A lack of resources is a challenge strongly felt by all temples, and at present all three are persevering on the steam of a very small core of dedicated individuals.

Beyond the Reaches of the Temple

This glimpse into temple worship does not capture the multiplicity of Hindu devotional praxis in Ottawa. Aside from a small core of dedicated devotees, the faces that come and go at these temples each week are continually shifting. There are approximately 8,150 individuals in the city of Ottawa who self-identified as Hindu on the most recent national census for which results are available (Statistics Canada, 2001). Perhaps 200 of these are regular attendees at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton, and another 100 at the smaller *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*.²⁸ One research participant, Gita, related that she does not attend a temple regularly, finding them to be too crowded and noisy for her preferred style of worship: “I go to a temple only on occasions. So for example on my birthday I will go to the temple, I will choose a corner and just sit down, I will bring my scriptures with me and my husband and I will just sit and chant”. Outside of such occasions, her daily practice is to sit in front of her shrine each morning and to recite a few verses of the Bhagavad Gita. I asked Gita to reflect on the differences between temple and household worship:

When I worship at the temple I am part of the community, part of the Hindu community. I enjoy the chanting by the priests, who are professionals. I enjoy just the smells, the flowers, the incense, and going in there its very similar to going in to a place of learning – it makes you feel good, it puts you in the frame of mind of spirituality. Worship at home is personal, and on a daily basis I think that is very important. It’s my relationship with the divinity. And I do it my way – the way that I

²⁸ Equivalent statistical data for Toronto is not available, but interviews with research participants in the GTA suggest a similar trend, with many people attending temples sporadically, often on festival days.

am able to relate best. In the temple, beautiful as it is, there are distractions. At home there are no distractions, I sit at the time that suits me, in the place that suits me. The *murtis* in my shrine mean something to me – they were given by specific people. There is a story attached to everything – for instance I have a Ganesha at home in my entrance hallway. That is a Ganesha that my mother gave me for a birthday. And to me that Ganesha means that he is always sitting there protecting the home from all harm. So that kind of sentimental attachment you may or may not have at the temple. So that's the difference: the worship at home is more personal, whereas at the temple it's part of a community.

Janini related:

I brought all [my *murtis*] with me and they have always been with me. Some of these belonged to my mother-in-law. So really the significance is not just that it is the picture, it's the fact that a lot of her own prayers have gone to it. So everything that I have inherited either from my mother or my mother in law, it's very important. So I hope someday my kids will take it. The only way I can do – you see, nobody can insist on anything – so what we do is I just live it, and hopefully they catch it. Because any of these things that you do like getting up in the morning, lighting a lamp, saying a prayer – these are all just discipline.

And Ila reflected that:

It's not necessary to go to the temple – it is good to go, but if you do at home it's also very good. If you go every day to the temple, it is very good. Whatever is convenient – the only important thing is to worship. They don't say you have to go to *mandir* to worship. Your house is your *mandir*. We all have *mandirs* at home – even if it is one photo, a small Ganesh, that is enough. It's all how you've been brought up – I've seen it, so I do it like that. I think in Hinduism there is no rigidity – it is not taught when you are a small kid – it is mostly tradition, how you have been brought up. It's a kind of teaching. We did that just to please the elders, and to follow the tradition.

There is clearly more to Hindu ritual praxis in Canada than can be observed by visiting these institutions alone. Daily household performances of Hindu identity afford a unique and important perspective on the lived experiences of Hindu individuals because they are narratives enacted in the home, and are therefore potentially more reflective of patterns and processes of meaning-making in everyday life than are temple

performances. Hinduism is happening at home. The observations yielded by this study support the claim that "religious institutions can help preserve group identities by extending the boundary of family to community relations. ...The 'real' culture, however, is performed in the routines, rituals and relationships" of individuals within family settings, as "'real' values emerge in the expressive, daily lives of family" (Langellier and Peterson, 2004: 140).

The shift from India to Canada is neither a smooth transition nor a simple transplant. Rather, the "process of reconstruction of communities is better conceptualized as a rupture or a disjunctive crisis" (Rayaprol, 1997: 4). As already demonstrated, such a rupture requires a rebuilding of identity, and of community, in the new setting. I now want to suggest that because Hindu interactions with the Divine are symbolic of familial and social relationships, the relationships Hindu women form with the gods of their households are important in the process of identity-construction. These relationships can also be crucial sources of support and balance in women's lives, as the narratives in Chapter Four will show. In diaspora, these bonds take on new significance as Hindu women actively engage in processes to both adapt and preserve traditional aspects of Hindu culture in their daily lives.

Literature dealing with the roles and rituals of Hindu women, both in India and transnationally, is largely concerned with ritual activities such as votive fasts and special festival observations carried out according to the rhythms of the lunar calendar. Such devotional acts - while clearly a part of the domestic ritual arena, intimately related to

and overlapping with activities at and around the home shrine, are in many ways distinct and should not obscure the importance of more quotidian engagements with traditional religious narratives, including the performance of daily household *puja*.

Anne McKenzie Pearson's 1999 study of Hindu women in Ontario, introduced earlier in this chapter, shows that traditional values remain a fundamental part of the lives of many first generation Indo-Canadian women. Like me, Pearson found the passing on of knowledge of ritual practices to the next generation to be of central importance. While she also found modifications to be inevitable, her study indicates a greater urgency on the part of the elder generation of women to see these practices continued by their daughters and granddaughters than I have observed among my research participants. In either event, Pearson's examination of which practices come to be maintained and which are deemed dispensable or no longer appropriate, as well as her inquiries as to how the practices that *are* maintained adapted to suit the Canadian context, are directly relevant to the current study. As has been indicated above, the freedom of relocating one's personal religiosity to a new homeland can be liberating in many ways. As Gita explained to me:

Living in Canada, in somewhat isolation from relatives and the large Hindu community in India has actually given us the opportunity to grow spiritually in a more natural way – in the way that came to us naturally. The other thing that Canada has done for me, and we are eternally grateful for that, is it has taken care of all our material needs so that we could focus on spirituality. Spirituality is difficult to follow on a hungry stomach. It's almost as if I was told: you have a home, you have food, you have money to look after your children – you now have the time to... and the peace.... So, that is the biggest thing that has happened to us. I really believe that our spiritual development has been helped by the fact that we live in a country that encourages multiculturalism, in a county where people

respect difference, and in a country where all my material needs were taken care of, so that I had the frame of mind to follow spirituality.

I'm not worrying about where my next meal will come from, I'm not worrying about who to bribe to put my children through university. Life is so much easier here. I recently retired, and I could have kept working longer but I decided to retire so that I can devote time, I practice yoga, so I devote time to yoga and meditation and Gita study. I couldn't do all of these things before, but it's only this country that allows me to do that, right? The fact that I have medical coverage, I have a pension plan – unless you live in a country like that, your physical needs are not taken care of. And then spirituality takes a back seat.

Gita makes plain the distinction between her remembered India (a place without medical coverage where one has to pay *baksheesh* in order to enroll a child in school), and her construction of Canada as a place where all her needs are fulfilled. In her reflections, both countries become imagined spaces: one of frustration and impossibility, the other of comfort and freedom. Such characterizations are, of course, subjective constructions of reality. Part of maintaining identity in a 'new country' is the construction of an 'old country' (see Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hopkins *et al*, eds. 2001; and Halbwachs 1992). The remembered country is an amalgam of shared conceptions and experiences, "a remembrance that encompasses the past and glosses over potentially divisive barriers" and emphasizing others (McLellan, 1999: 194). Because these 'old countries', these homelands of the mind, cannot help but be part real and part imagined, the preservation of a religion and culture in a new environment cannot be understood as an unpacking of some objective, permanent reality, but rather as an imaginative process of selection and adaptation.²⁹

²⁹ The conceptualization of homeland as imagined does not imply that it is false or fabricated in some way that "true" lands and nations are not. "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. ...In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-

"Once created, [imagined communities] become 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (Anderson, 1991: 4). As this process unfolds, and selections are made, values considered key to identity are revealed. As indicated above, one of the most striking discrepancies in the lived experience of Hinduism for Indo-Canadian women is that between what first and second generation migrants consider those key values to be. This in itself is not a threat to the maintenance of identity. A certain amount of disagreement on these points can be tolerated, as long as some unifying sentiments remain: "A public relies as much on the imagination of each individual as on a collective agreement as to its existence. People must believe that they are part of a public, and this gives it both its strength and its ephemeral quality" (Novetzke, 2008: 261). The retention of a "Hindu identity" is important to both mothers and daughters, but just how is that identity to be constituted? My research reveals a somewhat different dynamic than has been suggested by earlier studies.

Not surprisingly, one area of difference that arises between the generations is that of marriage. Pearson found that first generation Indo-Canadian women repeatedly and emphatically stress the importance of their children marrying within the tradition. Participants in the present study did not. All women indicated that both their sons and daughters were entirely free to marry as they wished, and several participants spoke warmly of their non-Hindu sons- and daughters-in-law. In keeping with earlier research,

face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by the falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1991: 6).

the second generation participants in my study did express a desire for independence and freedom of life choices, especially with regard to marriage - as also with dating, clothing, music and friends. Many wish to strike a compromise with Western culture, keeping the Hindu traditions that appeal and rejecting those that offend. As observed by Pearson, "respect for elders, family 'closeness', familial solidarity and assistance, ...[and] religious tolerance" remain important (1999: 440). Feminine values of self-control, willingness to sacrifice for others, and religious discipline continue to be cherished, while caste distinctions and gender inequities such as menstrual taboos are seen as overly restrictive - as oppressive (see Poonam's narrative in Chapter Four for more on this). Two of the three young women in this study also demonstrate the shift that Pearson observed away from what is seen as the ritualism of *bhakti*, preferring a more "philosophical" approach to religion. For these individuals, engagement in temple or household *puja* is sporadic, as is the undertaking of vows. They may still identify with a particular god or goddess but are more likely to meditate on his or her abstract divinity than to perform daily *puja* in his or her honour. Gita, originally from Chennai but a resident of the Toronto area for over 30 years, reflects on this process within her own family:

When the children were at home, they didn't tend to do *puja* on a daily basis but before they left for exams, before they left home to go back to university, they would use the shrine. And even now, when they are grown, they are married, they have homes of their own, when they come back, if they are going on a trip for example and they came to say goodbye, they would bow down to the gods on the shrine. Our older daughter is married to a Canadian of Sri Lankan background. So they are both Hindu. And they have a small shrine, it's nothing much, they just have a Ganesha. Our younger daughter is married to a Caucasian Canadian, Scott. They don't have a shrine. But even then though our younger daughter doesn't have a shrine, she uses prayer often. For example she will tell me, you know, "yesterday I had an ultrasound, and as I was laying there I was repeating some *mantras*". She's expecting a baby. Or she told me, she said, "Mom, you

need to teach me some more *mantras*, because I don't know enough to go a long time". So I know that they use prayer – it may not be in the very conventional sense, but they do use prayer.

Pearson advances the possibility that experiences of racism at school might be responsible for triggering a pulling-back from more visible expressions of Hindu identity on the part of some young women in her study. In some cases, however, she notes that ritual practice may be invigorated by this same perception of difference. One of Pearson's informants study reports a sentiment echoed by several of the present study's participants:

After coming here we value [our traditions] more than probably we would have back home, because back home everybody is doing the same thing and they don't really appreciate it... but over here we come to know that what we are doing is something really powerful or something really unique (1999: 436).

Pearson observes that first generation Indo-Canadian women tend to demonstrate increased ritual activity in diaspora - that is, they spend more time performing *puja* and votive fasts in Canada than they did previously in India. This increased religiosity sometimes spills outside of the private sphere and into the temple, as women take on innovative roles that would not be open to them in India: cleaning the area around the images, lighting oil lamps, and arranging the clothing of the *murtis*. Although this shift into a quasi-priestly role does expose the women in question to some criticism from within the community, it is generally tolerated as a valid, if somewhat audacious, expression of fervent religiosity. In my own fieldwork I witnessed evidence of such activity at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton: one elderly woman seats herself, always, on the men's side of the *mahamandapa* close to the front so that she can

periodically tidy up the offerings that have been left, and has generally taken on the self-appointed role of ensuring that things run smoothly every Sunday, often going so far as to direct others in their devotional activities. Her behaviour does not appear to be encouraged, but neither is it discouraged. Rather it is tolerated - almost ignored – as a harmless idiosyncrasy on the part of an old woman. The fact that some women appear to see this degree of temple involvement as an option available to them, and that they enthusiastically act on that option, is an indication of the flexibility of gendered roles as they are enacted in diaspora (see also Rayaprol 1999 and Dempsey 2005).

Other adaptations stem from more pragmatic realities. Ila, for instance, explained to me her rationale for various changes she has made in her daily life:

For festivals now, I don't make sweets, because no-one wants to eat your sweets, and then you have to eat your own sweets and you get fat.

And you know, in the office, I don't want to be different, with my *sindur* on my forehead. So I think maybe I should wear western clothes. I don't want to be not accepted. I have left my country and come to this country and I want to be accepted. It's a lot of adjustment. Everybody is not wearing a sari and you look kind of odd. And especially if you are working. And also because of the weather. But if I come to visit a friend I will wear a sari. It is a challenge. When I first came, I was told that you can't wear a sari at work. So you have to change, you have to adapt. It's a lot of adapting you need to do.

Flexibility aside, traditional gender roles are sometimes perpetuated within Indo-Canadian Hindu families, and to a certain extent subservience to one's husband in particular and to men in general is a cultural narrative internalized by many first generation female migrants to varying degrees (recall that 23 of 37 participants feel the *pativrata* ideal is relevant to their own lives). This narrative also casts women as inherently 'more religious' than men, in part due to the discipline required for rituals such

as fasting. Because of this characterization, women are often charged with the maintenance of tradition. Narratives expressing this dynamic involve a complicated mixture of rejection and acceptance of traditional roles. For instance, Kala related to me the following views on role models and subservience in marriage:

Basically I don't look at Sita as being an obedient woman, I look at her as an extremely strong woman who told her husband, you can test me over and over again – in my mind I know that I am pure, so it doesn't matter how many times you tell me to take these tests. I in fact always felt that Ram was the weaker of the two. She was always sure of herself. It was he who doubted, he who was the weaker in my mind, and so I think that's what I carried from it. And I think in my marriage we both have tremendous respect for each other. And in some cases it may look like a subordination of the female from the outside, but I do believe for any marriage to work there has to be some subordination – not in a bad way – but for any marriage to work it cannot be so cut and dried and like a 50/50. There has to be a slight balance going this way or that way. In most cases, women are stronger and can take more. So we tend to say, you know what, ok. But it doesn't mean that you are subordinate to the man, just that you are looking at it from the perspective that I want this relationship to survive and to become a healthy one. You are not subordinate, you are strategic. As long as there is mutual respect for one another, if the woman has to give in a little more, it's ok.

As self-perceived and *de facto* culture-bearers in diaspora, women take on the responsibility for educating children about their religious heritage. Pearson enumerates the primary sources of knowledge about Hinduism among the second-generation Indo-Canadian women who participated in her study. The most important of these she identifies as "familial practices (especially those of the mother - such as *puja* at home, the observance of festivals and calendrical ritual fasts)", followed by temple visits and lectures given by visiting *pandits* and *swamis*. Finally, she notes that a significant

portion of these young women's knowledge about Hinduism comes from university courses on India, Hinduism, and World Religions (1999: 438).

Despite their reluctance to force tradition on their children, the importance of mothers as teachers was confirmed by several participants in the current study, some of whom related highly creative methods of inculcating various aspects of Hindu myth and ritual in their children. For example, Gita explains:

When they were growing up, at different stages of their lives, based on age, they learned in a different way. When they were very, very little, I would tell them stories when I was feeding them. And I found that was a very good way to get the food in. They heard stories of Ram, and Krishna, and all the mythological stories they heard while eating. And then they also heard stories on the special festival days. If it was *Ramnavami* [the birth festival of Lord Rama] I would repeat the story, and they knew it well enough that if I left out a detail they would prompt me. So at that age it was like that. And I taught them some basic prayers when they were very little.

When they became teenagers, I noticed that they were less willing to learn, and less willing to sit. They were too old now to listen to me tell the same stories again, and they weren't doing anything on their own. So I came up with this ingenious way of teaching them. I wanted them to learn some basic prayers – *slokas* – and when they needed rides to their friends' homes, I would give them a ride if they would learn a *sloka*. And based on the distance I would basically make deals with them – if the ride was long to the next city, they would need to learn a couple of *slokas*. So, you know, I found a way around it. Today we laugh about it and joke about it but the fact is that they learned. Our younger daughter learned the entire *Jai Jagadish Hare aarti* on rides to school. She went to Newmarket High, she didn't want to walk, I was willing to drop her off at school but the deal was, you are going to learn the *aarti*.

So that went on, and then of course they left home and went to university, and the way I look at it is going forward. They are both grown women now, they are both over 30. We have given them the background we thought we should have given them, but spiritual decisions are personal decisions and we leave it up to them. We don't prompt anything.

Pearson's work provides an index of values identified as central to first and second-generation female Hindu migrants to Ontario, and an assertion that ritual practice functions largely to preserve traditional Hindu culture in diaspora. This is foundational data for the lived experience of Hinduism in Ontario. The present study builds on this foundation, revealing a notable difference in the reported need felt by mothers to enforce compliance among their daughters to traditional models of appropriate gendered behaviour. The desire to provide children with a rootedness in tradition does not, in this study, correlate to the desire that one's daughters embody that tradition. Religious narratives of auspicious womanhood, while considered important, are thus shown to be flexibly interpreted and deployed by participants. Through their nuanced performances of these traditional tropes, the mothers and daughters in this study are able to express, negotiate, nurture and contest the cultural narratives and familial relationships that have customarily determined their sense of selfhood.

This goes beyond the mother-daughter relationship. Nirmala, for instance, is a married woman in late middle age, the very embodiment of auspicious wifedom. Since her arrival to Canada in 1950 she has worn her black hair long, elaborately styled, with *sindur* in the part, and is consistently decked out in bangles and gold jewelry.³⁰ In response to my questions about *vrata* during one of our chats, she told me that the

³⁰ *Sindur*, or vermillion paste, is often worn in the part of a woman's hair and on her forehead as a visible symbol of her status as a married woman. In Hinduism, the ideal of the good wife is accompanied by visual markers: normative representations of femininity (bangles, bindis, saris, flowers in the hair, etc.) are concrete symbols of auspicious Hindu wifeliness, and are removed upon widowhood. Thus jewelry, cosmetics, and feminine dress are not expressions of individual identity alone. They constitute a visual language, fluency in which expresses adherence to cultural and religious norms. The question of how the body is made emblematic of Hindu womanhood through conscious strategies of decoration and display is an important area for further inquiry.

coming Monday was a fast day. "Is the fast performed for one's husband?" I asked. "No," she replied, suddenly looking vague, "it's for something else. The one for husbands is once a year - in October, I think". She then went on to tell me that "the October fast" (*Karva Chauth*) is the only *vrata* she now performs. "I used to fast more, but I was never clear on the rules. I was fasting wrong, so what's the point"? Another married woman and mother of sons, Mohini, has given up on fasting because it is too difficult while working full time. "But it doesn't matter" she tells me, "because it all comes from the heart anyway. We can really do anything, we are very free."

Because daily household encounters with tradition are inherently personal and thus more flexible than temple rites, they are well suited to adaptations made by both first and second generation Indo-Canadian women. Pushing the boundaries of tradition at the home shrine does not expose an individual to the disapproval of others in her community in the same way as would markedly unusual participation in temple activity. Domestic practices can thus be seen as a relatively accessible opportunity to broaden traditional understandings of women's experience of Hinduism, presenting a space within which women are able to constitute themselves as individuals in ways that subtly critique - but leave intact - the relational identities by which women have traditionally been bound. For example, Pearson found that young women are more likely now to attribute health as a motivation for undertaking a fast than the welfare of their husbands or brothers. A strong increase in questioning has been observed. Not just how, but *why*, do we do these things? A rationale is being sought for women's traditional ritual role, and those aspects of it that are deemed oppressive are likely to be dropped. At

the same time, the horizons of that role are being broadened as young women express increasing interest in the sacred texts, traditionally the domain of men, as a means of deepening their understanding of ritual and their general religious knowledge.

Certainly, women of either generation who do continue to perform *puja* at home may do so in order to preserve religious and ethnic identity by ensuring that ritual practice remains a part of daily life in a secular/Christian diasporic environment. As Janet McLellan argues in her study of Tibetan Buddhists in Ontario, religion provides a forum for "structural relationships, not only giving individuals a relevant series of linkages to each other, but forming the primary basis for expressing" a generalized ethnic identity (1987: 64). They may do it also in order to retain regional or individual particularities of practice that cannot be maintained in the pan-Indian atmosphere of the temple - a public space shared by a community marked by its diversity of practice. Some may also wish to reinforce traditional norms, particularly for the benefit of their children and grandchildren, and in acting on this concern a woman may perpetuate cultural ideals of Hindu woman as defined by those around her:

The story of my life is always embedded in those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past, and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide... What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit; a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition (MacIntyre, 1981: 205-6).

But we cannot overlook the important reality that some women who engage in the performance of religious narratives also do so in order to express their own feelings,

hopes and desires in the context of devotion. If we conceptualize Hindu interactions with the Divine as forming a continuum with familial and social relationships, the bonds Hindu women form with their household deities can be seen as central to the ways in which they construct identities as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, as Hindus, and as selves. By ensuring the wellbeing of her family through her own devotional activity, and by ensuring the preservation of cultural and religious traditions in diaspora, the idealized Hindu woman performs her *dharma* and wields considerable spiritual power.³¹ But the role of cultural custodian does not necessitate unquestioning adherence to traditional values, and flexibility is seen to operate when required.

In some cases, these performances carve out a space within which women are able to constitute themselves as individuals in ways that do not perceptibly rupture the networks of human relationship they otherwise construct, and in which they are situated.³² Here, normative understandings of ideal Hindu womanhood can be subverted or subtly manipulated through daily creative engagement with tradition. This process is of course not unique to transnational Hinduism, but in the context of diaspora, intimate devotional lives can take on unique significance as women negotiate personhood on their own terms while at the same time managing the preservation and adaptation of Hindu culture and religion as they deem appropriate. In the next chapter I

³¹ Although this power is not often recognized by outsiders to the tradition, it does enjoy considerable currency within the Hindu community and was voiced by a majority of this study's participants.

³² Judith Brown characterizes the extent of the diasporic South Asian community's influence on individual behaviour as follows: "A local shopkeeper may be the friend of someone in the extended kinship network, while his wife may be a member of a shared devotional group. So networks of support, expectations of care and patronage, considerations of honour and repute, are built up and reinforce each other in dense sets of social relationships, creating societies which can be 'home' in the best sense of being welcoming and supportive, but which can also be claustrophobic, over watchful and for some deeply controlling" (2006: 81).

will explore this dynamic in greater detail through the lens of individual participant narratives.

Chapter Four

Narrating the Hindu Self: Canadian Examples

This chapter reports on the lived religious experiences of some of this study's participants, and then looks at these in the light of the theoretical and analytical frames set out above: in what ways are these women performing gendered religious narratives in their daily household engagements with Hinduism? In answering this question, the familiar scholarly claim that women's involvements with religious tradition are both marginalized and marginalizing will be thrown into question. By taking responsibility for household shrines and in various other ways embodying female religious roles, are these women reproducing a normative gender discourse of inequality and oppression, and therefore performing identities constructed by that discourse? Or are women's daily interactions with the Divine key sites for performing Hinduism in Canada; offering a space for powerful reimaginings of the normative discourse? Both possibilities hold some truth.

My conversations with women over the course of this research revealed various themes as central to their faith lives. Among these are companionship with god expressed as an intimate relationship; gratitude for god's gifts (and faith is paramount among these); a sense that god is present within oneself and others; an emphasis on caring for oneself and others; a belief that generativity throughout life is important – that one must be a contributor, making meaning and purpose in life; and finally a conviction that faith provides strength, calmness and hope, and that this is woven through daily life.

Religion is, for each of these women, an important source of sense-making: through it, life experiences are made normal and valorized. For all but two, freedom to approach religious practice in the way that they wished was emphasized as central to Hinduism as they construe it.

Classical Hindu ontology posits four life stages or *ashramas*, each lasting twenty five years. These are *brahmacharya ashrama* (celibate studenthood), *grihastha ashrama* (married householdership), *vanprastha ashrama* (during which one turns toward scriptural study and meditation) and *sanyasa ashrama*, at which point one adopts an ascetic lifestyle in pursuit of god-consciousness. It is during the householder stage of life that one is meant to raise a family, pursue wealth, and cultivate familial relationships. Indeed Hinduism as a whole is often encapsulated as *varnashramadharma* (*varna*, caste + *ashrama*, stage of life + *dharma*, religious duty), a system in which one's spiritual duties correspond to one's stage of life. Domesticity in his model is thus itself a religious duty, and the home is the spatial locus of the householder way of life. Within this space, "shrines and kitchens are the key areas that define the domestic realm", and ritual performances in the home are interwoven with other domestic activities like cooking and cleaning. "All domestic rituals involve ways of doing things - of cleaning objects and serving foods, for example - that are not unlike the performance of comparable actions in non-ritual contexts" (Hancock: 17). It is this very embeddedness of household *puja* in daily routines that lends it unique analytical salience. "*Puja*, more than life cycle rituals, shape[s] domestic habitus because of its frequency, its material presence, and... its greater popularity and accessibility. *Puja*

[can] be performed without a priest, most rituals being learned from relatives or friends; instructional pamphlets, magazines, and audiotapes, and even movies" (Hancock, 1999: 88).

I came to this study with several assumptions. First among these was the expectation that Hindu women face a culturally specific notion of self, and that an important aspect of this is the ideal of *pativrata*. This concept has been elaborated in earlier chapters: it entails that women be responsible for the religious and physical well being of their husbands and children, and dictates that it is through their ritual activity that this responsibility is met. Moreover, I assumed that Hindu women in Canada would face the added responsibility of passing on cultural traditions to the next generation. I further expected that I would encounter a variety of responses to this ideal, with individuals interpreting their experiences along a continuum between the extremes of internalization and rejection. Surprisingly, the spectrum of opinion on these issues was far less tradition-oriented than expected, as has been discussed above. Fourteen of 37 participants reported Hindu narratives of womanhood to be irrelevant to their own lives, and only 15 of 37 indicated the desire to inculcate these values in their daughters and daughters-in-law.

I assumed also that household devotion would prove to be a key site for the articulation of daily, experiential Hinduism, and that it is the preserve of women. This was largely borne out by the study, with only rare exceptions in which men were involved. Finally, I brought to the research an assumption that women's ways of being Hindu are not

diametrically opposed to those of men's, and nor are they in any way inferior. But they are different in significant ways, and discovering those differences became a key aim of my research. In this chapter I show that through daily embodiment of their religious convictions, and through the intimately related nurturance of sacred space within the home, the women who participated in this study complicate, without rejecting altogether, the meanings typically associated with the gendered cultural norms of Hinduism.

These assumptions, based in large part on existing scholarship, led me to further hypothesize that women would put values of family and relationship at the centre of daily, lived Hindu practice, and that intimate communication with the gods would provide a safe outlet for the expression of sentiments and practices that might stray from the *pativrata* ideal. Thus, I hypothesized that *bhakti* could be understood as a one tool among several with which women shape and affirm their identities – with which they construct themselves as dialogical and relational ‘selves’ through their engagements with the sacred. These engagements are expressed as narratives, represented by women to themselves and others, which work to create and sustain identity: *engagements with the sacred are narratives that author a self*. These hypotheses were confirmed by the results of my research.

Participant Narratives

In pursuing these hypotheses I have followed Abu-Lughod's insistence that "focusing on individuals encourages familiarity rather than distance and helps to break down 'otherness'" (1993: 29). As detailed above, I spoke with 37 Indo-Canadian Hindu women of all ages, from their early twenties to their late eighties, in the cities of Ottawa

and Toronto. This chapter features the voices of 13 of those women, who stand as examples of what it is to be a Hindu woman in Canada. This is not to say that they are presented as ambassadors of a static, homogenous group. Each research participant expressed multiple narratives of identity and culture making. Their unique engagements with Hinduism are rich in interpretive potential and provide convincing evidence of the generative potential of personal religiosity as a space of meaning-construction. The thread that all of their narratives hold in common is the *personal and flexible* nature of their devotion, despite its shared religio-cultural framework. Absolutely every woman interviewed spoke confidently of the validity of her practice of Hinduism, however modest or elaborate, however close to or far from orthopraxy it was. To varying degrees, all expressed the importance of religion in their lives as a source of guidance and comfort, and as an aid in difficult times – but their individual ways of connecting with that source are somewhat divergent. For example, Kamini's story:

When we first came, we were more into the Krishna and Ram and that kind of thing. But my husband's religion – usually, when we marry we would take on the husband's religion. My mother is a Krishna follower, my husband is a Swaminarayan. He comes from the village where Swaminarayan was born. So I would take on his religion. But, because of the way I was brought up, with the non-denomination religion, I don't have a set way of prayers like everybody else does. Like, we do have a shrine in the house, but it is my husband who does it. So he is the one who does the prayers. I am not a person who sits down and prays. I just follow in saying that what I do is my religion. Daily, every day – that is my religion. I don't sit down anywhere and say prayers, there is no set thing. The way we were brought up, we were brought up in a British way. In a boarding school. So when my mother would say it's time for prayers, and we would ask questions, there were no answers. So there was no connection to it. It was just doing it for the sake of doing it. And then also I studied in a convent, I went to the church, I prayed in the church and it made no difference to me from the person I was. So, I am a Hindu, but I don't follow any form of religion, but I will do Divali, and follow all those things, I will do all that but not more than that. So I am a very different person than all these friends of mine. It is more my husband who is more religious.

References to rules were often cast in the light of diasporic temple practice. For instance, Bijli explained that, “because we are in Canada, we have to follow some kind of rules. But in reality there are no rules and it has to come from your heart”. Religion, for these women, *is* relationship with god. And this relationship is, in each case, lived and expressed through unique personal narratives. This exploration of the intimate context of women’s religious worlds reveals glimpses of the idiosyncratic, personal, and lived experience of Hinduism vital to a fuller understanding of the significance of religion in human lives.

Jyoti

One such narrative is that of Jyoti, a 55 year old, unmarried woman who lives with her middle-aged brother in downtown Ottawa. Born in the Punjab and raised in Delhi, Jyoti demonstrates her departure from orthodoxy in many ways, happily describing her *bhakti* as “very personal and informal”. She consciously identifies her approach in opposition to Brahmanism, peppering her comments with repeated observations that “the Brahmins do it differently”. It is interesting that Jyoti describes the Goddess Durga’s strength again and again in terms of her steadfast virginity: she was eager for me to understand that Durga suffered criticism at the hands of the male gods who, in Jyoti’s words, asked “Why should she be allowed to remain a virgin”? But Durga was so strong that “she never let anyone come near her.” As a middle-aged woman who never married, this interpretation of the Goddess’s strength has particularly important meaning and symbolic power for Jyoti. She is neither a wife nor a mother, two of the principal hallmarks of auspicious Hindu womanhood. Yet she speaks of her childlessness not as

a failure to meet a cultural ideal but rather as a conscious moral stance, saying, "I didn't want to add to the problems of India". Jyoti considers herself to be possessed of an impressive level of sacred knowledge, but downplays the elite status of Sanskrit, emphasizing that her religious education came in the form of storytelling and study of the *Bhagavad Gita* with aunts and other older women throughout her formative years. "I've collected my understanding from here, there, and everywhere." Like many Hindus, Jyoti locates the center of her faith in the *Gita*. She recalls fondly that her grandmother used to read it to her every day, and that she has placed great importance on the text since she was a young girl. She believes that this book contains all the knowledge that science is now demonstrating. For Jyoti, every observation, every discovery, every truth - from whatever perspective - can not only be accommodated by, but found within, Hinduism. She credits Durga, for example, with initiating vegetarianism. Jyoti revels in the individualism of her religious life, and regards herself as atypical. "Hinduism", she says, "gives a lot of individual freedom to people. It even allows for atheism. I don't think too many people will talk to you like that! But I have my own theories".

In describing her engagements with the sacred, Jyoti "embodies her experience – she is the narrator of herself as a character" (Langellier and Peterson, 2004: 12).³³ She identifies her own life with that of her divine role model, Durga, and valorizes her life history by doing so. The sting of her particular human history is abated through her identification with the 'more real' existence of the mythical Goddess, whose divine

³³ This also recalls the thought of Charles Taylor, who writes that "we find the sense of life through articulating it" (1989: 18), and of Mikhail Bakhtin who argues that cultural utterances become in a sense one's own through the assimilative process of constructing the self.

narrative subverts gender norms and remains impervious to critique. Jyoti's religious world provides her with a narrative framework that makes her mundane realities both more palatable and richer in significance.

Aditi

Aditi, 86 years old when I met her, came to Canada in 1967 from North India. Her short grey hair and penetrating eyes made her stand out from the women around her when I first encountered her at the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*. She spoke to me there of the need to move beyond rituals, which are "all about emotion", in order to get to the inner truth of Hinduism. She described this as an intellectual inner pursuit, and explained that rituals are very important as a stepping stone, a door that needs to be opened in order to move on. This discourse of moving beyond ritualism toward philosophical truth is not at all unusual, and I encountered it many times during the course of research (though usually when speaking to men). What makes Aditi's version unique is that all the while she was imparting this to me, she was clutching a bundle of pennies wrapped in red cloth that had been distributed as *prasad* immediately before. She then lowered her voice and told me: "You keep this where you keep your money – don't spend it – and Lakshmi will give you more money. Whatever the Goddess gives you, you take".

This juxtaposition of an elite discourse that explicitly denigrates instrumental ritual practice with a strikingly concrete example of exactly the type of popular ritualism it seeks to denounce is a rich intersection of meaning. For Aditi there is no contradiction in her statements that one must both move beyond ritual and at the same time cling

dearly to it. This does not reflect a lack of insight on her part, but rather a multiplicity of significance – in her religious world, each of these routes is a vital conduit to the Divine. In Bakhtinian terms, the ‘meaning’ of Hinduism for Aditi is generated at the intersection between her espoused preference for philosophy and her performative expression of ritual instrumentality. A similar multiplicity of meaning became apparent when asked about differences between men’s and women’s religious experiences. Aditi denied this possibility, telling me that “Religion comes from God, not from us or from anything that we do”, and that thus, gender has no relevance. Immediately following this statement, however, she revealed that the only reason she attends temple is because “it is beautiful to hear the learned men read from the scriptures”. While she sees no difference between male and female religiosity, she automatically assigns the reading of sacred texts to men and attaches considerable value to the opportunity of listening to these masculine recitations. This may appear to indicate a lack of reflexivity in Aditi’s engagements with tradition, an internalization of patriarchal values that blinds her to the inequalities of gendered ritual practice. But we can also, and perhaps more fruitfully, interpret this as an openness to manifold realities. What appears to the outsider as a contradiction is taken by the insider as a quite natural expression of a universe of meaning.

Bijli

Aditi’s daughter Bijli, also sporting closely-cropped hair, accompanied her mother to Canada in 1967. They have lived together ever since. Bijli tells me that “every Hindu home has a shrine” and that she feels these are crucial sites for the maintenance of

tradition outside of India: "This is how we keep our, you know, our culture with us". In Canada, one is removed from the pervasiveness of the sacred that characterizes Indian communities, and so must deliberately foster pockets of that sacrality where one can. "Here, we are cut off from our culture", she tells me, and sighs. "Well, you are where you are, I guess". As I chat with Bijli about my project, I mention that scholarly treatments of Hinduism often portray it as a patriarchal tradition. She reflects that "while there is some truth to that, times are now changing and now it's more or less the same for men and women. For instance," she tells me, "my uncle does household *puja* every day" – an example that in itself demonstrates the standard association of household ritual with women and this particular man's practice as remarkable. The only difference Bijli perceives between male and female religious roles is that women are responsible for the kitchen, and so perform rituals around the proper use and maintenance of that space. This is a very important responsibility, she says, as "every grain of food has engraved on it the name of the person who will eat it". Bijli sees this as an important source of sacred power for women, as cooking and serving food to others "brings many blessings". Rather than interpreting women's relegation to the household sphere as oppressive, Bijli chooses to highlight the positive aspects of this role by focusing on the sacred power to which it gives women alone access.

Radha

This perspective on the household sphere was shared by Radha, whom I met at the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* and later accompanied to the local ISKON temple where she danced like a young *gopi* for hours. Over *prasad* later, she spoke to me about

gendered religious roles largely in terms of parental responsibilities: “Whether one is a man or a woman the goal is to get close to the Lord. It is the same. Women may have the responsibility of taking care of and educating the children, but otherwise it is the same. It is important to maintain an atmosphere of peace in the home for the sake of the children’s spiritual education”. These comments about serenity and duty seemed hardly connected to the actions of the devotee I had just witnessed chanting and dancing, absorbed in *bhava* for Krishna. I felt in that moment that what I was evincing in interviews came only a small way toward revealing the full intricacies of these women’s religious lives. The goal of moving closer toward the Divine regardless of gender is consistent with the *bhakti* commonly associated with Krishna, but for Radha it does not act as a wholesale equalizer: women remain responsible for the bearing, rearing and spiritual education of children. Both Bijli and Radha present views that partly deny and partly exemplify the pervasiveness of patriarchal discourse in Hindu women’s lives. Raising awareness of these multivalent approaches toward, and interpretations of, received tradition is a necessary corrective to the static models of Hindu womanhood we have until recently relied upon.

Divya

Gender came up again in a conversation with Divya over lunch at the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* following the *archana* one Sunday. Divya, who moved to Ottawa in 1971, began (like virtually all of the women in this study) by telling me that “Hinduism is all very personal. What I do is different; what my husband does is different”. When I asked her whether the rituals she performs are done primarily for her husband, she

responded emphatically: "For the *family*, not just the husband. And if the family is doing well, then I am doing well". A mother of three children who are now grown, she told me "I am on my second life. I worked very hard for that, very hard. But now life is good". Although she approaches her ritual practices in part as an obligation to family members, by extension they are also aimed at her own well-being. Crucially, this well-being is tied to her relational identity as wife and mother. This is consonant with the observations of Selva Raj and William Harman that "...in women's practice of domestic [devotion] can be found a diffuse desire to keep marriage and family life intact. ...Whatever it takes to keep family intact is what women request: good health, prosperity, children who behave; harmony; the sudden disappearance of a husband's concubine. Whatever it takes." (2006: 29). Again, rather than assuming the uncritical internalization of a patriarchal discourse that requires Divya to equate her family's happiness with her own in a directly causal relationship, it is more helpful to a nuanced understanding to consider the agency she is exercising in framing her interpretation thus: Divya's formula not only acknowledges the reality of the structural relationships in which she finds herself (indeed, to deny them would do no good), it permits an active space for her own happiness and self-worth within that structure.

At this point, a middle-aged man sitting across from Divya and I interrupted our conversation, wagging his finger at me and saying loudly:

You are writing a thesis? I suppose you are going to say that Hindu women are controlled, and are depressed. This is wrong! Hindu culture gives women so much power, so much decision-making power. The women control the household, the children, their education, what temple you go to. The man's job is just to make the living. I am Minister of External Affairs, my wife is Minister of Internal Affairs.

Unfortunately his wife Raji did not have time to speak with me about her own understanding of that role, as she was occupied in the temple kitchen washing dishes. In any event, this outburst ended the discussion, as Divya and the other women I was seated with moved on to less contentious topics, conscious of the disapproving gaze still directed at us from the corner. Some time later Divya turned to me and said in quiet, worried tones, "Of course all families are different. In some families women are more aggressive, and in others it is the men who are more aggressive". Whether she was trying to mitigate the impression created by our male interlocutor, or to convey something more personal, I was not sure, and the atmosphere had become such that I felt I could not probe further. What was clear was that the interjection of the male voice into our conversation had not only curtailed (at least temporarily) our discussion of gender roles in Hinduism but had marked me as a problematic figure whose negative preconceptions about Indian families needed to be corrected. The masculine perspective was implicitly accepted as authoritative, and qualifications, challenges or clarifications to it were either relegated to whispered asides or left unspoken altogether. The most striking aspect of this exchange is that the perspectives being voiced by the women *were the same* as that of the man, and yet his stern tone and annoyance at our conversation still created the feeling of wrongdoing and effectively silenced us.

Lalita

When I began speaking to women of the younger generation, tensions around gender roles began to be more explicitly expressed. One of the women who best exemplifies these is Lalita, a 26 year old Punjabi woman who has never lived in India. Her parents

came to Canada by way of East Africa some thirty years ago, settling in Toronto. She completed a Bachelor of Commerce in 2005 and now works as a management consultant in Ottawa. Lalita feels considerable pressure from her parents to return to her childhood home, now that her schooling is done, and to "marry a suitable boy". Interestingly, instead of pushing her away from tradition, this pressure has triggered a renewal of Lalita's religious practice. At thirteen, Lalita had what she describes as a "formative" experience: while visiting her Grandmother's home, she witnessed a Ganesh *murti* drinking milk, and made her own offering to the thirsty god, which was promptly consumed. What had happened? How could this stone icon be drinking milk? What did it mean? She was awed, frightened and confused by this experience, and was unable to get satisfactory answers to her questions from any of the *pandits* or family members involved. This confusing event, coupled with an increasing annoyance at her parents' expectations of material boons from the gods, led her to withdraw from religion. In recent years, however, Lalita has reconnected with the traditions of her youth. She attributes this to the stressful transitions of finishing university and beginning a career, and in no small part to the need to deal with her parents' anxiety over her living alone in a different city. She has actively sought a re-engagement with tradition in order to provide her with a sense of selfhood and direction in her life decisions.

About a year before I met her, Lalita bought herself a small Ganesh *murti* and installed him in what she describes as a modest "temple" on a shelf in her living room. Untraditional as her living arrangements are from her parents' perspective, she has

intentionally constructed her domestic space as distinctly Hindu, and this is important to her. She emphasizes that this shrine has doors, "because it's personal, private. I'm not ashamed of my religion but I don't make a big deal of it in front of others", she explains. She greets God in this home temple each morning ("I say Good Morning"), lights a candle, and leaves for work. She checks in with Ganesha at the beginning of every day as a means of coping with her anxiety at acting against her parents' preferences. Having performed a simple morning ritual, she feels better about then leaving that Hindu space and entering the secular space of the city, turning her mind not to the welfare of some future husband but to her job as a management consultant. As she phrases it, "then I can go about my day and leave God at home".

Lalita explains that her relationship with the gods is meaningful to her in terms of solving problems and deriving comfort. Having found the overly sterile atmosphere of the Hindu Temple of Ottawa Carleton to be stifling of true devotional energy, she has given up on temple worship in this city, but does accompany her father to the *mandir* whenever she returns to the family home in Toronto. On these occasions, Lalita describes herself as being "very emotional", whereas in Ottawa she has not enjoyed the same experience of *bhava*. Her practice of Hinduism in Ottawa consists of privately reading the *Gita* and conducting occasional *pujas* in her apartment, where she also tries to follow appropriate rituals on festival days. In 2007 she performed *Divali puja* with an instructional booklet in one hand and her mother on the phone in the other. She is not terribly worried by the fact that she "doesn't know if it was even right", and that many substitutions were made (for example, chocolate almonds were offered and used as *prasad*). Indeed, she

speaks happily of the flexibility and personalization permitted by household ritual and by Hinduism more broadly.

Lalita is quite self-consciously constructing her identity as a young Indo-Canadian woman. Her deeply-felt relationships with the gods, particularly Ganesha, are an important part of that identity, providing her with strength in facing the decisions she must make at this stage in her life. She feels that her connection to God in some way mediates her relationship with her parents – a relationship that at this stage of her life is full of tension. She pursues her familial and religious relationships on her own terms, making a space for the sacred within a life that in many ways diverges from tradition – a space that serves to valorize her life choices.

Poonam

Like Lalita, Poonam is a twenty six year old university student who was born in Canada to Punjabi parents. She does not attend temple regularly, saying “I used to visit the temple almost every weekend as a child, but more recently, mostly because of time restraints, most of my family’s religious practices have taken place at home. She does perform household *puja* once weekly (on Mondays) and on special holidays. Because Poonam specifically identifies herself as a feminist who has spent a great deal of time reflecting on the mores of her tradition, I was interested to hear her views on the menstrual taboos that restrict women’s ritual lives. She indicated that she personally would still attend services at a temple, and does perform *puja* at home, while menstruating, but qualified this by saying “I think I am a unique case because I have

had the time to reflect on my feminism and its relationship to my culture and religion more than the average person. My answer is related to my personal beliefs about women, feminism and religion. But, it is something I have come to terms with. My mom still doesn't pray when she is having her period, and my sister and I usually take "charge" of the prayers that week."

Poonam learned about menstrual taboos as a child from her mother, grandmother and older sister. "For the most part, it has been an unspoken rule. Once it was 'said' it remained a rule until I decided that I didn't agree with it, and when I decided that my 'Hindu-ness' doesn't come into question despite violating this rule." She predicts that her approach will remain the same when she herself becomes a parent: "I would tell my daughter about it, mostly because I think it's important to pass on information, positive and negative (or accepted and rejected aspects). I wouldn't enforce it, or even consider it, when it came to my daughter's spiritual practice."

I asked Poonam if these restrictions somehow impinge upon her experience of devotion. Does she feel as close to God when menstruating? Or is she somehow removed or distanced from her relationship with God because of her so-called polluted state? Her reply downplayed the embodied nature of religious practice, emphasizing instead the cerebral and philosophical elements of her connection to the sacred: "Most of what I consider my devotion is my personal relationship with God, as in my belief in Its existence and its control and observance over my life. *Puja* happens to be one manifestation of this, but it's not the only manifestation. I considered myself as much of a Hindu when I didn't take part in weekly ritual as I do now." And yet, when asked

whether public temples are “more sacred” than household shrines, Poonam responded positively, noting that the home is suffused with pollution due to its “multidimensional purpose. I eat meat in the home, have sexual relations in the home, etc. etc. But the temple is functional and singular-purposed. There are more rules at the *mandir*. For example, I don’t wear a *dupatta* or any sort of head covering when I pray at home. But at the *mandir* it is more about social norms than it is religious ones.”

Poonam summarized her views on gender roles in her own family and in most of the Hindu families she knows by saying: “Women carry the tradition and the prayer.” Interestingly, the primary example she provided of this role as culture-bearer related to diet – and thus to the body. She said: “For example, most of the Hindu men I know eat beef, while most of the women I know abstain from beef and pork, or are complete vegetarians.” For Poonam, these dietary practices reflect a conscious stance taken toward tradition – a literal embodiment of Hindu values chosen by women and rejected by men. She went on to add that “during prayers at home, the women are the ‘lead’ and these days at the temple, while the *pandits* are normally men, women lead much of the singing and temple maintenance, while men are involved in the politics of the temple.” Again, women are identified as culture-bearers because of their bodily engagement with the life of the *mandir* (singing, cooking, cleaning, etc.), while men (with the exception of the *pandit*) are identified as disconnected from the explicitly religious nature of time spent there. Poonam’s concluding thoughts on the menstrual taboo also highlight women’s bodily connectedness to tradition, and to devotion, as something ultimately inaccessible to men: “I think the idea of menstruation in Hinduism is interesting because it’s intuitive – we seem to have learned the rules not in a direct fashion, but as

a realization. For example, men don't talk about it – they know the rule exists, but they could never tell if a woman was menstruating or not during her prayer. So the 'guilt' aspect is really an individual phenomenon."

Kalpana

Next we meet Kalpana, who approached me on the first day that I visited the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*, firmly insisting that I would have to come to her house to see her 'temples'. Waving her arm to encompass all the *murtis* present in the temple's *mahamandapa*, she proudly declared: "I have all of these at home. All of the Gods. Everything is there". The unorthodox tone of our continuing conversations was set by this opening statement in which she decentered the temple's authority and primacy as a place of worship. From the outset, Kalpana exemplified the potential to draw on the very idiom of normativity in order to redefine auspicious womanhood according to her own practices:

I have a shrine in my kitchen and also in my basement. People say to me, you eat meat, you shouldn't have God there in your kitchen. But I say to them, God knows what we eat. Why do you want to hide it? So if you are working with chicken, or beef, or whatever, you don't touch the god. You keep him up high. But God is everywhere. There is no sense in hiding.

I read this as a telling example of the reinterpretation of orthodox narratives: Kalpana does not reject notions of purity and pollution altogether (here she explicitly rationalizes her practice in relationship to them), but she interprets and responds to these cultural categories in ways that make sense to her. Rules of pollution exist and must be observed, but there is flexibility in this correct observance.

Kalpana came to Canada with her husband, a scientist and university professor, from Dehradun, north of Delhi, over forty years ago. She refers to India as "a foreign country" and, now that her parents are no longer living, says she has no reason to return there. She maintains ties with family members there, but insists that they come to Canada for visits. "We've been to India", she says. "It's more interesting for them to come here". Kalpana's imagined homeland includes India, but does not necessitate an ongoing physical relationship with it. This is an example of the fluidity of 'imagining' home touched upon in Chapter Three above and theorized by Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hopkins *et al*, eds. 2001; and Halbwachs 1992).

The mother of four boys, Kalpana explains that she was never particularly worried about what religious tradition her children followed, "as long as they believe in god" - any god. The boys, now grown men, continue to identify with Hinduism, although all have married outside the tradition and "put up trees in their houses at Christmas" – an observation she accompanies with a wry grin and a shrug.

Kalpana and her family are deeply involved with temple affairs. One of her sons (who has lived with his parents since his divorce some years ago) sits on the Board of Directors of the *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir*, and the family has just financed the acquisition of a new *murti* for the temple – a considerable expenditure and public display of support. And yet when Kalpana speaks of her involvement with the VSDM, it is always in terms of internal politics and financial struggles, never in terms of the temple as a sacred place where one goes to meet God. After all, she need not leave

home in order to do that: there are three shrines under her own roof. Each of these lovingly populated and maintained shrines marks the interior space of this Canadian suburban home as explicitly Hindu. The grandest is found in the basement, faced by a large ping-pong table (see Figure 13). Concerns about purity and pollution are nominally addressed by the presence of curtains for separation if the sofa bed in the room is being used by company – a common occurrence. Metal bookshelves crowded with old books and board games flank the shrine on either side, blurring the boundaries of this sacred space. Multicoloured twinkling lights and a green metallic garland frame the tableau and mark it as space set apart. This shrine exemplifies the wide-ranging multiplicity and inclusiveness permitted by Kalpana's ritual practice. In addition to several lithographs of Hindu gods (including Shiva and Parvati; Durga; Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman; Vishnu and Lakshmi; and Ganesha), it includes representations of both Buddha and Jesus (in the form of a crucifix). A hand-rendered poster in Arabic calligraphy denotes Allah's symbolic presence, and a Torah wrapped in a red sari stands as a visual representation of her fondness for – and ritual inclusion of – a Jewish daughter-in-law. Kalpana repeatedly emphasizes her desire to include all forms of the Divine in her lived religious world, and describes herself as unconventional in this regard. While Hinduism is widely recognized for its championing of multiplicity and its enthusiastic acceptance of divine manifestations from other religious systems, these are notably absent from the institutional sphere in Canada, where multi-use temples quite deliberately construct a somewhat static image of what "Hinduism" is, for the benefit of both the diasporic community and mainstream Canadian society. The

household shrine is a locus for these imaginative expansions of tradition, hosting a personalized pantheon of sacred personalities, symbols, and practices.



Figure 14. Kalpana's basement shrine.



Figure 15. Kalpana's basement shrine. Note Allah's name in Arabic calligraphy to top right of shrine, and Torah wrapped in red sari on shelving unit at right.

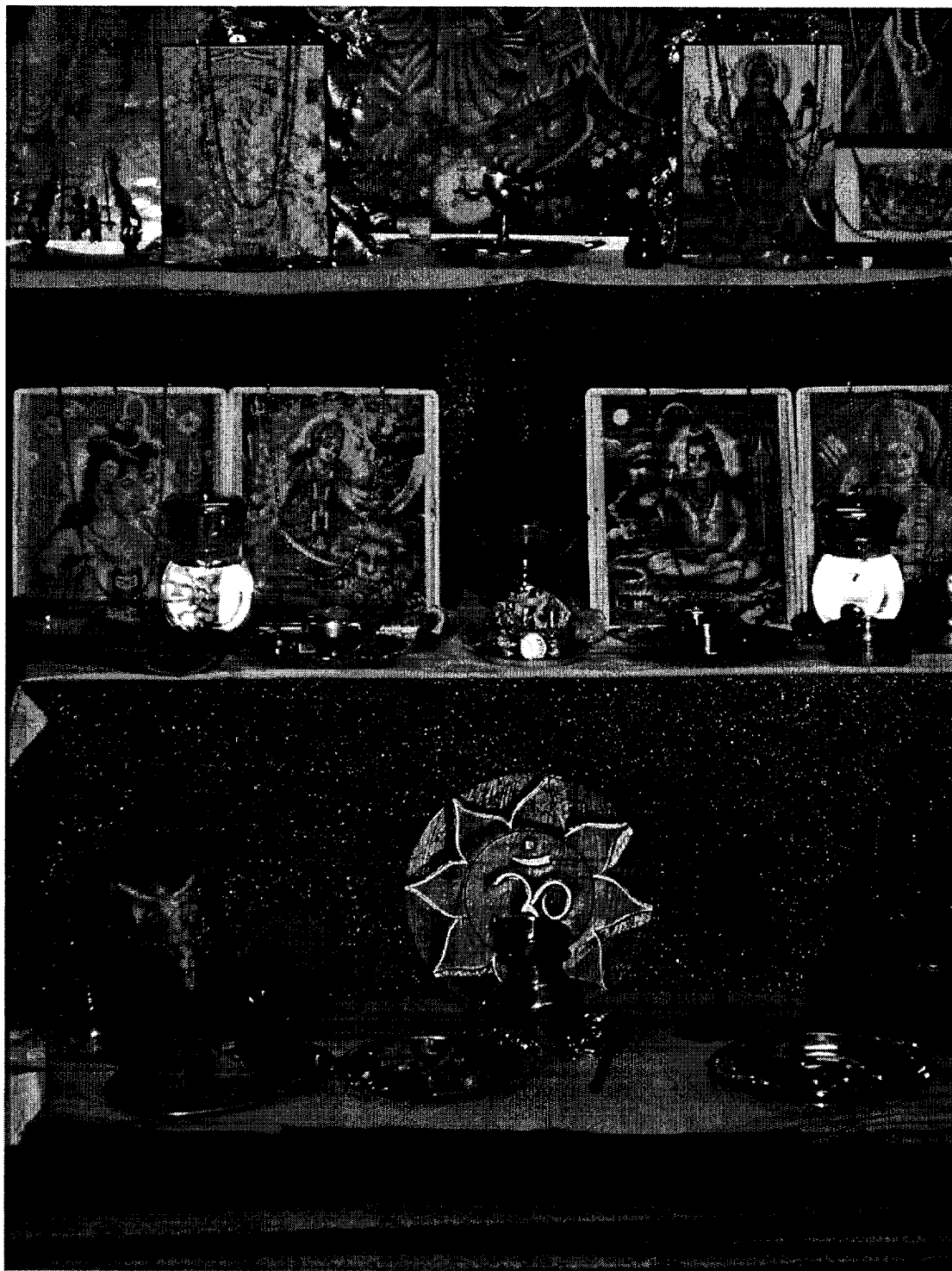


Figure 16. Basement shrine detail. Note presence of crucifix and Buddha.

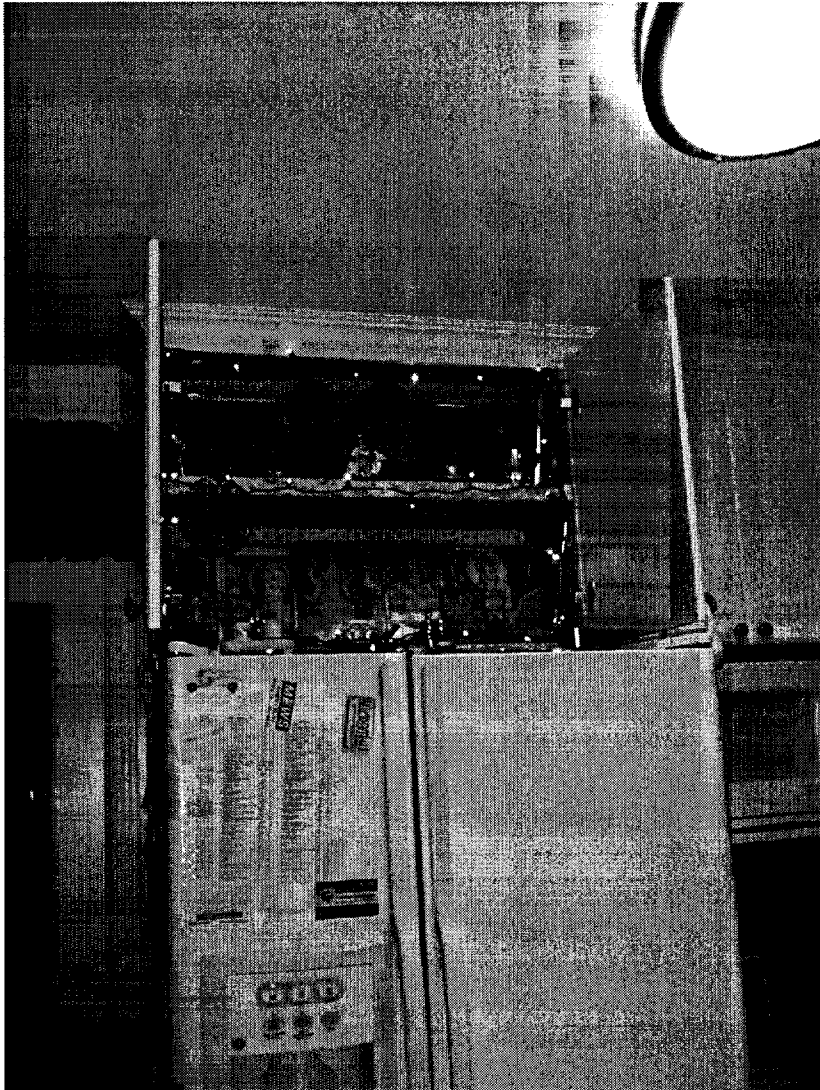


Figure 17. Kalpana's kitchen shrine.

In the kitchen, occupying the cupboards above the fridge and overlooking the stove, is the controversial kitchen shrine, where Kalpana reverently lights an oil lamp each morning. A third shrine is found in her husband's office. It consists of a long shelf with poster prints, a handmade newspaper cut-and-paste affair of Shiva and Parvati, a photograph of his deceased mother, and a collection of prescription medications very intentionally situated so as to absorb the healing grace of the Divine. A crucifix hangs over the door. Irrepressible, the sacred space in Kalpana's large suburban home spills

beyond these three concentrated sites. In the living room, a ceramic plaster portrait of St. Joseph hangs on the wall, along with a small Virgin Mary diptych. The Christian images in this room are worshipped daily along with *tulsi* (the goddess, present in the form of a basil plant) and the banana plant (which receives special attentions every Thursday, as described in Chapter Two's reflections on method). Kalpana walks throughout the home every morning with incense, in order to "make the whole house sacred". Only the washrooms are exempt from this sanctifying treatment.

Each morning and evening, she performs *murti seva* (*puja*, or devotional service to her *murtis*) at her large basement shrine. Here, after switching on the twinkling lights, she offers incense, water, rice and coins before waving an oil lamp in front of the gods (most of which are framed poster-prints permanently adorned with garlands). She recites *mantras* and sings her favourite *bhajana*, at times accompanied by tape-recorded music and at times by her young grandson. This series of ritual acts is invariably followed by a time of quiet reflection and prayer. Daily *puja* is thus both a means for Kalpana to construct and dwell in sacred space (as she "makes the whole house sacred", for instance) and sacred time (as she carves out periods of ritual activity and meditation with which to demarcate the beginning and end of her day).

Kalpana explicitly links her religious beliefs and practices directly to the family's experiences with various health issues. In 1992, she was badly injured in a car accident which she says left her suffering from epilepsy. She was cured in 2000, an event she describes as nothing less than a miracle. In 2002, her husband was diagnosed with

prostate cancer - and subsequently cured. Both attribute their recovered good health to faith, and explain their continuing religious practices (including regular temple attendance in Ottawa and trips to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal) in terms of an expression of gratitude for favours received both from the Goddess and from St. Joseph: "Just as a sick child must be grateful to her mother for nursing her through and illness, so we too must be grateful to the Mother, to God, for healing us". In March 2007, her husband suffered a stroke and has since been recovering at home. Kalpana has from that date foregone temple visits, instead focusing her devotional activity on drawing the healing grace of the goddess into the sacred space of the home.

Kalpana in many ways undermines the image of the docile, husband-worshipping wife, while at the same time performing that role to the letter – significantly complicating the *pativrata* ideal. Kalpana does not perform *vrata*, and interprets her role as household ritual specialist very broadly, soliciting (though not always successfully) full participation by all family members irrespective of gender. When her sons were young and preparing for exams, they would come before the basement temple to pray, saying, "Oh, mother's gods, please help!" Kalpana laughingly relates that she always reminded the boys that the gods were theirs too, not just hers – but her pride in that suggestion is evident and her personal relationship with the gods on the shrine more vital and deeply felt than that of any other family members. They are, in a palpable sense, her gods after all, and her husband and children both acknowledge this special relationship and look to it as their own link with the Divine.

Kalpana's household temples, her crafting of them and care for the sacred personalities who inhabit them, are emblems of her independence, creativity, and personalization of ritual performances to reflect her own experiences and needs. Although her husband's ill health is certainly one motivating factor for her ritual performances, she does not invoke the *pativrata* ideal in discussing her ritual life. It is not in a tone of wifely submission that she regularly grumbles, "In this life, it is women who have to do everything". She speaks of, and exhibits, a strong sense of personal religiosity and religious authority which, while inclusive of and shared by other members of the household, is by no means cultivated solely on their behalf, nor constrained by Sanskritic discourse of appropriate wifely religiosity.

Savita

Savita and her husband migrated to Canada from Uttar Pradesh thirty years ago. For nine years she has lived in a compact high rise condominium in Toronto. For her, the biggest adaptation to life in diaspora is the lack of a proper space for establishing her home shrine. She says: "The main adaptation is that we have no room for our prayer room in Canada. In India we would have a separate room. Here we will do whatever and put it in whatever direction, wherever we can. We don't put the *puja* in the bedrooms. In a separate room, or wherever you find a place". Savita's shrine now occupies the top half of a hallway linen closet (see Figures 17 and 18, below). She continued: "Even I can not put incense here, because the fumes come and it sets off the fire alarm. If I do it, I put it in some plant or some thing or in the kitchen sink, or..." she tailed off. Savita could not bring all of her *puja* items with her from India, but "could

not throw them” either, so gave many *murtis* to family members and friends before leaving. She tells me this in a tone of regret mixed with determination to make the best of her Toronto surroundings

Despite its spatial limitations, Savita feels strongly that this household shrine is an important means to stay connected with her faith, and feels this to be true of many in her circle. Her comments, reproduced in part below, encapsulate many of the themes we have seen emerge above among other participants:

I think it is... that every household has a temple like this, little different depending on their timings, because everyone is working also. My daughter lives here [in the city], she does not have much time, but she will do a little bit. If she does not have time then she will do in the evening, and she will observe *Navaratri* [Nine Nights festival honouring the goddess Durga], so these are the things I mean, I am sure most of the people are observing. If my daughter does it, so people of my age of course they are doing. But people of her age I am not so 100% sure they are doing it.

My daughter was born in India and we came here when she was ten. We don't go and teach them but they see. When we are doing *aarti* we will go and collect everyone and say ok come on we are doing *aarti* so we will do it together, that's all. After that, it's up to them. If they are interested, they do. Hindu religion is like that that nobody forces you to do everything. It is just your inside thing, that if you want to do it, you do it.

If you don't have time, you just do *namaskar* and forgive me for whatever and that's fine, then you go and do what you need to do. There are times in the morning when I don't have time to do it – sometimes I have to go somewhere, so that's it. I think every household is observing in this country, I am sure. And if they have a big, big house then they have a big, big room. And they will have more gatherings and more social things there.

Janet: Is this an important part of maintaining Hindu identity here in Canada?

Savita: I think so, yes. I think it is important. In India also, you know it is not that people go every day in the temple. Everyone will have a shrine in their home and every day they worship. Going to temple is not very customary in India. But some people here think it is better to go there than to spend your time anywhere else. Here it is like a community centre. Here you go, you have to stay there, spend

some time, see people and socialize a little bit and eat something and then come back. Once in while I go there with my daughter when there are few people there – then you concentrate better.

Savita's remarks highlight the flexible attitude toward both performing and passing on tradition remarked upon above. She also confirms the changed function of temples in diaspora in her emphasis of their role as community and social centers.

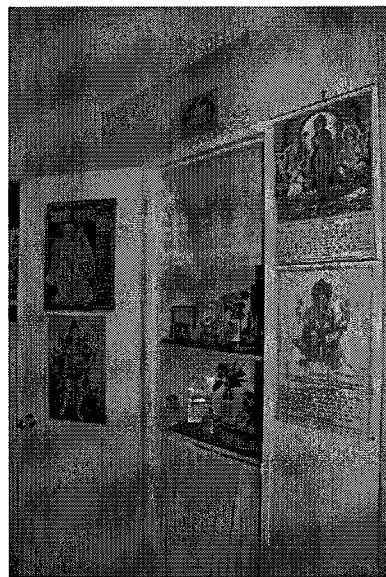


Figure 18. Savita's cupboard shrine



Figure 19. Savita's cupboard shrine, detail.



Figure 20. Savita's cupboard shrine, detail



Figure 21. Savita's cupboard shrine, detail

Kala

Kala, who has lived in Toronto for 38 years, attributes her personalized engagements with tradition to an inspiration that began with her mother's unique religious life. Her narrative is so rich in illustrating many of this study's themes that I include it here at length. She explains:

My mother used to meditate and she had a very elaborate shrine in the house, on the topmost level. When she used to meditate and she would be in meditation she would sing, and compose songs, all in the name of Kamachi, the goddess at Kanchipuram. For ten years she would not remember what she sang when she came out of meditation. When she was in prayer it would just come to her – she had the gift. So we bought her a tape recorder and she started to press the tape recorder when she went into trance.

She composed in languages that she never knew – in Sanskrit, and Telegu – and in *ragas* [complex Indian melodic forms] that she had never heard of. So it was a gift. So coming from a mother who had that, what she taught me is that religion is not something you can force on anybody. You have to believe it and you have to want to believe it. Anything that is forced will not linger. It will fade. But if you come to me with interest, and you want to learn about it, it is something that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

So when I got married at 21, I hardly understood the relevance of all this. When she was in prayer for two, three hours. So when she came to visit me when I first had my son in 1974, she brought with her several little idols that she used to pray to. So she gave these to me and when I left India she said take these and keep these with you someplace and she wrote a prayer for me and she said just read that prayer. So that's all I did.

When she came to stay with me in Canada, first for six months, and three years later for eighteen months, she composed 1,000 songs in Canada. So that's how it started, with my mother, and eventually the shrine grew and now I have a fair collection. And I have used the same philosophy on my children, and my husband: that I believe in it, and I do it. You see me doing it, and they've seen me doing it for years. And I find it funny sometimes that when they have a major crisis in their life, or they have an exam, I sometimes have observed that they open the door and kind of do a little... and take some blessings, some strength, to do whatever it is. But I have never told my husband or my children they have to do it.

I do it every day – every day I spend three minutes, that's all I do. But I say a little prayer. On certain days like Divali or certain festivals we have I will light a lamp or something.

After many years, Kala has caught her balance in the act of simultaneously maintaining and adapting tradition while also integrating with Canadian society. She has thoughtfully constructed an identity as a Hindu woman and mother while carefully ensuring her family's integration into the mainstream:

I came to Canada in 1971 and did not want to be singled out. I wanted very much to be accepted and to integrate and then moving to Newmarket [a bedroom community of Toronto], there were only six Indians here. And the very strange thing is that I worked for Bell Canada for 35 years and when I came to Newmarket to work for them they asked me what tribe I belonged to because they thought I was a North American Indian. Because the people in Newmarket you have to remember were basically farmers and they had not had much exposure to the world as such. And then I would sort of explain to them that I'm from the continent

of India. But at that point you don't want to start being overtly different. And it's a very private thing, your religion, your culture, your faith... it's personal. You don't really have to display it.

I had a Christmas tree until my kids were 14, and we celebrated Christmas every year. Because when these kids go to school – and my kids were the only brown kids in the entire school – and everybody says to you, what did Santa bring you, and they say nothing, then the connotation is that you are bad. Santa doesn't come to homes that are bad, and so are you a bad child, you know? And they don't need that. Because they didn't choose to live in Canada, we did. We chose to come here and so we need to make it as easy for them as possible to integrate. And the funny thing is that I've never asked my daughter to wear a sari, or pray, or anything like that, but she is more Indian than many of her counterparts from India. Because she is very proud to be an Indian, she is very proud of our – you know, like every chance she gets she wears a sari. She wore a pink sari to her graduation. And I was very proud and I thought gee, this is a very good way that I've brought her up because now she herself likes the religion and likes that's she's Indian and she's happy. But if you thrust it down their throats, I don't know, I have no idea.

At 14, I said you know, this is it. By now you guys pretty much know who you are, and you know that Divali is what we celebrate, and Christmas becomes just a gathering. So we ended up just putting stockings and that's how it's been since then. I mean you live in this country, so Christmas, this is what it's all about, but at home you have Divali, and you just have to accept both. So then, when they are older, they are very rooted. You have come to this country, you adapt to this, and still have your own.

Kala echoes the sentiments of many research participants in her preference to attend temple sporadically, hoping to avoid unpleasant crowds but equally relishing the focus and enhanced devotional energy she finds there:

I personally go to the temple when I want to, and when I feel the need, and I will only go when it is least crowded. So I will never go to the temple because I feel that it is the thing to do on a religious day, when there are 500 people there. I go to the temple for a different purpose – I go there because I find it peaceful, and I just sit for half an hour and meditate and then come back. The thing at home is that I do not sit for half an hour. When you are in the house, the phone is ringing, or someone is walking, or what have you. When you are in the temple, you don't do anything else. Also the energy is greater because of more people going – you feel good because everyone around you is doing the same thing, and you kind of get into it. I find the Hindu Temple in Richmond Hill has very, very good energy

and I do like to go there. I wouldn't say that I'm regular, I don't go every Sunday or once a week, or... but I do pray every day at home. I also do a lot of yoga and I find that also is a form of spirituality.



Figure 22. Kala's home shrine



Figure 23. Kala's home shrine

Rashmila

Rashmila, who has lived in Toronto for 25 years, was widowed in 1999. At that time, she relocated her household shrine from her living room into her bedroom, so that, as she says, "When I wake up, the first thing I do is to wake up and see the images." The *murtis* on her shrine, like others mentioned above, are cherished because of the family history associated with them. Throughout these participant narratives, the personal history attached to household shrine *murtis* has emerged as a significant factor in the

importance of household worship in diaspora. Rashmila explained the story attached to the most special of her icons:

The main goddess that I pray to is something that was given to my mother in law 50 years ago by one of the Shankara saints from Kanchipuram. And he had kept in his prayer at the *math* [school]. So he kept it there and invoked the spirit of the goddess into it and then gave it to my mother in law on Tamil New Years day. So every April 15th is very auspicious.

And when she gave it to me, she said it is yours, I told her: I have got two sides which are diametrically opposed to one another. One side is totally against religion. I dislike religion which is structured. But the other side of me, without feeling in any way that I am conflicting or being hypocritical, I can equally feel devoted. And I told my mother in law – what discipline do you expect from me, when I take this? And she said, there is nothing in this, it is all in your heart. So whatever you feel, as long as you respect my gift to you... she was a very enlightened soul, she was a remarkable woman.

The 'diametric opposition' of which Rashmila speaks has manifested throughout her adult life, both in her own practice and in her open-mindedness toward the practice of others:

So I wake up to that, and the *puja* is very important to me. But I also do not feel guilty if I do not... the form is less important to me. I have also had various phases when I have been very ritualistic, but it was more for the discipline. To say that hey, if I can do this then I can do anything. It gives you kind of an energy. So I can recite a lot of Sanskrit *slokas* by heart. I have a daughter in law now who is against religion and does not want to have any gods in the house, and I can totally relate to her as well. I have no problem with that. At her age I was in the same kind of.... Except I feel that if you can give yourself something by way of a prayer... I told her that if there is anybody in your family that you revere, and you can sit down and meditate [on that person], that is what prayer is.

I asked Rashmila to reflect on the importance of engaging with tradition specifically in light of Canada now being home. Her thoughtful comments set up an opposition between the deliberate construction of religious identity in diaspora, something she

perceives in a positive light, and what she sees as the somewhat automatic imbibing of tradition in one's homeland. She said:

In India it was easy to lose yourself in the form, because everybody around you is doing the same thing, you would be doing it more by habit. You really don't have the opportunity to examine, whereas here I have to make a conscious effort, especially knowing that my daughter is married to a Catholic and my son is married to an Indian who is quite agnostic. They all, I am happy to say, have learned what true faith is. My son has no problem, when he is troubled, going to a Hindu temple. They will just stand there and there is a sense of the power of faith that comes into temples because millions of people have prayed there and it kind of reverberates, you know.

For me, the daily prayer, because of what I have learned in India and it has become a part of me, I practice it daily, but the practice here is different from the practice in India. There it was more superficial I think. You didn't have the chance to struggle over it and keep it and want to do it, and here I feel I am more mature and I can see that I can pray without any sense of ...that I am practicing something which has no meaning, so it's like something you want to do and it helps you toward some kind of calmness.

Rashmila too feels that passing religious tradition on to children is important, but not for the reasons one might expect. Although religious herself, she feels it is important that young people become familiar with doctrine and ritual so that they are able to evaluate them with an eye to potentially rejecting them:

I think [passing religion on to kids is important] – I realize it more and more that there is a sense to all this nonsense, because when the time comes for them to stand up on their own and to evaluate and think for themselves, they should have something they can question at least.

Some of it is important for them to know – these are the practices, these are the rituals. If you start discarding on their behalf, they have no roots to even remember. If you present it with all its fallacies and weaknesses and all, you give them the chance to evaluate it for themselves. You want to give them the choice to at least know what these things are – it is ok to know what it is and then decide what is good, what is not good, what you want.

Rashmila concludes by reflecting that second generation Indo-Canadians "are not going to become Canadian in the same way as someone whose family has been here for 200 years, and yet they are never going to be Indian again either". It is this in-between position of their children that appears to inform the flexible parenting approaches adopted by most participants in this study.

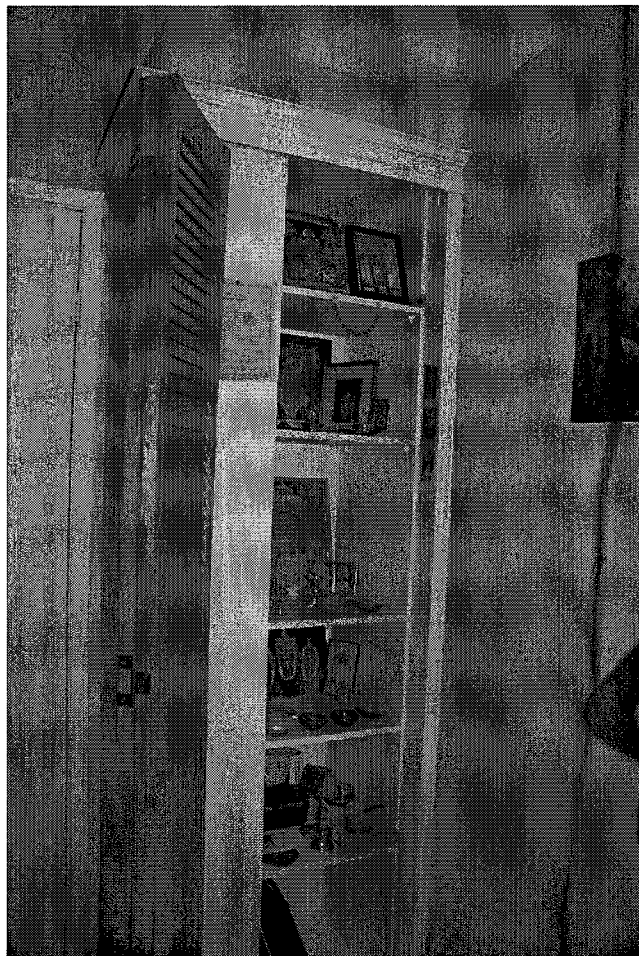


Figure 24. Rashmila's bedroom shrine

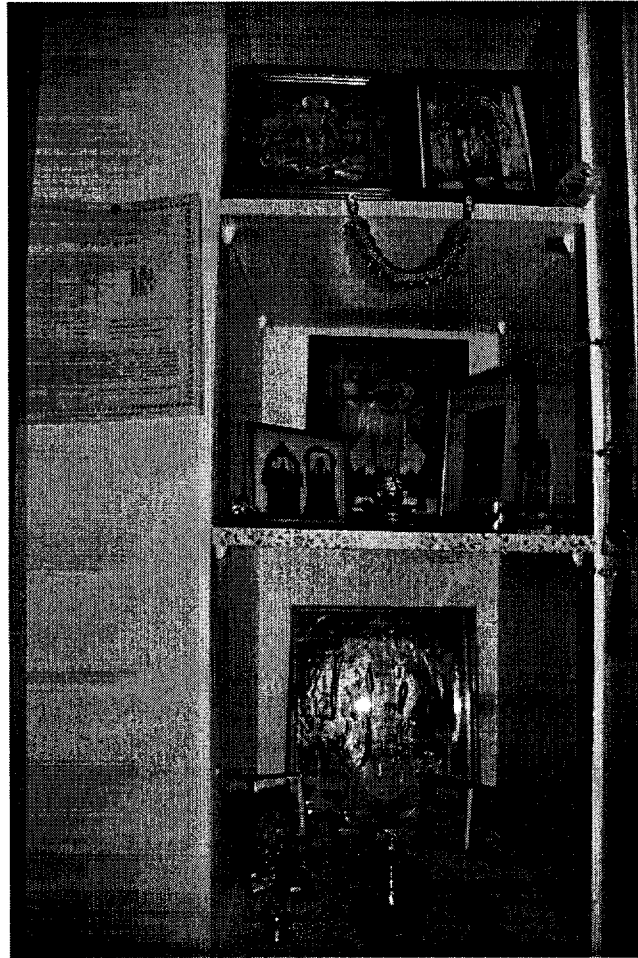


Figure 25. Rashmila's bedroom shrine, detail

Sonita

I met Sonita at the South Asian Women's Centre in Toronto. She fled Bangladesh in 2007, and spoke to me, tearfully, of a frightening life there shaped by communal violence. When she was seventeen and still living in her parent's home, an angry Muslim mob broke down the gate when only she and her mother were at home. She feared for her life on this occasion, and determined to someday leave for a place where her Hindu identity would not put her at risk. For the time being she remained, however, marrying and beginning a family. Once married and with 2 young daughters, Sonita felt

that Hindu-Muslim tensions made life sufficiently intolerable to justify giving up the material comforts enjoyed by her family in Bangladesh in exchange for the safety of Canada. In Toronto they are very poor, relying on social assistance and the various settlement services offered by the South Asian Women's Centre. The decision to come to Canada was entirely hers, and originally opposed by her husband, who temporarily panicked at the necessity of "leaving behind all of his possessions". Undeterred by the harsh financial realities of leaving Bangladesh for Canada, Sonita decided and quite boldly made it clear that she was going with the girls whether or not he accompanied them. Her adamant pursuit of this goal (including the completion of all paperwork necessary to get the family here) belies the notion of the subservient, unquestioning wife and, more specifically, the theory of dependent immigration – the assertion that women primarily immigrate in order to accompany or follow their husbands and not out of their own volition - espoused by Rayaprol (1999) and others. Sonita is glad of her decision, because in spite of the difficulties it prompted, "in Canada we are free. Free to speak whatever we want... Life is difficult for us here, but at least we are free."

Sonita has a single shrine in her home, which she keeps in her daughters' bedroom so that it remains untainted by the pollution of the marriage bed. She does *puja* at this shrine every morning, making offerings of fruit, rice, and flowers when she can afford them, and *aarti* every evening at sundown "to bring light into the home". If she is menstruating, her husband does the daily *puja*, but otherwise it is entirely her domain. Although her husband built the physical shrine, it was she who populated it with calendar images and one special *murti* brought from Bangladesh. No priest has

consecrated it – Sonita considers this an unnecessary formality and is entirely untroubled by the lack of consecration. Images on the shrine include Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali (Jagaddhatri) and Ganesha. The Jagaddhatri *murti* was a gift for her daughter on the occasion of her fifth birthday, because she had asked for it and was quite captivated by it for a time (an interest that has since waned). Unlike most participants, who transported much of their shrine's population with them to Canada, this is the only image Sonita brought with her from Bangladesh. She also performs the Lakshmi fast and *puja* on Thursday full moon days and immediately following Durga *Puja*, and understands this to be “for prosperity,” a pressing concern for the family in their new situation.

Sonita was keen to explain that her religious activity is motivated by “faith and feeling, not obligation. With faith and honesty,” she believes, “you can do anything”. She too placed great emphasis on her belief that nothing about Hinduism is compulsory, saying that her devotional life is motivated by personal interest only. This philosophy is clear in her attitude toward handing tradition down to her children: “We never send our kids anywhere to learn about these things. They just learn by watching at home, and if they some day have interest, that is fine.” And yet it is clear that she feels some responsibility for providing a clear religious identity for her daughters. For the first five years of her marriage (while still living in Bangladesh), Sonita did not have a household shrine. She was prompted to establish one, and to begin doing daily *puja* at it, by the event of her eldest daughter coming home from school with the question “Are we Hindu?”. Sonita feels strongly that the Muslim majority in Bangladesh was “confusing”

for her two girls, and that they are much more certain about their identity here in Canada. Although her daughters (one aged 10 and the other 7) do not participate in household *puja*, she is not worried by this as she feels they “learn by observing - if they wish to do it one day, fine”. At this stage, her girls do *puja* or pray only when they really want something (“most often toys”, she laughs). For her, she says, it is enough that in Canada her family is free to be Hindu without feeling threatened or discriminated against by a Muslim majority community. She says that she is not worried about her girls losing touch with tradition in Canada, and points out that for her family, religious activity is not the most important aspect of life in their new country. Their focus is on getting by from day to day, on adjusting to life in a small apartment with very few resources. “Everything is different here, and very difficult”, she says. The difficulties of surviving in the expensive city of Toronto take their toll on traditional devotional activities. “Here”, Sonita explains, “there is no time for the Gita. It is not possible.” Sometimes her husband will read from it and explain it to their daughters, but this is rare – a fact that does not worry either parent. While daily *puja* is an ongoing part of her life, struggles with money, language and culture shock are the concerns that occupy the forefront of her mind.

I asked Sonita what she thought about the notion of the *pativrata*. She laughed and responded: “It’s so old, nobody is following these things anymore. It’s ancient! When we do *puja*, it’s for the whole family, not just my husband or kids – and for the extended family too.” This slippage recalls the ability, also exhibited in diverse ways by other participants, to uphold the *pativrata* role in performance (she still identifies her

performance of *puja* with the success and happiness of the family) without expressing outward agreement with patriarchal discourse. Sonita then speculated that Gujaratis and Punjabis may be more inclined than Bengalis to follow the *pativrata* model, raising the possibility of identifying orthodoxy as something 'other Hindus' are concerned with. By locating the significance of the *pativrata* model elsewhere within the imagined community of Hindus, Sonita is able to acknowledge the existence of the model within her religious worldview while at the same time denying its importance in her own life.

On Sita, she explains: "Everyone wants to teach you about Sita, but I don't know if anyone is following those rules. I felt no pressure from my mother to follow this model." The closest parallel she finds in her own life is the example of her grandmother (now deceased), who used to wake at 4 a.m. every day to sweep the house and then do *puja*. She laughingly related that she tries to follow this example, but not so early in the morning. As for her daughters, she repeated in this context that she is not worried about their attachment to a sense of Hindu identity in Canada. In Canada, she explains, the children are not confused about their Hindu-ness "because nobody at school is talking about religion" (unlike her experiences in Bangladesh, in which the Hindu minority was made to feel constantly tense and 'Other' than the majority). She speaks with relief that there is less emphasis here on religious identity than in Bangladesh, saying: "Here it is simple to be Hindu." And yet, she does hope that her girls marry Hindus, saying: "Otherwise, how will they maintain it"? Despite her professed nonchalance at her girls' eventual taking up of tradition, there clearly remains an "it" to be preserved.

Sonita has attended three temples in Toronto (including ISKON) on festival days, but laments that these do not provide the same atmosphere as do temples “at home [in Bangladesh]. At home, everything about the temple is special, different. Here it’s just like going in to any other building.” In Canada, Sonita feels, the temple environment is more social, a place for community to gather, whereas *puja* at home is more conducive to quiet, personal devotion. The sizeable Hindu community in Toronto is also a comfort to this recently settled family. “It is nice to be around so many people speaking Bengali”, Sonita says. “You don’t feel like you are in a different country”. While temples do offer some of this community feeling, she places equal emphasis on the South Asian Women’s Centre, grocery stores and other shops in fulfilling this role. And yet it is the *lack* of emphasis on Hindu identity that provides the most comfort to Sonita. Her primary reason for relocating to Canada was to remove her daughters from an environment in which religious identity defined personhood in very concrete –and potentially violent – ways. Sonita’s example provides an important corrective to the frequent scholarly assumption that religious identity is a fundamental touchstone in the adaptation to life in diaspora: for many, religion may be of little importance at all, or may be a negative element in one’s personal history. Saroj’s story, which follows, also highlights the ambivalent role of religious narratives in resettlement.

Saroj

Saroj is a 50 year old woman who relocated to Toronto in 2006 from Delhi, where her parents settled after Partition. She does not have a home shrine here in Canada, and

did not have one in Delhi either. She does attend temples and *gurudwaras* regularly, often preferring the peaceful atmosphere of the Sikh temple to the Hindu *mandirs* she has visited in Toronto. "Some people are very traditional," she says, "[but] I believe everything [i.e. every religious message] is the same". For Saroj, the differences between Hinduism and Sikhism are "just politics".

As with many other participants in this study, a frequent refrain in my conversations with Saroj was freedom. "Nobody forced me" to be religious, she would often repeat, "and I never forced my daughter". Her daughter, now 25, attended a convent school in Delhi and used to be a regular church-goer there. The second recurring theme in our discussions was the importance of living one's faith. "When I go to the temple, I feel better, but external ritual is not as important as internal goodness. It's useless".

Although she used to keep fasts in Delhi, Saroj does not maintain this practice in Canada. "I am not a particularly traditional woman – I don't do things because they are compulsory". She names taking care of family as one of the primary responsibilities assigned to women under Hinduism, but has real trouble with the belief that her husband is a living god: "He is just a human being like me, right? So how can I [treat him like a god]?" "The man thinks, he is the best. So women are very weak. But we are becoming more educated now, even in India. Husbands expect it [subservience]. All the responsibilities are only for the wife. He wants it that way. But things change with the new generation."

Saroj has good reason for her mistrust of external ritual and dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles, having had painful experience with the roles of both wife and widow. Married at 23, she was widowed five years later with two daughters aged three years and eighteen months respectively.³⁴ She recounts a period of great personal shame and anguish, during which her in-laws were consistently cruel to her. "I suffered too much at that time", she says. "But it's not my fault [that I was widowed]! How am I supposed to feel?" After many years of ostracism, her daughter urged her to remarry in the hope of ending her mother's painful isolation. With this daughter's help, Saroj turned to the internet to find a groom. This is what brought her, eventually, to Canada. The Trinidadian man who chose Saroj for a wife traveled to India for their wedding, and three years later she joined him in Toronto. Once she arrived, the until-then seemingly mild mannered groom became very strict, ordering her to cook, clean, wash clothes, "do everything". He "completely changed", becoming verbally and physically abusive and at one point attempting to have her immigration status revoked. Saroj acquiesced to all of his demands, saying "I know my duties, I know my religion." In this she appears to be invoking the sentiments of Manu, who decreed that "a virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of good qualities" (Olivelle, 2004: 5.154)

After seven months of emotional and physical abuse, Saroj began to fear for her daughter's safety and sought the assistance of the South Asian Women's Centre. She

³⁴ Only on reviewing my notes of this highly emotional conversation with Saroj did I realize a discrepancy with respect to her daughters. While here she mentions having two young girls at the time of her husband's death, throughout the rest of her narrative she refers only to "my daughter" in the singular. I do not know what became of the other child. It is possible that she remained under the care of Saroj's deceased husband's natal family.

is now living apart from her husband. Her daughter is now afraid to get married because she fears that all Hindu men are like her abusive stepfather. If she does marry, she says she hopes it will be to a white man. Saroj simply prays that her daughter will find a good husband, and has no objection to the possibility of marriage to a non-Hindu. She is very clear in having never taught her daughter any "traditional" behaviour. "She is free. I always say to her, you are free".

Saroj still wears *sindur* in her part, red bangles on her wrist, and a large red *bindi* on her forehead. She still considers herself to be a wife. She says:

Internally I feel he is my husband. Still I think maybe one day he will change. This is Hinduism. I always keep quiet. I think, OK, God is watching everything, right? This is Hinduism. I believe in *karma*. I am doing my *karma*. I always try my best to do everything for everyone. But I am fifty. It is very difficult at this age if anybody comes to control you.

She does not consider her situation to be unusual, and feels that it is normal for husbands to want to control their wives. The difference, as she sees it, is that in India, the extended family would protect her, but in Canada she is alone, and thus at greater risk. Despite her negative personal experiences with her former in-laws, she believes it would be harder for her current husband to get away with abuse in an extended family setting. She interprets the lack of respect shown to her as a widow as being directly related to the lack of a husband – as long as she was married, she was treated well as a part of the family. In her present situation, she can only hope that her husband will someday reform his behaviour and adopt true "inner goodness" so that they can live together again and she can return to a proper wifely role. She cannot go back to India, she says, because there she would be even further ostracized now than in her previous

state as a widow. In Canada, "nobody cares" whether or not she is embodying a proper category of womanhood. "It's my *karma* to be here and keep doing my duties. Maybe someday he will change and realize his mistake. This is Hinduism."

Unlike Saroj, her husband does maintain a temple at home. Despite his outward observance of ritual, however, she considers him not to be a true Hindu, because "he is not good inside, and his knowledge of Hinduism comes from external sources". How can he be a good Hindu, she asks if, while performing ritual acts, he is at the same time abusing her and her daughter? Saroj's narrative is one of faith and suffering; of a strong sense of duty and resignation to the performance of one's *karma*. Despite her strong attachment to Hindu values, *puja* has no role in her life. For her, being a good Hindu woman is about cultivating and maintaining an internal goodness that guarantees the propriety of one's outward actions toward others. Internal goodness entails the uncomplaining performance of one's *karma* – in her case, the *karma* of being first a widow, then a battered wife, and now an estranged one who lives apart but still considers herself to be married and thus to have duties toward her husband. She continues to visit him daily in order to prepare his meals, do his laundry and clean his apartment. While she does not engage in daily acts of performative worship in her home, Saroj does very clearly embody religious narratives of wifehood in her ideological and practical commitment to that status and to the duties it prescribes.

These examples illustrate in various ways the reality that while a woman's outwardly orthodox performance of gendered religious narratives, whether they involve *puja* each

morning and evening or are less explicitly ritualized, might be understood by those around her as necessary actions performed in fulfillment of her culturally-determined role as *pativrata* (or, if unmarried, as appropriately upholding whatever *stridharma* is appropriate to one's stage in life), the ritual actor herself in many cases brings a host of other intentions to these performances, and draws from them in ways that are entirely intimate to her own experience of herself and of the Divine.

Jyoti rejects the *pativrata* model altogether and prides herself on what she considers a unique engagement with tradition. Yet this does not exclude her from the performance of religious narratives, as she emulates Durga and interprets her own life choices through the mythic lens of the great goddess. Aditi manages to reconcile the discourse of orthodoxy with her own long cherished ritual practices, finding no contradiction in her stated preference for philosophy and the discourses of "learned men" and in her demonstrated predilections for popular ritual performance.

Bijli, Radha and Divya each speak of women's religious duties in the context of the domestic sphere, simultaneously invoking a discourse of equality, personal choice and freedom along with that of the observance and maintenance of tradition. The ambiguity revealed by the narratives of these three women is characteristic of lived religious experience and helps us to move beyond bounded concepts that freeze religious actors in stasis. Bijli, Radha and Divya bring their own interpretations to auspicious womanhood and the religious responsibilities it entails, ensuring a space within it for their own happiness and spiritual fulfillment.

Lalita and Poonam represent the voices of second generation Indo-Canadian Hindu women in this chapter. In their stories we see a conscious construction of identity, but one that does not fully support the predicted trajectory described by Coward and Banerjee (2005) above, in which second generation children pull away from tradition in favour of integrating with mainstream Canadian society. Hindu identity is an important aspect of both Lalita and Poonam's daily experience, and their identification with tradition is strongly marked by personal choice rather than parental pressure. Perhaps more than any other participants in the study, they are deliberately selecting the religious narratives that they wish to perform, and their choices appear to be based on which offer the most meaning and relevance to them as individuals.

Kalpana exemplifies the woman who lives up to tradition while stubbornly insisting on distancing herself from orthodoxy. Her household shrines speak of a deeply personal and meaningful relationship with the gods that she has lovingly crafted over decades. That relationship is both so intimate and so secure that she need not even worry about cooking beef in front of God, for she is sure in her intentions and in dedication to her understanding of the sacred. Kalpana manages to carve her own religious path in this way while at the same time serving as the ritual specialist at the heart of her family, safeguarding the health and success of her husband and children.

Savita expresses frustration at the adaptations required to the physical arrangement and use of one's shrine in diaspora, lamenting the loss of a separate *puja* room. Her

comments also underscore the repeated theme of wishing to pass on tradition to subsequent generations without forcing compliance. Kala and Rashmila too demonstrate the delicate balancing act required of Hindu mothers in Canada as they describes their efforts to nurture their own religiosity, provide a framework for their children, and at the same time ensure their ability to integrate well into their surroundings.

Sonita and Saroj too are engaged in the performance of gendered religious narratives, with some striking variations. These may have much to do with the very different circumstances of their migrations to Canada: while the majority of research participants have lived somewhat comfortably in Canada for over twenty years, these women have only recently arrived and are struggling both financially and emotionally to become settled. Sonita performs *puja* twice daily but is in fact quite relieved to be in a place where her Hindu identity is *not* a central aspect of her existence. Quotidian concerns of survival are her priority, and she is not unduly concerned about her daughters' maintenance of tradition in the coming years. Yet faith remains at the center of her experience, as she looks back on her journey to Canada and says that "with belief and honesty you can accomplish anything". Saroj, despite stunning obstacles, persists in her identification as *pativrata* but out of an aversion to external ritual does not perform *puja* at all. She speaks of "doing her *karma*" and is clearly troubled by her inability to be "a proper wife". She repeatedly and emphatically stresses her desire that her daughter be free from any imposed religious expectations.

“What is a man, and what is a woman? Such images of woman, or of man, are foundational. We carry them in the very structure of our consciousness. They are shaped by and are part of the centuries’ long cumulative traditions of our religions and cultures. Even people who think of themselves as secular ‘think’ with these images” (Eck & Jain, 1986: 65). And yet it is clear that even if these 37 women “think” with the images of Sita, Lakshmi and Parvati in approaching their own understandings of Hindu womanhood, they do so with confidence in the malleability of these models. Luce Irigaray provides us with the heuristic tool of mimesis, in which women engage imaginatively with stereotypical gender roles, performing them unfaithfully in order to demonstrate their invalidity. She writes:

To play with mimesis is ...for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible’, of ‘matter’ – to ‘ideas’, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language (1985: 76).

The use of Irigaray's notion of “unfaithful” performance is intentionally overdrawn here. I am not suggesting that two possible ways of being a Hindu woman (i.e. culturally determined praxis vs. imaginative, creative poiesis) are in mutually-exclusive opposition, nor that these narratives consistently demonstrate the intentional subversion of normativity. Rather I am suggesting that for many of these women, the daily performance of religious narrative provides a space for a poietic praxis: for a performance of culturally-mandated ritual acts that express and perpetuate normativity while at the same time permitting the re-imagining and expansion of traditional gender

roles. It is best to think of this dynamic not as a fundamental opposition but rather as a generative, creative tension. Rather than conceptualizing Indian women as passive victims, the notion of poiesis suggests that women may be bound by culture while at the same time questioning, critiquing, and actively changing it.³⁵ This praxis serves as a sort of Ricoeurian narrative, a frame for interpreting experience that permits flexibility and change, while also providing a sense of a continuous self (see also Bruner, 1987). In this view, identity is intimately tied to the imagination – it is a creative, poietic becoming that floats alongside and is in dialogue with, but cannot be encompassed by, the external discourse of Brahmanic orthodoxy.

The most striking observation to emerge from these narratives is twofold: first, the distinction between the relevance of the *pativrata* ideal to one's own life as opposed to that of one's daughters and daughters-in-law; and secondly the distinction between one's children being rooted in a clear identity – which mothers want – and requiring them to actively perform the roles associated with that identity – which mothers do not actively pursue.

Contextualizing the Findings

Two ethnographies are of particular value in setting the results of this study within a broader interpretive context: Whitney Kelting's path breaking ethnography *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*

³⁵ Melanie Saucier (forthcoming) writes of the possibility that we might think of women in these contexts as "active victims", an analytical category deserving of further exploration.

(2001), and Tracy Pintchman's *Guests at Gods Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (2005).

Kelting highlights the prominence of Indian women as religious adepts in the lived tradition. Her study, while concerned with Jain women, is significant in many ways for the present enquiry, not least because a central theme is interconnectedness of lives, and of religion with daily life. In a letter to the women whose religious creativity formed the basis of her ethnography, she writes: "All the time, just in living, you understand and explain Jain philosophy and theology: in worship, in making food, in raising your little ones, and in the way you run your homes" (2001: xiv). I could say the same to the participants of the present study. In Kelting's case, a key element in this day-to-day theologizing is the creation, collection, transmission and performance of devotional songs. In her interpretive study she presents a uniquely feminine Jain theology, developed and transmitted through narrative.

Kelting portrays a creative tension between the received ideas of orthodox, textual sources on Jain theology (in which women are either ignored or understood negatively) with personal understandings developed through the collection of vernacular texts and devotional literature (which portray women as devotees par excellence). She describes a process in which women's reimaginings shape, in a very concrete way, the orthodox tradition:

Women draw much of their rhetorical structure for 'female-ness' from vernacular texts and images of women as devotees in the devotional literature. The lack of prescriptive advice expressly for women in the lay manual literature permits the lay women to negotiate this terrain by

articulating how they understand their own religious practice, usually by recreating Jain narratives and songs. Despite laywomen's lack of direct access to the Sanskrit/Prakrit orthodoxy, they build Jain theologies and transmit these beliefs and practices to their children - the same children who may grow up to be mendicants who write the prescriptive and devotional texts which then circle back to the women themselves (2001: 23).

Unlike Hindu women, who have access to a multitude of devotional handbooks to guide their ritual activities, Kelting explains that Jain lay manuals do not address women's experience directly. "Jain laywomen are the experts at being Jain laywomen; not one tract instructs them on their practice" (2001: 30). As in Hindu families however, the observed piety of a household's women is taken to be indicative of an entire family's moral character. Jain women too, then, can be described as the ritual caretakers of the home. This extends beyond ritual performance: appropriate management of the household, especially in terms of food preparation, is an important hallmark of a devout family. The responsibility for passing on Jain (or Hindu) values and identity to children typically falls to women. In this way we can see how deeply embedded within the fabric of daily life is the important performance of embodying and enacting appropriate religious ideals. All of this takes place within a community of women: "Women learn *puja* and fasts when they do these *pujas* and fasts with others. Women's most important source for knowledge of worship is, in fact, the other women in their lives" (Kelting, 2001: 115).

The *stavan* (devotional songs) collected and sung by Kelting's informants are not presented as radically transgressive counter-narratives. They contain, for instance, no

commentary on the social status of women within the tradition. Kelting does not interpret their performance as a means of negotiating problematic household relationships; nor as constructing a female identity that runs against the normative grain. In fact, Kelting warns against defining women's power always in opposition to men's, arguing that imposing such a resistance model on Jain women undermines their status rather than shedding light on their *emic* categories of worth. But *stavan* do diverge from orthodoxy in some senses: in that they tend to feature the relationship of laity to the Jinas, rather than philosophy, they "seem often to articulate devotional views and theological understandings seemingly at odds with the normative establishment" (Kelting, 2001: 28). The result is the emergence of a unique theology, controlled by women and recorded by them in the fluid and multivalent texts of devotional songs:

Jain laywomen's theologies are developed in the practice and performance of *stavan* singing. Devotional songs articulate theology through their lyrics and through the contexts in which each *stavan* is sung, which themselves reflect the women's interpretations of these contexts and songs... *Stavan* performers understand the *stavan* according to a complex relationship... between received ideas and the singers' particular experiences (Kelting, 2001: 30).

It is important to note that, unlike Hindu women, Jain women have a real choice between householder and mendicant life. Within the *Terapanthi Svetambara* sect, for example, the majority of renouncers are women.³⁶ This makes their experience unique among Indian women, and may bring an increased degree of agency to their consequent performances. And yet, despite the potential to choose the life of a renouncer, "Jain women are symbolically representative of the lay path" (Kelting. 2001:

³⁶ The Jain community consists of two principal sects, *Digambara* ("sky clad") and *Svetambara* ("white clad"). Only *Svetambara* renunciant orders accept females as fully-fledged mendicants, as it is unthinkable for a female ascetic to go naked as is required for *Digambara* renunciants (Vallely, 2002: 16).

52). In fact, their expertise in this path is such that "they can be seen as the primary source for important knowledge about being Jains" (Kelting, 2001: 81). Male informants "almost universally" identified women as the experts on all things religious (Kelting, 2001: 168). In other words, women's devotional activity is a key site for the 'doing' of Jainism, and their authority as religious experts is widely recognized within the religious community.

Kelting argues that Jain women work out their own answers to their own unique theological questions through their daily ritual performances of *puja*. These questions are often intimately tied to everyday life, dealing with such problems as, for example, "what to cook during the hot season when the only vegetables available (potatoes, eggplant) were not acceptable" (Kelting, 2001: 201). Like my own study, Kelting's work reveals the importance of women's religious performances both private and public, including explorations of *bhava*; of performing identity; and of intergenerational dynamics.

Tracy Pintchman's ethnography takes as its subject the sacred month of Kartik (October - November) in the holy city of Benares, describing and interpreting the daily ritual preparations culminating in Krishna's marriage to Tulsi on the very day that the orthodox tradition marks Vishnu's awakening from his cosmic slumber. Over the course of the ethnography, Krishna is ritually raised from a playful baby boy to a dashing bridegroom (complete with mistress), and the women responsible for these rituals have an opportunity to express, celebrate, and make sacred their uniquely female values of

relationship, marriage and fertility. Women's devotional activities during Kartik both appropriate and transform orthodox Vaishnavite traditions "in ways that reflect women's this-worldly concerns and desires" (Pintchman, 2005: 12).

Like Kelting and like myself, Pintchman is concerned with vernacular religion, and with women's position as experts on daily, lived religious experience. A significant element is the recitation of *kathas*, or ritual stories. One such story is the *Kartik Mahatmya Skanda Purana* - the story of the Buddha's irreligious and unchaste wife, whose failure to live up to the *pativrata* ideal effectively shortens *his* life. After his death, the woman is advised to perform the *kartik vrata* - and especially to offer lamps to Vishnu. She does so, and her sins are dissolved. She attains *moksha* not through wifely propriety but through devotion to Vishnu! "Buddha's wife attains spiritual fulfillment not through the power accumulated through proper wifely behaviour, but through religious devotion, bypassing the cultural ideal. In this case, devotion to Vishnu supplants wifely devotion to the husband" (Pintchman, 2005: 31).

Traditional ritual *foci* of the month of Kartik, drawn from the classical tradition and ostensibly organized around the awakening of the great god Vishnu from his cosmic slumber, are appropriated selectively by Benarsi women, who Pintchman observes to emphasize "elements that figure most prominently and meaningfully in their own lives" (2005: 54). Such themes include human relationships (especially that of mother and wife), fertility, sexuality, and marriage, as well as spiritual renewal. Devotees typically adopt a stance of loving service toward Krishna as the month-long *puja* unfolds:

Kartik *puja* invites worshippers to envision themselves as participants in Krishna's divine *lila* [play] and assume the role of his original devotees. In this case, it is specifically the *gopis* who serve as role models for *puja* participants: participants express their devotion to Krishna by replicating the caring bonds that Krishna shared with the women who loved him during his sojourn on earth in ancient times. The love that the *gopis* lavished on Krishna in ancient times thus becomes for many *puja* participants the prototype for the love they lavish on him in the *puja* circle (Pintchman, 2005: 92).

This stance is complimented by that of a mother toward an adored child, particularly in the early stages of the month, when Krishna is understood to be in infancy. This parental attitude is very popular, and "reflects the social and emotional significance that Hindu women living in North India tend to attribute to motherhood and the raising of children, especially sons" (Pintchman, 2005: 94). Thus "amorous and maternal devotional sentiments" are equally present and variously expressed throughout the month of *pujas*, both characterized by a "diffuse emphasis on loving care and service" (Pintchman, 2005: 94). Benarsi women recast Kartik *puja* in terms of marriage and motherhood, two themes of primary importance in their daily realities. It is significant that the wedding to be arranged is that of Krishna and not of Vishnu: the great god is too remote, while loveable Krishna is more intimate and more emotionally satisfying: "It is much harder to cozy up to Vishnu" (Pintchman, 2005: 95).

Pintchman's research participants almost always express their motivations in performing the daily rituals as "a way of expressing devotion to and affection for God in a way that [they] felt would 'make God happy'" (2005: 101). Two particularly evocative examples of such loving service follow:

....Devotees perform an act of religious service (*seva*) to Krishna in waking him up, and all the goddesses serve their mates by doing the same. On one level, this waking is an ordinary morning occurrence, an act of service that in domestic contexts tends to fall in the female domain. It is one of the duties of married women to awaken their husbands in the morning, and waking one's husband and one's god are homologous devotional activities. Mothers also wake up their children (Pintchman, 2005: 107).

-and-

...When she bathes Krishna and the other deities with Ganges water, she envisions Krishna as a young child, and she bathes him with the same loving feeling that she had when she at one time bathed her own children. In the context of this *puja*, feeding, waking, bathing, and so forth are all acts that have multiple resonances, suggesting simultaneously sexual and maternal intimacy, religious devotion, service, and loving care (Pintchman, 2005: 111).

Interestingly, it is the alluring (and, by many accounts, married) Radha, and not the socially acceptable fiancée Tulsi, that Krishna is being readied to encounter in the loving bath described above. Throughout Kartik *puja*, this theme of ambivalent human relationships is elaborated:

...Both Radha and Tulsi are celebrated as Krishna's most beloved consort, assigned special places of honor, and referred to as his wife. Yet while there is a tendency in the *puja* to conflate the two as Krishna's blushing bride, the situation also suggests a potential rivalry between Radha and Tulsi, given the tensions that surely must arise from having to share their beloved mate (Pintchman, 2005: 111).

As the wedding day approaches, *puja* participants extend invitations to one another, decorate the ritual space as for a human wedding, dress the bride (a potted basil plant) in a red wedding sari and deck her out. The (brass) groom is brought in, massaged, bathed and dressed. Sweets and gifts are presented to the couple. Dowry offerings are displayed. Wedding songs are sung. A *pandit* recites the appropriate *mantra* and takes

the dowry offerings as payment. The women recite the marriage vows on behalf of the bride and groom, throw rice at them, and then celebrate with music and laughter. After the wedding, it is understood that Krishna is living with his wife now, and is no longer present among the devotees. They do not make clay images of him after this point in the ritual. Krishna's brass icon and the potted basil plant are placed in a closed cupboard overnight, and the bride and groom are understood to be busy consummating their marriage. All of this occurs on the same day that the Sanskrit tradition marks Vishnu's reawakening from his sleep, but the latter event is not observed in Kartik *puja*:

Since women control and shape Kartik *puja* traditions, these traditions tend to reflect women's values and concerns. For Hindu women, marriage is a highly significant event; Krishna's marriage to Tulsi ushers in the human wedding season in Benares, making it especially significant. In the *puja* Krishna's marriage thoroughly eclipses the Sanskrit, textually sanctioned observance of Vishnu's awakening (Pintchman, 2005: 138).

Celebrating Krishna's wedding may take precedence over the textual tradition, but Pintchman points out that this is not an overtly oppositional stance. The women conducting Kartik *puja*, she argues, do not explicitly select non-Sanskritic performances over Sanskrit ones: "That distinction is not particularly relevant to them, at least in this context" (Pintchman, 2005: 119). Rather, stories recited and rituals enacted are chosen on the basis of their subject matter, and anything "that emphasizes proper ethical behaviour is welcome" (Pintchman, 2005: 119). The concern with ethics, however, does not translate into prudishness. We see that part of the preparations for Krishna's wedding include rubbing the icon down with mustard oil, a vigorous massage that prompts much joking about the wedding night among ritual participants. One woman

expressed her worry that the god would be “too sore to have sex with Tulsi” after receiving such a massage at their hands (Pintchman, 2005: 129).

Women use their bodies to perform Kartik *puja*, and Pintchman finds that the ways in which they use them are uniquely feminine, in that “conventions concerning the use of one’s body reproduce a stress on interrelationship” (2005: 151). Key activities during the ritual include sharing, passing around of *puja* items, touching one another, speaking to one another, adjusting co-worshippers’ saris, etc. This activity could be negatively interpreted as

...constantly directing one’s action away from the ostensible focus of the worship, [the gods, present in the form of a brass icon and a basil plant] ...Indeed, one male Benarsi mocked what he perceived to be women’s lack of focus in performing *puja*, imitating the stance of a woman leaning over a religious icon and carelessly tossing *puja* items on it while gossiping loudly with someone else. But the constant physical and verbal interaction that generally takes place throughout the course of this *puja* communicates a particular moral stance. It acts to constantly direct one’s attention not only inward, toward the icons, but also outward, toward other worshippers, producing and reproducing an emphasis on the collective nature of this form of worship and one’s relationship to one’s fellow participants (Pintchman, 2005: 151).

If the *puja* is an example of embodied performance, it can also be read as a text:

Inasmuch as Kartik *puja* expresses beliefs and theologies that women participate in shaping, it does writing’s work: it helps to both articulate and perpetuate a particular vision of reality. And it does so in a medium that engages not just language but bodily activity as well. The tradition of Kartik *puja* comprises religious narratives, activities, and theologies that maintain a dual orientation toward both spiritual and familial selves; the self that is engaged in kartik worship is engaged as both a spiritual and social being (Pintchman, 2005: 146).

So women shape Kartik *puja*, and Kartik *puja* in turn informs women's social realities. Pintchman's observations lead her to argue that "traditional, religiously devout individuals may... appropriate religious narrative in ways that help organize their experience of self" (2005: 145). Like my own, her work suggests that women are living, embodying, and performing stories that offer a counterpoint to the official cultural narrative (i.e. what constitutes Hinduism) - it takes up and integrates the official norms, using them to put women's values (marriage, family, fertility etc.) at center stage. Far from transgressive, gender norms are articulated, perpetuated, internalized, enacted and reaffirmed throughout the month. The result is a valorization of feminine nature: women do this *puja* because they are understood to be, and understand themselves to be, better suited to it than men. In this context, they are religiously superior. This is largely attributed to Hindu women's ability to better bear the burden of caring for others. Men are characterized as religiously lazy, lacking in discipline and the patience required to carry out long *pujas* early each morning. "Men cannot do what women do", one informant explained (Pintchman, 2005: 188). "Men don't like *puja* very much", added another (Pintchman, 2005: 190).

A significant amendment, then, to typical textbook characterizations of women's ritual: Pintchman clarifies that "while women do indeed tend to regard themselves as 'the repositories of tradition', they tend not to regard the traditions and stories they preserve as ephemeral, dispensable, or even uniquely for or by women", as the Brahmanic orthodox tradition would have it (2005: 118). This is not just about power. It is also about ethics: "Many women who participate in Kartik *puja* clearly describe their

participation as an ethically valorized activity that expresses and reflects the inherent virtue and strength of their gender. ...Their proclamation of female value provides a moral framework of self-evaluation in which women claim superiority for themselves" (Pintchman, 2005: 193). This turns our typical understanding of the position of women's ritual performances on its ear. In no way subordinate, the ritual activity of these women represents a key site for the 'doing' of Hinduism. Through their participation in this month-long ritual, and likely through their devotional activity the rest of the year, Hindu women construct and reconstruct their identities as strong cultural figures, as beings of worth. In this interpretation, the religious framework in which they operate is not oppressive but empowering, putting at centre stage, and in fact making sacred, their uniquely female values.

The most recent scholarship available on Hindu women's ritual lives is well represented by Pintchman's edited volume *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (2007). Contributors to this work make clear the need to broaden analytical categories to achieve a more nuanced understanding of women's lived religious worlds. The categories of ritual and domesticity are held up to scrutiny and shown to be surprisingly porous and far-reaching in their inter-relationship. The result is an interrogation of 'the relationship of women's ritual activities to normative domesticity, exposing and exploring the nuances, complexities, and limits of this relationship' (Pintchman, 2007: 6). Challenge and innovative re-interpretation of tradition are central themes here, as they are in the present study.

Margins are lively spaces. Much creativity and meaning-making occurs there. Hindu women, from one perspective relegated to the margins of normative practice, do cultivate and celebrate their own manifold worlds of meaning. In truly important ways, the margin becomes the center as women actively shape what it means to be Hindu. Each of the studies presented above investigates the ways in which women both subtly and overtly resist, contest, and re-imagine classical roles, contributing to a deepened understanding of the manifold ways – both positive and negative – that Hindu women experience their tradition. Hindu women's religious practices have traditionally been constrained by the cultural construction of their female bodies, but these studies highlight the many creative ways in which some women move beyond these constraints to create worlds of meaning and become religious specialists in their own rights. The present study contributes to the important project of tracing the multiplicity of meaningful engagements with Hindu belief and practice that mark the rhythms of women's daily lives: while a minority of respondents indicated that their personal relationships with God allow them to negotiate traditional models (only four of 37), the majority (31 of 37) of participants see themselves as faithfully embodying religious narratives in their daily engagements with Hinduism, and speak of these performances as meaningful to their sense of self as individuals and as members of a cohesive Hindu community in Canada. This impression holds despite the idiosyncratic nature of these participants' engagements with tradition. For these women, performing religious narratives in ways that resonate most with their own personal experiences, needs and desires is not subversive. It is Hinduism.

Chapter Five

Duty and Desire: Conclusions

*"The ties of family, the obligations to the world - they're not genuine.
It is your beauty that makes me drunk." (Mirabai)*

Daily engagements with God, however imagined, provide the women who participated in this study with a narrative framework through which life experience is made coherent. This personalized grammar is born of a lifelong immersion within Hindu belief and practice. It draws on cultural roles exemplified by the adult women of their childhood worlds, and exists in dialogic relationship with *archana* performed by temple *pandits*, while at the same time surpassing all of these. In this dialogue, no one way of being Hindu is given precedence. Instead, everything means. All ways of doing Hinduism are "correct". Despite the limitations of temple practice in these Canadian cities, governed as that is at times by Boards of Directors' concerns to foster a pan-Indian Upanishadic atmosphere with a minimum of messiness and ritualization, these personal expressions of Hinduism continue undeterred.

A central site for this continued theological work is the household, as women craft and maintain household shrines which encapsulate and accommodate their intimate experiences of the Divine. Mary Hancock's characterization of domestic space as marked by gender is instructive in this context:

It is a kind of space critically associated with females and femininity, and it is defined by experiences such as eating, dressing, washing, and sexual relations that are the cultural mediators of personhood. It suggests that domesticity is valued as a kind of interior world in which persons and relatedness among persons

are generated and boundaries between categories of persons are delimited (1999: 83).

Hancock goes on to describe the dynamics of her own field research setting: "The domestic world was pragmatically centered on transactions intended to manage the permeable boundaries among persons, between persons and things, and between persons and deities. The principal arenas for this, housework and ritual, were located in the domestic interior and were constitutive of it" (1999: 105). None of the women who participated in the present study are exceptional in their praxis. They are not spirit mediums or healers, as were those in Hancock's study. I wish to emphasize that this makes their lived experiences of Hinduism all the more important as sites of analysis, as they embody the very core of Hindu devotional practice.

It must also be said that not all of the women I spoke with maintain household shrines (see Table A, variable 1: five participants do not have a shrine at home). For instance, the household ritual performances of Kaajal, a retired nurse, consist of beginning and ending each day with uttering the sacred syllable "AUM". Another deeply devout woman daily expresses her devotion by reverently noting the presence of the sun in the sky, and by working on the translation of Sanskrit *slokas*. Several others indicated that while they do maintain simple shrines in some corner of their homes, and "try to do some small thing each day", it is not something that occupies a great deal of their time or thoughts. A third of respondents spoke of other concerns (e.g., economic pressures, racism, and political exigencies in India) as more fundamental to shaping their daily lives in Canada (see Table A, variables 17 and 18). Recognition of this multiplicity of

practice is crucial. Not all women feel pressure to adhere to the *pativrata* ideal and its concomitant ritual job description. Among those who do, the variety of responses to that pressure is considerable. Even fewer consider it important that their daughters or daughters-in-law embody this ideal. All of this suggests that engagements with the sacred for most of these women are a way of participating in culture selectively and on their own terms. To the extent that they perform religious narratives in their household devotional lives, the women in this study do so because they want to, and in the ways that they want to. In many cases, elements that are not wanted, such as regular temple attendance, fasting, or regarding one's husband as a living god, are dropped without remorse or concern for negative karmic consequences.

In addition to revealing the importance of the personalized narratives inhering in *murtis* found on household shrines, and raising the as-yet open question of why ritual innovation is readily accepted by research participants in daily household performance, but only reluctantly or not at all in *vrata* performance, this study has led to the following primary conclusions:

1. The daily performance of religious narratives is an important part of the majority of participants' lives in Canada.
2. Religious narratives of auspicious womanhood, while considered important, are flexibly interpreted and deployed by participants.
3. The majority of research participants are concerned that their children learn about Hindu tradition, but this concern does not lead to an insistence that they continue traditional practices in their own lives unless they wish to do so.

For the women who participated in this study, devotional practice is one avenue for the embodied production and reproduction of a grammar or coherent narrative framework for meaning. Through expressions of devotion and the performance of religious roles, they locate and legitimate themselves within – or distinguish themselves from – their community and tradition. Over and over again research participants in this study related to me the relative importance – or irrelevance – of religious narratives in their own lives, and very often made explicit the ways in which their performances of these narratives both connect and distance them from India, and from what they perceive to be 'tradition', as required. Of course the performance of religious narratives can mark both continuities and disjunctions between 'the way it used to be' and 'the way it is here'. For several of the women in this study, daily engagements with religion are markers of difference as well as of identification with tradition. "I do things differently"; "Not many people will tell you this"; "I was doing it wrong, so why bother?"; "I try to follow as best as I can but it doesn't really matter – all those things are so ancient".

Limitations of the Study and Further Research Possibilities

The conclusions I have reached concerning the relevance of religious narratives in the lives of 37 Indo-Canadian Hindu women are the product of a small-scale person-centered qualitative study. As with any such project, the results of my research are necessarily shaped by the circumstances of the participants. Thirty-five of the 37 women interviewed are of comfortable economic means and have been settled in Canada for decades (or all of their lives). The questions I pose here would benefit from being asked of a broader sample of participants. Fruitful comparisons might be made,

for instance, between a larger set of narratives provided by recent arrivals who may be struggling economically, linguistically, and emotionally, and those of more comfortably settled individuals. The stories of Sonita and Saroj, members of the South Asian Women's Centre, do suggest that important differences in the role of religion in daily life might be revealed. Questions of caste identification and sectarian affiliation would also add greater texture to these findings. I see this as a promising area of further research.

Similarly, more comprehensive inquiry into intergenerational differences would be useful for our understanding of lived Hinduism in Canada. Only three of this study's participants are second-generation Indo-Canadians, and their narratives begin to reveal some interesting points for further study. Indeed:

Becoming a diaspora is a long term business of managing change and continuity, and of negotiating old and new senses of identity as people come to terms with their new environment, and as they raise succeeding generations who in turn look critically at the position and achievements of an older generation of migrants and make their own decisions about who they are, how they should fit into their new homeland, and how they should relate to the land from which their parents, grandparents, or even more remote ancestors came (Brown, 2006: 29).

This project does not aim to generalize the devotional lives of all Indo-Canadian Hindu women, nor even all Indo-Canadian women in the cities of Ottawa and Toronto. As made clear in the title, *Hindu Women, Lived Religion, and the Performance of Gendered Narratives: Canadian Examples*, the aim is instead to focus on the creative activities of the women who have here described their actions in response, or in opposition, to this cultural ideal, and to deepen our understanding of lived Hinduism in the process. The majority of women in this study mark their homes and bodies as specifically Hindu, and

express their devotion daily as Hindu women within the zones of sacrality they construct. This is not a unilateral reproduction of patriarchal discourse, under which women are obliged to perform certain ritual tasks for the wellbeing of their family members. A wide variety of responses to the *pativrata* ideal has been reported above. It is the creativity, the flexibility, and above all the self-confidence in the validity of these responses that make these women's devotional lives a key site for the reimagining of traditional gender discourse.

The women whose words appear on these pages are not mute subjects of monolithic tradition. They are quite vocal individuals who are busy defining what it means to be Hindu in these Canadian cities – not only for themselves, but for their children, their parents, their husbands and brothers, and for the community at large. These women bring the ideal and the real into conversation, and the result of the dialogue is “Hinduism”.

Appendices

Appendix A

Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Guidelines for the Use of Temple Facilities

A. GENERAL

1. All activities in the Temple are strictly Hindu religious activities.
2. All religious activities in the Temple shall be officiated/performed only by the Temple priest(s).
3. Any person doing Hindu Vedic rituals may use the facilities for special religious rituals or services, to be done by the temple priest, by obtaining prior authorization.
4. The user shall be responsible for cleaning up after the function and for maintaining proper order and decor during such use, and for removing all garbage to the Garbage Bin in the Parking Lot (beside garage).
5. Tobacco (smoking and chewing) is not permitted and use of drugs and alcohol is strictly prohibited in the Temple premises.
6. All offerings and funds collected on the premises shall be the property of the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton Inc. The Temple shall make provision for special expenses, by prior arrangement through the Treasurer.
7. Canvassing, other than for raising funds for the Temple or for related religious activities of the Temple, is not permitted on the Temple premises.
8. Children (all ages) are always welcome to all services; however, the parents should see that proper sanctity, peace and quiet are maintained during *Poojas*, *Havans*, and other services.
9. Notices and announcements of activities may be placed on the notice board provided for the purpose with prior authorization from the Management.
10. All activities shall be limited to 3 hours, except for marriage, where the premises may be used for up to 4 hours.
11. All activities shall be concluded by 8:00 pm, so that the building may be vacated by 8:30 pm, to allow the priests and the manager to follow their regular routine.

B. MAHAMANDAP

1. Shoes and leather footwear are not allowed in the worship area.
2. All religious /ritualistic activities conducted in the *Mahamandap* shall relate to the *Sthapit* (installed) deities of the Temple. These include *pooja*, *Archana*, *bhajan*, scripture readings and recitations.
3. No pictures are to be used for worship in the *Mahamandap*.
4. Photography and use of cell phones is not permitted in the *Mahamandap*.
5. Consumption of food and drinks is not allowed in the *Mahamandap*.
6. Only special chairs provided by the Temple are allowed to serve the handicapped. Wheelchairs are allowed in the *Mahamandap*.

C. GITA BHAVAN

1. Shoes and Leather footwear are not allowed in the *GITA BHAVAN*.
2. *Gita Bhavan* is intended for use as the *Yagna-Shala* for religious, educational and other related religious activities. These include, among others:
 - 2.1 *Havan, Satsang, Bhajan* and *Keertan*, Recital, Concerts. (*GITA BHAVAN* is the only place where concerts are held).
 - 2.2 Sanskars such as *Upanayan*, Marriage, *Upakarma*, *Seemanthan*, etc.
 - 2.3 Festivals such as Ganesh festival, *Janamashtmi*, *Mahavir Jayanti*, *Durga Pooja*, etc.
 - 2.4 Special services in memory of the departed.
 - 2.5 Discourses on religion and scriptures by visiting scholars and saints.
 - 2.6 Only Hindu devotional music shall be played.

In order to maintain hygiene and routine cleanliness, tea, coffee or soft drinks are not served in the Temple building premises (This excludes apartments).

D. KITCHEN FACILITIES

The kitchen is not intended for general cooking of meals but as a service facility only.

1. The kitchen may be used for preparing *prasad* and items of *Bhog* associated with religious services of the Temple.
2. Alcoholic beverages, meat, poultry and fish products are not allowed in the Temple premises (inside or outside).
3. In view of the sensitivity of a segment of Hindu devotees, onion and garlic in any form shall not be served in the Temple.
4. In view of the allergic reaction of certain individuals to peanuts and walnuts, these in any form shall not be served in the Temple.
5. Paper plates, napkins, plastic spoons, Styrofoam cups for water are provided by the Temple for Sunday *Bhog* and other Temple activities. Devotees are expected to bring their own supplies for marriages and other functions. In emergency, the temple can provide these at a cost of \$25/100 per set.
6. The host must take home all left over food brought to the Temple. No food shall be left in the refrigerator.

E. MARRIAGE

1. The presiding priest at a marriage ceremony (both its registration and its religious ritual aspect) at the Hindu Temple shall always be our designated Temple priest. An outside priest invited by either the bride's or the bridegroom's party may only assist if needed.
2. The Temple being a religious place is not suitable for certain marriage celebrations such as social dancing, etc. (example *Bhangra* or *Garba*, etc.)

3. All activities related to marriage ceremonies must be completed within the regular temple hours. This also applies to all other private activities.
4. As noted for all activities (marriages included) at the temple, alcoholic beverages and meat, poultry, fish products are not allowed at both the built temple premises and the temple grounds outside.
5. As also noted for all activities (marriages included) tea, coffee, juices or soft drinks are neither prepared nor served within the built temple premises.
6. Outside tent can be installed where food can be served along with tea, coffee, juices and soft drinks; other restrictions still apply.

F. HOSTS FOR SUNDAY POOJA

1. Spread sheets in *Gita Bhavan* for plates.
2. Take food that is to be offered as *Bhog* to *Maha Mandap* before noon, but not during the discourse.
3. Send food for the priests and manager to their apartments before serving food.
4. After lunch put away sheets for laundry.
5. Vacuum *Gita Bhavan*.
6. Clean kitchen floor with broom and put cleaned and dried utensils back in the cupboards.
7. Remove all garbage to the Garbage Bin in the Parking Lot (beside garage).

Appendix B

Highlights of *Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir* Homepage

<http://www.durgatemple.ca/main/index.php>

Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir Association

Let us together create a:

***'Temple of the congregation,
Temple by the congregation, and
Temple for the congregation'***

MISSION

To promote and practice ideals of Hindu and Hindu based religions through worship, education and teaching.

To strive for spiritual richness and human excellence through assimilation of values in Hindu scriptures into daily lives, and

To recognize and respect other religions and belief systems in their proper context.

OUR AIMS

RELIGIOUS AIM - To cater to the religious needs of the community in accordance with traditional Hindu philosophy.

CULTURAL AIM - To cultivate a better understanding of Indian culture and heritage for coming generations.

SOCIAL AIM - To promote social activities leading to social cohesion and human betterment.

EDUCATIONAL AIM - To promote the learning of Indian languages, leading to a better understanding of the Indian literature and philosophies.

Appendix C

Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir Wikipedia Page

Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir Association (VSDMA) was incorporated in 1997 as a non-profit organization to promote religious, social, and cultural activities of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa and Eastern Ontario. **Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir** is the newest temple in Ottawa-capital city region of Canada. It is located on 55 Clarey Av. in Glebe area off Bank Street. Devi Durga Puja is held there every day but special Sunday services are held from 10.30 AM to 1 PM.

The main purpose of this Hindu temple is to promote Hinduism in Canada and Eastern Ontario. its membership and congregation is growing day by day. **Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir Association** strives to achieve the following objectives. **Religious Goal:** To cater to the religious needs of the community in accordance with traditional Hindu philosophy. **Cultural Goal:** To cultivate a better understanding of Indian culture and heritage for coming generations **Social Goal:** To promote social activities leading to social cohesion and human betterment. **Educational Goal:** To promote the learning of Indian Languages, leading to a better understanding of the Indian Literature and philosophies.

A brief historical background: Mata devotees, Mrs. Leena Shukla and the late Mrs. Rama Juneja, originally conceived the idea of having a Durga Mandir in the National Capital Region of Canada. Thus they became the two founding members of this temple. Inspired by their dedicated efforts, Mr. Surinder Sumra joined them and became a co-founder after a few months. The name **Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir Association** (VSDMA) for the temple was suggested by Maharaj ji of India.

Pandit Ravindra Narain Panday ji was approached by the members and requested to accept the reins of the temple's priesthood. Pandit ji brought on the needed impetus and initiated the performing of various services in mid-December, 1997. These included regular Sunday services, other required services as well as services at devotee's homes. The Community Center at Bellman Street remained the initial temporary location until May 1998.

With the expanding membership, the temple found a more suitable location in the Community Center at the corner of Bank Street and Riverside Drive, and moved there in June 1998. Due to ongoing renovations at the center, the temple had to move once again to yet another Community Center on Somerset Street East. The relentless efforts of the devotees finally succeeded in finding a permanent home for the temple at its present location, **55 Clary Avenue, Ottawa** where the devotees reshaped an old church into a vibrant temple in September 2005. During the following year, the auspicious Sthapana of the Moorties of Maa Durga and Shiv Ling took place. Despite several moves and temporary locations, the services were never interrupted.

Mandir Line Durga Mandir-Ottawa VSDMA@hotmail.com 613-321-0675
 President Mr Pramod Sood president@durgatemple.ca 613-837-5167
 VP Finance Mr. Parmod Chhabra chhabra_p@hotmail.com 613-591-5221
 Member-At Large Mrs. Leena Shukla
 members_at_large2@durgatemple.ca 613-825-9448
 Pundit jee Sh. R.N. Pandey 613-228-1305

[edit] Further reading

 This section requires expansion.

[edit] External links

 **Hinduism portal**

- Official website
- Placeopedia Link
- Canadian Desi Link

Coordinates:  45°24′03″N 75°41′11″W﻿ / ﻿45.400898°N 75.686521°W﻿ / 45.400898; -75.686521

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Hindu temples in Canada

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Toronto • Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton • St. John's Hindu Temple (Newfoundland) • Vishva Shakti Durga Mandir

Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vishva_Shakti_Durga_Mandir"

Categories: Hindu temples in Canada | Organizations based in Ottawa | Religious organizations established in 1997

Hidden categories: Articles to be expanded from June 2008 | All articles to be expanded

Appendix D

Lakshmi Mandir, Mississauga Website Information

Lakshmi Mandir Objectives

Lakshmi Mandir was formed over 15 years ago by Pandit Satyanand Sukul. His vision to start a Mandir on the south side of Mississauga was inspired by his late father Pandit Lalman Sukul. Since inception the Mandir has grown and stays committed to serving the community through the teachings of Sanatan Dharma.

Our Objectives:

- Our focus is on being socially responsible, to serve the community through various charitable acts and give back to our community wherever there is a need
- Lakshmi Mandir has a strong belief on setting down the right foundation for your future, therefore we focus primarily on teaching and educating our children on Sanatan Dharma through our Baccho Ki Vaani youth classes. Our children have developed a very good understanding of **why** we do what we do in *Puja*, Aarti, Hawan and a solid understanding of the fundamental principles of Hinduism
- We believe that by reaching out to other cultures and religious groups we can form a solid understanding of one another, thus eliminating a lot of the confusion that can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. We want to promote a harmonious society where everyone can love and respect one another with a solid understanding of each others beliefs.

Mandir ongoing & upcoming needs

The Lakshmi Mandir is committed to serving the community through the teachings of Sanatan Dharma. The Mandir now asks for your help in the building of its new Mandir.

We are currently in need of the following:

- contacts with carpet factory/distributor; we will soon need carpet for the mandir
- contacts with people in the marble, tiles, granite industry
- general financial assistant to help complete construction

Appendix E

Interview Guide

1. Demographic information

- age (general category)
- marital status
- occupation/education
- How long have you lived in Canada?
- What part of India did you come from/is your family from?
- Do you have children? Ages?
- Do you attend temple(s) here in Ottawa/Toronto? If so, which one? How often?
- Is there a shrine in your home?
- Do you do household *puja*? How often?
- How did you learn how to do *puja* (e.g. temple priest, books, mother, grandmother)?

2. The Household Shrine as Female Space

Who decided the location of the shrine?

Who decided which gods to put on the shrine?

Who uses it?

If husband uses shrine, how often? Does he do *puja* at it?

Are changes ever made to the shrine? Who does this? Is anyone else concerned about these changes?

Who maintains the shrine (in terms of changing the flowers etc.)?

Have you ever had *Panditji* come to perform a ritual at the shrine?

Does it matter that he is not here when you do *puja*?

3. Nature of household worship

- Which gods are on your shrine?
- What else is on the shrine?
- Why did you decide to have those particular gods there?
- Is one of the *devas* more meaningful to you? Why?
- What offerings do you make?
- Do you say *mantras*? Which one(s)?
- What do you pray for?
- Are there ways you think your household worship is different than at the temple? (e.g. more intimate with just you)?
- Of the women you know who don't go to the temple, do they do household *puja* regularly?

4. Relationship with the Gods

- What are your responsibilities to the gods on your shrine? What should you do for them?
- What are the gods' responsibilities to you? Do they have duties too?
- Can you describe your relationship with the gods?

5. Why do *puja*?

- Do you ask the gods for personal favours? What kind?
- Do you ask for things for your husband, your children?
- Do you/did you do *puja* to teach your children about Hinduism?
- Would you ever decide not to have a home shrine for any reason? How would your family feel about that?

6. Vrata

- Do you ever fast?
- Which fasts?
- Why?

7. Do you think there are differences between what men and women do (e.g. home *puja*, going to *mandir*)?

8. What is the most important thing I should know about household worship?

9. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix F

Research Questions

1. For women, are household shrines an important means of maintaining and adapting Hindu identity in Canada?

- How many women have established shrines in their homes? (*Is it generally women who do this?*)
- How often do they perform *puja* at these shrines?
- How do women describe their motivations for *puja* (personal spiritual fulfillment, education of children in diaspora, an outlet for expressing problems that don't fit with the *pativrata* ideal...)?
- Is the home shrine something that is established very shortly after settling into one's new home, or something that comes much later, once pressing material necessities are taken care of?

2. For those women who do not have shrines at home, why not? Do they attend a temple? Is the importance of religion overstated in our conceptualization of Hindu identity?

3. Aside from *puja* at the household shrine, what other household ritual activities are commonly practiced in Canada (*vrata*)?

4. Are the notions of *pativrata* and *saubhagya* relevant to South Asian women in Canada? How are these ideals understood in the Canadian context? Are they rejected, upheld, ignored? How are they expressed? Can one exist without the other?

5. Is marriage a central element of religious identity for South Asian women in Canada?

6. What ideas about the "good wife" remain relevant in Canada? What pressures do these ideas exert on women?

7. Do South Asian women in Canada express the desire/obligation to "live up to tradition"? If so, what form does this take?

8. Is the patriarchal model of Hinduism (Brahmanical orthodoxy) held up as normative? Is this an issue of concern (do women feel that their voices and practices are marginalized)?

9. Do women's household ritual activities in some ways question, critique, or change the values underpinning that orthodoxy? How?

10. Do women assign significance to *puja* in terms of what is important to them in their own daily realities (e.g. their own experiences vis-à-vis marriage, motherhood, or resettlement in diaspora?)
11. Do women consider household *puja* to be distinct from temple *archana*? In what ways? Does the household shrine provide some kind of personalized link with religious tradition that temple worship does not (a more intimate space, or a shrine populated deliberately with deities most meaningful to the individual or family...)?
12. Is the household shrine in some way a feminine space (i.e. do women feel a sense of ownership/expertise around this space that they do not in other, more male-dominated, spheres, like the *mandir*)?
13. How is “*the sacred*” understood in Canada, away from the mythological and sacred geography of India? How do South Asian women in Canada talk about sacred space?
14. Is the Ramayana an important cultural narrative for South Asian women in Canada? How do women relate to Sita?
15. Are the relationships that women form with the deities on their home shrines important in the way these women understand and deal with their human relationships (wife, mother, daughter-in-law, etc.)? i.e., “Although my relationships with my husband/in-laws/kids are flawed, my relationship with my gods is perfect”?
16. Are these ideals, norms and role models interpreted differently by Hindu women who have grown up in Canada? If so, what impact does this have on their household ritual practices?

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