

HINDUISM IN CYBERSPACE

By

BRADLEY STERLING ACKROYD

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006

Copyright 2006

by

Bradley Sterling Ackroyd

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my older brother, Norm, whose lifelong love for computers and science fiction novels was the genesis of my own interest in cyberspace and technology. His technical advice and assistance with this thesis was invaluable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 CYBERSPACE AND SACRED SPACE.....	9
Definition and Significance of the Internet	9
Religion and the Internet	17
Taxonomy of Hindu-Related Sites	21
Authority and Unity in a Global Context	31
Concluding Remarks	36
3 THE DOMAINS OF HINDU TEMPLES IN AMERICA	38
Assimilation, Accretion, and Adaption	38
Temple Culture.....	39
Ecumenical Tendencies and Temple Names.....	41
Website Aesthetics and Technology	47
Little India	48
<i>Seva, Dana, and Temple Budgets</i>	52
Promotion and Advertisement.....	58
4 VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM: HINDU STUDENTS COUNCIL ACTIVITIES ONLINE	63
Ethnic Preservation and Generational Conflict	63
Hindu Students Council (HSC)	66
Hindu Students Council on the World Wide Web	68
Website Aesthetics and Technology	75
Interactivity and Community	78
Concluding Remarks	84

5 VIRTUAL REALITIES: VIRTUAL RITUAL AND CYBERCOMMUNITY	87
A Satguru's Cybercall.....	87
Embodiment and Authenticity	88
Virtual Ritual	94
CyberCommunities.....	101
Concluding Remarks	116
6 CONCLUSION.....	118
APPENDIX	
A COMPLETE LIST OF ALL TEMPLE WEBSITES USED IN STUDY	124
B TEMPLES WITH GENERAL, ECUMENICAL NAMES	127
C TEMPLES WITH DEITY OR LINEAGE SPECIFIC NAMES	129
D LIST OF HSC CHAPTERS OBSERVED	131
E EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE	133
F HSC CHAPTERS EMAILED THE QUESTIONNAIRE	134
G HSC LOGO	135
H DISCUSSION ON FAITH	136
I DEVANAGARI-STYLED FONT.....	138
LIST OF REFERENCES	139
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	143

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

HINDUISM IN CYBERSPACE

By

Bradley Sterling Ackroyd

May 2006

Chair: Vasudha Narayanan

Major Department: Religion

Much like a Venn diagram—with Hinduism, America, and the Internet as the three circles—this thesis explores the relationship and intersection of American Hinduism in cyberspace. The focus is on how the Internet is used by Hindus in America, though this question must be explored in the larger context of Hindu migration and adaption to America. The Internet is a primary tool used by Hindu communities to maintain broad suburban networks and communities, particularly built around the temples and community centers. Therefore, the Internet is shaping Hindu communities in America by allowing massive, simultaneous communication among large groups of practitioners and extended families. However, the Internet also reflects adaptations and transformations that Hindus developed in becoming part of the American melting pot.

As Hindus migrated to America and assimilated into American culture, certain elements of their religious practice have inevitably been dropped, while other aspects are transformed and retained. American Hinduism tends to be ecumenical, simultaneously representing many various Hindu traditions, in an inclusive effort to bring many

immigrant minority Indians together as a unified group. Such unity provides a support network and social community, and is fundamental to the process of migration.

However, some skeptics are concerned that this ecumenical tendency is creating a generic, Brahminical ideology that breeds Hindutva ideals and revisionist histories. While Hindutva elements have indeed seeped into the American cultural and religious bricolage, and found a new home in cyberspace, my study indicates that the orthodoxy and Hindutva are only one portion of Hinduism in cyberspace and America; and a relatively small portion, at that. To the contrary, the Internet provides of multiplication of voices, allowing many diverse individuals to express their beliefs and experiences. As the Internet continues to increase in usage and significance, it will continue to generate and reflect the diversity of Hinduism, and the many global variations in practice and belief.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Much like a Venn diagram—with Hinduism, America, and the Internet as the three circles—this thesis explores the relationship and intersection of American Hinduism in cyberspace. The focus is on how the Internet is used by Hindus in America, though this question must be explored in the larger context of Hindu migration and adaption¹. The Internet is a primary tool used by American Hindu communities to maintain broad suburban networks and communities (particularly those built around temples and community centers). Therefore, the Internet is *shaping* Hindu communities in America by allowing massive, simultaneous communication among large groups of practitioners and extended families. However, the Internet also *reflects* adaptations and transformations Hindus have developed in becoming part of the American melting pot. During Hindu assimilation² into American culture, certain elements of their religious practice have inevitably been dropped, while other aspects are retained and transformed. American Hinduism tends to be ecumenical, simultaneously representing various Hindu traditions, in an inclusive effort to bring minority Indians together as a unified group. Such unity provides a support network and social community, and is fundamental to the process of migration. For this reason, many scholars, including Raymond Brady Williams, refer to the American form of Hinduism as ‘Ecumenical Hinduism’.

¹ I have, rather unreflectively, used the terms adaption and adaptation as synonymous words referring to the general process of retaining and modifying Indian cultural elements in America.

² I have used the term assimilation to mean the gradual process that migrant non-resident Indians adopt American customs and attitudes.

The seeds for ecumenical, inclusive attitudes and shared sacred worship are not a uniquely American dimension of Hinduism, with India having a long history of religious diversity and inclusivity. Indian Muslims, Sikhs and varieties of Hindus have shared sacred places of worship in India, and this seems to have prepared many Indians for inclusive shared worship in the American melting pot.

However, some skeptics are concerned that this ecumenical tendency is creating a generic, Sanskritized ideology that (in some contexts) breeds Hindutva ideals and revisionist histories. While Hindutva elements have indeed seeped into the American cultural and religious bricolage, and found a new home in cyberspace, my study indicates that orthodoxy and Hindutva are only one portion of American Hinduism in cyberspace; and a relatively small portion, at that. American (Ecumenical) Hinduism does not represent a homogenization of history and ideals built along anti-Muslim ideology, but rather a hybridized transformation built around general commonalities. The Internet supplements this diversity by providing a multiplication of voices, allowing many individuals to express their beliefs and experiences, and offers a forum to discuss their challenges and solutions. As the Internet continues to increase in usage and significance, it will likewise continue to generate and reflect the diversity and flexibility of Hinduism, and the many global and individual variations in practice and belief.

Chapter 1 analyzes central issues involved with religion in cyberspace, and attempts to answer key questions regarding the possibility for *performing* religion online. I then outline the various types of websites relating to Hinduism, focusing on the various degrees of information and interaction provided and allowed by the Internet. The dynamics of Internet communication are different from other forms of communication,

and cyberspace presents distinct limitations as well as new benefits. How Hinduism is constructed online, and who controls this information, is a central concern of this chapter.

Chapter 2 explores the various websites for Hindu temples in America, analyzing the function of the Internet and what can be learned about Hinduism in America from the World Wide Web. The Internet actually reflects the ecumenical nature of American Hinduism, and the various strategies and technologies of assimilation. Temple activities and services are promoted through their web sites, and list-serves function as a tool for outreach and networking. Furthermore, the Internet provides an efficient means for generating temple membership, funds, volunteer service and community support programs.

Chapter 3 analyzes the websites of the various chapters of the Hindu Students Council (HSC), and explores the same ecumenical dynamics. Differences in culture and values between the first-generation migrant parents and their American-born children create distinct challenges that are worked out in the home, temple community and within the childrens' social group of peers. The HSC presents a forum for these American-born Hindus to discuss these difficulties on their own terms, and build a student community for support. Though the HSC is officially part of the Vishva Hindu Parishad in America (VHPA), each chapter is individually managed and operated by students from each campus, with little oversight from the national HSC office or the VHPA. Furthermore, emphasis on the performing arts, social engagements and discussions about interracial dating show us that these are not young Hindutvavadins, but rather young adults working out difficult issues relating to minority status, generational conflicts with their parents and elders, and challenges of being Hindu in a Christian majority nation.

Chapter 4 addresses the current applications and potential for the online performance of Hinduism. Online services—such as online astrology and marriage matchmaking services—and virtual rituals—such as streaming *bhajans*, digital *darshan* and cyber-*pujas*—present a beginning to online religion performance, though they still primarily serve as supplemental practices. However, the interactive nature of cyberspace and Internet communication have created various online cybercommunities, which generate significant dialogue and discussion. Although these communities may not replace real life social networks, they do constitute a form of online religious performance so long as they create and maintain social solidarity and religious identity.

Concerns regarding Hindutva presence in America and on cyberspace should be taken with a grain of salt, and distinctions between generic Hindu beliefs and Hindutva ideology must be established. The emphasis on broad, general Hindu beliefs does not mean that American Hinduism and the HSC are Hindutvan, because Hindutva (or ‘Hinduness’) is a political retelling of Indian history, and not a religious ideology. In his seminal Hindutva text, Veer Savarkar (2003: 4) explains that

When we attempt to investigate into the essential significance of Hindutva we do not primarily—and certainly not mainly—concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed... Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race.

Lal (2003: 108) further explains that Hindutva operates by

Drawing upon the writings of Veer Savarkar, Madhav Sadashiv, and other Hindu ideologies who defined India as the eternal land of the Hindus and insisted that the ‘blood of Hindus’ streamed through everyone born in the motherland (*janmabhoomi*), the advocates of a renewed Hindu militancy have endeavored to turn India—to deploy Islamic terminology—into the land of the “pure and the faithful”.

However, Savarkar (2003: 91-92) is clear that not everyone born in the fatherland is Hindu, and not everyone accepting Hindu beliefs is Hindutvan because

we Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization...We are one because we are a nation a race and own a common Sanskriti (civilization).

Savarkar builds this definition of the Hindu race along an anti-Muslim platform, with an inclusive attitude towards all *indigenous* Indian religions, including Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and the many variations of 'Hinduism'.

Revisionist history of Hindutva is problematic, for a number of key reasons. First, the factual accounts of Hindutvan history are highly erroneous, and built solely around sensationalized accounts in north Indian history and language. South Indian history and dynasties (as well as linguistic, cultural and religious variations) are completely omitted from Savarkar's unified history. Second, Savarkar includes religious communities that sought to identify themselves outside the Hindu fold (such as Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism), denying their unique history and identity. Lastly, Savarkar's emphasis on religious traditions *indigenous* to India fails to account for the reasons that Islam and Christianity became established in the Indian subcontinent, and the various methods by which these 'foreign' traditions were localized and adapted. Islam is a South Asian tradition, representing a substantial percentage of the population and primary contributor to the Indian history and culture, despite Muslim origins in Arabia.

The process of globalization itself is challenging such nationalistic politics and identities as local traditions spread beyond their geographic boundaries and develop new variations; Hinduism is no longer a South Asian religious tradition, despite its origins in India. Cyberspace, which exists outside of geographic boundaries, is now furthering this process by illuminating the many global variations of Hinduism, and by providing religious information and ritual practices in the domain of cyberspace. Therefore, the

Internet brings two dynamics to the table: first, it allows for religious discussion and practice outside the basic geographic boundaries of traditional religious performance; and second, it is providing a voice and forum to express the many global variations of Hindu belief and practice.

Although global Hinduism still is largely wedded to individuals and communities of South Asian ethnic origins, many of the American Hindu communities are twice-immigrated, having moved to the US from parts of the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. Furthermore, many Hindu religious groups are drawing in American converts; some groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Shaiva Siddhanta Church, are quite conscious of a connection to the geographic borders of India, and are active in their global outreach and connection to Hindus (and Hare Krishnas) around the world. Other groups, including the myriad of American gurus and religious movements (Transcendental Meditation, Deepak Chopra's Center, Siddha Yoga, etc.), draw on all-inclusive tropes to bring in Caucasian American participants, and do not emphasize the Indian origins of their practice and tradition. Unfortunately, due to the scope and time-restrictions of this thesis, these groups were not included in this analysis.

Despite broad parallels of inclusivity in Hindutva history and American Hinduism, the similarity ends there. Savarkar places great significance on the *varna* system, though caste importance is often dropped outside of India, especially in America. Furthermore, American Hinduism draws on many sources of south Indian ethnicity and religion, including south Indian sects (such as the Shaiva Siddhanta Church), deities (especially Venkateswara and Murugan), and performing arts (such as Carnatic music and

Bharatnatyam dance). Furthermore, ecumenical tendencies are not the same as homogenization or unification; Hindus in America do not share the same deities, but rather include many deities together in shared spaces, including temples spaces and cyberspace.

Many of the dynamics of Hinduism in America are a product of the particular group of Hindus that immigrated to America. Statistically speaking, American Hindus are among the wealthiest individual groups in the US. Although the statistics show a high medium income and education for American Hindus, we must not make any overarching generalizations about individuals. Many Indians in America are working class, and not part of the elite occupations, such as medicine, business, engineering, finance or computer programming. Nonetheless, with a prevalence in the IT industry and a high level of education in general, American Hindus have access to the Internet, and are among the most active developers of Internet sites and technologies.

While this thesis explores the distinct challenges to performing religion online, many American Hindus are receptive to technological revolutions because of their urban environments, socio-economic status, education and occupations. Therefore, though many scholars are concerned that online religious performance will never be considered authentic, such technophobic skepticism seems ungrounded. In only the first 10 years of the Internet's existence, Hinduism has flourished in cyberspace. Furthermore, I anticipate this trend to continue to develop globally, particularly as India becomes more globally dominant in the IT industry.

Although education and socio-economic status are significant factors, the rapid migration of Hinduism to cyberspace also reflects the great significance of sight and

sound given in Hindu ritual performance. Therefore, although Internet technology is currently limited to text, images, and sounds, Hindus can still have sight (*darshan*) of a sacred deity, guru, temple, or *tirtha* (sacred site) online, and even listen to sacred *bhajans*, *shlokas*, and *mantras*. Virtually every American Hindu temple now has a web site and actively use e-mail listserves for outreach, and many sites now offer various online Hindu services. Soon Hindus will be able to witness the performance of religious song and dance online, take virtual pilgrimages of sacred sites and temples, see the blessed site of their guru, or witness a family member's *samskara* (life-cycle ritual) through a web cam. While it is difficult to ascertain the religious significance of the Internet because it is so new, it is clear that religious ideology and praxis are rapidly migrating to cyberspace. Just as Hinduism has transformed as it has migrated to new geographic spaces, so too can we expect new transformations as Hinduism migrates to cyberspace.

my lack of training in the field of globalization has resulted in a somewhat careless use of globalization terminology through the essay. Rather unreflectively, I have used the terms assimilation, adaption and adaptation as somewhat synonymous terms, when in actuality the concepts are used to refer to distinctly different processes. For example, I have used assimilation and adaption to refer to two separate but related functions: the process of retaining Indian cultural elements while living in the US, and the process of incorporating American cultural elements into their lives. The ambiguity of this terminology ultimately reflects my inexperience in the subset of globalization and religion, and reflects my need for future training in this field.

CHAPTER 2

CYBERSPACE AND SACRED SPACE

Definition and Significance of the Internet

The Internet, though grammatically written as a proper noun, is not one single 'place' or communication protocol. In popular usage, the Internet typically refers to e-mail and the World Wide Web, which actually account for the vast majority of Internet usage. Technically, the Internet refers to the overall exchange of information between individual computers and servers, using a variety of telecommunication networks (copper telephone lines, coaxial cable lines, fiber optic connections, wireless frequencies, etc.), transmitting data in 'packets' using an IP address (Internet Protocol). For example, when one computer sends an e-mail, this message is broken into a series of small packets, encoded with a recipient address (IP) and the packets are relayed through a series of other computers (servers) and network lines, eventually finding its way to the correct mail server, where the packets are reassembled into the original e-mail message.

It is important to note that the Internet and World Wide Web are not synonymous. The Internet refers to the entire collection of networked computers and servers communicating through various telecommunication systems. The World Wide Web is only one aspect of the Internet, and consists of a series of web documents, stored and networked on web servers, and made accessible using hyperlinks and URL's. Although the World Wide Web and e-mail comprise the majority of all Internet usage, many other Internet protocols are used, including newsgroups, FTP and file sharing, Instant

Messaging, Gopher, session access, as well as real-time services such as Internet radio, streaming video and other live web casts.

The use of the term 'Internet' can be somewhat arbitrary, particularly when conflated with other prefixes, such as 'cyber', 'virtual', and 'e-/electronic' (such as in e-commerce, or e-mail). Not all electronic transmission of data is considered part of the Internet. For example, with recent advancements in cellular phones and personal digital assistants (PDA's), communication between computer-based messaging and e-mail is accessible through interfaces other than a computer. Yet, this is not considered Internet usage for two basic reasons. First, technically, the Internet and text messaging use different protocols; the Internet uses a 'standardized' IP, whereas text messaging uses Short Message Service (SMS). More importantly however, receiving a cell phone text message generally does not constitute Internet exchange because it is imagined as part of the already established telephone technology, though the telecommunication lines and network routers used in information exchanges may be the same. Although the Internet represents the latest technological efforts in the ongoing development of telecommunication technologies, it is still based upon the previously established technologies, and therefore still limited by them.

Though the terms are arguably still being defined, 'Internet' and 'cyberspace' represent subtly distinct ideas. In popular usage, if the Internet refers to the general exchange of information through networked computers, then cyberspace represents the virtual 'place' where this exchange occurs. Whereas the Internet represents the real, physical networks of users, computers, and network protocols, cyberspace is an imagined zone created by this network and computer-based interface. Brenda Brasher sees

cyberspace as “a fiction of public etiquette that orients people in a virtual environment. An abstract idea with electronic components, cyberspace identifies the expanse, if not the time, where those communicating by means of computers believe and act as if they are” (Brasher 2001). Cyberspace is not merely the place, but also refers to the activities and communications that occur within the Internet; thus Vásquez and Marquardt’s definition of cyberspace as “the shifting public spheres and subcultures, the cognitive and social digital ‘matrix’, generated by the Internet” (2003: 94).

When 'logged-in' to cyberspace, one imagines that they are no longer within the physical bounds of nationality, borders and place. The user has access to a nearly limitless encyclopedia of information, from a vast array of sources, and contact with other users around the globe. This reflects the two greatest strengths of the Internet: *information* and *interaction*. The interactivity allowed by the e-mail and online chat makes exchange of ideas and information possible in new ways, through a myriad of textual, audio and video interfaces.

Although the Internet has revolutionized information storage and accessibility, there are significant limitations to the Internet. Since the Internet is built upon previously established technologies, it can only function as prescribed by these technologies. Therefore, as Højsgaard and Warburg point out, “the Internet by and large can be used either as a television set or as a telephone. In the first case, the Internet *transmits* messages...from content provider(s) to content consumer(s). In the second case, the Internet *connects* people from various places” (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 6). However, the Internet also transcends some limitations of print and broadcast technologies by:

(1) enabling many-to-many communication; (2) enabling the simultaneous reception, alteration, and redistribution of cultural objects; (3) dislocating communicative action from the posts of the nation, from the territorialized spatial relations of modernity; (4) providing instantaneous global contact; and (5) inserting the modern/late modern subject into an information machine apparatus that is networked. (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 95)

The Internet can therefore *transmit* more information faster than other technologies, and connect more people simultaneously.

The Internet is also limited by the content providers and consumers; i.e., those with the resources, training and access to computers and a network. Lövheim and Linderman (2005: 125) remind their reader that

Susan Herring's research on gender and participation in chat rooms is one of many indications that the Internet reflects, or even might reinforce, certain inadequacies in society. Although the Internet offers opportunities to acquire new skills and new knowledge, different Internet arenas also *require* certain technical, social, and cultural skills that different individuals may be more or less endowed with.

If the Internet users represent a disproportionate make-up of society, than the same inadequacies of representation will likewise occur on the Internet. For example, Vinay Lal writes that "in even as large a country as India, the largest democracy in the world, only a million people have Internet connections, and they are the ones who already have at their disposal fax, telephone, and other means of communication..." (Lal 2003: 101).

Furthermore, if we accept that "one of the iron rules of cyberspace...is that it is intrinsically Republican, or inegalitarian; its most keen enthusiasts are white, upper-class males" (103), then we may indeed agree with arguments that "cyberspace represents a more ominous phase of Western colonialism, the homogenization of knowledge and, in tandem, the elimination of local knowledge systems" (101). However, such bold statements require critical assessment. Lal's statistic of one million users is not only three years old, but is also a pessimistically low estimate. Figures from The Internet and

Mobile Association of India (IAMAI - <http://iamai.in/>), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU - <http://www.itu.int/home/>) and the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM - <http://www.nasscom.org/>) estimate that there are currently about 7-8 million Internet subscribers in India, and anywhere from 35-40 million Internet Users. The IAMAI's stated goal on their website is to have 100 million users by next year, with significant raises in female users as well (http://www.iamai.in/section.php3?secid=16&press_id=822&mon=2).

Furthermore, while access to the Internet is clearly limited by one's socioeconomic position, the Internet also has significant democratizing potential. Without a strict governing body to censor web content and e-mail exchange, and with the help of recent initiatives by companies offering free web space to host individual web pages, those with access to the Internet can express their own views, insights and experiences regardless of authority or education. This is in part due to the anonymity of Internet exchange, and a lack of authoritative and editorial review. Højsgaard and Warburg (2005: 7) write that

Cyberspace. . .basically represents a 'multiplication of voices'. Among other things, this multiplication of voices means that conventional or exclusive beliefs, practices, and organizational authorities are being confronted with alternative solutions, competing worldviews, and sub- or inter-group formations. In this interactive environment of increasing pluralism, reflexivity, and multiple individual possibilities, new ways of structuring and thinking about issues such as reality, authority, identity, and community are inevitably emerging.

For example, though women have not always been given a forum to express their perspectives and voices within temple, liturgical or otherwise clerical boundaries, the Internet provides a space where women can express and investigate religiosity outside the bounds of the religious institution. Thus, while Lal is concerned about the Internet and globalization leading to "the elimination of local knowledge systems", the Internet

actually provides a forum for the expression of such epistemologies, giving voice to the many unheard peoples and communities.

Furthermore, as the Internet becomes a necessity of global exchange and economy, international access to the Internet has grown greatly (and will surely continue to do so). “Worldwide, the number of Internet users is estimated to have been 16 million in 1995, 378 million in 2000, and more than 500 million in 2002” (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 5). Current estimates, gathered from various Network Information Centers, the International Telecommunication Union and user polls, place the number of Internet users over one billion (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). Although English is the predominant language of the Internet, this reflects the origins of the Internet (in the US) and the global use of English as a *lingua franca*, more than geographic usage. Computer technologies have been successfully dealing with the use of non-Roman script languages, and are now capable of handling most characters and scripts. As of 2005, 32% of web users request pages and searches in English, though other languages are becoming increasingly prevalent, including Chinese (13%), Japanese (8%), Spanish (7%), German (6%) and French (4%).

However, language statistics are potentially misleading, since many individuals outside of English-speaking nations use English. In fact, statistics on Internet usage by continent have shown that 34% of Internet users are in Asia, 29% in Europe and only 23% in North America (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>). Furthermore, since English, Chinese and Japanese are the three most used languages on the Internet, and Asian users compose the majority of all Internet users, Lal’s concern that the Internet is “intrinsically Republican, or inegalitarian; its most keen enthusiasts are white, upper-

class males" (103) seems overly pessimistic. We must keep in mind that the Internet has only been around for approximately ten years, and the statistics of the growth in Internet usage suggest (to me) that the democratizing potential will come to outweigh white, upper-class dominance.

This growth and democratizing potential of the Internet reflects modern social changes, but is also directly influencing society itself. As Dawson and Cowan write, "If for no other reason, this phenomenal rate of growth assures the importance of continued research into the Internet and its effects on society" (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 5). Many scholars argue that the Internet is more than a technological advancement, in line following the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television and satellite communication. Rather, they see the Internet as a new wave of civilization; a revolution from matter to information. Citing Alvin Toffler, Lal argues that the Internet represents a Third Wave of civilization. He writes, "If in the First Wave civilization was predominantly agricultural, and the Second Wave ushered in the age of industrial production, in the Third Wave 'the central resource—a single phrase broadly encompassing data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology and values—is actionable knowledge'" (Lal 2003: 99). This knowledge, or information, is radically altering forms of exchange and commerce, replacing older material forms in a process Michel Bauwens calls 'virtualization':

Today, the natural world is being transformed not only by using matter and energy, but also by information, leading to a new explosion of productivity. In one way, virtualization is the increased substitution of matter by information. This substitution has profound consequences for the relations of humankind to nature, between humans and other humans, and between humans and machines. This new layer of information is becoming increasingly prominent as virtualization intensifies. (1996)

What are the potential impacts of this 'virtualization'? Bauwens (1996) continues by writing that:

This alteration has affected leisure time. Many find watching nature documentaries on television more preferable than real walks in the woods. This process has been intensified by new cyberspace media. For many, the Internet is not just a continuation of traditional mass media, but a new shift. The Internet, unlike other media, represents a new collective mental space. Hence the notion of cyberspace, a parallel 'virtual' world, co-existing in tandem with real world. Over the long term of human existence, our prehistoric ancestors existed principally in a natural environment. Civilized humanity occupied an invented architectural environment. Our descendants may principally live in a digital environment (mentally speaking, that is), where they will spend a great deal of time, working and playing. If this digital revolution is altering civilization, it will also impact our metaphysical imagination, the basic building blocks of our experience.

We are in a transition from matter to information, from real life to virtual life. In fact, "rl" is an acronym commonly used in Internet chat and instant messenger communications to mean "real life" (also jokingly called 'meatspace'), as opposed to friendships and exchanges occurring only in cyberspace. Yet, Bauwens (1996) sees a transformation in our perception of the 'real':

In the past, the credo of science, the industrial world, and materialism was simply "*if I can't touch it, it is not real.*" Today, it is nearly reversed to the point where it could be said "*if you can touch it, it's not real.*" Information has become more important, in political, economic, social, and philosophical terms, than material objects.

A good example of this virtual revolution is in online transactions, where the exchange of physical currency has been replaced with electronic exchange of funds (which can be accessed through a variety of electronic interfaces, including personal computers, telephones and ATM machines). The future of much economic exchange lies within cyberspace, including banking, stocks, and online purchases, slowly eliminating the need for both currency and face-to-face exchanges.

Religion and the Internet

If indeed we are engaging a new era of civilization—cyberspace, and all it encompasses—then what effect will this virtualization have on religion? On the one hand, statistics show that religion is a significant component of the information available on the World Wide Web. Højsgaard and Warburg (2005: 2-3) write that:

By the end of the 1990s there were more than 1.7 million web pages covering religion...By 2004, the number of religious web pages had grown considerably worldwide. There were then approximately 51 million pages on religion, 65 million web pages dealing with churches, and 83 million web pages containing the word God...Although religion is not the most popular issue of cyberspace – the interest in this subject area among Internet users has become widespread: in 2001 28 million Americans had used the Internet for religious purposes. By 2004 the number of persons in the USA who had done things online relating to religious or spiritual matters had grown to almost 82 million.

Furthermore, “In 1998, a survey of American teenagers by the Barna Research Group of Oxnard, California, showed that one out of six teens said that within the next five years they expected to use the Internet as a substitute for their current religious practices” (Lövheim 2004: 59).

Although religion is a topic well represented on the Internet, does this mean that virtual religion can replace or substitute current religious practices? While there are indeed many sites offering information *about* religion, is this the same as *doing* religion? Lorne Dawson notes that “an element appears to be missing: an element Durkheim perceived to be essential to religious life. Can we *do* religion online, in the more demanding sense of participating in shared religious rites?” (Dawson 2005: 15). If we are to understand religion as a social function, we must recognize that religion necessitates action and performance. For Durkheim, this action strengthened and maintained social solidarity, and thus religion is always a *moral* phenomenon. Whether we accept a Durkheimian approach to religion, or even consider popular usage, Dawson argues that

"being religious still implies being part of a group, even if the affiliation is more symbolic and subjective than real. In the popular mind the notions of religion and community go hand-in-hand" (Dawson 2004: 75). Therefore, can religious action be *performed* on the Internet? Many traditional religious churches, organizations and groups have actively engaged cyberspace, using web sites to promote their activities and/or beliefs. Yet, in these instances, the Internet is merely an auxiliary tool used to complement their other (real life) activities. The Internet may be used to contact members and parishioners, and to advertise church information, but the 'religious' work is still being performed in the sacralized church, temple or home (as with home *pujas*), and not within the confines of cyberspace.

Some progress towards a 'cyber-religion' has developed, primarily within the online pagan movements. Bauwens (1996) points out that:

There are some movements that are taking a very active role in cyberspace such as the techno-pagans. They use the Internet not only as a self-organizing tool but as a new space that has to be ritualized. For example, Mark Pesce, one of the creators of the Virtual Reality Modeling Language, has developed a Zero Circle on the Internet and used a shamanic ritual to 'sacralise' it. Every three dimensional object will have to position itself against this spiritual "Axis Mundi" or "Center of the World." Similarly, Tibetan monks at the Namgyal Institute in Ithaca, New York consecrated cyberspace on February 8, using a tantric ritual usually performed by the Dalai Lama himself.

Efforts to sacralize cyberspace illustrates the imaginative possibility for religion to exist in the virtual world paralleling the real world. However, there is strong skepticism regarding the possibility and implications of cyber-religion. Højsgaard points out that "The Internet does not generate religion, only people do...The allegedly pure cyber-religious sites *are* being produced and used by persons who do not live their entire lives 'on the screen'" (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 9). Since all people must survive and exist outside the Internet, it is difficult to imagine that cyberspace could ever replace the

old, physical borders of the material world. As Stephen O'Leary asks, "Isn't the physicality of the place itself something that cannot be dispensed with? How could a cyber-temple ever replace the actual wall of the real one?" (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: 9).

On the other hand, Dawson, drawing on the concerns of Chris McGillion, suggests that if such a replacement of the real world with the virtual world could take place, necessary elements of religion would surely be lost. She writes:

Striking a Durkheimian note, he [McGillion] fears that the Internet 'encourages people to opt out of the kind of flesh-and-blood relationships that are the indispensable condition of shared religious meanings'. If religion becomes detached from real places, real people, and a real sense of shared time and cultural memory, then how can there ever be a significant measure of collective conscience and collective effervescence? The move of religion to cyberspace may be extending disenchantment and the secularization of the world, in ways unanticipated by its exponents. (Dawson 2005: 19)

While some pagan groups have created new online pagan movements, without an established real life component, this is much more difficult for a previously established religion to transition from sacred spaces to cyberspaces. Yet, even these cyber-pagans groups are composed of members who do exist *primarily* in real life. Therefore, even though a particular movement only has online components, surely the individual members have real life social groups who share similar views and values, and partake in the material culture of paganism. For the individuals, cyber-religion is still only an auxiliary tool for the other aspects of their total spiritual life.

Furthermore, the World Wide Web is only one aspect of the Internet. Interactivity is also a major component of Internet exchange. Going back to a Durkheimian perspective, a central and necessary element of religion is community. Therefore, can communication of religious ideas and experiences online constitute cyber-community?

The chat rooms have become an important forum for individuals to discuss religious beliefs, ask questions to other members, and dialogue about specifics of religious practice. If this exchange creates a community of regular users, who share their insights and experiences, is this not religious action (or actionable knowledge, as Toffler put it)? Some authors are skeptical about calling such exchange community, since there is typically not a real life component to this community, and often this community exists in total anonymity (where users only know each other by their user name and comments). Yet, this interpretation of online communication neglects the significance of such dialogue, not only in shaping one's own identity, but also in providing a forum for self-expression and exploration.

The dynamics of face-to-face, telephone and online communication are clearly different. Face-to-face communication allows individuals to communicate and read subtle expressions in the face and body, as well as the intonation of the voice. Indeed, body language and tone transmit tremendous information, sometimes even more than is verbally expressed. While Internet communication is still largely text-based, this is changing as Internet technology develops and changes. With the advent of web cams, video and audio online chat are possible, and in fact utilized in many business and social settings. However, this does not mean that text-based online chat is less complete than other forms of communication. Text-based chat provides a new feature not present in other forms: *anonymity*. Vásquez and Marquardt write that “the asynchronous, anonymous, and text-intensive nature of computer-mediated communication allows a level of dematerialization and disembodiment hitherto unseen, generating identities and forms of sociability quite distinct from those built on face-to-face exchanges” (2003: 95).

What individuals may be too shy, embarrassed or insecure to express in telephone or face-to-face dialogue, can safely be expressed in online text forums. These forums, then, provide a safe forum for individuals (particularly young adults) to engage and reconsider spiritual ideas they may be unable or unwilling to discuss with their parents, family or clergy. Sensitive issues, such as sexuality and dating, can thus be expressed online in relative safety.

Taxonomy of Hindu-Related Sites

It is difficult to quantify the content of the World Wide Web because of the disorganized nature of the Internet. Searching content is somewhat problematic; there is no one directory with all information and network addresses cataloged. Searching for web pages and documents stored on thousands of web servers located across the globe is not a simple task. Search engines work by regularly sending out automated searches following all links encountered and reporting the content and address back to the engine, which then stores this information in an indexed database. When a user performs a search, the search engine looks through this database for relevant matches. Unfortunately, these indexes are never complete, primarily because the Web is growing too fast for any current technology to comprehensively index, and because the vast majority of all content on the web is part of the Deep Web³. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the Internet and the expense of server storage and hosting has meant that sites are continuously changing, moving and being dropped.

¹ Web pages not accessible or indexable by search engines, either because they are dynamically generated, or hidden behind closed and secure networks.

As of January 2006, a Google search of Hinduism yields anywhere from 15 million to 26 million hits⁴. As a means of quantifying and interpreting this massive amount of data, I have divided the sites into eight types, based on content providers and consumers, with various degrees of *information* provided and *interactivity* allowed.

1. General sites
2. Academic sites
3. Personal sites
4. Sectarian sites
5. Temples sites
6. Activist sites
7. Virtual Ritual
8. Cyber-Community

This classification system, though logical, is nonetheless arbitrary; therefore, there is some overlap between the categories. Though most sites available offer little interactivity at this point in time, the current trends in technology are pushing for increased Internet interactivity and mobile access; we can expect interactivity to continue to develop, improve and increase in use and significance.

General sites typically offer encyclopedic information about Hinduism, with varying degrees of detail and accuracy. They can range from broad, all-encompassing web sites such as [About.com](#), to online encyclopedias such as [Wikipedia.com](#), online newsgroups such as [BBC.com](#), or online archives of data and textual storage, such as the “The Internet Sacred Text Archive” (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/>). Motivations for these types of sites involve many issues, including advertising revenue, selling products and/or services, and earnest desire to make information available to people.

Academic sites typically offer the same style of encyclopedic information about Hinduism, but are hosted on university servers, created by university professors and

² This range in “hits” represents only what has been indexed. Far more information is capable of existing on the Internet, but limits of search capabilities make accessing the entire available content impossible.

students, and/or are intended to serve as scholarly and educational aids and tools. Some examples include the [ELMAR](#) (Electronic Media and Religions) [Encyclopedia](#) project at St. Martin's College, University of South Carolina's [Encyclopedia of Hinduism: A Project for the Third Millennium](#) site, Minnesota State's [Hinduism](#) site, and [Exploring Religions: Hinduism](#), sponsored by the Religious Studies Program at the University of Wyoming. The [Asia Society](#) web page provides the latest news and events related to all of Asia, and the [American Forum For Global Education](#) "features a multimedia collection of primary and secondary source materials, narratives, literature, poetry, maps and video clips designed to supplement and enrich existing classroom resources". Many web sites are created by individual professors as aides for students and scholars. Gene Thursby's [Lifaafaa](#) site has various links related to South Asian studies, and his personal [Resources to Orient Students and My Point of View as a Teacher](#) page. Although academic sites are generally hosted on academic servers, the quality, detail and accuracy depend largely on the time, money and resources expended for the various projects.

Whereas the sites listed above are primary reference tools, providing information to the public, other academic sites and Internet protocols enlist high levels of interactivity. By networking with other scholars and dialoging about various issues, scholars can utilize the insights of many people, and not just their publications. In this regard, the Internet is enhancing accuracy and detail. The Indology.info web site (<http://indology.info/>) provides "Resources for Indological Scholarship", and consists of the following:

- [[E-mail](#)]: an adjunct to INDOLOGY@LISTSERV.LIV.AC.UK.
- [[E-texts / Software](#)]: an archive of Indic e-texts and Indological software.
- [[Papers](#)]: an archive of articles, papers, and other writings pertinent to Indological studies.

[Books]: an information service detailing Indological books listed by Amazon.

[Links]: a list of external websites and resources of value to Indological research.

The Religion in South Asia group provides information for scholars, and features the RISA-L listserve, allowing scholars to network and discuss issues relevant to their research and teaching (<http://www.montclair.edu/risa/>), as well as The South Asian Studies Program at Rutgers (<http://southasia.rutgers.edu/listserv.html>). Most scholarly organizations have restricted access in order to limit the information and discussions to scholarly interests, and to prevent a conflation of practitioner/scholarly debates.

Personal sites are created by individuals not necessarily associated with any particular sect, tradition or movement. Such sites are often personal expression of the web makers faith, experiences and interests. For example, “A Tribute to Hinduism” is a site created, maintained and paid for by Ms. Sushama Londhe (<http://www.attributetohinduism.com/>). Her motivation for creating this site, she writes, was to:

provide appropriate collection of information about Hinduism, as well as to attain correct appraisal of India’s rich cultural heritage. Furthermore, it is to create awareness among Hindus and non-Hindus about the world’s most ancient living tradition...A Tribute to Hinduism started out as a personal quest for my own spiritual heritage in early 1990s. The inception of the site began in the fall of 1997 as a small personal non-commercial web page/hobby, and it has grown over the years as I have become aware of more relevant information. I am an Indian American who came to the U.S. as a graduate student almost 30 years ago, and have settled here for good. Although I welcome feedback from everybody, this site is NOT associated with any religious or political organization.
(<http://www.attributetohinduism.com/>)

Some companies, such as Geocities, have allowed for such personal Internet expressions by offering free web space for members. Both the “Hindu Puja & Bhajan Home Page” (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8891/>) and the online “Biographies of Saints and writings on spirituality” (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8107/index.html>)

are expressions of two individuals own personal interests in Hinduism. In these two examples, both authors chose to remain anonymous. Although the authors neglect to offer sources for their expressions, such personal sites provide a forum for personal expression that brings in a 'multiplicity of voices' as well as a myriad of insights, perspectives and experiences. What may have been traditionally ignored by orthodox, patriarchal Hinduism can be fully expressed on the Internet.

Sectarian sites are created by members of a particular group or sect of Hinduism, primarily for their own use and/or to educate the wider public about their tradition(s). Most of these sites primarily only contain information about their particular sect, though many utilize interactive features as well, including BBS's, e-mail discussion groups and chat rooms. The "Shaivam Home Page" announces itself as "an abode on the net humbly dedicated to the worship of Lord Shiva, God of Hinduism" (<http://www.shaivam.org/>), and offers a wide range of information relating to Shiva and the various Shaivam sects. Similarly, Gaudiya.com provides information regarding the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition (<http://www.gaudiya.com/>). While both of these sites offer a great deal of information, neither offer any interactivity other than a contact page. The "Sri Vaishnava Home Page" (<http://www.ramanuja.org/>) was created by a handful of members in May 1994, to facilitate a forum for "the first public Vedanta email discussion group on the Internet", which included over 1,500 members at its height (Varadarajan 2005). Today, the site only serves to provide users with information about the south Indian sect.

For more organized groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the Internet serves as a portal providing services to

members and information for non-members. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness official website (<http://www.iskcon.com/>), working in conjunction with the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust site (<http://www.krishna.com/>), provides information (textual, audio and video) about Hare Krishna beliefs, as well as news, directory and contact information for members. Likewise, the Swaminarayan official web site (<http://www.swaminarayan.org/>) has information about the history, beliefs and practices of the BAPS movement, as well as a newsletter, temple directory, and other member information. Such regular newsletters have become an affordable and practical way of keeping large extended groups of members in contact with each other, and the organization leadership.

Temple sites are created by specific temples, primarily used to advertise their locations, services and deities. “Mandirs, Derasars and Gurudwaras Around the World” (http://www.mandirnet.org/temples_list/) lists Hindu temples (with websites and contact information) in forty three countries across six continents. Some of the larger temples in America, with more sophisticated web sites, include the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills, PA, (<http://www.svtemple.org/temple/index.shtml>), The Hindu Temple Society of North America: Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam in Flushing, NY (<http://www.nyganeshtemple.org/>), and The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, GA (<http://www.hindutempleofatlanta.org/>). Although the primary purpose of the temple websites is to advertise their services, with the hopes of individuals and families attending such services in person, like the sectarian organizations, the Internet (particularly online newsletters and e-mail list serves) has become a primary tool for communicating with the larger Indian American community.

Activist sites vary regarding the amount of information and interactivity provided; some activist web sites only offer information, while others utilize regular newsletters, list serves, chat rooms and BBS's. What is distinct about these groups of sites is the position and motivations of the web provider(s). Whereas some sites offer information in an attempt to provide an encyclopedia of collected knowledge, these sites offer limited elements of this knowledge (only those that the author(s) accept as valid) in hopes of affecting and persuading the users. Although the intended effects of the sites vary depending upon their position, one thing is clear: the activist web sites *about* Hinduism comprise a significant portion of such sites, particularly through the myriad of URL's and websites created by the Himalayan Academy and the Global Hindu Electronic Networks (GHEN).

The Himalayan Academy web site (<http://www.himalayanacademy.com/>) offers information about Hinduism, various publications and videos, Hindu temples, and daily news about the Shaiva Siddhanta Church and their various temples and monasteries. Most importantly, the electronic version of Hinduism Today (<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/>) is their latest effort in outreach, and through both the print and electronic versions, they are able to communicate with over 135,000 readers worldwide! In order to facilitate their goal of providing information about Hinduism, they have also established the “Hindu Resources Online” website (<http://www.hindu.org>), which offers information about a wide range of topics and links (which gives them a higher priority on Google searches). The Hindu Students Council (HSC) has been another active promoter of Hinduism on the Internet (<http://www.hscnet.org/>). Although the HSC's primary activity is in organizing student groups on campuses across North

America, they have created GHEN in order to facilitate “the ancient Vedanta truths such as *Vasudaiva Katumbakum* (The Whole World is One Family)” (<http://www.hindunet.com/contact.htm>). The primary task of GHEN has been to create a series of web sites dedicated to providing information relating to various aspects of Hinduism. The three primary web sites of the GHEN project are the Hindu Universe (<http://www.hindunet.org/>), the Hindu Web (<http://www.hinduweb.org/>), and the Hindu Links web site (<http://www.hindulinks.org/>). These sites typically offer general, if not generic, views and explanations of Hinduism, intended for a wide audience of Hindus. Other activist sites are more orthodox and fundamentalist in their information.

The Vedic Friends Association provides information and a forum for discussion about various topics of Hinduism, primarily involving orthodox interpretation of issues, including vegetarianism, caste, as well as “Vedic Science” and culture (<http://www.vedicfriends.org/>). The Vedic Foundation extols that it has “Authentic Hinduism”, and is “Re-Establishing the Greatness of Hinduism” (<http://www.thevedicfoundation.org/>) (I was not even aware that Hinduism was no longer great). Other sites offer opinions beyond even orthodox interpretation, crossing the bridge from orthodox to fundamentalist, if not outright militant. One such Hindutva site, HinduUnity.org, identifies itself as “promoting and supporting the Ideals of the Bajrang Dal: V.H.P.”, and claims that “Together we shall fight to protect our culture, heritage & religion” (<http://www.hinduunity.org/>). With hateful headlines such as “[Pakistan: Hindu Girls Kidnapped, Forced to Islam](#)” and “[Hindu Traitors praying to Allah](#)”, this site openly promotes dissension amongst Hinduism and most other world religions, though primarily Islam and Christianity. Of particular interest is the site's “Black List”, which includes all

those the site author deems to be “Enemies of Hindus” (<http://hinduunity.org/hitlist.html>), including a host of religious, political, celebrity and academic figures. Hindutva.org expresses similar views, exclaiming, “Today the enemy of the Hindus and of the world at large is terrorism. And terrorism resides in the hearts of all Muslims. Not just their leaders, but all Muslims, since all of them are bound by the Instruction Manual of Terrorism - the Quran that calls for killing of all Kafirs” (<http://hindutva.org/>). Both sites allow individuals to make comments on the various articles, though these comments are clearly censored by the hosts, who make no efforts to allow for diversity of opinions.

Virtual Ritual sites allow for some modified form of online ritual performance (or assistance). These sites provide a high degree of interactivity and user response, and represent the future of online religion and practice, and a potential for online *performance*. With the recent emergence of new technologies and funding, this potential is quickly becoming a reality. Both Shaadi.com and IndianMatrimonials.com allow families and individuals to search for potential spouses for their family and self; one member touts that he and his parents were able to find his sister a suitable spouse in Los Angeles, at the comfort of their home in Bangalore (http://www.shaadi.com/introduction_true-stories.php). Other sites have made online astrology possible, such as with Indastro.com and Astrogyan.com. These sites offer a host of astrological readings and charts, as well as providing advise on marriage dates, auspicious times and child names.

There are also web sites designed to allow or assist with ritual performance. Many commercial sites, such as SirIndia.com, sell *puja* materials online, in case an individual or family cannot purchase the necessary items due to their location (<https://www.sirindia.com/ps1.asp?catID=236>). Some sites go even further, allowing

individuals to commission temple *puja*-s online. Ekta Mandir, the Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple, even allows online *darshan* and *puja*-s of the deities (http://www.dfwhindutemple.org/online_puja.htm), guiding the user through a digital, interactive puja. The pressing question, of course, is whether this can be considered performing *authentic* Hindu ritual. Since both online *puja* services are sponsored by Hindu temples in the US and India, we can assert that some sense of authenticity is associated with these cyber-rituals. However, both sites also encourage in-person participation, and seem merely to provide these online services for individuals unable to attend in person; priority is still given to the physical presence of the devotee.

CyberCommunity sites are typically designed with dynamically interactive protocols, allowing for global networking and online discussions with other individuals. Features common to these sites include chat rooms, bulletin board systems (BBS's), blogs (web logs), e-mail newsletters, gifting, travel arrangements, matchmaking, as well as web hosting and e-mail accounts. Chat rooms allow users to join live text-based discussions, in which messages are immediately sent and viewable by any other user in the same “room”. Bulletin Board Systems (BBS's) allow users to post a message, comment or question on a web page, with other users able to read and post responses below. Blogs are web logs that provide individual users with a structured, user-friendly space to post their own site, images, text and other files. Typically, other bloggers (web log users) can post comments and questions on each other's blogs. E-mail list serves allow a group or individual to sent e-mail messages to multiple individuals at once, typically requiring an online ‘subscription’ to that list serve. Different hosts handle restrictions and registration differently, providing a range of limitations and benefits

relating to the control of content; such variations range from high host control in some forums and high user control in others.

Authority and Unity in a Global Context

The first six categories of Hindu sites (General, Academic, Personal, Sectarian, Temple and Activist) are primarily aimed at providing information *about* Hinduism. This information ranges from general Hindu overviews, to highly specific information about a particular temple, organization or tradition, depending on the nature and purpose of the web site. Since so many people are now using the Internet as a reference, how Hinduism is constructed, defined and explained on these Internet sites (and by whom) will have serious impacts on Americans' understanding of Hinduism, particularly young American Hindus. Indeed, serious questions have emerged: who has the authority to speak for a religion one billion people strong, who constructs this definition, who controls the information, and who verifies the accuracy?

Since the Internet is decentralized, and generally has no editorial process or authority, it has created authoritative problems and challenges for many religions (Barker 2005). Yet, Hinduism shares many of these same characteristics with the Internet. Vinay Lal (2003: 112) argues that

More than any other religion, Hinduism is a decentered and deregulated faith, and in this it appears akin to cyberspace. It has no one prophet or savior, nor are Hindus agreed upon the authority of a single text...Hinduism not only has multiple sources of doctrinal authority, it is polycentric [has many sacred spaces]...one could say that Hinduism is rhizomatic, with multiple points of origin, intersection, and dispersal...[therefore] Hinduism most certainly inhabits those very properties that characterize cybernetworks...Hinduism and the Internet, one might conclude, were happily made for each other.

For Lal, the significance of this is that Hindus easily gravitated to the Internet, and "through cyberspace, Hindus have found a new awareness of themselves as part of what

they now imagine is a global religion, and nothing could be more calculated to augment Hindu pride than the perception that Hinduism is on the verge of arriving as a 'world religion'" (113). With approximately one billion people in over one hundred and fifty nations, it remains unclear to me why Lal contends that Hinduism is on the "verge of arriving as a 'world religion'". However, there is no doubt that Hindus, now linked through the Internet, are becoming increasingly connected and aware of their rising status.

Lal worries that such connectivity and awareness is creating an unhealthy nationalism, and that Hinduism is being redefined along Hindutva lines. In his own research of the Internet, Lal analyzed the GHEN websites of the HSC, the various web sites created by the Himalayan Academy, sites specifically dedicated to teaching the ideals of Hindutva (HinduUnity.org, Hindutva.org), as well as the websites for political organizations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the VHP. Yet, Lal also notes that these activist and 'paramilitary' groups, in association with GHEN and the HSC, have created the most remarkable and comprehensive web sites about Hinduism. Through a series of hyperlinked web pages and sites, the plethora of different sites associated with Hinduism often carry links to the more militant Hindutva sites. Therefore, unsuspecting Internet surfers may very well find themselves suddenly on a Hindutva web site.

Although Lal is unclear if the relationship between American Hinduism and Internet-promoted Hindutva is causal or corollary, he unabashedly charges Hinduism in the US with a "literalism that is so characteristically an American trait", and that

compared with the Hinduism of India, “displays the most retrograde features” (107). He provides the following example:

To gain an inkling of what this Vedic civilization of diasporic Hindus looks like, one has only to consider the activities of the Saiva Siddhanta Church in the northern California town of Concord. A few years ago the *pujari*, or priest, of this temple [before it was purchased and turned into the Shiva Murugan Temple] placed a rope about ten feet away from the deity, and strung a sign on it that loudly proclaimed, ‘Vegetarians only beyond this point.’ At a slightly greater distance, another rope was strung out in the cold, denied *darshan* of their deity, condemned to be pariahs. (107)

Lal sees this American literalism, together with the online Hindutva, as redefining Hindu history. He writes that:

historical discourses are preeminently the discourses of the nation, and the Internet...is poised to become the ground on which the advocates of Hindutva will stage their revisionist histories...it is poised, alarmingly, to become a Hindutva domain, considering that there are scarcely any websites that offer competing narratives. (122)

While Lal recognizes that unifying capabilities of the Internet, particularly in unifying Indians and Americans, he contends that what is missing in American Hinduism is a recognition of the long history of hospitality, and the “soft and porous edges that gave the religion its historically amorphous and ecumenical form” (Lal 113).

Lal is quick to make hasty conclusions and judgments based on only part of the data, and tends to obfuscate the difference between Internet and World Wide Web. Yet, even more troublesome is his denial of agency. The nationalistic ethos of Hindutva implies a sense of victimization, that Hinduism has been weakened by Islam, Christianity, colonialism and globalization. While Lal's observations indeed carry some truth, based on my own research and cyber-ethnography, I contend that *the orthodoxy and Hindutva are only one small portion of Hinduism in cyberspace and America*; and a relatively small portion, at that! The literalism of the Saiva Siddhanta Church, and other

activist groups such as the Vedic Friends Association, seems obvious considering they are both comprised largely of Caucasian converts to Hinduism, and the dynamics of conversion are significant when comparing religiosity to individuals born within a tradition; not to mention that white Hindus must *prove* their authenticity to Hindu-born Indians. By sticking to literal interpretation and orthodox practice, such converts can assert their authenticity by virtue of rhetoric and praxis. Yet, this same dynamic would not apply to Hindus of Indian ethnicity, who are authentically Hindu by virtue of birth.

While there are certainly elements of Indian nationalism among Hindus in the US, this should not be surprising considering the relatively short amount of time that most Hindu families have been in America; they are still conscious of their 'homeland' and minority status in the States. As we will see in the following chapters, these minority Hindus draw strength and support in numbers by inclusiveness, bringing together many ethnically, linguistically and religiously different people. In fact, in direct contradiction to Lal's conclusions, I would contend that one of the primary characteristics of American Hinduism is both its "amorphous and ecumenical form".

Moreso, American Hindus are not misguided religiously because of western globalization and colonialism, nor are they passive victims weakened by colonialism. Rather, it seems the use of English and the educational institutions in India have prepared many Indian Hindus for life, and success, in the US. Following The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Indian migrants to America came because of their technological training, and have become major components of recent technological advances. The post-1965 Indian migrants have established strong niches in the fields of engineering, computer programming and medicine, securing "highly specialized jobs at institutions

such as NASA, at university research institutes and hospitals, or at large corporations such as IBM and Burroughs-Wellcome (Waghorne 1999: 104-105). As a result, this highly skilled and education population has indeed made tremendous economic strides in America. Priya Anand (2004: 11) reports that

The average household income of the Indo-American community is estimated at \$US 60,093 compared to the average household income of \$US 38,885. More than 87% of Indo-Americans have completed high school and 62% have some form of college education compared to just over 20% of the US population. They are found in high profile and diverse professions such as medicine, engineering, law, higher education, international finance, management and journalism, media and music. Their educational profile, economic success and knowledge of English help them to assimilate into the American 'melting pot'.

Furthermore, the IndoAmerican community is growing rapidly, particular in wealthy, urban states. Anand (2004: 11) writes

The United States now has a 1.68 million strong Asian-Indian American community. Between the 1990 and 2000 census a phenomenal growth of 105.87% - the highest among all Asian origin groups, was recorded. California has the largest concentration of Indo-Americans followed by states like New York and New Jersey. Other states with a sizeable population of Indo-Americans are Florida, Pennsylvania and Washington. The Indians who migrated to the United States belong to the class of educated and professional elites such as engineers (mostly software), scientists and college teachers as well as accountants and businessmen.

In fact, the overseas Indians on a whole have grown so successful that many are recognizing the economic and political potential that organized diasporal Indian communities present. Joel Kotkin, in his article "Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy", writes that "The more than twenty million overseas Indians today represent one of the best-educated, affluent groupings in the world...The Indian may prove to be the next diaspora to emerge as a great economic force" (Waghorne 1999: 104-105).

Indeed, this "great economic force" is already well established in America, and continually growing in size, as well as social and economic impact. In fact, this is in part

due to the Internet, a resource quite accessible to the Indian American Hindus considering their education and occupations. Through the interactive potential of the Internet, Hindus in America have been able to generate a strong social presence by drawing strength in numbers. By uniting as a strong group, Hindus in America successfully pressured Warner Brothers to delete a scene from *Eyes Wide Shut* in which verses of the Bhagavad Gita were recited during an orgy scene; an impressive feat, considering the daunting power of the Hollywood studios. Other figures, such as Rajiv Malhotra, have been able to generate group resistance against western scholarship they deem damaging by organizing groups to petition and challenge many academic scholars, as well as major media groups they accuse of “Hindophobia”

(<http://www.sulekha.com/blogs/commentdisplay.aspx?cid=4715&pageno=4>).

Concluding Remarks

Although the vast majority of the World Wide Web is primarily only informative, interactivity is a significant aspect of the Internet, particular when considering religion on the Internet. Although Sectarian, Temple and Activist web sites are primarily informative, they also incorporate a fair degree of interactivity, and have made extensive use of e-mail and Internet communication. The final two categories of Hinduism on the Internet, Chat rooms/BBS's/Blogs and Cyber-praxis, represent the initial attempts at *performing* religion online, through the use of sophisticated technologies and imaginative applications of religious ritual and practice. Although many issues and questions are raised by the current challenges of Hindus living in America, the high degree of interactivity made possible by the Internet provides a rich forum for Hindus to explore these issues with other Hindus across the globe.

As Hindus in America continue to organize, these communities are actively engaging their new environment, and developing clever and effective solutions, particularly through the Internet. The imaginative use of the interactive capabilities of the Internet by these various communities (including online communities) illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of Hinduism, and suggests that Hinduism is well prepared for the transition into this new Age of Information.

CHAPTER 3

THE DOMAINS OF HINDU TEMPLES IN AMERICA

Assimilation, Accretion, and Adaption

With migration comes new challenges, regardless of the circumstances of their transportation to a new land. As individual migrants settle in their new homeland, a common strategy is to form communities with other migrants from their homeland, that share a similar memory of their home land, language, religion and customs. Together, the community assists the individual members in their assimilation and adaptation to their new environment, and actively develop strategies of assimilating and adapting their religious tradition(s). However, not all aspects of Hinduism can be successfully transmitted outside of India. For example, Ninian Smart (1999: 424) points out that themes such as caste, yoga, *bhakti*, pilgrimage, temple rituals, austerity (*tapasya*), wandering holy men, instruction in the scriptural traditions, regional variation, pundits, a strong sense of purity and impurity, household rituals, veneration of the cow, the practice of astrology, belief in reincarnation, the importance of acquiring merit, etc. These themes, which are woven together into the complicated fabric of Hinduism in India, do not all travel easily to new environments.

As a result, many religious elements are dropped during migration, while other aspects are retained and transformed. Vasudha Narayanan (2006: 359) writes that

Selected elements from the more than three thousand five hundred years of religious life in India are retained, transformed, and transmitted in the diaspora. Through processes of assimilation, accretion, and adaption, some traditions are renewed and revitalized while others are marginalized and discarded. Hindus in the United States strongly support temple culture; transform temple buildings into community centers; frequently conflate ethnicity, culture, and religion; and overwhelmingly use the performing arts, especially dance and music, to transmit Indian/Hindu world views to the second generation.

For the migrant Indian Hindus, one primary method of adaption has been to build strong communities around a temple culture and ritual practice.

Temple Culture

Narayanan observes that “the most noticeable feature of Hindu communities that settled outside of India is the tremendous time, monies, and energy expended in the building of temples” (Narayanan 2006: 364). In fact, “No other country outside of India has as many Hindu temples as the United States” (3). Although the primary function of temples is to “provide the means for formal ritual worship”, Hindu temples in America have become a central locus for the minority Hindu communities, assisting immigrants with their assimilation and adjustment in a new country and culture (Anand 2004: 14).

Elaborating further, Anand (2004: 12) writes that:

Religious and cultural identity has been a significant factor in helping the community to cope with the stresses of adjustment in a foreign land. In addition to providing a spiritual dimension, affiliation with a temple or a religious group has enhanced social participation and group dynamics and has helped the immigrant to find acceptance among his peers. High priority is therefore given to the construction of places of worship. Religious centers act as community centers...Nationwide, a wave of Hindu temple construction is going on; perhaps 1,000 communities are in various stages of planning or construction. About 200 temples have already been built.

Due to the high cost of construction, temple building is difficult to achieve. Many communities started with small buildings, often converted churches purchased by the local community. However, by the late 1970's and 1980's, the first wave of ('authentic') temple construction began. Karen Pechilis Prentiss (1998: 4) writes that several factors were necessary for this momentum:

1. a critical mass of Hindu Indians had settled in the surrounding area...2. Members of the Hindu Indian community, most of whom are employed in the professional sector, had savings to contribute and the ability to participate in fundraising activities for the expensive project of building a temple; and 3. there was a growing

concern among parents in the community that their children would lose touch with traditional Hindu institutions and values.

This temple culture, however, involves far more than ritual practice; it also develops cultural synergy and community. Narayanan (2006: 366) explains that:

In addition to being a center for individual piety, temples set up by Hindus from India serve as large community halls for the local population...In all these matters, the temples in the diaspora are different from those in India and have assumed the functions found in the community at large in the home country. Regular newsletters and updated web pages provide an “outreach” function. New temples are rising up all over the American landscape, and in many cases, the community hall is being built even before the shrine. This is understandable in a situation where members of the Hindu tradition are trying to assert identities in the midst of a larger society in which they feel marginalized and sometimes disenfranchised culturally and linguistically. The community hall is a place where different Hindu groups can meet and have language, music, and dance classes and celebrate the many festivals of the religious calendar.

For Pyong Gap Min, this is significant in Hinduism because “Indian Hindu immigrants can maintain their ethnic traditions through religion effectively because their religious values and rituals are inseparably tied to ethnic customs (including funerals and weddings), values, holidays, food, music, and dance” (Min 2000: 100).

The Internet is a primary resource utilized by American Hindu temples, who maintain a broad community through their websites and e-mail exchanges. However, it is difficult to perform ethnography on e-mail exchanges, since they are closed communications, only accessible by the sender and recipients. Therefore, the primary focus of this chapter is on the websites of Hindu temples in America that are built, operated and maintained by Indian American Hindus. Although the analysis of this chapter is primarily aimed at determining the use and function of the temple *websites*, it must be placed within the context of temple use and function. Therefore, the base of study was limited solely to those temples which have websites (see Appendix A). The websites were located primarily using other websites—maintained by American Hindu

organizations—designed to assist in locating Hindu temples in America (as well as other parts of the world). These sites are the Himalayan Academy’s “[Temples & Ashrams](#)” webpage, the Hindu Student Council’s HinduLinks Universe “[Temples and Ashrams/U.S.A](#)” webpage, and the Council of Hindu Temples’ “[Hindu Temples in U.S.](#)” webpage. These websites, however, did not provide a complete list of all Hindu temple websites in America. Therefore, I supplemented these lists with searches performed on Google.com.

Ecumenical Tendencies and Temple Names

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin the analysis is with the temple names. Typically, the temple’s URL reflects the temple name. However, many temples share the same names, and therefore must make slight variations when choosing a URL. Of the eighty-nine temple sites studied in this essay, fifty-four had ‘ecumenical’ names (roughly 60%) (see Appendix B). By ‘ecumenical’ I mean names that are not specific to any type of Hindu sect, region or deity, but rather are pan-Hindu.

Temple names commonly employ broad, general terms without giving any specification as to the type or regional variation of worship. In fact, the most popular name of the temples analyzed is simply “Hindu Temple”, despite the term being a foreign demarcation. ‘Hinduism’ is term associated with British Colonialism as the British name for a multitude of religions within India, first coined around 1829 and popularized some fifty years later (Hawley 1991: 20-21). Hawley (1991: 22) writes that:

The word ‘Hindu’ is much older than ‘Hinduism’, but it too is a bit of a stranger in India itself. Though the Greeks knew a version of the word (*hindoi*), it was apparently first used by Muslim invaders who entered Indian early in the second millennium A.D. to designate the practices of peoples they found living in the region of the Indus River.

Nonetheless, today Hindu communities in America (and throughout the world) have adopted and implemented the term as a religious umbrella subsuming many Indian traditions, sects and regional variants. In doing so, the name of the Hindu temple represents the migrant community itself, which is comprised of a wide variety of people from different regions and religions of India. Furthermore, this tendency towards ecumenical terminology is typical of all minority groups (Williams 1992: 238).

Typically, the city or region is affixed to the end of the name, such as with [The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago](#), [Hindu Mandir of Lake County](#), [Hindu Temple of Central Indiana](#), or [The Hindu Temple of Metropolitan Washington](#). In these cases, the temple name even seems to imply that this particular temple is the ‘official’ Hindu temple of that city. Some of the Hindu temples in Michigan have chosen the name Bharatiya Temple, which extends beyond even pan-Hindu and implies being pan-Indian. Furthermore, many temples also affix “(Indian) cultural center” to their names, such as with the [Indo American Cultural Center and Temple \(Kalamazoo, MI\)](#), the [Hindu Temple & Cultural Center of Kansas City](#), the [India Cultural Center and Temple \(Memphis, TN\)](#), and the [Sanatan Dharma Temple & Cultural Center \(Maple Valley, WA\)](#). Such names illustrate that the temple performs many services beyond strictly temple rituals, as well as inclusiveness to all Indians and Indian Americans. Many temple names also include terms such as “society”, “association” and “institution”, which characterize the communal nature and mission of the temples, as well as illustrate the organization and structure of the temple, which speaks to the credibility of the temple.

Therefore, the importance of the temple name is that the name functions to bring in a varied and diverse base of devotees. By emphasizing the ‘Indian’ or ‘culture’ in a

temple name, Hindu temples have occasionally been able to include Jains and Sikhs in their activities and community. For example, the Hindu American Religious Institute (HARI) in New Cumberland, PA houses a number of Hindu deities, as well as a *murti* of “Lord Mahaveer” for Jain worshippers (<http://www.haritemple.org/deities.htm>). The [Hindu Temple Society \(Allentown, PA\)](#) accommodates Hindu, Jain and Sikh worshippers with regular ritual activities and festivals from all three traditions (<http://www.hindutemple-allentown.org/about.htm>).

As the Indian migrant community grows, the higher population allows for specialization of temples. Vasudha Narayanan argues that “a general rule of thumb in North America is that the smaller the geographic area under consideration, the more inclusive the group. A large city may have very specific groups based on caste, community, and language lines” (Narayanan 2006: 362). For example, as the numbers of Gujarati immigrants in America has grown, specific Gujarati communities, temples and communities have developed in many cities. In fact, Lal (2003: 124) estimates, based on his own research, that:

There are at least 2 million, and perhaps as many as 3 million, Gujaratis living outside India, and they almost certainly account for a greater portion of the 16 to 20 million diasporic Indians than any other community. Perhaps as many as a third of the 1.8 million Indians residing in the United States are Gujaratis...

Due to the exceptionally large Gujarati population in America, many cities have established specific Gujarati ethnic communities. The BAPS Swaminarayan movement, which comes from Gujarat and is comprised of Gujarati immigrants, is a perfect example of such an ethnic community. Through their official website and newsletters, the Swaminarayan leadership and community stay in contact with each other, and locate other BAPS members when relocating to new areas. One difference between the BAPS

website and individual temple web sites is the prominent use of Gujarati, as well as very specific information about their sect's history and leadership.

In metropolitan cities and regions with large Indian communities, we find non-sectarian temples which can be more specific than 'Hindu'. In these cases, the temple name denotes a specific deity, deities or sect [see Appendix C]. Many temples are named after a single deity, giving a preference or special place for that *deva*. Temples such as the [Sri Venkateswara Temple \(Penn Hills, PA\)](#), [Vishnu Mandir \(Bronx, NY\)](#), the [Maha Ganapati Temple Of Arizona \(Maricopa City, AZ\)](#), the [Murugan Temple of North America \(Lanham, MD\)](#), and the [Shiva Temple \(San Marino, CA\)](#) are all named after the primary *deva* worshipped at that temple. These names imply that the temples are more like their Indian counterparts, in that they only house one deity in the temple *garbhagriha*. Yet, this is *rarely* the case. For example, the [Maha Ganapati Temple Of Arizona \(Maricopa City, AZ\)](#), which was built specifically to house a 1400 lb., 4 ft. tall granite Ganesha *murti* denoted by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami in May 1999 (http://ganapati.org/about_temple.html), houses other *murtis*, including Shiva, Karthik and Lakshmi (<http://ganapati.org/>). The [Sri Venkateswara Temple](#) in Bridgewater, NJ is primarily devoted to Sri Venkateswara. However, other *murtis* are also present, including Shiva, Ganesha, Parvati, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati (<http://www.venkateswara.org/>).

Though the majority of temples named after a single deity are dedicated to Shiva or Vishnu, many temples are also named after *devis*, such as the [Sri Lakshmi Temple \(Ashland, MA\)](#), the [Kali Mandir \(Laguna Beach, CA\)](#), the [Durga Temple \(Fairfax Station, VA\)](#), and the [Parashakti Temple \(Pontiac, MI\)](#). Like the Shaiva and Vaishnava temples, all of these temples also employ other *murtis* as well. Likewise, in many of the

Shirdi Sai Baba Temples ([Florida Shirdi Sai, Iverness, FL – Sri Shirdi Sai Baba Temple, Pittsburgh, PA](#) - [Shirdi Sai Temple of Chicago, Hampshire, IL - Shri Shirdi Sai Center, Brunswick, NJ](#)), Shirdi Sai Baba is presented with along with other Hindu deities, and many Hindu festivals and rituals are still performed. Therefore, even in naming a temple to a specific deity, the temple worship is typically still ecumenical and inclusive for many different Hindus.

Other temples have sought a middle ground, by naming their temples after two primary deities, especially Shiva and Vishnu. Once again, however, the many “Shiva Vishnu” temples also house other deities, particularly Ganesh, Balaji, Murugan and/or Kartikeya. Other temples, such as the [Shiva Murugan Temple \(Concord, CA\)](#), the [Sri Sri Radhakrishna / Sri Balaji Temple \(San Diego, CA\)](#), or the [Shiv Shakti Peeth \(Flushing, NY\)](#) pair deities with some type of relationship to one another, such as with Shiva and his son Murugan, Vaishnava deities Radhakrishna and Balaji, or the male and female components (Shiva-Shakti) in Shaiva beliefs. Other temple names, such as the [Shaiva Siddhanta Church \(Kauai, HI\)](#) and the Shirdi Sai Baba temples, announce that these organizations belong to a particular lineage or tradition.

Although it may seem pedantic to spend so much time discussing temple names, the name of the temple is important. On the one hand, temples (particularly when multiple temples are present in one city) vie for devotee participation, membership and donation, making authenticity of the utmost importance. Names like “Hindu Temple” have no connection to the temple tradition in India, and therefore seem inauthentic by Indian temple standards. A certain degree of authenticity is granted to the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills, PA, both by its connection to the temple in Tirupati,

as well as by name. Yet, the need to be inclusive, in both temple practice and name, cannot be understated.

Therefore, a few temples have tried to avoid the problem by having two names. For example, [The Hindu Temple Society of North America \(Flushing, New York\)](#) is also called the Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapathi Devasthanam, and the [Hindu American Temple and Cultural Center \(Morganville, NJ\)](#) is likewise called the Sri Krishnaji Mandir. While these dual names give the temple both the general appeal and authenticity, the downside is having a long and complicated name.

This issue raises an intriguing question: how much does the Indian American Hindu community rely upon Indian Hindu standards? The majority of temples have ecumenical names, a strategy specific to the migrant Indian communities. Yet, we also see a trend in larger metropolitan areas towards specialization of the temples (at least in name). With a larger pool of devotees at hand, temples can afford to narrow their worship and still maintain a large enough body of worshippers. Yet, as these communities continue to grow in America, will new temples continue this trend of specialization? If we assume that the Indian American Hindu community is diasporal, meaning they share a memory of their common place of origin (Vertovec 1999: 12), it would logically follow that they would attempt to replicate temple standards in India, and thus become more and more specialized. On the other hand, the Indian American community has openly adopted the name ‘Hindu’, which is now part of the average Americans’ lexicon (whereas Gaudiya Vaishnava most likely is not). The future trends of temple naming, in many ways, will illustrate Indian American Hindus attempts to retain connections to their

shared past (elements of diaspora), as well as their active construction and naming of a new, American, form of Hinduism (patterns of migration).

Website Aesthetics and Technology

Other than the name, the first place to begin the analysis of temple website content is with the general look, aesthetics and technology of the site. Often, the temple websites are highly impressive, and utilize a high degree of programming technology. The significance of the programming technology is that the highly sophisticated sites appear more professional, which can set one temple apart from other temples with simpler web technologies. Furthermore, more sophisticated web protocols allow for more interaction from the user.

Although most sites are basic Hyper Text Markup Language (.html), many temple sites also incorporate elements of more sophisticated web protocols, such as Macromedia Flash and Shockwave-Flash (.swf), Hypertext Preprocessor (.php), Active Server Pages (.asp), Extensible Markup Language (.xml), and Cascading Style Sheets (.css), as well as a host of simple animated .gif's and Java Script functions. HTML is the most basic Internet language, but also the most limited. Essentially, HTML can only display text and images. For more dynamic interactions, as well as animation, other protocols must be used. CSS provides a way to organize web page textual features, such as font size, color and links, and are commonly used in association with HTML. Java Script is a protocol that allows for more dynamic features, such as roll-over images or drop-down menus, to be used within HTML pages. Animated .gif's are images which have multiple 'slides' which play at a set rate, giving the image the appearance of animation. Animated .gif's, CSS and Java Script are slightly more complicated than basic HTML coding, but common enough that individuals familiar with HTML can easily incorporate them into an

HTML web page. Therefore, they are the most common features on the various Hindu temple websites studied in this essay.

However, many temple sites utilize more complicated web technologies for more dynamic and impressive websites. The [Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple \(Lanham, MD\)](#) uses Active Server Page (.asp), which allows them more features, such as scrolling menus. The [Hindu Temple Society of Capital District \(Albany, NY\)](#) utilizes Extensible Markup Language (.xml), a language similar to HTML which offers better file management and display, within a .php protocol. PHP is an HTML-embedded scripting language that provides dynamic interaction and easy organization of the website content. Many sites, including the [Shiv Shakti Peeth \(Flushing, NY\)](#), have basic HTML pages with other more advanced features, such as online streaming *bhajans*.

By far the most impressive temple sites utilize elements of Macromedia Flash, or Shockwave-Flash (.swf). Macromedia Flash and Shockwave allow for animation and a high degree of dynamic interaction. Some sites, such as the [Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple Society \(Irvin, TX\)](#), [Sri Venkateswara Temple \(Bridgewater, NJ\)](#) and the [Hindu Temple of Arizona \(Scottsdale, AZ\)](#), are HTML pages with Shockwave Flash (.swf) elements embedded within the page, giving the sites simple animation. Other sites, such as [Barsana Dham \(Austin, TX\)](#), are made entirely of Flash, and therefore highly sophisticated in both appearance and functionality. This particular site has an animated cursor, with falling flowers and ‘mystical’ music as the user navigates throughout the site, giving a sense of the Indian and religious nature of the temple and organization.

Little India

Even if simple protocols are used, temples can still have a similar effect by incorporating images of the temple; in fact, the majority of temple sites have an image of

their building on the home page. Most of the temples have some architectural element of Indian temples, whether the entire building itself, or simply a spire attached to a pre-existing building. In all cases, these elements of Indian architecture provide a feeling of being in India. When conducting his research on immigrant Hindus and temple worship, Pyong Gap Min reports that many devotees said they came to the temple because they felt like they were in “Little India” (Min 2000: 108). By putting the images on the temple site’s homepage, visitors are given a virtual taste of “Little India” online.

Yet, even more than reminiscence, the images of the temples—especially the larger, more beautiful buildings—are a testament to the success of the Indian American community. These buildings, which often tower over neighboring buildings, required great finances and organization to construct. As a symbol of the Hindu community in America, these buildings legitimate the presence of the Hindu community as an active and vibrant part of the American landscape. Many temple sites even have “temple history” links, which document the successive stages of the temple building, and expansions. These histories often provide information and/or images of their *bhumi puja*, an elaborate ceremony to bless the ground before temple construction begins, which offers a sense of authenticity for the temple. Furthermore, these histories record the struggles that particular community underwent to construct the temple, which strengthens the feeling of accomplishment and success for that community and temple.

Both the sophistication of web technologies and the construction of ornate Indian temples are possible only with access to resources and finances. However, the Indian American community has enjoyed a high degree of success in this country. The proliferation of software engineers provides the Indian American Hindu community with

a pool of trained programmers, capable of constructing websites, both basic and sophisticated. Furthermore, the overall financial success of the Indian American Hindus provides the temples with a base of relatively affluent devotees. This, in turn, provides the temple with a member base that has access to the Internet. Without an affluent member base, the resource of the Internet would surely be useless.

As the temples have become the central locus of community activities, temple building and maintenance is crucial to the development and maintenance of the migrant Indian American community (Waghorne 1999: 522). However, temple building is an expensive task, potentially costing several million dollars to construct (Anand 2004: 12). Not only must a community acquire the necessary funds; temple building also requires the organization and leadership to carry-out the construction and maintenance of the building. This figure of “several million dollars” is somewhat misleading, since not all temples are as ornate (and expensive) as the [Sri Venkateswara Temple \(Penn Hills, PA\)](#). For example, the [Bharatiya Temple \(Troy, MI\)](#) cost approximately \$500,000 to build (<http://www.bharatiya-temple.org/home/history/>), with only slightly over \$100,000 put down. In fact, many temples begin construction with a simple building, and later add additional renovations when more funds are available. Furthermore, aside from the initial costs of building the temple, maintenance itself is costly, both for the physical building and grounds as well as temple priest and staff salaries. [The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, GA](#) estimates that it takes approximately \$90,000 per month to operate the temple (<http://www.hindutempleofatlanta.org/opexpenses.html>).

Funding these temples is complicated by the fact that Hinduism has no official tithe. Both the construction and maintenance of Hindu temples generally relies upon the

donations of the devotees. Therefore, Hindu temples in America have to provide simple methods of accepting donations and other forms of income. Virtually every temple website advertises for donations on their homepage. Many websites are even capable of accepting donations online, through a secure PayPal account or other online payment protocol. PayPal has made the process of accepting online payments simple by auto-generating the HTML code so the web designers can easily implement PayPal into their websites (https://www.paypal.com/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_additional-payment-integration-outside).

Another common method of generating income for temples is to have memberships to the temple. Most temples with memberships have online forms available, and many also accept online payments for the memberships. The [Birmingham Hindu Temple, AL](#) charges \$500 for an annual membership and \$5,000 for a lifetime membership. Though they have an online form for membership, they do not accept online payments at this time. The [Hindu Temple of Arizona \(Scottsdale, AZ\)](#) offers a series of membership types, based on the amount of donation:

Grand Benefactor : \$50,000 or more
Benefactor : \$30,000 to \$49,999
Grand Patron : \$15,000 to \$29,999
Patron : \$5000 to 14,999
Founder : \$2,000 to \$4,999
Life : \$1,000 to \$1,999
General : \$100 to \$999
(<http://www.hindutempleaz.org/membership.htm>)

The [Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, IL](#) offers three types of memberships: Annual membership are available with a donation or service fee of \$200 per year, Lifetime memberships require a donation of \$2,000, and Patron memberships are available for individuals that donate \$10,000 or more (<http://www.ramatemple.org/>

[HTGC_Membership_2005.pdf](#)). Typically memberships allow the individuals to vote on temple matters, with different types of members having varying degrees of responsibilities and considerations. [The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, IL](#), for example, states in their membership form that “The Patron Members will be considered as a separate category of members for voting and administrative purposes” (http://www.ramatemple.org/HTGC_Membership_2005.pdf). Therefore, higher financial donations are rewarded with more voting power, and thus more influence within that community.

Seva, Dana, and Temple Budgets

Hindu temples in India typically do not emphasize communal practice for ritual worship; yet, American Hindu temples have a distinct financial need for an established patron community to fund temple building, maintenance and activities. Although donations are emphasized and important in this process, membership is more mutually beneficial in that members provide regular income to the temples, and in turn can take part in the temple leadership and functions. The temple functions and activities funded by community finances testify to the success of that community. Therefore, individuals within that community can take pride in the accomplishments of the community at large.

Although Hinduism has no official tithe or sanction on donations and charity, selfless giving and service are all valued within the plethora of Hindu traditions. Priya Anand provides a general overview of the religious elements of charity and giving within the broad Hindu tradition:

For Hindus dana (giving) is an important part of one's dharma (religious duty). Dana includes selfless service or sewa to those in need. Dana is a broad term used to define almost any type of giving which is non reciprocal or one sided and which is not motivated by immediate self interest; to share our possessions with those less fortunate and to support institutions such as temples, schools, and service

organizations...A form of Dana is dakshina, which is given to the priest after a visit for any religious occasion. The dakshina is considered as a service charge for officiating at family functions. Another form is the bhiksha in the form of articles or food given to sanyasis or monks. Bhiksha therefore is only given to holy men and is different from bheekha i.e. giving to the poor, needy and persons with disabilities...Dana in turn is linked to dharma...Each person has a dharma wherein charity is first directed towards immediate family and is then extended to society, the world and all living beings. (2004: 9)

Since the Hindu temples act as a central locus for the Indian American Hindu community, many charitable activities are organized and performed at the temples. In fact, Anand reminds the reader that in America most money donated by individuals and families is given directly to the temple. In turn, the temple organizes and manages the distribution of these charitable funds (49).

The Internet is an excellent resource to promote the various types of *dana*. Most of the websites had a call for volunteers on the homepage. Typically these volunteer roles are to assist with various temple activities, such as assisting with classes. Other activities promoted on the temple websites include fund-raisers for various relief efforts, such as natural disasters, blood drives, toys-for-tots and soup-kitchen programs. Often these activities are performed in conjunction with non-Hindu churches and organizations (Narayanan 2006). The [Sri Venkateswara Temple \(Penn Hills, PA\)](#) has an online form that organizations seeking assistance can submit (http://www.svtemple.org/artman/uploads/guidelines_for_organizations_seeking_funds.doc). [The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, IL](#) often organizes a food drive for people in the Chicago area (http://www.ramatemple.org/Food_Drive_2005.htm).

Although these various activities have religious significance in terms of *dana* and *seva*, they also serve crucial pragmatic functions. Since part of *dana* involves payment to temple priests and temples, promoting *dana* is a means for the temple to promote

financial donations. Furthermore, the charitable activities themselves serve to reinforce and strengthen the communal bonds. On the one hand, these activities bring together the individual devotees and families, internally strengthening and maintaining their sense of belonging to a community. On the other hand, the charitable services provided to the larger community builds relationships with the external community of non-Hindu Americans. This assists in legitimating their presence in America, and that specific region.

Many other charitable fund-raisers have been orchestrated to assist India, illustrating a diasporal tendency in some of the volunteer work of Indian American Hindus. Anand writes that “overseas Indians demonstrate considerable attachment to their ancestral towns and villages and have contributed extensively after national emergencies like the Kargil war (1999), the cyclone in Orissa (1999) and earthquakes in Gujarat (2001)” (2004: 12). In fact, the amount of transnational funds filtered back to India have been extraordinary. Anand writes:

In 2000-2001 overall foreign contributions [from non-resident Indians] to India totaled \$955 million. The main foreign donor was the United States, which gave over \$315 million. It is estimated that between 1975-2000 \$97 billion was received from the diaspora. In 2002, the American India Foundation raised \$7.5 million from people of Indian Heritage now living in the United States. Of the \$7.5 million, one million went to the victims of the September 11th attacks with the remainder going toward relief efforts in...Gujarat. (5)

While there are many reasons for charitable works given to India, such donations must surely give the Indian American Hindus a sense of accomplishment and success by financially assisting the needy in their nation of origin. However, we also find that regions of India that have larger populations in the US also tend to get more money. Thus, in looking at the examples of Orissa and Gujarat above, we should bear in mind

that Gujarat received far more money than did Orissa, although both disasters were comparably devastating. However, the migrant Gujarati communities in the US (and UK) are much larger and more organized than Orissans, which accounts for this discrepancy. Therefore, it seems that ethnic identity still plays a prominent role in transnational donations to India (Lal 2003).

However, some scholars are concerned that this transnational exchange of money between the US and India, coupled with ethnic identity, is fueling and funding Hindutva pogroms against Muslims in India. Ashutosh Varshey speculates that as the diasporal Gujarati communities have become “fabulously wealthy...A lot of the new Gujarati wealth, at home and abroad, has gone to Hindu nationalist organizations” (Lal 2003: 124). In fact, Lal even argues that the political ascension of the BJP to power in India was a direct result of US Gujarati influence and finance, though he admits that “little empirical work has been done on the money trail that is widely alleged to exist between the VHP-America and other organizations committed to Hindu rejuvenation and supremacy in the United States...” (125). Vijay Prashad is also concerned about the Non-Resident Indian financing of Hindutva organizations in India. He reports that:

Between 1990 and 1992, the average annual income of the VHPA was \$385,462. By 1993 its income had gone up to \$1,057,147. An allied group of the VHPA, the India Development and Relief Fund, raised almost \$2 million in the 1990s (some of it via the United Way). This money is discreetly transferred into India. (Prashad 2000: 146)

Prashad admits that the few million dollars funneled to Hindutva organizations “appears to be insignificant” when considering the billions of dollars received from Non-Resident Indians. However, he argues that this money is enough to place Hindutva organizations within the intellectual elite, establishing their legitimacy and fueling a diasporal sense of nationalism (147).

The Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (CSFH) is an online organization based in California, which attempts to expose US financial exchanges (particularly from corporate philanthropy) that fund Hindutva organizations (<http://stopfundinghate.org/index.shtml>). Their home page encourages philanthropy, but “urges people to make the responsible choice in favor of supporting secular groups with a long-standing commitment to the pluralistic ethos and democratic ideals of India”. In their online article “A Foreign Exchange of Hate: IDRF and the American Funding of Hindutva” (<http://stopfundinghate.org/sacw/index.html>), the author argues that of all the money received by the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF):

Nearly 70% of the IDRF funds go to organizations dealing with education (largely in adivasi/rural areas), hostels, 'shuddhi'/reconversion programs, and Hinduization efforts; about 8% goes for health and welfare work; 15% goes for relief work, and only 4% towards what is normally understood in the NGO world as rural development. (http://stopfundinghate.org/sacw/part4.html#4_2)

What is particularly disturbing about this Hindutva funding is that the money is often obtained using deceiving fund-raising tactics. Priya Ananda reports that many major corporations—including Cisco, Sun, Oracle, Hewlett Packard, AT&T and MBNA—donated funds to the India Development and Relief Fund under the pretext that it was “for ‘development & relief’ work I India”, unaware of the organizations’ ideology (Anand 2004: 44).

However, while it is important to bring attention to transnational funding of Hindutva organizations, Priya Anand emphasizes that it is nonetheless “important to stress the positive role of religion in promoting social development and reform in civil society” (2004: 5). Though Hindutva organizations have successfully raised funds for their causes, this still only reflects a relatively small portion of the billions of dollars sent to India by the diaspora; “\$5 million from 1994 to 2000” (5). Furthermore, the education

programs are not all part of a Hindutva cause or attempts at Hinduization. The Chinmaya Mission, though dedicated to teaching the “wisdom of Vedanta”, nonetheless offers non-Vedic educational scholarships, and works with many humanitarian organizations, including Mother Theresa’s Mission (25). The Chinmaya Mission West (CMW) has 26 centers in the US, most of which are involved with local community projects, including soup kitchens, feed the homeless programs, and clothing donations to the poor. The Chinmaya Mission even raised \$150,000 for rural development in Himachal Pradesh, and runs a child sponsor program for impoverished children in Andhra Pradesh (26). The All India Movement for Seva (AIM), established by Swami Dayanand Saraswati and his followers, promotes various educational, environmental, healthcare and women’s empowerment programs (38-39). Similar programs are directed by BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, ISKCON, Ramakrishna Mission, Sathya Sai Baba Organization, Sankaracharya and the Veda Vyasa Foundation. Therefore, funds generated by Hindutva organizations, such as the VHP, are only one small part of the overall fund-raising groups and initiatives. In fact, “though the VHP claims it has links to various religious groups such as Chinmaya Mission, Ramakrishna Mission and the Sankaracharya, *it must be clearly stated that none of latter laid claims to such a relationship* [my emphasis]” (47).

Furthermore, the individual Hindu temples in America and the various BAPS Swaminarayan *mandirs* “receive much more in donations from their congregations” than do the various religious movements and Hindutva organizations (Anand 2004: 48). Furthermore, the funds received by the local temples are not generally sent to India, but rather applied to bettering and serving their local community. Dr. Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Society of North America (Flushing, NY) says that they undertake

local social initiatives to preserve Hindu culture by focusing on their local community, and not social causes in India (48). Therefore, while they successfully raised funds for the Gujarat Earthquake and Orissa cyclone, they likewise raised funds for the victims of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and continually perform many charitable activities within Queens. The Internet provides a forum for these local temples to advertise their charitable programs, and even collect donations online.

Promotion and Advertisement

In terms of religious activities (i.e. ritual worship and celebration), the World Wide Web primarily serves as a tool to promote the activities and worship. Most of the temple sites tell which *murtis* are housed in the temple, and often display images of them as well. Some sites even have cyber-*pujas* or online *darshans* of the deities. For example, the [Florida Shirdi Sai \(Iverness, FL\)](#) temple has a Flash introduction which begins with an image of Shirdi Sai Baba, and culminates with a virtual *arati* of the deity. The [Kali Mandir \(Laguna Beach, CA\)](#) has a virtual *darshan* of Kali on their homepage, which offers a brief Sanskrit prayer to the *devi* and a close-up image of the *murti*.

Likewise, most temples use the Internet to promote types and times of regular ritual services, such as *pujas*, *aratis*, and/or *bhajans*. By offering information about their services, devotees can know if their own deity and ritual practice is performed at that particular temple, and when they are performed. Furthermore, most of the temples also offer information about additional rituals, including the various *samskaras* and *pujas*. Typically the website also offers information about the pricing for these rituals (which are different when performed at one's home or at the temple), as well as the materials needed. Some temples even sell these materials, though I did not encounter any sites which sold these materials online.

In similar fashion, most temple websites offer information about various festivals and special events, usually within a year-long calendar of events. Like the ritual and deity worship, virtually all Hindu temples in America celebrate many major festivals from various regions and sects of Hinduism. Furthermore, other significant days are often celebrated, such as Gandhi's birthday, New Years Day and Indian Independence Day. Occasionally sites will even offer pictures from certain festivals and events, as a way to promote participation.

Most temples and community centers have classes for adults and children, and promote these classes on their websites. Although the specific information about class times are not always available online, the types of classes offered at the temple are usually listed on the website. Common types of classes include various languages (most commonly for Sanskrit and Hindi, but also English, Tamil, and other regional languages of India), meditation, yoga, sacred texts (particular discussions on the Bhagavad Gita), dance, music, *balavihar*, youth groups and camps and even SAT prep courses. Many sites even offer forms to sign up for the classes online.

Often the *balavihar* and youth groups or camps are listed separately on the homepage, which infers a certain sense of priority for these youth-based programs. This tendency reflects the need for the Indian American communities to bridge the generational gaps between Indian born parents (and grandparents), and their American born children (and grandchildren). Such programs provide a religious education to the children, as well as Hindu peers. By bringing their children together with other Indian American adolescent peers, these classes also function to preserve the future of the Indian American Hindu community.

All of the temple websites need some basic, common features, such as contact information, temple location and directions. Typically, the websites have contact information for the temple priests, temple staff, Board Members and Trustees, and the webmaster. Most sites also have background information about the temple priests, as a means of authenticating their ritual worship.

Another common feature of most of the websites is a news link, often in the form of a .pdf newsletter. Typically the websites offer a means to regularly receive the newsletter, such as by email list-serves. These newsletters often have information about temple expansions, classes, festivals and events. Although it is convenient to have all news information available online, it is not generally assumed that members constantly check the website for updates. Therefore, it is necessary to keep all members of the community informed about the various activities, and email newsletters provide a simple and effective method of communication.

Some sites have information about renting out halls at the temple and/or community center. Many of these temples and community centers even rent out space to the larger surrounding community. This provides the temple with additional funds, and forges new relationships with the surrounding non-Hindu community. By providing information and forms for these rentals, the temples can better advertise this space.

Some temple sites even have a FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions) link, which offer information and answer questions about Hinduism and Hindu Deities. Surprisingly, however, this is not entirely common. Most sites offer very little information, and assume the viewer is knowledgeable about Hinduism. For example, many sites will utilize

Sanskrit terms without defining the terms, therefore assuming their intended viewer is already familiar with the rituals and elements of Hindu worship.

Hindu temple web sites in America assist the temples in developing and maintaining community by promoting their services and activities. Thus, the Internet is primarily an advertising resource, with the primary religious work still being done at the physical temple itself. However, with more sophisticated Internet protocols and technologies, these sites are capable of serving even greater functions. The more sophisticated temple sites provide online resources, such as accepting donation payments, allowing individuals to sign-up for classes, hall rentals, and other activities online. The use of newsletters and e-mail exchanges allows the temple to stay in contact with their suburban devotees, who may be separated by substantial distance through the city, or even nation on a whole; indeed, most of my personal Hindu friends (who are primarily south Indian) made the trip to the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills for specific festivals. Newsletters (and the temple web site) allowed them to keep up-to-date on temple functions and festivals. Furthermore, these sites also illustrate the success of the temple, and surrounding Indian American community, by displaying temple information, history and images. With beautiful temples and websites, the Indian American Hindus have proven their success in this country, and the strength of their community and religion; a strength established through ecumenical inclusivity, and not Hindutva or Vedic orthodoxy. While the temple space and community becomes a primary place for many American Hindu adults and families to work out solutions to their new challenges, these solutions are developed on the parents and temple leadership's terms. As we will see in the next chapter, the Hindu Students Council (HSC) has emerged to allow a forum

for the young American Hindus to build groups of peers, and work out their issues and conflicts on their own terms.

CHAPTER 4
VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM: HINDU STUDENTS COUNCIL
ACTIVITIES ONLINE

Ethnic Preservation and Generational Conflict

One of functions of Hindu temples in America is to assist new immigrants with their assimilation to the American landscape and culture, as well as collectively develop strategies for adapting Hinduism to this new environment. Both processes develop and maintain strong local communities, built around the temple space and maintained through cyberspace. However, the primary impetus for temple building and participation in the US was the emergence of second and third generation Indian American Hindus. Renee and Ajit Bhatia (1996: 252), in their article “Hindu Communities in Atlanta”, argue that:

A significant factor contributing to the growth of religious institutions and organizations is the strong desire among first-generation Hindus to carry forward a viable Indian identity and instill cultural and religious values among their children, who are growing up in American culture.

Pyong Gap Min reports that the majority of Hindus he interviewed cited educating their children as the primary reason for their participation in the Hindu temple. He quotes two Hindu interviewees who stated:

‘We are from India. Helping our children to learn about their root is the main reason for going to temple. Have them know about Hindu gods and goddesses.’
Another informant...put it this way: ‘I think the main reasons are for my own peace of mind and my children’s development. We want our kids to know as much as possible about their religion and culture.’ (2000: 112)

These attempts to preserve their heritage are, in fact, attempts to *instill* their heritage onto their children.

One of the key challenges of any migrant community arises with the emergence of second and third generations, who do not have any (or much) first-hand knowledge of the nation of origin. Raymond Brady Williams, who has written extensively on the topic of Indian Hindu migration to America, points out that:

two national identities are involved in the development of any immigrant group: the nation of origin and the nation of residence... Tension between the two identities is often experienced as a generational gap between Indian parents and their American children. (1992: 237)

This tension between the generations creates significant conflicts, requiring mediation and resolution. Williams continues by arguing that one of the key strategies to overcoming these generational tensions lies within the use of religious organizations, which he sees as a “primary forum in which this dynamic is expressed” (1991: 251).

Therefore, participation in religious activities is among the most important factors of ethnic preservation. Pyong Gap Min, in his work on Korean Christian and Indian Hindu immigrants, presents a widely supported view that “there is a relationship between participation in an ethnic congregation and the preservation of ethnicity” (2000: 99). In fact, Min insists “religious participation consistently makes a greater contribution to ethnic identification than any of the family or individual characteristics examined, except recency of arrival” (99-100). For the second and third generations of Hindus, therefore, participation in religious activities is crucial for the preservation of their Hindu identity.

However, participation in religious rituals (such as temple worship) is difficult for second and third generation Hindus who have been raised as Americans, and do not understand the various rituals and *samskaras* (which are quite foreign to Americans). Many Hindu students articulate a discomfort with the ritualistic aspects of their religion which they feel “that they could not and were not asked to understand” (Waghorne 1999:

123). How, then, can the Indian American Hindu communities built around the temple facilitate interest and participation from their children?

The use of performing arts (primarily music and dance) becomes a primary method for religious and cultural preservation and transmission. Unlike the complicated and foreign temple rituals (which are often performed in Sanskrit), Indian dance and music is more exciting, and provides a venue where the children can actively participate. Most importantly, we should not assume that this participation in music and dance merely generates cultural transmission. As Narayanan points out, classical music and dance “have a broad religious base in India” (2006: 366). Furthermore, participation in “language and religion classes; frequent religious discourses; study circles for adults; and summer camps” further augment this preservation and transmission of Hinduism to the American born generations (366).

Yet, summer camps, temple and domestic worship and religious education are still on the parent’s terms; the children are instructed by adults and other authority figures. The challenge of this generational gap is significant. It is not merely an issue of teaching Hinduism to their children and generating interest in Indian culture, history and religion. It is also about instilling “Indian values” to their children; i.e. the same values held by the parents. Bhatia and Bhatia write:

Indian parents recognize the difficulties associated with teaching Hindu traditions and values to their children, who become steeped in American culture from their earliest years. Parents recognize this cultural change as an inevitable yet undesirable part of rearing children in the United States. (1996: 252)

Although Indian American Hindus have exhibited progressive attitudes and religious openness in many regards, it is extremely difficult for parents to watch their children develop interests and values which run contrary to their own. Although the various

classes and temple events can successfully generate interest and participation in Hinduism, the reality remains that their children are Americans, whose primary influences come from non-Indian American peers and American popular culture. Therefore, even if the parents can successfully transmit cultural and religious elements to their children, their “Americanness” cannot be removed simply by adding Hinduism. Differences between the two cultures generate conflicts between the two generations. For example, Bhatia and Bhatia (252) write that:

first-generation Hindus lived in a society that regarding dating and marrying outside the tradition as taboo. Conversely, for second- and third-generation Indian Americans, freedom to choose whom to date and marry is an integral part of courtship in this country, much to the chagrin of their parents...While some children acquiesce to their parents' wishes, many find ways of getting around these restrictions, even if it means creating domestic friction.

Indeed, the migrant parents often assert tremendous pressure on their children, attempting to persuade their decisions regarding key issues, including dating, marriage, use of English (in religious worship), education and career choice. Since the majority of religious education and participation occur in domestic and temple spaces, where the terms are set by parents and priests, there is a distinct need for a forum where the youth can explore these conflicts and issues *on their own terms*. The university, which typically provides the first steps towards independence and adulthood, is a primary forum where this dialogue can be facilitated and explored.

Hindu Students Council (HSC)

The Hindu Students Council (HSC) is a student organization with over fifty chapters across universities in North America. Their mission and goal is to provide education about Hinduism for students, and to provide a social group and support system of other Indian American Hindu peers. Their work at the university level is crucial

because such a high proportion of Indian Americans are college educated, which means that there is a greater chance that their children will be as well. During the formative years of college, the HSC presents young American Hindus with a forum to learn about the ‘foreign’ rituals and culture of their heritage (and parents), while having a group of peers who also share the same tensions. It is important to analyze the various activities and functions of the HSC chapters in order to better understand issues of migration and generational tensions within the Indian American Hindu community, as well as patterns for future developments of Hinduism in America.

Furthermore, it is necessary to analyze the resources utilized by the HSC organization and affiliate chapters, in their outreach attempts. I assert that the Internet is one of the primary resources used by the various HSC groups. The focus of this essay is on the various [chapter websites](#) at universities across America (see Appendix D), as well as the official website of the [Hindu Students Council](#). Although the analysis of this piece is primarily aimed at determining the HSC’s use of the Internet, it must be addressed within the context of the broader generational issues.

It is important to note that the HSC is not the only student organization that functions to assist Indian American Hindu students. The Indian Students Association (ISA) also has many chapters throughout North American universities. Although their emphasis is directly on broader Indian elements, and not specifically Hinduism, in reality both organizations participate in very similar events. This is not unexpected considering the overlap between religion and culture in Indian religions. Further along down the road, an examination of the various ISA websites would be needed to complete this study. However, due to limitations of time and the scope of this project, I have had to relegate

my observation and analysis to one group, and chose the HSC over the ISA because of their *explicit* religious emphasis, and because of their strong presence on the Internet as a result of the GHEN network.

The primary methodology utilized in this study was in-depth observations of the various HSC chapter websites, as well as the HSC official website. When observing the sites, I focused on two general aspects of the site: 1) website content and information provided, and 2) website aesthetics, use of images and symbols, and the Internet protocols used (such as .html, .php, flash). Therefore, it was necessary to view both the web page and the page source⁵. I further supplemented this observation with an email survey (see Appendix E), which I sent to the HSC officers and general chapter email addresses (see Appendix F). I intentionally put “HSC research” on the subject line of the email so that the members would know it was relevant to their membership in the HSC. Unfortunately, the responses were few and far between. While the information I obtained from these emails was highly beneficial, it is now clear to me that email surveys are not a strong method for conducting research. With the plethora of ‘spam’ and other junk emails and viruses, it is likely that the recipients deleted the emails without reading them.

Hindu Students Council on the World Wide Web

I will begin my analysis of the Hindu Students Council web sites by giving an overview of the official HSC website (<http://www.hscnet.org/>), because “all HSC chapters are registered units of the HSC (a non-profit 501(c)3 organization)”⁶. The HSC’s mission statement is crucial to this study because the goals and objectives of the

¹ The source refers to the code, or language, used to create the web page. In most browsers, the source can be located by going to View>Source. The source is important because it contains information about the various protocols and features used in the site, which may not be visible from the web page itself.

² Email correspondence with the General Secretary of the HSC, Nikunj Trivedi.

HSC organization are the foundation for each chapter. However, the emphasis of this study is not on the official HSC website, but rather on the individual campus chapter websites, which are used by the HSC members and other student participants. The official HSC website offers more information regarding the procedures of the HSC in general, as well as information about starting a chapter. For this reason, the majority of their content is not applicable to this study.

The HSC “About Us” page defines the Hindu Students Council as “an international forum that provides opportunities to learn about Hindu heritage through various activities, events and projects” (<http://www.hscnet.org/aboutus.php>). These activities, events and projects are listed on the page as:

- ✓ Campus Study Groups
- ✓ Classes and Symposia
- ✓ Seminars, Lectures & Workshops
- ✓ Celebration of Festivals
- ✓ Conferences and Camps
- ✓ Leadership Workshops
- ✓ Sport & Travel Activities
- ✓ Publication & Distribution of Literature
- ✓ Various Projects
- ✓ Collaboration with other campus and community organizations

However, it is important to note that while all of these various activities are practiced by various HSC chapters, most individual chapters themselves only participate in some of these activities. The site continues by asking “Why A Hindu Students Council?” (<http://www.hscnet.org/aboutus.php>). The subsequent answer states that:

One out of every six persons born on this earth is Hindu. Mark Twain said, "In religion and culture India is the only millionaire." And yet, so many of us know very little about this great culture and heritage! HSC represents the first and only North American and international attempt by students and young professionals like yourself to explore, discover & experience the immense treasures of the time-tested knowledge and wisdom of the great Hindu culture.

Therefore, one primary objective of the HSC is to learn and explore the teachings of Hinduism. Yet, it is significant to note that this is phrased as “the great Hindu culture”. On the one hand, this reflects the HSC’s relationship to the VHPA, and the VHPA’s use of Hindutva ideology, which attempts to lump all Indian cultures and traditions together as a unified great culture. Yet, it also illustrates the cultural and religious inclusivity found within many American Hindu communities and temples.

If education and information were the sole goals of the HSC, the organization could exist entirely online. However, the most crucial element of the organization (and subsequent chapters) is the social element offered by the group and their events (which are largely based on performing arts, music, dance and film); the community of students created and maintained by the organization. The “About Us” site continues by stating that:

As Hindu students, we often feel isolated and lost within ourselves because of our upbringing in a dual culture Hindu and Judeo-Christian. We try to reconcile our own sorrows and imperfections as human beings in a variety of self-defeating ways. And we usually go through this confusing internal struggle alone. It is precisely to assist you with this spiritual, emotional and identity needs that the HSC was born. Let us help you and help us to help others.

Therefore, above all else, the HSC website exclaims that the organization is designed to educate students about the “Hindu culture”, in a social setting designed to provide a community of fellow Hindu student peers.

This goal is likewise the objective of the various chapters. In fact, most chapters’ home pages have borrowed the official HSC site’s mission statement, either reproducing it in whole or slightly modifying the text. Almost a third of the sites quote the passage “One out of every six persons born on this earth is Hindu. Mark Twain said, ‘In religion and culture India is the only millionaire.’ ” However, other than the “About Us” or

“Mission Statement” pages and the official HSC image (see Appendix G), most chapter websites draw very little from the official site, in terms of both content and aesthetics.

Most individual chapter sites offer the basic information about that particular HSC chapter on their homepage. Typically this involves some variation of the HSC official mission statement, as well as the origins of that chapter. Often this includes the individuals that started the chapter, as well as dates and motivations for its creation. For example, the first thing on the homepage of the [Boston University HSC](#) site states:

The Hindu Students Council at Boston University started in 1995 by some very enthusiastic students...HSC at BU organized a plethora of activities in 1995-96 with the leadership of the its dedicated coordinators. (<http://people.bu.edu/buhsc/>)

One common trend in the homepage statements is an emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness. For example, the University of Virginia’s HSC chapter explicitly states that their primary goal is “is to provide a forum for both the Hindu and non-Hindu students at the University of Virginia to observe and practice the Hindu religion and the Hindu philosophies” (<http://www.student.virginia.edu/~hindu/>).

Most sites have the general contact information on the homepage, though many utilize some form of a “contact us” link. Almost every chapter site has a link to a page about the chapter officers, with their names, contact information, and occasionally images and other biographical information. This is significant because it highlights the actual people involved in the HSC, and not simply the activities and information itself. This implies an emphasis on social activity and group participation.

Some of the sites offer general information about Hinduism, in a variety of ways. The University of Pittsburgh HSC has two links which outline a basic history and general beliefs of Hinduism (http://www.pitt.edu/AFShome/s/o/sorc/public/html/hindu/index_hindu_history.html, <http://www.pitt.edu/AFShome/s/o/sorc/public/html/hindu/>

[index_hindu_religion.html](#)), based on information borrowed from the BBC's religion website. Boston University HSC has a prayerbook online, with a basic overview of Hinduism, as well as transliterated and translated *mantras*, *slokas* and *bhajans* (<http://people.bu.edu/buhsc/downloads/prayer.pdf>). By providing information online, the various HSC chapters can use the web as a resource to develop their goal of education about Hinduism. However, the primary method of education, as well as the function of social community, is not performed online.

Since the HSC is an activity-based organization, the majority of the site content regards their various functions, activities and events. These events are never online events. Therefore, the website simply functions as an advertising resource. Most HSC chapter sites have a link to an Events or Activities page, which lists the activities and dates. Many sites utilize a calendar feature, which provides a simple and organized layout of their activities. Other sites simply list the activities on their homepage, such as with the University of Michigan HSC (<http://www.umich.edu/~hindu/>). The University of Virginia HSC site has incorporated a “ticker script”⁷ into their html code, allowing their events window to scroll through various events at a set speed.

While many of the events are explicitly religious and ritualistic, many other events are social activities involving a blending of various elements of American and Indian popular cultures. Common religious activities involve regular *pujas*, *bhajans*, discussions and yoga or meditation sessions, as well as occasional lectures, special guests and temple trips. Many chapters have regular events on various days. For example, the Boston University HSC has a monthly *puja*, Tuesday night discussions and a Sunday morning prayer (<http://people.bu.edu/buhsc>). Their Tuesday night discussions are designed to

³ ProHTML Ticker script, © Dynamic Drive (www.dynamicdrive.com)

address all issues relevant to the students, not merely religious issues. Sample questions they list on the site include:

What does Hindu religion imply to you?
Do you practice your faith?
What does this mean, how do you practice?
How have you been able to adapt it into your life?
What do I say when people ask me about my religion/faith?
How do I explain things?
What are the most common misconceptions people have about Hindus?
What are the most common questions you are asked?
What is difficult for you?

Among the major topics raised throughout the various chapter discussions are issues of dating, racism, and conflicts with parents. The University of Florida HSC site has a write-up on their recent “Discussion on Faith” meeting (see Appendix H). What is striking about this discussion on faith is the prevalence of dating and love; in fact, no ideology was even discussed! Instead, the students discussed their own difficulties with dating and American values, in direct contrast to the views of the parents. This, in my opinion, is the *greatest strength and function* of the HSC. The Internet promotion of these activities allows for various Hindu students to also share their own personal struggles, discuss strategies for dealing with these conflicts, as well as encouraging participation in the HSC’s religious activities; this, in turn, develops and maintains their student community.

Diwali and Holi celebrations are especially popular with the HSC chapters, though a plethora of other festivals are also observed. However, based on the few questionnaire responses and frequency of occurrence on the websites, it appears that these two festivals have the greatest turnout. Other popular religious activities include *garbha* and *bhangra* dancing. These festivals and activities have great appeal because they are joyously celebrated, and fun social activities. Most importantly, they are religious activities that

allow the students (particularly female students) to actively participate in the transmission and retention of Hinduism in America. The performing arts have a long-established tradition of religious meaning and function in Hinduism, and are, in fact, a primary method for cultural preservation and religious education in America (Narayanan 2006: 366).

Other activities have relatively little religious orientation, but nonetheless serve to provide social interaction with other Indian American students. Such activities include watching movies (both Hollywood and Bollywood films), playing sports and leisure activities (which range from bowling to playing Hindu Jeopardy), as well as dinners and small feasts (with various Indian and American foods). Many sites incorporate online photo albums, displaying images of their various events. These online albums document the events, and provide an easily retrievable memory of the event for those that participated. Most importantly, these images (which always look fun) encourage participation from other students in future activities.

One of the stated goals on the HSC official website was to provide service (*seva*) to the community. However, this is not represented on most of the various HSC chapter sites. Georgia Tech University's chapter works with Raksha, a local Georgia-based nonprofit support and referral network, which their site describes as a:

non-profit organization which addresses social issues within our South Asian community such as family violence and divorce, as well as issues concerning children, senior citizens and new immigrants. Raksha strives to be a source of support for all South Asians who may need a helping hand.

(<http://www.prism.gatech.edu/~dsadmhsc/>)

Founded in 1995, Raksha's official homepage describe their various services as:

Raksha's general direct services include crisis intervention, information and referrals, interpretation and translation, legal and general advocacy, individual and family counseling with children and adults encompassing a variety of issues facing

the South Asian community.

Raksha's community outreach programs increase awareness around issues such as immigration, the myth of the model minority, family violence, child sexual abuse, hate crimes, stalking, LGBT issues, access to health care and workforce readiness within the South Asian community.

Raksha strives to promote cultural sensitivity and provides technical assistance on the unique needs of South Asians to law enforcement agencies, social service agencies and health care providers, among others.

(<http://www.raksha.org/raksha/services.html>)

Other chapters simply organize occasional community service activities on their own, which are likewise promoted on their website (such as the [University of South Carolina HSC](#) site).

In fact, the majority of service related promotion on the chapter websites involves student services. The [George Mason University HSC](#) site and the [University of South Carolina HSC](#) site have online “classifieds”, where students can post items for sale, rooms for rent and job postings. The [Penn State HSC](#) site has information about Hindi classes available at the university. Some sites include news features for their members and various participants. For example, both chapters at [University of Florida](#) and [University of Illinois - Urbana Champaign](#) have online newsletters; other HSC sites, such as the [University of Washington](#) and [University of California, Irvine](#), have mailing lists to keep their participants regularly informed.

Website Aesthetics and Technology

The second aspect of my observation involves the general look, aesthetics and symbolism utilized on the HSC sites. In fact, when observing the various sites, many recurring images, symbols, themes and tropes continuously emerged. The *om (aum)* symbol adorns nearly every HSC site, though the symbol is much less common in India. More popular religious symbols in India, such as the *Shri* and *swastika*, have no presence on the HSC sites. This is likely due to the fact that the *om* is commonly known to non-

Hindus in America, and is an increasingly marketed symbol in American pop culture, whereas the *Shri* is virtually unknown by non-Indian Americans. Furthermore, the *swastika* carries the stigma of Nazi Germany, which discourages its use in the west.

Images of deities and religious figures are also commonly used. Ganesh appears on nearly half of the HSC websites, as opposed to Krishna, Shiva and the goddess who appear on only a few sites. There was not a single Venkateswara located on any site; this was a surprise, considering the popularity of this particular form of Vishnu in both south India and America. Images of Vivekananda appear on the websites of [Stanford University](#) and the [University of Washington](#).

Many of the sites incorporate a Devanagari-style English font (see Appendix I), which gives the initial impression that the language is Sanskrit or Hindi. While this font gives the site a somewhat ‘Indian’ look, it does so at the risk of being kitsch. Some sites begin with traditional Hindu greetings, such as *namaste* and *svaagatam* ([Emory University](#), [Duke University](#) and [University of California, Berkeley](#)). Although these greetings are increasingly less common in India, they are finding rejuvenated use in America.

There are also a number of common phrases, scriptures and tropes inculcated into the websites. Not surprisingly, the HSC slogan, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (The entire creation is one family), is frequently quoted on the individual chapter sites. While the term Hindu itself is generic by nature—the etymology is based on geography, and not ideology and practice—the highly popular use of *Sanatana Dharma* ('eternal duty or religion', an ecumenical term popularized during pre-Independence India) reflects their inclusivity, as well as possible influence from the VHPA and other Hindu groups active

in America (including the plethora of Vedanta movements and philosophies). Many sites include quotes from popular texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and Rig Veda, including the Gayatri Mantra. For example, the [Penn State HSC](#) site has four quotes on their homepage:

Knowledge

Wisdom and righteous knowledge are the key to true success

Unity

The entire creation is one family

Progress

Let everyone be happy, healthy and blessed

Dharma

Truth is one, sages call it by different names

The [University of Pittsburgh HSC](#) site has two quotes from the Bhagavad Gita and Rig Veda:

God is seated in the hearts of all ~ Bhagavad Gita

There is no religion greater than truth and a truthful person knows no fear
~ Rig Veda

Furthermore, their link for information about Hinduism is called “Hindu Culture”.

Barkha Gurbani, the HSC President at John Hopkins University, wrote an article for the campus ministry’s newsletter called [Being Hindu, Being in College](#), in which she argues that:

Many people are misled to think that Hinduism is all about rituals. True Hinduism is a philosophy that everyone can follow and benefit from whether they call themselves Hindu or not. It is a faith based on the fulfillment of duty to self, family, friends and mankind without any expectation of a reward. (2002)

Vasudha Narayanan discusses some of these same ecumenical outlooks in American Hinduism, temples, and among the “young urban professional Hindu” (2006: 173). She writes that it is often said that:

‘Hinduism is not a religion, it is a philosophy, a way of life.’ This is usually followed with ‘Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world.’ These sentences are probably most commonly heard in this country. Some of my American friends who

teach religion here have told me how many of their second-generation Hindu students spout these lines at them. The ‘Visitor’s Guide’ to the Penn Hills temple tells us that ‘Hinduism might be better described as religious culture rather than a religion.’ (173)

Another common trope she outlines is that “Hinduism is a tolerant religion...Sentences like ‘Truth is one, Paths are many’ are voiced even as India spins into crises expressed by communal rioting and separatist violence” (173). However, these tropes reinforce the inclusive, ecumenical nature of American Hinduism, and it should not be surprising that this element is likewise found among the youth.

While the website symbolism, imagery and language use are crucial to their representation of Hinduism, the website structure and code are likewise important in their presentation of this representation. The official HSC website uses PHP, which gives their content more organization, and an overall professional appearance. However, since the individual chapters are responsible for creating, hosting and maintaining their own sites, using only the basic university resources available to them, most are simple HTML, though there is a wide range of technological sophistication. Some chapter sites, such as [Cornell University](#), [George Mason University](#), The [University of Illinois - Chicago](#), [Johns Hopkins University](#) and The [University of South Florida](#) are HTML pages with Shockwave Flash (.swf) elements embedded within the page, giving the sites simple (but effective) animation. Other sites, such as [University of Miami](#) and [Purdue University](#), are made entirely of Flash, and therefore highly sophisticated in both appearance and functionality.

Interactivity and Community

Other sophisticated elements of web design include chat rooms and discussion boards. However, since these require specific server-side setup and management, many

chapters are not able to utilize these functions because the university servers do not support them. However, technological support is only one reason for a lack of these features. The [University of Florida](#) chapter features a discussion board (<http://grove.ufl.edu/%7Ehsc/cgi-bin/board/YaBB.cgi>), yet there is only one post (a man looking for a *tabla* teacher). This is most likely due to that fact that the various sites of the HSC's GHEN network include chat rooms features; therefore the individual chapters do not need their own. However, other chapters have utilized these features with more popular support and usage, such as the University of Illinois at Chicago (<http://www.pliner.net/appmb/board.aspx?id=7621&key=C21A53F760F4440F>). Other university chapters in California had extensive usage of their message boards, but had to shut them down due to a plethora of racist and anti-Muslim postings (<http://www.rediff.com/us/2001/jul/10us6.htm>, <http://www.rediff.com/us/2001/jun/22usspec.htm>).

Such anti-Muslim statements can be interpreted in a number of ways. Racist postings on discussion boards, drawing on highly politicized Muslim-Hindu conflicts, can be the views of a few, extreme individuals. So much attention is given to these conflicts in the news and media that we should not expect these statements to be absent in American Hinduism. While the seriousness of these racist remarks necessitates attention, making concrete conclusions due to the existence of some racist postings is incongruent with the overall picture, and certainly not one representative of all Indian Americans or Hindus.

However, many scholars have made bold conclusions regarding American Hinduism, and the various student groups, *bala vihar's* and summer camps facilitated by

the HSC, Chinmaya Mission and FHA (Federation of Hindu Americans). These summer camps often teach general Hindu viewpoints, representative of ecumenical Hindu adaptions. Some scholars worry, however, that this pan-Indian education denies local traditions and languages, and can “indirectly provide the receptive soil in which the seeds of the [Hindutva] movement can be sown” (Kurien 1998: 64). Vijay Prashad, in his criticism of the HSC and 'Yankee Hindutva' takes this even further (Prashad 2000). His primary critiques of the HSC are that (1) the HSC is a Hindutva organization governed by the VHPA (VHP in America); (2) that Hindutva groups conflate culture and religion as a means of promoting the views of the 'elite' culture; (3) that the individual chapters are run exclusively by young men; and (4) that the various camps and summer programs are Hindutva training grounds (Prashad 2000). Prashad (2000: 148) writes that

Rather than join what should be a collective battle to reconstruct society along the lines of compassion and fellowship, Yankee Hindutva asks desi children to withdraw into Hindu enclaves to learn the ways they are great than others. At its summer camps, the VHPA trains youths in a syndicated Hindu dharma. There is nothing wrong with learning shlokas, literature, Hindi, bhajans...There is, however, everything wrong with learning them as if they are the heritage solely of Hindus and not part of a complex shared history that includes those who are not Hindus".

He continues by asking "How do they decide or make a choice [regarding their religious stance] when they have not been given a story filled with different versions of the past?" (148).

It seems that just as Vinay Lal fails to give agency to American Hindus, Vijay Prashad fails to give agency to the American Hindu youth. Young adults, though certainty impressionable, are not ignorant, mindless sponges eagerly absorbing any and all rhetoric thrown their way. They can, and do, actively think for themselves, like all adolescents and young adults. While it is undeniable that the HSC is an organization overseen by the VHPA, each chapter is individually operated by its members and student

leaders, who come from a variety of backgrounds. Likewise, his critic of patriarchal domination in the HSC is not supported by my research and discussions with participants in the University of Florida chapter of the HSC. Many chapters, including the University of Florida and John Hopkins University, are run by female leadership, and largely comprised of female participants. The HSC is a dynamic forum for the young adults to work out issues on their *own terms*, and not the terms set-up by their parents, priests, or HSC and VHPA national leaders.

Clearly there are distinct patterns of inclusivity and ecumenicism in American Hinduism, yet both Lal and Prashad view this pan-Indian ecumenicism as Brahminical Elitism (Prashad's alternate term for Hindutva). They do not address the necessity and function of this inclusivity due to issues of migration and minority status in America. Furthermore, inclusiveness does not equate to the denial of diversity; it simply builds on the common denominators required to bring a diverse group together as one strong, united community, with all their differences expressed openly (such as by including many different deities in a temple, offering *pujas* and prayers in different languages, including Shirdi Sai Baba and Swaminarayan images and *pujas* in non-sectarian temples, etc.).

Part of Lal and Prashad's error lies in their sole emphasis on belief and philosophy, often obfuscating the differences between Vedantic ideologies and Hindutva histories, not to mention the exclusion of performing arts from their analyses. The HSC activities and various student camps and *bala vihar* programs do incorporate lectures and discussions on Hindu belief. These lectures are typically inclusive by nature, emphasizing general, if not generic, beliefs and ideological viewpoints; viewpoints necessary to unite

Hindus from various backgrounds and family practices. Narayanan describes this dialectic nature of American Hinduism as “Diglossic Hinduism”, a complex overlap of generic and specific beliefs and practices (Narayanan 2000: 761). Like diglossic languages, such as Tamil, which incorporate both formal and colloquial strands, American Hinduism allows formal brahminical viewpoints to be discussed along with each member’s unique, specific traditions and family practice; it is this complex weave of traditions that Raymond Brady Williams describes as “Ecumenical Hinduism” in the “Sacred Threads of Several Textures”. Even Kurien recognizes that “the second generation is simultaneously becoming 'Indianized' in the colleges and universities, where there are many pan-Indian organizations. At home, however, the community with which they identify is the subcultural one, since most family-level- interaction is within the regional group” (Kurien 1998: 46). A student’s education comes from multiple sources; therefore, conclusions cannot be drawn from simply analyzing one aspect.

Kurien continues by arguing, however, that this “Great Tradition” had little impact for the majority of Hindus, until the recent airing of the Hindu epics and the rise of modern Hindutva (Kurien 1998: 56). However, this process is by no means new to contemporary Hinduism or the American front. M.N. Srinivas described this complexity in Indian history as “Sanskritization”, a process:

by which a lower caste attempts to raise its status and to rise to a higher position in the caste hierarchy. Sanskritization may take place through the adoption of vegetarianism, of teetotalism, of the worship of 'Sanskritic deities', or by engaging the service of Brahmins for ritual purposes. Sanskritization can apply to ritual and custom, to ideas and beliefs, or to the pantheon (Staal 1963: 261).

However, as many scholars have pointed out, this distinction requires some qualification. Staal's critique of this overly simplistic explanation is that the “little traditions” have, in fact, greatly influenced the Sanskritic, Brahminical ideologies, beliefs and practices.

There has been a long, ongoing interplay and exchange between various groups, traditions and castes in India, and this dynamic has been central to the development of Hinduism (Staal 1963). Similarly, this same interplay between the “great tradition” and local traditions is continuing today in India, as well as in America. Furthermore, we cannot focus our analysis solely to Hindu ideologies, for Hinduism incorporates many rituals, festivals, and embodied practices.

This is evident in the many local dances and festivals sponsored by the HSC, and engaged by the various HSC participants (many of whom are not members of the organization). When analyzing the various chapter websites of the HSC, photos and descriptions of the events typically include activities relating to dancing and music, as well as feasts; all of which have an established religious base. Even the popularity of Bollywood films, which draw heavily on the musical and dance traditions from India, reflects the student interest in the performing arts. In her discussion of the arbitrary distinctions between religion and culture (particularly in the academic study of religion), Narayanan addresses the tendency to emphasize Vedic, Brahminical ideologies as religious. She continues by pointing out that “None of this was wrong; it was just that the epic stories, the variations of the stories, the varieties of devotional activity, the celebrations of festivals, and the fuss about food seem far more important than doctrine and philosophy in the practice of the Hindu traditions” (Narayanan 2000: 762). She continues by stating that:

All over India religion is conveyed and transmitted through narrative and performance, both onstage and through mass media...It is quite strange that despite all these contributions to the understanding of the Hindu cultural tradition, the focus in portrayals of Hinduism as a religion is still on the Veda and not on performing arts. (Narayanan 2000: 775)

When scholars deny the significance of performing arts (both Indian and American alike), and place sole emphasis on ideology, it is easy to misconstrue American Hinduism as doctrinal and ideological. Yet, as Narayanan makes clear, performing arts are not “classical, static, arts” (775). They are dynamic, religious expressions, which can be used to communicate any social, political or religious issue(s). The interpretive dimension of the narratives and performances allows each individual to express the art differently, and for different reasons. “The performers of music and dance, the transmitters of the religious traditions, speak for Hinduism. We should listen to them” (776). By denying agency and voice to American Hindus and students, critics of American Hindutva have failed to listen to the transmitters of the religious tradition.

Concluding Remarks

While much can be learned from observation, it is only one part of the research process. Officers, members and participants of the HSC need to be interviewed and asked about their own usage of the Internet. However, as stated previously, the response to my email questionnaires was poor. While the information provided from the few responses was insightful, they were simply too few to establish any broad generalizations. Therefore, there is a need to pursue other methods of interviewing for future development of this research, particularly in-person interviews with local chapter officers and telephone interviews with other chapter officers.

Nonetheless, some insightful information was obtained through the e-mail questionnaire responses. Based on this small sample, it appears that well over half the membership is comprised of students born or raised in America, with a relatively small number of international students. This would suggest that the HSC primarily functions to assist students with generational issues and problems dealing with dual cultures (second

and third generations), and not so much with issues of migration and assimilation (first-generation immigrants or foreign students). Furthermore, the responses indicated that the vast majority of participants are Hindu, with some Jain and Sikh participants. One respondent wrote, “we have had some christians occasionally come to a meeting”, though the individual did not specify if these Christian participants were Indian American.

Aside of pragmatic issues of participation and procedure, I also asked the HSC members about their own experiences in the HSC. One respondent wrote that:

Through HSC, I have learned what being a Hindu means to me. It really bridged the gap between my cultures, and allowed me to appreciate the beauty of both cultures. I made my parents, my grandparents and my family more enthusiastic about HSC and Hinduism as well. (personal email correspondence)

What is interesting about this response is that she cites her involvement in the HSC as important in bridging both the cultural and generational gaps in her life. Much of the discussion of this essay has involved the idea that the HSC develops and maintains student communities of Indian American Hindus. Yet, in this response, the individual also discusses how her involvement has brought her closer to her family, who is surely excited by her participation in Hindu activities. The key question this raises for me is whether or not (and in what capacities) the HSC participants continue their involvement in an Indian American community following graduation.

The HSC websites function in two basic ways, based on the two outlying goals of the HSC. The first goal of the HSC is to provide religious information and education to the students on campus, though primarily aimed at second and third generation Indian American Hindus. This education is conducted during their various group activities, as well as from peer interaction. Although the Internet promotes the activities, it is rarely used to offer information directly by the HSC chapters. There, in this endeavor the

Internet is solely a resource used by the HSC to promote and advertise the activities. The second basic goal of the HSC is to provide a social network of peers, and a student community of Hindus. While this goal is likewise achieved by the group activities, the Internet provides the tools to network, gives the young students a voice to express their own understanding of Hinduism, and a forum to show pictures of their work, activities and festival celebrations. This work can then be seen by their families, and give the different generations a bridge to discuss their religion, and bring together the parents and children, grand-parents and grand-children.

CHAPTER 5

VIRTUAL REALITIES: VIRTUAL RITUAL AND CYBERCOMMUNITY

A Satguru's Cybercall

So far, we have seen the Internet as a tool to promote ideas (informative) and activities at Hindu temples and HSC chapters, but we have yet to see much substantial online performance of Hinduism. In this chapter, I will explore aspects of the Internet which utilize higher levels of interactivity, and the reality of virtual Hindu performance. While information *about* Hinduism does not really constitute religious performance, online discussion and ritual do. Again, the prevalence of informative sites over interactive sites represents the origins and previous Internet technologies more than lack of imagination. In 1995, the year typically credited as the birth of the Internet, the Himalayan Academy's Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami offered this consideration regarding the potential for Hinduism in cyberspace:

I've been meditating on what this all means for Sanatana Dharma and can see a time when Hindus are all connected on the Internet. An ashram in Fiji will be able to download explanations for samskaras. A yoga society in Orissa will be able to locate graphical information about chakras for a public slide show. A pilgrim will call up a home page with all the sacred sites, temples, tirthas and ashrams his family can visit on his way back to Bharat, complete with maps, train schedules and cost of A/C rooms. I see more. A panchangam we all use together, listing the holy days and festivals. Our own Timeline is already on the Net. It stirred historians to write us many letters, and discuss the new way India's history is being understood. Even now you can get it, and search for when Ramakrishna was born, when the Vedas were composed, when South Indian Chola kings set sail for Indonesia.

I see interactive courses. A teacher in South Africa could download the lessons for her students, lessons rich in photos, maps, Vedic verses, illustrations and sounds, all the things that interest children. How about having the Encyclopedia of Hinduism online, which our dear friends Muniji and Dr. Rao are working to

assemble through scholars throughout the world? How about a library of dharma graphics which anyone could log onto, find that perfect piece of art for illustrating a brochure, download it and never leave their desk?

Say your daughter just had a new child and you want a special name. What to do? Let's put all the Hindu names on the net-we have over 20,000-so anyone can search, find the meaning, learn the right pronunciation and then make a choice. Need a good time to start a business, sign an important contract or leave on a trip? Just call up the WWW home page on astrology for a computer analysis of the auspicious moment. (<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1995/5/1995-5-05.shtml>)

Although the Satguru sees the potential of the Internet as a primary reference tool, he also foresaw the networking potential to connect all global Hindus, and the need for various Hindu services to be available through the Information Superhighway. However, online communication and practice is significantly different than traditional in-person forms, and brings in new challenges. Therefore, in order for religious performance and interaction to exist online, these challenges must be addressed, and solutions must be adopted.

Embodiment and Authenticity

Although this chapter cannot comprehensibly account for every relevant web site, understanding the types of online services and the unique challenges present in online religious performance is more important for the scope of this analysis. By ‘online services’ I am referring to any type of Internet service that facilitates interactive user participation and administrator response for the purposes of religious practice; such services range from receiving astrological readings and religious advice via the World Wide Web or email to commissioning and performing temple *pujas* online. The primary challenge to virtual ritual performance regards the questions of embodiment, authenticity and authority. As Brenda Brasher points out, “to interact via a computer monitor with an online Hindu temple is a profoundly different religious experience” than participating in a

physical temple building (Brasher 2001: 4). Among the primary differences of in-person participation and online practice are the lack of sensory input and experience, as well as a lack of social effervescence. The Internet, as Brasher argues, is “a fantasy universe that stimulates the imagination but ignores the rest of the body, [it] is a non-environment that sucks attention away from immediate surroundings in which most traditional religious life occurs” (Dawson 2005: 19).

During my first visit to a Hindu temple in the Detroit area, the most immediate aspect that struck me was the sensory experience, far more than the ideas and beliefs I encountered. Every sense was engaged: I immediately smelled the sweet aroma of incense upon entering the temple; I heard the beautiful, rhythmic praying of the primary *pujari* and the ringing of the bell as each devotee approached the *murtis*; I felt the cold bell as I rang it, the dry *kumkum* powder my friends adorned on my forehead, and felt the cool floor upon my bare feet; I saw beautifully adorned *murtis*, so lifelike it felt as if they were indeed watching me; and I tasted the sweet *prasadam* (in the form of a Granny Smith apple) following the priests prayer and blessings. I watched and heard the young children playing, sneaking peeks at the white stranger in their temple, occasionally flashing brief, shy smiles in my direction. I was greeted with open arms, welcomed by the various families and temple priests, and honored as a guest in their spiritual abode. Yet, how can this experience be transferred to the world of cyberspace?

The simple answer is that it cannot. However, just because the experience of virtual religious practice is different from in-person participation, we should not assume that this experience is inauthentic and less religious. Stephen O’Leary, a scholar active in the subfield of religion and cyberspace, shares many of these same concerns. He asks:

What will happen to our spiritual senses when the next step is taken, i.e. When rituals are performed purely in the realm of the virtual? We may lose the smell of the flowers or the smoke in the ritual fire offering, but will the ritual necessarily be any less efficacious for its practitioners if the flowers are cyber-flowers and the flames are cyber-flames? And if the full sensory experience of the ritual is diminished by its reduction to the text, sound and imagery now possible on the web...what in turn may be gained by working within these limitations, and what are the possibilities for transcending them? (O'Leary 2005: 43).

What strikes me about O'Leary's statement is that he addresses the question of how to deal with the limitations of the Internet, and looks forward for ways that these limitations can be managed and overcome.

Similarly, Brenda Brasher explores the limitations of online religion, as well as the benefits, in *Give Me That Online Religion*. She analyzes the web site Digital Avatar [no longer in existence] which offered an online *darshan* of Lord Shiva, as well as audio/video sounds and images of Shaiva prayers and images. In considering online practice, she writes:

To contrast Digital Avatar with [a] temple, in the former the journey to the site is gone. There is no wait to get into the temple. There is no interaction with other pilgrims en route. The temple itself is gone. The heavy smell of flower and fruit offerings has vanished. In sum, in the transition from temple to screen, a radical alteration of the sense stimulation integral to Hindu worship has silently taken place. Consequently, the religious experience itself has been altered. The numinous, or holy, experience that cyberspace makes possible by way of Digital Avatar is almost entirely an affair of the mind. This stands in huge contrast to the immersion of mind and body in the numinous of an actual visit to the Kali temple.

Still, the Kali temple itself imposes limits. Only a select number of people beyond those who live in the immediate vicinity can readily visit the temple. Given its smallish size, a mere fifty or so can enter the temple at any one time. At the temple, novice worshippers may gaze without comprehension upon the iconography meant to summon the gods' presence. None of these limits apply to Digital Avatar. Its hyperlinked visual elements enable visitors who see an unfamiliar image or sound to learn all about it in their own language. Whereas a thousand may travel to the temple of Kali in one month, that many and more can visit Digital Avatar in one day. (Brasher 2001: 4-5).

So, the online performance of ritual allows individuals to transcend obstacles of space and time. Yet, considering the lack of sensory embodiment in virtual rituals, can these rituals be considered authentic? Lorne Dawson, drawing on a Durkheimian perspective, challenges the authenticity of online religious participation, arguing that:

The 'reality' of religious experience resides with the reality of society as the actual, if unrecognized, object of worship...In the absence of embodied social effervescence online, cyber-religion may prove little more than an intellectual chimera. It may be 'inauthentic' for everyone (2005: 29).

Although it seems impossible, at least with the current technologies we have available, to completely transfer the real life experience to the domain of cyberspace, I am hesitant to make any judgments about Hindu authenticity based solely on these scholarly challenges (even if they are legitimate issues).

Consider the example of performing an online *puja*. While it is *possible* to conduct a *puja* online, does this constitute authentic Hindu practice? Can one have *darshan* with an online image? Can a digital image be considered a *murti* when it cannot be bathed and sanctified? Most importantly (at least for the various *bhakti* traditions), in seeing the digital image, will that sight generate God's grace and salvation? Ramanuja, the pivotal south Indian Vaishnava saint, saw *darshan* as more than merely a reverential viewing of the deity. For him (and indeed the millions of worshippers influenced by his teachings), *darshan* in its highest form was an internal experience, shaped by the viewing and the individual's many life experiences. The external sight of the deity creates internal devotion, which in turn generates God's favor, blessing and salvation. Therefore, can we assume that online *darshan* is authentic so long as it inspires the devotee's love and devotion to god? No, for the simple reason that such logic is merely intellectual speculation; I am not a Hindu, and do not represent Hindu authority.

However, the practice and various notions of *darshan* seem particularly receptive to authenticity in cyberspace. There are many types of *darshan*, including sight of the deity, *tirthas* (sacred “crossings”), *dhams* (sacred abodes) *pithas* (the seas of the divine), sacred geographic places, and even sacred figures, such as *gurus*, *sants*, *sadhus* and *sannyasins* (Eck 1998: 4-5). Many aniconic representations of the divine can also constitute *darshan*, including various stones, clay formations, trees and other natural objects (33-36). In the modern world, *darshan* has even transferred to television, through filmed shows and animated cartoons; one temple complex even offers *darshan* of mechanized, moving statues of the deities (43-44). Most importantly, even photographs of a *murti* can be used for home *pujas*; in light of the great variation in the practice of *darshan*, having sight of an electronic image seems to fit within the parameters of the sacred act of seeing, and being seen by God. Nonetheless, online *darshan* will only be authentic when practicing Hindus accept it as authentic, for their own reasons and justifications.

Finding answers to such questions is simple; finding authoritative answers, however, is a different matter. Hinduism, in its broad inclusive sense, does not have a single founder, authoritative scripture, central sacred space or unified set of practices. Where do such Hindus go for questions of authority? Individual sects, particularly those that are well organized and institutionalized, will have specific leaders, scriptures and customs which they can go to with such questions. Family traditions often carry more weight than orthodox instructions, and authoritative prescriptions are not always followed by the practitioners anyways (consider the high whiskey consumption in Pakistan despite Islamic prohibitions against drinking alcohol). However, ritual authenticity is important

for many devotees. Therefore, as Hinduism spreads to new geographic regions, as well as cyberspace, there is a need for the authoritative allowance of religious change.

In *Transmission and Transformation of Rituals*, Dr. K.K.A. Venkatachari outlines the basic sources of authority relevant to most Hindus. He writes that “According to the scriptures, three authorities are ranked in order: (1) *Sruti* or the Vedas, (2) the eighteen *Smritis* of the *rishis*...and (3) *acara* or custom. Custom is accepted as authority only when it does not contradict either *Sruti* or *Smriti*” (1992: 178-9). However, he points out that there is still a great deal of flexibility within this authoritative system. For example, he writes that “The eighteen *Smritis* belong to different periods, and we find that the later authors sometimes reject the authority and teachings of earlier texts...The 11th century Tamil grammarian, Pavanantimuni, author of *Nannul*, argued that there is nothing wrong in rejecting the old practices and accepting new ones to meet the needs of the time” (179). As he argues, this process is by no means new to American Hinduism:

Historical analysis shows that Hindu rituals have been adapted throughout history to meet the needs of people in new contexts. Times of rapid social change provide impetus for adaption of rituals because such adaptation preserves the vitality of ritual in new social settings and functions to preserve the tradition at the time it is being transformed. Such change is not a modern phenomenon, but has been present in Hinduism for centuries, and it provides a justification for some of the changes that are taking place as Hinduism is being transported to America by immigrants. (178)

This statement makes clear that not only can Hinduism adapt to new conditions, but also that it can do so with authenticity by preserving “the vitality of ritual in new social settings”. In specifically addressing the adaption of Hinduism in America, he argues that these adaptions must be met with confidence. He writes:

It is not possible for people living in North America to observe festivals as long as nine or ten days or to continue all of the prescribed life-cycle rituals, but it is consistent with the history o Hinduism in India for festivals and rituals to be adapted to local circumstance. Just as regional languages have become part of

many rituals in India, so English is an acceptable medium for many of the mantras and explanatory elements of ritual in this country. New rituals and festivals will be created and adapted to the American calendar, just as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day have become times of major Hindu gatherings. The ability of Hinduism to adapt to constant and even dramatic social change is a reason for its survival and success in such a diverse country as India. Now it is spreading with immigrants around the world; and can have similar success. (189)

As Hinduism progresses into the new, uncharted domains of cyberspace, such flexibility and allowance for adaption will be crucial for online Hindu practice, and the continued success of Hinduism. Furthermore, we must recognize that there are no single answers to these dilemmas of authenticity; what will be acceptable to one individual, family or group may not be authentic to others. Even if a virtual ritual is accepted as authentic, this does not mean that people will use these services, or give them preference to real life practice. However, by exploring the various cyber-services available, and the techniques that these web sites utilize for authenticity, new light will be shed on this issue.

Virtual Ritual

It is difficult to systematically index and analyze all of the various web sites which offer online services, not only due to basic limitations of search engines, but also because there are a tremendous amount of different types of relevant services. Online performance of *pujas*, receiving virtual *darshan* of a deity, various services to assist with the many *samskaras* (life-cycle rituals), hearing streaming *bhajans* and *shlokas*, and receiving astrological readings online are all obvious examples; less obvious examples include online marriage services, the use of webcams to see a husbands face at the conclusion of Karva Chauth, dynamic pages which give current planetary alignments and eclipse times, and gifting services, not to mention countless others I have not even considered, and thus were excluded from my analysis.

Online *puja* services can function in a variety of ways: there are commercial sites that supply *puja* materials for home worship, other sites allow an individual to commission a temple *puja* online (to be performed by the temple priests), and some sites allow an individual to actually perform the *puja* online, and receive virtual *darshan*.

SirIndia.com's Puja Store sells various *puja* materials, in case an individual or family cannot purchase the necessary items due to their location (<https://www.sirindia.com/ps.asp>). Items they offer include religious home decorations, *murtis*, *yantras*, bells, incense stands and holders, *malas* ('rosary' beads), religious coins (for offerings) and sweets. This site did not offer other common *puja* items, such as sacred powders (*kumkum*, *vibhuti*, sandalwood paste, *bhasma*, etc.), sacred threads, organic materials such as grasses and Ganga water, *ghee* (clarified butter) or camphor oil for the *aarati*, *agarbatti* (incense), *chandan* (*kumkum* plate), *lotas* (water vessels) or *deepaks* (oil lamps). However, all of these items can be purchased from other online sources, such as the Maha Lakshmi Shop (<http://www.babajiashram.org/mls/>), GangesIndia.com (http://www.gangesindia.com/browse/puja_items), Vishal International (<http://statues.highpointdesigns.com/>), Machiami Trading Company's Pema Kilaya Store (<http://pemakilaya.yellowpipe.com/>), and countless others.

Some sites offer *puja* supplies specifically geared for one particular Hindu tradition. For example, the Himalayan Academy's Mini Mela Giftshop sells *murtis* and images of Shiva, Ganesh, Murugan, as well as *vibhuti* and incense. Devshoppe.com sells many *murtis* and *yantras* of various deities and traditions, but the only other sacred items available are *vibhuti*, *rudraksha* beads and *malas*, and *parad* items (items made of

mercury, a substance representative of Lord Shiva's potency), particularly *parad Shivlingas*, showing the Shaiva preference (<http://www.devshoppe.com/>).

Moving beyond simply offering *puja* items for domestic ritual use, some sites allow individuals to commission temple *pujas* online. For example, Kaalighat allows a person to commission *pujas* for a variety of different deities at a number of different temples. They explain that:

The matter of distance, shortage of time or the over engagement with a very busy schedule becomes a big factor for this inability. However, now through our online puja shop and services you can easily offer puja directly from your home and get "Prasad", "Pushpa", Sindoor etc. directly at your home. You can offer your puja at Holy Temples in India through us. Distance or time will not be a matter.

(<http://www.geocities.com/kaalighat/>)

Following the online set-up and payment, individuals are sent e-mail confirmations of the ceremony (which is performed by the temple priests), and physically mailed "Holy 'prasad' (Dry), Holy Sindoor (Dry), Holy 'Pushpa' (Dry)" and a "Photograph of Deity" (<http://www.geocities.com/kaalighat/Puja.htm>). Other sites offering similar services include HinduPurohit.com (<http://www.hindupurohit.com/>), Pariharam.com (<http://www.pariharam.com/>), Astroshastra.com (<http://www.astroshastra.com/>), and Subhakarium.com (<http://www.subhakarium.com/>), and Sarnam.com (<http://www.sarnam.com/>). Often these sites attempt to be all inclusive, offering *puja* requests, selling *puja* materials, and providing various other services, such as mantra e-mails, prayers for health, astrology, matchmaking, gifting, and requests for various *shraddhas*, *pujas*, *homams (havans)*, *yagnas*, *paarayanams*, and *pariharas*. While many of these web sites are not directly affiliated with any one temple, more and more temples are creating their own web sites, allowing devotees to directly commission *pujas* from them. For example, the Shri Mahalakshmi Prasana Temple, in Kolhapur, Maharashtra,

has a website that allows for Mahalakshmi pujas, and has links to many other Hindu temples in India offering similar services (<http://www.shreekarveernivasini.com/>).

Ekta Mandir, the Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple, even allows online *darshan* and *pujas* of the deities (http://www.dfwhindutemple.org/online_puja.htm). By clicking on any of the online images of the *murtis*, the users is giving a close-up image of the deity, a short Sanskrit prayer and English explanation of the divine figure, and guided through an interactive animated *puja* to 'awaken' the *deva* or *devi* for *darshan*. This process uses Shockwave Flash technology, and allows the user to ring the bell, light the *agarbatti*, apply *tilak*, wave the *aarati* around the image, and adorn the image with flowers, all electronically. Similarly, the online Rudra Centre allows for an interactive online *puja* of [Lord Shiva](#), [Ganesha](#), or [Mahalaxmi](#), and provides audio *bhajans*, *mantras*, *shlokas*, hymns and *chalisas* (<http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/>). The Alachua Hare Krishna website has a live webcam set up and posts a schedule of their activities (<http://www.krishna.com/alachua/index.php>). In doing so, any member who is sick or otherwise unable to attend the services can log on, see the deities and listen to the devotees' *kirtans*.

The pressing question, of course, is whether this can be considered performing authentic Hindu ritual. Since many of these online *puja* services are sponsored by Hindu temples in the US and India, we can assert that some sense of authenticity is associated with these cyber-*pujas*. In fact, having *darshan* via a monitor is not entirely new; discussions of tele-*puja* arose following the airing of the Mahabharat and Ramayan in India, and many temples in America have video monitors in the community centers in order for devotees to watch the ritual performance (Waghorne 1999: 125). Surely a

television screen and computer monitor are equivalent technologies. At the same time, most of these sites still encourage in-person participation, and seem merely to provide these online services for individuals unable to attend in person; priority is still given to the physical presence of the devotee.

Other rituals of particular significance in the Hindu traditions include the many *samskaras* (life-cycle rituals). However, these are much more difficult to perform online since the sacred *samskaras* are primarily embodied rituals. How do you shave your child's hair online? Such sites can only provide reference. For example, the Kasi Narasimha ganapatigal web site provides information about the 'proper' Vedic performance of various *samskaras* (<http://www.ganapatigal.com/>). Since the site is not affiliated with a particular temple, the web site author identifies himself, his background and his education to establish his credentials and authority. The site was written by Brahma Sri Narasihma Ganapatigal, who "hails from a family of Dekshithar & Ganapatogal, born...to Brahma Sri Ariyur Subrahmanyam". As the site expresses, "This service is useful for the people who are staying away from their own places where proper guidance is not available".

Although death rituals are generally performed by the family, His Holiness Sankaracharya of Kanchipuram started the Anatha Pretha Kainkarya Trust in Chennai, Tamilnadu as "a charitable organization to perform sacred last rites for orphaned children whose bodies have died; the name...means service to orphaned dead, the service being to guide these souls into a birth in a fine Hindu family in their next life". The group's leadership decided to make their web page as a means of generating support and

donations for their philanthropic cause and service, as well as to facilitate communication when a young orphaned child dies (<http://www.dharmaa.org/html/firstpage.htm>).

Likewise, although marriage is clearly a *samskara* best left for real life performance, Internet matchmaking services have become a popular, useful means of finding suitable partners. Two of the more popular matrimonial sites, Shaadi.com (<http://www.shaadi.com/>) and IndianMatrimonials.com (<http://www.indianmatrimonials.com/>) allow families and individuals to search for potential spouses for their family and self; one member touts that he and his parents were able to find his sister a suitable spouse in Los Angeles, at the comfort of their home in Bangalore (<http://www.shaadi.com/introduction/true-stories.php>). The popular Internet 'portal' Rediff.com also offers their own matchmaker service (<http://matchmaker.rediff.com/>). What is unique to these Indian-specific matchmaking services is that they typically list religion as well as specific caste and ethnic background, such as Khatri, Agarwal, or Vellalar, for example.

Although festivals have no real Internet application, certain elements of festival practices are augmented by Internet services, particularly the act of gifting. DiwaliMela.com allows individuals to order Diwali gifts for others, and have them shipped anywhere in the world (<http://www.diwalimela.com/>). Likewise, VirtualRakhi.com allows siblings to share gifts purchased on this web site, even if separated by distance (<http://www.virtualrakhi.com/>). Through this site, sisters can purchase and send the *rakhi* (holy thread) to their brother, who in turn can order return gifts for his sister. Another festival, Karva Chauth, requires that the wives see the moon and their husbands face before breaking their daylong fast. Yet, what if the husband is

away on business, so the wife is unable to see his face? With the advent of webcams, some women in this position are now using the Internet so that they can see face and break their fast (Khetan 2005).

Many web sites offer downloadable and/or streaming audio files of different *bhajans*, *shlokas*, *chalisas*, *kirtans* and *mantras*. The HSC's Hindunet.com web site has a Bhajan Kirtan page, with a massive index of accessible audio prayers and corresponding text files (<http://www.bhajans.org/>). Bhajanawali.com, based out of Toronto, has a large audio collection available for downloading, as well as a weekly streaming web cast (<http://www.bhajanawali.com/home/index.php>). The Geeta Temple in Elmhurst, New York, established in 1979 by Swami Jagdishwaranand, has a web site which offers many audio prayers, as well as lectures by their leading swamis (<http://www.geetatemple.net/>). The Sri Vaishnava Cyber Satsangh offers different *stotras*, *bhajans* and audio tributes to Ramanuja (<http://www.srivaishnavam.com/index.html>).

There are a plethora of sites that have made online astrology possible, offering a host of astrological readings and charts, as well as providing advise on marriage dates, auspicious times, child names and information about the *panchangam* (the Hindu astrological calendar). Indastro.com, Astrogyan.com, and Kamalkapoor.com are all sites specifically dedicated to providing astrological information and readings. However, various other service-oriented sites also offer astrological readings, including the many Himalayan Academy and HSC sites. Similarly, other sites utilize dynamic web features, providing current information about planetary alignments and eclipse times for various ritual applications (<http://www.heb.gov.sg/planetmovements.html>).

Based on the preponderance of authoritative support for performance on virtual rituals—including temples, swamis, gurus, and sectarian organizations—it seems that there is sufficient reason to conclude that online participation is seen as authentic, or at least acceptable in lieu of in-person participation. However, this still does not ensure that a substantial number of devotees will use these online services. With the growth of web sites dedicated to the performance of virtual rituals, however, it appears that the web hosts and service providers anticipate use to increase; otherwise, the valuable time, money and energy expended in building these sites on secure networks was entirely in vein.

So, if virtual rituals are primarily auxiliary tools to complement real life practice, can any substantial religious performance exist in cyberspace, or will it prove to be “little more than an intellectual chimera”, to use the words of Dawson (2005: 29)? I contend that while the virtual rituals represent the beginnings of online Hindu performance, cybercommunities that exist and operate in cyberspace do constitute religious action, by building and maintaining community, and engaging issues of belief and practice.

CyberCommunities

In her discussion of Hindu communities in America, Vasudha Naryanan reminds her reader that these suburban groups are only one aspect of Hindu communities:

There are also many *cyber communities* based on sectarian affiliation; listserves are dedicated to particular traditions where men and women want to just discuss the sacred texts—Sanskrit and vernacular—of their tradition or matters relevant to living a religious life in the American continent. These cyber communities bring together people from all over the world in virtual forums to discuss matters of mutual interest. (2006: 363)

In fact, discussion and exchange via the Internet is present in many types of web sites. In chapter one, during my discussion of the taxonomy of Hindu sites, I separated categories

of general, academic, sectarian, temple and activist sites from chat rooms, BBS's and online services. Although this distinction is arbitrary, it is nonetheless significant. As we will see, most features of cybercommunity (chat rooms, BBS's and blogs) are, in fact, most often elements of the general, academic, sectarian, temple and activist sites. However, their *function* is different from the informative aspects of these web sites, and in my opinion, require a separate analysis.

The connection between the interactive communication protocols and types of web sites hosting these chat rooms, BBS's and blogs is nonetheless significant because the host site narrows the body of participants down to specific forums. Access to the forums and discussions typically require registration, which may or may not be limited depending upon the goals and desires of the service provider. In either case, all Internet chat and discussion has rules of etiquette, usually expressly stated in the terms of agreement, as well as just generally 'understood'. Nonetheless, since most of these services allow the user to remain anonymous, comments and discussions can, and do, become heated, rude, and sometimes blatantly offensive. This is one of the dynamics of Internet exchange, and the primary reason that many sites restrict registration. Just like other forms of Internet religiosity, there are limitations and benefits; Internet discussion groups, listserves, chat rooms, BBS's and blogs network many Hindus from around the world, allow a space for individual expression and opinion, and create new dynamics of communication due to anonymity. These new dynamics are creating distinct problems, and generating varied solutions. Some groups are open forums, meaning an individual can sign-up and participate solely by registering with a username and e-mail address. These types of unrestricted access and anonymity allow all people to participate, but also

tend to invite problematic postings and allow individuals to post inaccurate and offensive messages without accountability.

Other forums have restricted access, where an individual must register with their real name and contact information, which removes anonymity. While this typically lessens the more 'extreme' postings, it also limits the types of exchanges by users who would prefer to not to be identified. For example, if a Hindu is dealing with difficult issues of sexuality, such as inter-racial dating, marriage, or homosexuality, anonymity is significant. Other online discussion forums require the individual users to send their post to the system administrator, who in turn posts the material online. This ensures a higher 'quality' of posts, as they have been filtered, but also means that the information is controlled by the Internet host. This limits the variety of opinions and expressions, though it should be stated that this, in of itself, is not a negative or positive element; it is merely a restricted form of communication.

General sites are the broadest and most inclusive of the cybercommunity forums, because they are without any particular affiliation to a tradition. Yahoo has a series of Hinduism related chat rooms within their Religion & Beliefs>Hinduism section (<http://chat.yahoo.com/>), which exclaims that it is "An open forum to discuss the deeper meanings of Hinduism". However, during my time spent observing the chat topics I noticed that very little religious discussion ever took place. Discussions I witnessed typically were comprised of on-line friends socializing with each other about various aspects of American and Indian media and popular culture. It seems the broader the scope of the chat rooms and discussion boards, the broader the range of discussion topics and

Other sites offer chat room features specifically intended for Hindu audiences. The “Hindu Gateway Boards” is a small forum, which includes topics such as women, teens, and love (<http://www.hindugateway.com/cgi-bin/webx/?13@-hin@.ee6b837>). The HinduChatZone is a general discussion forum, open to all participants, and currently features over 250 registered members and over 600 posted threads on a variety of topics (<http://www.hinduchatzone.com/>). Both of these communication forums are unrestricted, in that users need only to provide a username (of their choice) and e-mail address, and otherwise are entirely anonymous. However, HinduChatZone has divided the discussion topics into six categories: General Discussion Zone, Hinduism Section, Chit Chat, Hindu History, Polls, and Heavy Politics and Debate. While some sites shy away from heated topics, the HinduChatZone's inclusion of the final category, Heavy Politics and Debate, is a clever concept. Many people enjoy vigorous debate, and the HinduChatZone recognizes this demand. Yet, others are uncomfortable with the tone and confrontational nature of such debates. Therefore, their goal of this last section is “to divert some of the “heavy” political threads away from the General Chat section, so that people who are into it can debate it, yet the General Chat area doesn't become dominated by it. General forum rules still apply” (<http://www.hinduchatzone.com/>).

The AmbaHouse.com is a non-sectarian “spiritual” site that provides various information on Saints (Meera, Kabir, Tirumoolar, Tukaram, AkkaMahadevi and Sant Narsi), Thirukkural, Jataka stories and sections for Home Study Courses and Dharma for the Young. In their discussion forum, “THE LIGHT DIVINE: A Forum for expressing your thoughts towards a Global Religious Reformation”, the host utilizes restricted posting to control the “quality” and content of the postings

(<http://www.ambahouse.org/forums.html>). Users must e-mail their message to the website provider (who is anonymous), and the host posts the messages. Instructions for messages include:

1. No comments be made on anyone else's thoughts.
2. The language used in the email be free of abusive words.
3. You are welcome to comment on any religion.

When messages are posted, the host assures that “only your initials and country will be posted so as to honour your identity”. This measure allows the host to control the content, though interesting and important discussions still occur. One user laments that:

Modern Hindu families want all rituals to be rushed through. It has become more like a status thing. What are we priests who are trained in particular sampradayas and do know the value of performing rituals thoroughly, to do?

Another user expresses his concerns regarding the wasting of ritual materials:

Why are we wasting so much milk, honey, curds etc in the form of abhishekams when there are people who are hungry and thirsty. If annam is brahman then why are we deliberately wasting it in the form of rituals that are downright useless today ? Either just symbolically do this with just the minimum on a miniature utsava murthi or be sure to collect the abhishekam in a reasonable condition and have the congregation distribute it among the poor. Similiarly each week a special day should be assigned when clothes and jewellery placed on the murthis be either given to the poor who cannot afford dowries or auction the items and give the proceeds to the deserving!!

By not allowing users to comment on other postings, discussion and interaction is limited. However, this also ensures that insensitive, personal attacks do not occur, while still providing a forum for the discussion of significant questions and problems.

TakingITGlobal is a free forum designed to allow young adults to collaborate in a global setting. Their homepage explains that:

TakingITGlobal.org is an online community that connects youth to find inspiration, access information, get involved, and take action in their local and global communities. It is now the world's most popular online community for young people interested in making a difference, with hundreds of thousands of unique visitors each month.

TIG's highly interactive website provides a platform for expression, connection to opportunities, and support for action. Join now and connect with thousands of other young people around the world! (<http://www.takingitglobal.org/>)

Their list of features themes include: Cultural Diversity & Equity, Education, Employment, Environment, Health & Wellness, ICTs & Digital Opportunities, Media, Peace & Conflict, Poverty & Globalization and Social Justice & Human Rights. Users can create their own personal blogs, where they can post discussions, images and personal expressions, and a discussion forum where questions can be asked and answered by other users. Such a forum allows young adults to explore relevant issues with other members from around the globe, and gives a voice for users to express themselves and their insights. For example, one user, a young female from Kerala now studying in Mumbai, has posted various questions about university assignments and projects, as well as express her own views and experiences. On her blog homepage, she writes:

Interacting with people from all walks of life and coping with a brand new place and time after every two or three years has also endowed me with wonderful experiences which helped me develop an interest in writing. Recently, I was given a once in a lifetime opportunity to represent Mumbai University at the First South Asian Summer University organized by FES (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) a German NGO, held at International Youth Centre, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi from 21st May to 8th June'05. There, I got to interact with like minded academics from all over South Asia and Afghanistan through various workshops on topics like 'Youth and Politics', 'Multi-cultural society', 'Rationalism and Fundamentalism', 'Local Self government', 'Social Development' etc. But a more personal and fruitful interaction took place outside the official program where all the students openly shared their experiences and views. We also got a chance to participate in the first annual convention of SAARCYOUTH summoned for 6th to 8th June in New Delhi. The title of the convention was: "South Asia in 2015 – An Agenda of Mutual Beneficiary Change". All participants were asked to adopt the role of their respective national chapters of SAARCYOUTH. At the convention I presented the recommendations of the Travel and Communication committee. The entire event provided us, the youth of South Asia and Afghanistan a healthy platform to discuss the future of our region and essay a new chapter on regional cooperation on civil society. The experience has also helped us form a forum on the web called SAAYF (South Asian Active Youth Forum) where we exchange our views on various socio-political, economic and cultural issues. Being an active citizen of a developing nation, I am aware of the tremendous task lying ahead the youth of this

country, which is to build a concrete and stable future on the solid foundation that the older generation has laid. (<http://profiles.takingitglobal.org/anuriandima84>)

Sadly, I could not find any websites or forums of the SAAYF (South Asian Active Youth Forum) which she describes. Since the post was so new, it is possible that the project has not yet been developed.

NavyaShastra is an online community, operating through two hyperlinked protocols: their website, (<http://www.shastras.org/>) which discusses their goals and various projects, news and articles, as well as through a yahoo chat group designed to facilitate “Discussion of shastric and social change” (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NavyaShastra>). The discussion group utilizes a high degree of user restriction: both membership and individual postings are screened by the NavyaShatra host(s). However, some postings are made available to the public on their website (<http://www.shastras.org/yahoogroup.html>). Discussion topics listed on their website are broken into five basic categories, with selected entries posted in each: “Who is a Hindu”, “Shastric Reform: Caste”, “Saints and Sages”, “Karma, the Law of Causality”, and “Balinese Hinduism”. The discussions allow users to post questions and opinions, and lets other users respond to and critique these messages. The discussions posted on their website reflect a wide-range of opinions and views about caste, education, social and economic classes, and access to Hindu literature and doctrine for women and lower class Hindus.

Many sectarian web sites also offer forms of interactive communication, intended for use by the group's members. Some sites accomplish this by offering informative sites with little interactivity, such as with the Srivaishnavam Cyber-satsangh (<http://www.srivaishnavam.com/index.html>). Another Srivaishnava web site,

Ramanuja.org, attempted to unite global Srivaishnavas and provide a forum for open dialogue and healthy discussion of relevant issues. The highly popular Bhakti Discussion Group quickly amassed many participants (<http://www.ramanuja.org/sv/bhakti/archives/index.html>). In fact, the e-mail discussion group grew so large, that the site hosts lost control of the discussion content and quality, and ultimately were forced to shut down. “Its very popularity”, the web site author writes, “ensured its demise”. Varadarajan continues by stating that:

The Bhakti List is presently on hiatus and is not open for general discussion. This change was made in May, 2003, after a progressive degeneration in the quality of discussion in the List...In the meantime, please enjoy the [Archives](#), particularly those of the early years where discussion was open-minded, cordial, and engaging. (<http://www.ramanuja.org/sv/bhakti/archives/suspended.html>)

In light of this development, it is understandable why so many discussion groups are now restricting access to the forums. Accuracy is also a significant issue with online discussion groups, so many such groups preface that the information only reflects the opinions of the users, and not of the web sponsor. For example, Varadarajan writes, “I myself know of many erroneous statements that are present in the archives, and many others represent just viewpoints, other than which there may be many alternatives. Sometimes the most authoritatively written articles are the ones which are most erroneous or most empty in spirit” (<http://www.ramanuja.org/sv/bhakti/archives/index.html#CAUTION>).

Other groups have established web sites drawn along ethnic lines. The Tamil Forum Hub provides a forum for Tamils to network and socialize, about a host of religious, social, cultural and popular topics. Discussion posted on their “Hub portal” range from technical religious questions, to discussions of Tamil films and songs (<http://www.mayyam.com/hub/portal.php>). Their “Netfriends: Interact Page” allows users

to post queries and comments. The site relies upon the honor system, and reminds the users that "We like to keep this page a clean place for fun. Do not make personal attacks. Keep your politeness level high. Thanks!" (<http://www.forumhub.com/netfriends/chat/>). However, user posts range from legitimate questions about lifestyle and religious issues to rude and crass comments. Again, it seems selective membership is necessary for forums to remain serious and polite. The honor system does not work well when mixed with anonymity.

Many of the activist sites also incorporate various networked communication protocols. The electronic version of Hinduism Today (<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/>) is their latest effort in outreach, and through both the print and electronic versions they are able to communicate with over 135,000 readers worldwide! The motivations for this newsletter, as listed on their website, are:

- To foster Hindu solidarity as a "unity in diversity" among all sects and lineages;
- To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism;
- To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism;
- To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion, especially the Nandinatha Sampradaya;
- To nurture a truly spiritual Hindu renaissance.
- To publish a resource for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma.

These newsletters keep subscribers up-to-date on developing news and issues, and provides the Himalayan Academy with a consistent user base, even if the subscribers are not members of the Shaiva Siddhanta tradition. This is achieved by incorporating all relevant news about global Hinduism, and not merely news relating to their tradition. Articles often announce new temple developments throughout the world, as well as inspiring stories from Hindu communities, giving subscribers a sense of accomplishment and pride as Hinduism continues to successfully develop throughout the world. They also

archive all past editions, allowing prior articles to be searched and accessed. Although this inactivity is primarily unilateral, they can avoid problems inherent to open forums and discussions, and maintain a friendly atmosphere.

The HSC's Hindu Universe site has a BBS forum where users can post comments and questions, and other users can respond (<http://www.hindunet.com/forum/>). Users typically have to create an account and log-in to post comments, making it possible to track the number of participants. The Hindu Universe BBS, for example, has 23, 594 users, and thousands of existing posts. The web providers have divided the posts into various categories, and the users are restricted to posting within these sections. Although topics such as "India and Pakistan", "Hindutva", Relationship between Hindus and Moslems" and "Hindu Christian Relations" are highly popular categories, there is a good mix of opinions in these discussions. For example, one user posted a plea to stop Christians and Jews from trying to convert Hindus, and accosts "those ignorant [Hindu] people [that] believe these pink people and follow them"

(<http://www.hindunet.com/forum/showflat.php?Cat=&Number=54072&page=0&view=collapsed&sb=5&o=&fpart=1>). The following respondent replies "Pink people? Glad you decided to keep race out of your incoherent rhetoric...", which in turn is followed up by a challenge of the user's racial construction of Christianity, reminding readers of the existence of Indian Christians before the British arrived (as in Kerala). Another user remarks, "why are u so threatened?? there is no compulsion in religion....if they want to be hindu they will be hindu...if they want to be christian they will be christians". These exchanges, which most likely are mostly comprised of young adults based on language and word choice (i.e. "chill out, homie"), allow concerned and confused young adults to

ask difficult questions, and engage in difficult debates. Showing no lack of opinions, these active BBS users often utilize great insight and intelligence in their critiques and discussions of racism and religion in a global environment.

Rediff India Abroad has become a significant 'portal' for global Hindus to stay connected and network ideas and information. Unlike other sites designed to promote interactive communication and community, however, Rediff makes this possible through more 'closed' networking, by hosting web space and providing e-mail accounts, and not through public forums and blogs. Their primary web services include news regarding Hindus throughout the globe (available as frequent e-mail newsletters and via the web), as well as travel, classifieds, matchmaking and various other services (<http://ia.rediff.com/index.html>). As e-mail remains the dominant Internet usage in India, the importance of providing free e-mail cannot be understated (http://www.iamai.in/section.php3?secid=16&press_id=822&mon=2).

Sulekha.com, whose goal is "Connecting Indians Worldwide", features both blogs and discussion groups, allowing individuals to interact with varying degrees of involvement. Those looking for simple discussion can use the BBS, and those wanting to post more regular 'articles' can register for blog space. The success and popularity of this particular site is somewhat daunting; they have over 250 thousand individual blogs, and over one million posted discussions on the BBS! The tremendous amount of information is searchable, if the user wants to find specific discussions, but is otherwise virtually impossible to research and index in its entirety. Rather than create the discussion groups, forcing the users to follow their structure, Sulekha.com allows the users themselves to create discussion topics, giving more diversity to the forum and allowing the BBS to be

user-driven. With over 250 thousand users, and the freedom to post topics and discussions of their choosing, the beautiful part of this exchange is that a wide range of opinions and views are offered, and those in disagreement can post comments on other blogs and discussion threads. No generalizations can truly be made regarding the views and opinions of Sulekha.com users. However, the dialogue needs, and has, structured terms of use, and understood rules of etiquette. Sulekha makes clear in their Terms & Conditions that users cannot:

Upload or post or otherwise make available any Content that is unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, libelous, promotes violence, is invasive of another's privacy, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable; impersonate any person or entity, including, but not limited to, a Sulekha official, forum leader, guide or host, or falsely state or otherwise misrepresent your affiliation with a person or entity;
[\(http://www.sulekha.com/COLLATERAL/tc.htm\)](http://www.sulekha.com/COLLATERAL/tc.htm)

While most people follow these rules and engage in healthy forms of dialogue, exceptions do occur.

Sulekha organizes discussion and blog topics by popularity, with the Indology section listed as one of the most active threads. In these sections, individuals (of many different ethnicities, nationalities and religions) discuss, often vehemently, issues of South Asian scholarship and education. Rajiv Malhotra, an active contributor to this category and a frequent writer on his own Sulekha blog ([\(http://www.sulekha.com/blogs/
blogdisplay.aspx?contributor=Rajiv%20Malhotra](http://www.sulekha.com/blogs/blogdisplay.aspx?contributor=Rajiv%20Malhotra)), has generated a tremendous amount of response and concern regarding the representation of Hinduism in America, as well as his fears of what he terms “Hinduphobia”. On the one hand, such dialogs are a healthy process and beginning for Hindu self-representation; in a nation where Hindus are a distinct minority, both self-representation as well as accurate representation are crucial for Hindus in America. Challenging inaccuracies in schoolbooks and college textbooks

on Hinduism is significant, and concerns over Eurocentrism must be addressed. This is a significant problem, though certainly not one that is unknown or unconcerned to academia. The problem is that there are countless interpretations of the myriad of Hindu traditions and movements, from both practitioners and scholars. Generating one representation of Hinduism, which satisfies all Hindus and scholars, is simply not possible. However, the Internet is now becoming a primary forum for this ongoing discussion to occur.

The Internet is also used by Hindu groups with more political and social orientation. Friends of South Asia (FOSA) is an online group whose primary stated purpose is in “working towards a peaceful, prosperous, and hate-free South Asia” (<http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/>). Their web site provides news and information about issues relevant to South Asia, expressing their desire to generate peace and harmony and fight intolerance. They also ask for individuals to contribute by providing information, links, and news.

The Vedic Friends Association (VFA) has a website where their specific views and interpretations of Dharma and Vedic beliefs and can expressed. Aside from the news and information provided, the web also has a section on VFA Campaigns and Interests:

The Vedic Friends Association considers particular issues that affect the future and well-being of a better understanding of Vedic Culture, Hinduism, or Sanatana-Dharma. Below are particular campaigns that we have started, or stands that we take on specific issues. Our letters can be used by anyone who feels the same, and please share with us any contacts or emails that you find so that other members of the VFA can send the letter to them as well. This will create more awareness and influence for the cause or issue. (http://www.vedicfriends.org/vfa_campaigns.htm)

The listed 'campaigns' include 'Defending the Dharma', 'The VFA Position Paper on Casteism', 'Campaign Against Misrepresentation and Bias in the Media', 'The Campaign

Against the Exclusive Attitude Regarding Who Can be a Hindu', 'Vegetarianism', and a 'Questionnaire for Developing Tools for Preserving the Hindu Dharma and Identity'.

The Vedic Foundation is a group which is fighting to redefine Hindu history, belief and doctrine along orthodox Vedic lines. Included in their links are discussions of "Authentic Hinduism", scriptures, and Indian history (<http://www.thevedicfoundation.org/>). This version of Indian history, however, includes highly exaggerated ancient dates, typical of Hindutva revisions, and describes the introduction of Islam as a process of military invasion. Aside from providing information about their views and interpretation of Hindu history on the web, the group also promotes activities and in-person discussion groups (http://www.thevedicfoundation.org/educational_programs/index.html), lectures, news and contact information. Although the site offer no information about the members and leaders of this group, the contact information is listed as "The Vedic Foundation, 402 Barsana Road, Austin, Texas", inferring a connection with the Barsana Dham temple complex in Texas, though I could not confirm this (http://www.thevedicfoundation.org/contact_us/index.html).

Other groups, such as the Hindu American Foundation, have undertaken similar campaigns, as well as responding to various issues within the contemporary American religious environment (<http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/>). One recent and significant issue of debate which the HAF participated in was over the representation of Hinduism in school textbooks in California. This heated debate involved the California school board, many historians and academic scholars, as well as various Hindu organizations. While there are many issues at play in this debate, critics of the proposed changes have criticized the proponents as part of a Hindu Right

(<http://www.flonnet.com/fl2301/stories/20060127000807700.htm>), though this is an overly simplistic explanation. This debate is larger than issues of Hindutva ideology and nationalism; it is also about the significance and need for minority recognition and self-representation. Criticisms of Hindutva and the Hindu Right fail to reflect many other aspects and goals of these organizations, and their diverse individual members. For example, the Hindu American Foundation has been outspoken on other issues, not necessarily directly relating to Hindus and South Asians in America. On their homepage, they have an article posted expresses their shock and concern regarding the recent rash of Baptist Church burnings in Alabama. They write:

After September 11th, 2001, several Hindu temples across North America and the United Kingdom have been targets of vandalism, firebombing and arson attacks. In recently released statistics, the FBI reported that in 2004 alone, there were 1,197 hate crime incidents that were religiously motivated.

"Having faced similar attacks in the past, Hindu Americans empathize with the congregations affected by these heinous crimes," said Pawan Deshpande, member of the Executive Council of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF). "Because places of worship are central to many communities, we hope that law enforcement will be able to expeditiously apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators."

(<http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/>)

Similarly, the HAF also has posted an article on their web site regarding the recent controversy over the Dutch cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a terrorist. In response, the HAF writes:

"Though as Americans we are committed to freedom of speech and expression, cartoonists and their editors demonstrated a monumental lapse in judgment at best, and outright bigotry at worst," said Mihir Meghani, President of the Hindu American Foundation. "As a Hindu, having experienced painful depictions of my faith in this country, I can relate to the protests by the Muslim world, but violence is simply not an acceptable solution."

HAF has previously engaged several media outlets in the United States and Europe for inflammatory and vulgar depictions of Hindu symbols and sacred beliefs. Recent accounts in the American press depicted Hindus as cannibals, believers in

"capricious gods" and adherents of mythical religious texts.
[\(<http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/>\)](http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/)

Aseem Shukla, a member of the HAF Board of Directors, added, "In the age of globalization, it is especially important that mainstream media, rather than being the cause of undue provocation, works with religious minorities to promote tolerance and mutual understanding of cultural sensitivities". This message of mutual understanding and cultural sensitivity is important for many minority communities in the US, and not part of a fundamentalist ideology.

Concluding Remarks

India and the United States represent two of the largest democracies in the world, and challenges inherent to any democratic system also apply to the Internet. The history of humanity has shown us no shortage of opinions, only a lack of voice. The Internet now gives a voice to these opinions. One of the primary challenges of a democratic system is that a balance must be maintained between free speech and sensibilities; between rights and responsibilities. The Internet will surely continue to develop various forums and strategies for dealing with these dynamics.

The issues being discussed in these forums are crucial to the adaption of Hinduism in America. Concerns over the academic study of Hinduism, and the representation of Hindu beliefs and Indian history in textbooks have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, such debates can potentially bring academic inaccuracies to light, and have the potential to increase the accuracy of Hindu studies in the academy. The issue of self-representation, however, is somewhat complicated. While it is crucial that Hindus and Indian Americans take part in the academic constructions and representations of Hinduism, there are also distinct methodologies between the secular, academic study of

religion and the accounts of Hindu believers and practitioners, though this dynamic is not specific to Hinduism; consider the many petitions and legal battles to teach Christian creation views in public schools. Like the Internet, democracy and secularization present both benefits and limitations, which are continually being addressed and worked out, in America and in cyberspace.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The flexibility and diversity of Hinduism, in conjunction with its de-centered authority and de-regulated ritual practice, assists the Hindu traditions in their migration to cyberspace. However, it should be noted that flexibility and diversity are not dynamics specific to Hinduism. All religions exhibit great adaptability, and it is impossible (and irrelevant) to qualify if and how Hinduism is more or less adaptable. Furthermore, not all elements of Hindu belief and practice can be easily adapted to the realm of cyberspace, just as not all elements can be transferred to the American landscape.

Since the Internet can store and broadcast text, audio and image files, Hindu sacred texts, images, symbols and sounds can be transmitted to cyberspace with relative ease. As such, the proliferation of electronic texts, *bhajans*, *mantras* and sacred images is not surprising. Furthermore, *darshan* of the deity is within the technological capabilities of the Internet, and the variation in *darshan* practices and lack of centralized authority seem to indicate that *darshan* can likewise be successfully transferred to the Internet.

However, many other elements of Hindu worship can not be so easily transmitted to the domain of cyberspace. We are beginning to see *pujas* offered via the Internet, though significant elements of the ritual are lost when performed online, including the sensory experience and consumption of *prasad*. Consecrating a digital image is a new challenge to Hinduism, but the other limitations of Internet *puja* could easily be overcome by devotees placing the incense and offerings in front of their computer

monitor, just as many Hindus did with their television sets during the airing of the *Mahabharata*.

Although the performing arts cannot necessarily be *performed* in cyberspace, they can be aired and experienced on the Internet, just as they can on television. Hindu festivals are times for communal gathering and feasting, which likewise cannot be performed on the Internet. However, individuals can witness streaming video of large gatherings and celebrations if they are unable to attend. *Samskaras* necessitate that the individuals, family members and priests gather together; however, through Internet communication and webcams, it is now possible for grandparents living in India to watch their grandson's *chaula* (ceremony where the child's hair is shaved), their granddaughter's *namakarana* (name giving ceremony) or their daughter's *simanta* rituals (rituals performed during pregnancy). It is only a matter of time before sacred temples and *tirthas* offer cyber-tours, and online pilgrimage is made possible for those unable to be present in person. Although it seems that real life practices will not be replaced by the Internet (at least in the near future), the Internet allows modified forms of Hindi practice for those unable to attend by bridging gaps of distance and time.

We must keep in mind that the Internet is still a new development, barely ten years old. This technological advancement is part of a larger social revolution, whereby our society is transitioning away from material goods and placing greater value on information (such as with electronic banking replacing material currency). As such, we should not be obtuse in our considerations of future applications and significance of the Internet. The Internet is not merely a reflection of certain aspects of society; it has also shaped society. The Internet is, in many ways, developing a culture of its own. Short

movies and animate clips grow popular through the Internet with high circulation. The Internet is changing language, by introducing many abbreviated terms and ‘emoticons’. Common Internet chat acronyms—such as lol (laugh-out-loud), btw (by the way), ntm (nothing much)—are now being regularly used in real life conversation, and emoticons have been developed to nuance more emotion in text discussions. The latest wave of computer games are called MMORPG’s (massive multiplayer online role-playing games), which have virtual worlds hosted on servers that individual users connect to and interact with other players in the digital environment. Many lasting friendships are developed through these services, even if the individuals have never met in rl (real life). We are only beginning to see the potential implications of cyberspace. As Stephen O’Leary writes, “we can predict that [the available resources of] online religion will [expand beyond text to include] iconography, image, music, and sound – if not taste and smell...Surely computer rituals will be devised which exploit the new technologies to maximum symbolic effect (2005: 39).

Since the Internet is so new, it has not yet had a dramatic impact on Hinduism and other mainstream religions, though New Religious Movements have flourished in cyberspace. Nonetheless, the Internet’s interactive potentials and forms of communication are connecting Hindu communities, families and individuals in new ways, and the Internet has become a significant aspect of globalization and transnationalism. Connected via the Internet, Hindus are increasingly becoming aware of their global status and influence. With a new forum for discussion and expression of opinions, and this rising global consciousness, new challenges are emerging to traditional gender roles, issues of pollution/purity, authority, and xenophobia.

While it is clear that the Internet, in only its first decade, is altering and shaping Hinduism, it is difficult to assess how Hinduism has had an impact on the Internet. The Indian prevalence in the IT industry, both in the US and India, means that Hindus will continue to be active developers of the Internet and telecommunication technologies. However, this does not mean that Hinduism will necessarily shape the Internet. On a broad scale, some basic pan-Indian notions of ultimate reality have had an impact on the popular understanding of cyberspace. William Gibson's notions of cyberspace and the matrix were the basis of the hugely popular *Matrix* film trilogy, though the film directors also drew heavily upon Hindu philosophical idea as well. There are obvious connections between Hinduism and the film, such as character names including Kamala (lotus), Sati, Karma, and Rama-Kandra (Ramachandra), and the use of a Sanskrit chanting remixed with a techno beat during the credits. However, the film also draws upon general notions of illusion (*maya*) versus reality (*brahman*), based upon a cyclical notion of time, and a series of recurring saviors (*avatars*).

However, considerations of potential applications and implications of Hinduism in cyberspace remain largely speculative without substantial ethnography. Although this thesis provides a solid introduction and overview of the key issues and uses of the Internet for American Hindus, far too much was left out of the scope of analysis for it to be a comprehensive project. More cyber-ethnography needs to be conducted, particularly in the various Hindu chat rooms and BBS's, and individual Hindus need to be interviewed about their use of the Internet. We will not know how the Internet shapes the identity of young American Hindus until they are interviewed and asked about their use of the Internet, and online rituals are pointless unless individual Hindu devotees use

them. Furthermore, the discussion on Hindu temples in America will not be complete until it includes the various ISKCON, BAPS Swaminarayan, Shirdi Sai Baba and other temples in America, and the various guru-based religious movements have been completely ignored in this thesis. The chapter on the HSC will remain incomplete until a discussion of the Indian Students Association (ISA) is included and student leaders and participants of both organizations are interviewed.

Lastly, concerns that America and cyberspace are becoming Hindutva domains reflects a concern that Hindutva ideals are consolidating Hinduism into one uniform system, in turn denying the diverse ethnicities and religions central to Indian history. As Hinduism has expanded through the globe, necessary changes and adaptions have brought this issue into even greater significance. I, however, would counter such views by pointing out that Hinduism has also become increasingly diverse as Hindu communities have settled in new lands, and developed new strategies of adaption and divergent practices. As Hinduism now spreads to cyberspace, and increasing numbers of Hindus gain access to the Internet, I anticipate this diversification to continue. Therefore, globalization does not *only* create homogenization; rather, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse makes clear, globalization is also plural (2004: 60). Pieterse writes:

What globalization means in structural terms, then, is the *increase in the available modes of organization*: transnational, international, macroregional, national, microregional, municipal, local. This ladder of administrative levels is being crisscrossed by *functional networks* of corporations, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, as well as professionals and computer users. (65-66).

For Pieterse, there is not one mode of globalization and structure; therefore, the increase in global density will result in an increase of pluralization and hybridity, in what he calls a “global mélange” (71). We have seen this as Hinduism transmitted to new geographic

regions, developing unique blends and strategic adaptions to the new settings; likewise, we should expect to see this diversification as Hinduism transfers to the domain of cyberspace, while simultaneously witnessing many aspects of global unification and homogenization.

APPENDIX A
COMPLETE LIST OF ALL TEMPLE WEBSITES USED IN STUDY

1. [Birmingham Hindu Temple, AL](#)
2. [Maha Ganapati Temple Of Arizona, Maricopa City, AZ](#)
3. [Hindu Temple of Arizona, Scottsdale, AZ](#)
4. [Radha Krishna Temple, Bakersfield CA](#)
5. [Shiva Murugan Temple, Concord, CA](#)
6. [Fremont Hindu Temple, Fremont, CA](#)
7. [Kali Mandir, Laguna Beach, CA](#)
8. [Shiva - Vishnu Temple, Livermore, CA](#)
9. [Shree Lakshmi Narayan Temple, Sacramento, CA](#)
10. [Shiva Vishnu Temple of San Diego, CA](#)
11. [Sri Sri Radhakrishna / Sri Balaji Temple, San Diego, CA](#)
12. [Shiva Temple, San Marino, CA \(satyam foundation\)](#)
13. [Hindu Temple of Colorado, Littleton, CO](#)
14. [Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society, Middletown, CT](#)
15. [Rajdhani Mandir, Washington D.C.](#)
16. [Hindu Temple Association, Hockessin, DE](#)
17. [Hindu Society of Central Florida, Casselberry, FL](#)
18. [Hindu Society Of North East Florida, Jacksonville, FL](#)
19. [Florida Shirdi Sai, Iverness, FL](#)
20. [Miami Hindu Temple, Miami, FL](#)
21. [Shiva Vishnu Temple of South Florida, Southwest Ranches, FL](#)
22. [The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, GA](#)
23. [Greater Atlanta Vedic Temple, GA](#)
24. [Hindu Temple Society Augusta \(HTSA\), GA](#)
25. [Shaiva Siddhanta Church, Kauai, HI](#)
26. [Kauai's Hindu Monastery](#)
27. [Iraivan Temple](#)
28. [Saiva Siddhanta Church](#)
29. [Kauai's Hindu Monastery Web Site](#)
30. [Hindu Temple & Cultural Center, Madrid, IA](#)
31. [The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, IL](#)
32. [Hindu Mandir of Lake County, Grayslake, IL](#)
33. [Shirdi Sai Temple of Chicago, Hampshire, IL](#)
34. [Hindu Temple of Central Indiana, Indianapolis, IN \(under construction\)](#)
35. [Hindu Temple of Greater Wichita, KS](#)
36. [Hindu Temple of Kentucky, Louisville, KY](#)
37. [Sri Lakshmi Temple, Ashland, MA](#)
38. [The Hindu Temple of Metropolitan Washington, Adelphi, MD](#)
39. [Murugan Temple of North America, Lanham, MD](#)

40. [Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple, Lanham, MD](#)
41. [Sri Mangal Mandir, Silver Springs MD](#)
42. [The Hindu Temple Of Canton, MI](#)
43. [Paschima Kashi Sri Viswanatha Temple - Flint, MI](#)
44. [Bharatiya Temple of Lansing - Haslett, MI](#)
45. [Indo American Cultural Center and Temple, Kalamazoo, MI](#)
46. [Parashakti Temple, Pontiac, MI](#) (currently down)
47. [The Bharatiya Temple - Troy, MI](#)
48. [Hindu Temple & Cultural Center of Kansis City, MO](#)
49. [The Temple of St.Louis, MO](#)
50. [Sri Venkateswara \(Balaji\) Temple, Cary, NC](#)
51. [Welcome to the Hindu Society, Morrisville, NC](#)
52. [Hindu Temple Limited, Omaha, NE](#)
53. [Sri Venkateswara Temple: Bridgewater, NJ](#)
54. [Shri Shirdi Sai Center, Brunswick, NJ](#)
55. [Hindu Community Center of Garfield & Kearny, NJ](#)
56. [Ved Mandir, Milltown NJ](#)
57. [Sri Krishnaji Mandir, Morganville, NJ - Hindu American Temple and Cultural Center](#)
58. [Hindu Temple Society, Albuquerque, NM](#)
59. [Sri Neem Karoli Baba Temple - Taos, NM](#)
60. [Hindu Temple Society of Capital District, Albany, NY](#)
61. [Vishnu Mandir, Bronx, NY](#)
62. [Shiv Shakti Peeth, Flushing, NY](#)
63. [The Hindu temple Society of North America, Flushing, New York - Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapathi Devasthanam](#)
64. [Bharatiya Mandir, Middletown, NY](#)
65. [Sri Ranganatha Temple, Pomona, NY](#)
66. [Hindu Temple of Dayton - Beavercreek, OH](#)
67. [Hindu Temple of Greater Cincinnati, OH](#)
68. [Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple \(Greater Cleveland\) - Parma, OH](#)
69. [Bharatiya Hindu Temple, Powell OH](#)
70. [The Hindu Temple of Greater Tulsa, OK](#)
71. [Hindu Temple Society \(Allentown, PA\)](#)
72. [Hindu American Religious Institute \(HARI\) - New Cumberland, PA](#)
73. [Sri Venkateswara Temple, Pittsburgh - Penn Hills, PA](#)
74. [Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation - Stroudsburg, PA](#)
75. [Hindu Temple and Cultural Centre of South Carolina, Columbia, SC](#)
76. [Hindu Community Center of Knoxville, Lenoir City, TN](#)
77. [Ganesha Temple of Nashville, TN](#)
78. [India Cultural Center and Temple, Memphis, TN](#)
79. [Barsana Dham \(Austin\) TX](#)
80. [Austin Hindu Temple - Austin, TX](#)
81. [North Texas Hindu Mandir - Dallas, TX](#)
82. [Hindu Temple of San Antonio, Helotes, TX](#)
83. [D/FW Hindu Temple Society, \(Dallas / Fort Worth\), Irvin, TX](#)

- 84. [Hindu Society of Brazos Valley, Navasota, TX](#)
- 85. [Sri Meenakshi Devasthanam, Pearland, TX USA](#)
- 86. [Hindu Temple of Central Texas, Temple, TX \(Austin\)](#)
- 87. [Sri Ganesha Hindu Temple of Utah, Jordan, UT](#)
- 88. [Hindu Temple of Hampton Roads, Chesapeake, VA](#)
- 89. [Durga Temple, Fairfax Station, VA](#)
- 90. [Hindu Center of Virginia, Glen Allen, VA](#)
- 91. [Hindu Temple and Cultural Center, Bothell WA \(Seattle\)](#)
- 92. [Sanatan Dharma Temple & Cultural Center, Maple Valley WA \(Seattle\)](#)
- 93. [Hindu Temple Of Wisconsin, Pewaukee, WI](#)

APPENDIX B

TEMPLES WITH GENERAL, ECUMENICAL NAMES

1. [Birmingham Hindu Temple, AL](#)
2. [Hindu Temple of Arizona, Scottsdale, AZ](#)
3. [Fremont Hindu Temple, Fremont, CA](#)
4. [Hindu Temple of Colorado, Littleton, CO](#)
5. [Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society, Middletown, CT](#)
6. [Hindu Temple Association, Hockessin, DE](#)
7. [Hindu Society of Central Florida, Casselberry, FL](#)
8. [Hindu Society Of North East Florida, Jacksonville, FL](#)
9. [Miami Hindu Temple, Miami, FL](#)
10. [The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, GA](#)
11. [Greater Atlanta Vedic Temple, GA](#)
12. [Hindu Temple Society Augusta \(HTSA\), GA](#)
13. [Hindu Temple & Cultural Center, Madrid, IA](#)
14. [The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, IL](#)
15. [Hindu Mandir of Lake County, Grayslake, IL](#)
16. [Hindu Temple of Central Indiana, Indianapolis, IN \(under construction\)](#)
17. [Hindu Temple of Greater Wichita, KS](#)
18. [Hindu Temple of Kentucky, Louisville, KY](#)
19. [The Hindu Temple of Metropolitan Washington, Adelphi, MD](#)
20. [The Hindu Temple Of Canton, MI](#)
21. [Bharatiya Temple of Lansing - Haslett, MI](#)
22. [Indo American Cultural Center and Temple, Kalamazoo, MI](#)
23. [The Bharatiya Temple - Troy, MI](#)
24. [Hindu Temple & Cultural Center of Kansis City, MO](#)
25. [The Temple of St.Louis, MO](#)
26. [The Hindu Society, Morrisville, NC](#)
27. [Hindu Temple Limited, Omaha, NE](#)
28. [Hindu Community Center of Garfield & Kearny, NJ](#)
29. [Ved Mandir, Milltown NJ](#)
30. [Sri Krishnaji Mandir, Morganville, NJ - Hindu American Temple and Cultural Center](#)
31. [Hindu Temple Society, Albuquerque, NM](#)
32. [Hindu Temple Society of Capital District, Albany, NY](#)
33. [The Hindu temple Society of North America, Flushing, New York - Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapathi Devasthanam](#)
34. [Bharatiya Mandir, Middletown, NY](#)
35. [Hindu Temple of Dayton - Beavercreek, OH](#)
36. [Hindu Temple of Greater Cincinnati, OH](#)
37. [Bharatiya Hindu Temple, Powell OH](#)

38. [The Hindu Temple of Greater Tulsa, OK](#)
39. [Hindu Temple Society \(Allentown, PA\)](#)
40. [Hindu American Religious Institute \(HARI\) - New Cumberland, PA](#)
41. [Hindu Temple and Cultural Centre of South Carolina, Columbia, SC](#)
42. [Hindu Community Center of Knoxville, Lenoir City, TN](#)
43. [India Cultural Center and Temple, Memphis, TN](#)
44. [Austin Hindu Temple - Austin, TX](#)
45. [North Texas Hindu Mandir - Dallas, TX](#)
46. [Hindu Temple of San Antonio, Helotes, TX](#)
47. [D/FW Hindu Temple Society, \(Dallas / Fort Worth\), Irvin, TX](#)
48. [Hindu Society of Brazos Valley, Navasota, TX](#)
49. [Hindu Temple of Central Texas, Temple, TX \(Austin\)](#)
50. [Hindu Temple of Hampton Roads, Chesapeake, VA](#)
51. [Hindu Center of Virginia, Glen Allen, VA](#)
52. [Hindu Temple and Cultural Center, Bothell WA \(Seattle\)](#)
53. [Sanatan Dharma Temple & Cultural Center, Maple Valley WA \(Seattle\)](#)
54. [Hindu Temple Of Wisconsin, Pewaukee, WI](#)

APPENDIX C

TEMPLES WITH DEITY OR LINEAGE SPECIFIC NAMES

1. [Maha Ganapati Temple Of Arizona, Maricopa City, AZ](#)
2. [Radha Krishna Temple, Bakersfield CA](#)
3. [Shiva Murugan Temple, Concord, CA](#)
4. [Kali Mandir, Laguna Beach, CA](#)
5. [Shiva - Vishnu Temple, Livermore, CA](#)
6. [Shree Lakshmi Narayan Temple, Sacramento, CA](#)
7. [Shiva Vishnu Temple of San Diego, CA](#)
8. [Sri Sri Radhakrishna / Sri Balaji Temple, San Diego, CA](#)
9. [Shiva Temple, San Marino, CA \(satyam foundation\)](#)
10. [Rajdhani Mandir, Washington D.C.](#)
11. [Florida Shirdi Sai, Iverness, FL](#)
12. [Shiva Vishnu Temple of South Florida, Southwest Ranches, FL](#)
13. Shaiva Siddhanta Church, Kauai, HI
 - a. [Kauai's Hindu Monastery](#)
 - b. [Iraivan Temple](#)
 - c. [Saiva Siddhanta Church](#)
 - d. [Kauai's Hindu Monastery Web Site](#)
14. [Shirdi Sai Temple of Chicago, Hampshire, IL](#)
15. [Sri Lakshmi Temple, Ashland, MA](#)
16. [Murugan Temple of North America, Lanham, MD](#)
17. [Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple, Lanham, MD](#)
18. [Sri Mangal Mandir, Silver Springs MD](#)
19. [Paschima Kashi Sri Viswanatha Temple - Flint, MI](#)
20. [Parashakti Temple, Pontiac, MI](#)
21. [Sri Venkateswara \(Balaji\) Temple, Cary, NC](#)
22. [Sri Venkateswara Temple: Bridgewater, NJ](#)
23. [Shri Shirdi Sai Center, Brunswick, NJ](#)
24. [Sri Krishnaji Mandir, Morganville, NJ - Hindu American Temple and Cultural Center](#)
25. [Sri Neem Karoli Baba Temple - Taos, NM](#)
26. [Vishnu Mandir, Bronx, NY](#)
27. [Shiv Shakti Peeth, Flushing, NY](#)
28. [Sri Ranganatha Temple, Pomona, NY](#)
29. [Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple \(Greater Cleveland\) - Parma, OH](#)
30. [Sri Venkateswara Temple, Pittsburgh - Penn Hills, PA](#)
31. [Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation - Stroudsburg, PA](#)
32. [Ganesha Temple of Nashville, TN](#)
33. [Barsana Dham \(Austin\) TX](#)
34. [Sri Meenakshi Devasthanam, Pearland, TX USA](#)

35. Sri Ganesha Hindu Temple of Utah, Jordan, UT
36. Durga Temple, Fairfax Station, VA

APPENDIX D

LIST OF HSC CHAPTERS OBSERVED

1. [University of Alabama - AL](#)
2. [California State University, Sacramento - CA](#)
3. [Stanford University - CA](#)
4. [University of California, Berkeley - CA](#)
5. [University of California, Irvine - CA](#)
6. [University of California, San Diego - CA](#)
7. [University of Florida, Gainesville - FL](#)
8. [University of Miami - FL](#)
9. [University of South Florida - FL](#)
10. [Emory University - GA](#)
11. [Georgia Tech - GA](#)
12. [Drake University - IA](#)
13. [University of Iowa - IA](#)
14. [Illinois Institute of Technology - IL](#)
15. [University of Illinois - Chicago - IL](#)
16. [University of Illinois - Urbana Champaign - IL](#)
17. [Purdue University - IN](#)
18. [Boston University - MA](#)
19. [MIT - MA](#)
20. [Johns Hopkins University - MD](#)
21. [University of Maryland Baltimore County - MD](#)
22. [University of Maryland College Park - MD](#)
23. [University of Michigan - Ann Arbor - MI](#)
24. [University of Minnesota - Twin Cities - MN](#)
25. [Duke University - NC](#)
26. [North Carolina State University - NC](#)
27. [Cornell University - NY](#)
28. [New York University - NY](#)
29. [Syracuse University - NY](#)
30. [University of Oklahoma - OK](#)
31. [Penn State University - PA](#)
32. [University of Pennsylvania - PA](#)
33. [University of Pittsburg - PA](#)
34. [University of South Carolina - SC](#)
35. [Texas A&M, College Station - TX](#)
36. [University of Texas, Austin - TX](#)
37. [George Mason University - VA](#)
38. [University of Virginia - VA](#)
39. [Virginia Commonwealth University - VA](#)

40. [Virginia Tech - VA](#)
41. [University of Washington - WA](#)
42. [University of Wisconsin, Madison - WI](#)

APPENDIX E EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Does your chapter use the Internet to promote activities? If so, which types of activities do you promote?

Does your chapter use the Internet to provide information about Hinduism in general? If so, where does this information come from? Do you use any Hindu scholars, *pandits, pujaris*, or other religious figures?

Does your chapter use the Internet to provide information about places of worship? If so, are these places on campus, at nearby temples, or at other places of worship?

Does your site employ any chat room or discussion board features? If so, what is the intended role of the chat room and/or discussion board features? What types of general issues are discussed in these threads?

Of the Indian and Indo-American student participants, approximately what percentage are American-born (or raised in the US), and what percentage are international students?

Of the Indian and Indo-American student participants, approximately what percentage are Hindu? Do you have participation from other South Asian religions (such as Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, or Buddhism)?

What is your own citizenship? Where were you born? What languages do you speak?
What religion do you consider yourself?

I have intentionally left my last question somewhat open-ended – please answer the following questions however you see fit. Personally, how has your own participation in the HSC helped you in:

- 55. Developing knowledge about your religion (including beliefs, practices, history, etc.);
- 56. Bridging the gap between the Indian and American cultures;
- 57. Bridging the generational gap between you and your parents, grandparents and extended family;

APPENDIX F
HSC CHAPTERS EMAILED THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Boston University
California State University Sacramento
Cornell University
Duke University
Emory University
Johns Hopkins University
North Carolina State University
Purdue University
Syracuse University
Texas A&M University
University of Alabama
University of Florida
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
University of Iowa
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Oklahoma
University of Pittsburgh
University of South Carolina
University of Texas, Austin
University of Washington

APPENDIX G
HSC LOGO



APPENDIX G DISCUSSION ON FAITH

Living in the diverse society of college epitomizes a life filled with excitement, confusion, stress, and the need to explore. Although many have already developed their personalities by the time one reaches college, learning to live with an open mind to the cultures one is exposed to in this vast environment incites many to question his or her practices in life. Growing up in a dogmatic Indian household where the parents instruct their child partially on the “way of life” and then living independently in the real world where one is forced to reevaluate his or her choices and ideals augments the hardships of an already confused Indian-American. One of the many controversial topics among college students is the idea of interracial and interfaith relationships. This was the topic for the first discussion held on October 5th, 2004.

Many students who attended gave their opinions based on personal experiences and astute observations. Few of the questions raised discussed the problems an interracial couple would face with their parents, their future children, and even the society. When an Indian chooses to date or marry someone belonging to another culture, he or she is forced by his or her parents to either end the relationship or to choose them over the partner. Threats of possible disownment and ostracism by the family restricts an Indian-American to follow traditions that he or she may not even know about or approve. Since many parents living in America fear losing their Indian identity by assimilating too much into the Western culture, they prevent their children from experiencing pure independence in terms of choosing mates. Although asking one to preserve culture by following rituals and observing certain rules may not be asking much, it has a high possibility of backfiring. One may reason that being born “Indian” does not require practicing “Indian.” Some even argued that living in multi-cultural America, it is essentially hard to restrain from dating or being with someone non-Indian. If we were in India, however, it would be easier to maintain traditions by mingling with those of the same mind-set.

The institution of marriage is a culmination of happiness, togetherness, and problems. Regardless of the couple’s race or faith, everyone initially experiences difficulty adjusting and growing with the spouse. Differences in faith or culture adds to the problems by forcing the couple and their children to develop equal respect for all the faiths or cultures involved. Sometimes, one parent may unconsciously instill the child with values of his or her own culture and faith, thus causing the child to pick one parent’s way of life over the other. This display of favoritism affects the child’s relationship with the other parent thereby weakening familial bonds and also predisposing the child to have identity crisis. On the contrary, some parents decide to abandon their faith completely and even this choice affects the children. Aptly stated by Nicole Varma, who grew up in an interfaith household, it is “better to have a religion than forsaking them all.”

Another strata of parents choose to convert after marriage and just follow the spouse’s faith. Although this decision may bring some harmony to the marriage while raising the children, it still all depends on the person’s understanding of oneself and each

other. Many students agree in stating unanimously, “spirituality is an individual journey no matter what religion one belongs to.”

Towards the end of the discussion, we concluded that being in an interfaith or interracial relationship may or may not work depending on the people involved and their willingness to mature together. May it be an arranged or love marriage, a true Indian couple or a blend of Indian and Western cultures, a true Hindu household or a mix of multi faiths, a relationship is bound to last only if sacrifices and compromises are made to mold the two lives into one filled with harmony and unbiased understanding. Thus, as stated by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “love does not consist of gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction.”

(http://grove.ufl.edu/~hsc/HSC_Newsletter/hsc_articles/disc1_interfaith_race.wps.doc)

APPENDIX I
DEVANAGARI-STYLED FONT

hindu students council

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Anand, Priya. 2004. Hindu Diaspora and Religious Philanthropy in the United States. Paper presented at the 6th International Society for Third Sector Research, July 2004, in Toronto, Canada.
<http://www.jhu.edu/~istr/conferences/toronto/workingpapers/anand.priya.pdf> (accessed November, 2005)
- Barker, Eileen. 2005. Crossing the boundary: new challenges to religious authority and control as a consequence of access to the Internet. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bauwens, Michel. 1996. Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship. *First Monday*, vol.1 no.5 (November 4), <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html> (accessed January 2006)
- Bhatia, Renee and Ajit Bhatia. 1996. Hindu Communities in Atlanta. In *Religions of Atlanta: Religious Diversity in the Centennial Olympic City*. Edited by Gary Laderman. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Brasher, Brenda. 2001. *Give me that Online Religion*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dawson, Lorne. 2004. Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community. In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan. London and New York: Routledge.
- 2005. The mediation of religious experience in cyberspace. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dawson, Lorne and Douglas Cowan. 2004. Introduction to *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan. London and New York: Routledge.
- Eck, Diana. 1998. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- Gurbani, Barkha. 2002. Being Hindu, Being in College. *Johns Hopkins University Campus Ministries Newsletter*, vol. II, Fall 2002, Issue 1,
<http://www.jhu.edu/~chaplain/news/vol2/iss1/6.shtml> (accessed November 2005)

- Hawley, John Stratton. 1991. Naming Hinduism. *The Wilson Quarterly*. Vol. 15, 3 (Summer): 20-34.
- Helland, Christopher. 2004. Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven. In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan. London and New York: Routledge.
- Højsgaard, Morten. 2005. Cyber-religion: on the cutting edge between the virtual and the real. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Højsgaard, Morten and Margit Warburg. 2005. Introduction: waves of research. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Khan, Tasmia. 2005. The Evolution of Identity in the Ganapati Temple. *Hinduism Here*, <http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/religion/hinduismhere/khan-article.html> (accessed November 2005)
- Khetan, Rajni. 2005. Indore women go tech-savvy on Karva Chauth. *NewKerala* [Online]. <http://www.newkerala.com/news.php?action=fullnews&id=38732> (accessed January 2006)
- Kurien, Prema. 1998. Becoming American by Becoming Hindu: Indian Americans Take Their Place at the Multicultural Table. In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*. Edited by R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Lal, Vijay. 2003. North American Hindus, the Sense of History, and the Politics of Internet Diasporism. In *AsianAmerica.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*. Edited by Rachel Lee and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong. London and New York: Routledge.
- Larsen, Elena. 2004. Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online. In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lövheim, Mia. 2004. Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet. In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Edited by Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lövheim, Mia and Alf Linderman. 2005. Constructing religious identity on the Internet. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Min, Pyong Gap. 2000. 'Immigrants' Religion and Ethnicity: A Comparison of Korean Christian and Indian Hindu Immigrants. *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 2, 1 (Spring).

- Miniwatts Marketing Group. 2006. Internet Usage Statistics: The Big Picture. *Internet World Stats*. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed January 2006)
- Narayanan, Vasudha. 2000. Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 68, No. 4: 761-779.
- Forthcoming 2006. *May You Live a Thousand Autumns: An Introduction to Hindu Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nederveen Pieterse, Jan. 2004. *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- O'Leary, Stephen. 2005. Utopian and dystopian possibilities of networked religion in the new millennium. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Edited by Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pechilis Prentiss, Karen. 1996. The Pattern of Hinduism and Hindu Temple Building in the U.S. The Pluralism Project. http://www.pluralism.org/research/articles/pp_hinduism_article.php (accessed November 2005)
- Prashad, Vijay. 2000. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Savarkar, V.D. 2003. *Hindutva*. New Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan.
- Smart, Ninian. 1999. The importance of diasporas. In *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Edited by Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Staal, J.F. 1963. Sanskrit and Sanskritization. *Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 3: 261-275.
- Subramuniyaswami, Satguru Sivaya. 1995. Publisher's Desk. *Hinduism Today*. May, 1995. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1995/5/1995-5-05.shtml> (accessed February 2006)
- University of California Regents. 2001. Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965. *The Library, University of California, Berkeley*. CSAS Publications. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/echoes/chapter13/chapter13.html> (accessed January 2006)
- Varghese, Linta. 2003. Will the Real Indian Woman Log-On? Diaspora, Gender, and Comportment. In *AsianAmerica.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*. Edited by Rachel Lee and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong. London and New York: Routledge.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. and Marie Marquardt. 2003. *Globalizing the Sacred: religion across the Americas*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Venkatachari, K.K.A. 1992. Transmission and Transformation of Rituals. In *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*. Chambersberg, PA: Anima Press.

Vertovec, Steven. 1999. Religion and Diaspora. In *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Edited by Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi Warne. Berlin & NY: Verlag de Gruyter.

Waghorne, Joanne Punzo. 1999. The Hindu Gods in a Split-level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, D.C. In *Gods of the City*. Edited by Robert Orsi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Williams, Raymond Brady. 1992. Sacred Threads of Several Textures. In *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*. Chambersberg, PA: Anima Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mr. Ackroyd holds a BA in Religious Studies from Oakland University, in the Detroit metropolitan area. As an undergraduate, Mr. Ackroyd was able to work firsthand with many religious communities, including local Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims and Baha'i, at their respective places of worship. From his time spent with the diasporal South Indian community, he developed his primary interest in contemporary Hindu practices and migration, with a particular emphasis on temple functions and worship. His research interests include the various roles of Hindu temples, the use of technology and the Internet by Hindu communities around the globe, the sacralization of foreign soil, and the process of localization as devotional Hindu groups extend beyond South Asia. Mr. Ackroyd is writing this thesis as part of his requirements for the Master's of Arts in Religion at the University of Florida, where he has been studying since 2004.

ackroyd@ufl.edu