1 Becoming American by Becoming Hindu: Indian Americans Take Their Place at the Multicultural Table

Prema Kurien

As I kept learning [about my heritage and religion], I became more confident and sure of myself. With a wealth of knowledge by my side, I felt strong. . . . I felt a sense of belonging, but not sameness, as though I were an individual piece adding color to the complete picture. I could fit in but still be different.—Hema Narayan, school essay

Introduction

How to "fit in" but still maintain one's cultural and personal integrity is the challenge that most immigrants in the United States face in their transition from immigrants to ethnics. Indian immigrants from a Hindu background have achieved this end by using Hinduism, albiet a Hinduism that has been recast and reformulated to make this transition possible. Religion has conventionally defined and sustained ethnic life in this country, and thus while "becoming Hindu" may on the surface appear to be the antithesis of "becoming American," these Indian immigrants have made the transition from sojourners to citizens by developing a Hindu American community and identity. Asserting pride in their Hindu Indian heritage has also been their way of claiming a position for themselves at the American multicultural table.

This chapter is based on an ethnographic study of two Hindu Indian religious groups in and around Los Angeles. Their two new forms of collective religious worship and education represent two different strategies of sustaining Hinduism that Hindus have developed in the United States. I shall show how such transformations of Hindu practice take place as Indian immigrants adapt Hinduism to fit the American context.

New Forms of Hindu Practice

Satsang

It is a pleasant Saturday evening. In a suburban area, a row of expensive cars are parked in front of an upper-middle-class house. Shoes and sandals are placed neatly outside on the porch. Inside, the furniture has been cleared from the large living room and sheets spread over the carpet. In the center is a makeshift shrine with pictures of several Hindu deities arranged against the wall. Several of the deities are adorned with fresh flower garlands. Tall brass oil lamps with flickering flames stand on either side of the shrine. Baskets containing fruit and flowers have been placed in front. A man dressed in traditional South Indian clothes is seated on the floor before the shrine, his wife beside him in a silk saree. Around the couple are seated about fifty people, the men and boys in casual Western clothes largely on one side of the room, and the women and girls in rich and colorful Indian clothes on the other. This is the monthly devotional meeting of the Organization of Hindu Malayalees (OHM), a *satsang* (congregation of truth) of Hindu immigrants from the state of Kerala in South India. The states in India have generally been formed on the basis of language, and thus Kerala constitutes a distinct linguistic and cultural unit. Its people are Malayalees, speaking the language Malayalam. The OHM, established in 1991, is a religiocultural organization of around fifty to seventy-five Hindu Malayalee families. Members meet on the second Saturday of the month in different locations (mostly in people's houses) around the region for the *pooja* (worship) and *bhajans* (devotional songs). Around forty to sixty people attend each *pooja*. Since the members are scattered over a wide area, except for the "regulars," it is a changing group that attends each meeting, depending on the locality. The OHM meeting starts with the lay worship leader chanting an invocation (in Sanskrit) to the deities. This is followed by the singing of *bhajans* accompanied by cymbals, played by the leader's wife. The leader of the *bhajan* sings a line, and the rest of the group repeats it. Occasionally, there is a brief lull, and the leader and his wife call for volunteers to start new *bhajans*. Different members of the group, including a teenage girl, take turns leading the singing. Some fifteen to twenty *bhajans* are sung, each lasting around five minutes.

A few months before my fieldwork with the group ended, a Gita discussion period was introduced toward the end of the *pooja*, where two verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* were translated and explained by Mrs. Kala Menon, a university professor, followed by a group discus-

sion (in English). During one such meeting, a member of the group wanted to know why bad things happened to good people, and why people should bother to be good if that was the case. Mrs. Menon's reply was that the bad thing may have been caused by something bad that the person had done in a past incarnation. "Good deeds will be rewarded, if not in this life, then at least in the next," she answered firmly. Two of the teenage girls in the group also became involved in the discussion at this point, one pointing out that the Hindu conception of good and evil is more complicated than the Christian, since "good does not always give place to good." The other elaborated, "Yes, a person may lead a good life and then be rewarded in the next life with a lot of money, but the money may make him arrogant. So he will be punished in the following life."

After the teenagers complained that they felt alienated from the OHM meetings since they were largely Sanskrit-based and adult-oriented, the group has been making special efforts to try to involve them through discussions and youth activities. If the participation in the Gita sessions is any indication, this effort seems to be yielding results.

The two-and-a-half-hour worship concludes with further invocations and devotions by the lay priest and a group chant. A potluck vegetarian South Indian meal follows, during which there is a lot of joking and teasing as people catch up on the month's news. Relatives and jobs are enquired after, clothes and jewelry admired, and recipes and professional information are traded, while those who have recently visited India regale the others with their accounts. Youngsters go off and form their own groups. In the adult clusters, children are discussed in great detail by the parents—their health, educational progress, extracurricular accomplishments, and, in the case of older children, parental concerns about finding appropriate marriage partners for them.

Bala Vihar

On a Sunday afternoon in another suburban South Indian household in the same region, twelve Hindu families with school-age children from Tamil Nadu, another state in South India, get together for their monthly *bala vihar* (child development) meeting, also led by a lay leader, the father of two children in the group. After they sing some familiar *bhajans* and learn a new one, taught by one of the mothers, there is a discussion of Hindu philosophy and values (also in English) and how they can be practiced in everyday life in American society. The first issue discussed is the need for each individual to do his or her allotted tasks, however small, to the best of his or her ability, for the

well-being and smooth functioning of society. Children and parents together discuss the problems involved in maintaining the delicate balance between working toward the good of the whole and achieving individual success. One of the young girls gives an example of this tension: "Like, you know, I may want all my friends to get good grades, but my effort is spent in studying to get a good grade for myself." The group nods in agreement. At this point one of the men comes forward to make a further point. He cautions the children that in the work world people are often not given credit for their efforts. "Let me give you an example," he says. "I am a scientist, and a common problem that comes up in my field regards who gets to be first author for publications." He goes on to explain the significance of first authorship and gives examples of unfair decisions. He ends by saying, "So you should also be aware of your rights and fight for them."

The leader then discusses how to deal with disappointment when results fall below one's expectations despite hard work. Here his point is that the children should do their very best and then accept whatever they get as a result of their work, "even" if it is a B grade. "Don't care too much about the grade as such," he says. "But how can you not care about grades?" one young girl bursts out. Another teenager tries to explain to her, "Yes, you work really hard but a B somewhere in your transcript prevents you from getting into Harvard, and you feel really bad. But sometime later you may realize that the place you did get into was better for you than Harvard." One of the women adds, "Not getting the end that you think you deserve is very hard. I used to get very depressed when that happened to me and still do sometimes, but over time I have tried to cultivate a certain detachment. You should try to recognize that your effort is the only thing that you have control over, so do your very best but then stop thinking about it, go out and have a good time to rejuvenate yourself"—she pauses and then explains—"for the next big effort." There is laughter at this. She continues, "But the effect of this attempt to better yourself is that it results in an expanding sphere of influence. Take Gandhi for instance. He was at first only trying to better himself, but soon that started affecting others, and finally it resulted in his having a major effect on the whole world."

After a snack break, the group divides into two for the Tamil language class. The junior class focuses on vocabulary, while the senior class is taught to appreciate the beauty of classical devotional Tamil poetry. The group reconvenes in the living room for the story session led by yet another woman. The stories are taken from the Hindu epics.

Here again the moral of each story is expounded and discussed. One of the day's stories had a message about the sanctity of marriage and family, and the evils of extramarital sex. Particular Hindu practices deriving from the stories are explained, and the children are encouraged to follow them since they have been "time tested over thousands of years." The eagerly awaited crossword puzzle of the month is given out next. The puzzle has questions about Hinduism, Tamil vocabulary, and the history, geography, and culture of India. The three-and-a-half hour *bala vihar* concludes with the "host family time," when a child of that family makes a presentation to the group. This month the teenage daughter shows a video of the family's trip to South India, during which they made a pilgrimage to several temples that ended with their family temple. She gives an emotional account of the trip and its meaning for her, ending with a beautiful *bhajan* that she said was the favorite of the deity in their family temple. Several in the group are visibly moved. Finally, there is a lavish potluck meal to end the gathering

Satsang groups and *bala vihars* have proliferated among the immigrant Indian community in the United States. They represent two different strategies adopted by Indian immigrants to re-create a Hindu Indian environment on foreign soil. The first, which largely targets adults, celebrates and reenacts religious practice. The second is directed at teaching the children about the religion.[1] Both options come with their own problems. In the first case, many of the children in the OHM have expressed dissatisfaction with not being meaningfully included in the organization. Again, having a dedicated core of members willing to take on the extra responsibilities of being the planners and organizers is crucial for the survival of groups such as the OHM. *Bala vihars* are even more difficult to organize and sustain since they involve a heavy investment of time and energy by both adults and children. As a much smaller group (compared to a *satsang*), the *bala vihar* depends on members making the commitment to attend most of the monthly meetings. Besides cooking for the dinners and making sure that the children attend regularly and do their homework, parents also have to be willing to share in the responsibility of planning and running the various classes. Many *bala vihars* disband after a few months or years, when the adults and children in the group get too busy. Even if the group is successful in sustaining the *bala vihar* over a long period (as this Tamil group did), they have to deal with the constant attrition of college-bound children and their parents. These are just some of the dilemmas Indian immigrants face in their attempts to institutionalize Hinduism in the United States.

In this process of institutionalization, however, Hinduism is also "reinvented." Both *satsangs* and *bala vihars* are forms of religious practice that do not typically exist in India. In fact, group religious activity does not exist in "traditional" Hinduism.[2] In India, Hindus worship largely as families or as individuals, in their homes or a temple. Larger groups at the temple may be present to witness the *pooja* performed by the priest on behalf of the community. Only festivals are celebrated communally by a village. At temple festivals, groups of devotees might sing songs, and individuals take turns to be part of the group so that the singing can be continued uninterrupted for the whole period. As an Indian woman I spoke to mentioned, "I grew up in India, I consider myself a good Hindu, but I'd never heard of many of these things [the *satsangs, bala vihars,* and Hindu youth camps] until I came here."

Religious innovations have frequently taken place among American immigrants. To quote Timothy Smith's (1978, 1178) classic statement regarding religion and ethnicity in America, "Immigrant congregations . . . [are] not transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and, therefore, arenas of change. Often founded by lay persons and always dependent on voluntary support, their structures, leadership and liturgy . . . [have] to be shaped to meet pressing human needs". He continues: "Pastors, rabbis, and lay officers respond . . . to this challenge to make religion more personal by reinterpreting scriptures and creeds to allow ancient observances to serve new purposes." What these "pressing human needs" are for Indian immigrants and how the OHM and the Tamil *bala vihar* shape and reinterpret Hinduism to fit the American context will be the subject of the next two sections.

Indian Immigrants in the United States

The 1990 U.S. Census reported over eight hundred thousand people of Indian origin in the country,[3] of whom around 65 percent probably came from a Hindu background (Fenton 1988, 28). Having arrived largely in the wake of the 1965 immigration act, Indians are a fairly recent ethnic group in the United States. It is common now to talk about two waves of post-1965 Indian migration. Since there were very few people of Indian origin residing in the country before the act, most of the first wave of immigrants came under the "special skills" provision of the law, and thus were highly educated people who entered professional or managerial careers. Once here, however, they sponsored the immigration of relatives under the family reunification aspect of

the 1965 act, and thus the second wave of immigrants, coming since the early 1980s, often do not have the same educational or professional status as the first wave. Socially, too, their experiences are different, since they come to join relatives and an already established ethnic community.

The first-wave immigrants came in search of better economic prospects and often planned only a temporary stay. Thus, in the early years, they were generally preoccupied with building their careers and establishing an economic foothold. They socialized primarily with other members of their community (who were not very many in this period) during any spare time that they had, and thus, except in work-related contexts, American culture and society did not impinge on their personal lives to any great extent. But as their children became older and a return to India grew less and less likely (Fenton 1988, 39),[4] it became important for them to have a more structured means of interacting with co-ethnics.

Smith (1978, 1174–1175) poetically describes the reason for the "intensification of the psychic basis of religious commitment" among immigrants as

> *loneliness, the romanticizing of memories, the guilt for imagined desertion of parents and other relatives, and the search for community and identity in a world of strangers. . . . Separation from both personal and physical associations of one's childhood community drew emotional strings taut. . . . Friendships, however, were often fleeting, and the lonely vigils—when sickness, unemployment, or personal rejection set individuals apart—produced deep crises of the spirit. At such moments the concrete symbols of order or hope that the village church or priest and the annual round of religious observances had once provided seemed far away; yet the mysteries of individual existence as well as the confusing agonies of anomie cried out for religious explanation. For this reason, I shall argue, migration was often a theologizing experience.*

Most of the members of the OHM are first-wave immigrants, and its secretary offered an equally poetic explanation about why the group was formed:

> *Before we established OHM, many of the true lovers of Kerala heritage and culture were lost in the congested wilderness of Southern California without having any communication with other Kerala members who shared similar interests. Some of them felt lonely in the crowded streets of this faraway land, and hungry and thirsty, in this land of plenty, for company of people who recognized and under-*

stood them. They searched everywhere for some familiarity, to prove to their beloved children that the usual bedtime stories of their motherland and her heritage were not some fairy tales but existed in reality (Vellatheri 1992).

The teaching of Indian culture and values to the children was an important reason for the formation of the *satsangs* and the primary reason for the formation of *bala vihars*. Indian parents were concerned about the environment within which their children were growing up, which they perceived to be filled with unstable families, sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence. The attitudes and values that the children were picking up from school in many ways seemed completely alien to the parents, and created a frightening feeling that the second-generation was growing up to be total strangers with whom parents and other relatives could not even communicate. One of the members of the OHM told me about her friend, whose child came home from school one day and asked, "Why don't I have a white mommy like everyone does? I want a white mommy." Another described how her child, when younger, would dissociate herself from anything Indian and would refuse to walk with her father, acting like she didn't know him, when he wore Indian clothes.

The children in turn had to deal with the difficult issue of negotiating their personal and cultural identity between the values and practices learned at home and those of the American society they faced outside.[5] In the process they raised questions about their own culture and religion to which parents discovered they had no answers: "[W]e are forced to articulate over and over again what it means to be a Hindu and an Indian to our friends and to our children, and one feels ill-equipped for the task. . . . [In India] one was never called upon to explain Deepavali or Sankaranti [festivals], and least of all, 'Hinduism' (Narayan 1992, 172). In India, children "breathe in the values of Hindu life" (Fenton 1988, 127). In the United States, on the other hand, parents realized that unless they made a deliberate effort, children would never learn what their "Indianness" meant.

As R. Stephen Warner (1993, 1044–1093) points out, even in the assimilationist era, cultural pluralism was tolerated in and expressed through religion. The tendency to express cultural pluralism through religion has only increased with the range and diversity of backgrounds now in the United States. Recent immigrant groups such as the Indians, Pakistanis, and Koreans appear to follow this pattern even more strongly (Warner 1993, 1062; Fenton 1988, 50–51).[6] According to Raymond Brady Williams (1988, 11), "Immigrants are religious—by all

counts more religious than they were before they left home—because religion is one of the important identity markers that helps them preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in a group."

Thus, for Indian immigrants, particularly non-Christians, religion has become the key symbol of identity and of difference from American society, and has come to represent their Indian heritage.

Hindu religiocultural associations like the OHM and *bala vihars* have sprung up in all the major metropolitan areas around the country. These groups are not just narrowly "religious" and do far more than organize congregational worship. In the absence of the residential concentration characteristic of many of the other immigrant groups, the *satsangs* and *bala vihars* of Indian Americans are often the only place at which they meet other members of the community.[7] It is through their activities that the second generation is socialized into their Indian American identity and meet other young people whom the parents hope will provide a source of support. As Mr. Radha Krishna Sharma, a member of the OHM put it, "You know that children here go in search of their roots. We did not want our children to lose their heritage in a foreign environment and then have to re-create Alex Haley's journey!"

Besides the needs of children, there are also increasing numbers of retirees, older immigrants who have now "made it" (and therefore have more leisure time), and parents of immigrants (brought over under the family reunification provision) who enjoy such congregational activities. Usha R. Jain (1989, 168–169), for instance, notes that religious and philanthropic activities (usually involving collecting money for a cause in India) have become increasingly important for the older generation. In addition, such organizations are important to the large numbers of second-wave Indians who have been continuously arriving, since, "they provide a renewable continuity with religious organizations and traditions in India" (Williams 1992b, 252).[8] Most scholars who have studied Indian immigrants point out that contrary to conventional expectations that the cultural identities and practices of the home country will be gradually abandoned over time, Indians in the United States have tended to become more community-oriented, more religious, and more "Indianized" over time.[9] As the number of Indians in the major metropolitan areas of the country have increased, the Indian organizations have given way to more regional and sectarian groups such as the OHM, and thus the first-generation Indians in the United States are also becoming more "parochialized."[10] In areas where there are large groups of Indian immigrants from a particular region, it is not uncommon for the different castes to form separate

organizations.[11] 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. What the relationship between the regional and national identity will be for this generation remains to be seen.[12]

The Organization of Hindu Malayalees

In addition to the monthly meeting described above, the OHM celebrates the major Kerala Hindu festivals with religious and cultural programs. Cultural programs are also sponsored several times during the year, when music and dance-dramas are performed by community members or by visiting artists from Kerala. Member contributions are used for various projects—local charities as well as a women's shelter in Kerala and disaster relief in various parts of India. The group has also managed to raise $42,000 to build a shrine to Lord Aiyappa, a popular deity whose abode is in a mountain on the Kerala border, in the local pan-Indian temple.

My findings are based on a two-year ethnographic study of this group. In addition to attending the monthly meetings, I visited the homes of many of the members and conducted semistructured interviews with them. I also participated in more informal activities with individuals in the group. My own status as a Malayalee immigrant helped me considerably, although the fact that I came from a Christian background did lead to some initial discomfort on both sides and to a lesser extent continued to result sporadically in delicate situations. This happened particularly when I was introduced to people in the group, since my last name clearly identifies my background. My being non-Hindu also most certainly affected many of the statements members have made to me regarding their ideas and feelings about religion. It has also meant that I have had to proceed slowly and carefully with my research. After the centuries of mockery and harassment that Hindus have had to endure from Christians and the negative stereotypes that exist in this society regarding Hinduism, many of the members were understandably wary of my intentions and the purpose of my study. They were particularly anxious that I did not perceive or characterize them as "fanatic" Hindus and wanted me to give them a copy of "my report" before I submitted it to the editors. (I gave copies of a draft of this chapter to the current president, Ravi Vellatheri, who in

tum circulated it among the executive committee members and obtained their approval.) Despite their concerns, most members have been very warm, welcoming, and hospitable.

The OHM is a fairly elite group in class and occupational terms, a fact that they have repeatedly emphasized to me and to R. Stephen Warner on the two occasions that he met with some of the group. In contrast to the Kerala Christians that Sheba George writes about in Chapter 8, most members of the OHM, both male and female, are professionals—mainly doctors, engineers, scientists, and accountants. I was particularly struck by the fact that the women were as well educated and well placed as their husbands. In fact, there seemed to be only one case where the woman was currently not working or studying. But even in this instance, the woman had given up her career to raise two small children.

Formation

The founder-president, and chief initiator of the OHM, Mr. Govindankutty Nair, described how the idea of forming an association occurred to him:

> *During that time [the late 1980s] we used to go occasionally for various [Indian] get-togethers. But it all seemed so superficial. You know the way Americans say, "How are you?" and rush past without even waiting for your reply. It is a meaningless question. The person doesn't care whether you are ill or have lost your job or if your mother just died. Well, that's the way I felt about those parties. The same jokes recycled, the same trivial conversation. And generally the women would be in one room, the men in another, there would be a few people playing cards and the children would be somewhere else. Except for the fact that the different groups were within the four walls of same house, there was nothing gained from everyone being together.*

He hurried to add, however, that "I am not saying such get-togethers are bad. I still go sometimes—it just left me feeling unsatisfied." Mr. Nair paused and then went on:

> *I had been thinking about it for a while, and I had also talked to some of my other friends. My idea was to develop a support group for Hindu Malayalees. Christians have the church as a support group. Hindus don't have anything.*

Mr. Vellatheri, another of the founding members of the group, had made the same point regarding Christian Malayalees earlier, using

much the same words. Thus the Christian congregational model seemed to be an important influence for this group.

A little later in the conversation, Mr. Nair stated:

> *I also wanted it to be a group that did some social service. We are all in a good position here so I wanted us to contribute to support some worthwhile causes in Kerala. Preserving the culture was another goal. And then when our relatives and parents from Kerala came to visit, I wanted them to have a group where they would feel comfortable. These were my long-term goals. But I also had to think of something that would have short-term results and that would hold the group together in a more meaningful way than just a potluck party. That's how I came up with the idea of having a pooja and bhajan monthly meeting. So, the intention was always that the OHM be much more than just a bhajan group.*

To emphasize this, he told me that he had been thinking of organizing a workshop for women in the coming year, open to all but led by the OHM, to impart some basic financial, legal, medical, and child care knowledge relevant to life here. Referring to Indira, a woman who had been widowed several years before, he described the difficulty she had experienced having to deal with all the practical details that her husband had previously looked after and added, "Some of our group may lose their husbands, and when that happens they should know how to deal with the many issues that will come up." He also wanted the OHM to get involved in planning a retirement home for Indians: "We are all getting older, and in ten to twenty years there will be a big need for it. And particularly then, we would prefer to be with others from our own background."

While Mr. Nair played down the religious aspect of the OHM, it was obviously an important reason for its formation: "Growing up as Hindus in a Judeo-Christian environment can be difficult. There are so many misconceptions here about Indians and Hindus. People ask us about the cows roaming the streets—they think we are all vegetarians, that India is full of snake charmers." Mr. Sharma, an executive member of the group, said that one of the reasons that the OHM was founded was to correct such misconceptions. Mrs. Kala Ramachandran, another executive member, continued: "We are not fanatics, but being a Hindu organization, we believe very strongly that the Hindu religion and faith should be preserved forever. We believe that Hindu values have a big role to play in the future world and we are all proud of being Hindus."

The Social Community

Members of the OHM have developed a close-knit community, even though they are scattered over an area with a radius of around 125 miles. Mr. Vellatheri told me that the

> *OHM is like an extended family. It helps to alleviate problems—it helps in crisis management, stress management. There are many problems here—job related, domestic. Before OHM I had around four or five people to turn to, but now I have around twenty families that I can trust. I have several close friends, and we call each other one or two times a week for personal conversation, quite apart from official OHM business. Just talking to others helps so much. The community is small enough to be close-knit. The Kerala Association [the pan-Kerala association in the region], on the other hand, is very large. Around four hundred people show up for each function, so you won't know most of the people there.*
>
> *OHM also helps us in practical matters. We have doctors with different specializations from psychiatrists to cardiologists, engineers, accountants, business people, scientists, and attorneys. So, whatever problem comes up, we have an expert who can help us.*

Earlier he described how he had been informed by his office that his immigration papers were not in order (which turned out not to be true) soon after arriving in the United States. He was pressured by his employer and ran from attorney to attorney, but they just exploited his gullibility and cost him of a lot of money. He repeated several times, "If there had been an organization like OHM, nothing like this would have happened." He went on: "I did not know the American system . . . and we had no one to turn to for advice or help. We were so lonely and depressed—it almost drove us out of our minds at times. We looked through the phone book for Indian-sounding names and called them but many of the Indians we reached were not very friendly. Another time he said, "On the occasions of death, marriage, etc., members are there to help with flowers, consolation, and practical details. For instance, Savithri's father died at 4 A.M. in the morning. By 6 A.M. everyone in the community knew about it, and many of us went over." I have personally witnessed this community support at a function where OHM members helped with the serving and organization.

Several OHM members mentioned that they found the *bhajan* singing to be cleansing and uplifting. During those hours, they could forget all their worries and get some peace of mind. Others talked about how

beneficial the group has been for their children, as one women explained: "Earlier they [the children] went through a period when they wanted to have nothing to do with anything Indian. My oldest child (who has a long, traditional name) had Anglicized and shortened his name earlier. Now he insists that his friends call him by his full name. And my other children ask me why I did not give them traditional names!"

The effects of the OHM on the children have sometimes been overstated by the adults, since the teenagers felt that "it was an organization for adults." At the same time, all of the teenagers did say that the group had helped them at least indirectly by putting them in contact with adults and other children from the community. "It made me finally comfortable as an Indian. I realized that there were many other people out there who are like me, who talk like me, and that I am not by myself," elaborated Anand, one of the teenage boys in the group.

Developing Religious Traditions

I had been told that the OHM was the only organization in the United States that held a special pooja for Lord Aiyappa during the time of the annual Aiyappa pilgrimage in India. I could see that Aiyappa worship was also an important part of the monthly OHM *pooja,* so I asked whether this was because Aiyappa was the most popular deity in Kerala. "No," answered Mr. Vellatheri, "we picked Aiyappa since it was the least controversial choice. He is the one deity that everyone in the group could agree on. Aiyappa worship is a unifying factor in the group since there are *Vaishnavaites* and *Shaivaites* [worshipers of Vishnu and Shiva, respectively, reflecting a major division among Hindus][13] and members of different castes." He went on to tell me that Aiyappa was also a "secular" deity since a lot of non-Hindus perform the annual pilgrimage in Kerala. In an OHM booklet Mr. Vellatheri (1992) wrote about Lord Aiyappa and the pilgrimage he undertook with two other OHM members: "What is more important, right in front of the shrine, there is the temple of Vavara, a Muslim, the first lieutenant of the Lord, standing as a permanent monument to the Lord's declaration of the equality of mankind."

I was also curious about how members learned the *bhajans.* Most are in Sanskrit and a few are popular in Kerala, but from my conversations I gathered that many of the others were those that "an average Hindu growing up in Kerala would not know." In fact, often it is only the person leading the *bhajan* who knows it.; the rest just repeat the song, line by line. I asked several of the *bhajan* leaders how they had learned the songs. Mrs. Indira Iyer, wife of the lay priest and the

primary *bhajan* leader of the group, said that she made it a point to pick up new *bhajans* from friends, relatives, and tapes. Mrs. Kamala Devi told me that she learned them primarily from an older Tamilian woman. Latha, a teenager who had led a few, including at least one in Hindi, and Mr. Nair had both learned them at their respective singing classes. Another woman sang two that she had just composed the previous day. It was only during my fieldwork that copies of the *bhajans* (handwritten by Mrs. Iyer in English script) were handed out to members before the meeting. Around the middle of my study, Mrs. Iyer also tried to formalize the sequence of the *bhajan* singing according to the deities to whom they are addressed (using the South Indian practices with which she is familiar). Again, as mentioned, the group instituted a Gita discussion period and some youth programs toward the end of my study. Thus, the group was developing and modifying traditions to fit into the American milieu.

The Tamil *Bala Vihar*

"What is the most important thing parents should impart to their children?" Ramachandra Iyer asked R. Stephen Warner rhetorically, as the three of us stood outside the prayer hall before an OHM *pooja*. He then answered his own question by saying: "Values, those are the most important things—ethical principles of living and values. This is what we should impart to our children when they are young, until they complete high school. If we do this properly, they may have some adjustment difficulties for a semester or so in college, but then they will be set for life."

Mr. Iyer was talking about the *bala vihar* that he is part of and helped found fourteen years ago (he is a Tamil Brahmin from a family settled in Kerala, so he is a member of both Malayalee and Tamilian organizations). He credits the *bala vihar* with being vital in imparting a cultural and moral orientation to his two daughters, now twenty-two and fifteen years of age. He told us that it is important for parents to do this while their children are young, since later they are faced with so many temptations. "This way their time and minds are filled with other things instead of 'unwanted thoughts.'" he said.

Through Mr. Iyer and his wife, I was introduced to the Tamil *bala vihar* and have attended several of the monthly meetings. While I am a Malayalee by ancestry, I grew up in Tamil Nadu and studied Tamil in school, and am therefore familiar with the language and culture. However, as a Christian and non-Tamil single woman, my outsider

status has been even more conspicuous in this setting. The friendship extended to me by a group member—Mrs. Lakshmi Narayan, a university researcher who could relate to my project—has therefore been crucial in easing my entrance into the group. At the same time that I gave the OHM committee a copy of my draft chapter, I also gave a copy to Mrs. Narayan to be circulated among the *bala vihar* parents and have obtained their approval as well.

I have been extremely impressed with what the group has been able to accomplish through its monthly meetings. Clearly, the meeting was an occasion that the children looked forward to, and they seemed to have formed close friendships within the group. Unlike the OHM meetings, the *bala vihar* provided children with a lot of structured interaction time when they could talk through many of the issues they were confronting in their everyday lives, particularly their struggles in trying to balance their Indian and American identities. The *bala vihar* shows the children how this balance can be successfully achieved. Both adults and children sat down together as an "extended family" to discuss the meaning of Hinduism, to explore the ethical and moral dilemmas of day-to-day living in the United States, and to cultivate an appreciation for the beauty of the Tamil language and culture.

At one of the cultural programs organized by OHM, I spoke to Mr. Ramakrishnan, the person who had initiated the *bala vihar* meetings in the region (including the Tamil *bala vihar*), and his daughter. They are both very involved with the Chinmaya Mission, founded by Swami Chinmayananda (a Hindu 'guru' or religious teacher) and the *bala vihars* that Mr. Ramakrishnan had initiated were organized under its auspices. They told me that they used a book of lectures by Swami Chinmayananda[14] as the *bala vihar* text and that it was full of matters of everyday relevance. Mr. Ramakrishnan gave me the following example: "For instance, it helps deal with anger. It describes how anger develops and why, and gives practical suggestions for dealing with it. It also talks about how meditation and yoga help to cope with the daily problems of life." His daughter, now at the University of California at Berkeley, has started a regular discussion group to study the teachings of Swami Chinmayananda and how they can be used in their lives. Her goal, she said, was to show students of Indian origin "that our heritage is not a hinderance but can be of help."

The effect that the *bala vihars* can have on the youngsters is eloquently described by Hema Narayan, one of the students in the Tamil group, in a school essay on diversity that won a national prize. Initially,

she writes, she struggled to "fit in" by trying to be just like her classmates and rejecting her Indian identity. But over time, as she began to learn more about her heritage and her religion from her parents and the *bala vihar*:

> *I became more confident and sure of myself. With a wealth of knowledge by my side, I felt strong. I stood up to my classmates and introduced them to my beliefs. To my surprise, they stopped mocking me, and instead, wanted to know more. . . . I felt a sense of belonging, but not sameness, as though I were an individual piece adding color to the complete picture. I could fit in but still be different.*

The adults who attend the *bala vihar* have been able to devise interesting ways to impart this knowledge. As part of a Father's Day surprise, the older children were practicing a skit (written by Mrs. Mallika Badrinath) during their language class. They were enacting the bedlam that exists in a Tamil Brahmin household in India consisting of a busy professional couple, their three irrepressible children, and their disorganized servant. The conversation used was in colloquial Brahmin Tamil, which is very different from "official Tamil." Besides teaching these idiomatic usages, the skit exposed the children to appropriate gender and intergenerational behavior as well as her views about the distinctness of the Brahmin language, values and food habits.

The importance of family relationships and obligations were clearly among the most important lessons that the adults in the group wanted to teach the children. Undoubtedly this concern was due to the American setting, since the comparison was always implicitly or explicitly between the Indian and the American family. However, here again the aim was to show how Hindu values were important and relevant in the American context. The interpretation given to the tale of the *pativrata*, or "ideal wife," is a good example. The story was about an exemplary wife who, through her devotion to her husband, was able to amass greater spiritual power than a mendicant who had performed severe austerities for many years. The moral was that a woman's earthly duty to her husband was more important and fundamental than her spiritual obligation, and that this devotion alone could bring her supernatural powers. After concluding, Mrs. Sudha Subramanian, the narrator, triumphantly stated that "women actually have a better deal since men do not have this power," but hastened to add that "this is not because women are seen as dumb or passive but precisely because they are capable." She went on to emphasize that this duty was not one-sided,

since men too had the obligation to look after their wives and to take care of their needs. It also did not mean that women should be submissive, giving several examples from the Hindu epics of loving husbands and of assertive women. She concluded: "All these stories were written to show that the family was seen as the fundamental unit of society and to provide rules to keep the family together. If this requires patience and forbearance from the woman, so be it. If the woman is always asking, 'What's in it for me,' the family can never survive." Throughout the narration and explanation, there was much teasing, laughter, and booing along gender lines from the group (both children and adults). In the animated discussion that ensued, several of the older teenage girls seemed to be taking feminist positions, with one questioning some gender-differentiated religious practices, and two others presenting feminist interpretations of the epics.

Although the children graduate from the *bala vihar* when they leave high school, the parents, as Mr. Iyer expressed, hope that they will take with them some valuable lessons that will help them through college and adulthood. In fact the Tamil *bala vihar* was going a step further to ensure that the graduates had a concrete reminder of what they had learned in the classes by giving them tapes of the *bhajans* that "the children can play in their dorms when they feel homesick," as one mother told me.

While the *bala vihar* is meant for the children, it was also very clear that the adults enjoyed it as much as the youngsters. The parents actually mentioned to me and to the others in various contexts that they were learning along with their children. During the *pativrata* story, for instance, I overheard several of the adults discussing its implications among themselves as animatedly as the children. On another occasion, when some ex-*bala vihar* parents (whose children had gone on to college) had been invited to one of the *bala vihar* dinners, they talked about how much they missed the meetings. One of them said, half-jokingly "How about an alumni evening the day before the *bala vihar*?"

While the members of the Tamil *bala vihar* are less comfortable than members of the OHM with being designated as "elite" (they objected to my characterizing them in this manner in this chapter), they are also well-placed professionals. From their discussions of such issues as grades, study strategies, of schools like Harvard, and the writing of scientific papers, it is clear that the group is self-consciously adopting the "model minority" discourse.

An American Hinduism?

Steven Vertovec (1989, 159) has noted that "in virtually every case, Hinduism in diaspora has developed substantial modifications from the traditions originally carried abroad." While this is the case of all religions, modifications are even more likely in Hinduism due to the nature of the religion. The Federation of Hindu Associations (1995) states that, "Hinduism, . . . by not being a rigid revelation of a single prophet, book or event and by not preaching to destroy any existing schools of thought, has become an adaptable system to realize God, to live and let live, and attain Universal peace and brotherhood." Thus, the form that diasporic Hinduism takes depends on the nature of both the Indian community in the host country and the larger context. Vertovec compares the differences between Trinidadian Hinduism and British Hinduism. In Trinidad, the circumstances surrounding the colonial migration of indentured workers resulted in a "cultural blending" of the Indians (Vertovec 1991, 167) and the emergence of a "virtually casteless, 'lowest common denominator' Hindu tradition which catered to the religious needs of a diverse community" (Vertovec 1995, 134). Thus, by the late 1980's Hinduism was put forward into the public space as an ethnic communal ideology in bold and conscious contradistinction to the hegemonic Creole norm" (Vertovec 1995, 141). In Great Britain, however, "a rather fragmented picture" of Hinduism emerges, for "although some attempts are being made to organize Hindus and to formulate Hinduism on a national scale, in local quarters it is mainly segmentary forms of religion reflecting traditions specific to provenance, caste and sect that are practiced and institutionalized" (Vertovec 1995, 146). Vertovec (1995, 147) explains this phenomenon as a result of the "dominant multicultural discourse" in Great Britain. Scholars have noted that in the United States, Hinduism is being transformed into what has been variously called an "American Hinduism" or "Ecumenical Hinduism" (Williams 1988, 238–240). At the same time, as I have pointed out, there is a great deal of segmentation into region, caste, and sect. Thus, Hinduism in the United States appears to combine the features of the religion in both Trinidad and Great Britain. In other words, while there is greater sectarianism, the sectarianism is based largely on language and subcultural differences, and a certain uniformity is developing in the Hinduism practiced by the various subgroups.

The Evolution of Hinduism

As is clear from the 1995 statement by the Federation of Hindu Associations, Hinduism is different from other major world religions in many ways. The term "Hinduism" was introduced around 1830 by the British to refer principally to the culture and practices of the non-Islamic people of the Indian subcontinent. As such, "Hinduism is both a civilization and a congregation of religions; it has neither a beginning or founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization." ("Hinduism" 1993). Thus, the nature and character of Hinduism have varied greatly by region, caste, and historical period. In fact, there are even those who question whether there is one unitary religion called "Hinduism" at all, arguing instead that "what we call 'Hinduism' is a geographically defined group of distinct but related religions" (Stietencron 1989, 20). However, while scholars like Robert Frykenberg (1989) and Daniel Gold (1991) agree that in precolonial times there was never a "single 'Hinduism' . . . for all of India" (Frykenberg, 1989, 20), they claim that during the colonial period, Hindu revivalist movements developed and in the process created "modern" and "organized" pan-Indian versions of Hinduism. In the late nineteenth century, groups like the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) emerged to reformulate the message of Hinduism in reaction to the activities of Christian missionaries and the escalating communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus. (Ironically, in their attempt to counter the Christian threat, such groups ended up developing "Christianized" models of Hinduism.)[15] However, for the most part, these created or recasted generic versions of the "Great Tradition" had little impact on the majority of Hindu Indians. It has been only in the past five years, with the televising of the Hindu epics and the rising Hindutva movement demanding a "Hindu" India, that a pan-Indian Hinduism has gained some degree of mass support, particularly in northern India.

It is one form of the "Great Tradition" that is being recreated in the United States. According to Williams (1992b, 239):

> *An ecumenical Hinduism is developing in the United States that unites deities, rituals, sacred texts, and people in temples and programs in ways that would not be found together in India. In temples and centers created on an ecumenical model, emphasis is placed upon all-India Hindu "great tradition," on devotion to major deities, and upon some elements of the Sanskrit tradition. . . . Study and devotional groups use universally accepted Hindu texts, such as the*