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HINDUISM TRANSFORMED OR PRESERVED? A CASE STUDY OF HINDU DIASPORA IN THAILAND

Abstract:

In this paper I would like to argue that Hinduism is vague and broad and thus leaves a lot of room for changes. Hindus preserve their local traditions and make amendments depending on the situation in the host country. The paper attempts to study the Hindu Diasporic community in Thailand, a country with strong Hindu presence. The main focus is on the transformations Hinduism has gone through over time in a country sharing a long history of over 2000 years of trade links with India and a strong influence of Hinduism still evident today. Although the Hindu diasporic community constitutes only a small fraction of the total population of Thailand, the evidences of strong Hindu influences on the religious beliefs, ceremonies, arts, and scriptures on Thai culture makes the case of Hindu diaspora in Thailand an interesting one to study. Hindu diaspora is an important group contributing immensely to the local environment and has been understudied in the past. The paper aims to fill this gap by presenting Thailand as a home away from home for the Hindu diaspora. Hinduism has gone through several transformations in this country however important elements, central to the traditional Hindu beliefs remain unchanged. The paper will be divided into three parts: history of Hinduism and its presence in Southeast Asia; the transformation in Hindu beliefs in a foreign land; and the extent to which traditions have been preserved among the diasporic community.

Introduction

A number of times a unified definition is provided by the academics to refer to a group of people sharing a common belief system providing the believers with a collective identity. However there are several diverse groups that coexist and the need for a unified definition is more about creating a community. The definition overtime has been adjusted and readjusted by different actors for various reasons leading to the construction of a new identity. In this essay I would like to start with a brief history of how Hinduism was defined and was readjusted overtime giving rise to what Hinduism is today. Many scholars suggest that there is no evidence of a clearly defined sense of Hindu as a religious identity prior to the imposition of such by the Europeans in the colonial period (Smith 1959; Stietencron 1997). The later part will be more focus on Hinduism in Southeast Asia, Thailand in particular. This later section will focus on the changes brought to the Hindu beliefs and traditions by dividing them into two categories: ones that happened as a result of migrant Indians adjusting to a new environment and the other resulting from the Thais encountering Hinduism and their needs being accommodated accordingly.

The Indian constitution defines the Hindu community as those whose religions are native to India including groups like Buddhist, Jains, and Sikhs but exclude Indian Muslims and Christians. The Muslims and Christians are described as foreigners regardless of their presence in India for over 1200 years (Kurien 2005: 442). In fact all pre-Islamic native religious movements were seen as part of Hinduism. The Persian writers referred to India as *al-hind* and to the people living beyond the Indus as Hindus. The term was initially used as a geographic and ethnic term and only later used when referring to people practicing native religions of India and were neither Muslims nor Christians (Thapar 1990: 6-10). Stietencron argues that the perception of Hinduism as a unified religion rose when Europeans misunderstood the term Hindu that they took from the Persian authors (1997: 33). British writers coined the term Hinduism in the 19th century, thus relatively new. Additionally the idea of a single Hindu religion similar to the Semitic religions emerged only in the last two centuries. The Semitic religions acted to some extent as a model for shaping Hindu traditions. For example, religious texts like the Bhagwad Gita, are now considered sacred books switching from the religion of rituals and practice to the religion of the book. The need for a single uniform Hindu community comes from the politics of the past two centuries in addition to the changes in society under colonial rule. Using religious identities by the British for the purpose of political mobilization emerge from the idea of religious communities constituting units of Indian society, separate electorates and the system of quotas focusing on the idea of representation. Therefore the increasing involvement of religion in politics resulted in the communalization of the Indian society (Thapar 1990: 17). In this paper I argue that the term Hinduism is very vague and Hinduism as a religion is very broad. This leaves a room for changes in religious beliefs and traditions as Hinduism encounters the local beliefs and traditions central to the host environment where it travels. To support this argument, the following sections will provide evidence of the presence of Hinduism and the transformations brought in by the diasporic communities as they encounter the host environment.

Indians and Hinduism in Southeast Asia

The emergence of Indian culture in Southeast Asia is not really new. Southeast Asia shares long historical relations with India for over 2000 years that resulted in the spread of Hinduism[1] in this region along with South Asian practitioners (Coedes 1968). The Indian settlement here has been documented since the 6th century B.C.E. and contributed greatly to the development of the national culture of the Southeast Asia countries. Several factors contributed to the Indian settlements in Southeast Asia including the Kushans invasion in India around 1st century A.D exerting pressure on local population. Others included the opportunities opened for high caste Indians to pursue their fortunes outside of India (Coedes: 21-22). Other scholars suggest the Indian contact with Southeast Asia was more commercial and migrants brought the traditional arts, religious beliefs, and customs along with them. This historical linkage prompted more Indians to move to Southeast Asia to continue the old traditions of trade relations thereby forming the Indian Diaspora in a foreign land. The historical presence of Hinduism in Southeast Asia, dating back to over 2000 years, was able to create an important religious sphere for itself in a predominantly Buddhist country like Thailand. With a population of over 90 percent Buddhist, many engage features of Hinduism in worship that comes from the historical cultural and religious influences.

In the case of Thailand, the motivation behind Indians migration ranged from frustration to attraction. The factors included social, economic, or political coercions prompting people to leave their homeland in search of better opportunities. The Tamils and Gujaratis migrated in the late 1800s and were mainly involved in gems and textiles. A larger scale migration took place in 1890s from the northwest India followed by a wave of Sikhs and Hindus from Punjab (Bangkok's… 2009). According to Mani (1993), in the 20th century, the most important factor bringing migrants to Thailand was economic. This included poverty-ridden life in the villages due to droughts, crop failure, and unemployment. Additionally, political problems like India Pakistan partition in late 1940s contributed to increasing number to Indians, both Hindus and Punjabis, from the Pakistan side moving to neighboring countries. Thailand being a peaceful country and the already existing family links with earlier settled immigrants, made it easier for the politically displaced families to create a new home in Thailand. Religion was important to these migrants as it brought them social and financial support from the already established religious organizations of the earlier migrants. Others relied on support from their earlier settled family members. Religion then acted as a force binding the different groups (former and more recent) of Indian migrants together. It was easier for these groups to settle in Thailand because Hinduism already had its grounds historically. A general feeling among the Indian community living in Thailand is that living here is being in a home away from home. This is because it is very common to find Hindu gods everywhere ranging from shrines to temples to individual homes.

For Indian communities, religion is an important element of Indian diaspora (Vertovec 2000; Parekh 1993). The strong roots of belonging come from Hinduism, an

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[1] Coedes uses the term Hinduism to refer to the belief system practiced in ancient India. As mentioned previously this term is a relatively modern invention.

ethnic religion of India (Parekh 1993: 140). Over 85 percent of overseas Indians worldwide are Hindus who refer to their homeland as 'Mother India' with deep spiritual and emotional admirations fulfilled through routine visits and pilgrimages. However not every overseas Indian is a Hindu. Several religious minorities exist within the Indian diaspora such as the Muslims and Sikhs. The heterogeneity and diversity are the factors that distinguish the Indian diaspora from their counterparts in the respective countries (Singh 2003: 4-5). What really bind the Indian diaspora together are the emotions, acquaintances, customs, feelings and attachments that appeal to generations of emigrants for their motherland. These create a sense of belongingness and a unity in diversity through a unified identity of the motherland. Indian media plays an important role in preserving this identity among the ethnically diverse Indian diaspora by promoting the Indian values, customs, and the links to the motherland. The long history of migration has made the Indian diaspora experience great social, religious, economic, political, cultural, and other changes. This may involve abandoning some traditional practices, adapting new one and evolving a distinct way of life overtime. To further elaborate on that, the next section will be subdivided into firstly changes due to the adjustments of Hindu migrants to a new environment and secondly those changes resulting from the Thais encountering Hinduism.

1. Transformations as a result of adjustments to the host environment

Luchesi's (2004) study on the Tamil community in Germany provides an insight into the importance of community formation through religious and cultural organizations. He shows how the places of worship for the Tamil community started to emerge firstly in rented places and later moved to more permanent facilities, all over Germany. These places served as an inspired force bringing people together, connecting them to homeland, and helping to create an idealized image of homeland for the later generation in a foreign land. Luchesi shows how religious places help to maintain a collective memory of the homeland through shared practices. In the case of Thailand, Sikhs have their Gurdwara known as the Sri Guru Singh Sabha in Phahurat (Little India), believed to be the largest Sikh temple in Southeast Asia. The most well know Hindu temple is the Sri Mahamariamman temple on the Silom Road that is not only popular among the Hindus but very well known among the Thais and the Chinese community as well. Popularly known as Wat Khaek, Sri Mahamariamman temple was built in late 19th century in what is now the financial district of Bangkok. The current priest at this temple is now the fourth generation of the Tamil immigrants (Bangkok's…. 2009). Every Sunday people from the Indian community will gather at their places of worship to perform their religious duties and these gatherings become more of social gathering for the communities. For example the Sikhs gather in Gurdwaras and Hindus gather in their temples on Sundays in Bangkok. It is important to note that a community gathering on a Sunday is an adaptation from the modern Western society. In India, Sunday gatherings are not common and believers usually visit temples either based on their convenience or on days dedicated to personal gods. For example, devotees of Hanuman will pay their respects by visiting a Hanuman temple on a Tuesday and devotees of Durga would do so on a Friday.

Since most countries including Thailand follow the western calendar, Sunday is the day off and so after a busy week of work, it provides an ideal day of the week to

organize gatherings where people can revitalize and reunite with their fellow community members. The places of worship organize special religious activities like sermons, rituals, or community eating bringing the community together. One example of special religious activity is the Gau-dan (donating a cow), organized annually at the Dev Mandir (Hindu temple in Bangkok). The members of the Hindu community through donations support the event as cow is of great importance to the Hindu religion. Even during the ancient times, kings and others donated cows to Brahmins since donating a cow during a lifetime brought great merits to the individual. The temple makes such merit accumulating opportunities available to the Hindu community in Thailand allowing them to feel home away from home.

It is important to study religions and diaspora because there is a strong connection between the two. Smart (1999) suggests three reasons for this. First of all, the study of diasporas and their methods of adjustment provide understandings of the general forms of religious transformation. Secondly, diasporas may themselves affect the development of religion in the homeland whereby the wealth, education and exposure to foreign features transferred from diaspora may have important effects on organization, practice and even belief. Lastly, with the greater number of diasporas in the modern world, 'multiethnicity is now commonplace' (Smart 1999:421 cited in Vertovec 2009). In order to understand religion, diaspora and change, Vertovec suggests a consideration of the implications of what can be called religious travel. He cites the work of James Clifford (1992) who writes about 'traveling cultures', suggesting how meanings and relationships of dwelling and travelling replace the usual concepts of culture and place. However Smart (1999) raises questions on traveling religion, with the help of example from Hinduism and asks to reconsider:

'themes like caste, yoga, devotion, pilgrimage, temple rituals, austerity, wandering holy men, regional variation, pundits, strong sense of purity and impurity, household rituals, veneration of cow, the practice of astrology, belief in reincarnation, importance of collecting merit, etc. These, which are elements of Hinduism in India, do not travel equally easily to new environments'. (Smart 1999: 424)

As Vertovec puts it, religious and cultural reproduction generally takes place over generations. Issues related to maintenance, modification or discarding of religious practices are raised among the later generations that are born and brought up in a foreign land. The religious and cultural practices, religious cultivate at home and religious education at school, and participation at places of worship shape the identities and activities of the second and third generation of migrants. The identity and activity between the second and the third generation sets them apart from their immigrant parents (2009: 139-40). In places outside of India, the basic Hindu ritual procedures have been curtailed, refashioned, or eclectically performed. In most places, Hindu rites are popularized in order to appeal to the young, diaspora-born Hindus compared to the more conservative elders. For example, in Malaysia Hindu leaders complain of the inclusion of India produced music has created the 'disco-ization' of Hindu rituals (Willford 1998 cited in Vertovec 2009: 142).

Sinha (2005) work on the making of a new Hindu deity and rituals in the urban temples as part of the popular Hinduism in Singapore is another example of refashioning

of Hinduism. She shows how a new god in the diaspora is created, along with the integration of western practices like celebration of Father's Day and collective cake cutting in the temple as a new form of devotional expression. She shows how Muneeshwaran, a rural guardian deity in Tamil Nadu (brought to Malaya over 170 years ago), has been reconfigured as a god of urban residents and is popular with the third and the fourth generation of Singaporean Hindus. His worship encompasses free and liberal use of deities, symbols and ritual practice associated with other religious traditions as mentioned earlier.

Additionally in relation to the idea of sacred space in Hinduism, scholar suggests that among the diasporic Hinduism, India is no longer exclusive in claiming Hindu sacred places. Many local places, and rivers are seen as sacred to them (Jacobsen 2004 cited Penumala 2010: 421). In Thailand, the Chao Phya River has long been seen as a sacred river for the Thais as sacred as the Ganges. As Suarez records in 1690 Engelbert Kaempfer, a resident in Ayuthaya mentions the Siamese view of the source of Chao Phraya River as rising just like the Ganges in Bengal from the Himalayas and its various artilleries penetrate Cambodia, Pegu, and Siam and join with the Ganges (1999:156). With this sacredness, some of the Hindu rituals in Thailand, to be performed at the Ganges are conducted at the Chao Phraya River instead. A Hindu Brahmin[2] in Bangkok does not see any problem in doing so as 'all rivers are sacred and you can't afford to visit India every time a ritual needs to be conducted at the Ganges'. Upon death, in Hindu tradition, the ashes of the deceased collected after cremation have to be flown in the Ganges so that the deceased attains moksha. With the limitation of time and financial resources, many families scatter the ashes of their dead relatives in the Chao Phraya River where a Brahmin may be invited to conduct a ceremony.

Another example of a reshaping of Hinduism in Thailand is related to the sacred bath in the Ganges. On special events devotees (especially priestly class) take a bathe in the Ganges to wash away their sins. These events include Ganga Dusshera and Kumbh Mela among some others. Ganga Dusshera celebrates the birthday of Ganges and Kumbh Mela is the most extravagant festival that attracts millions of pilgrims to take a ritual bath in the river when the water becomes nectar (King 2005: 171-72). For Hindu diasporic communities it is not always possible to travel all the way to India and participate in these events. To fulfill the religious needs and to continue the Hindu traditions, Hindu Samaj temple in Bangkok organizes a bathing ritual for the devotees at the sea in Chonburi instead. This is done for the younger generation to be aware of the traditions and continue to practice them in the future.

2. Transformations resulting from the Thais encountering Hinduism

The Thai population has been exposed to Hinduism from the early times since Hinduism as incorporated into the Thai society by the elites historically[3] was seen as an

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[2] Interviewed on 13 Feburary 2014 in Bangkok. The Brahmin prefers not to be named and so I will refer to him in this paper as Pandit ji.

[3] For more information see *Coedes 1968*, Kam-Aek 2007,

important part of the Royal rituals. This historical integration of Hinduism in Thailand and in other parts of Southeast Asia has been widely covered by scholars and so the focus of this paper will be on more recent developments.

One of the very popular Hindu deities of worship in Thailand is Brahma. It is interesting to note that Brahma is not a deity of worship in India any more but is very popular among the Thai devotees. The most significant and popularly known shrine devoted to Brahma is the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok built in 1956 to ward off the difficulties faced in the construction of the Erawan hotel. The shrine is dedicated to Brahma, a Hindu god. In the Hindu tradition Brahma is one of the trimurti (trinity) with Siva and Visnu being the other two gods. In the Thai context, however, Brahma is seen as a powerful deity. The Erawan shrine gave rise to several smaller shrines which business and homeowners build and make daily offerings to please the deity believed to be the owner of the land. Houses maintain smaller shrines dedicated to the spirit of the place while businesses maintain shrines dedicated to Indian deities that have been incorporated in the Thai Buddhist tradition. The daily offerings at these shrines are believed to bring success to the businesses. Another example of shrines dedicated to Indian deities is the Siva shrine at the pillar of the city instituted in 1782 near the Grand Palace (Keyes 2006:3-4). Yet other important Hindu influences include the Khon, a Thai classical dance that narrates the stories of the Ramayana. It is interesting to note that these Hindu influences have become so integrated that they are seen as an integral part of the Thai society. Brahma, a deity no longer worshipped in India and has only handful temples dedicated to him in a country where it is difficult to count the total number of temple. However Brahma in Thailand has gained importance with the Erawan Shrine and is commonly seen by the Thai devotees as a Thai deity.

With this popularity, one of the Hindu temples, Hindu Samaj enshrined a Brahma statue. The purpose was to accommodate with the demands of the host society. Because of Brahma popularity among the Thai devotees, the Hindu Samaj temple decided to import a Brahma statue from Jaipur (India). A ceremony was conducted where the statue was taken out in a procession from the Hindu Samaj temple to the Erawan Shrine and brought back to the temple where it was enshrined. The event was participated with great enthusiasm by both the Thai and Hindu devotees. However, with Brahma not being a deity of worship, there are no festivities or rituals conducted to venerate him in the Hindu Samaj temple since the installation a decade ago. More recently a goddess, Gayatri, has been enshrined next to Brahma image upon the request of one of the Hindu devotees. According to the legend in the Varaha Purana, Sarasvati (wife of Brahma) is addressed as Gayatri, the goddess of learning who is worshipped regularly once a year (Wilkins 2003: 111). She is considered the mother of the Vedas and the embodiment of the Gayatri Mantra. Gayatri in India is better known with the Gayatri Mantra and it is uncommon to find her status in Hindu temples. However a Hindu devotee who worshipped Gayatri as his personal god brought in a Gayatri statue from Jaipur. According to temple sources, it took 2 years to get the committee members of the temple to give their consent to install Gayatri statue that finally took place in February 2014. As Panditji explained to me, a priest who must act as the host as well can be the only one to enshrine Gayatri statue. In addition those belonging to the three upper castes namely priests, warriors, and merchants can only perform her worship. Therefore it is not common to find Gayatri statues enshrined in temples in India.

When asked how religious Hindus living in Thailand are, Panditji sees a diminishing importance of religious belief among the Hindu community. He rather sees the Thais as being more involved in Hindu rituals and practices compared to the Hindus themselves. This according to him is because the younger generation, born and brought up in Thailand, is influenced by the surrounding Buddhist environment and do not carry the Hindu believes as did their forefathers. Many visit Buddhist temples and perform Buddhist ceremonies as a way of assimilating with the host society, which they see as home. Panditji is invited more by the Thai devotees to perform Hindu rituals and ceremonies. He sees the popularity of Brahma and more recently Ganesh as the reason behind the increasing involvement of Thais in Hinduism. This has lead to the creation of a popular Thai Hinduism in a predominantly Buddhist country.

Brahma's popularity has already been discussed earlier. The popularity of Ganesh in Thailand is more recent comparatively. Ganesh has been popular through out India as a god of warding away obstacles. He is more popular in the western state of India known as Maharashtra where a festival dedicated to him, Ganesh Chaturthi, is celebrated with great enthusiasm. The festival has historical and political importance. The tradition of community celebration was started by Chahatrapati Shivaji (a warrior king of the Maratha Empire in the 17th century) as a public event to promote traditions and nationalism. The festival was the highlight of all the seasonal festivities until the Marathas were defeated in the 3rd Anglo-Maratha was in 1818. Bal Gangadhar Tilak revitalized it in late 19th century with a message of freedom struggle to bring unity and revive the patriotic spirit. All classes of the society were brought together against the British regardless of the caste differences. Thus Ganesh Chaturthi was a festival for all castes or classes. Cultural events including dance, dramas, musical nights and religious gatherings were organized on this ten days festival. Since then the festival is of great significance to people in Mumbai, Maharashtra where the city virtually shuts down as millions of people celebrate the festival. The festival gains further popularity through television broadcasts and movies with Mumbai being the center of Bollywood. This popularity has spread to places where Indians migrated and Thailand has more recently been one of them. In the past the celebration was limited to Indians in Thailand coming from Maharashtra. But over the years with the influence of media and Bollywood in particular, the festival is gaining popularity among the Thai devotees as well.

As the president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in Thailand, Susheel Saraff, said in an interview with the Times of India:

Thailand is the only place in the world where there are more non-Hindu followers of an Indian God. The Shiva temple (in Ramindra), Utthayan Ganesh temple (in Nakhon Nayok) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad celebrate Ganesh Utsav with enthusiasm. Participation by locals gets bigger every year. (September 2013)

The VHP Thailand started celebrating Ganesh Chaturthi in Bangkok seven years ago when they were granted permission from the Thai government to do so. The government however had a condition that the deities should be eco-friendly. Each year the number of participants is on an increase and in order to accommodate the increasing number of Thai devotees; the prayers are made available in both Thai and English. Idols

of Ganesh are made and ceremonies are performed and at the end of over a week of festivities, the idols are brought out in procession taken for immersion in the Chao Phraya River. These processions have become increasingly attractive to the Thais and with the influence of media more devotees join such events. With more Thai devotees becoming aware of the festival through media, different Hindu temples and shrines conduct Ganesh Chaturthi to serve the religious needs of the believers. The celebrations are more Thai than Hindu with the incorporation of spirit mediums and Buddhist style offerings. An increasing number of transvestites also join Hindu rituals as it provides them a freedom to express their devotion. The participation of spirit mediums, businessmen and transvestites to the Hindu festivities is new compared to the Royal court Brahmins who have been performing royal ceremonies according to Hindu traditions for a very long time. The businessmen attraction to these festivities has led to the commodification of religious beliefs as they add the money element by demanding services of the Brahmins, icons, and other religious goods. The increasing number of transvestites believing in Hinduism is also very new. Because transvestites are marginalized in Buddhism, they are attracted towards other religious beliefs that give them a freedom to express their devotion. Their presence is very much evident in religious processions organized by Wat Khaek on festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Navratri.

As for the Royal Brahmins a number of changes in their version of Hinduism are evident at the Royal Brahmin temple in Bangkok. The temple practices Saivisim where Siva is worshiped as the supreme deity and so Siva is the main deity in this temple. In an interview with Hinduism Today[4], Phra Rajaguru Vamadevamuni expresses how the rituals performed are from the South Indian tradition but are not the way they are done today. He mentions that the texts use Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil but the Brahmins do not know Tamil. The mantras are in Sanskrit but since the native language is Thai it is difficult to pronounce Sanskrit words, therefore the accent of chanting changes to be more like chanting Buddhist sermons. Phra Rajguru is taking active steps to revive Hinduism in Thailand by promoting education and he has since sent four Brahmin boys from his family to study Hindu philosophy in Kanchipuram, India. Based on their talent and merits, one of the four will be appointed a successor as the royal priest. He expresses his worry of declining believes in Hinduism as the younger generation gets involved in drinking and the like. They need to be taught what karma, is good and bad, and then teach the philosophy and religion, as parents do not devote time teaching their children. He just like Panditji is concerned about rituals being cut short by the Brahmins in order to save time and allows them to make more money by conducting several pujas in different places within the same day. Phra Rajaguru would like to form an organization of the priests in order to have proper coordination and evolve a common code of conduct. However the priests are more interested in making their earnings rather than being forced to observe the rules. Phra Rajaguru is optimistic and sees the future for the

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[4] Malik, Rajiv wrote a special feature on 'Thailand Hinduism' for the web edition of the magazine Hinduism Today. Retrieved on 22 February 2014 from
http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3760

Hindus bright in Thailand with its historical presence. This will be possible if children are educated properly about Hinduism.

Although a number of changes have taken place in Hinduism among diaspora, I argue that some changes remain unacceptable. A number of times, I have observed that the Brahmins at the Hindu temples in Bangkok do not allow spirit mediums to demonstrate their supernatural abilities at the temple premises. A number of times, spirit mediums exhibiting their supranatural abilities have been asked to leave by the Brahmins and sometimes even banned to enter the temple premises in the future. When asked, the priests at Hindu Samaj explained that the common Hindu believe is that human body is not pure enough to enshrine spirits of any gods. Therefore spirit mediums promoting that they are the body enshrining a Hindu god is not accepted. In the Thai context, however Hindu gods are very popular among the spirit mediums[5]. This provides evidence that spirit mediums have incorporated Hinduism into their spiritual lives in Thailand but this is still not accepted in Hinduism.

Acculturation with the host environment

As Baumann argues the preservation of religious specificity is different from dominant religious affiliation of the host country but does not hinder the social integration of the group. Instead keeping the heritage of difference and a merging with the host society's socio-economic patterns go well together (2004: 77). The Indian communities in Thailand maintain their native religions and cultures in addition to taking part in the religious activities of the host country. In addition, securing jobs and their futures insert pressure on diasporic communities to acculturate into the new host environment. However there is a two-way acculturation in the case of Thailand. The Thai Royal ceremonies are instilled with Brahmanical rituals that were incorporated by the elites in the past. Representatives from the Indian community will be present at these royal ceremonies to observe and participate in the rituals. Additionally the Buddhist holidays will also be observed at the Hindu temples and special ceremonies are organized where an active participation of the members of the Hindu community is evident. With effective acculturation, the new and earlier settled Indians have acquired Thai language proficiency and have a picture or a poster of HRM the King in their homes to show their respect and the inclination to be part of the Thai society. On the Kings birthday, the Hindu temples observe it as a special day, which sometimes include processions organized by the temple authorities.

Traditions preserved or modified?

The Indian traditions are a mix of a range of diverse traditions that differ from one ethnic group to another and from one place to another. However there are some traditions commonly found all over India. The tradition of welcoming guests has always been an important part of Hindu tradition. Guests are seen as gods visiting ones home

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[5] *See* Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 'Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand'*, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*: The National University of Singapore, Vol. 36. No. 3, pp 461- 487.

and a common saying known to every Indian is 'Atithi Devo Bhawa" meaning guests are god. Visiting guests will be given utmost respect and special food will be prepared. The tradition continues wherever Indians go and are known for their guest hospitality. Other important traditions are the rites of passage including birth, growing up, marriage, and death among others. In a Hindu family, a newborn baby is welcomed with a ceremony by tasting honey as the first thing upon birth. This follows with a naming ceremony done ten to twelve days after birth and later with the ear piercing and first haircut ceremony, which are considered highly significant. The other rite of passage is when a sacred thread ceremony is held in some Hindu families when a boy is grown up. Upon reaching adulthood, a marriage is arranged which may vary from region to region. However the common elements are the marriage vows made around the sacred fire and the elders and the priest bless the couple. The last rite of passage is the death ritual that has a uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas. However there might be variations between sects, regions, castes, and family traditions. A priest traditionally performs the death rites. The eldest son in the family according to the Hindu traditions cremates the body of the deceased. The traditions related to all the rites of passage are kept alive among the Indian diasporic communities. The form of performing the rites might change but the contents remain the same. For example the naming ceremony is traditionally done at home in India but becomes a bigger event for Hindus in Thailand where the ceremony is held in hotels with parties thrown for relatives and friends to join in. The sacred thread ceremony is rarely held among Hindus in Thailand. Panditji mentions that it is very rare for him to be invited to conduct the sacred thread ceremony. However the marriages are done in a traditional way but are more lavish at the same time. The marriages in India generally last for several days but here they are cut short to be just one or two day's event depending on convenience of the families. The rituals are curtailed to confine them to only the most important rituals essential in a Hindu wedding. It also involves western style celebration of cake cutting at the wedding reception and the seniors (boss or superiors) of the bride and the groom offering garlands to the couple. It is to be noted that under the Hindu tradition, the bride and the groom exchange garlands as part of the wedding tradition but under the Thai influence the tradition has be modified.

The question then rises how are these and many other Hindu traditions preserved among the diasporic communities. The parents pay an important role in the preservation of the traditions where children are taught and exposed to these traditions by regular participation in these different rites of passages. In addition children are sent to International schools run by Indians so that they can learn the home language (Hindi or Punjabi) in a foreign land. In addition the food culture is maintained where Indian food is served during the weekdays while weekends are generally left for people to eat outside depending on their likings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to assess the transformation of Hinduism among the diasporas with an emphasis on the Hindu diasporic community in Thailand. It is difficult to have a uniform definition of Hinduism as the term was adjusted and readjusted by different powers that ruled India at different times. The term was introduced during the British time for the purpose of political mobilization. This paper provided a brief history of the developments in Hinduism and the historical relations between Hinduism and

Southeast Asia. These relations gave rise to an integration of Hinduism in this region and particularly Thai society. The historical trade links, earlier settled Indian migrants, and the presence of Hindu gods in Thailand allowed the new migrants to feel more at home away from home. However Hinduism has gone through several changes that can be grouped together into two categories: those resulting from an adjustment of the Hindu diasporic community to the host environment; and those resulting from the Thais encounter of Hinduism. Several of these changes were assessed in this paper with a conclusion that even though many changes have taken place, some elements, like customs, traditions and beliefs important to Hinduism remain unchanged. The Hindu diasporic community has been able to maintain and preserve its Hindu identity in addition to acculturating with the demands of the host society.

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