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Preparing for Life: Gender, Religiosity and Education Amongst Second Generation Hindus in Canada

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Abstract

A hallmark of Hinduism is its respect for religious diversity. Amidst religious pluralism in a multicultural Canadian society this strength poses challenges for the second generation. Drawing on qualitative interview data from 57 '1.5' and second generation university students, this article examines the roles that Hinduism and gender play in the process of identity construction in visible minority groups. These young people were raised in families where traditional Hindu religious and cultural practices were valued by immigrants as they creatively adjusted to Canadian society. Parents tried to actively involve their children in their way of life but were largely unable to assist them in articulating the meaning of Hindu rituals and beliefs. As a result, young men and women are caught between the values of their parent's generation and those implicit in Canadian educational institutions. The secularism of this educational system, permeated by religious illiteracy, contributes to tensions and ambiguities in identity construction.

Keywords

Immigrant, second generation, Hindu, gender, Canada

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Introduction¹

Religion shapes the way that I am right now. Because, uh, I don't know, I feel that I watch everything that I do... Well, I guess, yeah, it did shape a lot, but I just don't know how to express it. But I know, like when I am doing something and I know it is bad, like, I don't do it. But I know it's not because I'm not doing it, it's because there is just something that tells me not to do it. So religion affects me in every way. Like, if I do, if I get good marks I don't think it's because I do it. It's because God has like, helped me out with it. So it affects me in every way, every day (HF36).²

These are the words of Smeeta³, an eighteen-year-old woman whose Tamil family immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka when she was seven years old. Smeeta and her three older siblings are all students in university, fulfilling their parents' wishes that they get an education in order to secure a good future for themselves and for their family. She is studying management and hopes to work in human resources. Her family is Hindu and she describes

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the support from Dr. Peter Beyer of the University of Ottawa, principal investigator of the project from which the data for this article came.

² HF and HM stand for Hindu female and Hindu male respectively, indicating the source of the direct quotes.

³ Smeeta is a pseudonym as are all of the names used in this article.

her mother as very religious. In describing some of her family's religious practices Smeeta notes:

We always, for sure, every year celebrate Saraswati puja 'cause, it's the most, especially for students, and us people in school, it's important, um, because it's worshipping the goddess of knowledge. So that's for sure – every year we do that, for sure (HF36).

Smeeta is a member of a cohort of Hindu-Canadian young adults figuring out who they are at the intersection of culture, gender, religion and ethnicity. They are negotiating their identities in the contexts of family, friendships and educational institutions. In this article we ask: how do these university students 'do gender' and how is this process influenced by the intersection of Canadian and Hindu identities and practices? Gender roles are socially constructed and every religion is gendered in that specific ways of acting in the world are associated with being female or male. Yet gender roles are dynamic and subject to the influences of social contexts. Why do the women rely more than their male counterparts on their Hindu religious and cultural practices? What efficacy does being Hindu have as these students successfully navigate Canadian educational systems that are largely unsupportive of religious adherents, especially those that are non-Christian?

While educational success is a high value for immigrant Hindu families, we contend that the atmosphere of Canadian educational institutions makes it difficult for students and educators to understand those aspects of religious identity that make Hindus unique and mark their particularity in the contemporary multicultural landscape. At the same time, these young adults' experiences of lived Hinduism have not equipped them with ways of describing their religious practices and beliefs that explicate (and interpret) their religious identity fully either to themselves or to their Canadian peers and teachers. The inability of teachers within the Canadian educational context to adequately conceptualize Hindu religiosity along with the evidence that parents within the Canadian Hindu community are not able to assist the second generation to communicate a meaningful Hindu identity has led to a situation of heightened ambiguity of religious identity among young Canadian Hindus. This is taking place at a time when they are *preparing for life* – making critical choices about their futures. Our aim in analysing the gendered and rich complexity of religiosity among Hindu youth is to emphasize that there is much that teachers and administrators can learn from the experiences of these Hindu

women and men in order to make educational institutions more reflective of Canadian multicultural values, which include respect for religious diversity.

Data and Methodology

The data upon which this article is based is linked to a larger project examining religion among '1.5' (foreign-born yet raised in Canada) and second generation immigrants in Canada from non-Christian backgrounds.⁴ A team of researchers conducted 202 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa with young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, who grew up in Canada as members of immigrant families. The participants were recruited from universities in each of these cities and include both current and recent students. This strategy was justified by the fact that 80 to 95 per cent of people in their demographic category – adults in their early twenties who grew up in Canada in new immigrant families – have post-secondary education. The students self-identified as having a Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu background and knew that the project was specifically about religion. About half of the students were from Muslim families (n=93) and the rest were divided among Hindu (n=57) and Buddhist (n=47) backgrounds.⁵ This article is based on a sociological analysis of the transcripts from Hindu students. Thirty-seven of the participants were born in Canada, making them second generation and twenty were born in either India, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, Europe or Africa, but moved to Canada before they were twelve years old – hence the designation of generation 1.5.

The analysis involved reading and summarizing the interview transcripts, particularly noting meaningful religious practices and recurrent themes. Several 'ideal types' based on the recurrent themes were identified and we chose those participants we thought best exemplified these types. We then identified the three social worlds or contexts in which

⁴ 'Religion among Immigrant Youth in Canada' was a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa) was the principal investigator, with the collaboration of Rubina Ramji, Shandip Saha, Kathryn Carrière and Wendy Martin (University of Ottawa), Nancy Nason-Clark and Cathy Holtmann (University of New Brunswick), Lori Beaman and Marie-Paule Martel Reny (Concordia University in Montreal), and John H. Simpson, Arlene Macdonald and Carolyn Reimer (University of Toronto).

⁵ P. Beyer, 'Religious Identity and Education Attainment Among Recent Immigrants to Canada: Gender, Age and Second Generation' in *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 6:2 (2005), 177-199.

religious identity formation was taking place in the lives of the research participants: family, friends and education. For the purposes of this article we chose to analyse the complexities of gendered Hindu religious identity construction within the context of the Canadian educational systems.

What emerged is a vivid portrayal of identity construction – together with its ideological and behavioural components. Identity involves choices, strategies and resignations, sometimes made in isolation from others, often with the support of family, an educational cohort, or others who share a similar experience of having migrated to a new country. Thus, as we shall see, religious identity can be resisted, embraced, celebrated, despised and altered. But, it cannot be easily abandoned, forgotten or lost.

Theoretical Perspectives

Religious elements were among multiple aspects of identity that the research participants were managing in the ongoing process of identity construction. Religiosity varied widely within the sample. Yet, it is important to consider the role that religion plays in the lives of this particular minority group in Canada, and, in this way, serves as an example of what members of visible minorities in general face. The contemporary media is awash with stories related to religion, particularly in regards to religious conflict and the boundaries of religious freedom in Western democracies. Yet these stories often misconstrue religious people according to stereotypes of either violent male extremists or passive women oppressed under a rigid regime of religious patriarchy. Stereotypes blind us to the complexity and nuance of religious agency as one factor among many used in the integration into Canadian society. As it relates to modern people adapting to changing circumstances, identity construction involves elements of continuity and differentiation.⁶ Religious identities contribute to what it means to be Canadian today in a pluralistic world. The analysis of our Hindu-Canadian students is guided by the theoretical perspectives drawn from the literature on immigration, the sociology of religion, and feminism.

Hindu immigrants are part of a racial, cultural and religious minority that has gradually changed the face of Canadian society, at least in large

⁶ N. Ammerman, 'Religious Identities and Religious Institutions' in M. Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, 207-224.

urban centers.⁷ Until immigration laws changed in the late 1960s, the majority of newcomers to Canada were white Christians from Britain and other parts of Europe.⁸ Reformed immigration policies and the state's official support of multiculturalism opened the country's doors to people from a larger variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. In recent decades, 32 per cent of immigrants to Canada claimed to be adherents of religions other than Christianity. According to the 2001 census⁹, six per cent of the Canadian population are members of the Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh or Hindu faiths. Back then, 297,200 Hindus were living in Canada, of whom 73 per cent were living in Ontario and 64 per cent in Toronto. This meant almost a doubling of their numbers from the previous decade.¹⁰ Immigration for Hindus has been a strategy for economic and social mobility. But overall, Hindu Canadians continue to have lower levels of income compared to persons of equal education and experience from the white majority.¹¹ This is attributed to their visible minority status and highlights the importance of current debates about the actual success of multiculturalism in Canada.¹²

In the tumult of the migratory experience, many Hindus – though not all¹³ – rely on their religious and ethno-cultural heritage for strength, and adapt their traditional religious practices as they integrate into the

⁷ P. Bramadat, 'Beyond Christian in Canada: Religion and Ethnicity in a Multicultural Society' in P. Bramadat & D. Seljak (eds.), *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, Toronto: Pearson Longman 2005, 1-29.

⁸ P. Beyer, 'From Far and Wide: Canadian Religious and Cultural Diversity in Global/Local Context' in L. G. Beaman & P. Beyer (eds.), *Religion and Diversity in Canada*, Leiden: Brill 2008, 9-39.

⁹ Census data on religious affiliation is collected every ten years by Statistics Canada. The data from the 2011 census had not been released at the time this article was written.

¹⁰ A. Pearson, 'Being Hindu in Canada: Personal Narratives from First and Second Generation Immigrant Hindu Women' in *Religious Studies and Theology* 23:1 (2004), 55-69.

¹¹ K. Gosine, 'Revisiting the Notion of a 'Recast' Vertical Mosaic in Canada: Does a Post-Secondary Education Make a Difference?' in *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 32:3 (2003), 89-104.

¹² L. G. Beaman, 'A Cross-national Comparison of Approaches to Religious Diversity: Canada, France and the United States' in L. G. Beaman & P. Beyer (eds.) *Religion and Diversity in Canada*, Boston: Brill 2008, 199-216. In the same volume see also D. Cowan, 'Fearing Planes, Trains, and Automobiles: Sociophobics and the Disincentive to Religious Diversity,' 67-83.

¹³ P. Connor, 'Immigrant Religiosity in Canada: Multiple Trajectories' in *International Journal of Migration and Integration* 10 (2009), 159-175.

conditions of their new social worlds.¹⁴ Prema Kurien posits that the migration experience can intensify Hindu religious commitment.¹⁵ Defining with some precision the nature of this commitment is a challenge. The scholarly task of categorizing Hindu religiosity and identity is complex given the nature of Hinduism, its historical development and its relationship to Western colonization.¹⁶ Hinduism involves a wide range of religious beliefs, practices and texts, including the worship of gods and goddesses, and because of this diversity the very definition of Hinduism as an organized religion has been contested as a post-colonial construction.¹⁷ Although Hinduism describes the religious identity of the majority of people in India, it is not a centrally organized religion and a significant proportion of the Indian population practices more than one religion.¹⁸ In their homelands, the immigrants' religious identities were primarily ascribed and being Hindu was closely bound with simply being part of a local culture.¹⁹ Immigrants do not simply transport their religion to Canada in its native form. They are recreating their religious traditions in a new context.²⁰

While Hindu religiosity changes with the migratory experience of the first generation,²¹ it is further transformed in the process of identity construction among generation 1.5 and second generation Hindus in Canada. The aspects of ethno-cultural and religious identity that served their parents' needs are not always those that the next generation finds meaningful. Ebaugh and Chafetz suggest that one reason for the noticeable absence of second generation youth from immigrant religious groups is that the ethnic ambiance of their parents' generation are off-putting.²² In the contemporary milieu, establishing a distinct religious identity while

¹⁴ H. R. Ebaugh & J. Chafetz (eds.), *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press 2000.

¹⁵ P. A. Kurien, 'Becoming American by Becoming Hindu: Indian Americans Take Their Place at the Multicultural Table' in S. Warner & J. Wittner (eds.), *Gatherings in the Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigrants*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1998, 37-70.

¹⁶ L. M. Anderson, 'Women in Hindu Traditions' in L.M. Anderson & P. Dickey Young (eds.), *Women and Religious Traditions*, 2nd edition, New York: Oxford University Press 2010, 1-44.

¹⁷ T. N. Madan, 'Thinking Globally about Hinduism' in M. Juergensmeyer (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press 2006, 15-24.

¹⁸ B. Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 2005.

¹⁹ Kurien, 'Becoming American by Becoming Hindu,' 37-70.

²⁰ Bramadat, 'Beyond Christian in Canada,' 1-29.

²¹ Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity*.

²² Ebaugh and Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants*, 445.

accepting religious diversity in society has become the norm. Generation 1.5 and second generation immigrant children are in a situation of deliberately choosing elements of their diverse and complex Hindu heritage.²³ As the Hindu men and women in this study successfully assimilate educationally, linguistically and socially into Canadian society, they are selectively assimilating ethnically and religiously.²⁴ Many second generation Hindus stress unity and ethical living over the particular regional religious beliefs and practices of their parents.

Personal identity construction is an ongoing process of negotiation between social worlds impacted by race, class, gender and generation. Religious identity is one aspect of this fluid and multi-faceted process. Nancy Ammerman theorizes that coherence in religious identity for all individuals is continually constructed in relationships of social solidarity.²⁵ Challenges in the identity construction process are evident in experiences of gendered religious roles and responsibilities within Hinduism, racial slurs, the tensions that young people experience with their parents, and the ongoing questions, largely raised in educational contexts, that they have about the meaning of their Hindu beliefs and practices. The experience of young Hindus is particularly important for the study of gender relations in patriarchal religions. The empowerment of women through their experiences of religious agency within patriarchal religious groups presents a challenge to Western feminist theorizing.²⁶ Feminist theorists have largely ignored the fact that women around the world take a more active interest in all forms of religious expression than men. The rise of fundamentalist factions and their emphasis on 'gender inerrancy' within many faith groups has led to the mistaken assumption that all religious people believe in the second class status of women. Some feminists, however, are calling attention to the fact that the majority of the world's women understand their bodies, concepts of justice and equality through the lens of the sacred.²⁷ Women's religious expressions challenge the socially constructed boundaries between the sacred and the secular and

²³ P. Beyer, 'Can the Tail Wag the Dog? Diaspora Reconstructions of Religions in a Globalized Society' in *Norwegian Journal of Religion and Society* 1(2007), 39-61.

²⁴ K. Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race and Ethnicity in Indian America*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 2006.

²⁵ Ammerman, 'Religious Identities and Religious Institutions,' 207-224.

²⁶ N. Nason-Clark & B. Fisher-Townsend, 'Gender' in H.R. Ebaugh, ed., *Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions*. New York, NY: Springer 2005, 207-223.

²⁷ L. Fernandes, *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books 2003, 10.

between the public and the private.²⁸ Women who belong to patriarchal religions do exercise religious power in ways that serve their spiritual and social needs. Women's agency needs to be understood as embedded in religious structures just as it is embedded in economic and political structures.²⁹ Sociological research into women's lived religion illustrates the claim of Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith that the conflicts between patriarchal legitimations of male dominance and feminist ideals of gender equality may make women's lives problematic but do not deny them agency.³⁰ While the postmodern turn in theorizing has critiqued the monolithic categories of race, class and gender, Smith maintains that when a social group refers to these categories, they create a shared attention, particularly when it comes to social problems.³¹

By referring to aspects of lived religion in the lives of young adults, we are calling attention to how second and 1.5 generation Hindu women and men grapple with and make use of their religious resources and power. Sociologists of religion are increasingly intrigued by the ways in which people concretely live religion in their everyday lives.³² Rather than relying on definitions of religiosity determined by scholars of religion, sociologists are probing the spiritual practices of individuals in their daily lives. What counts as validly religious is perhaps better determined by the experience of people themselves, because ideas of what are considered normative religious practices and beliefs have been socially constructed.³³ Therefore it

²⁸ K. Aune, S. Sharma, & G. Vincett, 'Introduction: Women, religion and secularization: One size does not fit all' in K. Aune, S. Sharma & G. Vincett, (eds.) *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate 2008, 1-19.

²⁹ S. K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 2003; A. C. Korteweg, 'The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency' in *Gender and Society* 22:4 (2008), 434-54; S. Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' in *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (2001), 202-236.

³⁰ D. Smith, 'Knowing the Social: An Alternative Design' in *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press 2005, 27-45.

³¹ D. Smith, *Writing the social: Critique, theory and investigations*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press 1999.

³² N. Ammerman (ed.) *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, New York: Oxford University Press 2007; D. D. Hall (ed.) *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997; M. B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, New York: Oxford University Press 2008.

³³ M. B. McGuire, 'Sacred Place and Sacred Power: Conceptual Boundaries and the Marginalization of Religious Practices' in P. Beyer & L. G. Beaman (eds.) *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, Leiden: Brill 2007, 57-77.

is the efficacy of religious practices in the lives of generation 1.5 and second generation Canadian Hindus, rather than the determination of whether or not they are authentically Hindu, that is important for this study. Similar to Joshi's study of Hindus in America, we are more interested in asking 'how are they Hindu?' rather than 'how Hindu are they?'³⁴

Young Hindu Canadians experience emotional and social ties to family, culture and religion in places both within and outside of Canada, and at this stage in their lives – on the cusp of careers and intimate adult relationships – they are pulled in several directions in the process of choosing which aspects of their social worlds will help them to achieve their goals. They strongly affirm their Canadian identities, yet they are not completely free in their choices, given the structural and social barriers they face as members of a visible minority. Understanding the dynamics of this process more fully, especially in regards to the situation of Hindu students in educational institutions, is at the heart of what we attempt to accomplish in this article. However, before examining the challenges posed by Canadian educational contexts, we will outline key components of the gendered Canadian-Hindu religiosity revealed in the interview data.

Hindu-Canadian Religiosity

The fact that 39 women and only 18 men responded to the call for Hindu research participants for this study is an indication of the gendered nature of Hindu religious identity construction. In their gender analysis of data collected from the entire sample of over 200 Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim men and women, Nason-Clark, Ramji and Beaman argue that Hindu females see religion as a way of living – where all decisions are, or can be, made through the lens of religious morals and values.³⁵ At the same time these authors are quick to point out that not only is Hinduism a way of thinking in the lives of the young women they studied, but it is also a way of behaving. Through their vegetarian diet and their daily meditation, Hindu women live out, that is, embody their spiritual quest. And it is very important to them that they pass on these Hindu values and morals to their future offspring. For many, the desire to maintain religious goals include the wish to marry a fellow Hindu, something that would increase the probability that the children would be raised with a strong religious

³⁴ Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground*, 20.

³⁵ N. Nason-Clark, R. Ramji & L. G. Beaman, 'Gender' in P. Beyer (ed.) *Second Generation Immigrants in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (in press).

passion. For males, however, Nason-Clark et al report that while Hindu moral values are important, the idea of interpretive flexibility seems to be more critical in terms of their religious identification. By their own words, young Hindu males said their spiritual goal was the action of respect – respect for their parents and respect for the religious views of others – which they consider to be something integral to the core of Hinduism. While Hindu women were concerned with passing on to the next generation the actions and rituals they believed to be fundamental to Hinduism, males reported that they were content with fulfilling the spiritual question of their faith by the way they see and treat those around them.

There were examples of a wide range of Hindu beliefs and levels of practice revealed in the data. Several key features of Hindu religiosity characterize the young adult participants:

- the centrality of family ties;
- the role of food as a cultural and religious marker;
- the importance of religious rituals performed together with others in the Hindu community;
- the fluidity of religious practices and expectations;
- the intertwining of culture and religion;
- the duty of women for maintaining religious practices in the family.³⁶

For these young Hindus, the religious and ethno-cultural aspects of their families of origin are the foundation stones upon which their identity is built. Ritual participation and food were the primary ways that this heritage was maintained. Prayer, food, music and dance grew out of their family traditions, creating webs of connection with their lived experience of religion. Everyone indicated that what they knew about Hindu practices and beliefs they had learned primarily from their family. For example, participants spoke about reading comic books based on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics that their relatives had sent over from India. Others recalled having watched these stories on television with their grandparents. Strong bonds were forged between family members through shared religious practices. Their homes had some sort of shrine, usually

³⁶ C. Holtmann & N. Nason-Clark, 'Negotiating Expectations: Young Hindu Women in Canada' in P. Beyer (ed.) *Second Generation Immigrants in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (in press).

maintained by their mothers, that included pictures or *murtis* of a variety of Hindu gods and goddesses to whom *pujas* were offered. Parents and grandparents regularly engaged in *pujas* at the shrine and invited (or forced) their children to take part. Devotion to the gods and goddesses varied, as did beliefs in the purpose or effects of prayer and *pujas*. Each Hindu family had a particular blend of gods and goddesses to whom they were devoted, often depending on the birthplace of the parents or grandparents.

Religious dietary restrictions are a prominent feature of many of these Canadian Hindu households. When asked, nearly everyone spoke of abstaining from certain foods, most often meat, on particular days of the week as part of their devotion to a god or goddess. A number of the women mentioned that fasting helped them to stay in touch with their bodies and pay attention to their health. In developing a level of self-awareness, they were also able to forego fasting when they felt they needed more energy to pursue their studies. They had learned this from their parents whose own vegetarianism was often dependent on the level of activity in relation to their work lives. While it was usually their mothers who took the lead in preparing food in accordance with ethnic-Hindu customs, there were several stories of fathers who were paying closer attention to their diets as they aged: whether this was for religious or health reasons was not clear to their children. Several young men mentioned that they abstained from alcohol and smoking, while others indicated that even though they smoked or drank, they did not think their parents knew about it.

While home-based Hindu practices play a central role in the religious identity formation of immigrant youth, they are not confined to the nuclear family. Our participants spoke of how many families would gather in homes to perform *pujas* and *bhajans*.³⁷ Through these celebrations the youth developed strong bonds with people in their ethnic-Hindu community. Breaks from university include opportunities to reconnect with extended family and friends through religio-cultural practices, which always include sharing meals together. It was this network of immigrants that had worked together in order to encourage and broker migration to Canada and had followed this up with help with finding housing and employment.

³⁷ A *puja* is a gift of light, water, incense or fruit to a deity and a *bhajan* is a devotional song.

Temple attendance varied widely among the families in our sample. This is not surprising given that group religious participation is not normative in Hinduism. Some Hindus in our sample went to the temple, either as families or individuals, for festivals like *Diwali*, to mark family birthdays or deaths, or to pray for personal needs.³⁸ Canadian Hindu temples often include a combination of gods and goddesses, depending on the devotional practices of the founding members. As children, some female participants had attended language or dance classes offered at the temple but few of the men or women had been part of Hindu youth groups.

The participants' families embraced the religious diversity and fluidity that characterizes Hinduism. There were many inter-religious marriages. Even in families where both parents were Hindus, often the father's religious background and practices differed from the mother's due to places of birth. Many families had adopted some blend of Hindu regional traditions. Some described the presence of symbols such as having pictures of Mary and Jesus as well as holy water from Lourdes included in the household shrine. Amir's father was Hindu and his mother was Muslim. In elementary school he had fasted during Ramadan and in his Catholic high school had worn a necklace with an *OM* symbol. Another element of their stories included periods when their parents were simply too busy to engage in Hindu practices on a regular basis. They recounted how hard their parents worked to get to this country, the menial jobs their highly educated fathers and mothers took here, and the long climb toward economic prosperity and social integration. Adjusting to the gender norms of Canadian society in terms of juggling the responsibilities for both work outside the home and care of the children without the help of an extended family or servants was particularly evident in the stories about their mothers. Their parents had helped to establish a vibrant cultural community, and once this was accomplished personal religious practices could be resumed. With this model before them, the university students in our study felt justified in foregoing religious practices while meeting the demands of higher education. Many of them, particularly the women, assumed they would become more religiously engaged at some later point. In the case of Vaanika, even in her early twenties, she was already thinking about how she would be engaged in translating both her culture and her religion to her children. The concept of balance entered frequently into her interview: balance between religious and practical concerns, balance

³⁸ Banerjee and Coward, 'Hindus in Canada.'; Pearson, 'Being Hindu in Canada.'

between two cultures, and balance between her own dreams and the dreams of her parents for her successful career. In contrast, Balram was in the process of moving away from his religious heritage. All the same, the flexibility he sees in Hinduism will, no doubt, enable him to continue to harness some of the strength of family and faith from his past when the ideal of Canadian multiculturalism meets with the reality of daily living. The gendered experience of being a young Hindu in Canada separates men and women along lines that run very close to family practices and traditions of the home. Despite their parents' wishes, many males have chosen not to adopt many tenets of the religious traditions they witnessed as children. Thus, fluidity, diversity and balance help us to understand some of the features of the religious journey that was described by the 1.5 and second generation Hindus of this study.

The blurred boundaries between religion and culture for the Hindus in our sample were most apparent in terms of gender. Ideas about Hindu gender roles were expressed in particular by the female participants when they were asked about marriage and plans for raising children. As university students, they were clearly in the midst of preparing for professional careers, yet aware of the Hindu ideal of a woman's religious duty to devote herself to her family and sustain religion in the home. This was what many of their mothers were doing. One woman said, 'My mother has always tried to tell me I should make sure my career is sort of going places and make sure I can take care of myself' (HF27). Yet there were examples of men being more religiously engaged than women in the family – evidence that Hindu gender roles are not rigid in the Canadian context.³⁹ One woman, who described her family as Jain-Hindu, said that her grandfather had become an 'initiated devotee' and that this had a big impact on her. She had become a strict vegetarian and avoided clothing made of animal products. Overall, the Hindu women were more concerned about their religious identity than were the men in the study, illustrating their sense of agency within the tradition.

Many of the women and men acknowledged that their parents wanted them to marry Hindus, or at least someone with the same ethnic background. No one resisted the idea of marriage. Several of the women disclosed that they were secretly dating. Secrecy was a strategy that helped them in their negotiation of their identities as Hindu-Canadians and to

³⁹ P. A. Kurien, 'Gendered Ethnicity: Creating a Hindu Identity in the United States' in *American Behavioral Scientist* 42:4 (1999), 648-670; A. Pearson, 'Because it Gives Me Peace of Mind.' *Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women*, New York: SUNY Press 1996.

avoid conflict with their parents.⁴⁰ The young women in this study were figuring out how to manage the Canadian secular ideal of women's equality in relationship with traditional Hindu gender hierarchies. The interviews with male participants did not show evidence of them having conflicts with their parents about dating and several women spoke about how their brothers had been treated differently in this regard. The fact that Hindu women feel it necessary to maintain secrecy concerning dating relationships makes it more difficult for them to disclose abuse and get help.⁴¹ Few students in the study had divorced or separated parents indicating that this may have been a burden for their mothers as well, since rates of domestic violence do not differ between religious and non-religious families.⁴² Research indicates that immigrant women in Canada may be more vulnerable to risk factors for interpersonal violence.⁴³ Both women and men said that they were willing to marry someone who was not Hindu, but it was the women who emphasized that they wanted to marry someone who at least respected their Hindu identity. Almost without exception, the women spoke about feeling responsible for teaching their children about Hinduism and hoped that when the time for that came, they would have the opportunity to learn more about their religious background.

It was in respect to learning about what it meant to be Hindu in Canada that the most obvious ambiguities and tensions arose for the research participants. While most of these young adults had grown up more or less immersed in the rich sights, sounds and smells of lived Hindu culture, few of them received satisfactory explanations from their parents about the *meaning* of their religious practices or details about Hindu beliefs. Anil, a second generation male whose family migrated from Sri Lanka, articulates the problem:

No one knows what they're doing, I guess. At the end of the day whether, like you know even your parents or your grandparents or whatnot, no one knows the main reason why they do the ritual. It's the same at the wedding when the priest comes and does all, like the ceremony and

⁴⁰ N. Manohar, "'Sshh..!! Don't tell my parents". Dating Among Second Generation Patels in Florida' in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 39:4 (2008), 571-588.

⁴¹ Kurien, 'Gendered Ethnicity.'

⁴² N. Nason-Clark, 'Making the Sacred Safe: Woman Abuse and Communities of Faith' in *Sociology of Religion* 61:4 (2000), 349-368.

⁴³ D. A. Brownridge, *Violence Against Women: Vulnerable Populations*, New York: Routledge 2009, 201.

whatnot – no one in the crowd, not even like the two who are getting married, know why he’s actually doing all that stuff (HM10).

Peter Beyer contends that contemporary globalization has led to a situation of increased reflexivity in religious identity.⁴⁴ In contrast to their parents, it was insufficient for these young adults to just *be* Hindu; they wanted to know what these practices meant. However, it was usually the women who were more successful in integrating meaningful Hindu practices and beliefs into their university lifestyles. It was within Canadian education contexts that their inability to clearly articulate what it meant to be Hindu arose. In interaction with their non-Hindu peers and teachers they felt ill-prepared and unsure of how to explain their Hindu identities. Perhaps this highlights the demands placed on Hindus to refashion their religion as they migrate in a globalized world. Or is it that religious people in general find it a challenge to defend or explain their faith and practices in the Canadian educational context?

Canadian Educational Institutions

The education system in Canada has three characteristics that make it particularly challenging for Hindu youth to understand and articulate their religious identities: the shifting religious demographics of Canadian society; widespread religious illiteracy fueled by assumptions concerning the secular nature of modern society; and the lingering effects of Christian hegemony in Canada.

Statistics indicate that mainline religious institutions are experiencing declining numbers of adherents.⁴⁵ Among those who indicate that they still value religion, the extent to which they understand or engage in personal religious practices and beliefs is unknown.⁴⁶ At the same time, there has been marked growth in Canada of non-Christian communities of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims⁴⁷ as well as among evangelical Christian and non-European Christian adherents and groups.⁴⁸ The result is a situation of flux within and between Canadian religious groups and this

⁴⁴ P. Beyer, 'Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions' in *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, 167-186.

⁴⁵ W. Clark & G. Schellenberg, 'Who's Religious?' in *Canadian Social Trends* (2006), 2-9.

⁴⁶ J. Thiessen & L. Dawson, 'Is There a "Renaissance" of Religion in Canada? A Critical Look at Bibby and Beyond' in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 37:3-4 (2008), 389-415.

⁴⁷ Beyer, 'Appendix' in *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, 235-240.

⁴⁸ Bramadat, 'Beyond Christian in Canada.'

plays out in the broader context of Canadian society, particularly in the education system.

Writing within the American educational context, Stephen Prothero claims that there is widespread 'religious illiteracy'.⁴⁹ In the midst of changing religious dynamics, people do not know much about their own religious traditions or those of others, a religious illiteracy which is a civic problem because religion can be a 'volatile constituent of culture'.⁵⁰ The goal of religious tolerance based on sameness is being challenged in the current religious climate by an increased emphasis on religious and ethnic particularity. Referring to the Canadian context, Paul Bramadat credits contemporary misunderstandings about religion to generations of acceptance of a naïve secularization hypothesis by political and cultural elites.⁵¹ The present vibrancy and growth of particular religious groups in Canadian society, however, challenges this secularization assumption, as does evidence of women's persistent reliance on religious agency. Devout religious women and men think and act like many non-religious people. Assumptions about secularization coupled with religious illiteracy among the Canadian-born population can make it difficult for religious youth in general and immigrant youth in particular to find understanding among their peers and teachers about what it means for them to be religious in the public sphere.

A further aspect which complicates the general misunderstanding is the legacy of our Protestant-Catholic colonial heritage. While non-Christian religious groups are rapidly growing, the majority of the population remains influenced by Christian hegemony. Religious and non-religious Canadians assume that what constitutes religion resembles Christianity. They expect that legitimate religion requires male religious leaders who have authority over all members who participate in regular and uniform collective worship of one God (imaged as male), believe in an ancient sacred text, and follow prescribed moral rules. While some religions do resemble Christianity in this regard, this model does not work at all well for understanding Hinduism.⁵² Robert Orsi points out that the Western history

⁴⁹ S. Prothero, 'Worshipping in Ignorance' in *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53:28 (2007), B6.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ P. Bramadat, 'Our Current Interregnum and the Decline of Secular Modernity,' Metropolis Canada Working Papers, Ottawa 2007. See as well P. Bramadat, 'Religion and Public Policy in Canada: An Itinerary' in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 37:1 (2008), 121-143.

⁵² Beyer, 'Globalization and the Institutional Modeling of Religions.'

of religious studies in education has divided so-called good from bad religion.⁵³ The legacy of Christian hegemony prevents Canadians from appreciating the distinct characteristics of Hindu religiosity. It also compounds the difficulty that the young Hindus in our sample had in understanding their own religious identities.

We assert that a complex combination of religious illiteracy, the naïve acceptance of secularization, and the misconceptualization of Hindu religiosity due to Christian hegemony contributed to situations which led to heightened feelings of ambiguity about being Hindu for members of our research sample. Because this ambiguity about their Hindu identities was so noticeably pervasive throughout our data, we now turn to a detailed analysis of the educational contexts in which our research participants were situated.

Hindus in Canadian Education Institutions

The enormous hope that Hindu parents place on the shoulders of their sons and daughters to excel in the Canadian educational system and find employment in a career that will ensure a financially secure future cannot be overstated. This hope, understandable given the sacrifices parents have made in pursuit of opportunities for a better life for their families, places tremendous pressure on their children. Examples of the high expectations for educational success and its effects on the Hindu identity of young adults are revealed in numerous ways.

Our data shows that success in education was both a practical and a religious goal for these families. Hindus believe that there are three paths that can free a person from the cycle of *samsara*, the cycle of births and deaths. These are the paths of knowledge, action, and devotion.⁵⁴ While most Hindus follow the second path or *dharma*, the other paths remain religious ideals. Thus for Hindus the pursuit of knowledge has religious value. No matter which path is chosen, for Hindus life is ideally imagined as being lived out in a series of stages, each path beginning with the stage of a student. The stage of student life is the foundation upon which a Hindu religious life is built. For Hindu parents whose own education and work credentials were devalued upon arrival in this country, their children's Canadian educational success becomes even more critical. But for Kirin, born in Africa to parents from Bangladesh, this emphasis may have been

⁵³ R. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005.

⁵⁴ Anderson, 'Women in Hindu Traditions,' 2.

overdone. In explaining why his engagement in Hindu rituals had waned, he said, 'I think that the more I studied in the Canadian curriculum I think I become more liberal-minded, I guess' (HM08).

With the exception of those members of generation 1.5 who had received some schooling abroad, the students in our sample had attended primary schools in Canada, in which they were an ethnic and religious minority. Their friendship networks were of mixed religion and ethnicity. It was in elementary school, as many of them described, that they encountered situations in which they discovered that being Hindu was very different from their classmates. There were experiences of racism, especially racial slurs like being called 'Paki', but nearly everyone qualified these examples by saying something like 'it was just words'. However, Nahal, a devout Hindu whose family is from Guyana, said that these slurs made him feel ashamed of his ethnicity. Some women talked about how their brothers had endured more discrimination than they and others spoke about 'getting looks' while shopping. A situation was described by Leela in which she went from believing that her religious practices were 'normal' to realizing that they were not.

When I was in elementary school and ah, like in grade five, grade six, um there weren't a lot of browns at that time and my teacher discussed, 'How was your weekend?' and asked questions and you know? People would answer, and people would say 'Yeah we went to church, you know, on Sunday.' And I would put up my hand and say, 'I went and this is how it went and all that.' And I didn't realize until I was in grade seven or eight that I was actually Hindu ... and so the whole time when they said 'church' I thought that's what I had been attending (HF18).

Leela's experience illustrates that she came to a gradual awareness of the distinctiveness of Hindu religious practices. Although she does not describe feeling that her religion was inferior, it was not 'church'. Some students spoke about not having Hindu religious holidays acknowledged and the general lack of awareness concerning Hindu cultural practices. Perhaps this is why several spoke of how strongly they were impacted by trips to their parents' homelands. They recognized that in some ways it was easier to be Hindu in a non-minority context, and yet they also realized that in Canada Hindus were forced to be more deliberate about cultivating their religious identity.

In describing their experiences in Canadian high schools, those who were more engaged in their Hindu family rituals tended to have friends who were religious, often Muslim. It was in high school that many justified

a decline in their participation in the religious practices in their families due to their studies. Most claimed that they did not have time to attend community rituals and the women felt unable to observe ritual fasts because it was too much of a strain. These fluctuations in ritual participation were mirrored by stories of changes in their parents' religious practices. Change in religious engagement was not viewed as a negative thing. It was understood as a practical reality and few youths related feeling pressured by their parents to be more religiously engaged. Those young adults with higher degrees of ambiguity about being Hindu were particularly vulnerable to the influence of the climate of secularism and religious illiteracy that marked their friendship networks in school. While Hindu parents encouraged their children to focus on their studies, they probably did not understand the ways in which the education milieu was undermining their children's religious identities.

Evidence of the pressure to achieve is found in Preema's reticence to tell her family that she was planning on changing her major in university from biology to writing and English. Preema knew that her Sri Lankan parents wanted her to become a doctor:

Interviewer: How did they feel about you leaving biology?

Preema: Um, they don't know yet.

Interviewer: OK! How do you think they will feel?

Preema: Um, probably be very upset – very shocked. Probably wouldn't be expecting it. So, they'd probably try to convince me to change. Um, probably disappointed and angry. Yeah. (HF10).

Rubina, majoring in political science, spoke about her parents' expectations:

[Higher education was] very, very important. I was always told that there's doctors and teachers, there's a lawyer in the family. 'You know your aunt's a magistrate in Trinidad.' So ... profession ... a career in the arts wasn't really something we were encouraged to do. We weren't really encouraged against it either, but, it was more like, 'Be a professional, a lawyer, a doctor or something' (HF39).

Many of the women and a few of the men said that they maintained personal religious practices such as regular prayer or meditation in order to deal with the stress of university life. Dev, whose parents came from Trinidad and Tobago, said,

I do pray every day, I do ... think about it ... I do practise it at least having the actual prayers and stuff ... every Thursday, I don't eat any meat or any egg or anything, I think that's important – to live a healthy life, and to be aware of just God every day (HM07).

For many it was in university that they finally found a substantial cohort of young Hindu adults. Several of the students spoke about being labelled 'white washed' by their ethnic peers. This label highlights the struggle to manage a bi-cultural identity. Religiously engaged Hindu students found South Asian groups on campus too focused on socializing. The marked ambiguity concerning Hindu identity and gender roles among the second generation was disturbing to Akuti, a student doing a masters degree in anthropology and a feminist. She had helped to organize a forum on campus: 'I really wanted to create programming ... you know... dialogue that helped people understand their identity because I had always been isolated and I really wanted to do something to help that... you know... to help anybody who was lost and confused ... I guess... in some sense' (HF08). The forum was supported by student groups as well as local temples, attracted many students, and had included a variety of workshops. Yet Akuti was unsure of how to assess the results of the forum because male temple leaders had said that raising the issue of intimate partner violence during the forum reflected negatively on the Hindu community.

Several students spoke about having taken religious studies courses as a way to learn more about religion and their Hindu heritage. For some, academic study heightened their curiosity about their own religion and they were in the process of learning more. Other students spoke about their struggles to make sense of their religious beliefs. For example, Raj was majoring in biology and involved in the South Asian Alliance on campus. He said, 'Being that I don't believe in a higher being and all the implications that come with it within a religious institution, I am free to believe in science' (HM03). This contrasts with Prema, who was pursuing a graduate degree in epidemiology. She said,

The basic distinction between religion and science is how you get your worldview and science tends to be backed up by evidence and experiments and you know reliability and so forth, religion is more faith-based. But I think that in science there is also room for having that faith and that's what theory is about. So I don't think they are necessarily two distinct parts (HF14).

Questions about scientists' religious beliefs are something that social scientists continue to debate. Based on extensive fieldwork Howard Ecklund argues that within the academy many scientists hold religious beliefs that are as dear to them as they are divergent from each other.⁵⁵

Conclusions

There are obvious limitations to this study and its generalizability due to the nature of the sample. Further research needs to be done with second generation Hindu-Canadians who are not enrolled in post-secondary education as well as with those who are not living in large urban centers. However, the data from interviews with 57 second and 1.5 generation Hindu university students in Canada does illustrate that these students face numerous challenges in negotiating their identities. Gender matters when it comes to the nexus of religious and cultural boundaries—that is the story from the interviews conducted amongst young men and women linked to Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu faith traditions, from which this subset of Hindu women and men has been drawn. As members of a visible minority, Hindu youth were raised in families where traditional religious and cultural practices were valued by their parents' generation. These practices were creatively adapted to a new cultural context and helped members of the first generation adjust to life in Canadian society. Parents tried to actively involve their children in their Hindu way of life but were largely unable to assist them in articulating the meaning of Hindu rituals and beliefs. This resulted in a high degree of ambiguity in religious identity construction for the second generation. We believe that the milieu of the Canadian educational system, a context influenced by its Christian heritage, built on the assumptions of secularism and permeated by religious illiteracy, further exacerbated this ambiguity. What this will mean in the long term, as these young Hindu adults enter the workforce, remains to be seen. Will they establish successful careers and fulfill their parents' dreams? How will they fare emotionally and socially in an increasingly unstable Canadian and global economic climate? Who will they marry and how will this affect the Hindu-Canadian community? Will Hindu-Canadian women continue to shoulder the responsibility of instilling a lived Hinduism in their families despite the demands of careers? Only time will tell.

Young Hindu adults are caught between the values of their parents' generation and those implicit in Canadian educational institutions. Change

⁵⁵ E. Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, New York: Oxford University Press 2010.

is necessary on both sides of this equation. On the one hand, Hindu families and their religious communities need to realize the importance of finding strategies to explain traditional religious practices in more meaningful ways to their younger members. The nature of religious identity has changed and religious authority has moved from the community to the individual in contemporary society. The young Hindus in this study have shown that they appreciate respect for religious diversity, a hallmark of Hinduism itself, but they need help in articulating what particular Hindu ritual practices and stories mean for them today. Young Hindu women are presently more successful at this than are their male peers. Their ability to more fully understand and explain their Hindu religious identity will help them to better inform others about the richness of this ancient lived tradition.

On the other hand, leaders in Canadian educational institutions need to respect the importance that religion continues to hold in our society, particularly for members of new immigrant groups. Religious people are not simply out of step with reality but make up a substantial proportion of contemporary global society. Women who follow patriarchal religious traditions exercise agency that enables them to integrate religious understandings of body, mind and spirit into their everyday lives, and are not simply victims of false consciousness. As increasing numbers of religious non-Christians seek to integrate into Canadian society, we are provided with an opportunity to learn something new and interesting about them. Religion is a legitimate aspect of any cultural identity. Increased understanding of and respect for religious diversity could become a noble goal for Canadian educators and administrators as we deal with the complexity of multiculturalism in Canada. Helping students across this country to *prepare for life*, with all its complexity including religion, is the challenge offered to educators by the group of Hindu young men and women in this research.