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*Hindus in Alberta: A Study
in Religious Continuity and Change*

ABSTRACT/RESUME

This paper is the second in a series of studies mapping contemporary religious life in western Canada. Three elements of religious life, ritual, scripture or sacred language, and the *guru* are examined in order to determine both continuity and change in the tradition. The study is based on discussions with Hindu devotees selected because they were identified by the community as leaders in the religious life. It examines how they, on the cutting edge of the newly transplanted tradition, understand and live the loftiest aspects of their religion within the context of modern Canadian culture.

Cet article est le deuxième d'une série d'études sur la vie religieuse contemporaine dans l'ouest canadien. Trois aspects de la vie religieuse, les rites, les textes sacrés ou la langue de la liturgie et le rôle du gourou y sont abordés afin d'évaluer tant la continuité que l'évolution au niveau de la tradition. L'étude se base sur des échanges avec des fidèles de l'hindouisme choisis à cause de leur rôle de chefs spirituels au sein de leur communauté. On y examine comment ces personnes, qui ouvrent la voie à leur tradition nouvellement transplantée, comprennent et vivent leur spiritualité dans le cadre d'une société moderne comme la nôtre.

This study focuses on seven Hindu families living in the cities of Edmonton and Calgary.¹ It examines three elements of religious practice in order to determine both continuity and change in tradition. The three elements are ritual, scripture or sacred language, and the *guru*. In six of the seven cases, the subjects interviewed were born and raised in India, leaving as fairly mature adults. Thus, they were able to provide considerable information on religious life in India in the context of their homes and extended family. Our thesis is that life in the new Canadian environment (Edmonton and Calgary) has resulted in considerable change or adaptation in which the *guru* tends to play a key role.² We will map the change in ritual practice and the use of sacred language arguing that a significant change in the structure of the tradition has occurred. Based on discussions with Hindu devotees,³ an assessment of the implications of this change for the tradition in North America will be made.

For the purpose of this study we have selected leaders within the East Indian community, representatives of the developing religious practice. A statistically

random sample of all "Hindus" in the province does not serve our purpose. Our concern is to grasp how those interviewed, declared models of the religious life within the community, "understand[s] and live[s] within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection being sought."⁴ In a strict sense this is a study of religious life.

Ritual in the Indian Context

This portion of the paper sketches ritual in the lives of those persons interviewed, initially in the context of the subcontinent and then as it is currently practised in Alberta. It also explores the variance between the two locations and discusses them in terms of the general thesis of the paper.

Two of our subjects sketched a childhood imbued with the full range of rituals associated with Orthodox Hindu practice. One was born into a South Indian Brahmin family in which the sacrality of life was marked by rituals from the moment of conception.⁵ Indeed, his description is that of a family living from ritual to ritual throughout day, season and year. He comments:

From the time I began to recognize things . . . the household had priests . . . dedicated to (it). They would come and remind us that your birthday is on so-and-so date or there is a particular constellation appearing in this time of the year or there is an eclipse here or you have to perform certain ceremonies for departed souls in your family. We'd fix a time when he would come and do it. From birth I was very attracted to rituals, so every day I used to spend about three to four hours watching and listening to them. We started . . . my sister and I . . . at about 4:30 a.m. In the prayer hall we had pictures of the various deities and we used to take a wet cloth and clean each one. I would make a lot of sandal paste and then we used to anoint these pictures and we would draw jewellery on them and flower garlands. . . It took us maybe 2½ hours to do that. Then it was time to go to school. In the evening . . . the priest was there so we used to sit . . . till about 6:30.⁶

A couple from the Rangpur district of Bengal described the village *pujas* (gatherings for ritual worship) of their childhood which occupy considerable attention throughout the year. The thread ceremony, *Upanayana Samskara*, played a significant role in the child's life as did the extensive chanting of sacred texts during the annual festivals. The influence of Rammohan Roy's Brahma Samaj movement led one of our informants, when he was a young student, to reject the ritual cycle he had been raised with, on the grounds that, "we are diluting our effort (for liberation) by concentrating on ritualism."⁷ A recovery of the *senatan dharma*, the eternal religion, highlighted for him the spiritual limitations of ritual.⁸ Dwelling in this system of religious ideas renders ritual obsolete.

These two informants stand out as having lived in the bosom of Hindu ritual. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the "lay-priest" who serves the Edmonton Hindu Society. Thoroughly committed to a ritual path at this point in his life, he discounted its function in his childhood. When initially asked about the ritual life of his family, he unequivocally said there was nothing that could be called ritual in his childhood home. As we pursued the subject, however, it became apparent

that the women of the household made the daily offerings of food to the god *Agni*, and the blessings with holy water, and set aside a portion from the table for the cow. The father spent a short regular period of time in prayer, and a grandmother would pay homage to an image of her *guru* tucked away in her bedroom. The family also identified with a temple to the Divine Mother located some distance away and went there for the tonsuring, *Chuda Karana*, of the sons. However, the customary Hindu festivals which often focus family devotional life did not take place in the dominantly Sikh village where the family lived.⁹ Another informant was born of Orthodox Brahmin parentage in the culturally protected region of Madras. He was raised reciting the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, and was taught devotional chant. Although attendance at *pujas* was apparently common, the key element the subject identified as the source of his spiritual formation was his father's tutoring him in sacred texts.¹⁰

The remaining two informants discussed their childhood homes as being deeply "spiritual" but with little ritual.¹¹ Both fathers were influenced profoundly by the Arya Samaj movement. *Pujas* were part of the ritual at the Arya Samaj school and at the movement's regular meetings. The continuity with the full flower of the Orthodox ritual pattern, however, was broken by the Samaj¹² and other *Vedic* renaissance movements.

Ritual in the Alberta Context

In both Calgary and Edmonton, the ritual life of the community is conducted under the auspices of Hindu societies. A regular pattern of "public" *pujas* has been established with the intention of fulfilling the spiritual, social and cultural needs of the community. In Calgary the regular worship service consists of *Agnihotra* ritual, following what is understood to be the pristine interpretation of the Vedic ritual tradition by Swami Dayananda.¹³ Not all members of the society by any means are Samajists, nor do they share in the iconoclastic inclination of the movement. To accommodate this diverse sensibility, a service at a side altar devoted to a particular deity is appended to the *Agnihotra* where offerings to a *murti*, or idol,¹⁴ are made. The ritual devoted to a particular form of the deity and the ritual central to the *Havan* are quite separate. In Edmonton, collective worship is marked by elaborate attention to the various manifestations of God within the context of the *Havan*. *Pujas* are organized with strict attention to the Hindu calendar, giving the major figures of the pantheon their due on appropriate occasions. The ritual is handled by a lay-priest committed to detailed rubrics, though he increasingly uses the occasion to teach those gathered through discursive means about the symbolic meaning of the ritual.

Several examples of continuity and change in ritual pattern follow, suggesting our thesis that the guru's role has become the key element in the religious self-definition of Hindus.

Ritual as the Context of Formation

One informant suggested he had a great advantage over his children since he had grown up in the religious environment of India. His response to the Alberta situation is evident in the following remarks about the development of his children:

They haven't had the advantages that I had in terms of the envir-

onment. . . . So to that extent they are handicapped quite severely. . . . We have told them the importance of these things (ritual practice). There are certain things they have memorized, certain pieces of worship for various deities. . . . They certainly have not memorized *Upanishad* because they have not learned Sanskrit.¹⁶

Indeed, in this home a room has been set aside with an altar. A regular pattern of adoration of various deities structures the spiritual discipline of the family. Saturday morning is devoted to a weekly *puja* including several hours of text recitation. The father continues to engage his children in regular conversation on spiritual themes, albeit of a more discursive and less formal nature than that used by his father when he was a child. The emphasis on personal teaching, through discourse and devotional music, an inherited pattern of spiritual discipline, is adopted by our informant for the following reasons:

My life is short and I don't consider myself a separate individual. I consider myself a responsible human being carrying on my back some 300-400 generations . . . who have set up the path in which I follow. I used to think these (rituals) were not important. Why should we do all this? But now I am beginning to . . . attach a sanctity to the whole thing. To get the spiritual satisfaction you need to go through a whole rigorous discipline . . . unless (of course) you reach a level where these things don't matter; and most of us can't do that. I'm not a Shankara.¹⁷

Our informant, like his father, tutors his children in texts, teaches them the theology and philosophy of the tradition, guides them in ritual devotion, and nurtures the musical life of the family as a primary spiritual discipline. Within the family the parental generation has retained a remarkable continuity from India to Calgary. The general environment, however, is dramatically different.

A number of informants discount the meaning and importance of a ritual life. The following comment is illustrative:

I make a distinction between the values that are taught in the original scriptures and the values that are handed down just by tradition. . . . A lot of customs and rituals . . . developed as time went on. Many of these rituals had a relevance in certain social contexts, at certain times. But that doesn't mean they are universally valid. . . . These rituals have a time factor whereas the truths . . . making Hinduism what it is . . . (are) universal . . . timeless. They are true today as much as they were true 5,000 years ago.¹⁸

As the conversation developed with this informant the view of ritual appeared to shift:

It doesn't hurt to bow your head before a god . . . I am not against those rituals. I also do certain pujas at our own home, once or twice a year; I don't make a fetish of these. It is not a criterion of whether you are religious or not.¹⁹

He went on to describe a *puja* the family had had recently to inaugurate an addition to their house. They often encourage their children to join them in *pujas* at the homes of friends to share in the presence of a "saintly person", a *swami* or *guru*.

For this informant, ritual is understood as a viable path, perhaps, for some people. The choice he suggests is "strictly individualistic," and does not involve an affirmation of traditional ritual practice in and of itself. What he "inadvertently learned from his father" is reinforced by his *guru* and this alone accounts for his spiritual life.²⁰ Traditional ritual, to him, is useful only as it provides an occasion to be touched by a holy person. Two informants as noted above came from families where the rich ritual life of orthodox Hinduism structured their childhood. In one case, the family was initiated by a *guru* after they arrived in Canada. The implications for the ritual life of the family were dramatic.

Nowadays you can get all kinds of fruits in plastic, that (are) decorative pieces. If someone brought you real fruit, would you ignore that and still go back to your plastic? . . . If you've got something life-giving (that) you can serve (you do it).²¹

This is the same informant who described at length his experience in India of living from ritual to ritual, rising early to prepare for *pujas* and closing the day with acts of devotion. Finding a *guru*, "the real fruit,"²² dramatically shifted the ritual practice of the household. The family continues to have a room devoted to worship. However, the altar shrine recently acquired a large earthenware statue of Swami Ananda Giri. It was given to the family by their *guru* on a recent visit to the *Aradna* celebrations at the *guru's Ashram*. It dominates the altar, receiving prayers, and focusing the *mantra* given the family members at their initiation at the *Ashram*. These devotional acts, accompanied with offerings of holy water and fruit, all to the statue of the *guru*, have replaced the traditional cycle of worship associated with the *Panch Devta*, or five deities.

The purpose of all ritual was simply, our informant commented, to free one from the rat-race and give "a few minutes of satisfaction. Nothing else."²³ The presence of the *guru* held out this opportunity to the family in a personal way that made the previous cycle of ritual devotion appear "plastic" compared to the "real fruit" of the *guru*.

The Disintegration of Cosmic Initiation

We have examined the shift in the traditional forms of ritual devotion from the traditional pattern touching on all aspects of cosmic valorization to a focus on the *guru* as "the centre of sacredness."²⁴ Now we will examine the ritual pattern currently associated with death and the "final" integration with the cosmos, as illustrated in the heightened need for specific religious rootedness in the past. A common characteristic noted by numerous scholars is the trend in contemporary society away from embodied forms of ritual practice to a world view expressed increasingly through abstractions.²⁵ The attempt to accommodate to modern society has required a "flexible" attitude towards such religious structures as calendar, norms of religious paraprofessionals (such as funeral directors) and, as we are about to note, the law and technology associated with cremation.

Death in North America customarily occurs in a hospital. Following the initial arrangements with a funeral director, the lay priest is contacted.²⁶ Family and friends gather around the exposed body at a funeral home with the necessary facilities for cremation. Following a welcome and eulogy the lay-priest conducts the ritual for the deceased. The service is simple and direct. An invocation to Lord Vishnu, the preserver, is followed by a *mantra* from the *Upanishad*: "from

the Unreal lead me to the Real; from Darkness lead me to the Wisdom Light; from death lead me to Immortality. Oh Peace, Peace, Peace."²⁷ Krishna's magnificent sermon on the transience of the body is read from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The ritual actions associated with the funeral have accommodated the norms of North America. In India or Africa the body would have been carried to a pyre, covered with *ghee* (clarified butter) and a mixture of spices called *samagrere*; "fed" with water and rice balls, for the deceased is "still with us"; and offered gifts as a sign of devotion and thanksgiving. In Alberta *ghee* is placed on the body, a drop of water in the mouth, and flowers are offered. The facilities do not allow for the *Havan*, with its rhythm of *mantras* and offerings to *Agni*, (fire) the god who bears all to the eternal. The *mantra* alone remains. The physical contact with offerings, the ritual linking of the *Havan* and the funeral pyre with the eternal is at best expressed through a mere token gesture. The pyre, of course, is now a high-technology furnace making *ghee* irrelevant as an aspect of ignition and conflagration. The natural symbolism of *ghee*,²⁸ with all it surrounding imagery from hearth and table to pyre, is broken, and, with it the immediacy of symbolic connections "showing" the integration of the deceased with the divine.

Following the rite, the body is pushed on a trolley to the crematory furnace, usually accompanied by close family and friends. Often several reach out and touch the moving casket. It is raised mechanically into the furnace. The traditional symbolism would have it otherwise. The body would be personally shouldered by a circle of intimate friends. It would be deliberately placed on the pyre, the preparations visibly made. The eldest son would come forward, take the fire from *Agni's Havan*, and ignite the pyre while all were present. The final integration of the body/soul with the cosmos was engaged with conscious intent.

What we wish to note here is not simply an arbitrary change in ritual form, a change which allows the theological ideas informing the meaning of the experience and the ritual to remain untouched. Rather, we would suggest that when the traditional symbolic structure is broken, when its task in structuring the experience of the devotees is no longer apparent, the secondary world of theological reflection loses its power to link experience with the universe of meaning of the tradition. The universe of meaning (theological idea) is in danger of becoming an abstract teaching "about" meaning requiring an imaginative leap from the experience of a particular death to the idea of death's valorization in the unity of all creation with the Divine. The loss of the continuity of symbolic gestures consequently heightens the relative importance and power of personal beliefs. The longing for concrete, embodied, spiritual experience has to find expression elsewhere.

Sacred Language in the Context of Hindu Religious Life in Alberta

Previous discussion has shown that in Canada there has been a shift away from traditional ritual practice and toward the practice prescribed by the *guru*. What effect has this shift had upon the function of sacred language in Hinduism? In India sacred language was learned passively. From an early age one heard it over and over again as part of daily activity until the texts and *mantras* were internalized and became part of one's consciousness. As one subject noted, "We imbibed it."²⁹ The parents and grandparents taught children texts and *mantras* through daily household worship. In addition, the surrounding culture was suffused with

the same texts and chants so that the learning took place, as it were, by osmosis. A good description of this process was offered by one respondent:

My father was a great scholar in Sanskrit and right from the age of four or five he used to let us get up very early in the morning and teach us all these scriptures *Upanishads* and *Vedas*, and all the religious chants. He would make us repeat it a number of times, almost by rote. We didn't know the meaning of any of those things at that time.

We had a number of occasions when we would chant them outside the house, too. Suppose you go to a temple where there is a *puja* or something taking place and they usually chant these *mantras* too. If you have already got them by heart at home, you feel free to join with the rest of the people there . . . you simply become part of the proceedings. So you fit in quite well and you have got a place for yourself right there . . . If you know what you are doing and if you can join in and do it as well as they do, you are accepted straightaway, nobody even questions who you are or what you are, you just go into the *sanctum sanctorum*. On the other hand, if you don't know, you don't know, and that's all there is to it. There is no other way.

I never asked my father any questions as to why I should learn, or what benefit it is going to be to me. He simply said "repeat what I told you yesterday." He would correct my mistakes because these chants have got to be recited in a particular rising and falling musical tone . . . The first two or three hours in the morning were devoted to this, then breakfast could be taken.³⁰

This then was the traditional pattern in India, especially among the upper classes. By this means passages from the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, etc., were first committed to memory by oral repetition. Through repeated rehearsal they became part of one's mature consciousness. Ritual chants such as the *Gayatri* were learned in the same way, and assumed the same function in consciousness.³¹

In India the texts and mantras were usually learned in Sanskrit. Although the importance of sacred language is retained in Hindu practice in Canada, its nature and function exhibit marked changes. No longer do the children rise at four or five in the morning to chant with the parents and grandparents. In many instances, even if the children did rise at that early hour, they would not find the adults doing their chanting. Some adults confess that they now do their morning chanting while running for the bus or while walking to work. Gone is the more leisurely pace of India. In Canada it is replaced by the North American work ethic. Within the home it is hard to find a time either morning or evening when the whole family can be together for worship. One of the families interviewed has adjusted to this difficulty by setting aside Saturdays for family devotional practice.³² Often the absence of grandparents or other members of the extended family further reduces the power of the family group for transmitting sacred language. Outside the family, Hindus live as a minority group in a secular, materialistic culture, and so the environmental reinforcement of family practice, experienced in India, is simply absent in Canada. With the exception of the two

Hindu societies where the major festivals are given social and religious observance, little opportunity is present for external learning. The "osmosis effect" of living in India is replaced in Canada by an environmental conditioning away from traditional scripture, language and devotional practice.

In the face of these difficulties a new pattern in the use of sacred language is beginning to appear. It is a very simplified pattern which in essence consists in chanting a *guru's* name or *mantra* 108 times, two or three times a day.³³ Whereas in India sacred language was usually attached to scriptures or rituals along with observances relating to a *guru*, in Canada much of this has been replaced by the simple and flexible practice of chanting the *guru's* name or *mantra*. This approach has several distinct advantages for the practice of Hinduism in Canada:

1. It is easy to learn. The *guru's* name or the *mantra* he gives can be learned in a matter of minutes, as opposed to the years of practice taken to learn the scriptural chants in India.

2. Sacred language is retained. The *guru's* name or *mantra* is usually still a Sanskrit word. This word can be easily memorized and chanted even though the person knows no Sanskrit. This appears to be a more satisfactory approach than to attempt to chant English translations of scriptures. As one subject put it, the English translations do not "vibrate" correctly.³⁴ In English the power of the word to affect consciousness is lost. Since learning Sanskrit and the proper melodic forms of chanting verses seems out of the question in Canada, and since English translations do not seem to work, the obvious solution would appear to be the use of a very simple chant in the original language, such as the repetition of the *guru's* name.

3. The time and place of the chanting can be adjusted to suit whatever lifestyle one adopts in Canada. Chanting may be done morning, evening or midday. It may be done at home, while walking to work, on a train or plane, or in one's office. When in public it may be done silently. Thus one can retain regular spiritual practice in spite of the constant change and fast pace of Canadian life.

4. It can be learned easily at any age. Whereas traditional use of sacred language in India depended upon long periods of memorization in early childhood—a practice not likely to occur in Canada—the *guru mantra* requires no training in childhood for it to function in later life.

5. It fulfills the same spiritual role of keeping the mind controlled and focused on the divine. Since the *guru* is merely a channel to the divine, the *mantra* he gives is the psychological device for opening that channel and keeping it open. In India, of course, this function was often fulfilled in the practice of ritual and the learning of sacred scripture.

While the *guru mantra* may prove effective for Hindus living in Canada, one must ask whether the shift has negative implications for the continuing strength of the Hindu tradition. The very simplicity of the approach, and the "blind faith in the *guru*" that is required, may well produce a Hinduism with much more

dependence upon a priestly group (i.e., the *gurus*) than was the case in India. If people no longer learn their scripture and ritual in childhood, the possibility of religious practice independent of the *guru* as mediator may be largely lost. Dependence upon a *guru* may, on the other hand, be the only way of continuing some kind of Hindu practice.

(a) *The Guru as Living Master*

By far the most popular conception of the *guru* in North America is that of a living teacher who gathers around himself a group of disciples whom he initiates into a particular spiritual discipline, and who subsequently acts as guide in the practice of that discipline. The important words here are "initiates" and "spiritual." Indeed, this was illustrated vividly in the views of a mother who had taken a *guru* from the Vedanta Society in Chicago.

Q): Did you have a *guru* in India?

A): No, I can have a *guru* only once.

Q): Only once? What if somebody chose a *guru* and found out later that it was not to be done, that it was not right? Can that happen?

A): That means I am wrong. Then you cannot ignore the prior *guru* unless he was a phoney one. You can't ignore him. You can learn from many teachers, but you have to keep the same *guru*. Because *guru* is nothing but God himself.³⁵

Involved in the quotations above is the popular conception of the *guru* as a living person to whom one relates in a rather special way for spiritual guidance and perhaps initiation of some sort. This special relationship with a living teacher is based on a number of considerations. There must first be a conviction on the part of the follower that the *guru* is competent. How this conviction is acquired is not at all clear, but there is an insistence that it must be there. It may begin with an exchange of letters, some reading which is recommended to the student by the prospective *guru*, or some form of recognition on the part of the prospective *guru*. The setting in which the conviction arises is that of a search. For example, the statement "I was expecting you" normally would not elicit an extraordinary response, but spoken by a prospective *guru* in the context of a search, it carries with it a conviction of its own.³⁶ In part, this conviction is based on confirmation found in special external circumstances, in the recognition of something extraordinary about the person of the *guru*, or in testing of some sort.

One of the subjects summarized the different ways in which conviction and confirmation can happen and ended with an emphasis on external circumstances:

... there are only four ways of attaining a master. The first one is to visit every saintly person that you come across. And you look into his eyes and if you see sort of a glow from within then that is your master. Because that glow will not appear to everybody. The second is to sit in his presence and if you feel that your mind is at peace, then that is your master. If your mind keeps telling you, "I want to go and see that person again," that is your master because the master is supposed to be a realized soul so the moment he sees you, he has made communication: you and he are one. And finally, if none of these work, just sit and yearn for a *guru* and the *guru* will come knocking at your door. And that's exactly what happened in my case.³⁷

In all instances in which the *guru* was understood as a special living teacher, it is interesting to note that the relationship with the *guru* was established, not in India, but in the Western world, in London, New York, Chicago and Toronto. This is noteworthy when one considers that every subject was born and grew up in India. Yet the search for a *guru*, at least the conscious search, did not begin until after the move to the Western world.

Almost invariably the formal relationship with the *guru* was recognized as beginning with an initiation ceremony, for which there appears to be no set pattern. In some instances, the ceremony involved simply giving a *mantra* to the initiates and in other instances, the giving of the *mantra* was preceded by a *puja* ceremony.

Once we were initiated by the *guru*, then he guides us in what ritual we follow; he gives us a *mantra*, to do every morning. We have to chant it 108 times or a thousand times like that. And when once you get the *guru* then he's everything.³⁸

(b) *Less Important Conceptions of the Guru*

Throughout the interviews there were many references to seeds of spiritual formation sown in early life which came to fruition later. One such reference is found in a situation where one would say that the *guru* was understood in terms of an interpretation of the teachings found in the writings of a long-deceased *swami*, rather than as the presence, words and touch of living master. The seeds sown have to do with early education in an Arya Samaj school in Ludiana, North India, and monthly Samaj meetings which included the *havan*, prayer and lectures on *vedic* religion. The dependence on childhood experience is obvious in the matter of what rituals one is to perform and how these are to be performed. In answer to the question of the kind and pattern of the rituals one ought to follow (e.g., the *Samskaras*) the reply was simply, those "laid down by Swami Dayananda, on *Vedic* lines." Or in response to a question on the type of marriage ceremony used:

Well, it's a *Vedic* ceremony and I perform it according to the *Vedic samskars* as elucidated by Swami Dayananda.³⁸

Thus the correct understanding of ritual practice is seen as coming largely from Dayananda Saraswati and his writings. The issue here is the teaching which is found in two sources—the books of Dayananda, and the traditions of the Arya Samaj itself. This becomes authoritative tradition, the spiritual guide. Thus while it is said that the real *guru* enlightens one spiritually, that enlightenment comes through written and oral teaching and traditional practice based on those teachings. The *guru* and scripture come together to the point of being one.³⁹

In this case Dayananda's writings replace the *Vedas*; or the *Vedas* or Dayananda's writings are the only ones that are read. An interesting variation, one that reminds one of Theosophy and Madame Blavatsky, is the *guru* as a disembodied teacher. The description initially sounds much like a description of a loving master:

My *guru* was very liberal-minded; he didn't believe in discriminating between human beings on the basis of their faiths or creeds or castes and so on; he didn't believe in rituals. So my *guru* just reinforced the teaching that I have inadvertently learned from my father.⁴⁰

On closer inspection it becomes apparent that this is a bodiless spiritual guide able to communicate with the disciple anywhere:

. . . my firm conviction is that once we have established this relationship, that he being the *guru*, it's now his responsibility to guide me and therefore it's up to him to communicate to me, whenever and whatever he wants to. But whenever he thinks I need some help, he gives it.⁴¹

In part this communication is based on the ability of the disciple to be attuned. This is achieved through thinking about the *guru* and chanting his name.⁴² The chanting takes on a ritual flavor. It is done first thing in the morning and enables one to focus on the ultimate to achieve spiritual self-realization. In this sense, then, the name of the *guru* becomes the distillation of all that is ultimate, all that is sacred.⁴³ This is fairly close to the emphasis on going beyond the living form of the *guru*, to come to understand the *guru* as a universal reality which is resident in everyone, collectively or individually.

The role of the father as *guru* is an interesting one in most of the interviews conducted, particularly with respect to initiation. Almost invariably, the initiation by a *guru* was not the first one, at least for the males. Usually there had been a initiation early in life, carried out by the father or some other male member of the family, an initiation which was in many respects similar to initiation by the *guru*. The context of this early initiation was the thread ceremony, *Upanayana Samskara*, and thus it amounts to an initiation into the responsibilities of life rather than an initiation into a specific path of spiritual discipline. Other than this, however, the description is similar to the description of the initiation by a *guru*, even down to the matter of imparting a *mantra*. The *mantra* in the initiation by the father is usually the traditional *gayatri*. In one of the interviews it was in fact suggested that traditionally the father could function as a *guru*. Given the kinds of pressure exerted by Canadian society, this allowed more scope and perhaps even provided a little pressure for the father to become the *guru* for the children:

In our Hindu community, many, many people did not really have to go out and look for a *guru*. The father could be a *guru*. So here (Alberta) the father can function better. It gives a better chance for the father to be a better father, to fulfill the role.⁴⁴

Reflections on the Role and Importance of the Guru

The most interesting aspect of these reflections is the recollection that parents, either one or both, had a *guru* in India. Not much importance, however, is attributed to this, at least with respect to his influence or to the totality of religious life as it was perceived. While the presence of the *guru* in the flesh or in iconographic form was noticed, this presence was understood to constitute only a part, in some cases a very small and insignificant part, of what it meant to be Hindu. Consider, for example, the following comments from the same individual. The first has to do with the ritual of food offerings:

When my mother cooked the food, my grandmother came and offered at least five offerings into the fire . . . and that was good enough; that was the Arya Samaj version of worshipping. When she

ate she would sprinkle some water on the food, she would say the prayers . . . Thirdly, she would take out a portion of the food and put it aside, and that would be for the holy cow.⁴⁵

This was followed by comments on the mother's *guru*:

Then she would go into the little room, where she had a picture of her *guru* . . . She was initiated, that I know.⁴⁶

The *Guru* was seen as a piece of the religious landscape along with many other ingredients. Thus apart from the *guru*, one finds at times elaborate descriptions of morning worship before breakfast under the guidance of a priest, of the significant *pujas* during the year, and of the *samskaras*, particularly the thread ceremony with the giving of the *gayatri mantra*. And along with these items one finds almost casual mention of the fact that the family had a *guru* or that family members were initiated by various *gurus*:

My father was initiated by disciples of Swami Vivekananda. My mother with somebody else, my elder sister by . . . first disciple of Vivekananda. And I went to listen to him, get advice from him several times, but I didn't feel to have a *guru* at any time.⁴⁷

Among the comments relating to the Canadian scene, perhaps the most impressive because of its frequency was the acknowledgement of the different religious situation in Canada in comparison to India. This difference has four components. First, that Canadian society was secular and that it was far more natural to breathe and live in the profoundly religious atmosphere of India. Second, that Canada is pluralistic, at least in a formal sense. Third, that the style and pace of life here made traditional observances, particularly in their frequency, much more difficult. Thus compromises were in order and observances tended to become less frequent and more *ad hoc*. Finally, that it is uncommon to have priests familiar with the traditional ritual patterns available for consultation, and performance of, rituals. Thus one would have to make do with local resources or one would simply go without. In this situation it appears that the *guru*, wherever he was operative, had a special role to play either by way of example or through explicit teaching. Consider, for example, the following situation in which we have an initiation by a *guru* (swami) in the Ramakrishna Centre in London. Of importance is the admission that the initiate's spiritual and devotional exercise all began in England, and this of course is linked to the initiation by the *guru*.⁴⁸ Of significance is the description of the spiritual discipline, including ritual, observed in the Ramakrishna Centre compared to the description of ritual exercises in the Hindu Society in Edmonton where the initiate came to play a leading role. First the reflections on the disciplines observed in the Ramakrishna Centre:

At that time the only religious practices were the repetition of the *mantra*, bath, and sitting for meditation. This is traditional Ramakrishna without a central base. Because, some *swamis* do the rituals, and others don't even bother about rituals. A ritualist worship is not what they appreciate most. I saw my *guru* doing the Ramakrishna birthday *puja* in one of them . . . I think it was great. He did the rituals; he was from Kerala, very traditional, very orthodox rituals. One of the strong-holds of mother worship.⁴⁹

The looseness with reference to the form of spiritual exercises—the *ad hoc* approach—which one finds in the above quotation appears clearly in the discussion of ritual observances in the Hindu Society of Edmonton. Note, for example, the following comment on the marriage ceremony:

The Arya Samajist ceremony or the Sanatanist ceremony, basically there is no difference. But the only thing is, there are certain rituals which Arya Samajists don't do, and the Sanatanist Hindus do. Like worshipping the *Devatas*, the *Ganapati*. The Samajist simply want to adore the divine. O.K. fine. But in the other (Sanatanist) marriage we do a little bit of worship. And that hardly takes half an hour extra. . . . I do ask, or some people do tell me what they want, and we do it accordingly. But for me it makes no difference. I'm a great follower of Vivekananda and Swami Dayananda at the same time.⁵⁰

The *ad hoc* approach is virtually the same as that which one sees in the initiation ceremony by the *guru* and in the spiritual exercises observed in the Ramakrishna Centre.

The special role of the *guru* in both initiation and teaching in the Canadian context is made even more obvious in other instances where one finds explicit admission of and comment on this special role. One can, for example, look at the case of an initiation, again under a *guru* from the Ramakrishna mission, this time in Chicago. The initiate regards it as fortunate that she came to North America because here she could get a spiritual *guru* and could have him in her own home, an advantage which might not be available to her in India.⁵¹ The understanding of the particular spiritual path which she gained from the *guru* became important for the new situation she faced in Canada:

You see, I am initiated . . . from the Ramakrishna mission . . . we first believe that there are many ways to reach the highest goal, that is, realizing God. So we have many ways in front of us, but the easiest and nearest way is what we have seen . . . If I have seen the rituals and I have found out the good effects of it, then I'd better follow it. And if I am somewhere where there is nothing available for that purposes, then I don't feel bad, because I know there are many ways. So the main thing is loving God and doing things for Him.⁵²

The ritual pattern in this case was quite different from descriptions of ritual in the paternal and maternal homes in India. Indeed the whole of ritual currently practised focuses on the *guru* and the mantra given by the *guru*:

If I understand him (the *guru*) then I will understand the God absolute. So he did the *puja* of Shri Ramakrishna and then he gave me the mantra . . . from then on I chant at least 108 times daily. It should be three times a day, once in the morning, one in the afternoon, so each time it is before a meal . . . and then as many times as I can. Actually when I'm not doing anything I just say the mantra. That mantra will give me all the mental strength and whatever power I want will come through that mantra. I should have blind faith in it, and I will know the meaning of it. So actually that is my *puja*.⁵³

Thus the *guru* not only became important for adjusting to what was perceived to be a new life situation; he fulfilled the function of the ritual for the individual, replacing observances which had been important in the homes of the parents in India.

In another case the *guru* became significant in the context of a search for something missing, a something which could no longer be found in traditional rituals, particularly those practised in the Arya Samaj, which were seen as boring anyway.⁵⁴ The meeting with the *guru* resulted in a clear understanding of the soul of Hinduism, a release of energy which allowed the respondent to understand the real significance of the ancient texts which had previously not been important to him, and an enjoyment of meditation which now became more meaningful.⁵⁵ All of this came about simply through the touch of the *guru*, Baba Muktananda. Ritual now had to do not with observances which were traditional in India, or even in the Arya Samaj outside of India, but with visiting the *ashram* of Muktananda, reading texts suggested by Muktananda, playing tapes of conferences and singing *mantras* associated with Muktananda.

One can see an interesting variation in another case in which there was involvement in a full ritual life in India and initially in Canada. In India this ritual was done in a prayer room in the home and involved the cleaning, anointing, garlanding, and worshipping of various deities and a full range of annual and special ceremonies requiring priests. During the respondent's university years in India, his level of ritual involvement was reduced. Following the description of all this, there is the comment:

And then in 1971, I came to Canada. And, of course, immediately it was back into the old ritualistic environment because my mother, even in Windsor, Ontario, where we made our home, had one room dedicated for prayer just as I have here (Calgary) and we continued all the rituals. Today I have reduced rituals very much because in 1976 our entire family got a *guru* who initiated us into the *mantra*.⁵⁶

In this case there was no specific injunction from the *guru* that the rituals should cease. Rather, they were instructed to continue the family pattern but to chant the *mantra* given by the *guru* as well. However, more and more time was spent with the *guru's mantra* and less with the traditional rituals simply because the *mantra* allowed for unwinding, for seeing through problems clearly, and for spontaneous responses to potentially problematic situations.⁵⁷ There is in this case a clear recognition that ritual life takes on another form or moves in another direction as a result of meeting the *guru*.

There is a discipline, a ritual practice which develops, revolving totally around the name of the *guru*. This is expressed well in the following comment.

The practice (chanting the *guru's mantra*), like the rituals, are one way to reach God or salvation, or whatever you call it, that ultimate gain, ultimate goal. You know, some people call it finding the truth or finding your own self, self-realization or finding God. I think these are all different words meaning the same things. My chosen part is chanting to myself, not loudly, necessarily. I don't make a public issue of it like the Hare Krishna people. But chanting the name, and thinking about him. . . .⁵⁸

This discipline is seen as something which is obviously more suited to, more useful in a new or "modern" situation, than were more traditional rituals. It can be and is carried out as one rushes from home to office in the automobile or from office to office on elevators.

Conclusion

In his article, "The Guru as the Centre of Sacredness," David Miller argues that the enlightened *guru* is the dynamic sacred centre of Hinduism, more important than either sacred texts or the worship of deities. His interpretation of scripture, tradition and experience is more sacred than sacred texts themselves.

The dynamic, sacred centre within Hinduism continues to be the enlightened *guru* whose charismatic leadership creates the institution for philosophical, religious and social change, guiding Hinduism in new directions that transcend the limitations of traditional sectarianism and that seek a dialogue with other universalist religious points of view.⁵⁹

The focus of Miller's discussion is on figures of the Hindu renaissance, men like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Ramana Maharshi. The claim, of course, is that the function and importance of the *guru* are not developments peculiar to the renaissance, but that the *guru* has always played a central role in the perpetuation and development of the diverse Hindu traditions.

If Miller's assessment is correct, and there are good grounds for claiming that it is, then for one interested in the development of Hindu traditions, it is important to ask whether and to what extent the *guru* continues to play a significant role for Hindu families that have taken up residence in Western society. A first glance at the results of the interviews conducted in Alberta would suggest that Miller's claims concerning the *guru* would apply here as well.

However, we would argue that there is also a significant difference in the place of the *guru* in the "new" Canadian context, at least for the majority of the families interviewed. Given that the models of "religious living" have experienced the shift described, we would predict that it will characterize the experience of the community as a whole in due time. The *guru* is no longer simply the instrument for philosophical, religious and social change, for guiding the devotee and the tradition in new directions. The *guru* now becomes the heart of Hinduism, or Hinduism personified, that which allows East Indians in the West to feel that they are still Hindu in spite of the fact that they can no longer engage in traditional patterns. Even if they were inclined to a full-scale ritual life requiring the services of specialists, such specialists are simply not available on a regular basis, and time constraints will now allow it. It is not as though the *guru* has not before been in evidence or even that he has not been significant. Clearly this role continues for the *guru* even in the Canadian context and in this sense the *guru* continues as a sacred centre. In the new setting, however, the *guru* has a heightened significance. In India, to be Hindu meant to have a *guru* and to engage in traditional rituals inclusive of scripture recitation; in Canada, to be Hindu means simply to have a *guru*. This now becomes almost the exclusive point of identification, that single item which provides a sense of belonging to a tradition. The *guru* is not merely the connecting link to Hinduism: he becomes the sum and substance of it, in effect becoming the ritual, the *mantra* and the scripture.

NOTES

1. This is the second in a series of studies. A consideration of the religious life of the Japanese Buddhist community in Southern Alberta titled, "Sacred Ritual, Sacred Language: Jodo Shinshu Religious Forms in Transition," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 12, 4 (1983):363-379.
2. The thesis of this paper characterizes the Hindu community in Edmonton and Calgary Alberta. It is likely that a similar situation exists in cities with a comparable Hindu population. Separate studies in cities such as Toronto where the Hindu population is large enough to support traditional religious infrastructures would likely yield a modified thesis.
3. Interviews were conducted by David J. Goa. These tapes are available at the Folk Life Collection, Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
4. Walter Principe, "Toward defining spirituality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 12/2 (1983), p. 136. Further methodological considerations can be found in, *The History of Religions, Essays in Methodology* edited by Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959).
5. Interview with Srinivas Doraiswamy, Calgary, March 18, 1982.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Interview with Sujit and Aruna Chakrabarty, Edmonton, April 10, 1982.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Interview with Sushil Kalia, Edmonton, April 14, 1982.
10. Interview with C.G. Balachrandran, Calgary, February 27, 1982
11. Interview with Dr. F.C. Sood, Calgary, March 18, 1982 and, Dr. Murdeshwar, Edmonton, March 16, 1982.
12. Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm, Hindu Consciousness 19th Century Punjab* (Berkeley; California: University of California Press, 1976).
13. A form of this service prepared by Dr. F.C. Sood titled *Havan Yajna* is available from, Dayanand Sansthan, Ved Mandir, New Delhi—110005, India.
14. It is common to find Hindu devotees who use a *murti* in worship, refer to it as an "idol". Whereas the history of such usage can be meaningfully traced, the question as to its implications for the children of devotees remains.
15. Several essays by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) are fruitful in considering this matter.
16. C.G. Balachrandran, *op. cit.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Murdeshwar, *op. cit.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Doraiswamy, *op. cit.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. David Miller, "The Guru as the Centre of Sacredness," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 6, No. 5 (Summer 1976-77), pp. 527-33.
25. See for example Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954).
26. The bulk of descriptive material for this section is drawn from the authors participatory observation and from an interview on the subject with Sushil Kalia the lay priest for the Edmonton Hindu community, Edmonton, May 15, 1982.
27. Brhadaranyakopanisad 1, 3, 28.

28. For a full consideration of this theme see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols, Explorations in Cosmology* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978).
29. Doraiswamy, *op. cit.*
30. Balachrandran, *op. cit.*
31. Chakrabartty, *op. cit.*
32. Balachrandran, *op. cit.*
33. Chakrabartty, *op. cit.*
34. Doraiswamy, *op. cit.*
35. Chakrabartty, *op. cit.*
36. Interview with R. Sood, March 10th, 1982.
37. Doraiswamy, *op. cit.*
38. Interview with Dr. F.C. Sood, March 18, 1982.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Murdeshwar, *op. cit.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. Kalia, *op. cit.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Chakrabartty, *op. cit.*
48. Kalia, *op. cit.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. Chakrabartty, *op. cit.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. Doraiswamy, *op. cit.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. Murdeshwar, *op. cit.*
59. David Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

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