

The Hindu Diaspora in Western Canada

The Hindu diaspora in western Canada can be traced back to the migration of South Asians during the early nineteenth century. The earliest known Hindu immigrants were a small group of Punjabi men that arrived in British Columbia between 1900 and 1908 (Botting and Coward 35). Upon their arrival the immigrants were granted full British citizenship by the federal government which enabled them to vote and aided their ability to find work. This was significant as the first immigrants had left their homeland and families in search of work to provide funds to purchase farmland in Asia (Ibid. 36). With this intention the early immigrants had only planned to stay in Canada temporarily. However, within a few years the initial plan changed as the temporary settlements the first immigrants had built in Canada became permanent.

By 1907 the population of south Asian immigrants had grown substantially. The men had started to use their income to bring their wives and children permanently from south Asia to British Columbia and had begun to create their own lives in Canada. As the population of immigrants grew the Anglo Saxon inhabitants began to perceive them as a threat. The Anglo Saxons came to believe that the south Asians would overwhelm their population due to the immigrants cultural and religious diversity and began to pursue a means to ban south Asian women from entering the country. The Anglo Saxon population believed that if the south Asian women were denied entry to Canada the men would have no way to start a family and set down roots (Gupta 61). The Anglo Saxon inhabitants started to raise their concerns nationwide through newspapers, petitions, and rallies. The issue drew to the forefront in 1907 when the federal government voted in favor of revoking all the British citizenships they had granted to south Asian immigrants (Ibid. 60).

By 1908, the provincial government had followed suit by suspending the right of all south Asian immigrants to vote in municipal and provincial elections. At the same time, the provincial government denied the same immigrants the ability to serve as school trustees, on juries, in public service, holding jobs resulting from public work contracts, purchasing crown timber, as well as practicing the professions of law or pharmacy (Botting and Coward 36). However, this was not enough for the Anglo Saxon inhabitants as the immigration of south Asians had yet to be deterred. Later in the year, the demands of the Anglo Saxon community were met with the immigration policy known as the continuous journey stipulation which required immigrants to purchase a ticket from one's country of origin through to Canada (Ibid). At that point there were no shipping companies with the capability to cover both the Indian-Hong Kong and Hong Kong-Canadian portions of the trip making the purchase of a continuous ticket impossible. The continuous journey stipulation succeeded in cutting off the immigration of south Asians for decades to come.

In 1919 amendments were made to the immigration policy in an effort to allow legitimate wives and children to join their husbands and fathers in British Columbia (Ibid. 37). The Canadian government demanded that the legitimacy of the wives and children be proven by certificates of marriage or birth. However since no formal records of such a nature were retained by the south Asian governments prior to 1924 only a minority of women were able to immigrate on these grounds. As a result, between 1920 and 1940 only 144 women and 188 children arrived in Canada leaving the south Asian immigrant population in British Columbia static until 1950 (Gupta 61). South Asian immigrants were not openly welcomed into Canada again until the 1960's when Canada experienced a shortage of qualified professionals and blue collar workers. In response the first large group of Hindus immigrated to Canada from the north Indian province

of Uttar Pradesh. This initial movement started a new wave of Hindu immigrants to Canada from former British colonies. Over the next decade Hindu professionals immigrated mainly from East Africa, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, and Guyana; while a number of blue collar workers came from Trinidad (Buchignani 212).

The current problems faced within the Hindu diaspora in Canada no longer center on immigration issues but on the retainment of the traditional practices of the Hindu religion itself. By 1991 the Canadian census stated that the Hindu population in Canada had risen to 157,010, of which the greatest concentrations were found in greater metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver (Botting and Coward 35). The majority of the population in the two centers were separated into two distinct age categories, below the age of 15 or between the ages of 25 and 44. With these demographics the diasporic family structure has become different from the traditional structures found in south Asia. Conventionally the grandparents and parents would share the role of educating the children in the customs and traditions associated with the Hindu tradition. In the Canadian diaspora grandparents usually do not live with the family (if they even reside in the same country as their family) which has left a rift in the religious education of the younger generations (Ibid. 45). The second and third generations of Hindu immigrants in Canada have three primary sources for the attainment of education surrounding their traditional languages, culture, and religious knowledge. The first of which is their immediate family, the second is their participation in heritage and cultural programs, and thirdly on trips to India (Pearson 438). As heritage and cultural programs are not widely popular and trips to India are not always possible, Hinduism in the diaspora has come to rely heavily on the family home devotions of its followers as well as the guidance of the *guru* to transmit the religion to younger generations.

In India the *guru* plays a pivotal role within the Hindu tradition. The *guru* was given the responsibility of interpreting the scriptures for the community. As Hinduism places an emphasis on the sacred experience rather than the sacred text, the *guru* became a driving force for the movement. The *guru* allowed for the continuation and adaptation of the tradition within the growing postmodern world (Botting and Coward 41).

As many Hindus are involved in Canada's fast paced culture, time constraints have affected their ability to fully carryout daily devotional practices. In order to provide the worshiper with the ability to carry out their daily devotions family *gurus* have simplified the devotional practices. One new aspect of devotional worship known as the *guru-mantra* was brought about to replace the traditional practice of chanting Sanskrit texts (Botting and Coward 44). As the younger generations have not had the chance to memorized sacred texts and languages the same way their parents had, *gurus* have replaced this with the practice of chanting the *guru-mantra* 108 times 2 to 3 times a day (Ibid. 46). The institution of the *guru-mantra* has proven to be effective in Canada however it does raise questions regarding the simplification of the tradition. With such dependence on the *guru* one may find Canada's future form of Hinduism to more closely resemble that of India except with a greater dependence on the priestly cast (Botting and Coward 46). It has also been argued that without the second and third generations learning the sacred languages and texts as deeply as their parents they may have lost their ability to see the importance of the devotional lifestyle outside of Hinduism's major rituals such as naming, marriage, and death (Pearson 430). However, it is important to note that the third generation has exhibited the most interest in rediscovering and restoring the practices of their grandparents (Botting and Coward 38).

While individual practices held within Hinduism have been more easily carried over in the Canadian diaspora public rites have not. One such case can be found in the Hindu death rite. Often Hindu communities in Canada do not have their own temple equipped with the means to carry out such a ritual to the standards of law (Ibid. 42). In Canada family and friends of the deceased are often forced to perform the death ritual at a funeral home with the necessary facilities for cremation. At the start, an invocation to Visnu may be offered followed by a *mantra* from the Upanisad. Next *ghee* will be placed on the body, a drop of water will be put in the mouth, and flowers are offered while the body is being placed in to the casket. Funeral homes in Canada will not allow for the eldest son to fully perform the *havan* as it requires offerings to be made to the fire God Agni who bears the dead to the eternal realm. However, the *mantras* for the *havan* are said even if the fire offering is unable to be made (Ibid. 42). The funeral pyre has become the cremation furnace which requires a mechanical lift to place the body into the furnace. In India the family and friends of the deceased would have traditionally placed the body on top of the pyre. As the furnace has its own ignition mechanism the *ghee* no longer plays a role in the actual ignition of the pyre. The restructuring of the death ritual to fit Canadian standard's has left it abstract, removed from the mourners, and at a loss for its great symbolic and theological meaning (Ibid. 43). In an effort to reclaim some of the portions of the death ritual lost when it is held in a funeral home Hindu communities in western Canada are building their own crematoriums to allow them the ability to properly carry out the ritual (Ibid. 44).

Within the last century the Hindu diaspora in Canada has evolved to fit its ever changing environment overcoming political and social pressures to find its place in the fabric of Canada. With the movement currently in its third and fourth generations removed from its initial immigrants, its ongoing success in Canada will center on the traditions ability to reach

individuals and families in a meaningful way while maintaining the sacrality of the tradition. The continued growth of the movement will also depend on the tradition's ability to maintain the interest of its younger generations with the threat of secularization and consumerization in Canada.

References and Further Recommended Reading

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Waghorne, Joanne P. (2004) *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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