

The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism: Postcolonial Patterns in India, Britain and the US

Rationale and Research Context

This network project aims to examine the various ways in which Hinduism has been asserted and maintained as a public presence in a range of contemporary contexts. It compares the public representation of Hinduism as a religion in India with that of Hinduism in diasporic contexts.

There are two bodies of work which provide the research context for this network.

Research context A: The first concerns the development of a more nuanced understanding of religion as a modern discourse, and the impact that this might have on our understanding of the place of Hinduism in a variety of modern contexts. In recent years the concept of 'religion' has come under increasing scrutiny, with scholars such as Fitzgerald (2000) and McCutcheon (1997) questioning its viability as a *sui generis* category, and examining its historical development as a feature of modern relations of power. An associated body of work has focused on the idea of Hinduism. Some scholars have argued that this concept simply cannot adequately make sense of the wide range of ideas and actions that are regularly seen to be encompassed by it (von Stietencron, 1997), or that its use actively marginalises ideas and actions which appear to cut across the perceived boundaries between Hindu and non-Hindu, therefore reinforcing some very real relations of power both in the subcontinent and beyond (Oberoi, 1994, Searle-Chatterjee, 2000). Others focus on the historical construction of the concept, arguing that some critical interventions in the early modern period effectively 'constructed' or 'invented' Hinduism as a religion, either partially or fully (Frykenberg, 1989, Pennington, 2006, Sweetman, 2003).

Research context B: At the same time, the salience of Hinduism as a globally significant category in the contemporary world is plainly evident, and this observation forms the backdrop to the second body of work which this project takes into account. In the postcolonial era, Hinduism has established a public presence in a number of contexts. Often, this public presence is projected by organisations which seek to represent Hindus and Hinduism, either in specific sectors or in a generalised fashion, in the context of discourses of nationhood, citizenship, ethnicity and, of course, religion. In India, the work which has examined such organisations has been dominated by a focus on Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. Organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad project themselves as the gatekeepers of Hindu identity, and a good deal of work has examined their development and ideological trajectories (Anderson and Damle, 1987, Jaffrelot 1996, Katju, 2003). There have also been some examinations of Hindu nationalist organisations in the diaspora, but more generally diaspora-focused work has considered the development of Hinduism as a 'migrant religion' with an emerging public face. There have, then, been some valuable examinations of sampradayas such as ISKCON and BAPS Swaminarayan (Nye, 2001, Williams, 2001), and also of the developing public presence of Hindu temples in particular localities (Knott, 1986, Nye, 1995). There has been one major study articulating the idea of a 'Hindu diaspora', in which the idea of an emerging global Hindu consciousness is mooted (Vertovec, 2000).

The research network proposes to build on these two bodies of work. It acknowledges the emerging public presence of Hinduism, projected by a range of organisations, but also seeks to build on the work of scholars who have interrogated

the idea of Hinduism as noted above. The network aims to explore the location of Hinduism in a range of public contexts, without assuming the existence of religion as a discrete, 'special' category of human experience, but rather understanding the way in which it is projected as such by different groups in different contexts. In this way, the research will seek to increase awareness of the dynamic nature of the category 'Hinduism', the different ways it relates to political discourses and key social discourses such as caste, race, class, gender and religion.

The objectives of the network will lead it to extend the work which has been achieved in both the contexts outlined here. In context A, where the construction of Hinduism as a modern category has been explored, the emphasis has been on ideas and social processes occurring in the colonial and early modern contexts. Relatively little work has engaged with the impact of these ideas on the presentation of Hindu-ness in a post-colonial context. By focusing on the public representation of Hinduism in contemporary contexts, the network will address this lacuna. In context B, the emphasis has largely been on the study of Hinduism and its public representation either in India or in different diasporic contexts. The advantage of the network format is that it will encourage a comparative approach, examining the different social, political and cultural contexts in which Hinduism has been publicly instituted in both India and two critical diaspora contexts, Britain and USA. The network will also provide the opportunity to compare the work of transnational organisations, exploring the nuances and multiple inflections of their presence in different contexts, and assessing the impact of advanced forms of communication and other aspects of globalization on their development. The comparative approach will also encompass the dynamic of Hindu institutions and organisations in relation to those representing other religious identities, particularly in political contexts framed by rhetorics of communalism and/or multiculturalism.

A dominant theme in the public representation of Hinduism, as indicated above, has been the development of Hindu nationalism, both in India and in the diaspora. The network will acknowledge and work with this dominant theme, as there have been surprisingly few studies of Hindu nationalism which span its development in both India and the diaspora. Beyond this, however, the network will also encourage research into other forms of public presence, such as

- Temple building and public worship. In particular, the establishment of large, 'show' temples with a national profile; for example, the Neasden temple in north-west London, and the Akshardham temple in New Delhi, both, as it so happens, established in recent years by the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. Also the development of new modes of worship, including congregational innovation in political contexts, such as the Shiv Sena's 'Maha Aarti' ceremonies, and so-called 'on-line puja' in transnational perspective.
- 'Modern sampradayas'. Related to the above is the developing profile of some sampradayas in a range of public contexts. Taking a lead from Lise McKean's work on 'modern Gurus' (1995), this area of research seeks to explore the development of sampradayas such as BAPS Swaminarayan, ISKCON, and the Saiva Siddhanta Church as organisations with a resonance in modern institutional contexts and transnational spaces.
- The establishment and development of representative organisations. Certain organisations have sought to represent Hindus – socially, culturally, politically – in a self-consciously broad, non-aligned fashion. This development is evident in diaspora contexts, where we have seen the emergence, for example, of the Hindu Forum of Britain and the Hindu American Foundation. The research will examine the ideological trajectories of such organisations and their impact both in diasporic and Indian contexts.

- Hindu organisations in the NGO sector. 'Faith-based' development and disaster relief work has become increasingly significant in recent years. The network seeks to explore ways in which Hindu organisations have become part of this development both in India and the diaspora, and how the transnational profile of some organisations has contributed to this development.

The research network is necessarily interdisciplinary as it seeks to bring together researchers in Britain and the USA who may be located in Religious Studies, Anthropology, Sociology and South Asian Studies departments with researchers in India who may be located in departments of Politics, Sociology, Anthropology or History. One interesting feature of the network is its potential in bringing recent thinking in Religious Studies into conversation with other social science and humanities disciplines interested in these ideas, but perhaps less familiar with Religious Studies literature. In particular this is relevant as there is no tradition of Religious Studies as a separate discipline in India.

Key Objectives

- To bring together a range of researchers interested in the development of modern Hinduism in public contexts
- To investigate and compare different ways in which Hindu-ness is articulated as a religion in different social and political contexts
- To evaluate the impact of Hindu nationalist ideas on the public presentation of modern Hinduism
- To raise awareness of the political, social and technological forces underpinning the development of Hinduness as a form of identity
- To explore the development and potential of transnational organisations in relation to the production of modern Hindu identity

Timetable of Activities

The network will run over a period of two years. The first meeting will take place as a panel at the 2008 European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, to be held in Manchester in July 2008. This conference attracts academics from around the world and will provide an excellent environment for the launching of the network. Papers will be sought for a panel on 'The Public Representation of a Religion called Hinduism', and a discussion paper will be circulated to delegates in which the key objectives of the network will be explored.

Six network symposia will then be held during the course of 2008 – 10. These symposia will be held in the three countries covered by the research, the UK, India and the US. Different symposia will be focused on different aspects of the research proposal as follows

- Temple building and public worship
- Modern sampradayas
- Hindu representative organisations
- NGO's and 'faith-based' development
- Hindu nationalist organisations in social and political context
- Hindu nationalist networks in the context of transnationalism

The two year cycle of the network will be completed with a further event at the 2010 ECMSAS conference (venue yet to be decided). At this conference, the network will sponsor a panel placing the public representation of a religion called Hinduism in the context of the representation of other religions, both in India and the diaspora. The network steering group will also seek to organise a round table discussion as a plenary session at the conference, in which the experiences and key ideas of the network are reviewed.