# Following the Swami: Diaspora, Dialogue, and the Creation of a Hindu Identity in a Queens Community

By Drew Thomases

*"Move on, O Lord, in thy resistless path!*
*Till thy high noon o'erspreads the world,*
*Till every land reflects thy light,*
*Till men and women, uplifted head,*
*Behold their shackles broken, and*
*Know, in springing joy, their life renewed!"*

**-excerpt from "To the Fourth of July"**
**by Swami Vivekananda** (2004, p. 555)

## Introduction

Indians and especially Hindus have found it necessary to develop a strong group identity when establishing a community amongst the assimilative "melting pot" of America. India—a vast land of linguistic, religious, and cultural differences—serves as a poor template upon which one could create such a cohesive identity. Yet out of this seemingly negative situation arose the greatest of opportunities; the opportunity to rewrite history, to reestablish the long-forgotten, and to throw out the all-too easily remembered—the opportunity to create an identity that, although separate from India, cherishes its "Indian-ness." Thus, the Hindu diaspora was established. This paper is designed not to document the creation of this diasporic identity, but rather to explore its appearance today, and most importantly to interpret how this community has participated in the recreation of a Hinduism unique to the American landscape. Undergirding this observation is the growing stress placed upon religious education, both of the second generation American-born Indian youth and the general adult population. It is within the dynamic of cultural edification that the interaction between Hinduism and the West becomes most salient.

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda stepped onto the shores of America, bringing with him something wholly new and unfamiliar. That something—entrenched in thousands of years of Indian tradition—was Hinduism. The World Parliament of Religions in Chicago served as the means through which the Swami could teach America of the many ways of the Hindu. In the coming decades, other Swamis from India would come to America to intrigue the audience that so loved the mystery and allure of the far-off subcontinent. Apart from spiritual teachers, though, few Indians were actually permitted entrance into the country. America, it seemed, admired the philosophy of the East, but eschewed having Indians as fellow citizens. Finally, the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965 granted these "new immigrants" complete access to American soil.

Presently, there are around 1.5 million Indian immigrants in America, with a fourth of them living in New York City. Queens houses about half of that, making it one of the largest Indian communities in America (aafny.org). And while Sikhs comprise a disproportionably high percentage of immigrants from India, Hindus are nevertheless the majority. Throughout Queens there are cultural centers such as the "Little India" area of Jackson Heights, and several Hindu temples in nearby Woodside, Elmhurst, and Flushing. Unlike temples in India, which are largely places for worship, temples in America assume a much larger role, acting as the "nexus of cultural expression," where adults mingle, and where children take classes to learn about their traditions (Bhardwaj & Rao, 1998).

This study focuses on three different temples in Queens, and how they reflect important themes within both the community, and diasporic Hinduism. First, I attended a class called "Basics of Hinduism for Children and their Parents" with Canadian-born (and

Canadian-blooded) Swami Nikhilanand at the Satya Narayan Temple in Elmhurst. Here, the Swami expounded upon a homogenized Hinduism, seeking authenticity through ancient texts, and focusing on monist or monotheistic philosophy. Next is the Ganesha Temple in Flushing, which has several language, cultural, and religious classes all designed to help the second generation cope with problems of double identity. Third is the Hindu Center in Flushing, where a Sunday afternoon congregation and lecture portrays the adoption of an ecumenical attitude akin more to Christianity than to Hinduism (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). An exploration and analysis of these three temples will demonstrate how dialogue between the Hindu diaspora and the West has led to the creation of a community unlike any other in the world.

**Hinduism as an Indian Construct**

One might be confused to find that, in many ways, Hinduism is not a religion. Still, when trying to comprehend a several thousand year old tradition that contains varying sects, gods, scriptures, languages, and practices, perhaps confusion is the best sentiment that one should feel. Ursula King (1989) explains the first of many problems when trying to define Hinduism:

> "Religion" is often used as an observer's construct. As such it is applied to sets of activities which the actors themselves may not necessarily term religious, nor may they necessarily combine distinctly separate activities into a coherent unity in the way the observer does (p. 75).

And so it seems that in the struggle to define Hinduism, scholars often establish truths where there are none; they look for threads of commonality that—no matter how small—help to create a unified Hindu belief system that, in most simple terms, does not exist.

Indeed, what makes Hinduism so very special is not its unwavering unity of thought, but rather its enormous body of diverse history, philosophy, and practice. The

earliest traces of what we might call Hinduism comes from the Indus Valley Civilization, which produced the Vedic culture. Although the historicity of this civilization is a largely contentious issue, the general consensus is that sometime around 1800-1000 B.C.E., a group of religious scriptures, called the Vedas, were written. These Vedas spoke of many gods and goddesses, with a strong focus on the practice of rituals. Other works such as the Upanishads were written to accompany the Vedas, and to elucidate a more monist approach. Eventually Vedic gods fell out of favor, and new gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, and Durga became the objects of worship. Later came Hindu reformers of the 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ century like Swami Vivekananda, who again spoke of Vedantic monism, but "did not so much describe what Hinduism is but, influenced by a western model of religion, they prescribed what Hinduism ought to be" (King, 1989, p. 80). The modern orthopraxic Hindu in India is aware of Vedantic philosophy, and knows well the words of Vivekananda; but his religious practice seldom reflects their ideals. Instead, he goes to temple, gets *darshan* (divine sight of the gods), and loves mythic television serials. We cannot so easily explain what is "Hindu" and what is not.

Perhaps the most delicate issue of the study of modern Hinduism is the debate over monotheism and polytheism. Hinduism is undoubtedly polytheistic; there are many Hindus—both past and present—that might worship Vishnu and not Shiva, and vice versa. In fact, bloody sectarian battles have been fought over this difference. On the other hand, Hinduism is undoubtedly monotheistic; the tradition's great scriptures all openly declaim the Oneness of God, and most Hindu philosophy deals entirely with the concept of *brahman* (Supreme Reality). Diana Eck (1998) describes this seemingly unsolvable dilemma:

> The point here, however, is that India's affirmation of Oneness is made in a context that affirms with equal vehemence the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen this Oneness and expressed their vision. Indian monotheism or monism cannot therefore, be aptly compared with the monotheism of the West. The statement that "God is One" does not mean the same thing in India and the West (p. 24).

Furthermore, she adds that Oneness is not any more valid or significant than the polytheistic tradition, but rather that the two are "inextricably related" (Eck, 1998, p. 28). Pundit Krishna Pratap Dikshit of the Hindu Center in Flushing relayed this idea with equal veracity. In an interview, the Pundit pointed to a number of things: a light bulb, a tube light, a computer, and a fan. These, he explained, were the many forms of God. Yet a singular power (electricity) lights these bulbs, works the computer, and turns the fan on. The light bulb is nothing without the power, but we would never be aware of the power's presence without the light bulb. And so both the single power and the multiple forms are dependent upon each other (K.P. Dikshit, personal communication, July 25, 2006).

Hinduism is a conglomeration of traditions that—over the past several thousand years—has seen innumerable transitions. It is a way of life and a culture. Or as Diana Eck (1998) so simply puts it, "Hinduism is no more, no less than the "ism" of India" (p. 24). We must now ask what this "ism" of India looks like when it is no longer on home turf. What defines Hinduism in the diaspora, and how has the opportunity to create changed the face of Indian culture abroad?

**The Dynamics of a Community**

Structuring a community, especially in the diaspora, can be a daunting task. As noted earlier, when immigrants arrive in their new home, they immediately face the pressures of assimilation. While some Indians welcome the West in open arms, most do as much as they can to preserve their culture, and values therein. According to Bhardwaj

and Rao (1998), these Indians must undergo a “regrouping process,” where something as simple as the construction of the household altar accomplishes multiple objectives: it becomes the focal point of family engagement, the place of worship, and perhaps most importantly, the overt symbol of allegiance to the religion and culture of the home country.

Eventually, the community grows large enough to warrant a more extensive regrouping with the establishment of the cultural center. A cultural center, like that of Jackson Heights, provides a much needed home-away-from-home, where the sights, sounds, and smells are all pleasantly familiar. As “the visible signs of ethnic identity,” these centers serve as a memento of a culture far away, but not forgotten (Lessinger, 1995, p. 32). In having to represent themselves to the Western world, the members of the diaspora take an opportunity not simply to reproduce India in America, but rather to decide what retains value within the diasporic context. It is this separation from the homeland that allows for the reconsideration of certain ideas, and for the creation of a Hindu tradition that is in dialogue—not at odds—with the West. Caste, of course, is the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of “reconsideration.” David Frawley (2003), in his book *Hinduism: The Eternal Tradition (Sanatana Dharma)*, notes that “Caste is the most embarrassing part of Hinduism and the most difficult to explain to the modern mind” (p. 213). It is therefore within the reigns of the diaspora community to selectively forget caste or any other part of Indian tradition that does not contribute to the success of the community (Clifford, 1994). Caste does not, in fact, play any significant role in the every-day diaspora, but when a family begins to investigate marriage, caste restrictions

become palpable (A.W. Helweg & U.M. Helweg, 1990). Still, these vestiges of conservative Indian tradition may dissipate in the second generation youth.

With the structuring of the cultural center, the community might begin to establish its religious centers. This once again involves careful deliberation rather than simple replication. The first issue always concerns what deities to have in the temple, and it seems that the unanimous answer is "all of them." That is not to say that there are 330 million *murtis* (divine images) in every temple, but rather that most temples contain the deities from every major sect and region: Lakshmi-Narayan, Shiva-Parvati, Rama-Sita, Krishna-Radha, Hanuman, Ganesha, Durga, and Saraswati. The decision to install this large group of *murtis* is both practical and profound: practical in that it attracts devotees from all regions of India; profound in that it suggests a reconsideration of differences across religious boundaries, pointing to a unification process found within diaspora Hinduism. This unification is not necessarily homogenizing, but rather gathering the varied traditions under one roof.

When looking at transformations in immigrant religions, Yang and Ebaugh (2001) note three overarching themes: one, the increasing congregationalism found within previously non-congregational religions; two, the return to theological foundations in search of a "purer" form; and three, the process of reaching past traditional boundaries for greater inclusion. Within the Hindu religious community of Queens, all three of these themes are present. Congregationalism, although not by any means common, is evident within the Hindu Center in Flushing, and will be discussed in-depth later. The process of reaching past traditional boundaries is certainly an aspect of the Hindu diaspora, especially when Hindus in India rarely look past their region or language-group for

inclusion. The most relevant theme to this study, however, is that of returning to theological foundations. The success of diaspora Hinduism is dependent upon perceived authenticity, which is acquired through both a return to theological foundations, and a revisiting of the past. I will explore this theme alongside an analysis of Swami Nikhilanand and what he considers the "Basics of Hinduism."

**Following the Swami: Basics, Foundations, and the Future**

Just a five minute walk from the "Little India" section of Jackson Heights is the Satya Narayan Mandir (temple). The building itself is brick with barred windows—a seemingly mundane structure. Its canopy is black and white and has the name of the temple written in English, Hindi, and Urdu. The doors are painted saffron, offering just a small taste of what is to come. Upon entering I take off my shoes, put my palms together and say "namaste" (hello) to a man who is undoubtedly Swami Nikhilanand. There are many Indians in the temple hall; all except for me and the Swami.

Born in Canada and raised a Christian, Swami Nikhilanand is one of many Westerners who has turned to Hinduism in search of answers to spiritual questions. He became a Hindu in the Barsana Dham Ashram in Austin, Texas—all before he had traveled to the subcontinent. He studied the many Hindu scriptures, Hindi, and Sanskrit, went to India several times, and was eventually given "Sanyas," or the rank of spiritual teacher and ascetic. Following the ways of his guru, Jagadguru Shree Kripaluji Maharaj, Swami Nikhilanand worships Radha as a form of "Divine Love" ("Barsana Dham," 2003). He often comes to New York for a few months out of the year to teach about Hinduism.

A "Basics of Hinduism" class remains a new concept for those in the diaspora. Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Temple Society of North America, explains:

> As we grew up [in India], we never questioned anything. We observed lots of things happening inside the homes. Festivals were being celebrated, rituals were done, but then we didn't ask what they were doing, why they were doing it. We simply said 'yes, they're doing it, so we do it.' But today [in America] the children are different, and they have to know why, and the problem is the parents do not know the answer (Uma Mysorekar, personal communication, July 28, 2006).

Hindus in America can no longer just "do it"; they need to explain their religion, not only to their Western neighbors, but to there own children as well (Baumann, 2001). And so Swami Nikhilanand has come at just the right time. Yet as stated before, Hinduism is a particularly ambiguous term, especially when trying to ascertain its "basics." A tree with innumerable branches may seem to have a single sturdy foundation in its trunk, but by looking beneath the soil one finds an even more complicated root system. Truly, the Swami has a difficult task.

The subject of the first "Basics of Hinduism" class was a telling one. Swami Nikhilanand wanted the children to give the many names for God. As the children yelled out names of the Hindu pantheon, the Swami's assistant wrote them down on a white-board. A child said "Jesus," and the Swami promptly replied "Jesus was a great teacher, but right now we are talking about *Bhagwan* (God)." There were now twenty names on the board. The Swami asked "So are there twenty gods?" The room fell silent. "No," he exclaimed, "There is only one God." Five minutes into the class, and my mind was racing. One must now recall Diana Eck (1998): "The statement that God is One does not mean the same thing in India and the West" (p. 24). The question is whether a Hindu child, born in America, can understand his religion in the context of a country in which he may have never lived? Essentially, what will the statement "God is One" mean to

those Hindus who have learned about Hinduism in America? This is important because, as I have mentioned before, the future of diasporic Hinduism lies within these children.

When asked in an interview about polytheism, Swami Nikhilanand explained his understanding on the issue:

> There is a big confusion in the world. If you read any Encyclopedia and look up Hinduism, the very first sentence will be "Hinduism is a polytheistic religion," which is absolutely wrong (Swami Nikhilanand, personal communication, July 27, 2006).

"Absolutely wrong" is a strong phrase for a statement one might believe to be half-right. Hinduism contains innumerable traditions, many of which involve varying gods. Yes, they may ultimately reflect upon a supreme divinity, but their presence must not be ignored. On the other hand, the push to bolster monism and to rebuke polytheism is understood—especially in the West. It indicates the attempt to reinterpret for the sake of cultural reconciliation, and may therefore play a role in the future success of American Hinduism. Nevertheless, tradition and change must always remain in balance.

It was not until the third class that the Swami alluded to the process of returning to theological foundations. As a land of many different regions, histories, and dialects, India has never possessed complete cultural cohesion. Having only recently thrown off the shackles of Colonial dominance, moreover, India has also not yet fully decided what it means to be "Indian"; not Indian under Muslim rule, nor Indian under the British Raj, but just Indian—independent and free to explore identities. And so both India and the Indian diaspora have the unique opportunity to "engage in the critical task of reciprocal invention" (Radhakrishnan, 1993, p. 766) This means to find theological foundations that best suit one's identity or beliefs, to valorize them in the "mythic past," and then to internalize them as if they have always been (Radhakrishnan, 1993, p. 766).

The Swami's return to theological foundations was not any different than that of Swami Vivekananda over a hundred years ago. Still, it is worth noting that what Swami Nikhilanand presents as a theological foundation becomes internalized in the minds of the twenty Indian children that sit before him. The Swami handed out a piece of paper with a short Sanskrit verse of a "Vedic chant," written in Devanagari and English script, cited from the Svetasvatara Upanishad. The translation read:

> God is One. He has a Divine form. He resides in the heart of all living beings. He is omnipresent. He is the supreme Soul of all souls. He is the eternal witness of all their karm and gives the consequence of their actions. The whole universe resides within Him. He is Graciously watching all the souls. He is Divine Bliss and knowledge and he is beyond mayic qualities ("Basics of Hinduism," 2006).

Swami Nikhilanand's reciprocal invention is subtle, but very powerful. The significance here is two-fold. First, the Swami chose a passage that, in returning to the theological foundations of the Vedas, bestowed upon itself authenticity and authority. In truth, the majority of Vedic literature does not reflect the practices of modern-day Hinduism. Nevertheless, The Vedas enjoy importance because they assert Hinduism's position as one of the first world-religions. Second, and more importantly, this passage is from the Svetasvatara Upanishad, undoubtedly benefiting from the authority of the Vedic corpus, but differing from Veda in philosophy. Here, one must take note of Swami Nikhilanand's selectivity. He could have easily chosen any number of chants from the much earlier Rig Veda, but these would fail to bolster concepts of monism. A hymn to Agni illustrates this:

> Like some rich Lord of men may he, Agni the banner of the Gods, Refulgent, hear us through our lauds. Glory to the Gods, the mighty and the lesser glory to the Gods the younger and the elder! Let us, if we have power, pay the God worship: no better prayer than this, ye Gods, acknowledge (Griffith, 1896).

Through selectively choosing an ancient text that espouses the Oneness of God, the Swami is able to simultaneously emphasize the focus of his teachings while conferring authority upon them.

Swami Nikhilanand's "Basics of Hinduism" class offered valuable insight into the changing nature of diasporic Hindu thought. His emphasis on the Oneness of God and the return to theological foundations suggests an idealized Hinduism—one where philosophy aids in the everyday, and theory meets practice. The children who took this class will remember the Swami's words, and they will help to shape the future of their religion.

**The Ganesh Temple: Removing Obstacles for the Next Generation**

The second generation youth in the Hindu diaspora faces great challenges when growing up in America, mostly deriving from issues of double identity. This situation is unique to the youth, as the first generation parents have always looked at themselves "as Indians in America, rather than Indian Americans" (Moag, 2001, p. 251). These second generation children, therefore, are the first to have the privilege of questioning whether they are Indian, American, or American-born Indian. Rodney Moag (2001) observes the "three stages of second generation identity formation": first is the "totally Indian" stage, where the child spends his early years under the parents' control, and is rarely exposed to the outside world. Once the child enters school, though, stage two, or "conflict and compartmentalization" begins, and he sees a world that is far different from anything he had ever known. He meets students from different cultural backgrounds, becomes aware of the stereotypes facing him, and often struggles to understand himself in the new context. The third stage, "reconciliation" is where the now college student has come to

terms with his identity, and can comfortably approach his two cultures (pp.250-255). But must a child struggle with his identity for 18 years of his life? Does the process of reconciliation have to wait so long?

Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Temple Society of North America (otherwise known as the Ganesha Temple), understands the struggles of the second generation, and has gone to great lengths to initiate the process of reconciliation. Indeed, the Ganesha temple maintains more educational and youth services than any other single temple in the Hindu diaspora of New York, perhaps the country. As one of the first Hindu temples built in America, and the very first built according to the *Agama-sastras* (temple-building scriptures), Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam (the Ganesha temple) stands as a paragon of the accomplishments of the Hindu diaspora (Hanson, 2001). In October of 1998, the Ganesha Temple opened up its Ganesha Patasala, a building adjacent to the temple designed specifically for youth activities. Here, members of the Youth Club meet for language classes, Math and English classes, *bhajans* (prayer-songs), dance lessons, and Veena lessons. The wide variety of offerings at the Patasala reflects the varying needs and desires of the second generation youth. Furthermore, the classes provide the opportunity for many students of the same background and similar disposition to meet, and begin to understand themselves through others.

The most impressive array of classes at the Ganesha Temple is that of Indian languages. Whereas most temples offer at most Hindi, the Ganesha temple offers Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Sanskrit. The variety is particularly important because about 50% of the temple's devotees are from Southern (non-Hindi speaking) regions. Dr. Mysorekar explains that parents "are always concerned about their mother-tongues," and

so it becomes a priority in their child's education. The chance of a student actually gaining proficiency in a once-a-week language course is slight, but any level of competence, or even effort, instills a "sense of pride" amongst child, parent, and extended family (Uma Mysorekar, personal communication, July 28, 2006). Furthermore, language acts as an apparent symbol of cultural preservation, regardless of its practical use. Thus, language classes reflect that both the temple and the surrounding community are making an effort to preserve all remnants of home culture.

Sanskrit classes, however, do not fall into the same category as that previously mentioned. Sanskrit, the language of Hindu scripture dating back to around 1800 B.C., has not been a "mother-tongue" for quite some time. Most Hindus, aside from Brahmins, do not know Sanskrit, and more importantly, do not care to. Still, even more than the mother-tongues, Sanskrit has come to represent all that is good about India, Indian culture, and the glorious Indian past. As the sacred language of the Aryans, of whom recent scholarship has begun to question, Sanskrit serves as a reminder to members of the Indian diaspora that they are descendents of one of the world's earliest civilizations. Furthermore, Sanskrit is an ancient contributor to the Indo-European language group, allowing Indians to claim linguistic, and ultimately cultural superiority over their European counterparts. For the second generation youth, Sanskrit is not just about language, or religion, but about building identity and cultivating a connection with the past.

In addition to these language classes, the temple offers courses in *bhajans*, Dance, and Veena. These courses are unique in that they present themselves as being largely recreational, but ultimately propound religious thought. Art and spirituality are

inextricably tied in Indian culture, and can play a powerful role in the inculcation of the second generation. Dr. Mysorekar explains that forceful religious education results in retaliatory sentiments, and to "mix fun with religion," is not simply preferable, but utterly necessary (Uma Mysorekar, personal communication, July 28, 2006). Moreover, such classes allow for students to meet others with similar interests, and develop friendships with people who struggle through the same issues of identity.

The temple offers another class that, although not specifically targeted to the youth, is certainly worth noting. It is a Veda class, involving translation and discussion, instructed by the temple Pundits. Vedic chanting—undoubtedly a common practice in subcontinental Hinduism—is performed by the Pundits of the Ganesha temple on a daily basis. The intriguing detail, therefore, is not the fact that the Vedas are important in these religious centers, but rather that Vedic literature is deemed *so* important that an instructional class is required. Again, this portrays the return to theological—and philosophical—foundations for the sake of claiming not only authenticity, but acceptance. Uma Mysorekar expounds upon this:

> In order for us to expose ourselves and to make the Western population accept us and understand what Hinduism is all about, you [have] got to have philosophy to explain. Otherwise you are a cult (personal communication, July 28, 2006).

This sentiment seems to hold true throughout all of the diaspora community. They gain acceptance in America through carefully overcoming the social stigmas of India, and subsequently presenting a more cohesive, philosophy-based tradition that is in dialogue with the Western frame of mind.

What would childhood be without summer camp; it is, quite simply, part of the American Dream. Yet for the youth of the Hindu diaspora, camp is much more than fun and games—it is time for cultural education. And so earlier this year, the Hindu Temple

Society of North America, in conjunction with Omna Ancient Art, set up "Summer Camp 2006." From 9:15A.M.-3:30P.M, Monday through Thursday in the month of July, children of the diaspora enjoyed the company of fellow Indians while learning about their traditions. The daily schedule was as follows ("Ganesanjali," 2006):

- Yoga, Meditation 9:30-10:30
- Geeta Class 10:30-11:15
- Snack Break 11:15-11:45
- Knowledge of India 11:45-12:45
- Quiz 12:45-1:15
- Lunch Break 1:15-2:00
- Dance/Drama 2:00-3:15
- Play Time (table tennis, chess) 3:15-3:30

From the schedule, we notice that this summer camp has a singular focus—that of the religion and culture of India. Play time, which constitutes the majority of activities at conventional American summer camps, is assigned a mere 15 minutes in the diaspora camp. Nevertheless, this demonstrates the diaspora's ability to engage in a traditional American pastime while maintaining the unique goals and ideals of Indian culture. The American landscape will continue to change before our eyes as it makes way for a people, culture, and way of life that it has yet to fully understand.

At present, the youth in the second and third generations are appearing in the forefront of the Hindu diaspora. We do not know exactly how they feel, but we do know that the day-to-day struggles that they face are entirely unique to them. They have been chosen to receive a tradition that is in a rapidly changing state, and will continue to do so until they—like the generations of American immigrants before them—have established themselves as a part of this country. The process is slow and tortuous. Yet people like Uma Mysorekar, and the members of the Ganesha Temple have absolute faith. They know that Ganesha—the remover of obstacles—will ultimately help the future

generations. They also know what they can do to help. The wide array of classes, ranging from Dance to Sanskrit, offers a welcoming atmosphere for forging friendships, learning about one's religion, and creating a sense of self amongst the wider community. And in the end, the relationship between the youth and the community as a whole is a reciprocal one.

**The Congregation of the Hindu Center**

Parents too suffer from problems with identity; not from being born in a "foreign" land, but rather conversely, from being thrown into a land where one realizes that the culture one once knew now seems far less suitable in the diaspora. Diana Eck (2000) puts forward this intriguing conundrum:

> But the dispersal of the Hindu communities outside India is considerably more complex than the term diaspora might convey, for these communities were already "dispersed" in the varieties of regional and sectarian traditions that compose Hindu religious life in India (p. 224).

Hinduism, it seems, is far too diverse to warrant either strict exclusion or inclusion. In the diaspora, though, inclusion in order to avoid alienation assumes a role of the utmost importance. In this circumstance, the creation of a unified "Hindu Nation" offers "a solution to the complex question of identity" (Biswas, 2004, p. 286). That is, a process of nationalization in India provides the opportunity for those in the diaspora to claim religious authenticity from the motherland. Here, homogenization is undoubtedly at work; but homogenization need not possess pejorative connotations, especially in the conditions of the diaspora.

The Hindu Center in Flushing, just a few minutes from the Ganesha Temple, participates in a practice unique to the diaspora of Queens; a practice that, above all else, aids in the unification and homogenization of Hinduism in America. This practice is

congregationalism. Yang and Ebaugh (2001) explain that the push towards a more "Protestant model" of worship is representative of "organizational assimilation or Americanization" (p. 273). They present congregationalism as a multi-faceted process wherein the religious center establishes lay leadership, provides expanded services, and adopts a standardized weekly routine for worship. The Ganesha Temple—with Uma Mysorekar as the lay leader, and the many youth classes reflecting an expansion of services—demonstrates the first two qualifications of Yang and Ebaugh's congregationalism. Yet only the Hindu Center has implemented the third facet, adopting a Sunday night congregation and lecture, and thereby diverging completely from what is described below as Hinduism:

> Since Hinduism is not a congregational religion, its temples do not require expansive interiors. Devotions are performed daily in a home shrine. There is no sacred day; Hindus visit a temple individually or as a family on days of personal importance such as a birthday, or on days significant in the mythology of the enshrined deity (Dehejia, 1997, p. 141).

This short passage on ritual practice in India alludes to the changing nature of Hinduism in the diaspora. What was once considered "not-Hindu" has now come to define a unique form of Hinduism abroad.

The Head Pundit of the Hindu Center, Krishna Pratap Dikshit, understands this divergence from the traditional practices of Hinduism as a necessary one. He sees Hinduism as a "flexible" religion that "can't afford" to be as narrowly segregated as it is in India (K.P Dikshit, personal communication, July 25, 2006). Therefore, every Sunday from 6:00-7:30 P.M., Pundit Dikshit calls together the devotees of the community for a lecture. He speaks—in Hindi—to his largely North Indian congregation, and discusses significant features of Vedantic literature, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and other religious scriptures. Here we find Hinduism transform from

the personal to the congregational, and from the diverse to the cohesive. Through sermon, the canon creates itself, and singular scriptures assume more importance than ever enjoyed in the past. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, for example, poster-board scripture of both Indian scholarship and Hindu nationalism, has only assumed significance since the late 18th century (King, 1989). And although over two hundred years of popularity may seem noteworthy, it is minuscule considering the excess of a thousand years in which the *Gita* has existed. When the Pundit elucidates upon the importance of the *Gita*, however, history becomes drawn into the mythic past, and the battlefield lives not only as allegory, but as reality. In hearing his words, the community unites as a singular group with a singular history, and a singular belief. Congregationalism, as seen in the Hindu Center, allows for the creation of a Hinduism specifically suited for the dynamics of the diaspora.

"Hindu nationalism" throughout the diaspora is rather ambiguous, but pertinent to the study of Hindu unification, and therefore worth mentioning at least briefly. Established in 1970, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, set out to create a nationalism not based on India, but rather on India's roots as the home of Hinduism. The VHP, together with the Bharatiya Janata Parishad (BJP), sought to gain political power under three basic claims: one that there is a "distinct Hindu community"; two, that foreign invaders have always oppressed the Hindus; and three, that "Hindu tolerance, non-violence, and disunity" have prevented efforts at liberation (Lochtefeld, 1994, p. 589). Throughout the past few decades, much blood has been spilt in the name of this so-called Hindu nationalism; all for the purpose of uniting a land that—in truth—has never been united. This is important to our study because it is believed that "the rise of Hindu nationalist politics has been funded and supported by Hindu diaspora groups"

(Biswas, 2004, p. 272). It seems more accurate to say that the diaspora supports any entity that heralds unity within Hinduism, and not necessarily Hindu nationalism (or militancy). The congregation at the Hindu Center, for example, in searching for a cohesive identity, implicitly supports the claims of nationalist politics. Still, the homogenization that the Queens community supports is innocuous, if not beneficial. The community has created a form of Hinduism that flourishes through change, and finds cohesion without forsaking diversity.

## Conclusion

> Suppose a man starts straight towards the sun. At every step of his journey he will see newer and newer visions of the sun—the size, the view, and light will every moment be new until he reaches the real sun. He saw the sun at first like a big ball, and then it began to increase in size. The sun was never like the ball he saw; nor was it ever like all the succession of suns he saw in his journey. Still is it not true that our traveler always saw the sun, and nothing but the sun (S. Vivekananda, 2004, p. 482)?

The Hindu diaspora of Queens is simply another view of the sun. It is a community that has extracted the ideals of the homeland, and transplanted them upon American soil. In doing so, the members of the community have created an entirely new identity—one undeniably tied to India, yet at the same time perhaps even more so tied to the Western frame of mind. Through fluidity of discourse and dialogue, they have established a unified belief system that, in returning to theological foundations, echoes across both past and present. Indeed, the sun is the same, but the viewers are looking at it like Americans.

It is the youth, however, that we must rely upon in order to understand the changing nature of Hinduism in America. Their religious and cultural inculcation is a necessity for the preservation of their traditions, and it is happening now. What they learn—either from the likes of Swami Nikhilanand or Uma Mysorekar—will reflect the

future of not only Hinduism, but the American landscape as a whole. We can make no assumptions for the future, but simply observe as this remarkable phenomenon comes to fruition.

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Drew Thomases is a senior at Hamilton College, double-majoring in religious studies and Asian studies, with a particular interest in Hinduism and the East-West encounter. He studied in India for four months during the fall of his junior year, conducting research on religious performance traditions, and solidifying his fascination with South Asia. During the summer of 2006 he received an Emerson Grant to study the Hindu diaspora of Queens, New York; "Following the Swami" is the final product of his fieldwork. In the fall of 2007, Drew will be attending Columbia University for a Masters in religious studies. He hopes to receive a PhD, and become a professor of South Asian religion.

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