Teaching Dharma:

An observation of religion class at the Hindu Temple of Maple Grove

I. Preface

I was born into a Catholic family. I attended a private Catholic school as an elementary student and was raised believing in one God, and one way of worship. All I know about other religions is that there are many, and from what my parents have told me, Christianity is the best way to go. As an adult, I’ve begun questioning whether or not Catholicism really is the right fit for me, and as such, become more and more interested in exploring other belief systems.

When I started my search for an ethnography topic, I knew I wanted to do something religion-based. I am fascinated by different ways of thinking. Luckily, I had the perfect connection to a religion outside of Christianity: Hinduism. A childhood friend of mine, Manjari, is Hindu and attends temple every Sunday with her parents, whom I love dearly. I contacted Manjari and arrangements fell perfectly into place when she told me she would be volunteering in a Sunday school-type classroom at the temple every week. I was thrilled to attend this class with her and learn more not only about the religion itself, but the dynamic of its followers at the temple.

Having gone to Manjari’s house multiple times, I had a few pre-conceptions about the Indian and Hindu lifestyle. I expected to see women and girls dressed elaborately in colorful Saris, because Manjari, her mother, and her grandmother have often worn them.
Manjari and I met when we were five years old. Oddly enough, we attended the same Catholic elementary school; Saint Anastasia’s. She stands approximately 5 feet tall, with a tangle of thick, curly, black hair running down her back. Though she attends the Hindu Temple every week, I would never classify her as religious. “I sometimes wish religion had a bigger role in my life, but for now I’m okay with it having a minimal role,” she said. “I think as I get older it will become a bigger part of my life because I’ll better understand the purpose it can serve.”

I expected the students in this class to be just like any other group of kids—loud, with short attention spans. Though I respect Manjari’s family very much, I have also had a number of negative run-ins with Indians while at work. I work at a clothing store and it seems that every time an Indian family comes in, their children misbehave, they smell, and they take hours to make a decision on what items they want. I also have a hard time communicating with them because they have heavy accents. Thankfully, the class was taught in English. Despite the accents, I was able to understand each lesson.

II. Background

Hinduism is the world’s third largest religion, practiced by 80% of India’s population, as well as over 30 million others outside of India (“Basics”). As stated in the article “Hinduism for Beginners,” Hinduism teaches non-violence, reincarnation, and the practices of yoga and meditation (“Beginners”). According to an article by Subhamoy Das, some scholars believe the Hindu religion can be traced back as early as 10000 B.C. (“Beginners”). As Das says, “There is no ‘one Hinduism’, and so it lacks any unified system of beliefs and ideas. Hinduism is a conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions,” (“Beginners”). Hinduism influenced Buddhist beliefs and practices, as well as modern practices of yoga and vegetarianism in the west (“Contributions”). It even contributed to Catholicism by introducing the practice of praying with
a strand of beads. In Hindu, these beads are called japa malas, and were adapted by Christians in Europe, resulting in the rosary ("Eat, Pray, Love").

The culture of Hinduism is far too large for one to observe, especially since its practices are so varied throughout the world. I chose to observe a weekly religion class held for 8th and 9th grade students whose families attend the Hindu Temple in Maple Grove, a town approximately 35 minutes from my home in Buffalo, with a population four times the size. The temple is the largest in North America, located just 20 miles west of the Twin Cities, which is home to more than 40,000 Hindus today ("StarTribune").

The class I observed was held on Sunday mornings. It began with a large group assembly at 10:00, followed by a religion class until 11:15, and finished with language classes held from 11:20 to 12:00 noon. There are 14 students in the class, who meet with the same teacher each week to learn about the history of Hinduism. The group first met 4 years ago, when the temple had been established for about a year. According to my broker, Manjari, “After being open for awhile it occurred to them they could have a school and teach religion classes, but there aren’t nearly enough rooms; that’s why we’re in the copy room upstairs.”

According to the mission statement on the temple’s website, it is the temple’s goal to “teach its younger members the history and development of the Hindu philosophy and religion and to inculcate a pride of their heritage. Encourage their participation and involvement with daily activities of the Mandir (Temple),” ("HTM"). This makes sense to me as I see the importance of establishing beliefs in a younger generation. Without doing so, the subculture may struggle to continue inspiring its members, especially those who are younger.

III. Observations

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After checking, double checking, and triple checking with my broker, Manjari, to make sure she’d be at the temple to greet me, I tentatively crawled into my old, 1998 Chevy Malibu—displaying a silver, Christian fish on its bumper—and began the 30-mile drive to the Hindu Temple of Minnesota. I had no idea what to expect. After being in the car for about half an hour, I was a little worried I wasn’t going in the right direction at all. The GPS on my phone had led me far out into the country, and all I could see were trees losing their orange and red leaves with each blow of the wind. A few minutes later, however, I approached the temple: a beautiful, white-gray building with intricate designs along the walls and a golden statue of—assumingly—a god or goddess above the entrance. The immaculate building stood out in its surroundings. Driving down County Road 101, surrounded by silos and corn fields, it seemed unlikely to arrive at such a radiant edifice.

In contrast, the interior of the building matched that of any other conference hall. I followed Manjari into an assembly room with tan walls, black folding chairs, and a PowerPoint projected onto a large screen in front, and sat down in a sea of Indian men and women.

A woman in the front of the room grabbed a microphone and started the assembly with a series of prayers and chants that the members all knew by heart. Thankfully, the words were also displayed on the PowerPoint written both in English and Sanskrit. This indicates that the temple has been largely influenced by American society. I assume that Sanskrit is preferred by the older generation, while younger members prefer English, the language most likely spoken at home and in school.

Families shuffled in periodically for the next five minutes, dressed casually in jeans and sweatshirts. “They really try to get the kids here on time, but Indians have their own idea of what it means to be on time.” said Manjari. Her casual dress—blue jeans and a brown Northface
jacket—and laidback attitude related to the atmosphere of the assembly room. They proved the influence America has had on its Hindu citizens, as did Manjari’s father, Ashok, who was looking intently at his iPhone.

Ashok is a quiet, middle-aged man, with a unique past. At the age of 31, he moved from Patna, India to the United Kingdom and became a member of the Royal College of Physicians of England. He and his family moved to America in 1996, and somehow ended up in the small town of Hutchinson, MN. His role as a father has always taken precedence over his job as an Internal Medicine Specialist. He is one of the nicest people I’ve met, and always puts his family before himself. When it comes to religion, he says “I’m not too religious. Basically I just try to be a good person, and I think that’s enough.”

After the woman in front had finished leading prayers, a man took her place and began a three-minute meditation. The rules for meditation are simple: silence, closed-eyes, a comfortable position, and the repeating of a god or goddess’s name in one’s head. Most adults in the room participated, but the kids had a hard time sitting still for so long. The simplistic way these members approach God is different and refreshing. Rather than trying to remember when to stand, when to sit, and when to kneel—like at Catholic mass—Hindus allow themselves to clear their minds and enter into a deeper part of their being.

When the assembly was over, kids were dismissed to their classrooms, and I followed Manjari through a set of glass doors into another part of the temple. We went into a small room with cubbies lining the walls, and I was told I had to take off my shoes in order to go to the classroom upstairs. This action is done because the worship temple is upstairs and when worshipping, one should be offering their purest self to God. Shoes, according to Manjari, “are dusty and dirty and, I guess, impure.”
The classroom upstairs wasn’t really a classroom at all; it was a copy room. Surrounding five folding tables were shelves filled with binders, copy paper, cardboard boxes, manilla envelopes, and—oddly—a large bin of rice. This signifies the room’s double use as a classroom and a storage space.

I sat down in a black, metal folding chair in the back and watched as 14 8th and 9th graders filed in and chose seats next to friends of the same gender. This small act demonstrates the students’ adolescence. The eight boys and six girls in the class refer to their instructor as “Uncle”. Ashok had informed me that this is the proper name to call an adult male at the temple, just as one would call a Catholic priest “Father”, or a nun “Sister”.

Uncle—whose given name is Vishal—started teaching HATS (Hindu American Temple School) in 2009 at Chinmaya Mission in Hopkins, MN. When Chinmaya changed locations, he decided to join the Hindu community in Maple Grove. His goal as a teacher is to “ensure that they [the students] understand how Hindus can contribute to American society, and to ensure that they have answers to questions others may ask them about their faith.” Uncle admires HATS for devoting time to interfaith perspectives. “I think this is something unique about our school. Most other schools do not compare and contrast Hinduism with other religions.”

Throughout the class period, the students seemed obviously less enthused about the history and geography of Hinduism than Uncle. The environment was similar to that of a classroom at Buffalo High school. Students lied their heads on the tables, played with their smart phones, and yawned countless times as Uncle tried to excite them about the upcoming lesson. It occurred to me it would be an easy environment to fall asleep in, by virtue of the strong scent of incense wafting through the air and the soft humming coming through the walls of the worship temple.
As if reading my mind, Manjari got up and led me back to the assembly room to find Ashok. He was reading scripture with a group of 12 men around his same age. The atmosphere of the room had changed drastically from an hour ago. The men all sat in quiet contentment as they listened to an older man talk about scripture. The silence in the room was interrupted as Ashok got up to leave and show us around the large, wide-open worship temple.

In the center sat a prominent maroon rug, in front of a statue of the god Shiva, believed by the Hindus to be the most powerful. Seventeen other gods and goddesses are also displayed in the temple, each with their own, smaller “temple” decorated with candles and incense. Rather than a room with seats or pews facing the front, the temple is open for anyone to roam at any time, contributing to the idea that we are all of vital importance to the earth, and anyone is welcome to enter and observe the temple. The allure of the space doesn’t seem to coincide with the dull, tan walls downstairs, just as the location itself contrasts with the building’s opulent exterior. This exhibits the constant battle Hindus face between expressing pride in their heritage, and fitting themselves into a Mid-West American mold.

On the rug sat about 50 worshippers, chanting prayers—known by heart—in Sanskrit. Ashok explained to me that he doesn’t understand Sanskrit, so he doesn’t take part in group worship. He also lead me around to each god and goddess, and briefly explained what they each represent.

Ashok informed me that Hindus do not believe in multiple gods, but worship through representations of the one true god’s characteristics. Each god and goddess represents something unique, and there are arguably hundreds, if not thousands, of gods and goddesses worshipped in the Hindu religion. Upon learning this, I immediately thought of the saints held to a somewhat holy status in the Catholic church. Catholics are taught not to worship the saints themselves,
but to pray through them to reach God. In the same way, Hindus are taught to worship through whichever god or goddess represents the characteristic they need most that day. For example, the goddess Durga represents the power of good over evil. One of the teachers in the first grade classroom explained to her students that when having negative feelings within, one should pray to Durga in order for positive feelings to take residence.

Worshippers who did not take part in the group prayer walked around to each god and goddess and worshiped in their own, unique way. I saw one man who knelt down and kissed the floor before each statue. Another woman sat cross-legged in front of a Jainist god and read scripture aloud. Others simply closed their eyes, folded their hands, and prayed silently.

When we were done walking around the worship temple, we headed back downstairs to the main lobby. Members of the temple were everywhere, winding in and out of each other in order to get where they needed to go. So many languages were spoken that I couldn’t get a good grasp on any conversation. Ashok told me there are now 22 official languages in India, and the temple teaches four.

There is a constant struggle for members trying to hold onto their heritage and trying to embrace being American. Though English is the primary language in the United States, members are not ready to give up learning Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, and Telegu, because learning these languages provides them with a sense of self and gives them a strong connection to their heritage.

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I arrived at the temple a little bit later the second week than I had the week prior, and this time, Manjari and Ashok were not there to greet me. As I walked into the assembly room,
prayers had already begun, but I was able to quickly find a seat next to a gray-haired woman wearing a Sari in the back. When prayers were finished, the group was again asked to meditate for three minutes. I tried—unsuccessfully—to close my eyes and repeat God’s name over and over, but was too distracted by the wealth of latecomers showing up, and children kicking their short legs back and forth under their chairs.

In the copy room, only 12 students were present, compared to the 14 a week earlier. As they found seats next to their friends, Uncle set up two poster boards filled with pictures and stories about the history of Hinduism in Pakistan. He mentioned the word “trinkets” and Blue Sweatshirt, as I’ve dubbed him, asked “What’s trinkets?” A girl dressed elaborately in a light pink Sari behind me said—in a thick accent—“Learn English.”

The irony here hits me square in the face. Pink Sari knows the English language well enough to know the word trinkets, but is probably seen by an outsider as unintelligent because of her accent. I am guilty of putting this label on customers at work, because I have a hard time understanding them. It’s easier to categorize them all as “annoying”, than to take the time to try and understand them.

As students turned their attention toward Uncle, he began to talk about the Islam religion and the persecution Hindus receive from Muslims because of their faith. He talked about the acts of terrorists and Muslim extremists, which really got the students talking. A girl named Annika said it’s not okay to judge an entire religious group based on the acts of only a few of its members, but Uncle seemed to disagree. It was easy to see the differences between generations, as Annika battled with Uncle and tried to make herself heard. A debate broke out as some students argued that if Islam doesn’t teach hate, why don’t their leaders speak out against terrorism? Uncle was in agreement with these students, while Annika argued that there’s no way
the Qur’an (Islamic scripture) promotes violence and hatred.

It is interesting to see a minority group speak poorly about another. Prior to this experience, I had clumped all other religions and ethnicities together in an imaginary file labeled “different”. It turns out, however, there are many deviations between Hindus and Muslims, in addition to those between Hindus and Christians. We live in a world where every religion and every denomination believes their truth is the only way to eternal life, and anyone who believes differently is doomed to whatever path of despair exists within said religion.

**IV. Conclusion**

Religion can and will be exactly what we make it. It has the power to unite, or tear apart, cultures across the world. What I learned at the Hindu Temple is that its members prefer unity. It was easy for me to learn about Hinduism and its followers; all I had to do was ask. This leads me to believe that the world of religion would be a much less violent place if we would simply look past the rituals we’ve been raised to believe in, and allow ourselves to explore something new.

Growing up, it never occurred to me that any way of worship separate from Catholic mass would bring me to God. Through observing Hindus in my area, I found that there are many ways to reach Him. As professor Stephen Prothero said, "It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great—and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that's great, too," ("Now").

At the temple, I wasn’t surrounded by a group of dressed-up Indians speaking another language and looking at me as if I were a freak. In fact, just the opposite occurred. I was welcomed into the subculture with open, casually-dressed, arms.
The members of this subculture have a difficult role to play. They are constantly trying to embrace their heritage, and at the same, communicate with those around them and understand how their Dharma (duty) fits in with America’s ever-changing society. There is a constant battle for them between preserving the old and embracing the new. They strive because of their ability to lead by example. Rather than force their religion on anyone, they show that through prayer and meditation, happiness is easily attainable. This happiness has given them the motivation to move to an area predominantly white and Christian, and teach those around them that it’s okay to go about things differently. The path is not important, rather what you learn along the way.

Works Cited


