

Religion, immigration, and home making in diaspora: Hindu space in Southern California

Shampa Mazumdar^a, Sanjoy Mazumdar^{b,*}

^aDepartment of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-5100, USA

^bDepartment of Planning, Policy, and Design, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-7075, USA

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ABSTRACT

How does religion affect the ways in which immigrants create suitable and meaningful homes in their new places? Based on ethnographic naturalistic field study of Hindu immigrants in Southern California, this paper provides a detailed description of how religion influences and is inscribed into home spaces through décor, artifacts, and gardens. The processes of ritually appropriating a home, sacralizing it with religious artifacts, and landscaping it with significant trees and plants help an immigrant renew connections with past experiences, environments, and people. Offering the concepts of “home as religious space” and “ecology of religion” we propose that home can be a site for religion, and suggest that religion can affect homes in tangible/physical ways, helping create a sacred ambiance and ethos, which in turn facilitates a multi-layered experience of both religion and place.

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1. Introduction

Migrants establishing homes in their newly adopted places has become more common in this era of large-scale migration. For this, they convert whatever pre-existing houses and housing they can afford into somewhat more acceptable and meaningful homes – homes that have higher appropriateness, suitability, and congruence with the immigrant’s prior spatial, cultural, and religious experiences. Here we focus on religion and home space. Below we examine the literature that informs this study.

1.1. Religion and immigrants

That many immigrants have turned to religion to ease the stress of transition and to find meaning in a new social world has been documented well by studies of Irish, Italian, and other immigrants from Europe to America (Handlin, 1951; Herberg, 1955; Miller, 1977).¹ In recent years, a growing body of research has added substantially to this early literature. Scholars have documented the expansive role of religion, the increased vitality and multifaceted dimension of religious life and religion sponsored activities among post-1965 “new immigrants” to the USA from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (Eck, 2001; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000;

Iwamura & Spickard, 2003; Leonard, Stepick, Vasquez, & Holdaway, 2005; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008; Min & Kim, 2002; Orsi, 1999; Warner & Wittner, 1998; Williams, 1988; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). From this emerging literature on religion and immigration we learn about transnational identities, linkages and networks (Guest, 2005; Levitt, 2003), the role of ethnicity (Min, 2005), music (Leonard & Sakata, 2005), second generation socialization, identity formation, inter-generational conflict (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Bankston & Zhou, 1995), increased religious congregationalism (Warner & Wittner, 1998; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001), and others.

“[R]eligion helps immigrants imagine their homelands in diaspora and inscribe their memories and worldviews into the physical landscape and built environment” points out Vasquez (2005: 238). Furthermore, “religion plays a critical role in identity construction, meaning making, and value formation. Migrants also use religion to create alternative allegiances and places of belonging” (Levitt, 2003: 851).

Studies show that the new immigrants have integrated religion into their lives in a variety of ways. First, they have created a religious infrastructure by establishing religious organizations, institutions, schools, and clubs for community building (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008), religious socialization and transmission of identity (Guest, 2005; Kurien, 2005; Leonard, 2003); second, they have built sacred spaces, such as churches, temples, mosques, and *gurdwaras* for the practice of religion (Eck, 2001; Iwamura & Spickard, 2003; Lin, 1999; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2006, in press; Metcalf, 1996; Thompson, 2003); and third, they have set up

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 949 824 5046; fax: +1 949 824 8566.

E-mail address: mazumdar@uci.edu (S. Mazumdar).

¹ Immigration has occurred throughout the world, and has increased with ease of travel; here our focus is on the USA.

commerce in religious merchandise and services for the religious consumer (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2005; Metcalf, 1996).

Much of the scholarship on religion and new immigrants has been directed toward the establishment of religion in the public realm, on the visible and easily observable institutional, congregational, and public domain with very little attention given to the non-congregational, personal,² and the not so visible lives of immigrant families (see also Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2003; Vasquez, 2005). Only a few studies have focused on the domestic aspects of religious life, such as issues of “décor and usage” (Thompson, 2002: 13), creation of prayer spaces (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2003; Min, 2005; Thompson, 2002), food and food taboos (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008; Min, 2005; Thompson, 2005). These studies notwithstanding, we still know very little about how immigrants use their homes to construct, articulate, and sustain their religious identities. This neglect is unfortunate because scholars of religion and immigration could have gained significantly from a rich body of existing literature in environment-behavior research on home and identity.

1.2. Home and identity

The role of home in identity formation has been the subject of ongoing research in the area of environment and behavior (Belk, 1992; Cooper Marcus, 1992; Hummon, 1989; Relph, 1976). It has been argued that homes, artifacts, and objects not only express identity (Duncan & Duncan, 1976; Rapoport, 1982), but also help shape it (Belk, 1992; Brown & Perkins, 1992; Hummon, 1989; Relph, 1976). Eyles (1989: 109) writes:

Place ... is not only an arena for everyday life ... [it also] provides meaning to that life. To be attached to a place is seen as a fundamental human need and, particularly as home, as the foundation of our selves and our identities.

Significant places such as homes, thus, play an important role in development of the self. According to Mead (1934), the self originates through taking the role of the other, first the significant other, such as parents and teachers, and then the generalized other, such as the group or community. Later, Rochberg-Halton (1984) extended Mead's framework of the generalized other by asserting that not only people but artifacts and objects also can serve as “role models”. In a similar vein, Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983: 57) suggest that “the development of self-identity is not restricted to making distinctions between oneself and significant others, but extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found”. Place identity therefore is “a substructure of the self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives” (Proshansky et al., 1983: 59). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996: 208) emphasize that place is “inextricably linked with the development and maintenance of continuity of self”, asserting further that “all aspects of identity have place related implications” (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996: 206).

Werner, Altman, and Oxley (1985: 5) also elaborated on place “appropriation, attachment and identity” which, according to them, “refer collectively to the idea that people invest places with meaning and significance and act in ways that reflect their bonding and linkage with places”. Home spaces are “appropriated” and “personalized” (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Brown & Perkins, 1992; Korosec-Serfaty, 1985; Mehta & Belk, 1991), with objects that serve as reminders of “travel experiences, achievements, close relatives and friends” as well as of

“religious or ethnic identities” (Mehta & Belk, 1991: 399) and carry symbolic meaning (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). “[C]ontinuity with important environments of the past” is seen as “critical to our emotional well being” (Cooper Marcus, 1992: 88). They can act as a “psychic anchor, reminding us of where we came from, of what we once were” (Cooper Marcus, 1992: 89). Identity is “linked to spatial continuity and may be disrupted” through displacement, thereby leading to “identity discontinuity” (Milligan, 2003: 382; see also Fried, 1963). Thus, our home, interiors, décor, alterations, furnishings and landscaping are all expressions of our identity both personal and familial (Brown & Perkins, 1992: 280).

Places of the past continue to play an important role in “identity continuity”, especially for new immigrants. “Estrangement” from prior “material anchors” can be a source of grief for them (Mehta & Belk, 1991: 400). They can experience feelings of “placelessness” (Relph, 1976), “identity alienation” (Mehta & Belk, 1991), “environmental displacement” (Pastalan, 1983), and “environmental deprivation” (Mazumdar, 1992), relying sometimes on nostalgia to “repair” and “regain” a “sense of identity continuity” (Milligan, 2003: 381). According to Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996: 208) place continuity is maintained in two ways: first “continuity via characteristics of place which are generic and transferable from one place to another” and second “continuity via places that have emotional significance for a person”. At times, immigrants have settled in or near places with specific physical characteristics that remind them of home (e.g. for Norwegian immigrants see Jonassen, 1949/1961; and Korean and Russian immigrants see Abrahamson, 1996).

“Nostalgia also motivates people to obtain material reminders of places and events” (McDannell, 1995: 41). These “material reminders” enable immigrants to “transport part of their former identities to a new place ... These transitional objects, when ritually incorporated into the new habitat, may provide an important aid to identity transition” (Mehta & Belk, 1991: 399). Familiar objects help reclaim a sense of identity by connecting the present to the past.

Despite this extensive body of environment-behavior research on home and identity, only minimal attention has been paid to the role of religion in place creation, place meaning, place ties, and identity formation and transition. This at a time when religion, religious place-making, religious consumption and religion sponsored activities are becoming increasingly important parts of the lives of immigrants, as pointed out earlier.

How does religion affect the ways Hindu immigrants create suitable and meaningful homes for themselves in their new places? How is a secular house transformed into one appropriate for religious practice? In what ways is religious experience facilitated? What strategies are used to maintain continuity with past events, environments, and people? These are some of the questions we seek to pursue through our analysis of the immigrant Hindu home in Southern California. As these questions indicate, a purpose of this study was to obtain detailed understanding and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the lives and practices of Hindu immigrants and the creation of appropriate homespaces, and not to test any *a priori* or predetermined hypothesis.

2. Method

The method used for this research was ethnographic Naturalistic Field Research, one of the “qualitative” or “non-positivistic” approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, 1967; Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

2.1. Data collection techniques

Several data collection techniques were employed to collect “rich” data (Lofland & Lofland, 1984: 11), and to gain “intimate familiarity” (Lofland, 1976).

² McDannell's (1986, 1995) studies on the home based, material dimension of Christianity are important exceptions. Her focus, however, is on Christian households not on new immigrants.

2.1.1. Observation

Observations were made of the physical environment of the home – its interior spaces, aesthetics, décor, and placement of devotional and decorative religious art and artifacts.³ Also observed was the home garden – its trees, plants, and flowers. People and activities were studied through participant observation and included domestic ritual and ceremonial events and celebrations. Observation sessions were of varying lengths but most were more than an hour. These were recorded through field notes, sketches, and when permission was granted, through photographs.

Twenty-one residences were visited for observation, two of which were apartments and the rest single-family detached dwellings in cities and suburbs. Sizes ranged from 1200 to 3600 square feet, and included single, double, and triple-storied units. We were able to follow six families as they changed homes. Five homes housed multi-generational families.

2.1.2. Interview

Interview was another important data collection technique used. In order to understand the intricate nuances of lived experience and the meaning of home in the context of diasporic religion, long, in-depth interviews were conducted.

The questions were unstructured and explored the meaning of past places, ritual practices, and artifacts, their significance for the present environment, and the socio-spatial strategies used to maintain continuity and socialize children into their religious identity. Answers were open-ended and varied in length. Multiple interviews were conducted with key informants when one interview seemed insufficient. Interviews lasted as long as two hours; most were at least 90-min, though a few were shorter.

Interviews were conducted in English with 23 Hindu⁴ immigrants to Southern California, and included first generation, ranging in age from 27 to 75, and second generation (age 18–25). Professions of the former included doctors, dentists, engineers, architects, real estate agents, managers, city employee, schoolteacher, college professor, entrepreneurs, unemployed, and others. They came from West Bengal, Tamilnadu, Gujarat, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra.

2.1.3. Archival research

Finally, various types of records also provided useful data. This included examining ethnic newspapers, magazines, community bulletins, newsletters, and web sites. This paper comes from a larger ongoing study of immigrant religions, and their homes, and sacred spaces (both private and public).

3. Making Hindu space in Southern California

Hindu immigrants trying to make a home in Southern California encounter conditions different from those in their native land. In India, a Hindu is surrounded by the larger sacred macrospace with familiar sights, sounds and ambiance of religion – bells from the neighborhood temple herald sunrise and sunset, an elaborate cycle of calendrical rituals punctuate the seasons, grandparents narrate stories and myths, parents take children on religious sightseeing to sacred cities, temples, mountains, and rivers, and roadside vendors and local stores sell special holiday food and artifacts. These features are either absent or only minimally present in California. Making Hindu space (which is

important to Hindus, see Khare, 1976; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1994; Pandurang, 1972) involves at least four major activities described below.

3.1. Home blessing: Ritual appropriation and sanctification of space

For a Hindu, taking possession of a new home is not merely a financial and legal transaction, it is also a religious act involving sacred time, rituals, decorative arts, and artifacts. Hindus seek to synchronize the move-in date with sacred time through the selection of an auspicious date according to the Hindu almanac in consultation with family members and temple priests in order to perform the necessary prayers, conduct rituals, and install their family gods and goddesses.

However, life in diaspora poses many challenges and immigrants have to strategize, negotiate, adjust, and compromise in order to mitigate/minimize potential conflicts with secular time, work schedules, legal and other constraints:

A family had bought a home but according to the homeowner's association regulations, was not allowed to officially occupy it until the required house painting was completed. The family was in a dilemma because the religiously auspicious date for moving fell within the painting period. It was important for them to ritualize the setting at the auspicious time. Rather than move in at an inauspicious time, the family sought special permission from the homeowner's association to meet the minimal ritual requirement by placing their deities. In this minimal event, on the selected auspicious day, only the husband, wife and teenage daughter came, unobtrusively set up their altar, and boiled milk in the kitchen allowing it to overflow symbolizing abundance and prosperity in their new home. Later, after they had legally occupied the home, they chose to have a more complete and elaborate celebration – with *pooja* [prayers/worship], music, and food – that could be attended by relatives and friends (HIH\FO\1\1).⁵

For another family, the construction of the home was not fully complete at the auspicious time. Feeling that keeping to the auspicious time was more important, the family decided not to wait for the completion of the home building process, but rather to perform the basic, minimal ritual requirement at the auspicious time. Niyati, a young female college student who has lived in the United States for over 15 years, described the event:

We did a *pooja* even before our house was completely built. The carpets still needed to be put in and some other work still needed to be completed. Only my immediate family, my mother, father, sister, and I participated. My mother had chosen an auspicious time and date. We carried framed pictures of our gods and hung them. One big, framed picture was put near the entryway; others were put in the kitchen and bedroom (HIH\Interv\9411\Niyati\1).

To ritually prepare the home to welcome and receive the family deities and to establish the family altar a number of actions are taken. On the appointed day, Hindu families clean the home extensively, especially pre-existing houses and apartments, by vacuuming, sweeping and swabbing non-carpeted areas and the front entrance. A priest or family member sprinkles holy water in all spaces (except bathrooms), to purify the built structure and the surrounding physical environment.

They believe that the home has to be occupied first by the family Gods before the human occupants can take up residence.

³ See McDannell (1995) for detailed explication and definition of decorative versus devotional artifacts. We have generally followed the distinctions made by her.

⁴ Hinduism has many forms and offers numerous variations in practice. Although some of that variety will be evident, much could not be included.

⁵ The alphanumeric code at the end of quotes indicates to us which project it is, whether the quote is from field notes or interview, and where specifically it is from.

Accordingly, the family altar and its resident deities are the earliest to be set up in the new home.

The very first thing we did was to set up our family altar; a temple replica which housed our deities was established in our new home. ((HIH\Interv\9004\Devi\1).

Fire, an element Hindus consider sacred, is an essential feature in important religious rituals. They light a fire for *homam* prayers, the sacred camphor flame, and *aarati*. They believe that the consecrated fire and the smoke from it to have purifying powers. They pass the *aarati* flame to every member participating in the prayers for receiving blessings and homeowners carry it to every room to cleanse the rooms from evil. Srilata, a Hindu immigrant and busy professional provided details:

When we bought our home, we wanted to have an elaborate *pooja*. We asked the priest from the Malibu Temple to come and bless our home. We wanted a fire altar (*homam*) set up. We really wanted this. You see one of the reasons for the *homam* is that the smoke from the sacred fire drives evil out. Unfortunately, the priest had a prior engagement and could come only in the evening. This was a problem since *homams* are not conducted in the evening! We were really disappointed that we did not have a *homam*. However, there were other things that we did do. (HIH\Interv\9411\Srilata\1).

In the United States, Hindu families think these activities with fire can be problematic, unlike in India where lighting a fire in houses with their bare concrete or tiled floors does not pose a fire hazard. Homes being made of wood and the presence of flammable carpeting make the lighting of a fire (especially for *homam*) a more risky venture. Smoke from the fire may activate the smoke or fire alarm, causing disruption of the ritual, and neighbors, unaccustomed to Hindu rituals, to become suspicious of the happenings inside the immigrant's home or to panic. Due to these concerns, many families limit their prayers and forego lighting a fire.

Hindus consider the threshold, especially of the front entrance, to be significant and decorate it with sacred objects and art.

When we moved to our house, the entrance door of the new house was [*sic*] decorated. Coconut and rice was placed on the front door (HIH\Interv\9411\Ruma\1).

They anoint the door lintel with sacred paste made from sandalwood, turmeric, and vermilion. Women of the household execute *rangoli* or *alpona* at the entrance threshold, which they

believe brings auspiciousness, prosperity, and protection from evil. The designs represent flowers, *shankha* (conch shell), footprints of goddess Lakshmi, the sun, moon, and planetary deities. Srilata described occupying her new home:

We drew a *rangoli* at the threshold of the front entrance. During *Griha Pravesam* (home occupancy), the doors and windows were left open for auspicious spirits to enter the home. We prayed in every room, particularly at the doors, since the doors are the entry point for the entrance of good and evil. We also anointed the doors with sacred sandalwood paste to bless them. The priest performed the *pooja*, said prayers and blessed the home. We carried an *aarati* [consecrated flame] to every room. After this, the priest sprinkled holy water in the rooms and outside [the house] thus purifying it. (HIH\Interv\9411\Srilata\1).

To summarize, the above descriptions reveal that Hindus believe that in order for the physical structure to become a home and be transformed into a sacred microcosm it needs to be ritually appropriated, cleansed, purified, and personalized through processes that include cleaning it by sweeping and swabbing, sprinkling holy water, performing prayers at auspicious time to help appropriate space, anointing the entrance doorway with sacred paste, drawing *alpona* to protect from evil, carrying the *aarati* flame to the spaces to sanctify, installing the family gods and goddesses at an altar, and boiling milk among others. Modifications are made in diaspora (e.g. muting of the sounds, smells, and sights of religion, such as muffled chanting or music, limited use of fire) so as not to arouse suspicion, panic, and hostility of neighbors.

3.2. Home altars: Devotional religious objects and art

For a Hindu, home, besides being a place to live, is a repository of devotional icons, objects, and artifacts for which the family altar is the most notable location (Fig. 1). It is in front of the home altar that a Hindu sits cross-legged on the bare/carpeted floor or on a prayer mat and seeks communion with his/her deity, engages in prayer, or in quiet meditation.

They prefer to locate the altar, when possible, in a tranquil, calm, serene, meditational, and spiritual retreat, mostly in the family's *pooja* or prayer space. This is best in a separate spare room:

Rajeev's altar was located on the second floor of their home, in a separate room (HIH\Field Obs\9012\1).



Fig. 1. Altar with deities and religious objects.

In homes where a bonus room or spare bedroom is not available, families sometimes make alterations to the house to add a prayer and altar space:

Ruchira and her husband created a unique prayer area for themselves; enclosed on three sides, but open on one, without doors, and situated in a small annex, it was specially designed and added to their home. Inside, the arrangement of deities and ritual objects was not very traditional. It did not have a formal *mandapam* (altar). Rather, there were framed pictures of deities on the walls. Hindu-themed paintings were prominently displayed. Also unique was its non-traditional seating arrangement. In her prayer room, low cushioned stools provided seating (HIH\Field Obs\9411\1).

Or they place the altar in the kitchen, master bedroom, study, and even in a closet, shelves or cupboard (Fig. 2).

Our *pooja* area is in the kitchen. My mother decided on the kitchen because it is a clean area. ... She also wanted it to be secluded. She did not want strangers and non-family members to touch anything on the altar. She also wanted it located in such a way that we did not face our back to the gods. That would be disrespectful. Originally, the area near the sink seemed the most appropriate. But then, the altar would be near dirty dishes and that was not acceptable. Finally, after much thought, my mother had elaborate shelving built into the kitchen ... The shelf is covered with cloth. Our Gods are placed on the upper shelf. (HIH\Interv\9307\Payal\1).

Some altars are extravagantly equipped with architectural replicas of temples as in Rajeev's house:

Attempt was made [by Rajeev] to recreate the ambiance and appearance of a temple. The floor was of white marble, cool to touch. The *mandapam* or altar was a large, three-tiered marble structure with a dome on top. On the altar were placed the family deities some of whom had clothing and jewelry. The fragrant smell of incense and fresh flowers pervaded the room (HIH\Field Obs\9012\1).

These are made out of wood (many transported from India), and some are of gold, silver, marble with silk brocade clothing and gold

and silver jewelry. Some put original paintings by famous artists. Framed printed pictures are more common, as in Ruchira's house described above.

Many altars have elaborately hand-crafted statues of Hindu deities such as Lakshmi, Durga, Ganesh, Saraswati, Krishna, and others:

We have statues and some pictures of Krishna, Sai Baba, Lakshmi, Shiva, Radha, Ganesh, Santoshi Ma and Saraswati. Our family God is Shiva. Holy books are placed on the lower shelf. Other items include incense, silver containers, jewelry for the Gods, and a brass bell (HIH\Interv\9307\Payal\1).

Thus, Hindus attempt to create an altar and prayer space in their homes. The devotional religious artifacts placed here are given a special exalted, consecrated status; they are the recipients of prayer and thus different from the decorative religious artifacts publicly placed and displayed in different areas of the home. Some devotional icons, objects, and artifacts are family heirlooms handed down from one generation to the next. One family, after the passing away of both parents, brought back from India the sacred artifacts that had graced their altar, including prayer beads, icons, pictures of saints, water from the river Ganga (Ganges), *shankha* (conch shell). In this way, the past was connected with the present and ritual continuity was ensured.

Sanctity of the altar is important and families expressed concern (e.g. Payal above) about maintaining its ritual purity in diaspora, where non-Hindu visitors to the home, unfamiliar with Hindu rules of pollution could, unknowingly or inadvertently, compromise its sanctity by walking in wearing shoes or touching the altar or its artifacts with unclean hands (see also Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2003, 2008). Hindus see their altar as a private shrine, a sacred space not to be easily visible or accessible to the casual visitor.

3.3. Home aesthetics: Religious art and artifacts

After a home is occupied, Hindus place religious art and decorative religious objects and auspicious signs throughout the home, including entryways, doorways (Fig. 3), bedrooms, living rooms, family areas, and kitchen, on walls, bookshelves, coffee tables and

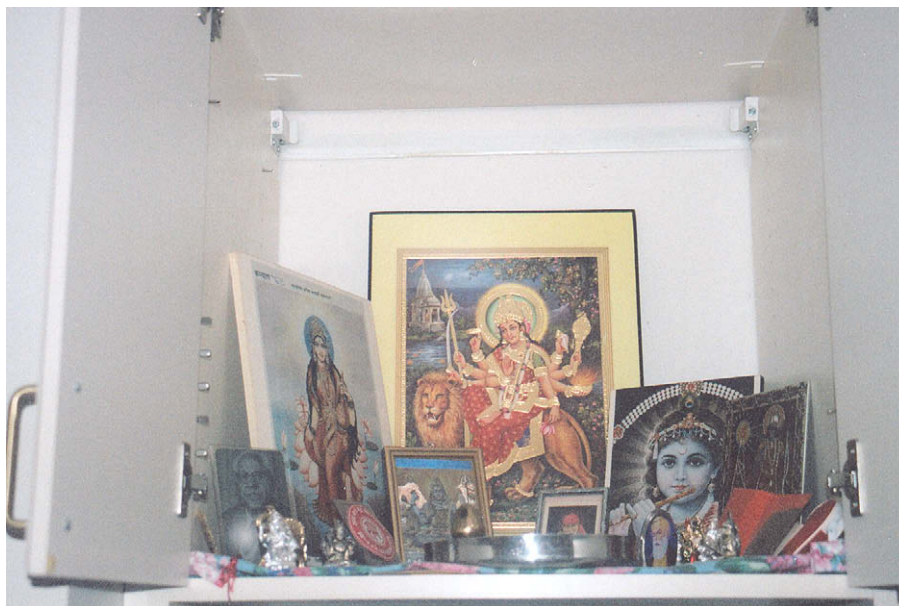


Fig. 2. Altar in cupboard.



Fig. 3. Decorative religious art including religious symbols hung above doorway.

cupboards. These are not located in spaces considered profane such as toilets (see also Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1994).

The entrance to the home receives special attention (Fig. 4):

In the entrance foyer of a Southern California home is an impressive display of several statues of Ganesha, the Hindu God who is believed to remove obstacles. The lady of the house is particularly fond of Ganesha and over the years has built her collection—ranging from large statues to intricate miniature carvings. Some were purchased during her travels while others were gifts (HIH\Field Obs\0501\1).



Fig. 4. Statue of Ganesha near entrance door.

Special artifacts are put on doorways to protect occupants from evil and harm (see Figs. 4 and 5). Anupama, a college student, describes her home:

As you enter our house, we have an elephant facing the front door for good luck. Another elephant faces the door to my room also for good luck. (HIH\Interv\9203\Anupama\1).

Above the threshold on doorposts and on walls they put the “Om” sign (Fig. 5) they believe to be sacred and auspicious.

Hindu immigrants incorporate many forms of religious art into their homes. Sushma describes the profusion of Hindu art in her home:

We have twelve pictures of Lord Krishna all over the house. We also have statues and figurines of Lord Krishna and Lord Ganapati in the different rooms (HIH\Interv\9005\Sushma\1).

These include intricately carved bronze, brass, wood, paper and other statues, figurines, and sculptures of Hindu deities. Statues of Nataraja (Fig. 6), a depiction of Shiva the Supreme Cosmic dancer, are common in Hindu homes and are significantly displayed both as representations of the sacred and as artistic creations. Paintings, fabric art (Fig. 7), tapestries, weavings and wall hangings, depict Hindu gods and goddesses, avatars, stories. Murals, objects, and framed and unframed paintings and pictures (Fig. 8) in distinctive artistic styles from different regions of India (such as Phad paintings from Rajasthan, Madhubani paintings from Bihar) represent and visually narrate stories from Hindu epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata), myths, and folk tales, articulating the Hindu conceptualization of love, romance, manhood, femininity, filial duty, and family relationships.

Artistic renderings of Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, show her riding a graceful swan, holding a *veena* (a stringed musical instrument) and a white lotus flower – all items rendered sacred by divine association. Artifacts used in prayer and ritual observances, such as lamps, are sometimes decoratively displayed. Models and replicas of famous Hindu temples are placed in various parts of the home.

Some religious art pieces are old items inherited from parents or close relatives. New ones are acquired during travel to the home country and pilgrimage to sacred sites. Others are purchased locally at ethnic businesses and stores, such as those located in local enclaves (e.g. Little India), as well as on-line enterprises that have targeted the religious consumer through the marketing and merchandising of faith-based products. A few immigrants have collected original religious artwork, which they display in their homes. Family and friends when they travel sometimes bring back items. Religious icons, objects, and artifacts are on occasion given as gifts to mark important life stage transitions, such as weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays. For example, one family celebrating the 80th birthday of the patriarch, presented each invited family with a miniature sculpture of a deity.



Fig. 5. Om (Aum) sign – considered auspicious.

Hindu families incorporate making of visual arts by creating and drawing *alpona* or *rangoli* at the threshold, which in America some women make mainly on special occasions. Some families make sandalwood paste and use the paste to decorate particular objects, such as pictures of gods.

They perform experiential arts as part of religious practice in their homes by singing devotional music, chanting, hymns (e.g. *kirtans* and *bhajans*) at auspicious times and on special occasions. These are performed live by family members, and by accomplished visitors. Chanting of the sacred *Om* and *gayatri* mantra are examples. Alternatively pre-recorded CDs, tapes, and records are used. Special invocations to the goddess *Saraswati* are usually done through performance of music or dance. During prayer, which may be said or sung aloud, a bell is rung and at particular times a *shankha* (conch shell) is blown. At such times, sounds of religious music produce an auditory experience and an aural ambiance in the home.



Fig. 6. Nataraja sculpture on bookshelf.

In sum, a Hindu home has various forms of religious art. Pre-created art is installed, performance and experiential arts are engaged, and visual arts created. The selection of appropriate aesthetics, artifacts, and materials is given careful consideration. This provides opportunities for seeing, touching, feeling, creating, and participating. All of these are part of the sensorial experience of religion at home (Eck, 1981).

Through these visual arts in the home the sacred is “made visible” (Eck, 1981), the home is sacralized, and memory activated. Religious artifacts “not only serve as a bridge between the human and divine worlds, they can also be objects of memory” (McDannell, 1995: 39) and “material reminders” (McDannell, 1995: 39). The very presence in Hindu American homes of these arts acts as a visual aid in religious instruction, familiarizing children with the multifaceted symbolism of Hindu art and iconography. Children born in America are introduced to Hindu heroes and heroines such as Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha not only through written texts, prayers, music and storytelling but through religious art and artifacts as well.

Sacralizing the home with devotional and decorative icons also helps in religious socialization and facilitates the transmission of both religion and art to the second generation. Such possessions are “tangible manifestations” of an immigrant’s desire to hold on to identity (Mehta & Belk, 1991: 408). Acquiring and caring for them, as well as displaying them in one’s home can serve to minimize the effects of “identity alienation” an immigrant is likely to experience in unfamiliar surroundings lacking the many “material anchors” of the past (Mehta & Belk, 1991: 400). Art, symbols, representations, artifacts, objects, and multi-sensorial experiential items play an important role in Hindu religious encounter.

3.4. Home gardens: Significant flowers and trees

When they can, immigrant Hindu families take special care to plant and nurture ritually significant trees and plants and to recreate gardens that are reminiscent of the landscapes from their past in their native India. Hindus believe many trees, plants, flowers, fruits and even blades of grass to be sacred and these play important roles in Hindu ritual, belief, and myths.⁶ Examples of trees are the *Pipal* (*Ficus Religiosa*), *Banyan* (*Ficus Bengalensis*), *Neem* (*Azdirachra Indica*), *Bel* (*Aegle Marmelos*), and *Mango* (*Mangifera Indica*).

Many of these flowers, and twigs with leaves (such as mango), Hindu families wash and offer during *pooja* (prayer), and string flowers into floral garlands and place around the deities on special occasions such as home occupancy, marriage, and birth of children. Fruits are offered in *pooja* as *prasaad* (ritual offering) and later distributed to those present. They prefer it if these are from their garden.

Although the warm Southern California climate is conducive to many plants an immigrant can nostalgically recall, growing these in the garden requires much effort as a college student explained:

There are some plants in our garden that my mother went through a great deal of trouble to find and then grow (HIH\Interv\9411\Ruma\1).

The *tulasi* (*Ocimum Sanctum* or holy basil) is a special plant that families go to great lengths to procure. One family expressed their fond desire to bring with them seeds of the *tulasi* plant from their old ancestral home in India to sow in their new garden here in America. Others obtain cuttings from a local temple (e.g. at Malibu); or from their friends. *Tulasi* plants are kept in a pot in their kitchen,

⁶ See for example Upadhyaya (1965) and Nair (1965). For the importance of plants in Native American culture and ritual see Hardesty (2000).



Fig. 7. Fabric painting of Krishna and Radha.

or planted in the ground in the backyard garden and worshipped to bring auspiciousness and prosperity to the family:

“We had a little outdoor shrine in our back patio. We had a *tulasi* plant. We also had a *shiva linga*. On special days we would anoint the *tulasi* with *kumkum* (vermillion) and say prayer” (HIH\Interv\0705\Priya\1).

They believe this plant ought to not be cut without proper rituals, and take special care to nurture, sustain and protect it, entrusting its care to family or friends when away on vacation.

They consider certain flowers particularly auspicious and offer these in prayer daily at the family altar at home. These include hibiscus, offered to goddess Kali, lotus associated with Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, marigolds and others. Flowers Hindu immigrants grow in their gardens in Southern California include hibiscus, marigold, gardenia, varieties of jasmine, and rose, among others (see also Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2008). Priya, a college student, fondly recalled the little hibiscus plant she and her family planted in her previous home, which over the years grew into a bush. In her present apartment, she has no garden and no significant flowers and trees. Another family, who for years lived in rented apartments with no garden, periodically obtained fresh flowers from their friend's garden to place at their altar. When they bought their own home, they specifically instructed their landscaper to plant a profusion of hibiscus and gardenias, flowers they remembered using in prayer and ritual in their parental homes in India. When in bloom, gardenias were in great demand as friends often requested them for domestic rituals.

Mogra is a jasmine family plant that bears delicate small white fragrant flowers that immigrant Hindu families take great pleasure in finding and successfully growing in their gardens.

Wijaya and Naveen were very proud and excited about the *mogra* plant in their backyard. They had tried very hard to find it, ultimately locating a Hawaiian strain at [a local nursery], available only during a specific period. Naveen joyfully explained how happy he was to find the plant because now they could use it in their *pooja* at the family altar. The fragrant flower reminded him of his family's *pooja* ritual. At one group event at his home, his wife Wijaya, took her female guests outside and showed them their plant in full bloom in the backyard. She plucked a few and gave them to her female guests. The assembled ladies nostalgically talked about summer nights in India with *mogra* in

full bloom, and its fragrance in the night air (HIH\Field Obs\9410\1).

One family, who had caringly nurtured *mogra* plants, expressed deep sorrow when two of these hard-to-grow treasured outdoor plants did not survive the winter. The lady of the house subsequently became quite protective of the surviving plants and has transplanted them into pots so that she can bring them indoors during inclement weather.

Through gardens and gardening and the careful cultivation of significant trees and plants and their use in the performance of *pooja* (prayer) rituals children learn about their roles and the

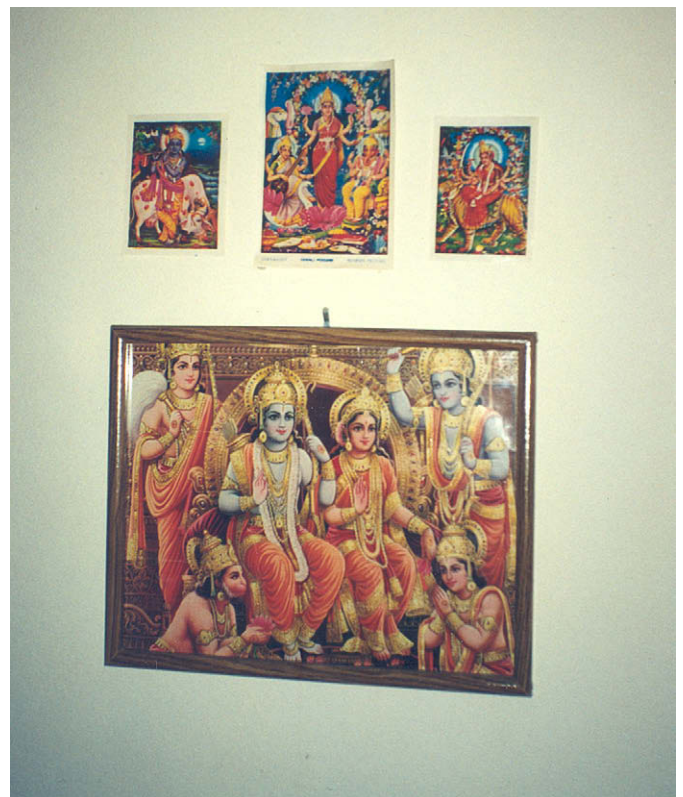


Fig. 8. Religious art on bedroom wall.

symbolic meaning of “offerings” – some flowers are auspicious, others are not. They learn about religion and religious practices and important environmental values including the ethics of care, nurturance, and reverence toward nature. They are taught that flowers and plants, for example, are not to be “disturbed” after sunset, as they too “rest at night”. This environmental dimension of religion adds another layer to the daily, lived experience of domestic religion.

To sum up, the Hindu religion inculcates values that influence home gardens through the careful selection of sacred trees, shrubs, plants, flowers and fruits. These in turn facilitate the practice of religion.

Home gardens are also sanctuaries of memory and nostalgia, reminding the immigrant of landscapes left behind. Filled with “smells and outdoor colours” of the past, they help to bring “the familiar into their new life” (Thompson, 2005: 230). Creating such spaces, therefore, can help the migrant “link the home of origin with the new” enabling him/her to “feel at home” and regain “a sense of belonging” (Thompson, 2005: 229–231) and rootedness and symbolically connect their two homes and landscapes.

4. Concluding discussion

From this research there are at least two kinds of lessons. One set is case based conclusions. Here we learn much about one religion and one immigrant group – the Hindus in Southern California, and can answer the questions we began with. A second set is beyond the case implications.

4.1. Case specific conclusions

First, Hindus view their homes as sacred places. They transform their newly acquired secular residences or houses into what they consider to be appropriate space by consecrating these through enacting rituals and installing at sacred time their family gods. They also create an altar, which becomes a repository of religious objects and artifacts.

Second, Hindus incorporate various forms of religious art into their homes. This art is symbolic and conveys important Hindu values by depicting gods, goddesses, and stories. Such art represents the significance of knowledge and music, and reverence for nature, the waters of the sacred Ganga and the Yamuna, the lofty mountain peaks of the Himalayas (referred to as the dwelling place of Shiva), cows, elephants, peacocks, swans, and others. Family and others perform other art forms, such as drawing, singing, chanting, and dancing. These together facilitate the experience of the religious.

Third, Hindu families create gardens and work assiduously to obtain and grow particular flowers, plants, trees, and fruits they believe to be auspicious and use in prayer. The garden appears to be an integral part of their “home”.

Fourth, these multi-sensory creations consisting of artifacts and activities – the sound of bells, the chanting of hymns and the sacred *Om*, the sight of auspicious flowers and the visual art, the olfactory experience of the fragrance of fresh flowers offered at the altar, sandalwood paste, burning incense and camphor, touch involved in making the offerings, and the taste of fruits and food offered as *prasaad* – make the Hindu home and the practice of the religion multi-sensorial experiences (Eck, 1981). Together with the creation of art, the performance of music and dance, the cooking of food, and cleaning, tending to plants, these facilitate a holistic engagement with religion and serve to enhance the religious experience (see also Eck, 1981; McDannell, 1995: 272). This careful creation of sacred sentience through ritual appropriation and sacralization of home space by layering the material with the spiritual appears to be a significant part of the lived experience of Hindus in diaspora.

Fifth, many of the objects are brought from the homeland, and several have longstanding connections. These together with the familiar plants and trees act as memory markers and help build connection and continuity with past practice of religion, environment, and people.

Sixth, the processes of acquiring, ritually appropriating, sacralizing, landscaping, performing, and creating, help these Hindu immigrants maintain continuity, gain a sense of belonging and identify with the new land. These contribute to the formation and making of what Proshansky et al. (1983), Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) and others have referred to as place identity.

Seventh, when the home provides a facilitative setting for religious practices and lifestyle, home can become the primary locus for the practice of religion and take on added ritual significance, relevance and meaning. It helps shape values, enables the next generation to observe, experience, and learn, thus enabling socialization. In diaspora, one’s home, particularly a religious home, can become “foundational” (McDannell, 1986: 48) and can represent a sacred microcosm, a sanctuary of stability and continuity in a changing and not fully familiar world. In doing so, it also enables identity formation.

Eighth, for these immigrants removed from the larger sacred macrocosm of neighborhood temples, support services and infrastructure, the home took on greater significance as a site for religion. Lacking fully supportive physical or social settings and ambiance unavailable in diaspora, Hindu families made several modifications and adjustments to their homes and practices because conditions they considered ideal were absent.

4.2. Beyond case implications

Going beyond this case, but based on it, several comments can be made, some of which may be transferable or have broader relevance. These are described below.

Some of the findings from our study focusing on the socio-physical-religious were similar to those noticed by others in their research on Hindus (e.g. Eck, 2001; Khare, 1976; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Sinha, 1997).

We propose that home can be an important site for religion. We offer the concept of “home as religious space”, and further suggest that religion, beyond affecting homes in tangible/physical ways, helps create a sacred ambiance and ethos, which in turn facilitates a multi-layered experience of place. Our review of the literature suggests that scholars of environmental design have done pioneering work on the symbolic aspects of home (Altman & Low, 1992; Belk, 1992), examining the home as an expression of self (Cooper, 1974), as an artifact of culture (Rapoport, 1969) and ritual (Saile, 1985). And yet how religious beliefs, values, activities, and ceremonies affect home selection, decor, aesthetics, and use has not been studied in great detail. Our claim is not that all religions view the home and garden similarly but a few do (e.g. McDannell, 1995; Pavlides & Hesser, 1989). The literature reveals several activities are not peculiar to Hindus and some similar processes have been found in other cultures/religions, for example, ritual sanctification of home (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; Pavlides & Hesser, 1989; Saile, 1985), decorative religious art (McDannell, 1986), and self-identity (Belk, 1992; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004).

Focusing on one religion, Hinduism, permitted us to understand the intersection of the material (prayer spaces, landscapes, art, artifacts) with the experiential (sensorial engagement) and the religious (prayer and meditation) in the context of home. This enabled us to fulfill our goal of suggesting the need for incorporating religion into environmental psychology, environmental design research, and environment–behavior studies, especially of homes. Similar studies of other religions could add to the richness of our understanding of the idea of “home”.

Similar to Berger's (1967) idea of material "objectifications" we note that home spaces and material artifacts are significant in the creation of the sacred in the home. But to this we add art objects and sentiences, including multi-sensorial experiences, as also assisting in the endeavor.

Although most literature looks at the home by itself, in this study we see "an ecology of religion" suggesting a strong link between home spaces, landscapes, and ritual. This can include the creation of specific landscapes with distinctive design elements – a garden of significant plants, fruit trees, and flowers, a lily pond, koi fish swimming in the water, sand and pebbles, fountain – all of which can help enhance a spiritual experience as well as nurture and connect with the environment, both past and present. When mixed with sacredness, everyday activities, such as tending to the garden, cleaning the pond, raking leaves, pruning bushes, and even taking a leisurely walk along a meandering garden path can be psychologically calming and reflective. Moving beyond this study, the literature indicates that in at least Zen Buddhism similar dimensions, such as the meaning of home gardens, the connection between, and the incorporation of environmental awareness and care into daily life, and meditational activities exist (Morgan, 1993). This environmental sensitivity and focus can have implications beyond the individual home garden.

Environmental psychologists have sought to learn about how the human psyche is affected by the material world and through concepts of place identity and place attachment, among many others, have explored how individuals connect to the environment. However, with only a few exceptions, they have neglected to understand how religion influences the environmental psyche of humans or how it affects actions, as in the way social groups conceptualize, design, and occupy their homes and gardens, or how and why they acquire particular artifacts. This paper helps fill this gap.

Finally, the literature on religion has its own limitations having focused primarily on doctrine, on the public buildings of religious worship, on institutional structure and support services. The significant role of homes in the enabling of religion has not received adequate attention. This privileging of public over private, of congregational over familial/personal/individual has led to an unfortunate bias in the literature where religions with greater public presence (such as the Abrahamic religions) have received far greater attention than those which have traditionally viewed the home as the primary site for religious practice. In this age of heightened religious tension and strident public discourse on religious behavior it is important to examine how home, through decor, aesthetics, and landscaping, can inculcate tranquility, inner peace, religiosity, and spirituality.

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