HINDU BELIEFS, PRACTICES AND LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

TRADITIONAL SOURCES

Although not a 'religion of the book' as such, Hinduism has its own body of canonical sources. The foundational scriptures, the Vedas, are regarded as a kind of 'authorless revelation', since the timeless words were simply 'heard' by contemplative seers around the beginning of time. The broader Hindu tradition has embraced other scriptural texts after the Vedas as being significantly authoritative, also, namely, the Puranas, Dharma Sashtra, and the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata (the latter includes the Bhagavad Gita, 'Song of the Lord'). These texts contain prescriptions for rituals, worship and observances; codes of law; moral and ethical teachings for self-discipline, managing emotions, social conduct and care for sentient creatures; manuals on government and social organisations; philosophical teachings on yoga, tantra and meditation as aids to self-realisation and liberation; and vignettes on death, rebirth and the life hereafter.

Hinduism underscores the belief in one ultimate reality, the Brahman as the impersonal absolute Being, which is also responsible for the blueprint of the emergence and dissolution of the universe over vast temporal cycles, called yugas (time). A hymn in the 10th mandala of the Rig Veda, Purushasukta, proclaims that the entire cosmos and the gods, divinities and all beings alike emanate from Brahman, with which they all merge at the end of the time, only to re-emerge again possibly in different geometric and cosmological arrangements. Hindu mythology attributes the material task of 'creation' to the first-born god, Prajapati, or Brahma (not to be confused with Brahman). However, even the gods and holy mothers rely on the inexorable principle of karma ('law of one') to maintain the universal order (ritu) even as they oversee the harmonious governance (dharma) of the planetary, social and individual (across all species) lifeworlds.
KARMA AND REINCARNATION
Two cardinal doctrines of the Hindus – popularly known though they create difficulties for non-Asian minds, and are central also to Buddhism and Jainism – are karma and reincarnation (or rebirth). Karma suggests that every action creates conditions for its own retribution or reward, either immediately or later in life, or perhaps in another lifetime. Indeed, the momentum of unresolved karma may well necessitate a subsequent physical embodiment in which the accumulated karma of previous lives (good and bad) can be worked through. In other words, merits and demerits that accrue from actions, in the form of deeds, words and thoughts or desires, impinge on the destiny of the individual, here and hereafter. Also, since one lifetime may not be sufficient for cumulative karma to be adequately resolved and fully exhausted, a cycle of death and birth (samsara) becomes incumbent until the individual is able to block all karma-producing actions and thereby gain liberation, or moksha, from recurring deaths. Moksha means that the individual has successfully cast off the shackles of maya (delusional nature of reality) and reached the highest truth, which is said to result in re-merging or oneness with Brahman, even while living. It is a state of ‘the clear-light of mind’.

CASTE SYSTEM
Traditional Hindu society was divided into four caste groupings, namely, brahmana (or brahmin), the priestly class; ksatriya, the warrior and ruling class; vaishya, the agricultural and commercial class; and shudra, the labouring, serf class. Lower down the social rung are groups that are clustered under the general category of ‘other backward castes’. Then there are unspecified caste groups as well as ‘tribes’, or clusters of non-urban or economically ‘backward’ tribal peoples that fall outside of this fourfold scheme. They are referred to variously as ‘outcastes’ or ‘untouchables’ (acharyas). Harijan (‘children of God’) was Gandhi’s preferred term for ‘untouchables’, which is now largely replaced by dalit. Officially, the dalit come under the category of ‘Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes’.

Below the vaishya, not many of these caste, non-caste or tribal groups would identify themselves as Hindu (the official censuses, however, do). Clearly, the Indian society largely remains organised around hierarchical lines determined by caste distinctions, with numerous sub-caste groupings, called jati, which determine the distribution of rights, entitlements and privileges, and denials and disadvantages, from region to region, between one linguistic and ethnic group and another, and between the genders as well. Thankfully, albeit slowly, the caste system is disintegrating in larger towns and certainly in the cities. It is hardly visibly prevalent in the Indian diaspora.

The cosmic principle of governance, or dharma, came in time to be identified with the duties, rules, regulations and localised laws of different castes and ethnic groupings. As well as demarcating occupations and skills, the caste divisions have tended to entrench social and institutional divisions, and at times get exploited for political and sectarian ends.

HINDU PRACTICES AND WORSHIP
Given the complexity of Hinduism, a vast assemblage of customs, taboos and expectations prevail among Hindus. The Hindu year abounds with observances, mandated rites and festivals. Hindus believe that the movements of the sun, moon and the various planets have a special spiritual significance for life on Earth. Their lunar calendar lists days that are auspicious or propitious, such as for weddings, certain personal activities or for new business transactions. Hindus in Bali and Java in Indonesia are also beholden to this ‘gods’ eye’ syndrome, so much so that former presidents Sukarno and Subarto, although Muslims, would consult local astrologers before staging their planned military coups, against each other!

Hinduism is a strictly personal religion, and does not entail any weekly congregation as in the Christian and Jewish traditions. Most Hindu homes have a mini-altar, or a small wooden shrine, in an alcove set
aside for offering devotional worship (puja) to their chosen gods or guru, followed by mantra recitation and meditation. In former times, the daily worship was performed by the man of the house. Nowadays, women seem to have taken over the role. Before performing the puja, the person bathes to purify herself and attires in simple, clean clothing. The concept of purity is all-important to the Hindus. The deities are then symbolically washed, dressed and decorated with flowers and perfumes. Incense, waving of light (deep) and sounding of bells is followed by prayers. Offerings such as sweets, coconut, water, milk etc., are then distributed and consumed as prasada, the food left over after gods have partaken it. On special occasions, an invited priest performs the rituals in greater detail. He is then fed, given clothing and money, and his blessings are sought.

Temple worship is more elaborate. The Hindu temple consists of a central portion called the garbagriha (womb-shrine), where the main deity is given residence. Temple deities are installed through the performance of a highly elaborate set of prescribed rituals called pranapratishtha ('installing life in the icon or image') in especially dedicated shrines. In front of the main shrine(s) is a large hall, where devotees gather to pray and attend special worship services. In most shrines, only the priest is allowed into the 'sanctum sanctorum', where he performs rituals that involve the awakening, bathing, dressing and feeding of the deity in the form of a highly embellished icon. After this, incense, ghee or oil lamp, lit camphor, specially prepared food and fruits are offered (arati). During arati, worshippers stand facing the deity, while the priest waves the lamps around the deity and rings a bell to symbolise the warding off of harmful spirits. The devotees may join in the singing of special incantations and hymns.

RITES OF PASSAGE (SAMSKARA)

There are, in all, 16 purification rites (samskara) associated with the major events in Hindu life, from the moment of conception to death. Most of these events take place at home or in the temple, and this signifies the importance of the community and the home and family life. The four most important rites are as follows:

Birth: Special care is taken with the horoscope for the newborn infant, as it also suggests suitable syllables for the child's naming. A special act of worship (namakarana) is performed by many families, which has its parallel in the baptising service among Christian traditions.

Initiation, or threading ceremony (mamjibandhana): In India, this is of great importance for the Brahmin boys, in particular, as it indicates their readiness for religious education, much like the bar mitzvah in the Jewish tradition.

Marriage (vivaha): Marriage in Hinduism is not a contract as such, but rather a 'sacrament' and a pledge-making event that is witnessed by the gods and community. (In modern India, Hindu marriage is accorded legal status. Once the wedding takes place, the couple registers it at the local office of the Collector within a few days). Time and place of the wedding are determined according to the religious calendar. The ceremony itself used to take 3-7 days to complete, although these days it may last around 2 hours.

As with any ceremony, the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, is invoked first. This is followed by the worship of Shiva and Gauri, the father and mother of the world according to Hindu thought, by the bride. Lakshmi, the goddess of welfare and prosperity, is also worshipped. The bride seeks a long and happy married life from Gauri, symbolising as Gauri does the ideal wife and successful motherhood. Next is the ritual of welcoming the groom, exchanging of garlands, giving away the bride (kanyadana) and tying of the sacred necklace (mangalasutra). Offerings are made to Agni, the god of fire, in a central fire-altar, around which the bride and bridgroom circumambulate four times and pledge important binding oaths. They then take seven steps together (saptapadi) on seven heaps of rice, taking new vows each time. These vows signify pledges toward sharing of food, strength, wealth, fortune, auspicious seasons and everlasting friendship. The groom takes a vow to follow the codes of conduct as laid down by the
society and to observe the sanctity of the marriage by following religious duties, earning a decent living and thereby looking after the family, and enjoying sexual pleasures within the wedlock. The couple also pray to the gods to be blessed with healthy offspring. Prayers for the presiding deities in the respective family homes of the newly wedded are also offered, followed by sumptuous feasts and gifts for the invited guests. Meat and alcohol are not part of the Hindu religious fare.

**Last rites (anteyesthi):** Hindus believe that the deceased should be cremated, not buried. The two exceptions to this rule are holy men (sannyasin), who have renounced the material world and are therefore outside the pale of social norms, and still-born foetuses and infants who have not yet been initiated. In both of these instances, the bodies are buried. Cremation signifies offering of the body to the gods as the ultimate sacrifice, after the completion of the present lifetime, through the medium of fire and smoke (agni). Traditional rituals involve placing the cleansed body, wrapped in cloth, on a wooden pyre. It is then smeared with ghee (clarified butter) while the eldest son ignites the pyre with the accompaniment of Vedic mantras and chants from sacred texts. The entire ritual is believed to facilitate a smooth journey for the parting soul (atman) onwards to the celestial regions. On or after the third day of the cremation rite, the ashes are scattered in one of the holy rivers. The 14th day is a time for celebration, when the soul of the deceased is thought to have been freed entirely from all earthly bonds and suffering, or pleasures.

**HINDU PRACTICES IN AUSTRALIA**

Generally speaking, Hindus in Australia aspire to continue and perpetuate the entire range of Hindu beliefs and practices as described above. However, due to obvious constraints and limitations that are faced in a predominantly Western and secular environment, a modified approach to traditional rites often results in the diaspora. For instance, elaborate Vedic-Agamic rituals, which require a large contingent of priests and paraphernalia, have been performed only on the rare occasion of temple-inauguration ceremonies in the major urban centres. To a lesser extent, similar elaborate rituals might be performed during the most auspicious days in the Hindu almanac, such as Mahashivaratri, or the Great Night of Lord Shiva, where rites based on Vedic fire-altar (homa) are performed. A mixture of Vedic and Puranic rites still comprise the bulk of the traditional Hindu wedding ceremony, although these are almost invariably performed in less time, followed immediately by a secular reception. Receptions are grand affairs that include a lavish feast, where meat and alcohol may also be present. The feast is followed by DJ-assisted, Bollywood-style dancing. To avoid the short-circuiting, the more ardent Hindus take their marriageable children to India to benefit from a ceremony performed in full regalia and with attention to details in customary practice.

Funeral rites (anteyesthi) reflect even a greater change so as to adhere to local health regulations. If death has occurred away from home, the body of the deceased is not allowed to be returned home, unless special arrangements have been made with the funeral directors engaged. The usual Indian practice of the eldest son torching the funeral pyre is not permitted by local authorities. The family has to be satisfied with placing an incense stick atop the coffin-lid as it is lowered into the high-voltage furnace at the crematorium. The ashes are returned to the family for scattering in holy rivers such as the Ganges, Kaveri or Tungabhadra, or local rivers, or in the nearby Indian Ocean.

Another observation to be made in this context is that the priests that are available for private ceremonies outside of the temples are not necessarily as well versed in the life cycle and calendrical rites as priests in India might be expected to be. The main reason for this is that the priests (except the temple priests) in Australia have other occupations or vocations, and conduct such community rituals on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, it is often the case that the dedication of the key participants and sponsors (yajaman) of such rites is rather strong, and the task
is carried through with a sense of duty and respect for the tradition.

_Arya Samaj_ is a major reformed sect within Hinduism, and its members, known as Aryasamajis, account for 30 per cent of Hindus in Australia. They tend to be more orthodox than other Hindus, and congregate in homes to perform _Vedic homa_, or sacrificial offerings, to _Agni_, the fire god. The remaining Hindus, often called _Samatani_, popularly congregate to offer _artibana_ and _arati_ (worship followed by waving of lamp), and perform _Satyanarayan_ and _Ganesa pujas_. There are a large number of devout Hindus, including Anglo-Australian followers, who form small community groups and meet regularly to chant _kirtans_ or _bhajans_ ("devotional songs") to their _guru_, such as _Sai Baba_, _Sathya Sai Baba_, _Ramakrishna_, or another Godmen or _Amma_ (Mother), whose large, colourful poster-images adorn the petalled _mandap_ or makeshift altar and walls of their homes.

Festive days and important astronomical constellations, particularly the four phases of the moon (new, full and 10th day after each, called _ekadasis_), are observed in many Hindu households. Hindu communities have begun to distribute computergenerated _panchanga_, or almanacs, that register agreeable or propitious timings for new or risk-bearing tasks as well as marking the precise significance of the day in the lunar monthly cycle. This time-tuning helps the family earmark days appropriate for observing certain rites, as well as fasting and maintaining purity in the household, which usually entails refraining from placing meat or alcoholic drinks on the dining table. Women during their menstruation periods are generally discouraged from participating in _puja_, observances or visiting temples.

Major festivals, such as _dussehra_, _diwali_, new year (according to variant Indian calendars), _Sankranti_, _Pongal_ (among south Indian Hindus), birthdays of _Rama_ and _Krishna_, birth and death anniversaries of the _Buddha_, and days dedicated to _Ganesh_, _Shiva_, _Kartikeya_ and the goddesses _Durga_, _Lakshmi_ and _Saraswati_, are celebrated with much pance. The celebrations variously consists of _puja_, preparation of sweets and other delicacies, inviting family and friends to the home, exchange of greetings and gifts, prolonged chanting and music enraptured, enacting and joining in stylised fertility folk dances (_garba_) and so forth. These can be occasions for ‘one big holy partying’. The festival of _Holi_ is celebrated with great gusto in the grounds of Hindu temples in the major cities.

There are also signs of what might be termed ‘protestantisation’ evident in the Hindu diaspora in Australia. The first factor in this configuration is the environmental constraint. The Western context, with its decidedly materialistic and secular ambience, makes even the most devout Hindu somewhat circumspect about the extent to which traditional and orthodox beliefs and practices can be maintained without attracting attention to one's ‘otherness’, despite multiculturalism. The second factor is related to the aspirations, career motives and educational aspirations for the younger generation and the desire, as the popular saying has it, to get on with life and all its demands, or to integrate more effectively with the host society. The third factor has to do with changes in religious orientation being experienced on the subcontinent, in the broader context of nationalist and communal tensions, where an element of politicisation, if not militancy, in expression of primordial allegiances has entered into the fabric of everyday Hindu life. Hindus in the diaspora, from _Mahatma Gandhi's_ home-rule struggle to the present turbulent times, which witness a greater emphasis towards a Hinduised polity, have not been spared this fervour. Indeed, some would want to claim that the ferment on the subcontinent in this matter is to some extent fuelled or funded through resources, instigators and sympathisers from within the diaspora.

There is a growing and strong transnational link between Hindus in North America, United Kingdom, Africa and Australia. The diasporic agenda is marked by a zeal for reforms in India that would allegedly help preserve the heritage of Hindu civilization and certain fundamental rights of the Hindu as a _bona fide_ citizen of India against the alleged encouragement of partisan communal, religious or
caste-based claims, by other groups within the vast Indian landscape.

Similar sentiments appear to guide the organisation and activities of Tamil-Hindus from Sri Lanka, who have forged closer working relations with Hindus from other regions of southern India. There have been many reports also of Tamil migrants being approached for donations toward supporting the Tamil liberation fight in Sri Lanka. A major cause of schism and eventual split within the first broad-based Hindu temple association in Victoria was attributed to the differential allegiances between moderate and extremist elements among the Tamil community representatives. Similar patterns have been noted in the other states also, particularly in New South Wales.

These factors tend to de-emphasise the mystical or the esoteric aspects and the internal diversity of Hinduism in the urge to universalise and present a more unified and accessible creedal front than the tradition has hitherto afforded. The operational threads of community affairs assume a more centralised structure and defined authority, as in political party structure. In addition, there is emphasis towards shifting the focus from home worship to the temple or community centre, where patrons are encouraged to 'sponsor' special or regular *puja*, such as *abhisheka* (bathing of the gods while chanting special mantras), *havan* (fire sacrifices) and *prasadam* (food offerings), in return for public recognition. The level of afforded donation becomes a measure of one's dedication to the religious community.

There are ramifications here for the kinds of leadership made possible within the community. Community priests are called upon to conduct *puja* and certain life-cycle rites; temple priests likewise are revered as functionaries keeping alive a tradition. Beyond this, the priests have no status or significant voice in the community on matters relating to values, disputes, official family or community affairs, or representation in the larger social formations. All such matters are negotiated with leaders, derived from within the ranks of the local temple association or in the community at large. Indeed, the leadership issue can be contentious and can lead to much friction.

**HINDU ORGANISATIONS**

First, a word on attitudes towards caste identities in the diaspora may be appropriate. Among the earlier migrants up to the 1960s, it was not uncommon to be identified in terms of one's village or town of origin and caste. Forty years on, caste is almost never discussed openly and much less does it determine the make-up of social and religious gatherings. However, when it comes to the issue of marriage, caste considerations may play a significant role. Arranged marriages continue to constitute the majority of Hindu marriages, and the suitable boy or girl is often selected along equivalent caste lines (though no longer always through sub-caste or *jati* or linguistic lines). Preferences are stated, even in local and internationally circulated matrimonial columns, for particular caste background, although a compromise may be reached if the level of education and socioeconomic standing of the prospective partner is attractive enough. A Hindu family in Australia will rather happily have their daughter marry a man of comparable (or even lesser) stature residing in North America or the United Kingdom than enter into wearisome negotiations on dowry and immigration sponsorships for an identical caste suitor from India. Overall, caste preferences are staked not in deference so much to orthodox strictures, but rather as an antidote to the perceived laxer moral and sexual attitudes in Western society. However, despite such apprehension and the high chance of failure of mixed-caste marriages, some Hindu families leave the matter entirely to the choice of the young adults in finding their prospective partners.

**THE GURUS' TOUCH**

The first notable Hindu *guru* to visit Australia was J. Krishnamurti, then associated with the Order of the East, or the Theosophical Society in Madras, in 1925. But it was in the 1960s and 1970s that *guru* and their movements with a neo-Hindu universalist outlook began to arrive in large numbers. An
assortment of guru, yogi, bhogi, baba, swami, tantric advocates, self-made goddesses, spiritual mothers and harbingers of universal brotherhood and 'moral armament', began to traverse the last spiritual frontier, seeking converts mostly among disenchanted young people as they moved from city to city, or settled down in comfortable inner-city ashrams, supported by their upper-middle-class followers. It was during this period of the widening quest for 'alternative' spiritualities and therapies that the phenomenon, or the cult, of 'the guru' came to prominence in Australia. The influential teachings spilled into New Age movements, from up-beat yoga, meditation and astrology, to down-to-earth ecology followings. Esoteric bookshops flourished in major cities, and to this day the Theosophical Society bookstores remain the larger outlets for literature of the Hindu and esoteric variety.

Notable among the spiritual visitors was Swami Ranganathananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Mission, who came in 1964 and several times since, until his demise in 2005. His visit helped found the Vedanta Society of New South Wales, which ran a spiritual bookshop for a while. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of TM\(^\text{TM}\) (Transcendental Meditation) fame and one-time guru of the Beach Boys and the Beatles, and perhaps most influential of all the gurus of his time through his arresting TM technique of meditation, gained a wide and popular following. TM has been making inroads into professional and executive circles as well. In 1969 came the Hare Krishna movement, officially known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), founded in New York's Soho by Bhaktivedanta Srila Prabhupada, who visited Australia on several occasions as well.

Equally popular is the Siddha Yoga syndicate, brought to Australia in 1970 by Baba Muktananda, a highly colourful guru who made his debut in the United States in the late 1960s. His followers considered him to be an adept meditation master possessing mystical powers (siddhi) that he could transmit in spiritual comport (shaktipat) to his disciples. His proclaimed successor, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, has now taken firm reign over the multi-million dollar Siddha Yoga empire that stretches between Catskill in up-state New York, upper Mumbai, India, and Melbourne's North Fitzroy.

In the 1960s also, came Guru Maharaji, then a teenage boy who claimed to be privy to the ineffable 'Knowledge', which he would transmit to his disciples in devotional-meditational sessions managed by his Divine Light Mission. Although philosopher-turned-mystic Rajneesh of the Osbo (Orange-clad) fame, never visited Australia, he gained a sizeable following alongside the galaxy of Indian gurus who sent emissaries, recorded teachings and goodwill to the West. Among these were, Swami Sivananda of the Divine Life Mission, based in Rishikesh, India, three of whose brother-disciples made their presence felt in Australia: Swami Saccidananda (Jumbled the 'Woodstock rock guru'), Swami Venkatesananda, who established a farm-ashram near Perth, and Swami Satyananda Saraswati, who operated out of an ashram near Mangrove Mountains in New South Wales. Their ecumenism and 'Integral' approach has not been unlike that of Dom Bede Griffiths, a Benedictan sannyasin (monk) living in India who experimented with infusing aspects of Hindu practices and Christian spirituality. Dom Bede also visited Australia twice.

The most widely read Indian or Hindu guru in Australia, as all over the world, is Yogamahans Paramahansa, through his popular Autobiography of a Yogi. He was the first of the California-based gurus to exploit the United States (or Western) thirst for spiritual know-how of a more numinous order. He is followed by Paul Brunton, an enigmatic European yoga advocate who travelled widely in India, claiming to have been initiated by the jnani-mystic Ramana Maharshi, who also had followers in Australia.

Another influential guru was Swami Chinmayananda who founded the Chinmaya Mission. With his flamboyant erudition of traditional scriptural teachings during his several visits to Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, he later switched to emphasising the political instability of Hinduism, and publicly endorsed the Hindu extremism.
Perhaps the guru and spiritual figurehead who is currently most popular among local Hindus is Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Not without his own controversies in India, Sathya Sai Baba has managed to summon considerable popularity through his devotional teachings, educational activities, building huge free-to-public hospitals and the supposed powers to perform miracles that produce material items said to heal diseases and so on. His Afro-style hair, simple though unusual attire and his ecumenical leanings, with profound commitments toward social transformation and human values, endear him to many around the world. Sathya Sai Baba groups in Australia co-ordinate services and educational activities as well, especially for the aged and the younger members of the community, respectively. In this respect, Hindus, and their sympathisers or fellow devotees drawn from the larger multicultural Australian community, dedicate a portion of their time and energy towards social and community services.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS
Given the fact that most Hindus arrived in Australia only from the late 1970s, they have made good progress in keeping their customs, traditions and beliefs alive, and in spite of their small number outside Sydney and Melbourne, they seem to have made their mark on the Australian landscape. This is especially so in the fields of public celebrations of Hindu festivals and propagation of the already established guru cults, not to mention Indian cuisine. Major Australian cities now boast hundreds of Indian restaurants, and even small country towns are likely to have an Indian take-away restaurant. The total Hindu population reached 148,000 in 2006, with the largest numbers coming from India and Fiji, and those born in Australia.

Institutions such as the Ramakrishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission and Sathya Sai Baba centres have now been firmly established in all the major cities. Ramakrishna and Chinmaya missions in Melbourne and Sydney have been able to attract substantial following among expatriate Indians and their children, and also among local Australians. Thanks to some generous devotees, both have managed to acquire large properties. Retreats are regularly held at these places and in country Australia under their auspices. Sathya Sai Baba holds sway among many White Australians as well.

Australia now has over 30 Hindu temples. As one would expect, Sydney and Melbourne have the largest number. While the main deities in most places are either Shiva or Vishnu, or both, there are now special temples dedicated to Ganesha, Murugan (Kartikeya), Durga, Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba as well.

The Shiva-Vishnu temple in Melbourne and the Shri Venkateswara temple at Helensburgh, near Sydney, are large shrines situated on several hectares of land. Such temples host a number of community activities associated with calendrical religious festivals. Festivals such as Ganesh-Chaturthi, Holi and the birthdays of Rama and Krishna are celebrated with great gusto at these temples. Holi, which recreates Krishna’s frolics among young gopis (cow-girls) of Vrindavan, is very popular among the young, where they get a chance to sprinkle friends and especially members of the opposite sex with coloured water, and some licentious behaviour is tolerated.

In the Shri Venkateswara Hindu temple at Helensburgh, New South Wales. Photo: Elizabeth Gilliam.

On the day of the Ganesh-Chaturthi, Ganesha’s clay image is ceremoniously installed at the temple. Every day, devotees come to pay homage at the time of the evening arati. The image is subsequently taken through the streets to the nearest river or bay.
and ceremoniously drowned (visarjan), amidst loud chants of Ganapati Bappa Moraya (Hail Lord Ganesh). It is not uncommon to see over 1000 devotees take part in such processions. Ganesha is a particularly favourite god in Maharashtra in India, and the Marathi communities in Melbourne and Sydney have been celebrating this festival for the past 20 years. The Gokhale family in Mentone started this celebration on a private scale some 30 years ago. It has now become a major event mainly for the Marathi and Gujarati communities of Melbourne. Close to 1000 people attend the visarjan ceremony at Mentone beach. Large numbers of women volunteers cook the prasada, which is served later.

Interestingly, Darebin council in Melbourne is the only municipality in Australia that installs Ganesha in its 'Art and Cultural Centre' and has a separate budget for this occasion. Ken Evans, a local sculptor, makes the eco-friendly image out of pure clay. At the time of the visarjan, State Emergency Service volunteers escort the procession through the streets of Preston to the tram depot, where a Yarra tram awaits. The image is taken in the tram to the lake at Bunduora Park, where it is ceremoniously drowned in the lake. Many Marathi families now install Ganesha together with 'standing Gauri' images, according to the tradition of the Deshastha Brahmins of Maharashtra. Once again, people flock to the darshan and partake of the prasada.

For the past few years, Diwali (divali, deepawali), the festival of lights, has been celebrated on a grand scale by cultural programs held at Federation Square and fireworks on the Yarra River in Melbourne, and fireworks at the Harbour Bridge in Sydney. The Gujarati communities in all the major cities celebrate the Navaratri festival, with Garba dances for nine nights. Such events, held in public halls, attract huge crowds and are often a great venue for matchmaking. To sum up, while the Indian community is a long way from being politically active by its presence on Ethnic Community Councils and by fielding candidates at elections, it has started to make its distinctive cultural presence felt within the Australian community.

**DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL PROFILE**

In the 19th century, small groups of low-caste Hindus worked as hawkers, farm hands and camel drivers, alongside 'Ghans' (Afghans), Muslim-Punjabis and Sikhs. Most were itinerant and many returned to the subcontinent. By 1911, there were no more than 1000 so-called Hindoos, representing just 0.01 per cent of the population. The intervening years of the two world wars and the White Australia Policy saw a decline in Indians choosing Australia as a destination, except for a handful of merchants, academics and students. Late in the 20th century, the picture was significantly different, especially after the relaxation of immigration regulations. Thus, by 1981 the Hindu component increased to 15 000 and the 1986 Census identified 21 500 Hindus (representing 0.14 per cent and 0.26 per cent of the population, respectively) doubling to 43 580 in 1991. This sharp rise was largely a function of the end of colonialism, changes in immigration policy, a relaxed family reunion immigration program and increased opportunities in middle-level professional and technical areas in which Hindus have an established proficiency.

Also, in the late 1980s, two military coups in Fiji and political upheavals in Sri Lanka and some African states increased the number of people of Indian descent seeking refuge in other lands. Many looked to Australia. Between 1991 and 1996, an additional 34 687 people emigrated from southern Asia, and by the 1996 Census, Hindus represented 0.38 per cent of the population. By 2001, Hindus numbered 95 473 or 0.51 per cent of the population. According to Census figures, in 2001, Hindus were more numerous than Jewish citizens in Australia, having experienced an increase of more than 40 per cent in just 5 years. Many of these migrants came with some financial resources and were quickly able to find well-salaried, specialised positions, while by 2006 an increasing number were students.

At the time of the 2006 Census, Hindus numbered 148 125, or 1.3 per cent of the population. Hindus were most numerous in New South Wales,
where they accounted for 73,888 of the population and almost 2 per cent of the population in Sydney. Hindus constituted 3277 of the Australian Capital Territory and 1 per cent of Melbourne, but only 42,309 of the population of Victoria as a whole. In both New South Wales and Victoria, approximately 95 per cent of the Hindu community lived in the capital cities. In fact, three-quarters of all Australian Hindus lived in either Sydney or Melbourne.

Hindus represented less than 0.5 per cent of the population in the rest of Australia. The capitals of Brisbane and Perth held most of those in Queensland (14,058) and Western Australia (8160) as a whole. Hindus constituted only very small numbers in the Northern Territory (532), South Australia (5116) and Tasmania (782), and were concentrated in their respective capitals. The high concentration (over 90 per cent) of Hindus in Australia's capital cities reflects the fact that most recent immigrants begin their lives in Australia in urban centres as doctors, business owners or other professionals.

The age profile for the Australian Hindu community is much younger than the Australian population. There is a similar proportion of people under the age of 15, but much higher proportions of people in their 20s and 30s. The profile reflects the fact that many Hindus are very recent migrants and many come in their 20s and 30s, often prior to starting a family. More than half the community was aged between 20 and 39 in 2001, with around one-quarter in their 20s, compared with 17.2 per cent of the overall population and around a quarter in their 30s, compared with 19.1 per cent of the Australian population. People in their 40s were also slightly under-represented.

Hindus over the age of 50 were under-represented. Around one-tenth (10.3 per cent) were in their 50s in 2001, compared with 14.9 per cent of the population, while 5.2 per cent fewer were in their 60s. Few were aged 70 or older. In 2001, a greater proportion (52.5 per cent) of the Hindu population in Australia was male, while 47.5 per cent was female. The relatively recent establishment of the Hindu community in Australia may be seen through the fact that only 16,571 (16.1 per cent) out of the 148,000 Hindus living in Australia in 2006 were born in Australia. Over 94.5 per cent had two overseas-born parents, while the remainder were second-generation immigrants, with one or both parents born overseas.

In 2006, 80 per cent of Hindus were born overseas, as compared with 23.9 per cent of the total population. Of overseas-born Hindus who specified a year of arrival, most had arrived since 1980. Very few were born in Europe, North America or New Zealand, although the United Kingdom and New Zealand were among the top 10 birthplaces, reflecting remigration from these recipients of Indian and Fijian migrants. Apart from India, the most common birthplaces in 2006 were Australia (23,889), Fiji (22,724), Sri Lanka (11,588), Nepal (32,28) and Malaysia (31,59). The largest numbers in all these categories were located in New South Wales. Other countries in the top 10 included Malaysia (22,51), and Singapore (1301). Because of their recent arrival, proportionately fewer Hindus are naturalised citizens than from other sources. In 2006, only 57.9 per cent were citizens, considerably lower than for Buddhists or Muslims.

In 2006, 34 per cent of Hindus in Australia spoke Hindi at home (51,014). One reason for the large number of Hindi speakers is that it is the lingua franca of Fiji-Indians. However, most Hindus are bilingual, particularly those from post-independence India and Fiji, and many speak English as a second language. According to the 2006 Census, 16.9 per cent of Hindus spoke only English at home, 16.3 per cent spoke Tamil (24,101) while smaller numbers spoke Gujarati (9,810), Telugu (7,416), Marathi (3,753), Punjabi, Indonesian, Malay or a variety of other Indian languages. However, 25,085 spoke English at home, much lower than the overall total for those born in India, many of whom were Christians or Anglo-Indians.

In the 2001 Census, 62.9 per cent of Hindus over 15 years were married, compared to 51.4 per cent of the total population. To find reasons for the high rate of marriage, one has only to examine the age
profile of the Hindu community. Because of the young age profile of the Hindu population in Australia, comparatively few were widowed (2.7 per cent compared to 6.2 per cent of the total population).

Fewer in the Hindu population lived in de facto relationships: 1.8 per cent compared with 6.7 per cent of the total population. They also had a lower proportion of separated (2.0 per cent) or divorced people (3.3 per cent) relative to the population. This suggests that the institution of marriage is very important to the Hindu community. Hindus had a very high rate of marrying other Hindus, relative to their overall numbers (88.1 per cent).

Of the other world religions identified in the Census, Hindus had the third-highest rate of intermarriage, after Islam (90.0 per cent) and Sikhism (87.8 per cent).

The Hindu community was the most highly educated of all major religious groups in the 2006 Census. Forty per cent had attended university (39.9 per cent), as compared with only 12.9 per cent of the total population. The Coptic Orthodox were closest to the Hindus in terms of the proportions of tertiary educated, but the proportion of Copts with higher degrees was much lower than the proportion of Hindus.

Hindus with higher degrees accounted for 18.4 per cent. Over one-quarter held bachelor degrees (30.4 per cent). Fewer Hindus than the average held trade certificates, reflecting the professional orientation of most Hindus living in Australia. The level of education is a consequence of Australian immigration policies that have only accepted highly educated or wealthy Hindus into Australia in recent decades, as well as a growing number on temporary student visas.

In the 2001 Census, 64.0 per cent of Hindus participated in the labour force, compared with only 55.9 per cent of the total population. This reflects the fact that most Hindus living in Australia were highly educated and those of working age were over-represented. Similarly, a low proportion were not in the labour force (28.8 per cent), compared with the total population (35.4 per cent). On the other hand, 6.4 per cent were unemployed, compared with 4.5 per cent of the population. This is probably because many Hindus are recent immigrants and some struggle to find employment to suit their qualifications. Nonetheless, this was down from 8.8 per cent unemployment in 1996.

Almost one-third of all Hindus were professionals (32.5 per cent), which was much more than in the total population and second only to the proportion of Jewish professionals. Another quarter worked in the clerical, sales and service fields. All other occupational categories were relatively low, as compared with the proportion of professionals. Managers and administrators were under-represented.

Hindus were most highly represented in finance, property and business services. In 1996, community services, health and education were the most common industry sectors for Hindu employment. Hindus were also over-represented in manufacturing, which, in part, may be indicative of those unable to obtain employment in their professional field, but also reflects the involvement of engineers, and technicians in the information technology sector. Hindus are over-represented in communication services, given the increase in IT-software professionals brought out by multinational companies, ‘call-centre’ and ‘outsourcing’ personnel who come for training with their parent companies in Australia, and a large and visible contingent of student émigrés who work part-time in service industries and outlets to fund their studies. Many were employed in the recreation, hospitality, personal and other services area sectors. This industry category includes those Hindus working in Indian restaurants as well as operating centres for yoga or other aspects of spirituality and well being.

Hindus are an affluent group, second only to the Jews among religious communities. However, some Hindus have very low incomes: 2.6 per cent more than in the total population had incomes of less than $200 per week. In all other income brackets between $200 and $599, Hindus were under-represented. One possible reason for this is that recent Hindu immigrants begin with very low incomes until they
are able to get established. Some are students living on limited incomes while studying.

CONCLUSION
Hindus, like all South Asian migrants to Australia, have endured many hardships and experienced prejudices on account of their racial or religious background. They have persevered despite social and cultural alienation. Only in recent times was the community able to resist pressures of an assimilationist ideology that had all but erased their earlier distinctive presence in the vast, empty landscape. This community has been somewhat slow in affirming and celebrating its diversity and ethnic distinctiveness while also reinforcing traditional values. Through various gestures and symbols, the community has expressed the hope that these aspirations are not lost on the new arrivals or the Australian-born, nor stymied by the wider ‘host’ society. Thus, the tension between expectations and the reality of the moment weighs heavily on the process of settling in and finding meaning amidst the pressures of a ‘new world’ environment.

In the broader context of mainstream Australian society, the moon-Shikharas of the Hindu temple, with its myriad gods, symbolise in their different ways the struggles of maintaining distinctive communities within a decidedly multicultural and ethnically plural environment.

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