

From Ritualism to Vedanta: Hinduism in South Africa – Then and Now

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ABSTRACT The rise of Vedanta (a non-sectarian based system of higher philosophical teaching) through the increasing institutionalisation of the Hindu religion is gradually replacing the older version of ritualism sustained through Brahmanism – the upper/priestly caste domination of sacred ceremonies in India and its diaspora populations. This article is based on an historical reconstruction of Hinduism in South Africa, covering past practices and contemporary patterns of worship based on a universalism that transcends caste and regionalism as practiced in India, and as exported to South Africa when Hindus first landed in Port Natal (now Durban). Organisations such as the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, the Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, (which exist among a range of other similar organisations), will be used as prime illustrators of the shift that is still in progress in South Africa. Caste distinction, which has been a significant determining factor in crucial matters such as child rearing, observance of rituals, marriage, and socialisation, prevailed for most of the period since Hindus arrived in South Africa. However, significant socio-religious shifts, to the point of new types of value realignments, have been taking place over the past two centuries in order to meet the demands of ongoing change in a rapidly transforming world. This article will demonstrate how these shifts have been taking place over the past few decades and to what extent they have transformed to date.