

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.

INTRODUCTION

From the time that indentured labourers arrived from India in 1860 to work in the Natal Colony's burgeoning agricultural, railway and coal mining sectors, Hindu religious practices were based mainly on memory and personal experiences. They therefore varied according to caste, regional origins, and individual inclinations, defying any pattern of uniformity and convergence of normative practices. The lives of Hindu communities in India were woven around systems of economic dependencies that also placed a religious value on each of the activities that people were born into. Their occupational specialisations were equated to the castes to which they belonged, which almost always restricted them to whatever economic duties they were expected to perform. Their rituals were also caste based, but could not always be practiced in South Africa with the level of togetherness that the villages in India afforded them. Their diverse origins gave rise to what people believed could best serve their religious needs in their early years in South Africa. Meer (1969: 141) noted that "The early Hindu immigrants introduced a variety of village rituals to Natal, many of which crystallised into temple cults. The religion, however, lacked a central organisation and it is said that Hindus were more

responsive to Christian and Muslim mission movements."

As their numbers grew between 1860 and 1913, when the last shipload of indentured labourers were allowed into Natal, people from common geographical areas began identifying the need to regularise worship patterns through the ritualism that they had brought with them from India. Among people of north Indian backgrounds, Pandits, mainly from the Brahman sub-caste of "Maharaj", brought by colonists to cook on the ships and on the sugar cane plantations, began assuming the role of priests and religious leaders within this segment, a watered-down version of India's Brahmanism (the priestly castes' hegemonic control of ritualism). However, such patterns of worship over the past 150 years have gradually given way to more philosophical approaches to worship, free of dogmatic adherence to the social exclusivism derived from caste based social boundaries (Vedanta). At this point it would be useful to distinguish between ritualism and Vedanta. Against the backdrop of the realities that people at household and community levels function in, ritualism in Hinduism is best understood as prayer and ceremonial performances that contribute towards the hopes, aspirations and psychological well-being of people in terms of their localised identities as people of a caste or sectarian background.

In contrast, Vedanta is about the universality of beliefs and practices that transcends the restrictive boundaries of localised identities and ventures towards the worship of that unforeseen creative power and source of life called "God" (in English). Ritualism and Vedanta are not necessarily in opposition to each other, but the former can be understood, in Hindu philosophical terms, as a lower truth in comparison to Vedanta, the higher truth. While ritualism is restrictive in terms of issues such as caste or localised beliefs systems, Vedanta is more universal, embracing and unifying in its message to humankind.

Hinduism since 1860

There are at least two diametrically opposing perspectives about the strength and practice of Hinduism, since the arrival of the first indentured labourers in 1860. One is negative and the other more resoundingly positive. The writings of Vedalankar (1981), Kuper (1960) and Naidoo (1984), generally demonstrate a negativity that portrays a picture of weak and directionless customs and practices associated with Hinduism. The groups of indentured labourers that were brought to the Natal colony were disparate in terms of their geographical origins, caste backgrounds, and variations in their religious observances. But common to all of them was the subservience they had to show to their colonial employers, the onerous task of having to please them through multiple duties and the inhibiting environments in which they laboured. Their preoccupations with their duties and the long shifts that they had to work (usually up to 12 hours per day, although it was not unusual to work for 16 hours per day), forbade an indulgence in religious practices that lifestyles in India would have generously afforded them. The absence of communal places of worship such as temples or ashrams in the first decade can only be attributed to them being first-time settlers from India. Herein lay the misconstruction by Kuper, Vedalankar and Naidoo of the alleged erosion of commitment to religious and spiritual practices.

Kuper's research among the Hindus in Natal in the 1950s was mainly among working class households where patterns of worship were restricted largely to the confines of the household. There are several issues that all of the three

writers omitted in their analyses of worship among the first of the Hindus who landed in Natal. As indentured labourers, they were subjected to conditions that were hardly different from that of slave labour, bar the abolition of legalised slavery. Indentured labourers were no more than units of labour who had to satisfy their employers' entrepreneurial needs. The rations that they received and the inferior quality accommodation that they shared with other families in barracks style buildings were symptomatic of the culture of racism and intolerance of beliefs and practices that had been prevalent since their arrival. But it was the attraction of the climatic conditions in Natal and the future possibilities of economic prosperity and of transcending the racism that Hindus then faced that forced them to opt for land rather than a free return trip to India after their indentureship. This aspiration took them along a path of hard work to build their family homes, acquire more land and ensure the provision of food for their families. Their religious practices were usually of no consequence to their employers, nor was it given any official recognition or respect as a religion. The absence of schools or any other form of formalised education added to the woes of Hinduism's stunted existence at that time; although the existence of *pathasalas* (vernacular schools), despite a tremendous scarcity of resources, did play a significant role in educating people in their vernacular. Central to these schools was the teaching of the *Ramacaritamansa*, a Hindu epic that has been in existence for several millennia (Shukla 2002; see also Desai and Vahed 2007).

Shukla's (2002) refutation of the notion of the degeneration of religious practices and assertion of the strength they presently hold is more accurate. The strength of any living entity in its later years of existence is almost always a reflection of its nurturing in its infant stages. What Kuper, Vedalankar and Naidoo almost commonly referred to as "degeneration" of Hinduism among the early Hindus in South Africa, was more accurately the formative years of a religious force in the making. As an endorsement of Kuper's view, Naidoo (1984: 67) uncritically quoted her, arguing that Hindus were "so grotesque as to be totally devoid of any religious meaning". That historical juncture was neither adequately represented nor understood in the writings of the three authors who wrote

critically about the state of Hinduism in the colony of Natal at that time. None of them for instance, wrote about the human capital that Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi saw among the Hindus at the turn of the twentieth century, which he capitalised on to initiate his now world famous approach of passive resistance against exploitative political ideologies. It was the practicing Hindu population that inspired Gandhi to experiment and nurture his ideas of passive resistance among them. Such an achievement would hardly have been possible with people whose religious and spiritual beliefs and practices were inconsistent with what we know of presently as “Hinduism”. Shukla’s (2002) discussion of Hindus from the vernacular Bhojpuri/Awadhi belt of North India depicts a population generally steeped in the practices of *bhakti yoga* (love of God through worship and service to humanity), and *karma yoga* (love of God through the spiritualisation of work). Among the various other paths of yoga, these two methods are viewed as the most appropriate for this contemporary period of industrialisation and commercialism. Their dependence upon the *Ramacaritamanasa* as a text and medium through which they sustained their religiosity served as their foundation to build upon the more complex ritualistic and spiritual practices that are known to Hinduism. It was their endurance against hostile political forces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their perseverance in the absence of more organised and institutionalised forms of religious protection that ensured the survival of what constituted Hinduism then. It was on Sunday afternoons or on rare occasions when gatherings could occur, usually in open air spaces, and under trees, that recitals took place.

Gandhi’s arrival in South Africa also led to the popularisation of the *Bhagavadgita*, another Hindu epic that provided the inspirational basis for his passive resistance movement, hatched and tested here, and exported to India in a way that not only shook the British Empire but also led to its demise as a colonial authority. The *Bhagavadgita* eventually complemented the recitals from the *Ramacaritamanasa*, as well as set the scene for the entry of the higher philosophical traditions in Hinduism to consolidate themselves on South African soil. Gandhi’s “Experiments with the Truth”, a socio-political endeavour that was intended to conscientise and

educate Hindus (and Muslims) about the power of faith and collective action, had its roots in the *Bhagavadgita*. It was from these mental and intellectual exercises that the debate about what word would best suit the concept of “passive resistance” arose. After much thought and debate over several weeks, the word “Satyagraha” was coined and formalised (Gandhi 1927; Parekh 1995). The extraction of ideas from such an Epic was indicative of the level of conscientisation and commitment that Hindus had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – albeit in degrees according to issues such as class, levels of formal education and education in the scripture itself. Gandhi’s successes against the British through his use of the Satyagraha concept were also attempts to popularise the *Bhagavadgita* – which grew in significance in the twentieth century throughout the world. Until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, religious practices among Hindus were mainly ritualistic, although side by side with this was emerging a higher philosophy through Gandhi’s “experiment with the truth” – extracting from the Hindu epics and as well as his personal life experiences.

Hinduism since the Early Twentieth Century/Hindu Maha Sabha/Arya Samaj

After more than five decades the realisation that Hindu beliefs and practices need not remain stagnant at the level of ritualism alone, growing interest in the deeper philosophy of the scriptures such as the Vedas and the Upanishads began taking root in South Africa. Gandhi’s frequent reference to the *Bhagavadgita* not only popularised an important text among Hindus, but also initiated a transcendence among a significant number of Hindus, from localised village-based practices that disparate groups brought with them from Indian villages, to a more universalistic approach to worship and philosophical thinking about the concept of God. The mood among more conscientised Hindus brought them to the realisation that more Hindus needed to be educated in the scriptures in order to raise awareness about higher philosophies and practices than their routine ritualism. The first organised visit to achieve this, facilitated by a local philanthropist, was by Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj, who arrived in the port of Durban on 4 October 1908. Against the

backdrop of a euphoric level of curiosity and interest, a special welcome reception was arranged for him at the Natal Indian Congress Hall in Durban. The attendance was in excess of the hall's capacity and the keenness to listen to a visiting monk from India for the first time in South Africa was reflective of the need that Hindus felt for inspiration from people more learned than themselves in scriptural knowledge.

Swami Shankaranandaji's experience and acumen in organised religion in India served as the basis for his approval to travel to South Africa and assess the situation for what it was. He was renowned for being a perceptive, eloquent and majestic leader, with a penchant for bringing people together on a more organised basis. After several public lectures his analysis of the situation in South Africa brought him to the acknowledgement that Hindus in the country suffered from inherent weaknesses like weak religious administration and a visible lack of commitment to higher spiritual ideals. His aim therefore was to bring Hindus together on a more organised basis. In this vein he inspired the formation of organisations such as the Veda Dharma Sabha, the Hindu Young Men's Association and the Young Men's Vedic Society. While each had to forge an identity of their own, they remained committed to common ideals that were being fostered by Swami Shankaranandaji. Such commitment brought them to converge on the purpose of consolidating Hinduism as a religion that had more to do with higher philosophical traditions and ideals than with restrictive family or individual-oriented rituals. Within a period of three years these achievements served as a basis for greater consolidation of Hindu solidarity and rising awareness through public lectures and educational programmes. However, Swami Shankaranandaji's stay was interrupted in 1911 when his spiritual master (guru) fell ill, forcing him to return to India. He returned to South Africa after a few months and began the process towards forming a regional Natal Hindu Maha Sabha. But a young lawyer (a Mr Pather) convinced him to go national and form a single body for all Hindus throughout South Africa. He agreed and preparations for this event culminated on 31 May 1912, when the South African Hindu Maha Sabha (SAHMS) was formed. This initiative urged Swami Shankaranandaji to travel to other provinces as well, especially the-then Transvaal and Cape Province, in order

to spread his influence as well as bring Hindus closer together through organised religion.

Since its formation the SAHMS had taken up a range of issues that were not only a result of mere neglect by the state in South Africa, but also deliberate conspiracies hatched by it to inhibit and frustrate people of Indian origin. In a brochure to mark its 70th anniversary in 1982, the SAHMS boasted about hosting at least 20 conferences during this period, and noted that it had taken up issues that were neglected due to the absence of any tangible organisational direction, as well as issues that required community effort to sensitise the state about its derisive attitude towards issues that were Indian. For instance, it brought people from all the Indian linguistic groups together, with one of the main purposes being to support the sustainability of Indian languages, and to ensure that different linguistic groups did not necessarily lead to divergent positions on what it was to be Hindu in a foreign and hostile environment. At least two common causes that all Hindus had with the colonial and Union governments (1910 onwards), for instance, were the recognition of their marriages and the maintenance and building of places of worship (especially temples). The SAHMS took up the fight for the recognition of Hindu marriages from 1945, while issues around places of worship were raised from its very inception, although a special conference was held around the maintenance of temples in January 1944 (Nowbath et al. 1960: 110). Their added purpose was to adopt the westernised pattern of worship on Sundays – calling on Hindus to attend religious services on Sundays because economic circumstances made it most suitable to do so.

The SAHMS was also faced with the enormous problem of indigent Indians who were being increasingly marginalised as anti-Indian sentiment gathered momentum among their white counterparts. While they were denied unrestricted access to political activities, they were being victimised even more in areas of economic opportunities. Such poverty made them vulnerable, and missionary religions such as Christianity and Islam often capitalised on those they thought could be easily converted to their respective religions. The offers of food and employment by Christian and Muslim organisations often came at a price – that of foregoing Hindu religious beliefs for either one of them.

Deliberations on the extent of the problem were raised at the centenary conference of the arrival of Indians in South Africa in 1960 and growing public awareness campaigns have contributed to the arrest of the pace of conversions. A periodical called *The Hindu* became the official organ of the SAHMS in 1945. However, the lack of trained personnel to sustain it as a regular offering eventually led to its discontinuation.

The SAHMS's work was substantially complemented by the formation of the Arya Samaj, an affiliate of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, in 1919. While one of the Arya Samaj's major contributions was the promotion of Hindi, it had a much broader agenda that centred around a 10-point plan. In their attempt to simplify methods of worship among Hindus they advocated the worship of the one formless God, as opposed to the worship of deities with innumerable forms and names. This message, they believed, was amply found in the study of the Vedas – a privilege that they propagated as the right of all to study, irrespective of caste, creed or religion. In doing so they demonstrated visible opposition to Brahmanism – which restricted scriptural studies and the conducting of rituals to Brahmins only. In this endeavour the Arya Samaj established educational institutions – for the three-fold propagation of Hindi as a vernacular, the propagation of religion, especially in the understanding of the 16 Sanskaras (rites of passage), and for the promotion of secular education as well – this was a public demonstration of the will to adapt to the changing circumstances of people of Indian origin in a foreign environment. These efforts also demonstrated the organisational capacity of the Hindus, openly calling upon Hindus not to fall prey to the forces that attempted to convert them to other religions. Side by side with such initiatives were welfare efforts to promote awareness of Hindu's duties towards the indigent and towards untouchability – a caste phenomenon that prevailed in a lesser form in South Africa as well. Hindus' general harshness towards widows also drew the attention of the Arya Samaj, causing it to take a public stand in favour of widows remarrying and against child marriages. These two issues still stand, especially in India, as socially degenerative issues which cloud the elements that give Hinduism an otherwise positive image as a system of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. In equally visible and committed ways,

the organisation acquired a commendable reputation for building orphanages, homes as places of care for the elderly and medical dispensaries where free medicines were given to the poor.

The community and charity work of the SAHMS and Arya Samaj in the early twentieth century were essentially attempts at rebuilding faith and confidence in a population group that was, although predominantly Hindu, still relatively diverse and desperately in need of direction. The common political and economic experiences of most Indians in South Africa, as well as their minority status, provided fertile ground for both the SAHMS and the Arya Samaj to embark on programmes that succeeded in bringing Hindus across caste, linguistic and regional barriers to converge on issues that were necessary for both common purpose in a hostile political and economic environment, and for the sake of drawing insular boundaries against competing religious forces that preyed upon the weak and the vulnerable to convert. The approach to religion since the early twentieth century by these organisations also marked a shift away from the antiquated style of self-imposed seclusion in naturalistic environments for the sake of achieving *Moksha* – God realisation and release from earthly bondages, especially birth/rebirth and death. Uninhabited or sparsely inhabited forests and mountains were ideal places for the life of a recluse – where the characteristic peace and quiet provided the ideal conditions to turn inwardly and meditate. Such seclusions were by no means easy tasks, since they were lives of renunciation of comforts and conveniences that drew them away from the material world and enforced austerities and penances that benefitted the person who chose to renounce the world. Concentration and meditation was for self-upliftment and self-realisation – to see one's self as an extension of that ultimate truth called God (*hum Brahman asmi*: I am one with God). The modern-day approach, over the past two centuries, was a shift away from such individualistic approaches to God realisation towards aims and approaches that were beyond this pattern of spiritual practice. Numerous organisations that draw from the knowledge base referred to as Vedanta, began, from about the mid-twentieth century, to make themselves more visible through welfare services and religious educational programmes. Prominent among them in Durban are the Ramakrishna Centre of

South Africa, the Divine Life Society, the Chinmaya Mission, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Sai Baba Movement. While all of these organisations are motivated by common aims and objectives such as raising hopes and aspirations, morale and morality among individuals and communities, they use particular ideals and human figures as points of reference and as sources of inspiration to continue with their work. It is the will and commitment to follow leaders who lead or have led by example, as a means to pave the way for the achievement of higher levels of consciousness, if not for redemption from bad deeds or salvation for a better life in the hereafter. The worth of such organisations is often judged by the credibility of the individual leaders that inspire people to work selflessly and without motive for any personal gain. Each of the organisations mentioned have in their midst the ideal figure towards whom respect is forever bestowed and whose life serves as a worthy example to follow and to be associated with, however historical he/she might be. All of the original sources of inspiration in these organisations are from India, and their influences have permeated the religious inclinations of South African Hindus to create more religious stalwarts and followers within this country.

This article focuses on just one of these organisations, to amplify the extent and commitment of the welfare, religious and community work that they are engaging in *viz.* the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa.

Vedanta and the Consolidation of Worship through Service

The community-oriented approaches of the SAHMS and the Arya Samaj were off-shoots of the already credible approaches towards social, religious, political and economic reconstruction in India. An appreciation of the work of religious organisations in South Africa is best achieved against the background of their mother organisations in India. The philosophies that they adopted and the work that they do in the spirit of Vedanta transferred itself to South Africa as well. Religious leaders, still very much renunciates in the tradition of their predecessors, began reassessing the role that they should be playing in an India that became so impoverished through the devastation caused by 750

years of Moghul rule and 250 years of rule by the British Empire. Without foregoing the journey towards the goal of self-realisation of *hum Brahman asmi*, through highly individualistic means, the modern-day approach was to not only to see God within, but also to see God without, especially among the poor and downtrodden. Recorded through the public discourses and writings of a notable saintly figure, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the move in the Ramakrishna Mission and Math in India was increasingly towards his oft-quoted persuasive advice that "Service to man is worship of God". The authenticity of Swami Vivekananda's philosophy and urge to encourage people to work for the sake of others, and to see God in them before seeing Him in themselves, could hardly be doubted. Affectionately labelled "the Wondering Monk", he travelled throughout India, often on foot, bringing him into direct contact with the nature and extent of poverty and the sordid living conditions that the downtrodden in that country had to endure. It was in these face-to-face experiences of impoverishment of its worst kind that Swami Vivekananda realised the meaning of his spiritual master (Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's) advice that instead of selfishly taking up a position under a tree in a forest to realise God, he should become the tree itself, vast and expansive in order to provide shade and shelter to all those who sought refuge and direction under him. Time, practice and submission to Sri Ramakrishna ensured that he realised this mission in his life and provided the inspiration and direction to those who surrendered to him, to prepare for greater commitment to selfless community work.

Against the background of the manifold problems that bedevilled India over the last millennium, Vedanta inspired followers and religious organisations to recognise the need to adopt an iconoclastic approach against the deeply ingrained social evils that characterised India even up to the mid-twentieth century. The wide social and economic rifts in the class and caste structures had necessitated a radical shift from the past – with the aim of eroding the socio-economic barriers that were inhibiting progress and which were antithetical to the pillars of the philosophy enshrined in Vedanta. The Ramakrishna Mission in South Africa has, like its parent body, adopted a six-point approach to its universalistic philosophy, referring to it as "Practical Vedanta", *viz.*:

- Each soul is potentially divine – man’s real nature is neither the body nor the mind, but the SELF or divine consciousness at the core of each being.
- The ultimate goal of life is to manifest this inherent Divinity.
- This state of God realisation can be attained by sincere yearning for God, the pursuit of true knowledge, psychic control and dedicated selfless service;
- God is present in all beings as the Supreme Self, hence service to man is to be regarded as service to God;
- Spiritual life must have a foundation in morality;
- Every religion is a pathway to the Ultimate Reality (70th Anniversary Brochure 2012: 13).

In a world that was swiftly transforming through secularism and influences of industrialisation through both capitalistic exploitation as well as the idealism of communism, Practical Vedanta sought to confront these ideological frameworks in ways that ensured the sustainability of Vedanta in its purest form. The approach contested the social exclusiveness of the past based on caste in India. Brahmanism, which reigned supreme for centuries in respect of recital and knowledge dissemination of the scriptures, was speedily being replaced by a more egalitarian approach towards the accessibility of the scriptures. That each soul was now being seen as potentially divine and that anyone with a sincere yearning for God can achieve Moksha, was in direct contrast to the position that the Shankaracharya adopted in his time, *viz.* that only Brahmins could achieve God realisation (Moksha). Sri Ramakrishna, himself of Brahmin birth, promoted the ultimate ideal of God realisation as achievable by anyone who lived a pure and dedicated life that was entrenched in the lofty ideals of humility, service to humankind, and unwavering thought in God consciousness. As long as the former two aspects were located within the ambit of God consciousness, Moksha was as achievable as it was in the days of yonder when monks retreated to the undisturbed silences of the forests to meditate and turn inwardly in order to discover the Truth force within. Welfare work and the social and economic upliftment of people is viewed as no less spiritually elevating than the self-centred practices of the past. Hence the modern-day approach

towards Vedanta, especially over the past two centuries, has made a radical shift away from mere individual or household-based ritualism, as well as recluse style austerities and penances, thrusting itself towards the universal approach coined by Swami Vivekananda, that “Service to man is worship of God”.

Within the context of these six principles of Practical Vedanta, the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa has, through its spiritual commitments as a basis for its activities, extended itself across racial and class boundaries to offer services in at least ten identifiable areas as their outreach programmes *viz.* in education, family welfare centres, nutritional programmes, medical clinics, legal advisory services, skills development programmes, veterinary clinics, senior citizens’ forums, educational publications and cultural programmes that cut across gender and age boundaries. What is viewed in the secular world as social responsibilities and cultural enhancements, are not necessarily in conflict with what is at the core of spiritual practice. The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa is a typical embodiment of the modern version of the institutionalisation of religion, through which a wider spectrum of people can be reached and appropriate services rendered to them. This manifold to all-embracing approach to Vedanta has not only ushered in a meaningful relationship between the members and the institution, but has also become a useful and meaningful extension to welfare services where the state and other community-based organisations are unable to mobilise professional help to render appropriate services.

The distinction of an institution such as the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa is that it not only mobilises professional help in the form of selfless service, but it also provides crucial services in state run institutions such as hospitals and clinics, where specialist medical services are often absent. In a country that is fast losing its medical professionals to first world countries because of the political uncertainties in South Africa, brought about by escalating levels of violence and perceived corruption, specialist medical services are not easily found in state run institutions. Those that can acquire such services often have it on a part-time basis only. Most medical professionals operate more profitably as self-employed practitioners. They therefore cannot offer more than a set number

of hours per week to public institutions. In numerous state sponsored hospitals where medical attention is often in the hands of nurses and newly qualified general practitioners, diagnoses of patients are often dangerously wrong. Hence incorrect remedial treatment is administered and patients often leave the hospital no better, if not worse than the condition in which they arrived at the hospitals. But the service that the volunteers of the Ramakrishna Centre offer is not merely medical, or auxiliary or legal, but a spiritual one – in that each consultation is preceded by a prayer offering and rendered as a spiritual offering by virtue of a silent recitation and the thought of Sri Ramakrishna in mind. All of these activities are performed in the names of the Holy Trinity and the selfless service that they preached about.

CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that ritualism among Hindus wherever they are, either in India or in the Diaspora, will fade away to the point of being totally replaced by the lofty principles of Vedanta and selfless community service. There is still a place, affinity and need for ritualism, especially during important events such as births, deaths, weddings, and daily propitiation of the deities in morning and evening prayers, which not only mark the specialness of the occasions, but make a pronounced statement about beliefs and identities. The peculiarities of the rituals and the common association that Hindus of various social backgrounds may experience during a ritual bring about a sense of community through shared beliefs and customary practices. In these aspects ritualism remains significant as a personal as well as communal link and association that people feel they have with God. Propitiation of God by devotees of the Divine Life Society, Sai Baba Movement, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), or the Ramakrishna Centre may differ by virtue of their respective spiritual preceptors' advice and inspiration. But they differ significantly in form and practice from the early days of the Hindus, whose forms of worship referred to as village rituals which crystallised into temple cults. Contemporary Hinduism has outgrown this situation and outlasted the missionary zeal of Christianity and Islam, notwithstanding the fact that the indigent in Indian-dominated townships (sub-economic housing provided by the local

state), have and still are being converted in large numbers.

The approach to religion by these organisations is now beyond the restriction to ritualism, shown especially in their commitment towards social welfare services. The building and ongoing support of centres for education, victims of HIV/AIDS, skills training and capacity building, feeding schemes for the indigent, and health services, among a range of other activities has by now achieved a permanent place and established a sense of significant respect for a religion that first began in South Africa as one that should not be taken seriously. The services rendered by the medical practitioners associated, for instance, with the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, exposes the serious dearth of medical specialists in state run hospitals. Their service has become invaluable to a health system that is known to be haemorrhaging through a serious lack of specialist services, that it attaches even greater significance to their work that they refer to as "selfless". However antiquated the earlier practices of Hinduism might have been they certainly served a purpose by virtue of the organisational structures that sprang out of them over time.

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