

## Resistance and Change: Strategies of Neo-Hindu Movements in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** Virtually all neo-Hindu movements in South Africa began their work with an ideal to transform Hinduism from what they termed as superstitious beliefs and archaic ritual practices. What they were really responding to was the fear of losing Hindus to either Christianity or Islam. Their diagnosis was that the Hindus that came from the lower strata of society to South Africa from 1860 as indentured labourers were steeped in ritual practices that were grounded in superstitious beliefs and that they lacked a rational philosophical and intellectual understanding of Hinduism. This led to their attempts to introduce an intellectual and rational approach to Hinduism which they believed would provide a strong foundation to withstand the attraction of converting to other religions in the face of a strong critique that Hinduism was based on idolatry and polytheism. In the end, the strategies attempted by the neo-Hindu movements neither prevented at least some Hindus from joining other religions, nor did they abolish the so-called archaic ritual practices that South African Hindus to date continue to practice. In this article, the researcher examines the strategies of two important neo-Hindu movements, the Arya Samaj and the Saiva Sithantha Sangam, to assess their impact on Hindus in South Africa in offering alternatives to resist the temptations to become converts to other religions.

### INTRODUCTION

Change is something that people, societies, cultures, institutions and organizations initiate in order to leave something that might be seen as unproductive, retrogressive, undesirable or unpleasant, and irrelevant or useless. Change is not limited to any single aspect of human life for it encompasses all aspects of our lives. Religious and cultural changes are no exception. Often the older traditions are viewed as pristine and uncontaminated by values that are seen in present times as shallow and vacuous. Hence there is a tendency to hold on to the ancient customs and practices as more genuine and authentic representations of who they are as societies and people. However, ancient is not necessarily the only criterion in choosing to preserve traditions in most societies. There are other variables that come into play. For instance, there has been a tendency in most cultures to value traditions that are transmitted through written texts with conscious efforts to rationalise their philosophical imports as they are generally considered more authentic and reliable than traditions that are transmitted through oral modalities, which are not always easy to corroborate and authenticate as reliable. Beliefs and ritual practices that are transmitted through oral modalities are often considered with some doubt and suspicion that they are spurious and unreli-

able and hence ought to be replaced by traditions that are documented in written text by intellectual representatives of the traditions. Therefore, change often seems to happen from a top-down approach when the orthodoxy steeped in intellectual rational modes wishes to replace the ground level practices and beliefs that are considered popular and lack validity. Notwithstanding the sophistication associated with the intellectual traditions that wish to replace the popular ones, resistance to such attempts at the ground level is inevitable. Pointing out the complexities in understanding the concept of 'resistance' Hollander et al. (2004: 547) delineate seven different types of resistance: "overt resistance, covert resistance, unwitting resistance, target-defined resistance, externally-defined resistance, missed resistance, and attempted resistance". All these types imply various relations between the resister, the object of resistance and the observers who may or may not recognise the act/s in question as resistance. Therefore, recognition and intention are seen as important factors in understanding resistance. But there are many variables in both recognition and intention in order for either of the two or both to be associated with resistance. Hollander et al. (2004: 539-44) offer some insight into the significant nuances in the association of recognition and intention with resistance. However, for the purposes of this article, it

should be noted that some acts of resistance may be neither recognised, nor are they intentional. Nevertheless, they offer resistance to the changes initiated by the dominant group. Furthermore, resistance need not be seen as one-sided. Often when resistance to *status quo* initiates attempts at change, the *status quo* might engage in acts of counter resistance, except, as described above, they might be neither recognised as such, nor do they appear to be intentional. It is these features that I wish to emphasise when I deal with the neo-Hindu resistance to Hindu temple ritual *status quo* in South Africa and the resulting counter resistance from the Hindu temple ritual *status quo* without being conscious of the fact that they are indeed resisting the change that is being introduced by the neo-Hindu movements.

### **Background: Problem of Bad Diagnosis**

From 1860 a steady stream of immigrant labourers from India under the well-known scheme of indenture arrived in Natal and eventually spread to other parts of South Africa. Within the duration of the first decade between 1860 and 1870 scores of shrines and temples were built in greater Durban. Many more temples were built after that period. In an earlier study the researcher has generally described these temple building activities as part of maintaining the immigrants' cultural traditions to pass on religious and cultural values to the next generations (Kumar 2013). However, over the years, having read the indenture documents over and over again, it became clear to me that their temple building activities were perhaps also related to their quiet resistance to the dominant group, which in this case are the European colonisers and their white employers. There is sufficient evidence in these documents to point to the fact that the indentured labourers used the shrines and temples to escape from the daily oppression that they experienced under their not so sympathetic employers. It may be an unintended consequence of building the shrines and temples, but they did seem to have served as bastions of emotional and social security and vanguards of their core identity as Indians and Hindus (Meer 1980). The other misconception has been that the indentured Hindus in South Africa, being less educated and from a rural background, could only relate to popular beliefs and therefore built shrines and temples that fostered

such rituals that were considered by Brahmanical Hinduism as inferior. This is the line of argument proffered by scholars such as Oosthuizen (1975) and Naidoo (1992), who believed that the ritualistic Hinduism would give way to more intellectual forms of Hinduism in the form of neo-Hindu organizations, as well as the neo-Hindu movements that critiqued the ritualistic Hinduism as a lower form and tried to introduce their brand of Hinduism as a more rational and authentic form. In retrospect, it is fair to point out that such theoretical postulations did not yield the anticipated results. Instead, the ritualistic Hinduism has continued to flourish to this day and in fact more and more temples have been built in the past few decades alone, while the neo-Hindu movements remain largely relegated to the middle class sections of the Hindu society. While the neo-Hindu organizations focus on the lower strata society by offering welfare programmes, their membership is largely drawn from the middle class and the wealthy business families that could make financial donations for the various charitable causes that they undertake.

### **'DECLINE OF HINDUISM' ARGUMENT: ARYA SAMAJ AND SAIVA SITHANTHA SANGAM<sup>1</sup>**

The Arya Samaj and the Saiva Sithantha Sangam emerged in South Africa as part of a critique of Hinduism during the early twentieth century. Both have attempted to bring about reform within Hinduism, adopting different methods. The Arya Samaj was brought to South Africa by the visiting Arya Samaj leaders in the early twentieth century. The general background against which they visited South Africa was aptly described by Pundit Nardev Vedalankar:

*They were steeped in orthodoxy, ignorance, bigotry, superstition, blind faith and witchcraft. The feeling of high and low emanating from the pernicious caste system had a grip on them. The system under which they had come to this country and the degrading treatment that they received at the hands of their masters had a demoralising effect on them, so much so, that their basic social and religious principles were destroyed (Vedalankar 1950: 14).*

The points that he makes are interesting to note - the indentured labourers were experiencing the decline of religion, giving rise to blind

faith; caste conscious behaviour; and degrading treatment under their employers - all of which led to a loss of social and religious principles. It is in this context that he hails, as the title of his book points out, the arrival of Arya Samaj as "religious awakening in South Africa". However, it is important to note that such descriptions of Hinduism originally emanated in India from the critique of western missionaries during the colonial period. Most neo-Hindu organizations that emerged out of the nineteenth century context in India explicitly accepted that critique and responded by reforming Hinduism through introducing Vedanta-based philosophical ideas as the core principles and values of Hinduism. In retrospect the justification by Arya Samaj leaders for their arrival in South Africa that Hinduism in South Africa had declined and deviated from its core values is something that needs careful and critical analysis. The prevailing practices among the indentured Hindus in South Africa were not really different from those of their counterparts in India. In fact, they are what their ancestors practiced in the Indian villages and therefore what they brought with them and replanted in South Africa. It is therefore erroneous to suggest that Hinduism in South Africa had declined at the turn of the twentieth century; hence the need to bring reformers from India. For the Arya Samaj to deploy this argument as justification for their arrival is rather disingenuous. This argument is not new as it was precisely on the same basis the earlier organizations in India such as Brahmo Samaj and even later organizations such as the Divine Life Society and the Ramakrishna Mission had gone about their reform of Hinduism. Brahmo Samaj, of course was not intended as a reform of Hinduism, but under the leadership of its founder, Raja Ram Mohan Roy the movement critiqued Hinduism as superstitious and behind the changing times, that needed to be replaced by a rational religion which he tried to achieve by establishing the Brahmo Samaj. However, it must be noted that the western critique was not so much about the decline of Hinduism but rather the perception that it was steeped in superstition and could not be compared to 'rational religions' that are based on the idea of one god. From a western Christian point of view, religions evolved from their superstitious and polytheistic stages to the more rational idea of one god. The response from neo-Hindu organizations in this

context was to argue that Hinduism in its pristine and earliest stages was monotheistic and hence the call to go back to the ancient philosophical texts that underscored the idea of the abstract principle of divinity.

The application of this generally prevailing critique of Hinduism in India to the South African context by the Arya Samaj is therefore misleading in that it created the perception that the decline of Hinduism was peculiar to the South African context, due to the alleged ignorance of the indentured people. The perpetuation of this 'decline of Hinduism' argument by the subsequent new Hindu organizations deepened the notion that Hinduism had declined from its earlier noble and eloquent stages. And the Saiva Sithantha<sup>2</sup> Sangam of South Africa that was established in later years in South Africa was no exception. Although Saiva Siddhanta as a philosophical school dates back to the medieval period in India, the establishment of Saiva Sithantha Sangam of South Africa on the basis of the medieval philosophical school's ideas was in direct response to the perceived Christian and Islamic encroachment into the Hindu fold through conversion activities. Between 1905 and 1929 the Arya Samaj brought several of its leaders from India to propagate the Arya Samaj brand of Hinduism. From 1937 until the present the Saiva Sithantha Sangam, led by its locally established leaders have spread the philosophy of Saivism that rejected the ritualistic forms of Hinduism. Let us look at their respective strategies in attempting to achieve reform within Hinduism in South Africa.

### **STRATEGIES TO COUNTER WESTERN AND OTHER RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON HINDU SOCIETY**

In the period between 1905 and 1929 several distinguished leaders of the Arya Samaj movement propagated the ideals of what they referred to as the ancient Vedic philosophy. The original founder of the Arya Samaj in India, Swami Dayananda Saraswati established the philosophy of the Arya Samaj along Vedic lines. In South Africa, one of the key strategies of the organization is to emphasise the ten principles derived from the Vedic philosophical lore. Whether or not these ten principles were developed as some conscious response to the Christian Ten Commandments might be a moot point,

but the coincidence may be notable. These ten principles deal, not surprisingly, in large measure with the idea of the divine. Underlying all the principles is the argument that God is one. In the South African context, the Arya Samaj emphasises these aspects very strongly. While the first principle deals with the divine as the single origin of all existence, the second deals with the various characteristics attributed to God, such as omniscient, all-pervading and so on. The third deals with Veda as the source of true knowledge. The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh deal with ethics, the eighth deals with ignorance, the ninth deals with individualism and the tenth deals with subordination to the laws of the organization. The main body that is responsible for the propagation of Arya Samaj ideals in South Africa is the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha established in 1925. Its main objectives are:

*... to foster the Arya Samaj movement; to disseminate the Vedic Religion and Philosophy; to promote the art, culture and civilisation of India; to encourage the study of Hindi and other Indian languages, to protect and defend the rights of Hindus and concern itself with the spiritual, moral and social advancement; and to co-operate with other Hindu organizations in matters affecting the Hindu community (Nowbath 1960: 120).*

While its objectives as stated above seem broad, its particular concern to protect the rights of the Hindus is perhaps the most important, given its concern regarding conversion activities by Christian and Islamic religions. In line with its concern for the spiritual, moral and social advancement of Hindus, and in the light of its critique of ritualistic Hindu practices prevalent in Natal at the time, the establishment of an academy (*Purohit Mandal*) for the training of Hindu priests in accordance with the Arya Samaj ideals is an important strategy. Its chief task is to regularise the procedures relating to the various Hindu ceremonies. (Kumar 2013: 141) The success of their influence in the largely Hindi-speaking community also has to do with the promotion of the Hindi language through the establishment of schools and the development of syllabus for Hindi language teaching. The hallmark of their reform in the field of rituals is the introduction of 'havan' ritual as central to all Hindu ceremonies and the prescription of the traditional Vedic ceremonies known

as *samskaras* that deal with various phases of life such as birth, marriage, and so on. Furthermore, through the systematic training of priests, the introduction of women priests into the order and rationalising the mythological aspects of Hinduism, such as the narratives of *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* by treating them as human narratives rather than treating Krishna and Rama as deities, the Arya Samaj is able to speak of God as one. Like most Vedanta oriented organizations, they quote the famous Vedic dictum: "They say many, but reality is one" (*ekam sad vipra bahuda vadanti*) (Kumar 2013: 143) In other words, their attempt to present Hinduism as a rational religion is the key to responding to the external threat to Hinduism.

In similar vein, the Saiva Sithantha Sangam emphasises the notion of one God, Siva and opposes all iconography and ritualistic aspects. By emphasising the grace of Siva and by worshipping in a congregational setting every Sunday, the Saiva Sithantha Sangam propagated a unique Hindu philosophy that appealed to mainly Tamil-speaking Hindus. It locates its teaching in specific Saiva Sithantha texts such as *Sivajnana Bodham* and the hymns (*Tevaram*) of the medieval Saiva poets in India (Kumar 2013: 151).

A comparative perspective of the Arya Samaj and the Saiva Sithantha Sangam in terms of their strategies would enable us to understand how they responded to the so called 'decline of Hinduism' argument.

- Both organizations entered the South African scene in the early twentieth century when conversion was of particular concern in Hindu society.
- While Arya Samaj responded to the western critique of Hinduism and its own perception that Hinduism is internally declining, the Saiva Sithantha Sangam was particularly concerned about the issue of conversion of Hindus to other religions.
- The Arya Samaj specifically targeted the Hindi-speaking community; the Saiva Sithantha Sangam focused on the Tamil-speaking community.
- The Arya Samaj drew from the ancient Hindu texts known as the Vedas, whereas the Saiva Sithantha Sangam drew from Tamil texts such as *Sivajnana Bodham* and *Tevaram*.
- The Arya Samaj attempted to reform Hinduism by introducing Vedic ceremonies

such as the Havan; the Saiva Sithantha Sangam emulated the western Christian mode of worship by introducing sermons, preaching in public places, and later introducing the Havan ritual.

- The Arya Samaj discouraged temple rituals and image worship in particular and replaced these with the various rites of passage (*Samskaras*), whereas Saiva Sithantha Sangam emphasised congregational worship and Saiva teachings and discouraged participation in rituals in temples.
- The Arya Samaj encouraged participation in Hindu festivals such as Diwali; the Saiva Sithantha Sangam emphasised participation in festivals associated with Siva, such as *Sivaratri*, *Karttikadeepam* and so on.
- For the Arya Samaj the central authority is the priest trained in their order; for the Saiva Sithantha Sangam the central authority is the head of the organization, often referred to as Guru.
- While Arya Samaj became socially active and involved in politics and social reform, the Saiva Sithantha Sangam encouraged a form of ascetic life and a certain detachment from society.

It is clear that the strategies deployed by both organizations did not necessarily yield the expected results. Instead, not only did they become denominations in their own right, attracting their specific following from different linguistic groups, but in both cases they also created internal divisions. In the case of the Arya Samaj, it unwittingly divided the Hindi-speaking community into the Arya Samajists and the Sanatanists.<sup>33</sup> In the case of the Saiva Sithantha Sangam, it created two forms of Saivism within the Tamil community - Saivism without any iconographic and ritualistic aspects and Saivism based on temple rituals.

Notwithstanding their attempts at preventing Hindus from converting to other religions, the statistics indicate a decline of Hindu numbers in relation to the growth in other religious groups within the Indian community of South Africa (see SA Stats of 1996 and compare them with 2001 Stats). Over the years the very organizations that emerged as responses to the so called 'decline of Hinduism' in South Africa became no more than denominations. Even by the early 1990s a mere 4 percent of Hindus were

affiliated to the Arya Samaj, while the Saiva Sithantha Sangam had a following of 9 percent. On the other hand the Sanatana practitioners represented about 32 percent (see Kumar 2013: 218). In my earlier work (Kumar 2013) I have made a case for the resilience of the ritualistic Hinduism by means of popular festivals and ceremonies that Hindus tend to be drawn towards as these ceremonies are intrinsically connected to their various daily needs. To this day thousands of Hindus take vows to observe either Kavadi or Firewalking rituals as they are seen to offer emotional and physical well-being.

The tendency to look down on ritualistic Hinduism by the neo-Hindu organizations such as the Arya Samaj and the Saiva Sithantha Sangam needs to be seen in the context of the way the western-oriented scholars privileged text-based notions of Hinduism. I therefore argued in my previous work:

It is because of their underestimating of the popular religious orientations among Hindus that the 18th century and 19th century Western scholars tended to focus heavily on the texts and constructed a Hinduism which is largely present in the text, and not so much on the ground. Such text-based constructions of Hinduism still tend to dominate our scholarly research on Hinduism. But in recent years, historians of religions are beginning to see the significance of the vernacular-based popular traditions and are beginning to look at the context and text together. A case in point is Alf Hiltebeitel's masterly work on the cult of Draupadi (1988), a tradition which has survived among South African Hindus to this day. Fire-walking ritual (as it is known in Natal) is, perhaps, the most dominant tradition among Hindus in South Africa and has become a pan-Hindu tradition. An originally Tamil/Telugu tradition, it has spread beyond its borders and has become assimilated into the North Indian tradition. In South Africa, the Gujaratis, Hindus, Tamils and Telugus participate in it, and it is beginning to draw some European participants also (Kumar 2013: 209).

In other words, the ritualistic Hinduism seems to have resisted the attempts of neo-Hindu organizations' wrong diagnosis of the problem of conversion of Hindus to other religions. Underlying the conflict between the neo-Hindu notions of Hinduism and the ritualistic, traditional forms of Hinduism is the conflict between representing Hinduism through elite texts and

dynamic vernacular oral narratives. What we see here is a fundamental ideological dissonance between the elite and the popular. No wonder the neo-Hindu organizations are more popular among middle class societies, whereas the temple rituals seem to attract people of all walks of life, including the middle class as these rituals deal with their mundane needs and not just the otherworldly spiritual quest.

### CONCLUSION

The neo-Hindu organizations set out to address the perceived critique of Hinduism from western Christian and Islamic sources and assumed that the critique was due to the decline of Hinduism. They therefore set out to bring about change from within by returning to the ancient forms of Hindu doctrines and practices. The resistance that they brought to bear on the so-called pressure from conversion to other religions in the long run did not yield the anticipated results within the South African context. Instead, the neo-Hindu movements addressed in this article ended up coming to loggerheads with the traditional forms of Hinduism that have become deeply entrenched within South African Hindu society. In doing so, the Arya Samaj created a division within the Hindi-speaking community resulting in the division between the Arya Samajists and the Sanatanists. At the same time, the Saiva Sithantha Sangam isolated a minority of Tamil-speaking Hindus from the majority Tamils who oscillate towards rituals and temples, especially the Fire-walking and the Kavadi rituals. The fact that to this day the ritualistic Hindu practices are very popular both among Hindi-speaking and Tamil-speaking Hindus demonstrates that the traditional forms have resisted the neo-Hindu attempts to change religious practices within South African Hindu society.

As noted in my theoretical comment above, the intellectual approach pursued by both neo-Hindu organizations in question in this article has been resisted from the ground level by simply not giving recognition to their resistance attempts. In other words, the popularly entrenched ritual practices among South African Hindus managed to survive by simply deflecting the intellectual and elite approaches. The traditional methods of religious practices did not have to openly confront the neo-Hindu attempts but rather simply continued to do what they

knew best and felt comfortable with. As such, the traditional forms of ritualistic Hindu practices in South Africa may not have intentionally gone about resisting the neo-Hindu attempts at change, but rather by naturally and organically perpetuating the building of more temples and shrines to continue their traditional rituals they have found useful in their mundane life struggles. In a sense, what my observations thus far confirm is that religion has to deal with the here and now, notwithstanding its otherworldly concerns. The ritualistic forms of Hinduism offered Hindus in South Africa successful avenues to resist the oppressive measures adopted by the colonial masters during their time of indenture; in the same way, they continued to resist the changes attempted by the neo-Hindu movements in the name of uplifting Hinduism from its perceived decline. The success of ritualistic Hindu practices therefore lies in their pragmatic relevance to the daily lives of people, in that the rituals are directly about the practical needs of health, wealth and prosperity.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, I will not offer a comprehensive historical background of the two organizations. For a comprehensive account, the reader may consult Kumar (2013).
- <sup>2</sup> In South Africa, the organization uses the spelling 'Sithantha' whereas the spelling 'Siddhanta' is used more globally and in the context of India.
- <sup>3</sup> Note that in 1929 Pandit Ramgovind Trivedi established a counter organisation to the Arya Samaj along the lines of traditional Hindu practice (Sanatana dharma). It created divisions within the Hindi-speaking community for the first time (Kumar 2013: 139).

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