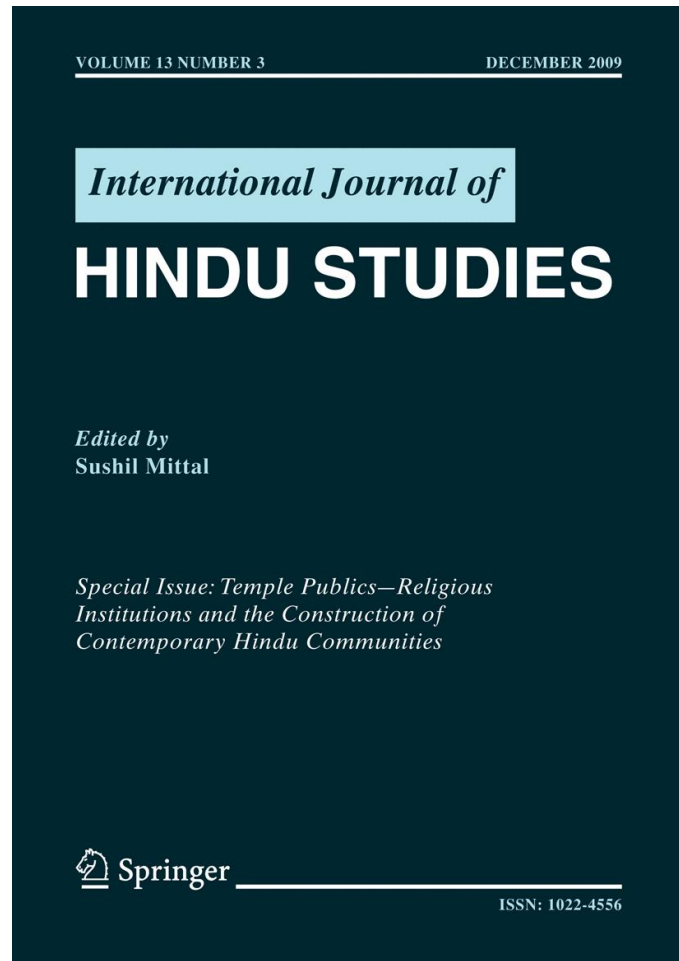


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## **Temple Publics: Religious Institutions and the Construction of Contemporary Hindu Communities**

**Deepa Reddy and John Zavos**

Extract from fieldnotes (Zavos), Akshardham Monument, New Delhi, January 25, 2008:

After I had arrived, one very smartly dressed young man in a blue blazer showed me to the management block. He walked very fast and had a two-way radio. Air of serious efficiency. He had worked at the Mandir as a volunteer for two years. I met with two *sadhus* and a senior *satsangi* who was a specialist in Sanskrit. The two *sadhus* were both American South Asian, both had been studying for degrees in the States before deciding to take *diksha*. These were two highly articulate young men, very careful and gentle in their approach. I asked them why the space of the Akshardham was so clean and orderly. This struck them as a peculiar question, but in the end they said that it comes from Bhagwan's teaching—he did not want people to spit and so on, as it showed disrespect for the environment. Things should be orderly, otherwise there would be chaos. Who would want chaos?

This extract comments on a visit to one of the main sites of the BAPS Swaminarayan movement, the New Delhi Akshardham Monument. This enormous complex houses a significant Swaminarayan Temple, as well as a range of exhibitions and other attractions associated with Hinduism and the movement, a management complex and large accommodation block, ornate gardens, and the enormous monument which forms the centrepiece of the site. The Delhi Akshardham was opened in 2005. As is indicated in the fieldnotes, it is a very well-ordered site. The space is marked by its cleanliness and the efficiency with which impeccably dressed volunteers like the one in the extract above direct large numbers of visitors from one to another sector. It is a sense of order and cleanliness which is, it goes almost without saying, in marked contrast to the general bustle of the busy city beyond the walls of the complex. Entering the complex, one is entering a space which is different, although in many ways recognizably familiar to visitors sensitive to the inflections of Hindu temple life.

It is this sense of the differently familiar, and its implications for the development of Hindu community identities, which this special issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* seeks to interrogate. Our interest is in the ways in which temples and practices associated with them have developed in the contemporary era, seeming to shape and invoke communities in new ways. The Akshardham is a very striking example of how a modern Hindu organization marks religious space as special in the context of a dynamic, rapidly developing urban environment. Our intention is to raise awareness and provide examples of the different ways in which modern environments are negotiated by Hindu organizations. In focusing on this issue, we are interested not just in observing and analyzing different strategies of adaptation, but perhaps more pertinently in the *creative* implications of the multiple ways in which public space is engaged and thereby reconfigured. Sometimes, these implications emerge as the innovative deployment or hybridization of genres of public practice and institutionalization; often they are manifested in processes which produce new and developing notions of community, coalescing around particular institutions or sets of institutions and resonating differently in a complex network of public spheres. These are the “temple publics” of our special issue title: notions of group consciousness which are established through the presence of Hindu religious institutions and practices associated with those institutions in different, often globally configured, public spheres. By exploring the emergence and development of these different “temple publics,” we hope that this special issue will contribute to growing scholarship about the relationship between religious identities and the complex field of late modern public culture.

The papers in this issue were all presented at the first of a series of seminars held under the aegis of an international network examining the “public representation of a religion called Hinduism.”<sup>1</sup> The slightly awkward framing of the project as focused on “a religion called Hinduism” is designed to create a kind of critical distance from the concept of “Hinduism,” to point up the tensions which are implicit in the identification of this dynamic set of traditions as “religion.” This approach is premised on a range of theoretical work which has emphasized the constructed nature of this concept, fashioned in the context of colonialism (see, for example, Frykenberg 2000; King 1999; Sugirtharaja 2003). Behind this work on Hinduism, there is a further range of work which has deconstructed and radically historicized the idea of religion itself—projecting it not so much as a universal phenomenon associated with the development of human societies, but rather as a feature of modern relations of power (see, for example, Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2000; Hirst and Zavos 2005). The general aim of this network is, then, to explore the location of Hinduism in a range of public contexts, without assuming the existence of religion as a discrete, “special” category of human experience, but rather understanding the way in which it is projected as such by different groups in different contexts. In this way, the research seeks to increase awareness of the dynamic nature of the category “Hinduism,” the different ways it relates to political discourses and key social discourses such as caste, race, class, gender, and, of course, religion. Whereas the session in which the papers in

this issue were presented was focused on modern temples and forms of worship, other sessions focus on issues such as umbrella organizations and modern *sampradayas*, Hinduism in the media and in the educational and development sectors, and various manifestations of Hindu nationalism. This special issue represents the first published output from the network, and the themes explored here should be placed within the wider framework of public representation and the shifting identifications of “a religion called Hinduism.”<sup>2</sup>

Our focus on “temple publics” is in some senses an indication of this shifting identification. The session from which the issue was drawn was originally entitled “Show Temples and Public Worship,” as our intention was to highlight the apparently self-conscious projection of modern organizations into broader public spheres through innovative modes of worship and especially the building of high profile temple complexes such as that referred to above. The notion of “show temples,” however, was not popular with some practitioners who were acquainted with and otherwise interested in the themes of the session. In particular, an argument was put to us by some members of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha that “show temples” implied that the principle purpose of modern temple building was an outward expression of the power of particular organizations; rather, they argued, the building of such temples was an inward-looking act of devotion, part of a broader approach based on selfless service, or *seva*, which was central to their understanding of themselves as Hindus. Without precluding the idea of temples as sites of public representation, the project recognizes these concerns and the possible pejorative connotations of the “show temple” characterization. We agree that in order to maintain the idea of the project as an open space—a space for the articulation of shifting identifications, as it were—different ways of conceptualizing the public representation of Hinduism should be developed.

The idea of “temple publics,” we hope, maintains our focus on the interactions between institutions and community identities, while at the same time opening up a hermeneutic space for different understandings of these interactions. Readers will note that the term itself is not used explicitly in the papers presented here, because it is an idea that has developed out of the process of bringing this work together, rather than being an initial premise. The papers, we feel, reflect the development of temple publics in diverse yet related ways. The first two papers, by Maya Warriar and by Pralay Kanungo and Satyakam Joshi, are focused on temple publics which take shape as institutions and individuals engage in particular political arenas—of British multiculturalism, on the one hand, and Hindutva, on the other. In papers which explore devotionalism to Goddess Adhiparasakthi in East Ham, London, and the Bollywood star Madhuri Dixit in Tatanagar, Jharkhand respectively, Ann David and Shalini Kakar both write of marginal temple publics that each, in their way, challenge the kind of norms of devotional and ritual practice which are posited in the political arenas explored by Warriar, and Kanungo and Joshi. In papers on the BAPS Swaminarayan and Sathya Sai Baba movements, Hanna Kim and Tulasi Srinivas both write of temples as transnational institutions, multiply claimed and constituted

by devotees in both local and global contexts in order to form dynamic, shifting temple publics, thus reiterating the sense of process apparent in the preceding papers. These differently imagined temple publics, then, demonstrate the dynamics of identification on which this project is premised. In the remainder of this introduction we will explore the idea of temple publics in more detail, relating it both to existing literature and to the papers which will follow.

### **Temples and their Publics**

In a study of caste disputes in the town of Masulipatnam in Andhra Pradesh, Pamela G. Price (2000) makes a distinction between acting “in public” and forming a public. The former refers, she says, to the idea of acting locally in an open forum in some kind of representational manner; the latter refers to the articulation of groups specifically beyond a locality, focusing on shared identity and shared values in this supra-local sphere (Price 2000: 28–29). Price’s argument is that the idea of “the public” (as opposed to acting “in public”) emerges through the social transformations of the nineteenth century, under the influence of colonial rule, in a manner which recalls Sandria Freitag’s (1989) analysis of emerging public arenas as spaces for collective action.<sup>3</sup> As Price notes, ritual performances in open spaces were significant in pre-colonial India in terms of “articulating political relations” and “constituting and representing the authority of groups and persons” (2000: 28). Such performances generally reflected the vertical mobilization of competing groups of castes in localities (the “right and left hand” alignment of castes) in order to act “in public.” During the nineteenth century, in the context of the rational-bureaucratic colonial state and developing notions of civil society, horizontal alignments exceeding the locality began to emerge (in the guise, for example, of caste associations). Hence, she says, “issues of caste status...became more universalistic, relatively speaking” (Price 2000: 32).

Price’s distinction is a useful way of thinking our way into the idea of “temple publics.” As it stands, her work here is to a certain extent explicitly about the articulation of different kinds of publics in relation to temples, as many of the caste disputes she refers to are expressed in terms of relative rights and privileges in the performance of temple-based rituals. More than this, however, the distinction provides a template for thinking about the shifting position of the temple in the transition to modernity. The classic identification of the temple (at least in the South Indian context) as explored by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge in 1976 is as the locus of a redistributive process, in which ritual performance provided both a means of effecting redistribution and a dramatic representation of the relative status of “men and groups” with a perceived connection to the presiding deity, “the authoritative centre of the temple” (1976: 208). This is a kind of kingship model, in which those associated with the temple are cast as subjects of the sovereign deity. Human kings have a vital role to play, as they fulfil the “royal mandate of protection” by arbitrating in disputes which may arise in the course of the redistribution

process. Although the king is himself a servant of the “divine sovereignty enshrined in the deity,” he is nevertheless indispensable because “the deity cannot, by its very nature, arbitrate conflict among its servants” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976: 206). In this way, the temple reinforces the monarchical structure of power, in which “men and groups” act in public as subjects, without, to refer back to Price, forming a public.

Appadurai and Breckenridge recognize that this situation changed with the onset of colonialism. “Given the legal-rational-bureaucratic (in the Weberian usage) basis of the...political order, the [institutions of the state act as] a ‘protector’ of South Indian temples in a much different way than its pre-British royal predecessors” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976: 207). The argument, elaborated in Appadurai 1981, is that the bureaucratic relationship established by the British state and continued in the post-colonial era was more managerial and less representational in terms of ritual order. The division of the state into executive and judiciary also complicated and transformed its position in terms of temple conflict, to the extent that the actions of the state itself could henceforth be challenged through the courts. Clearly these changes are significant in terms of the relationship established between temples and groups of people with an interest in that temple. Nevertheless Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that “the government...is in some fashion carrying on, in its management of temples, the mandate of pre-British Hindu kings to protect such institutions” (1976: 208). Although there have obviously been structural changes introduced through the onset of colonialism, this view suggests that the relationship between the temple and its devotees, the temple as a “cultural entity” (Appadurai 1981: 19), remains relatively unchanged; the deity maintains its position as a “paradigmatic sovereign” who models the position of devotees as subjects and the state as a kind of tutelary conduit.

There is plenty of evidence that supports this approach by demonstrating that the state has maintained a critical position in the life of the temple. Franklin A. Presler (1987), for example, notes that despite the impression generally given that the British government withdrew from interference in religious institutions by the mid-nineteenth century (the developing policy of “non-interference”), the state nevertheless maintained control “in the areas most critical to the government—lands, allowances and temple accounts in treasuries” (Appadurai 1981: 23). At the same time, the way in which devotees related to the temple was considerably changed by this policy shift. Although the state maintained control over the areas mentioned, it nevertheless from the 1840s onwards ceded responsibility for ceremonial practices to “autonomous managers” (Frykenberg 2000: 18); as a result, Robert Eric Frykenberg argues, contestation emerged around this new managerial role. Competing groups “sought protection of their interests through resort to the courts” and “organized themselves and mounted campaigns of protest and petition” (Frykenberg 2000: 18). Here, we can see the emergence of a new form of public-ness related to temples, in which emerging social classes with a consciousness beyond the locality could assert their status in, as Price says, a relatively universalistic way. Frykenberg argues that

this process led to the development of a new “sense of ‘public’ identity,” and with it, “the emergence and articulation of a Hindu ‘public opinion’ ” (2000: 21, 20). What is of interest to us here is not so much the precise historical processes through which “a religion called Hinduism” was constructed (a matter, of course, of some debate), but the way in which temple-related competition invokes the formation of a public, whose identity is contested through that relationship.

Joanne Punzo Waghorne (2004: 35–74) also emphasizes the idea of competition in her examination of temple building in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Madras. She argues that the surge of temple building in the city during this period represented an expression of cosmopolitan expansiveness inspired by a dynamic economic environment in which both social and geographic mobility were key motors of change and innovation. Quite graphically, these mobilities produced a new kind of public in Madras. “In Blacktown,” she says, “British merchants mingled with a mixed group of Telugu-speaking Vaishnavas...who migrated from nearby Andhra, Tamil-speaking Shaivas...from farther south, and Gujaratis who moved from the north” (Waghorne 2004: 37). The expression of this new public, she argues, was not so much the intervention of mercantile classes and a developing modern state in the running of royal temples, but rather the building of new temples “in a new urban environment that was fully part of a global interchange of goods and people” (Waghorne 2004: 40).

One significant result of this proliferation of temples within the space of the city was a kind of divine decentring. There was, Waghorne notes, “no Hindu deity at the center of this polytheistic and polyglot world,” because “within the spatial configuration of the city, none retained sovereignty; this privileged space in Madras belonged to the grand house of commerce, Fort St George” (2004: 74). In this sense, we may here detect a critical transformation, through which notions of “public” related to temples emerges: different temples invoke devotees not so much as *subjects* of the sovereign deity, but as a *constituency* within a competitive ritual marketplace. Waghorne notes the emergence of three types of temple in this environment: eclectic temples, in which different deities were accommodated, and with them, different communities within the cosmopolitan space of “Blacktown” (even, at least in terms of narratives of devotion, the British); caste temples, in which the ritual practices of specific communities were played out in the context of a multi-community, or multi-cultural, environment; and duplicated temples, constructed, she argues, as kinds of “branch offices” of older, more famous temples located elsewhere. These different types of temple represent differently creative responses, different ways of articulating a sense of identity in the complex world of economic dynamism apparent in eighteenth-century Madras: “the modern world of global trade demanded and still demands both a sense of universality (the whole world as our home) and at the same time its seeming contradiction (the particularity of each national and ethnic community and its gods)” (Waghorne 2004: 73). Waghorne’s typology in a sense projects three different types of temple public; they invoke constituencies within the city in different ways, fashioning modern identities through their position as “sites of con-

versation, of business and of social life" (2004: 74), as well of course as sites of devotion.

Part of Waghorne's objective in producing this typology is to demonstrate connections between the Madras/Chennai of the long eighteenth century and that of the late modern era. She sees in both periods a mix of economic and political change, migratory dynamism and cosmopolitanism, which is enacted in religious innovation. In the latter period this stretches to practices apparent among Tamil communities in London, Washington and beyond, where "the same types [of temple] are reappearing" (Waghorne 2004: 41). Other recent scholarship, however, highlights the ways in which temples in the current era come to represent a widening range of interests, both incorporating and interpellating "public" constituencies in novel and diverse ways. These new temples are variously traditional or popular, orthodox in their engagements or almost playful, dedicated to neo-traditional deities such as Bharat Mata, newly popularized gods and goddesses, or to hugely adored Bollywood/regional filmstars like MGR, Amitabh Bachchan, and Madhuri Dixit (see Kakar, this volume). Shrines Milton Singer might once have classified as belonging to "little" traditions or popular Hinduism become sites of inter-communal political contestation, therefore being transformed into representations of a monolithic Hinduism (see Kanungo and Joshi, this volume). This proliferation of different forms, we would suggest, might struggle to be accommodated by Waghorne's three-point typology. The contemporary period produces multiple temple forms, reflecting, as we will go on to argue, a multiplicity of publics.

The literature on temple building outside of India, particularly in Europe and the United States, demonstrates that Hindu communities have developed considerable sensitivity to the pressures of cross-cultural translation, albeit in different ways (Rangaswamy 2000: 257). Whether by "adjust[ing] the sacred calendar to coincide more closely with long weekends in the United States" (Narayanan 2006: 232), renaming the Edinburgh Hindu Temple a community center so as to be eligible for financing (Nye 1995: 183), or by providing resources to teach families how best to represent Hinduism in multi-cultural or inter-faith environments (Kim 2007; Waghorne 2006: 110), the integration of temples with local environments is consistently apparent. That immigrant communities adapt to new cultural environments in novel ways that re-create traditions and pasts is by now well-established. What current literature seems to suggest further is that, both in India and elsewhere, temple building trends overwhelmingly reflect a heightened awareness of the temple as existing within a wider public that it needs to call upon—inform, educate, and above all engage with—precisely so as to be able to function effectively in relation to it. Temples are increasingly becoming public institutions, in this general sense.

Waghorne writes of the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Washington, DC, for example, that "devotees and committee members are aware that in India, the addition of a *rajagopura* [literally a gateway grand enough for a king] marks the temple as a premier institution, a serious part of the *public* realm" (2006: 104; emphasis in original). The temple's use of royal imagery thus not only consolidates the position



of the Hindu community with its “newly earned wealth,” but sets it on a par with “stately New England church[es],” “conscious[ly] engage[ing] civil space in America” (Waghorne 2006: 116, 106). The temple management holds that having “something magnificent to show” in the nation’s capital enables the temple to “influence public opinion from here unlike in other towns” (Waghorne 2006: 105). The task of the temple, it seems, is not just to speak to its own constituent devotees, but equally to produce a public representation of itself and of Hinduism more broadly as being equal in stature with other religious groups (cf. Nye 1995: 165; Prentiss n.d.) so as to then influence public opinion. It is slightly ironic that the *rajagopuram* of the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple is built with an eye to engaging not royalty any longer, but indeed the Hindu and non-Hindu public at large.

As temples participate in stocking food pantries and working in soup kitchens at Thanksgiving or Christmas or urge “adherence to the principles of humanitarianism, compassion towards the poor and the needy, and of amity and goodwill among mankind,”<sup>4</sup> it becomes clear that the goal is not merely integration into a broader community, but representation, and ultimately legitimization. Temple publics, in transcending narrow local interests to varying degrees, become the dynamic sources of the temple’s own broader legitimacy. A key constituency in this process, both in India and abroad, is the Hindu middle-class. Waghorne reports a sentiment often repeated in sites as physically far-flung as Nashville, Malibu, and Chennai: “Once only kings could build temples, but now we middle-class people are able to do this!” (2004: 9). The “ability” referenced in this statement is of course very largely financial ability or fundraising capability. Where once kingly patrons might have underwritten such costs wholly, contemporary realities compel temples to hold galas and fundraising dinners to raise their monies in more piecemeal fashion, thereby further calling into existence a constituency of devotees to invest in, support, and identify with *their* democratic religious institution (Waghorne 2004: 18, 2006: 112). And the involvement of greater numbers of donors increases the pressure on the temple to remain institutionally transparent, accountable to its publics (Waghorne 2006: 112). Authority is thus transferred not insignificantly to the temple’s “congregation” as temple building becomes increasingly a participatory affair.

The participatory nature of the contemporary temple is evident also from the increasing license taken in creating smaller, far less ostentatious shrines that make no allusions to royalty but make use of popular icons to still decenter the divine. Here a flower seller named Kantha Srinivasan creates a shrine dedicated to the Tamil film star and later politician, MGR;<sup>5</sup> there a *chaat*-shop owner deifies the Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit (see Kakar, this issue). The Amitabh Bachchan Fans Association embark on a four month-long “Amitabh Utsav” (festival) in honor of the actor himself, combining traditional *pujas* with “poor feeding,” microsurgery eye camps, and blood donation camps for thalassaemia patients—causes close to Amitabh Bachchan’s heart.<sup>6</sup> Veena Das (1981: 52) tells us of the role of the Bollywood film *Jai Santoshi Ma* in creating a cult to the new Goddess, both through the establish-

ment of new temples and through the revival of temples to goddesses like Shitala (a Bengali smallpox goddess) in the name of Santoshi Ma. In such examples as these, demigods are divinized by the adoration of their fans, who are often from lower classes and castes (cf. Dickey 1993); these temple collectivities from below, as it were, organize themselves sometimes fleetingly, sometimes more institutionally.

Interestingly, such “little” temples (to hearken back to Milton Singer’s distinction) represent something of a call to democracy in divinization and to that limited extent can be compared to the North American and European temples that similarly represent and seek representation within a wider political public sphere. The Bharat Mata temples in Banaras and Hardwar, by contrast, approach the problem of representation quite differently. More concerned with the “institutionalization of nationalism” (Jha 2004: 37), these structures call upon the public to function as a national body of a particular kind. “We are all children of Bharat Mata,” Lise McKean cites the guidebook to the temple in Hardwar as reading, “Our country is one, our society is one, our civilization is one, our culture is one, our relations are blood relations” (1996a: 261). This conception of one-ness further casts the public, almost by fiat, in a mould that emphatically contains “no inequality, no untouchability, no reservations, no high and low” (cited in McKean 1996a: 257). The temple eschews particularism both ideologically and architecturally: it is an eight-storey office building-like structure that promises an “emotional experience of religious and national unity” (McKean 1996a: 264). Indeed, McKean’s descriptions indicate that the temple demands nothing less than “self-sacrificing devotion” (1996a: 254), “actively fashion[ing] social identities and differences as well as instructing people in the appropriate expression of a specific type of Hindu identity” (1996b: 118) and ultimately promising “a liberation that is at once political and spiritual” (1996a: 254). The public interpellated by the Bharat Mata temples, then, is at once ferocious and sacrificing, proud and obligated; it is a disciplined public that the temple seeks, as its model of inclusiveness is ideological rather than participatory. McKean highlights the ways in which such rhetoric and strategies put forth a certain set of interests, here explicitly political, and make demands of and indeed *mobilize* a public bound by “shared identity and shared values” (Price 2000: 29)—so that by these demands the nationalist vision of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad can be consolidated and reaffirmed.

Thinking of the shifting forms of the temple in the context of late modernity, then, we increasingly find the coalescence of Price’s “publics”—that is, groups mobilized beyond localities to “engage in activities related to common issues of government policy and/or of power, status and authority” (2000: 28)—occurring in a number of different ways. The accelerated and intensified processes associated with globalization—further migrations, cultural dislocations, and the concomitant re-figurations of the “traditional” in the context of the contemporary—produce diverse, sometimes conflicting visions of community, variously projected through discourses of Hindu-ness, Indian-ness, and associated formations.

## Temple Publics in the Contemporary Era: Some Conceptual Parameters

In this section we aim to provide some conceptual parameters for this proliferation of temple publics. In particular, we would like to highlight issues around three quite contentious and rapidly developing concepts which bear upon this project: “community,” “religion,” and most of all, “public.”

### *Understanding the Public*

Any project which purports to reflect on the public presence of particular phenomena needs also to reflect on what exactly is meant by the notion of “the public.” Price has already helped us towards an understanding of notions of public-ness, by making her useful distinction between being “in public” and “forming a public.” As the prior section indicates, it is primarily this latter idea of forming a public which interests us, as it suggests the imaginative projection of particular groups, framed by identities which motivate them to act in particular ways. What is clear from Price’s distinction, and reiterated by Waghorne’s examination of eighteenth-century Madras, is that the idea of “forming a public” is made possible by the opening up of a particular type of social space within societies.

This is, of course, the so-called public sphere or public space, clearly associated in the first instance with the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989). Habermas conceived of the idea of the public sphere as a distinctive feature of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment modernity. He argued that this notion of publicness emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe in autonomous, independent, and voluntaristic arenas of debate such as coffee houses, salons, and literary journals. Habermas mapped out the public sphere as governed by a kind of civic rationality, developing as a critique of institutional power and attempting to fashion conceptions of what constitutes the common, or public, good. This Habermasian public sphere provides a kind of universal template for understanding the idea of the public as a rational political force, recognized by normative modes of behavior and a clear understanding of what constitutes the public good.

There have been numerous critiques of this template (for a summary list, see Garnham 1992: 359–60). Post-modern and post-colonial theorists in particular have critiqued its universal implications. For example, Jim McGuigan (2000) argues that the idea of universalism is subverted by the existence of numerous networks of political action which challenge the discourses and institutions of mainstream politics. In this sense, it is more accurate to envisage a network of particular public spaces, which operate across and in dialogue with each other. “We may,” he says, “identify a multiplicity of public spheres, mainly unofficial or semi-official, representing many differences of identity, interest and aspiration” (McGuigan 2000: 3). McGuigan also critiques the cognitive trajectory of the Habermasian public sphere; that is, its perception as an arena concerned with rational debate about a politically conceived common good. He argues that this cognitive trajectory is frequently offset by emotional or aesthetic interventions which can have a major impact on political

discourse in any particular time or space, especially when issues of identity form a feature of that discourse. These arguments point us towards an understanding of the idea of the public not so much as a space or sphere with a particular set of discursive constraints, but as a web of spaces with a multiplicity of discursive registers, which frequently cut across and challenge one another.

In the post-colonial context, this web or network of public spaces produces complex, interwoven political environments. Thomas Blom Hansen's (2001) exploration of the performative politics of contemporary Mumbai is an example of this. The politics of the city, he argues, are practised only partly in the Legislative Assembly or Municipal Corporation; the dynamics of power which shape the city are also played out in multiple public spaces circumscribed by criminal networks, neighborhood dynamics, police actions, trade union and caste alliances, property development, and building contracting. One aspect of post-colonial public space of particular interest is its implicitly transnational character. Ideas of post-colonial public culture operate across "interactional contexts formed by media, market and travel dynamics" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 8) which, in Appadurai's phrase, form "ethnoscapes," that is, fluid and shifting landscapes of connectivity which enable identities to form across global flows of ideas and transnational organizational networks. Temples, we argue, form just such a "landscape of connectivity" in the web of transnational publicness. One objective in this special issue is to demonstrate how temple publics are formed and reformed through interactions across this web, projecting notions of Hindu-ness in various, sometimes conflicting ways. This is evident, for example, in Ann David's study of the Adhiparasakthi Temple in East Ham, London. David demonstrates how the links formed through this temple with Shakti traditions in Tamil Nadu and Tamil refugee communities fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka provide a globalized public space of empowerment for women who would otherwise be marginalized even in the diasporic public space of South Indian Hinduism in London (let alone the broader public space of "British Hinduism"), such as that represented by the large London Sri Murugan Temple, also in East Ham. Another quite different example is provided by Hanna Kim's paper, which argues that the BAPS Swaminarayan movement has, over time, deployed temple space in diverse ways to engage and accommodate a diversity of publics, notwithstanding the comment noted above about the devotional intent of BAPS' temple building activities. The rapid expansion of BAPS in a sense produces these diverse engagements across a network of public spaces, as the organization negotiates its position in transnational, national, and localized arenas.

### *Communities in Time and Space*

Raymond Williams referred to community as a "warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships" (1983: 76). As elaborated in a text inspired by Williams, part of the reason for this "persuasive" quality is that the relationships implied are "felt to be more 'organic' or 'natural,' and therefore stronger and deeper, than a rational or contractual association of individuals, such as the market or the

state” (Yúdice 2005: 51). From this we may gather that the concept of community needs to be treated with some caution—this is particularly so when it is conjoined with religion, as the “naturalness” of community is reinforced by the reification of religion through the dominant World Religions paradigm which constructs religious identity in terms of clearly defined and discrete “sub-sets,” such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on, in order to produce the inexorable and ubiquitous notion of the “religious community.”

The pervasiveness of this reified notion is demonstrated by Dhooleka S. Raj’s (2003) account of her ethnographic sojourn in North London, searching for the collective lives of Hindu Punjabis. Raj recounts that when she started her work, she sought to gain access by locating a particular temple where this community worshiped—a localized Hindu community, that is, should worship in a localized Hindu temple. Her experience, however, was of individuals moving from place to place, according to a range of factors, rather than worshiping in one community-identified temple. Particularly because they are mobile, middle-class people, Hindu Punjabis in London are a “dispersed group...who lead much of their lives in separate social fields” (Raj 2003: 93). Researchers, Raj reflects, “look for community and find it in the religious space. Therefore it is assumed the religious space makes the community” (2003: 82). In order to avoid this reified notion of the Hindu Punjabi community as a religious community, Raj develops the idea of a Hindu Punjabi community being constituted “in moments,” during particular times of worship such as festivals, but not in any constant way. The community, then, rather than being a fixed element of social life, is in this understanding a fluid concept, coalescing and dissipating in interaction with a range of factors.

The temple, in this sense, operates as one of this range factors implicated in the production of community identities in “moments.”<sup>7</sup> The evidence in this special issue reinforces this idea, as communities are variously constructed through actions associated with temple life. Clear examples are provided by Maya Warriar’s examination of the shifting notions of community associated with the temple bull controversy at Skanda Vale, Wales, and Pralay Kanungo and Satyakam Joshi’s detailed account of the development of Hindu community identity through the construction of a temple in the Dangs, a tribal dominated district of Gujarat. These examples demonstrate the way in which notions of community related to temples are floated in particular public spaces, spaces in which different political discourses dominate. Despite the marked difference in political discourse, notions of corporate Hindu identity emerge in both cases, as local religious identities engage in and are translated through broader public spaces. Comparing the precise processes of identification, and the types of institutions and forms of worship involved, enables us to understand how and why community identities may resonate differently in different “moments.”

Anne Hardgrove draws attention to two elements of the anthropological conception of community that are relevant here. First is the idea that community is always already a relational construct, as communities are generally identified by “outside

label[s]” or “ethnic tag[s]” that cordon off their specific beliefs and practices from those of other groups. Second, “the production of community entails performances of marking the symbolic boundaries of community in order to produce an internal space of community (such as domesticity)” (2004: Chapter 2). This is not to imply that, once constituted, these boundaries and the internal spaces they demarcate remain stable. Quite the contrary, it is the very debate about *how* boundaries are drawn and how the spaces within are defined that determines the nature of community. Tulasi Srinivas’ paper, for instance, describes the series of gateways leading to the Sai Ashram in Puttaparthi, marking in measures the concentric boundaries that separate the outer world of “exile and loss” from the “sacred landscape” of community within. Further gates and security systems within the Ashram act both as symbolic markers of distance from the Divine persona of Sai Baba, as well as physical controls on public access to him: the physical layout of the temple complex itself reflects on the nature of the community assembled and on the methods of the temple’s engagements with it. Building a temple, as Diana L. Eck has remarked, “is simultaneously the process of building a community” (2000: 221).

But what sort of “community” is it that temple building delimits? Malory Nye (1995) offers the view that the distinction between community and *congregation* is one way to cut through the inherent diffuseness of “community”—and, as Steven Vertovec (2000) adds, a way to distinguish conceptualizations of “community” within India and in diaspora since the latter is much more a Western/Christian term. Nye argues that disparate understandings of Hindu community as “*the* group of people who share *the* common religion of ‘Hinduism’ and who worship according to ‘Hindu’ custom” are “brought together by the common understanding that the worshippers at the temple form a congregation, and that this congregation forms a community” (1995: 183–84; emphasis added).

While it is undoubtedly the case that “congregations” so defined are more a diasporic formation than the “temple communities” of Indian scenarios,<sup>8</sup> we are interested in the concept primarily for another reason. Following Rasamandala Das (co-director of ISCKON Educational Services), Nye (1996, 2001: 20) describes the shift from “full time” involvement in the “intense life of the temple” to “part time” engagement with the temple institution—from core to periphery as it were—as a process that produces ISCKON’s congregation. The profound impact of this shift on the ISCKON organizational and conceptual infrastructure aside, what is worth noting for our present purposes is the way in which this “congregation,” precisely by rejecting the all-consuming demands of the temple establishment, actively participates in defining the “moments” of its contact and its coming together as a community. Such a notion of the “congregation,” then, although Western/Christian in origins, nevertheless does allow us to think of both Indian and diasporic temple communities as dynamic, even fleeting or at times unstable; returning to Raj, a community “in moments,” coming together around a political issue, a common cause and then dissipating, albeit never completely.<sup>9</sup> Temples, then, are one important site to provide both physical and conceptual parameters for the on-going boundary-

making performances of “community.” The papers in this special issue explore the dimensions of this process via investigations of the ways in which people gather around temples, and thereby identify aspects of a more-or-less fleeting but still shared devotional praxis.

*(Non-)Reified Religion*

What is the relationship between Hinduism and religion? The question is not one that this issue seeks to address directly, but it has significant bearing nonetheless on the project of knowing how temple publics are constituted. Of course there is the popular cliché about Hinduism being *not* religion but a “way of life.” Alongside it, however, is a vast literature that describes Orientalist, modernist, and diasporic constructions of Hinduism, as well as much work that describes various *sampradayas*’ incorporation of Hindu precepts and practices into models of universalism, Hindutva (or political Hinduism), and so on. On the one hand, scholars and communities of devotees alike continue to grapple with how best to come to terms with the beguiling range of practices and beliefs that constitute “Hinduism” (for example, see Lipner 2004). On the other hand, reifications of Hinduism are ubiquitous, and almost it would seem unavoidable in order to “operationalize” (Kelty 2004) Hindu praxis in modern scenarios.

Our particular concern in this special issue is: Whether, how, and by what means “a religion called Hinduism” is adapted and operationalized via the institution of the temple. The papers in this special issue necessarily consider temples to be nodes around which people gather, communities assemble, and publics emerge in relation to questions of religion. Eck quotes from a brochure of the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh that avers that the temple is “*more than just a religious institution*”; it also claims to be a reaffirmation of heritage, a place for dialogue, and a reminder of America’s immigrant/multiculturalist origins (Eck 2000: 226–27, emphasis added). So, rather than presumptively assuming the purely religious nature of either temple communities or temple publics, we are interested in understanding the role of the temple in putting religion (in all our examples, Hinduism) to *use*: in creating spaces which then allow for the articulation of meanings, boundaries and interests, be these shared *or* contested. We view the temple, in other words, as a crucial *interface* between the public and religion. Hanna Kim’s paper elaborates this theme most obviously: she argues that to understand BAPS Swaminarayan temples, it is imperative to understand their engagement with discourses of religion. In her account, “religion” represents a discursive framework that draws together some very different publics. The many divergent perceptions, desires, views, needs, and analyses of these publics, and their participation in the discourses of religion, produce not only communities but the space of the temple itself. In this Kim echoes and elaborates Nye’s observation in reference to the Edinburgh temple, that Hindus construct “their concepts of Hinduism, temple worship, community and Indianness at the same time as they are constructing the temple interior” (1995: 205).

The debates, disagreements, and contestations that occur under the rubric of

“religion” are critical in determining how people gathered around a temple come to represent Hinduism and to define the terms of collective action in the name of religion. If “community” represents no consensus, then it seems that much the same is true for “religion.” In writing of Hinduism in Great Britain, for example, Kim Knott (2000: 95) tracks the processes by which Hinduism comes to acquire a public face in the 1970s, precisely by the establishment and institutionalization of temples. She writes: “Although Bhaktivedanta Manor and the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir represented particular Hindu *vaishnava sampradaya*, they were both keenly aware of their role in representing Hinduism in Britain and in mobilizing British Hindus” (Knott 2000: 90). In other words, religion in diaspora tends to function metonymically, with distinct parts taking on the mantle of representing a presumed whole. But also, the determination of a diasporic community to “reproduce Hindu practices and institutions on British soil” leads eventually to a “willingness to fight for Hindu causes and a Hindu identity” (Knott 2000: 90–91). Contests in broader public spaces over the meanings of religion and the rights of religious groups lead to the formation of new types of publics. As much as Knott tracks, in the institutionalization of British temples, the emergence of a politically conscious Hindu public, she also notes that the dynamism of British Hinduism comes from within, too, from the challenging voices of women and particularly youth (Knott 2000: 102). Sub-groups like youth exemplify “a passion for environmental issues, pride in a Hindu identity, innovation in fundraising and communication, a competitive streak, and a desire for personal achievement” (Knott 2000: 102). As such they claim the capacity to “judge the adequacy of what is created and interpreted in the name of British Hinduism, rewarding it with their support or ignoring it for something different of their own making” (Knott 2000: 102). Temples become sites that perforce shift to accommodate such critiques and new demands, publicly negotiating the bounds and terms of “a religion called Hinduism” from without and within.

Critiques of religion and of the ways in which (temple) communities reify Hinduism or reinterpret Hindu praxis are expressed variously in the different contributions to this issue. Maya Warrior’s paper explores the journey of Skanda Vale’s ecumenical spiritual community towards identification as Hindu, through the battle to save the temple bull Shambo. Textually mustered arguments work well to advance a community’s political interests in this case, but these can also be a source of concern. Hanna Kim demonstrates how BAPS’ critics are uneasy about the way in which the Swaminarayan Sanstha’s reliance on a textualized Hinduism imputes an artificial coherence to the “Hindu story” and thus opens the possibilities for political alignment with Hindu nationalism. Shalini Kakar reports on the Indian press’ bewilderment that anyone should want to study Pappu Sardar’s Madhuri Dixit Temple at all: religion, already on the other side of rationality in such assessments, seems to float further into realms of the eccentric-absurd. More and less subtle critical undercurrents come from within temple communities to define the sort of “multivocality” of Sai devotionism that Tulasi Srinivas describes or to refigure the very patterns of women’s participation in temple rituals that Ann David documents. Pralay Kanungo



and Satyakam Joshi read the Hinduization of Adivasi communities in Gujarat as a critical response to Christian proselytism (itself a critique of the prevailing social order), by those representing more of a Hindutva agenda, further drawing attention to the role of temples and temple rituals in facilitating on-going contestations over identity. In other words, taken collectively, the papers in this issue go a long way toward understanding the ways in which specific, temple-mediated engagements generate “religion,” while remaining cognizant of the paradoxical ways in which critique and reification, sometimes even resurgence, can be mutually constitutive.

### Show Temple Publics

We return briefly in closing to the idea of the “show temple,” in which this special issue has its origins, although perhaps with a slightly different inflection. Vasudha Narayanan has remarked that, indeed, all temples are inherently show temples in the sense that they are concerned with exhibition, demonstration, and performance at one level or other.<sup>10</sup> Our interest is accordingly with what contemporary temples *show* and how the meanings of these “shows” are constructed through dialogical processes in which a variety of publics are engaged and, indeed, constituted.

What sorts of things do contemporary Hindu temples seek to show—to perform, to demonstrate, and to exhibit? What “zones of debate” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 6) do they enter in the process, and what sorts of publics are the outcomes? If we view the discourses of religion as narratives circulating in a symbolic public commons of a sort, we might then view temples as the “focal point[s] for a series of rituals,” both esoteric and not, “whose purpose is to achieve *cultural enclosure*” (Mazarella 2002: 388; emphasis in original). The papers gathered in this special issue invite reflection on the familiar-yet-different mechanisms by which such enclosures are generated in contemporary scenarios, however imperfectly or tenuously.

### Notes

1. The network is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The session from which this special issue is drawn also acted as a panel at the 20th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, held in Manchester, UK in July 2008.

2. For more details on the project, please visit the website at <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/hinduism/>.

3. Freitag argues that in the transition to colonial rule, public arenas, which were “originally just the realm in which collective activities were staged,” became “an alternative world to that structured by the imperial regime, providing legitimacy and recognition to a range of actors and values denied place in the imperial order” (1989: 6).

4. These words are inscribed on the wall of the Birla Radhakrishnan Temple in Calcutta, consecrated in 1996; see Hardgrove (2004: Chapter 2).

5. <http://mgrroop.blogspot.com/2007/10/mgr-temple.html> (accessed August 11, 2009).

6. <http://movies.indiainfo.com/features/amit-temple.html> (accessed August 12, 2009).

7. Another major factor is the state. Baumann (1996, 1998) demonstrates this in some detail in his ethnography of Southall, West London, where he argues that the localized actions of the state not only enabled religious groups to prosper in the context of local politics, but actively operated to institutionalize such groups as “quasi-corporate communities” representing ethnic difference (see also Knott 1986, 1987; Samad 1987 for similar work on different urban localities in the UK). The idea of religious community is of course deeply institutionalized in the Indian state as well, partly as a legacy of colonial preoccupations. Hansen (2004), for example, explores the tendency to construct and practice post-colonial politics in Mumbai through the lens of community interest, either in terms of religion or caste.

8. “Congregation” is increasingly a critical term in the discussion of diasporic temple community formation: Bauman and Saunders (2009); Coward, Hinnells, and Williams (2000); Narayanan (2006); Nye (2001); and Vertovec (2000).

9. Thanks to Ritu Khanduri whose comments on flash mobs encouraged us to think along these lines.

10. Vasudha Narayanan, personal communication.

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