ADAPTATIONS TO MODERNITY: RECENT TRENDS IN SURINAMESE HINDUISM

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The East Indians who migrated to the West, did their best to preserve their cultural heritage, but while moving along with time, they allowed minor adjustments as the new situation and conditions demanded. Initially there were adaptations dictated by migration, such as the acceptance of (Christian) burials instead of (Hindu) cremations, and so on. Later on, the immigrants freely allowed further adaptations as suited them. This paper focuses on the latter development in Surinamese Hinduism and tries to explain what motivated those adaptations to modernity. To illustrate this phenomenon, the traditional Hindu service (i.e. *SatyanârâyaGa pûjâ*) is studied closely, and the reasons why its fundamental "story" (*kathâ*) has been substituted by a more 'modern' narrative is examined.

Tradition and Modernity

Hinduism is traditionally paraphrased as Sanâtana Dharma, i.e. the 'Eternal Religion or Law.' This description, however, is problematic as it suggests that Hinduism is monolithic and unchanging. This may partly be true, but on the other hand Hinduism is also characterized by diversity and change, and may therefore better be described by the dual notion of 'continuity and change'[1] David Smith illustrates this idea with the metaphor of the ancient Indian chariot of Lord Jagannath (Krishna) representing tradition that moves slowly, but steady when pulled by hundreds of devotees during processions. Its counterpart, the Juggernaut lorry, is the epitome of modernity, which moves very fast due to its state of the arts technology. Notably, none of them can be stopped easily, because of their mass and speed, due to which they sometime may clash with one another, but more often move along quite peacefully.[2] The continuation of Indian traditions can thus only properly be understood in the light of its continuous adaptation to a chain of developments in the areas of ritualism, philosophy, religion, culture, and so on.

It is no overstatement to assume that the moment Hindus left their villages in India and began their journey to overseas destinations their cultural heritage was exposed to numerous situations that would ultimately also alter their religion in one way or the other. The migration to the Caribbean also exposed the main Indian religions to a new region, a multi-ethnical and multi-cultural environment. Notable is the dynamics in which fashion things developed in the new situation, for example, on the institutional level: minor Hindu and Muslim organizations from India such as the Arya Samaj and Ahmadiya movements, which played practically no role in

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the Indian context, have become sizable factors in the Diaspora, numerically, politically and religiously.

In the new destination countries the local conditions would determine their future as distinct religious movements. Apart from e.g. the grade of religious freedom or the counteraction from the Christian mission, there were important factors such as the local legal system that would obstruct the profession and practice of one's religious customs. Notable was the struggle for the recognition of Hindu marriage and cremation.

In the following paragraphs we will survey some of the possible areas where the effects of modernity on Hinduism are evident in the Caribbean, especially Surinam, usually discussed against the background of the Indian situation.[3] Even though the situation and conditions in the Caribbean are different from that in India, a comparison with India is often worth the effort since modern trends there often seem to parallel, or at least foreshadow, certain developments overseas as occurs from some of the discussions below.

Reduction in the Number of Rites

The ancient Vedic rites and sacrifices as described in Vedic literature such as Soma, Agnicayana, Agnihotra, Aœvamedha, etc.,[4] have virtually disappeared or, at the most, been reduced to their rudimentary forms. In contemporary India, the number of Hindus who regularly perform the lengthy and sometimes complicated rites prescribed by the *dharmaúâstra*s is also decreasing. From the series of about sixteen purificatory rites (*saskâra*), mainly the 'first tonsure', the 'investiture of the Holy Cord', 'marriage' and 'cremation rites' are now performed, and even then often in a modern abridged or changed form – at least in educated sections of urban areas.[5] In this regard, the situation in the Caribbean is almost the same. A notable remnant from ancient times is the so-called *jag* (*yajña*), a long and expensive form of ritual that could last for seven, nine, eleven or even fourteen days.[6] A popular form has been the *Bhâgvad*.

However, the most important and popular form of ritual that has survived in the entire (orthodox) Hindu world, is the common and standardized *pûjâ*. The term *pûjâ* is used to denote a ritual worship of an idol (*mûrti, pratimâ*) or an aniconic form of a deity.[7] *Pûjâ* appears in different forms; apart from the daily domestic worship, there are also elaborate standardized types (*vidhipûrvikâ pûjâ*s)[8] and simple or abridged forms. *Pûjâ* is also incorporated in most of the important rites such as the *saskâra, úrâddha* and *smârta jag*s.

Reduction in Length of Rites

Apart from the fact that the rituals and duties enjoined by the texts, are too numerous and complicated, many are too long and expensive such as the *jag*, wedding and cremation. As a result of the pressure of modern life style, only few can spare the

time and money that is required for such performances. In order to be able to fulfill one's religious duties, these rituals had to be reduced to acceptable proportions. In Surinam the debate goes on whether or not to interfere in the rules laid down by tradition for, e.g. Hindu cremation.[9]

Proliferation of New Movements

It is obviously due to some sort of dissatisfaction with certain rules, practices or structures within orthodox Hinduism[10] itself that gave rise to numerous new religious or spiritual movements in Surinam and the entire Caribbean. From the 1960s onwards, we see the gradual appearance of, e.g. the Gayatri Parivar, Sai Baba movement, ISCKON, Brahma Kumari's, TM, Art of Living, etc. Notably, the new groups did can hardly be considered as breaking with or falling outside the fold of Sanâtana Dharma, as they only 'bend' certain rules[11] that lay in their ways only to accommodate themselves better in that tradition. Would their 'schism' have been radically incompatible with the mainstream tradition of Sanâtana Dharma, one would expect them rather join hands with the 'heterodox' Arya Samaj or for that matter even with Christianity or Islam.

This 'emancipation' from the conservatism of the Sanâtana Dharma may be understood as a natural reaction against the opposite development of domination or 'Brahmanization' that took place during the first half of the twentieth century when the Brahmins established their hegemony and ritual grip on the community by pulling all specializations in the field of sacrifice, cremation, sermon, service, astrology, medicine, sorcery, witchcraft, and so on, to themselves.[12]

Obviously the same resentment mentioned above, pushed certain sections of the Sanâtana Dharma away from the traditional liturgical and ritualistic services, towards *bhakti*,[13] a more devotional form of Hinduism involving the singing of devotional songs (*bhajana*), chanting (*kîrtana*), recitation (*japa*), meditation (*dhyâna/yoga*), spiritual meetings (*satsaga*), and so on.[14] The inclination towards these forms of devotionalism was obviously the same as in India as they also seem to promise the devotees easy results with the least possible effort since no tiresome study, ritual or asceticism is required for achieving those results.[15]

In line with these developments is also the growing tendency towards vegetarianism (see further, Elizabeth den Boer, 2006, p. 31).

Increase of Rites and Festivals

Due to globalization (through mass media, study and tourism) the contacts with India and Indian spiritual leaders intensified and created in the Diaspora more awareness of one's rich cultural heritage. The ensuing process of Indianization or say 'Sankritization' initiated a reassessment of one's cultural heritage, leading to a reintroduction of certain religious trends in Suriname such as 'ritual bathing in the Ganges' (*GaEgâ-nahân*, *Mahâ Kumbha Melâ*), the 'worship of a *ShivaliEga* made-

of-sand' (*Pârthîva-ShivaliEga-pûjâ*), and so on. Also a number of spiritual centers (*âúrama*) and pilgrimage places (*tîrtha*) have been established at Weg naar Zee (*Rameshwar dham*), Kameelbrug, Uitkijk, Domburg, Zeedijk (*GaEgâ Nahân Ghâm*), etc.

Adaptation of Content

Thus far studies of Caribbean Hinduism have been limited to the aforementioned three areas, as none have probed into the existing rituals, searching for interesting developments. In the following paragraphs I do that into one of the most important rituals of modern Hinduism, *viz.* the SatyanârâyaGa pûjâ. In Surinam it is evidently even more popular than in India because, as De Klerk (1951, p.71) explains, the Surinamese priests consider it equal to many holy pilgrimages (*tîrtha*), of which there are many in India, but not in Surinam.

Pûjâ-s are traditionally divided into three categories: daily (*nitya*), occasional (*naimittika*) and optional (*kâmya*). The SatyanârâyaGa is an occasional *pûjâ*, which means that it is performed when a special occasion arises, often observed regularly according to the family tradition or temple tradition.[16]

The decision to perform a SatyanârâyaGa (pûjâ) is often preceded by a solemn vow (*vrata*), *viz.* to carry out certain obligations with a view to achieve divine blessing for fulfilling one or several desires. So the SatyanârâyaGa[17] is carried out with a particular result in mind. It comprises of three parts: worship (*pûjâ*), a fire offering (*havan/homa*) and an edifying story (*kathâ*). The worship (*pûjâ*) usually ends with the narration of a *kathâ*, i.e. a story connected with the *vrata*, which is read aloud. These stories follow a well-designed patter: after narrating the origin or revelation of the *vrata/pûjâ* by a seer or a deity and its first performance, it states the rewards which are gained by its performance. The implied logic is that 'by listening to them the devotee takes part in the events of by-gone times and induces the power which effected beneficial results formerly to do the same for him now.'[18]

In India three such *vrata/pûjâ* and corresponding stories are very popular: the SatyanârâyaGa, Zcipañcamî and the Anantacaturdaûî.[19] The story of SatyanârâyaGa, as preserved in the Bhavicya PurâGa (3.2, p.24-29) and the Skanda PurâGa (5.233, p.1-236), consists of five chapters (or even seven in some other sources):

1. Introduction: NârâyaGa (= VicGu) narrates the *pûjâ* to Nârada.
2. Œaunaka and other seers in the Naimica forest ask Sûta whom to worship in the Kaliyuga as an easy means to achieve fulfillment of desires. Sûta narrates that once upon a time, Narada approached Lord NârâyaGa to seek help for human beings who are suffering badly in the world. The god reveals to him the SatyanârâyaGa observance: VicGu in the form of SatyanârâyaGa fulfils all desires in the present Kaliyuga. The fruits of the performance are wealth, offspring and fulfillment of whatever wish one

has in mind. [The procedure of the worship (*pûjâ*) that follows has been skipped here].

3. Story of the poor Brahmin. To the poor Brahmin Úatânanda VicGu manifests himself disguised as an old Brahmin and advises him to worship SatyanârâyaGa in order to get rid of his poverty. He then reveals his divine form to the Brahmin and tells him the procedure of the *pûjâ*.

4. Story of king Candracûâ. When king Candracûâ is conquered he flees to the woods. Once he goes to Kaûî where he finds SatyanârâyaGa being worshiped everywhere. He requests the priest Sadânanda [same as Úatânanda of the previous story?] to instruct him about him about this *pûjâ*.

5. Story of the wood-cutter. The seers inquired about the next person who performed the SatyanârâyaGa *vrata* after the poor Brahmin did so. Sûta reports: once when the poor Brahmin (of Ch. 1) performed the *pûjâ* a wood-cutter arrives. The Brahmin praises SatyanârâyaGa's *vrata*. The wood-cutter receives *prasâda* and returns home. He buys ripe bananas, sugar, ghee, milk, flour of wheat and performs the *pûjâ* together with his family. He becomes prosperous and after death goes to Vaikunmha, i.e. SatyanârâyaGa's abode in heaven.

6. Story of the merchant. King Cakracûâ performs SatyanârâyaGa *pûjâ* regularly. Once the merchant Lakcapati happens to see this worship and inquires about the performance. The merchant vows to worship SatyanârâyaGa in case a child is born to him. He gets a daughter Kalâvatî who marries ÇaEkhapati. Father and son-in-law forget to worship SatyanârâyaGa. Once during a business trip both are falsely accused for stealing in the palace of the kind and imprisoned. By chance the daughter happens to see SatyanârâyaGa *pûjâ* and later performs it in her house together with her mother. Thereby SatyanârâyaGa is satisfied and causes the men to be released. Both are allowed to return home, but they again forget to worship SatyanârâyaGa. Only when the latter reveals his divine form and reminds Lakcapati of his promise, the merchant repents and begs SatyanârâyaGa's pardon. On getting the news, Lilâvatî interrupts the *pûjâ* of SatyanârâyaGa in order to receive her husband. But because she forgets to eat the *prasâda* of the *pûjâ*, her husband's ship sinks. Everyone is in distress. SatyanârâyaGa's voice is heard from the sky ordering Kalâvatî to eat the *prasâda* which would enable her to meet her husband. From then onwards the family performs the SatyanârâyaGa *pûjâ* regularly, enjoys worldly pleasures and goes to heaven after death.

7. Story of king VaCoadhvaja. This king happens to meet a group of cowherds who worship SatyanârâyaGa. Out of pride he neither shows respect towards the deity who is being worshipped not accepts the *prasâda* which is offered

to him. Because of this guilt great misfortune befalls him. He repents, worships SatyanârâyaGa and thereby regains his loss.

Each chapter reconfirms a number of essentials which may be summarized as follows:

- Results: the fulfillment of one's wishes such as wealth, offspring and so on.
- Conditions: a devoted adherence to the deity has the desired effect and averts one from his wrath, punishment or disaster.
- Reparation: remorse shown to any form of disrespect towards the deity, results in mercy, blessings and restoration of losses.

This worship is presented primarily as an easy means to escape the horrors of Kaliyuga, which is characterized by poverty and suffering. Accordingly, it offers a practical means to fulfill all one's wishes.

The popularity of this 'promising' worship among the Indian immigrants needs no further explanation when one considers their common social economic background, which was often marked by prolonged deprivation and disaster. Listening to these kinds of stories, which promise to change their situation to the better, obviously mesmerized the audiences and filled their hearts with faith and devotion, obviously all strongly desiring to escape their individual situation.

The worship of Lord SatyanârâyaGa has been very popular in Surinam until a few decades ago; the *pûjâ* has remained, but notably, the story (*kathâ*) is often swapped by other stories, preferably by the immensely popular Geeta Patha 'recitation of the Geeta' or Bhagvad Katha 'the divine story of Lord Krishna'. The exact reason for this interesting development is not clear, but sweeping developments in the field of employment, economy and education during the 1970s and 80s, appear to have caused this important phenomenon. We may try to reconstruct this development as follows. One can say that after indentureship, the Surinamese Hindustanis, as the East-Indians there prefer to refer to themselves, benefited from the food shortages created by World War I and II. After the 1970s and 80s, poverty was almost wiped out among the Hindustanis; in comparison with other ethnic groups they may be called relatively independent, prosperous and well-off. In this regard, the SatyanârâyaGa kathâ, primarily designed to drive out poverty, by then had become meaningless and even boring to modern Hindus in general, who now live in splashy bungalows, drive expensive off-trail cars, and spend their leisure time liming and other activities. The traditional desire for children had also become outdated and meaningless.

Before beginning with the narrative (*kathâ*) after the worship (*pûjâ*), the priest usually asks the performer or host of the ritual which story he would like to hear. These days hardly anyone opts for the SatyanârâyaGa story.[20] So in due time, the traditional "story" was replaced by a more meaningful narrative, more palatable to the demands of modern tastes.

The developments discussed here, represent a good example of change and continuity, where nothing is compromised beyond what is allowed; tradition is maintained - only an old fashioned story has smoothly been substituted by a more up to date one that complies with the prevailing logical and philosophical standards of modern times.

Notes

1. See for example Gonda, J. (1965). *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*. London: Mouton & Co; Michaels, Axel (2004). *Hinduism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2. Smith, David. (2003). *Hinduism and Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

3. In this regard I draw on some of the points made by Bühnemann (1988: 93 ff.) and F. Bakker (2003: 58, 88-91).

4. Gonda, J. (1975). *Vedic literature* (Samhitas and Brahmanas); A history of Indian literature: I.1 Wiesbaden: Otto Harrossowitz.

5. Cf. Bühnemann 1988: 93.

6. See further F. Bakker 2003: 62 f.

7. Cf. Bühnemann 1988: 29.

8. Such as the *coaúopacâra*, the *pûjâ* with sixteen offerings or services such as *âcamana, devatâva-dâna, âvâhana*, etc.

9. A paper on the current discussion on the problem of reducing the cremation ceremonies in Surinam is forthcoming.

10. One may think here for example of the discrimination against women and the members of various castes.

11. Such as for example the outdated caste system, the discrimination of women, *karmavâda* instead of *janmavâda*, and so on.

12. Cf. Steven Vertovec 1991: 12.

13. This development seems to run parallel to similar developments in Indian cultural History where 'Hindu religions and religiosity changed within every new period … We can speak of a paradigm change that determines every successive epoch…' (A. Michaels 2004: 28). What is meant here is the gradual shift from a worldview dominated by ritual or action (*karma*) during the Vedic period (ca. 1750 BCE – 1000 BCE) to one dominated by knowledge (*jñâna*) from the late-Vedic period onward (ca. 1000 BCE), and finally a radical departure from both views to one of predominantly devotion (*bhakti*) from the Late Age of Classical Hinduism onward (650 CE).

14. Bühnemann (1988: 95 ff.) indicates that in India still various efforts were made to adopt the rituals to the requirements of modern life, such as for example, the publication of a number of 'do-it-yourself' manuals enabling individuals to perform their own *pûjâ* without the guidance and supervision of a priest; the introduction of congregational worship, and so on. Notable were the booklets on 'Upanayana' (to which girls are also considered entitled), 'Vidhavâ-punarvivâha' (remarriage for widows) and 'HindûkaraGa' (conversion to Hinduism).

15. See further A. Michaels 2004: 252 ff.

16. Cf. Bühnemann 1988: 183.

17. Bühnemann (1988: 200 f., n. 64) explains the name as meaning 'the unfailing NârâyaGa (= VicGu) who always meets the expectations of his worshippers' and 'NârâyaGa who is identical with the ultimate truth (*satya*)'.

18. *Ibid*. pp. 185 and 196.

19. For their summaries, see Bühnemann 1988: 202-221 and n. 72. De Klerk (1951: 62-describes only the SatyanârâyaGa kathâ.

20. From a group of about two to three hundred 'clients' of my priest-informant, only three opt for the SatyanârâyaGa story.

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