



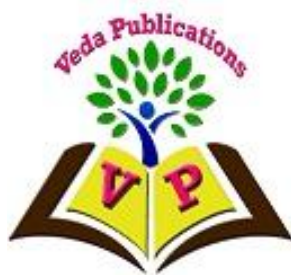
BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH RELIGIOUS RITUALISM: A STUDY OF INDIAN HINDU DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT



Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, is a highly innovative, complex novel which explores man's eternal quest for liberty. This is a quest for liberty which is sprouted from the inside of the human heart. It deals with partition, border issues and immigration. The novel also focuses on various aspects of independence and liberty. Having won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, *The Shadow Lines* is a critical perspective on time, liberty and history, which are closely connected to the postmodern thought.

Keywords: *Globalization, Diaspora, India, Transnationalism, Religious discourses.*

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Diaspora occupies spaces of liminality and struggles to forge identities in a new land all the while finding comfort in hybridities. We are at a moment in history where we come across generations of diaspora population and the experience of each generation is no longer easy to categorise. Globalization and trends of transnationalism complicates these further. Transnational flows across nations have redefined diasporic experiences. Virtual world adds on to the already complex network of social interactions. Indian diaspora population is an influential one both in their homeland and host land. They actively intervene in major policy decisions and are a force to reckon with. Globalization has increased manifold the diaspora's presence in their homeland in multifarious ways. Their contribution to the Indian economy in the form of foreign remittances strengthens their position. They voice their opinions in major discourses in their home land due to their enterprising nature and governments have increasingly acknowledged the strong presence of this community in major policy decisions in the country. They seem capable of asserting their identity in their host land through large scale intrusions into the host country's political, economical and cultural milieu.

Indian diaspora across the world experience the pangs of separation from their home land and confront complex socio-cultural adjustments that challenge their identity. Yet they acclimatise themselves and seek refuge in nostalgic memories of their homelands and endeavour to recreate their national identity through various processes like bonding with fellow immigrants, setting up religious groups of an informal nature, celebrating festivals as a community event and so on. The Hindu community in the US occupies a prominent position among the Indian diaspora across the world, for their progress and prosperity in their host country. According to the Pew Research Center's "Religious Landscape Study", Hinduism is the fourth largest faith in US. The number has increased to 2.23 million since 2007 and the Hindus have grown to 0.7% of the total population since 2007. The study also cited the economic and educational advancements made by the community. Though the report has been

criticised for overlooking the marginalized section of the community, it reveals the immense growth the community has attained as a diaspora population not only in population growth but also in socio-economical standards. (IANS) "Hinduism has become increasingly established in the U.S. through a series of encounters over the past 150 years. These encounters are emblematic of Americans' increasing familiarity with Indian, and Asian, traditions; of contact between Americans and Indian immigrants, and of relationships among cultural traditions in a society that is self-consciously pluralistic", Prentiss wrote in the essay published under *The Pluralism Project under Harvard University*.

While the term 'faith' is a far more complex term which identifies itself in several contexts, religion is to be understood in a much restricted framework. In Hinduism, religious faith happens not at the rational level, but at a deeply spiritual level and can be attained in different ways, all as personal experiences. Faith is understood as the key that holds the power to unlock the mysteries of life. While faith remains at a personal space, religion moves on to the public social space and becomes one of the major institutions, with the power to transform the social structure.

Hinduism is to be understood not as a religion but as a way of life, purely metaphysical in its essence. It does not ascribe divisions but rather has its foundations on spirituality. It has within itself the ability to renew and reaffirm without any conscious revivalist activities. But this concept does not seem to go well with the concept of nation and national identity. The Dharma based on the Vedas prescribed the laws of life for the Hindu. But colonial notions of nationhood changed these concepts and later national spirit was often identified with Hinduism by several of the leaders of Indian independence. Religion which was strictly part of the personal life began to infiltrate into the world of politics and Minto-Morley Reforms Act of 1909 institutionalized it by establishing separate Hindu and Muslim electorates. Religion was relegated to the sidelines after independence till the beginnings of globalization in 1990s when religious identity emerged as a force to reckon with in Indian social structure. Religion is used in identity reconstruction



in this era of multiculturalism and globalizing processes. The heterogeneity of transnational experiences forces people to an identity quest which imposes upon them homogenous and exclusionist versions of religions. It thrives on the binaries of self and other.

India as a nation is a social construct build upon several identity markers and symbols and culture codes. Icons are constructed which anchor people's feeling of a common national identity. Forging of a national identity happens in order to maintain the territorial integrity of the nation and helps keep the people together. National consciousness and national culture are inseparable and therefore the power elite manipulate cultural identity in order to maintain their hegemony. With the process of globalization sweeping over the world, major changes in the construction of identity in the Indian context also happened along with several key structural changes in the social system. National identities seem to be under threat from the global communication and media network as well as the economic activities that transcends national borders. The world has emerged as a transnational one with a plurality of identities and transcultural processes being the regular pattern of social life.

Transnationality is usually taken to have something to do with: the cultural and economic flows of globalisation, the erosion of the nation state, a 'borderless world', de-territorialisation, debates about whether we live in a 'global village' or are witness to ever more sophisticated forms of 'global pillage'. Trans denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something ... (it) also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism. (Leon Hunt 3)

Indian diaspora is considered the second largest with over twenty million people and since 1990s, globalizing trends have forced the Government to maintain better relationship with this social group. Influence of the communication

technology and time-space compression has resulted in better relationship with the homeland. Indian diaspora is governed by multiple discourses that operate within frameworks and a strong one among them being religion. It is not a uniform one but is fragmented with Hindu population in the majority. Since the media plays a major role in forging identities and films being a very popular medium for the diaspora we see the influence of mainstream cinema which often creates culture stereotypes where Indianness is identified as being a Hindu.

Ninan Smart observed three basic reasons regarding the need to comprehend the connection between religion and diaspora. First is that diasporic community helps us gain some insights into the patterns that are transforming religion. Moreover, diaspora with its wealth and exposure to the world at large can play a significant role in the development of religion in the homeland. Religious affiliations also help in building the diasporic consciousness. Complexities and permutations often characterize the processes that influence religious practices in the diaspora. They are often altered to fit in with the changed circumstances and sometimes to accommodate the second and third generation diaspora population. Imagined spaces are created through these ritualistic practices. Religious and cultural identity helps a diasporic community to cope with the stress of adjustment in the host land. Affiliations with religious associations ensure enhanced social participation and group dynamics and it also helps the individual find his place in the diasporic community. If the situation of the first generation diaspora was one of finding an identity of its own in a foreign land, the second generation diaspora finds itself in another dilemma. In order to link them to their homeland, it becomes imperative that they maintain their identity as an Indian. This is done with the help of religious rituals and traditions and several steps are taken in this regard.

Diaspora often recognizes the hybrid nature, the multiple identities and affiliations they have as part of their social identity. Being deterritorialized, they share a strong ethnic group consciousness based on their uniqueness, a common history and a shared fate. As Robert Cohen points out, there is a 'triadic' relationship that involves its self-identified identity,



its shared destiny with similar groups and its relations with their homeland. Diasporic communities are very sensitive to the socio-political and economic discourses both in their home and host countries. This is true of their religions as well.

The diasporic communities living abroad try to overcome the pangs of dislocation and stigmatization with the help of religion. Such affiliations connect them to their homeland and help them imagine that their national identity is preserved intact. But these sentiments are often exploited by religious groups who thrive on the finances raised from among a diasporic community that seeks to maintain its identity through religious rituals and celebrations. In the transnational context, religion finds itself establishing a concrete space for itself. With its visual, linguistic and musical traditions, religion gains in stature and religious identity becomes almost synonymous with national identity. With the spacio-temporal distances getting reduced with advancements in technology, the diaspora is constantly in touch with the homeland and the dynamics of power relations in social discourses as well. Religious organizations with an agenda of their own exploit this character of the diaspora to their advantage.

Benedict Anderson defined the allegiance shared by the immigrant communities as 'long distance nationalism' (74). It stems from the nostalgic remembrance of their homeland and serves to bind the immigrant community. This sense of community and the patriotic fervour shared by them is strikingly visible in host lands which are multicultural in character. Multiculturalism in North America bolstered the spirit of nationalism to strengthen within the diaspora communities. This also helped Indians since they gained the right to register themselves as occupying minority status in the country. Sucheta Mazumdar opined thus: "Once included as minorities under the rubric of Asian-Americans, they have been able to take advantage of the new legislation..." (241). This also encouraged the Hindus to set up several temples in keeping with "increase in overt religiosity in American public life" (Mazumdar 242). Temples were initially spaces for ritualistic worship when they started sprouting up in 1970s. According to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad

website, there are over 400 temples in various parts of US at present. They symbolically represent a cultural homogeneity for an immigrant community in a multicultural nation. The massive structures that host these sacred spaces instil a sense of pride that often translates as a nationalist and patriotic sentiment.

The growing presence of religious ideologies and the extent to which they permeate Hindu communities is visible in the enormity and opulence of the temples built in these countries. Temple tourism is also encouraged with conducted tours organized for devotees. Temples within the host countries act as identity markers and visits to these spaces transports the immigrant to his homeland and the boundaries around these temples segregate these imaginary yet real spaces from the host country. Such spaces are not restricted to geographically defined spaces, they spread across the virtual space as well. Appadurai observes in his work *Modernity at Large*:

"Religions that were in the past resolutely national now pursue global missions and diasporic clienteles with vigor: the global Hinduism of the past decade is the single best example in this process. Major transnational separatist movements,... conduct their self-imagining in sites throughout the world... . Diasporic public spheres ... are the crucibles of a postnational political order. The engines of their discourse are mass media". (22)

The presence of websites on Hinduism, maintained and extensively used by the diaspora reflects the active involvement of this community in religious organizations and propagandist methods. According to Vinay Lal, Hinduism, decentralized and polymorphous by nature, found a natural medium of expression in the internet (249-450). In a paradoxical manner, attempts are made over social media and the internet to centralise the activities of Hindu organizations. Websites like www.hinduexistence.org, www.wordhindunews.com, www.hinduwebsite.com, www.usatemple.com



are just a few of them. There are also several pages and groups on the social media like www.facebook.com/westernhindu that facilitate discussions on Hinduism and connects Hindus across the host land.

“Online Hindu nationalism provides a particularly pertinent case-study to assess the relationships between migration, technology and transnationalism. It showcases the particular sociology of mobile Hindu nationalist elite and provides a starting example of how an existing offline network is translated online. Moreover, it sheds new light on the articulation of a global movement’s universalist ambitions and a brand of nationalism,...” (Therwath p 4).

In Hindu diaspora communities, caste hierarchies still exist but fail to exert their influence effectively. What is left in a foreign land is a staunch loyalty to the religious ideologies largely propagated through easily available popular media. Television serials that portray radical Hindu ideological discourses are a major source in this context. These ideologies permeate the Indian sensibility and soon get manifested in rituals disguised as bricolage. So sacred fire places, where fire cannot be lit, are arranged in halls, that are filled with smoke detectors. Temporarily constructed gods and goddesses are prayerfully organized at wedding ceremonies. Marriage rituals and other initiation ceremonies are faithfully performed with a priest to officiate and offer blessings. Any hegemonic intervention at this level of religious ritualism soon shifts towards a rigidly structured right wing ideology or a sympathetic understanding of Hindu fundamentalism. Acculturation processes and identification with the Hindu community are given priority in the case of children. Tradition and Hindu values are carefully taught to them. Centres like Balavihar initiated by Vishwa Hindu Parishad teach religion and culture to the children who represent the second or third generation of immigrants.

Transnational flows across geographical spaces have transformed the identity of religious denominations and they utilize this to their advantage. Hinduism of the times assists in

assimilating a community that strives to establish a cultural identity that has been challenged by deterritorialization. Religion with its fantastical claims and an ideological framework consolidated over a long period of time succeeds while nations fail. Diasporic condition accentuates the importance of religious identity. The process of migration makes it more meaningful which translates into a passion to adhere to rituals and practices which are felt deep. Ceremonies begin with marriage, child birth and every other initiation ceremony. Religion acts as an emotional anchor when confronted with insecurities and alienation associated with migration. It acts as a core that creates and binds communities around these sacred spaces. When it comes to acculturation of the next generation, religion often gets equated with culture and tradition. Religion is internalised as a force against homogenising forces of globalization.

A paradigmatic shift from a socialistic pattern of development to a neo-liberal and capitalistic growth pattern initiated several changes in the perceptions of nationalism. Presence of a political Hinduism accelerated this shift. The polarisation that happened after the Babri Masjid demolition and the Kargil war had its repercussions in the diaspora community as well. Bridges of nostalgia for the homeland also permitted the discourses on Hindutva to traverse into the diaspora community. This acted as a catalyst to Hindu radical thinking in the homeland since the diaspora community could provide assistance in the form of capital for the propagation of this ideology. The nationalist fervour shared by the community gets manifested as right wing propaganda and this gets manifested in the flashy reception and huge contributions in the form of money during the visits of political leaders. Nationhood gets redefined in this context of transnational nationalism that foregrounds religious affinities.

Diaspora around the world is steeped in ideological discourses and its identity shapes and reshapes itself in this age of transnationalism and cross-cultural flows. This state of fluidity brings to play several forces that interact with one another and this play of power is clearly visible in the case of Indian Hindu diaspora. Diaspora, in this globalized society is no longer the rootless alienated community



tormented by the angst of being deterritorialized. They are as James Clifford argues, “mediating cultures”(308). The term carries an element of political identification, with their increased influence in their homelands and host lands made possible through new channels of communication, economic transactions and physical mobility. Hindu diaspora identifies itself with their religious identity at a deeper level since globalization seemingly pulls apart several traditional systems of thought nostalgically remembered by the diaspora. The homogenising forces of modernity leave religion and ritualistic traditions untouched due to their sacrosanct nature. Diaspora thus attempts a revival of their ritualistic religion in the form of pujas, pilgrimages and huge donations to the religious organizations.

Globalization of Hinduism as a religion with ambitious goals and an extremist fundamentalist ideological agenda is visible in the expansion among the diaspora population. Once hailed as a tolerant and peaceful community, Hinduism has emerged as an aggressive and assertive community under the leadership of leaders of extreme right wing political parties. Hindu diaspora that enjoys economic and political privileges are positioned comfortably and a mutually sustainable relationship is built among this diaspora group and the Hindu fundamentalist groups from the home land. Hindu radicals promise a land of nostalgia, a territory steeped in the mythical traditions, and builds upon the national spirit. A locally realized dream founded on Hindu ideology that foregrounds universal principles. These are new transnational practices of nationalistic discourses which satisfies the immediate needs through rituals and magnificent spaces allotted for them. They are encouraged by cartographies built by Hindu radicals who gain through the enormous financial aid that flows from the immigrant population. A version of transnational Hinduism pervades the diaspora community, offering bridges built of ritualism and fundamentalism, and it thrives in this age, exploiting the immense potential of the mass media and the internet, and often proving detrimental to humanistic values of tolerance and compassion.

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