'Let us Live as Hindus': Narrating Hindu Identity Through Temple Building Processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost (1988-2015)

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CHAPTER 5: MEDIATISED NARRATIVE REGISTERS DURING THE DD CLOSING (2010-PRESENT)

I now turn to a small yet significant collection of print and visual media that covered the closing of the DD temple in 2010 and the aftermath of losing the temporary temple space. In order to further nuance the narrative of Hindu hurt, it is important to include media actors into the construction of Hindu identity and templeisation in Amsterdam Zuidoost because media actors from outside and inside the community perpetuate what I have already noted as the commodification of victimisation. Here, the strategy of Hindu hurt is, (perhaps unwittingly) perpetuated by media actors outside of the community who focus on powerful visual constructions of vulnerability. While the coverage was not extensive, key pieces in print media highlight the suffering of community members, without a place to worship, betrayed by their own temple board. The construction of a media narrative of victimisation marks a shift from the correspondence laid out by the temple board actors after 2010. I suggest here that these articles, in their focus on the victimisation of the community, develop a narrative register of Hindu hurt that constructs a symbolic boundary between the community as 'the Hindus', on the one hand and 'the temple board', as a group of Hindu individuals that have acted against the interest of their community, on the other. It also introduces the narrative register of betrayal from within the community, complicating the temple board actors' narrative registers that projected the temple building issue as a conflict between an innocent community and a corrupt government.

The crucial role that media play in the formation of group identities of various scales has been well established. In his seminal study of national communities, Anderson (1983) attributes the growth of print capitalism and the circulation of print media as a key factor in sustaining a sense of national community (37-46). In a similar vein, Appadurai's (1991) vision of globalisation connects mediascapes and ideoscapes, where the former is defined as both the distribution and capabilities to disseminate media in myriad forms and the images that those media construct (35). Ideoscapes are also tied to the production of images that correspond to political and ideological narratives as well as to categories such as rights, freedom, representation and democracy (36). Appadurai's framework has been mobilised by scholars of diaspora studies and transnationalism, who have studied how mediatised images of various identities and events have played a crucial role in meaning-making and identity formation in diaspora communities (Desai 2004, Verstappen 2005, Gowricharn 2009). In the Hindu diaspora specifically, media has been increasingly important in the dissemination of Hindutva discourse that is made locally relevant. Diaspora based media outlets such as *Asian Voice* in the UK (cf. Zavos 2012b, 2008) and *Hinduism Today,* based in the United States (Kurien 2007), remain dedicated to discussions of Hindu issues that circulate across diaspora contexts today.

As Alexander (2006) argues, mass media and public opinion are responsible for presenting and influencing social relationships: 'The media of mass communications—radio, television, newspapers, the Internet, magazines, best-selling books, and movies—constitute one fundamentally significant articulation of the imagined and idealized civil domain' (75). The role of mass media is then to sustain and construct events that constitute social reality, by assessing actions as moral or immoral (81). Similarly Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997) note that media actors wield much power in the perpetuation of social suffering—choosing which images and voices represent suffering, and which do not (xiii).

Kleinman and Kleinman (1997) also note the troubling aspects of mediatised suffering, particularly the ways in which suffering is not only commodified, but 'universalised' to elicit everything from donations to empathy with 'the victim' (2). I suggest that this kind of mediatised suffering, where images attempt to create a universally acknowledgeable image of suffering is in itself an affective strategy.

The collection of media articles and televisual footage that covered the closure present themselves to a public that is both inside and outside of the Hindu community. There is certainly overlap; one cannot assume that tuning in to Hindu Media Organisation television programmes means ignoring national print media like NRC and Trouw. In the way that these media pieces are put together, it is apparent that the reader is taken to be a Dutch citizen, and that the issue of public spaces of worship symbolises something greater than building a temple. It is a symbol of integration that goes beyond the religious obligation of minority communities (Sunier 1996, 2009) and symbolises recognition and belonging in Dutch society as a religious minority.

In the days leading up to and including the closing of the DD temple, the media began to put a sharper focus on the role that temple board actors played, especially as the local government reiterated that funds were not paid to them on time. The construction of a symbolic boundary between the besuur and the 'community' continued throughout news coverage.

By failing to submit money and plans on time through the proper channels, the temple board has misled and disappointed the community who must now search for a new place to go without money or proper leadership. Honesty therefore becomes an important category that determines the moral boundary between the temple board and the community (Lamont 1992, 24). In these two articles, the temple board is painted as misleading the community about receiving their funds, and to have 'endlessly' delayed submitting their plans for a new temple to the local district government.

Crying Mothers: Corpothetic Constructions of a Suffering Community

Pinpointing a specific, vulnerable 'victim' on which controversies or protests can centre is a critical feature not only of the mediatised circulation of social suffering, but also of Hindu

campaign mentality. A visible and vulnerable victim can easily translate Hindu hurt across wider societal groups. For example, in the case of the Skanda Vale controversy, the innocent bull, Shambo, was carefully projected by members of the community as the victim of unfair policies that infringe on the rights of animals (Warrier 2010, 263-4).

One such image that has been particularly successful is the use of the image of the 'crying elderly woman'. There is a rich link to the to deeply-rooted history of the violation of motherhood as an Indian national-cultural trope (Sarkar and Butalia 1995, Basu 1996, Ramaswamy 2010, Pinney 2004), and of Hindu women as protectors and brokers of culture and religion, both in India and in the diaspora (Hancock 1999, Kurien 2007, 138 Prashad 2000, 130). Much like nationalist symbols of mother India being raped and abused by colonisers, foreigners, Marxists and 'others' (Smith 2003,184) helped to visualise nationalist sentiment, the vulnerability of women became a key mediatised symbol circulated by both Hindu and non-Hindu media actors.

Pinney (2004) argues that such powerful visual images should be understood as 'corpothetic'—embodied and corporeal (8) rather than disinterested 'aesthetic' representations (*ibid*, see also Meyer 2009, Meyer and Verrips 2008, Werbner and Fumanti 2013). Pinney (2004) has noted that in a corpothetic understanding of Hindu visuality, there is a 'desire to fuse image and beholder' (194) so that the distinction between seer/seen, or subject/object disappear. This approach to visuality that stresses its connection to affective experiences and bodily expressions is not unlike Merleau-Ponty's 'double sensation' (Pinney 2004, 194, Merleau-Ponty 1964, 231), Meyer and Verrip's (2012) re-theorisation of *aesthesis* as embodied and multisensorial experience, or Werbner and Fumanti's (2013) aesthetics of diaspora.

As Khanduri (2012) and Pinney (2004) argue, the idea of the corpothetic is inextricably tied to Hindu visuality as *darśan,* or divine sight. Building upon Eck's (1998 [1992]) seminal study of *darśan* as a mode of seeing-and-being-seen by the deity, Pinney (2004) argues that seeing is interactive and brings both deity and seer into contact (9) and Eck (1998) notes that seeing is in fact a form of touching and knowing in the Hindu context (9).

The corpothetic power of the image of the crying mother is a particularly important aspect of the way that the evacuation of the temporary temple space continues to be narrated by Hindu and non-Hindu media actors. The cross-culturally significant visualisation of victimisation is what McFarlane (2004) calls 'diaspora visuality', a process wherein 'grafting and juxtaposing of multiple modes of visuality…reflect upon…another' (177). This is demonstrated as both non-Hindu and Hindu media actors use the image of the crying mother to symbolise the vulnerability of the Hindu community: while Hindu actors may associate this with the larger corpothetic

tradition of visualising hurt through the image of the mother, it is also more universally a symbol of frailty and vulnerability.

On the official day of the closing of Devi Dhaam, national and local journalists were there to document the move and the community's reaction. An article was featured in the national newspaper NRC:

'*A woman sits in front of the image of the goddess, crying uncontrollably. She is inconsolable; Today her Amsterdam Hindu temple* [must be] *cleared out by order of the court. …Movers and devotees carry furniture outside…The Hindus are now without a temple. It is difficult to know how it got this far. For fourteen years, the Hindus in the district have been talking about a new temple location. The local district government has waited endlessly for plans from the temple board…The outrage is great…" '* (NRC, 23 April 2010)

Here, the article is framed in narratives of emotion—outrage, tears and loss. When I spoke to a young female journalist named Saar who had written about the DD community many times before for another national newspaper, it became clear that she communicated the seriousness of the situation by focusing on what she calls the 'sad story' of a community losing its place of worship. For Saar, her coverage was on the one hand a way to gain greater insight into the conflict between local government actors and the DD community, but it was also to narrate the story of a community that had 'suffered trauma'. According to her, the story had as much appeal as it would if it was a Christian community evacuating a church or a Jewish community evacuating a synagogue because it was so intimately and affectively felt, lived and discussed by the community members with whom she spoke. She told me that the story itself was important for her to cover because she felt that it had 'universal appeal'. The idea of 'old women' being taken out of churches would jar any 'Dutch citizen', she explained, and felt that the experience of the Hindu community would be sympathetically received by the greater Dutch public. She felt that 'this is not just a Hindu issue, but an issue of religion freedom', and hoped to reach a wide, non-Hindu audience with her coverage.

The most significant Hindu media actor in the Netherlands is the Organisation of Hindu Media (OHM)[67]. OHM's mission is to highlight stories related to Hindu philosophy and religion as

[67] In 1993, the Foundation for the Organisation of Hindu Media was founded. It broadcasts on the public broadcasting service NPO, under the media law (*mediawet*) that allows faith-based programming to air. The development of OHM is again a consequence of the continued legacy of pillarisation: interfaith groups were encouraged to broadcast on Dutch TV with the idea that multi-faith television would serve to integrate various minority religious groups into Dutch society (OHM n.d.,).

well as to represent the Hindu community in Dutch society (OHM, n.d.). The viewership of OHM programmes is overwhelmingly Hindu.

In the same way that national print-media coverage began with the image of the 'crying mother, OHM's footage begins with a clip of two older women, one consoling another, as they choked back tears during moving day at the temporary DD space.

It is also significant that the OHM coverage of the closure specifically centered on the narratives of women. Two middle-aged women were prominently featured in the coverage, the first one saying:

'This is a scandal. It's terrible. How can they do something like this? It is just inhuman…I have no words [for it]*'* (OHM May 2 2010)

Directly afterwards, another woman was interviewed:

'*I cannot miss it* [this temple]…*It is everything in my life…Not only me, so many other visitors have the same need.'* (OHM May 2 2010)

The OHM coverage made use not only of the corpothetics of the crying mother, but also reinstates the role of woman-as-cultural-purveyor (cf. Hancock 1999, 39-74) by foregrounding women's voices in the coverage. The OHM therefore reaffirms a gendered, corpothetic strategy to visualise the community's suffering that was also circulated by Non-Hindu media actors.

Alongside official media coverage, a few 'grey' (Knott 2009, 90) media outlets also covered the closure. A single Youtube video was uploaded[68] shortly after the closing, under the title 'Closing of Devi Dhaam Temple by the Government Grandmother Cries', shows an elderly woman crying uncontrollably on the floor in front of the deities, while two middle aged women comfort her as she tries to speak through her sobs. After two minutes of sobbing, she stands up reluctantly and gives her blessing to all of the deities. As the camera turns towards her, she breaks down and sobs again, with her hands in prayer position (Hindugroup 2010).

The corpothetics of the crying mother resonate strongly among those who experienced temple space's closure. The narratives that my respondents told of the closing day at DD temple space were almost always accompanied by the image of a crying elderly woman to communicate their collective grief —whether or not they personally felt the DD temple should have remained open or whether they chose to visit other temples in the neighbourhood.

For example, when Mr. Chandra was telling me his reasons for building up the LSHT temple, he reasoned:

[68] This video was uploaded by a user calling themselves 'Hindugroup'. The user was unfortunately unavailable for comment.

'*I saw matas* ['mothers'], *crying* [the day that the DD temple closed]. *How can they* [the local government, the temple board] *do this to a community? I saw the community suffering.'*

When I had spoken to Sheela and asked her to recall her reaction to the news that the temple was going to be closed, she quietly narrated to me the work she and other members of the community had done to keep the temple open. Although she was comfortable worshipping in other temples, when I asked her to describe the events of the closing in May 2010, she only said two words:

'*I cried.'*

In 2014, when I asked Devi and Jaya to recall their relationship with the DD temple, they both mentioned that they had 'hardly' been there—Devi because she had been working and Jaya because she was a young girl. However, Devi recalled that her mother used to regularly attend the DD temple. When I asked her about her mother's reaction to the closing, Devi said:

'*She cried. She cried and cried when it closed. The former chairman* [of DD temple] *on his deathbed begged for her forgiveness as he had caused her so much suffering.'*

The media coverage of the DD closing, both national and local, in-group and out-group, used the image of the crying mother to communicate the wrong that had been done to the community. The strong corpothetics of the image have continued to frame the narratives of the closure among my respondents, and show to wider Dutch society that women, as the cultural purveyors of Hinduism, particularly suffer without their temple space.

The diasporic visuality that emerges from the DD campaign strategy marks off a powerful sense of victimisation that is intelligible to both Hindus and non-Hindus. While the Hindu visuality mobilised through the crying mother at once recalls the corpothetic performances of Indian nationalism, the crying mother also represents a diasporic reality that confronts other Dutch citizens: the importance of the right to worship, symbolised through the suffering of the crying eldery woman discussed and visually represented in the media coverage.

The use of the crying mother also introduces the idea of a symbolic boundary between community members and those temple board actors who had betrayed their promise to the community to build a new temple. I turn now to this symbolic boundary in more detail. I argue that the construction of this boundary is a crucial moment wherein the emphasis on the role of the local government is downplayed, and the closure is seen as a matter of in-group deception and mismanagement. What is more, through media coverage, the idea of a unfied Hindu 'community' versus their selfish 'bestuur' is inscribed, making a crucial link between who is considered a Hindu and the processes of temple building—through the loss of their space rather than through the establishment of a purpose built temple.

As the print and televised coverage will demonstrate, the temple board is, as many bureaucratic structures, seen as operating in secrecy, completely removed from impact their actions have on community actors (Herzfeld 1992). At the same time, 'the community' has trusted to temple board to represent their cause to the local government and civil servant actors, only to betray that trust for their own selfish ends.

The Narrative Register of the Selfish Temple Board

The mediatised narrative of the temple board actors as selfish and morally corrupt offers a powerful counter-narrative to the temple board actors' narrative registers. As Saar told me, she felt that it was her duty as a journalist to also highlight how the temple board was to blame for the situation:

'*I can imagine that it is horrible to lose such a religious place. When I wrote this, this was going on for years already… I knew I wouldn't find the truth out of what went on…The negative feelings they* [The DD community] *had are completely rational; something went wrong in the process and of course they blamed local district government…The frame of* [my] *article is that you see that there is a problem that's been going on for years and you see that there is no solution…The people that work for the city council, it was not a pretty* [ie. flattering] *story for them. I think it is also visible* [in my article] *if you read between the lines that the temple board is…fighting with each other, that it is their* [the temple board's] *own fault…'*

Not unlike Saar's thoughts that the temple board actors were openly involved in the conflict, media outlets began to pay close attention to the role the temple board had alongside that of the local district government:

'*News that the Devi Dhaam temple was going to close has the Hindu community in deep sadness. How did it get so far? "Years of mismanagement…the gemeente* [local city council] *has failed…the PBKS has also failed…this did not have to happen."* (OHM 2010)

In 2009, a small piece detailing the ruling from the local district government that said the temple must leave their place in Amsterdam Zuidoost was published online on *dichtbij.nl*, a print and online newspaper that covers local district affairs throughout the Netherlands:

'*The only Hindu temple loses its house of prayer. For all of 12 years, the Devi Dhaam temple weekly sees hundreds of visitors who pray with each other. On October 1, the temple must close, because the neighbourhood is under the shovel* [is being developed]. *The local district government had promised another place, but has revoked the permit because it was paid too late. The Hindus say that though they* [the temple board] *had received the money, paying too late has caused problems. Not only is there no new temple, the chairman* [of the temple board] *is left with angry followers who do not understand why there is not an alternative…'* (2009)

Five months after the closing, *dichtbij.nl* again published a short article following up the story from June 2009 called 'Still No New Place for Hindu Temple Zuidoost':

'The Devi Dhaam had to leave their current location in Amsterdam Zuidoost beside the Engeldonk because the area is being developed. That led to unrest and heavy protests. There was another location [to move to] *but because the temple board had paid too late, the local district government had revoked the permit for this place. There is still no clarity about* [the possibility of] *another location. For the Hindus in Zuidoost, time is running out. In two weeks their month of fasting* [Navratri] *begins. They cannot go to a temple…'* (2010).

Here, the community members are portrayed as lost and vulnerable, whose only concern is to find a temple before their time of ritual fast begins.

As Saar's comments demonstrate along with the excerpts from print media, media actors shape a renewed victimisation narrative that centres on the symbolic boundaries between the greedy, self-interested temple board and the community of victims, represented visually as the crying mother. The temple board's inability to function as an honest, organised representative body ultimately cost the community their chance to be directly involved in the institutionalisation of their community in their neighbourhood, an act that Sunier (2009) argues increases not only visibility, but prestige in a multifaith and increasingly diverse public milieu (171).

Unlike the correspondence during the first stage of the DD campaign, the mediatised coverage of the closing of DD focuses less on the divisions between the local district government and the community, and introduces the temple board as morally corrupt and selfish, in opposition to a vulnerable 'community' of practitioners who now suffered for the temple board's action.

I now turn to the ethnographic accounts of community actors who build upon and corroborate the symbolic boundary between temple board actors and community actors, although many of my respondents did claim to be unaware of the media attention paid to the event. Here, the narrative of Hindu hurt is played out in shifting registers that pay specific attention to the community itself. The idea of the Hindu as an ex-colonised victim is displaced and community actors blame their own lack of solidarity and involvement in the issue rather than government actors or civil servants. In this way, the temple board actors continue to be viewed with contempt and disdain, but the 'community' is perpetuated as being the victim not of the government, but of their own disinterest in becoming more involved in templeisation processes.