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

Swamy, P.

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Author: Swamy, P.

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CHAPTER 8: THE NARRATIVE REGISTER OF 'DEMOCRACY AND EQUALITY'

I now turn to the newly emerging narrative register that reintroduces narrative registers and boundary making that I have discussed in Part II. I observed that the affective strategy of Hindu hurt now focuses on the role of the brāhman priest, setting up a strong moral boundary between community actors on one hand, and brāhman priests on the other. In chapter 7, I noted that 'Hindu' has become an 'accessible' identity that is strictly regulated through various performances, actions and dispositions that must be constantly reiterated to stake a claim to Hindu identity. Building upon this idea of accessibility, below I discuss the ways in which access to temple space and rituals in Amsterdam Zuidoost have taken on a social and democratic function that is more concerned with access to ritual knowledge, the daily functioning of the temple, and decision-making.

This is something different than other academic discussions of 'accessibility of space' in diaspora Hindu temples. As Narayanan (2006) notes, the Penn Hills temple is in the first place a way for diasporic Hindus to access the divine in the Hills and landscape of rural Pennsylvania (236), and Kurien (2007) introduces the idea that deities in a diasporic temple in Malibu are in fact more accessible and easily accommodated in space than at major temple centres like Tirupathi in India (93). While having access to the deities is of course a major priority for my respondents, the aftermath of 2010 has nevertheless shifted emphasis onto the social, bureaucratic and organisational concerns with accessibility that directly relate to the transparent and democratic running of temple spaces.

For example, Tony discussed the importance of expanding the ways in which one can perform 'Hindu-ness' beyond the rigidity of priest-led ritual:

'Ritual is not too important for me, what I learned in the Gita is that Krishna said 'Give me water, flower, fruits with love and I accept it' and that's the important thing. But the lamps with the clarified butter—are there animal-free wicks for the lamps? If I have to give money to someone, I give to the cancer foundation for children so they can help people. It is more important for me, some people believe that they should give the money to the statues of gods. My philosophy is, does God need money? No... I know people who read the Ramayana [story of Rama] every day, but they don't live it. For me, living it is more important than only reading it.'

In the same vein, Maya felt that a focus on spiritual practices among second generation Hindus in the Netherlands set them apart from Hindus in Suriname and India who focused on the material aspects of ritual:

'More and more youngsters are going to meditation, going to yoga... When I look at Surinamese communities in Suriname, Indian people in Bharat [India], they are all fixed on material stuff. Offering flowers to the gods on these days, fasting on these days, but they do not

look at the other basics of the Hindu dharma like yoga, meditation, helping others, you have so much more actually...They don't look at the things you cannot touch, and these are the most important things...How to be a good human being.'

As Kurien (2007) notes in her study of a Hindu student organisation in California, Hindus in 'India' or ancestral homelands are often portrayed as confused or misguided about their religious background (218). Here, Maya's comments echo such ideas, as she feels that youth living in the Netherlands are searching for a more spiritual path that focuses on the abstract ideals of living a good life, rather than simply gathering merit for correct ritual practices.

Ideally, my respondents articulated that temples should function more as a place for people to gather, learn and come together rather than to perform obscure rituals. Following the idea that a temple operates as a civil association, many of my respondents saw the temple as a place of learning and spirituality, but downplayed the importance of certain rituals. For example, the idea of donating money weekly into a small collection box '*hundi*' or to give money to the temple was seen on the one hand as a sign of solidarity, particularly for those who were now involved with building a temple through SMO. However, it was also seen as a relatively unimportant part of the ritual service in a temple.

The Narrative Register of the 'Corrupt Brāhman Priest'

Overwhelmingly, my respondents said the tension between brāhman and non-brāhmans in temple spaces was the largest barrier to the smooth and efficient running of a temple space that is open for all. This tension was described as an ongoing struggle between brāhmans as upper-caste, ritually pure religious specialists, and members of the community who are 'self-taught' scholars and spiritual leaders. I observed that my respondents were increasingly wary of priests, seeing them as anxiously clinging to their training as their exclusive cultural capital and preventing lay devotees from actively becoming involved in temple and spiritual matters. What is more, the 'brāhman priest' became a symbol for all that stood in opposition to the moral economy of active Hinduism. van der Burg and van der Veer (1986) have analysed 'pandits and profit' in the Netherlands, arguing that during the early years of migration into the Netherlands, priests became 'free entrepreneurs' (523) as Hindus were dispersed all over the country and relied more heavily on personal connections with priests rather than organisational bodies that regulated Hinduism. This situation led to a client-entrepreneur relationship in the community, where priests 'marketed' themselves and developed a price range across various rituals and worked to gain more clients, and hence, more legitimacy (523). The authors note that 'the clients who feel they have lost control over their pandits sourly label them as merchants and money-grubbers' (*ibid.*).

As temple spaces began to establish themselves in the Netherlands, various respondents told me that priests would also treat their roles in the temples as semi-permanent. Often two or

three priests are associated with one temple, and they are mobile within the community. This has led to the establishment of various ‘celebrity’ priests and swamis who are known and preferred throughout the community.

Currently, with the ideal of a public, egalitarian temple space, the role of the priest as an entrepreneur is increasingly met with suspicion. At the same time, their claim to exclusive cultural capital related to ritual, philosophy and worship is less relevant as community members seek out and gain access to religious knowledge on their own.

In chapter 1, I contextualised how brāhman priests were organised as ritual specialists in Suriname. While it has been established that the caste system ‘disappears’ as early as the moment when members of various castes, religions and birth communities are put together in embarkment centres before beginning the journey to the Caribbean, how completely it has ‘disappeared’ is still an important issue that needs to be addressed. As Nugteren (2009) and van der Burg and van der Veer (1986) have noted, upon migration into the Netherlands, some Hindus adopted the title ‘brāhman’ while crossing the ocean by plane. Although other caste identities may have disappeared, the notion of the ‘brāhman’ as a ritual specialist still prevails. However, as I will demonstrate below, the role of the brāhman is increasingly interrogated and rejected by my respondents in Amsterdam Zuidoost who reject this form of caste-based hierarchy as ‘anti-Hindu’ because they are old-fashioned and do not fit in with ‘modern’ ideas about equality and anti-discrimination that should govern society in the Netherlands.

For example, Maya articulated the idea that priests are driven by money and power while discussing her views of an appropriate Hindu ‘life-style’. She had often crossed paths with priests who did not share her views. She recalled an incident from her youth that illustrated a priest’s lack of ‘Hindu’ values and obsession with money and status:

‘Well, once I had a pandit who was angry at me because I was a young girl and he did a ritual for me and he said to me, ‘Put the money here on the statue’, and I wasn’t used to that, I used to always, at the end you do what you want to do, you give money or you give a flower, but he said ‘You[have to] put the money here in the beginning’. So I went to my aunt and my grandmother and I said ‘Oh, that was strange, I had to put the money first’ and of course, grandma does what grandma always does, and she went telling everyone. The pandit was very angry and said ‘You told people that I asked you for money, I have a Jaguar over there, my daughter is a lawyer’...And I was like [sic] ‘You’re a pandit, it doesn’t matter if you drive a Jaguar, is that your argument, that you have a Jaguar and your son and daughter are lawyers?...This is not how I believe a pandit should be. And now these days, youngsters are very critical about the pandits, about the way they’re living, the way they speak, what they do and a lot of youngsters especially think that all of the pandits just want money, nothing more. Also the things

they preach are nothing more than books, they learn, they preach it and then they ask for a lot of money.'

Maya's narrative demonstrates a renewed emphasis on ways of life, habits, and self-discipline that are incompatible with the selfish ways of pandits who think that their ritual knowledge is indispensable. In particular, my respondents felt that temple spaces should be open to everyone—and that ritual practices in public spaces should be undertaken by anyone, regardless of their training or ancestry, as long as they have worked hard to gain spiritual knowledge and conduct themselves as 'good Hindus'—possessing the appropriate moral capital.

For example, Tina felt that the caste system was only meaningful for those who call themselves 'brāhmans'. Unlike Maya and Tony, however, she was more confident that the relevance of caste would soon fade away, as more community members speak out against pandits and brāhman practitioners who claim their superiority over others:

'...The biggest problem that is still there [In the community in Zuidoost] is about caste...The people who think they are brāhman, they want to keep to the brāhmans!... They want to rule the temple. For that group, the temple is like their income. They don't want to allow another person who is well spoken to come in and speak to the community. Even they can't say a mantra well, but they don't accept others. This is an internal fight. This is a big problem but then the janta [people, community] will decide. And for the coming period, this issue shall be solved at PBKS and DD...I spoke to one woman, she wasn't a brāhman but she married a brāhman, and she divorced him but she was saying she couldn't drink from a glass of water that her cousin gave her because he wasn't brāhman, and she was brāhman because her ex [husband] was a brāhman! That doesn't make sense to me.'

Tina found the very logic of the caste system that community actors expressed in everyday life to be contradictory. Indeed, her own focus on meditation and vegetarianism that I discussed above makes the need to cling on to 'old fashioned ideas' like the caste system unnecessary. What is more, she felt that those who clung to the caste-system were 'trying to live as our ancestors did in India', something she felt was ridiculous, as 'we live in a country where everyone is given equal opportunities'.

Tony also told me that he viewed brāhmanical hierarchy as something out of date and out of step with contemporary Dutch society. He told me that he visits many temple spaces in Zuidoost to play music and sing, was upset with members of the brāhman community who did not allow him to sing in the temple:

'I come from a traditional Hindu family and they believe in caste, very strongly [they say] "If you are brāhman, you have to be a pandit, if you are shudra you are nothing". But for me it was not like that, it was discrimination, it's not good. Then I did more research and I found out

that all the pandits are businessmen, and I think 'No, I don't need them'. Ten years ago I met a young swami...he said 'Everyone who can read the[Hindu] books can be a pandit'...I think the caste system was important in that [old] time, in present day it's not necessary because if you go to the ISKON, there are a lot of white people there. Why can't they have the status of brāhman or pandit?... You have some mandirs in Amsterdam... I thought I would sing a mantra for a little bit, and the whole temple was singing [along] and then the pandit said to me, 'In this temple you can't chant that mantra...'

As Tony went on to tell me, younger generations look for alternatives to brāhmans for knowledge about their religion:

'These days, we have 'google swami', and when people want to know something they go to Youtube, they have the pravachans that a swami says, what Deepak Chopra says about spirituality, about Hinduism and it is closer to you. I have cousins that are older than me, and they have respect for their parents and they do what the pandits say...But if I say to my son 'You have to do this', he'll say 'Why papa'?', then I'll have to tell him, he needs answers...The media and films, the [television] series, for people it's now easier to understand...In LSHT, we are more free. Everyone is welcome and there is no discrimination. We don't have caste discrimination. Everyone speaks to the pandits, the pandits sit with us to eat. Here everyone can sing [bhajans or mantras] everyone can do aarti, everyone can have some role. We do things together.'

Caste-based control of ritual knowledge is therefore considered outdated: younger generations see education as the way to become revered in the community rather than ancestry. What is more, mediatised access to information, especially via the Internet, has made it easy for young people to access information and various opinions that undermine traditional views about caste and Brāhmanical superiority.

As modern temple spaces are increasingly democratised (Waghorne 2004, Dempsey 2006), constraints related to hierarchy and birth communities are less acceptable. In the case of predominantly Hindustani temples in the Netherlands, such restrictions are considered backward and impinge on the rights of devotees. 'The brāhmans' belong to an archaic culture that did not develop according to principles of human rights and equality that my respondents feel is part of their lives in the Netherlands.

After Tony found LSHT, he felt that the temple space and its events, festivals and outlook matched the ideals of goodness, equality and choice that other temples in the city had not provided. Earlier, the chairman of LSHT had told me that as a non-brāhman, self-taught priest, he was sensitive to the fact that strict rules of purity attached to the caste system alienate the community, especially younger generations who do not 'believe' in such inequalities. He was very vocal about allowing everyone who had 'good intentions' and a 'good heart' to join in rituals

and offerings. He made it a point to personally invite members of the community into his office whenever they had time to sit with him and to take meals with members of the community. I once observed that he became agitated when a group of women cooked special stuffed bread for him but made regular bread for the rest of the devotees. He said that ‘there should be no special treatment for priests here’ and tore his stuffed bread into pieces to share with the other community actors sitting in his office. He mentioned to me quietly that this was only something done by the ‘older women’ who had recently migrated from India with their families or in-laws. Other kitchen volunteers ‘brought up here’ do not give him such special treatment.

On another occasion he told me that he encourages his devotees to question his practices and ideas, allowing them to interrupt him as he speaks:

‘...We preach in the temple during all of the festival days, and when I deliver the talks I openly asked them if they have any doubt so that they can ask me anything...So we can guide them in a proper manner.’

Mr. Chandra was very clear about the connection between openness and purity—priests and community members should be free to question and receive adequate answers to their queries. At the same time, those being questioned should not close off their answers or make their speeches or discourses inaccessible, they should be able to guide the community in a way that ‘anyone can understand’.

Various members of the community also told me of a well-known non-brāhmanical spiritual leader was once ‘chased away’ out of Amsterdam Zuidoost by priests who felt that he could not speak in a temple. Many devotees were angry that he had been asked to leave, as he was considered a well-educated and well-spoken young man who was especially popular with second generation devotees. Tina recalled his story as one that demonstrated the priests’ anxieties over losing their cultural capital in the temples:

‘He was not a brāhman, but he was well-spoken, he studied in India, his guru was very good, he is aware of society’s problems and our community’s problems...If he was giving a pravachan, people would come to listen to him, this was a problem for the brāhman pandits. He was not allowed to speak...’

Sharlinie also told me in hushed tones that a young non-brāhman was originally based in the neighbourhood, but had to leave:

‘[He] got into problems with the pandits because he’s not a brāhman and the brāhman pandits don’t like him...And [he] said people must be devoted knowledge, they can do their own thing, and brāhmans only want to take the money...He took all his murtis and he left...He has no temple here [in the Netherlands]...Most of pandits here do not want him...’

Don also regretted that the young leader had to leave the community, and stressed the importance of education and self-study when it comes to deciding who can lead in a temple. He felt that the divide between brāhmans and non-brāhmans still prevented the community from coming together, despite all that they had learned after the temple closing in 2010:

It depends on education. If people have studied the culture, if they can read the scriptures, if they gain knowledge, if they do research and think about Hinduism. What kind of nonsense is this between brāhmans and non-brāhmans? ... This is such a sad thing that Hindus are against each other! We are under one umbrella, we are Hindus. If someone asks me 'what are you?', I say I am Hindu. In the first place I am a Hindu'.

Don felt that the Brāhman community in Amsterdam Zuidoost continued to be a major obstacle to establishing Hindu solidarity. Below, I focus on the way that various community actors have narrated negative 'brāhman involvement' in the DD closing.

The Narrative Register of the 'Unco-operative Priest'

The monopoly that priests have on ritual knowledge and the hierarchical relations that they perpetuate ultimately obfuscate processes of groupness in the community. Don's comment reflect a large concern among my respondents that after 2010, priests scrambled to maintain the status quo so that their positions of power and cultural capital would continue to function in the community. Rather than encourage the community to come together, they were seen as obstacles to bringing together groups of Hindus across denominations and temple spaces.

Many of my respondents felt that brāhman priests had played a crucial part in delaying templeisation processes in Zuidoost. On one occasion in the DD temple, I spoke to Sonia who had been a member of the search committee for new space for the DD community. She told me that pandits often told her 'not to accept certain spaces', or that she was contradicted during meetings when she would speak in favour of an alternative site they had visited. When I asked her why she thought the priests had disliked certain sites, she shrugged and said they didn't want to move to a place they 'didn't choose themselves'.

Sieta also complained that brāhman priests made it very difficult for the community to find a new space and delayed their situation. She felt that the priests were being deliberately obtuse about finding a place so as to 'show to the local government and community that they were in charge' of the situation. She angrily recalled that a large group of priests from all over the country showed up unannounced on the day they were supposed to view a plot of land:

I said [to the search committee] 'let's go on Saturday to see the plot so you can move there' in 2010, a few weeks before it was closed... Suddenly [on that day] there were 21, or 26 priests sitting there, coming from all over [to accompany us]! We brought all the priests over

there to see [the plot of land] and they said 'No'. [on the day of the viewing] The priests [at DD temple] was already saying we should not go [move] to this spot'.

Although it was difficult to confirm exactly how many priests had been invited to various viewings for new temple spaces around the neighbourhood, this vignette is part of a reoccurring narrative wherein 'the priests' were considered an obstruction to establishing a new DD temple space. Rather than think in terms of the community, Sieta felt that the priests were there only to exercise their power and control over the decision-making processes. Although it was not made clear to me the stake that these priests would have in the choosing of the space beyond exercising power within the community, my respondents felt that their unwillingness to cooperate not only undermined the idea of solidarity in the community, it undermined the values of egalitarianism and transparency that should guide Hindu practice.

'The Caste System Gives us Security: Support for Caste Identity in Amsterdam Zuidoost
While the DD temple community and LSHT has been very vocal about their anti-hierarchical stance, as I mentioned in chapter 3, Mr. Ravi of SSD is a vocal supporter of the caste system. His voice represents one of the most prominent counter-narratives to anti-brāhmanical notions of purity that circulate among my respondents. He is also vocal about the specialised ritual and spiritual value that brāhman priests possess, which allows them exclusive access to various rituals. As the chairman told me, the role of the priest was to 'educate the community' as they possessed the knowledge to which others did not have access:

'The caste system gives [us] security. You have security in your life since you are young. You know you can earn money, have an income...The Muslims and the English saw this [the caste system] and said 'This is the strength of Hinduism', then they gave it a bad name. In my village, people who work as a hairdresser come two times per week to cut hair, they don't need to leave the village. They don't worry. They earn money. The family of these people do not need anything, they have it all...All knowledge comes from Hinduism...And this has been built up through the caste system...People don't have to worry about how to earn money or their [marital] relationship...'

While these ideas were echoed by the priests that identified as brāhman, devotees who attended the temple had a very different vision of brāhmanism. As Sharlinie had told me, the chairman was known within the SSD community as a 'radical priest' and that many people 'ignored the caste issue' because he had remained open and honest in developing the temple space. She also told me that while she did not agree with what he says about the caste system, she

respected that he has taken care of them and set up such a beautiful temple, but she would ‘never believe that brāhmans were better than anyone else.’

Sheryl was also very suspicious of the chairman’s discussion of caste and brāhman priests. Having grown up outside of an Indo-Hindu milieu, she felt that the role of heritage and caste was particularly unimportant, and she and her family had been devoted Hindus since her childhood. At the same time, she did not openly challenge the chairman’s views, but chose to ignore them, much as Sharlinie did, as she felt that despite caste issues, he had done a very good job of engaging and creating a successful and holy temple space in Amsterdam Zuidoost.

In this way, while there may be hushed whispers after certain addresses that celebrate the caste system or the special place for brāhmans within Hindu practice, very few members of SSD temple vocally challenged the idea of caste or the power of brāhman priests in the space.

It is also significant to note that among my Hindustani respondents, as I discussed in chapter 1, all caste identities except that of the brāhman priest have virtually disappeared. The distinction is therefore always between brāhmans and non-brāhmans, rather than, as Mr. Ravi notes, a stratified caste system with variegated identities and birth communities. In this way, I view the rejection of caste-identity not just a matter of active Hinduism and egalitarianism, but one that relates specifically to the experiences of Hindustanis—if one cannot locate themselves within the system, it becomes difficult to value or reproduce it.

It is also significant that I did not observe outright challenges or defiances of priests in temple spaces around the neighbourhood. Even those respondents who felt very strongly against the caste system still acted politely and reverently to priests if they spoke to them. Again, this points to the ways in which the articulations of non-hierarchical purity and egalitarianism are treated as ideals in the moral economy, as community actors themselves appear to be reluctant to make grand or controversial gestures to push this idea forward. At the same time, they articulated to me that principles in ‘this country’ such as equality and transparency were more important than the rigid rules of caste hierarchy, distancing their visions of ideal Hindu practice from the caste system.

So far, this chapter has focused on the way that non-hierarchical principles are increasingly defining the ideal temple and ways of temple worship in Amsterdam Zuidoost. I now turn to an equally important value that has increasingly come to define how ‘good’ Hindu behaviour and ‘proper’ temples should be run: that of democracy as an abstract ideal, particularly as a way to involve all members of a community in transparent decision-making processes and to demonstrate one’s commitment to being an active citizen.

Voting and the Articulation of 'Hindu Democracy'

The ideals of democracy and the democratic structure of various diasporic Hindu temples has been well contextualised, particularly in temple spaces in the US (cf. Kurien 2007, Narayanan 2006).

As Kurien (2007) notes, Hindu temples in America are required by law to set up democratic committees with elected representatives, allowing for community members to involve themselves in decision making processes (97).

As I noted in chapter 1, the creation of immigrant organisations in the 1980s was often done in haste; very few rules were put in place and structures of these organisations varied greatly. In this chapter, I will explore how engaging in democracy and running temples as democratic institutions as an ideal of 'Dutch law and order' as well as Hinduism have become intertwined with the greater value of 'political involvement' since 2010.

When I asked Don to elaborate upon his views about his religious background and political involvement, he eloquently laid out that his manners, his way of navigating everyday life situations, and above all his political involvement, remained tied to the Netherlands:

'My Hindu dharma is in this country, I live in this country. I will always do the things that I do in benefit of the country. I am not going to say I'm a stranger here. I've been here for so many years, my kids have been born here, my grandkids. It is my country. But I have a bond with India, I have a bond with Suriname but this is my country I will do everything to make everything go right...I live according to the laws of this country, and I am interested in the news and events of this country...'

Don's comments focus on a crucial element that my respondents mobilised throughout their discussions with me: that their Hindu-ness and their commitment to the DD campaign was articulated through their identity as Dutch citizens. This is not unique to the Netherlands, as Zavos (2009, 2012) Warriar (2009), Kurien (2007, 2012), Prashad (2000, 2012) and Anderson (2015) have demonstrated, diaspora Hindus, especially groups launching campaigns, express their hurt as citizens. I observe that in temple spaces in Amsterdam Zuidoost, not only have Hindus expressed hurt and outrage as citizens, but also their pride. Their democratic values come from a negotiation between their ancient Hindu background as well as their position as Dutch citizens who share notions of democratic involvement and the rule of law with greater Dutch society.

The continued templeisation processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost have constructed the temple as an important site of civic education and symbol of civic duty. As Martikainen (2004) notes, temples in the diaspora are increasingly involved in secular activities that blur the boundaries between religion and politics, religion and culture and religion and civic engagement (240).

That civic engagement is part of diasporic temple life has been well established across national and regional contexts (Kim 2012, Baumann 2010, Jacobsen 2010, Fibiger 2010, Narayanan 2006, Rajagopal 2000). As Baumann (2010) notes in the case of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Switzerland, civic engagement is formed through volunteer work and fundraising to support underprivileged Tamils in Sri Lanka, as well as through 'cultural services' such as classical dance lessons, education programmes for local schools, and interfaith dialogue sessions that reach across the religious communities of Switzerland (11). These cultural services are often brokered through a priest or a prominent member of the community, and serve to assert and legitimise the temple's presence within wider Swiss society.

Baumann (2010) notes that civic engagement that brings Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils into contact with the public through opening up their temple space is often a issue of establishing trust and face to face relations in a country where Sri Lankan Tamils have the reputation of being criminals and abusing social benefits (8-9). In the case of Hindu spaces in Amsterdam Zuidoost, it is not a matter of 'making familiar' a community that has recently become part of the public social landscape: As I have written earlier, the vast majority of my respondents enjoy full legal membership into the Netherlands and have upon arrival into the country. What is more, the model minority stereotype has succeeded in perpetuating that Hindus are 'well-integrated' members of society.

Yet, with the changing emphasis in Dutch integration discourse onto affective and active forms of citizenship (Hurenkamp, Duyvendak and Tonkens, 2010), Hindus in Amsterdam Zuidoost are increasingly aware that their 'integration' into society must be re-affirmed to match more abstract, moral values. What is more, the experiences of templeisation processes in the Netherlands have made it so that many of these values, especially political involvement, democracy and voting rights have become strategically important to future temple-building processes in the neighbourhood.

Templeisation processes do not cease when a purpose-built temple has been realised. To continually reaffirm legitimacy and its role in the public identity of Hinduism and Hindus, temples in the diaspora run various events, stage public interventions, and perform publicly their ideas of 'Hinduness'. In this way, diaspora temples are 'active' spaces in and of themselves. The SSD temple is particularly committed to using its space for civic engagement. As mentioned earlier in this study, the space and rhetoric in the temple is strongly Hindutva, and spreading the message of Hindu pride is often the impetus behind hosting educational events such as 'Hinduism and Science' and 'Hinduism and Health'.

In particular, SSD temple focuses on championing and connecting Hindu practice and the ‘rules’ of democracy to their religion as well as the principles of active citizenship. The importance of individual choice, rationality and self-guidance through life are also emphasised as connectors between Hinduism and democracy.

Here, I re-examine the SSD as what Anderson calls a ‘neo-Hindutva’ space wherein the register of ‘diaspora Hindutva’ narratives are connected to the values associated with democracy and political involvement in Dutch society. While it is important to interpret to view the narrative of ‘Hinduism and democracy’ outlined below as a form of ‘soft’ Neo-Hindutva rhetoric that obfuscates certain political messages in order to highlight Hindu superiority, doing so presents only one side of the picture: that which connects Hindutva to rights and recognition in a society. I argue here that the task of connecting democracy and Hinduism subverts the need to express cultural superiority vis a vis Dutch culture, as Dutch civic duties such as voting and political involvement are framed as *identical* to Hindu religious duties. It is therefore crucial to explore the construction of Hindutva narratives from within ideals presented through moral and affective citizenship in the Netherlands.

The task of grafting of Hindutva ideals onto those of Dutch cultural values sets Hindus apart from those minorities whose values are viewed as a ‘threat to the moral order’—particularly Muslim actors (Buruma 2006, van der Veer 2001, 2006, van Reekum 2012, Ghorashi 2006, Duyvendak, Hurenkamp and Tonkens 2011, Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010). Rather than require a complex negotiation of morality from within two, competing world-views (cf. Kleiburg 2006) that of secular Dutch tolerance and the other of religious dogmatism, the connection between Hinduism and democracy is a process of reconciling elements of secular and religious world views. I therefore argue that articulating their similarity is a strategic ‘re-integration’ narrative that reinforces Hindu belonging in the Netherlands.

Ram, Democratic Involvement and Soft Neo-Hindutva at SSD Temple

In SSD temple, the priest is vocal about his membership in the RSS, but he maintains that his public discussions of Hindutva are related to religion, particularly the Ramayana and Ram:

‘...In the temple, I don’t talk about politics. Politics are personal. I try not to influence [people], I try to let them realise [things] themselves. Here, I talk about Ram...I talk and tell them to think about the life of Ram, what has Ram said and told people...Ram says work for poor people, give help to the people. We also should do this.’

Ram has always been a central figure of worship among my respondents. As Parekh (1994) and Cohen (2007, 67-8) have argued, the narrative of Ram as one of forced exile, obedience and dutifulness is particularly relevant to the lives of indentured workers. As Lutegendorf (1991) also

notes, the areas in contemporary Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from where my respondents trace their ancestry is traditionally known as ‘Ram-country’ where the worship of Lord Rama and the retelling of his story in the vernacular Avadhi text the *Ramcharitmanas* (‘Life of Ram’) is central to the socio-cultural and religious life of many in the area.

Alongside this particularly important role in the religious lives of my respondents, Ram has an equally ubiquitous presence in Hindutva narratives. In one of its most violent incarnations in 1992 in Ayodhya, the life of Lord Ram was explicitly tied to the Hindu nationalist campaign related to Ram’s place of birth, which various nationalist groups claimed was ransacked by Muslims. The Babri Masjid, which stood atop of Ram’s alleged birthplace was destroyed so that the ‘*Ramjanmabhumi*’ temple could be established.

The event elevated Ram to a national symbol of Hindu-ness, a ‘unifying figure’ for the project of reconstructing Hinduism’s past glory and erasing its current humiliation and hurt that came from centuries of Muslim oppression (Hansen 1999 174-5). What is more, Hansen (1999) notes that Ram was presented not only as a cultural or political symbol, but a historical ideal that represented the land of Bharatiya as the land of Ram, and therefore Ram as the ancestor of all Hindus (176). The symbolism of Ram as tolerant and patient king (Hansen 1999, 176) as well as a ‘warrior-god’ (Pollock 1993, 262) gave weight to the idea that Hindus suffered, but were also strong and capable of upholding their righteous place as Hindus (Hansen 1999, 177).

However, in relation to the templeisation processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost, a prominent community member named Suresh mobilised Ram narratives not to contextualise the community’s place as migrants in exile or Hindu oppression, but to symbolise their predisposition to and integration into the values that form the backbone of Dutch society. In particular, Ram was reinforced as a symbol of the values inherent in democratic, egalitarian societies such as the Netherlands.

As the following observations demonstrate, temples are concerned with asserting the connection between Hinduism and civic ideals such as democracy. The month before the provincial elections in the Netherlands, SSD temple the event ‘Hinduism and Democracy’ on a Sunday morning, directly following weekly worship. It included a special lecture from a non-partisan civil association known as Pro-Demos⁸³ that educated various groups in Dutch society about the importance of voting, the different political parties in the Netherlands, and the logistics of the voting process. As the representative of Pro-Demos repeated throughout the event, this was

⁸³ The representative from Pro-Demos at SSD temple described the organisation as the ‘house of democracy and the rule of law’. The organisation is funded by the national government and is designed to make citizens active and informed when it comes to their voting rights. See <https://www.prodemos.nl/>.

the 'first time' their organisation had ever been invited to a temple, and the experience was 'special' for their association.

When I asked one of the priests at SSD why the event had been organised, he mentioned that the 'community should be interested' in voting and the upcoming elections. Being informed citizens was 'part of their duty', as he reminded me (as he had on previous occasions) that 'we [devotees at SSD] are not strangers in this country' and should feel compelling to participate in the daily life of the Netherlands.

To begin, Suresh was called upon to give an introduction to the theme 'Hinduism and Democracy' and interpret the relationship between the two. His discussion focused on Hinduism as a religion of democratic choice, the righteousness of questioning authority and participating in democratic processes:

'Welcome, on this beautiful Sunday, in this great temple. After the puja and the recitation of the Ramayana, the bhajans, it is now time to talk about democracy. What is democracy? How do we [Hindus] define democracy? How does Hinduism view democracy?'

I remember an incident: There was a young man, he was in his last year of university. He said 'Well, I don't understand Hinduism. In Hinduism you have Ganesh, then you have Shiv and then you have Ram and then you have Krishna and then you have Durga and then you have Sita...I think it's so difficult. That's why I keep a little distance from Hinduism'.

I said: 'You raise a good point'.

[to the audience] This occurred in Tilburg, and you know, people from there love football, in Tilburg the local club is Willem II.

[I said to the boy] 'I have lived many years in Almere, but I go crazy for Ajax [the local Amsterdam football team], do you think that's wrong?' And he said: 'How so?'

I said: 'And I have a friend who lives in Rotterdam and he is crazy for Feyernoord [Rotterdam football club]. But a cousin of mine lives in Brabant and he is always crazy for PSV [Brabant football club]. How boring would it be if everyone was only for Willem II, for PSV, Ajax or Feyernoord ?I asked.

He said: 'Oh, in other words, we have choice [In Hinduism]!'
[to the audience] There is choice in Hinduism, too. If your heart falls for Laksmi instead of Durga or Saraswati [It does not matter]. Then the boy went away to think about it. He came back and said 'OM, thank you. I get it now.'

I know that Hinduism is nothing more or nothing less than democracy. There is choice. If your heart falls for Ganesh then that's great, but there is one God only. We don't have 'gods'—if you please, no! Don't talk about gods, we make a big mistake there. There is but one God with different aspects. I am here first as a teacher, second I am an uncle, third I am a dad, fourth I am a colleague, and fifth I am a neighbour. In other words, Who am I? We have different functions, just as we can differ, even God has different forms...One is however not more important than the other.'

Here, Suresh rationalises Hindu practices as a way to draw a closer comparison with democratic choice. As Kurien (2007, 2012) notes, American discourses of Hinduism forward a 'pluralistic' Hinduism where a Supreme Being is worshipped in many forms is in direct contrast to 'exclusivist' monotheistic Abrahamic religions that attempt to stifle choice (2012 104). It is also, As Williams (1992) and Vertovec (1999, 2000) argue, a key element of the self-rationalisation that has become an important part of diasporic Hindu practice. Especially as second-generation Hindus find themselves (reluctantly) thrust into the position of 'cultural broker' (Rajagopal 2000), it becomes increasingly important to defend and explain certain practices and rituals to oneself and to the public. In this case, Suresh uses a framework to discuss the presence of many gods and goddesses that is also compatible with global Hindutva discourse of a non-dual form religious belief that is more tolerant and pluralistic than monotheistic religions.

Suresh also links the forms of choice that exist in everyday life to that of Hinduism—much like we make lifestyle choices and take on multiple intersecting roles in society, so can God take on multiple forms as gods and goddesses.

In the second half of Suresh's address, he makes use of the popular mythology of Ram to illustrate the importance of democracy in relation to Hinduism. As I mention in chapter 1, the attachment and relation to the mythology of Ram is particularly significant across Hindu groupings in Amsterdam Zuidoost. What is more, facets of Ram's life story are well known across ages, genders and class backgrounds, making it an accessible narrative with which to address democracy:

'The Shri Ramcharitmanas [is] the story about a king, Dasaratha and his son, Rama... In his [Dasaratha's] eyes, his son Ram will be ready to ascend him. So he goes to his guruji [spiritual leader] and he gets permission. Then he goes to his advisors, the representatives of the people. And what does the king say to the people gathered there?

'If you all approve the plan to crown Ram, prepare with a happy heart for the coronation of Ram. Tell me, vote with reason, if you can live with the fact that Ram replaces Dasaratha as King'.

[Aside to the audience] *This is one of the best ways to understand 'freedom' and 'democracy' [within Hinduism]...*

Again, Suresh focuses on the broad idea of 'choice' to reiterate his discussion of democracy, pointing out the way that King Darsaratha called upon his subjects to choose whether or not Ram could ascend the throne, setting up the idea that the gods themselves respect and honour the right to choose:

Lord Ram, on the day of his coronation, had to go into the jungle for fourteen years...Ram goes with a smile into the jungle. [Ram says] 'My father gave me the kingdom of the jungle'.

'Ram says: at first I was supposed to get the developed parts, but now I get the forest'. Ayodhya was bordered by the river Ganga. Ram goes with his consort and his little brother, and when he had to cross the river Ganga, he calls out to a boatman because he is in a rush to cross. The boatman said: 'I know that you're the prince, but I won't just come over, you can't tell me to, even though you are king of the forest.'

The boatman says this, even though he is uneducated. He was an uneducated man, but still he knew what democracy is, and you can't, because of your lineage, just tell people what to do. The boatman said, 'I know your reputation, I will only let you get into my boat if you accept my conditions'. This again, is proof of democracy. Where the people have all the rights—This is democracy, not demon-cracy. There is only the difference of one letter.'

These narratives reinstate the ideals of egalitarianism: the 'uneducated' boatman knew his rights to be treated with dignity and respect. What is more important, he did not hesitate to assert them, even in the presence of a king.

Lord Ram goes into the forest and there lived forest-people [sic], the people who are completely uneducated...He listened carefully to the stories and words the people of the forest had to tell, the way a father listens to his children. Even though people were so uneducated, he listened to them...In other words, everyone received the respect that he or she should... So Ram says 'Listen to me and do what you think is right. When I do something unsuitable, please tell me. Correct me.' And that is Lord Ram, just as a leader, king of the people, is supposed to be.'

That Rama and his kingdom are bastions of freedom and equality has been traced to Valmiki's version of the Ramayana (Ramanujan 1991, Lutgendorf 1997, 22), and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* as these texts establish a connection between ideal ruler and ideal place as reflection of the cosmic order (Lutgendorf 1997, 22). While this vignette demonstrates that the speaker is reinforcing Ram as an ideal king (see Ramanujan 1991, Lutgendorf 1991, Pollock 1993), he also again implies the

role of an ideal citizen to be active and question the leader.

Active Hinduism and Individual Responsibility

Towards the end of his address, Suresh reinforces the importance of individual responsibility in the negotiation of Hindu-civic identity. The ‘rules’ of democracy, and the constant struggle to do what is good or what is right is not regulated, it is up to individuals to develop a sense of right and wrong based on principles of democracy and equality:

‘...At the moment that Ram comes back from the forest into Ayodhya, he is crowned and then he calls the people of Ayodhya together and says: ‘Listen to me, and do what you think is good’. Hinduism is not an absolute law...it is not set in concrete. All our scriptures are guiding threads but you have to use your own reason. [For example] you drive around here, you know it is a residential area, you have a speed limit of 30 km. There is not constantly a policeman behind you to follow you and check you. It’s your rationality that tells you ‘I cannot break the speed limit’... I think Hinduism is the giver of democracy, and please note, democracy, not demon-cracy. Make use of your rights, Hinduism is your basic right but it is up to you to give substance to it...’

Suresh ends by emphasising the importance of responsibility and initiative in exercising one’s right to Hinduism that, by extension is the ‘same’ as rights to democracy in the Netherlands. As Duyvendak, Hurenkamp and Tonkens (2010) and Schinkel (2008) point out, the processes of ‘culturalisation’ of citizenship and active citizenship in the Netherlands are increasingly articulated as the responsibility of citizens themselves. As de Wilde (2015) notes, neighbourhood-scale integration policies depend increasingly on the active involvement and initiative of community members, under the auspices of: ‘powerful people in powerful neighbourhoods’ (63). This too, becomes part of the moral economy of active Hinduism, where the benefits of belonging to the community are privileged to those who wish to initiate their own journey of self-discovery, education and activeness. It is one’s duty to make sure that they are involving themselves in Hindu practices, in democracy and in civic life. It is not the responsibility of priests, politicians, or teachers to encourage people to become active. For Tina, the temple is therefore crucial as a civic space that educates an individual to become aware of their duties:

‘People in the temple are searching for knowledge. People are not aware of the role that our Hindu dharma can have on our private lives. If they are on that track, much can change. Nowadays, you see a lot of demons around you, especially after 2010 [the closing of the DD temple space] you have to deal with those demons and that makes life difficult for us. I mean people with ego problems, and it doesn’t matter if its India or Netherlands, you see it around you... It will only become worse. But how to deal with it? How to make people aware that by

walking on this [dharmic] path that your life will be more in control? The temple is where you go to discover dharma...It is a place to learn, the temple is just education, just like a university...The temple is bringing you to a path of education but only you know how well you must do on your exam!’

Suresh’s address and Tina’s comments demonstrated that cross age, gender, class and socio-economic background the idea of being an active Hindu should be controlled and checked by one’s own consciousness or moral compass.

While Suresh uses powerful and meaningful narratives of the life of Ram to communicate the importance of voting and democracy in society, it remains to be seen if this translates to an increase in voter turnout, for example. Again, I reinforce here that active Hinduism sets out ideals that must be reached through constant self-discipline and engagement. In this case, the act of connecting and articulating Hinduism as a civic-religious identity with a focus on active engagement is already a step towards participating in the emerging moral economy.

This section has shown the ways in which ‘Active Hinduism’ should be interpreted not only as a Neo-Hindutva narrative but also as narrative in which the mythology of Ram is not made relevant through exile and migration, but through democratic re-integration into Dutch society. I now turn to the final section of Part III that develops the value of democracy in relation to the way that temple spaces around the neighbourhood are organised.

Instilling the Ideals of Democracy

While the importance of democracy and voting as a civic duty has been illustrated in the previous section, I now turn to how these ideals of democracy effect not only one’s civic duty, but the ethos and structure of the temple organisation since 2010. As chapter 2 noted, the DD temple board was widely narrated as a secretive, elite organisation. Since 2010, however, the vision for the new temple board of DD represents what Waghorne (2004) notes in her study of urban middle class temples in contemporary Chennai: temples are increasingly run with principles of fairness and democracy behind them. Rather than a priestly class that is in charge of the temple, there is a democratic board that oversees the daily life of the temple (Waghorne 2004, 17). This idea of the democratically elected temple board or committee has become a key feature of diasporic temples (see Narayan 2006, Kurien 2007, 97), representing the temple’s vision, their goals, and fostering a sense of community through publications, event planning and outreach programmes.

Reinforcing the idea that post 2010 temple spaces in Amsterdam Zuidoost treat democracy as a collective articulation of Active Hinduism, I present two vignettes on the importance of democratic organisations below.

Transparency at Asamai

Although it remains one of the least visible Hindu organisations in Amsterdam Zuidoost, the Asamai foundation has a reputation of being a ‘transparent’, well-run foundation that respects the rules of democratic temple board elections. During one of my visits to the temple on a crowded Navratri celebration on a Saturday evening in autumn, an outgoing member of the temple board named Rahul came to the microphone and reminded the community that soon they would vote for a new temple board. Nominees were encouraged to come forward and involve themselves more directly in the foundation. During his speech, the chairman became emotional and said that even if he was asked to stay in his role he would step down as he ‘had heard that some people did not think he was honest’. Members of the community, especially women, urged him that this was not the case and that he had been wrongly informed. The room suddenly became very tense: people began shouting that ‘it wasn’t the case’ and others began to quietly scoff at his comments among themselves.

Rahul eventually became too overwhelmed to speak; he left the temple area to stay in the kitchen, choking back tears. Members of the community pleaded with him to stay or to come back and discuss the issue, but he stayed away. An elderly man and founding member of the foundation took the microphone and continued to give details about the upcoming election, visibly uncomfortable with what had just happened.

After the speeches, I stayed sitting with the women at the back of the temple, as young children, men and women at the front filed into the kitchen for their evening meal. A woman turned to me and asked if I had fully understood everything he had said, and that if I had, to ‘not let it upset me’, as Rahul was only responding as ‘anyone else would’ if they had been accused of acting dishonestly. The other women nodded in agreement.

I eventually asked a young respondent in her mid 20s named Gita, who had come to the Netherlands from Kabul as a young girl, if she had any insight into what the chairman had said earlier. She told me that she ‘didn’t know’ much about the temple board or rumours circulating in the temple board, but that he felt as if people did not think he was running the space appropriately. He was personally offended by the rumour that he had not done his job well, as Gita told me that: ‘He takes his job very seriously. There used to be rumours about corruption years ago, but now the temple board has worked very hard to make this a real community organisation. Calling someone corrupt is a big thing for us. We try our best to be transparent’.

Gita also felt that Rahul was upset because he ‘wasn’t backwards or anything like that’. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that Rahul had always wanted the temple to ‘run smoothly’ so that all the community actors who came to the space felt comfortable, women, men, children and elders. Not just Rahul, but the outgoing temple board actors saw themselves as

representatives of the community. They understood that they had a ‘big responsibility’ to run the temple like ‘professionals’. Unlike other temple spaces, Asamai did not have a priest who visited regularly: authority over the space was supposed to be diffused throughout the community and did not only lie with temple board actors. Rahul’s reaction to the accusations that he was hiding things from the community was therefore so emotional because it implied that the openness he had worked so hard for was something people thought he only pretended to value.

On a separate occasion when I visited Asamai, I spoke to Rahul and Akash about the upcoming vote for the new temple board. Both of them were adamant that their processes were transparent, and that they gave their community members every opportunity to voice their own choice for new temple board members.

They proudly told me that they had set up a ‘sophisticated’ system where absentee voting was permitted and third parties could cast a vote, provided that they had the signature of the person in whose name they were voting. They both reiterated that they felt that such a system was ‘how all temples should be running in Zuidoost’, as these were the principles that guided ‘all the other elections’ that take place in their lives. They also told me that the day that the votes are cast, a special meeting happens after worship, where the outgoing temple board details their yearly costs to the community. ‘The community pays to be here’, Akash told me, ‘they have a right to know where their money goes’.

For the Asamai community, transparency has become the guiding principle for the temple board and for the community—accusations of corruption and mismanagement are considered personal insults. In the case of Rahul, the accusation caused great emotional distress.

Democratising the New DD Temple board

Perhaps the most significant shift towards a democratic ethos is the DD community’s vision of their new temple board. Since 2010, members of the DD community have discussed at length the ways in which a ‘proper’ temple board should run, based on the values and criteria that I have previously explored in chapter 6, such as a well-educated, well-spoken, democratically minded chairperson, as the new vision for the temple board wishes to equally represent women, Hindustanis, Indians and priests in the decision making process. Since 2010, there has been a temporary female chairperson and other women on the board.

On the seventh day during an autumn Navratri celebration, I was invited to visit the DD office space. The DD office space was bustling with activity during a *kanya puja*, a ritual dedicated to young (unmarried) girls as manifestations of the goddess. In the Netherlands, it is common for young boys to participate as well, so both young girls and boys flooded the office space that day eagerly receiving sweets, toys and money from various devotees, much to their delight. It was one of the busiest occasions I had ever observed in the office space, with almost

every corner filled with people taking their turns to worship. After the children were presented with sweets and gifts, the evening unfolded much like it had on other occasions, until after the priest delivered an address.

Towards the end of the evening's programme, a prominent Indian man who attended the temple space named Mr. Bhatia was invited to share some news with the community. With pride in his voice, he announced that the SMO had successfully negotiated to obtain the same plot of land where the DD temple space used to be.

Instantly, the community erupted. Many people began crying and shouting *Mata ki Jai* ('Victory to mother')! A devotee broke out in devotional song, and was immediately handed a microphone so that those at the front of the office space could hear them. Mr. Kumar, who usually sits on a couch just outside the main altar, was escorted over to the crowd and was asked to say a few words out of respect for his position in the community and his role in obtaining and caring for the deities. He broke out into sobs as he spoke, as he denounced the old temple board as 'demons' (*rakshashas*) and expressed his thanks that the goddess would soon be able to return 'home'.

Other prominent members of the DD community were given the microphone and asked to speak. A prominent devotee, also moved to tears, mentioned that this victory was one for Hindus: 'No longer will people say that Hindus in the Netherlands only know how to talk, we will show them that we are here and we are Hindus!'

While the community was celebrating around him, the priest sat calmly in a chair and expressed his happiness, but admitted that he was concerned about what changes should be made to ensure that earlier mistakes will 'never be repeated'. He suggested that the temple board had to be 'open'. A devotee immediately said: 'The new temple board will be by the people, for the people! The new temple board is the voice of the people!'

The devotees broke into thunderous applause. For the rest of the evening, many members of the community excitedly discussed the necessary steps for the future such as dates for elections, groundbreaking ceremonies, and the appropriate time to release the news to the media.

I spoke to Tina's husband, who said that they had waited to reveal the news until the last night of Navratri. He told me that the work that the community had done had paid off—as he knew it would. 'All the politics and struggling were necessary', he said, as it is part of your dharma as Hindus to fight injustice. In the end, he said that the community was ready to 'move on' and to start again as a community where everyone could be involved in decision-making processes.

The vignettes from the DD office space and the Asamai foundation demonstrate how the democratic ideals of openness, fair and equal representation are fostered in these temple spaces

and continue to be valued by community members. The importance of democracy as an ideal that should permeate not only temple spaces but the everyday lives of devotees demonstrates how temple spaces after 2010 have been concerned with civic and political issues, while also undergoing major restructuring to develop democratic and open temple spaces.