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Cover Page



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SUMMARY

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

The aim of this dissertation is demonstrate how temple building processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost have much more at stake than the re-creation of Hinduism outside India, as the lack of a temple in the neighbourhood has called into question what it means to be a ‘Hindu’. This dissertation examines the ways in which community actors have intervened as citizens in the ongoing political struggle to establish a visible, purpose-built temple space in this particular locality by asking: How has Hindu identity become articulated through the absence of a purpose-built temple in neighbourhood? This dissertation takes the 2010 closing down of the temporary Devi Dhaam Hindu temple as a critical event in which narratives of Hindu identity began to reshape themselves from within ideals of moral citizenship and community solidarity.

Methodologically, this dissertation is multidisciplinary, drawing most heavily on ethnographic interviewing and participant observation as well as oral history interviewing technique. The research presented here reflects the narratives of Hindu community actors across gender, class background, age and ethnicity, while also focusing on the views of relevant stakeholders such as civil servant actors and media actors.

Conceptually, this dissertation builds upon the notion of ‘diaspora’ by exploring the ways in which diasporas are dynamic categories that imply more than just a shared ethnicity or homeland. Instead, diasporas are strategic: they come into being during times of trauma and collective action when a group decides to present themselves as a cohesive whole in public. At other times, they are less cohesive, less visible, and less vocal. In Part I, I introduce the term ‘groupings’ as a subcategory of diaspora. The term ‘groupings’ is to account for the diversity of backgrounds among my Hindu respondents, while also acknowledging that they have been strategically grouped based on their ethnicity, religious affiliation and migration trajectory into the Netherlands. It should not be assumed that belonging to one grouping may exclude belonging to another, and that actors within groupings do not interact with each other.

Although Afghan Hindus, Surinamese Hindus, Direct Indian migrants and Professional ICT migrants all have a stake in the neighbourhood, the voices and experiences of Surinamese Hindus have become representative of a diasporic Hindu identity in Amsterdam Zuidoost. It is not only because they are statistically the most prominent grouping of Hindus in the neighbourhood, but they have also been in a position to ‘represent’ Hinduism to the wider public based on their cultural capital as former subjects of a Dutch colony.

Part I also contextualizes the recent history of Amsterdam Zuidoost in order to connect the issues of temple building to the ongoing problems to produce local subjects in the neighbourhood. Such problems are due to the changing nature of the locality and the ideals of designers and urban planners in the 1960s that set out to build a neighbourhood of the future. Instead, the neighbourhood became home to various migrant groupings particularly those who had left Suriname after its independence in 1975. For Surinamese Hindus specifically, their lives in Amsterdam Zuidoost were seen as continuations of their lives in Paramaribo, Suriname, and the narrative of ‘cultural denomination’ in relation to Afro-Surinamese groupings was often used to describe their distrust of local residents and their continued failure to build a temple in the locality, while other religious buildings, such as the Taibah mosque and the Kandelaar group of Ghanaian churches established themselves.

Although a visible temple in Amsterdam Zuidoost still does not exist, there now are four functioning temple spaces that however remain invisible and makeshift. Although the idea of a grand, multifunctional temple is still articulated as a goal, Hindu groupings in the neighbourhood value these spaces as sacred, gathering in them throughout the week to celebrate festivals, birthdays and to approach divinity in the comfort of one’s own community.

This dissertation also explores the way that a strategic ‘Hindu’ identity in Amsterdam Zuidoost became articulated through the idea of ‘Hindu hurt’. This dissertation contributes to the growing literature in the field that nuances this idea of Hindu hurt as not just coming from the context of Hindu nationalism, but that of human and citizenship rights in one’s country of residence. Part II focuses on the idea of Hindu hurt by analysing a body of correspondence that elite temple board actors sent to the local district government. Focusing on the years 1988-1996, this research introduces four ‘narrative registers’ that are strategically mobilised in order to justify why a Hindu temple not only should be built in the neighbourhood, but why it should be fully subsidised by the government. Within these narrative registers, not only is there an overarching narrative of Hindu hurt, but various ways in which the elite temple board actors have identified ‘Hindus’ in the neighbourhood. First, as their place as marginalised citizens, second, in relation to their ancestry as indentured labourers in Suriname; thirdly, in relation to their marginalised position in relation to other minorities in the Netherlands; and fourth in relation to their exotic, ‘Eastern’ worldview that keeps them in isolation from the rest of Dutch society.

However, after the 2010 closing of the Devi Dhaam temple space, the media and various community actors began to shift these narratives. They focused on the ways that ‘the community’ had been victimised by a ‘selfish’ temple board who had neglected to find them an appropriate place to build a permanent Hindu temple. Community actors continued to perpetuate the idea of a selfish temple board as they narrated the trauma of losing their temporary temple space, and began

to focus on the importance of Hindu solidarity. This dissertation suggests that the notion of Hindu solidarity becomes the ideal upon which Hindu identity after 2010 is based.

Part III builds upon this idea by introducing the emerging Hindu moral economy in Amsterdam Zuidoost. This dissertation makes an original contribution to recent studies on the moralisation of citizenship discourse in the Netherlands by moving beyond debates that problematise the relationship between citizenship and religious identity and instead look to the ways in which Hindu community actors in Amsterdam Zuidoost consciously connect the moral teachings of their religion to the values that circulate in Dutch society today. Furthermore, it interrogates the idea that Surinamese Hindus are a politically dormant ‘model minority’ community that attaches value to socio-economic success and material wealth rather than involvement in politics or political conflict.

In particular, the importance of being an active, political citizen has been narrated as an important way to re-establish a Hindu temple in Amsterdam Zuidoost. While some community actors favour a more direct approach and have become active in local politics, elderly working class community actors see their continued devotion to the goddess as part of a wider political protest to re-establish a home for the divine. This undermines ideas circulating in the media and academic literature that label Hindus, particularly Surinamese Hindus as a ‘model minority’ who remains detached from political life in Dutch society in order to focus on socio-economic success and upward mobility.

Besides the importance of political involvement, since 2010 community actors have also begun to value the democratic running of a temple space, and the democratic right to vote. This dissertation connects the emergence of these values to the traumatic experiences of undemocratically run temple spaces in the past.

The focus on political involvement and democratic temple organisations also draw attention away from ancestral claims to authority through caste. In particular, Hindus in Amsterdam Zuidoost increasingly reject the brāhman priest’s authority and favour an open selection process to determine who can perform rituals and speak in the temple based on skills, habits and morals.

This dissertation broadens the discussion of temple building in the diaspora by focusing on the ways in which temple building is not only a process of religious placemaking—especially in instances where temple building processes fail or are stalled. The case of Amsterdam Zuidoost demonstrates that a Hindu temple is a symbol of in-group solidarity that reinforces the legitimate place of Hindus as citizens in the Dutch social and cultural landscape. Although processes of temple building have largely failed in the neighbourhood, the campaign and mobilisations behind these processes overwhelmingly demonstrate that Hindu identity also has a marked political

dimension in which community actors exercise their rights as citizens: It is this connection between temple building and citizenship that has become central to current narratives of what it means to be 'Hindu'.