

RELIGIOUS BELONGING AND IDENTITY AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN HINDU WOMEN

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1. Introduction

The year 1860 is a significant year in the consciousness of any South African Indian. This is the year that saw the arrival of Indians from India, to South Africa. They arrived as indentured labourers to act as cheap labour for the English farmers who had found the African labourer unpredictable and sought alternate cheap labour. Here then would have been a transaction involving two colonies of the British Empire. From 1860 to 1911 or the length of the entire period of indentured immigrants, about 26,926 women were brought to South Africa.¹

This article looks at the arrival of the Indian woman as indentured labourer and attempts to examine some aspects of her early articulation of a religious identity within the historical context of migration and displacement. The article asserts that through memory and recall the Hindu woman in South Africa has reconstructed her religious identity by endeavouring to replicate certain ritualistic observances. The particular history of this experience of women has been muted by her absence (in a religious sense) in the documented (local) literature, which subsumed her presence within the wider generic of the early Indian experience. We look particularly at the South Indian Tamil speaking woman in South Africa and at her relationship to the goddess Māriammen and unpack the role this goddess is supposed to play in her life.

2. A Religious Identity

The construction of a religious identity calls into the arena of most, although not all, traditions another thespian, an actor or actress in the guise of a god or goddess. It brings to the performance particular understandings

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¹P. Brijbal, "Demographic Profile" in A. J. Arkin, K.P. Magyar, and G. J. Pillay eds., *The Indian South Africans: A Contemporary Profile*, South Africa: Owen Burgess Publishers, 1986, 25-26.

of the world and your place in that world. It is, of course, overly simplistic to claim that in some ways you are born with the script, in that you are born into a religious tradition. Of consequence is also how you choose to interpret and act out that script, whose text might lend itself to multiple readings and might well undergo various shades of slight to severe change when played to a new audience and in a new venue.

This new venue was to be South Africa. Writing in the year 2000 approximately 140 years after the first Hindu stepped onto African soil, Pratap Kumar writes of South Africa:

South Africa is a land of cultural diversity. It is one of the most cross-culturally rich and powerful countries. One could take a walk through the main streets of Downtown Durban [in Natal] and feel the profound reshaping of Western and Eastern cultures in the crucible of an African ethos. One is simultaneously passing through a multidimensional worldview.

It is in the context of this multidimensional worldview that one has to understand the uniquely reshaped Hindu culture outside of its original home India.²

This is some 140 years down the historical time line. That is not to say that I am not able to echo his rather evocative description of multicultural and religiously plural South Africa and the Hindu's place in this land. Nelson Mandela's by now somewhat clichéd term 'Rainbow Nation' is itself a mirror of this sentiment. Pratap Kumar does a good job of reconstructing the life-world of the Hindu in South Africa; to a lesser extent do other authors who have focused on particular Hindu religious movements or Hindu religious festivals. These authors though have not had as their foci the Hindu woman or more specifically the early indentured Hindu woman who would have contributed to this uniquely reshaped Hindu culture and multidimensional worldview. The exception to this is the scholar Alleyn Diesel, whose articles,³ and earlier unpublished doctoral thesis (1998), looked at contemporary goddess worship practices as symbols of empowerment for South African Hindu women.

²Pratap Kumar, *Hinduism in South Africa*. South Africa: University of Durban-Westville, 2000, 1.

³Alleyn Diesel, "The Suffering Mothers: The Hindu Amman Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 15, 1 (2002).

3. Invisibility of the Hindu Women in the Literature

There has been much written in South African literature about South African Indians and their relationship to the liberation struggle and their provoked political consciousness in the wake of the arrival of Gandhi in 1893. There has also been a fairly substantial, although not exhaustive, amount written on Indian and Hindu women and their contribution to the political struggle against Apartheid.

There is however, a paucity of information about the early history of the indentured Hindu women. The experiences of these women have been subsumed within the broader context of the Indian experience. While this may not be a deliberate androcentric bias in scholarship, it nevertheless contributes to their (the women's) invisibility and feeds into furthering academia that has in the past largely preferred to focus scholarship on the generic man. Like in many other areas there is, thus, an urgent need to recover the indentured Hindu women's experience as an integral player in the particular trajectory of the history of Hinduism in South Africa.

Historical and archival material are seen to deal and converse with the social reality of the early indentured Indians as a whole. The most perfunctory of looks at Pratap Kumar's bibliography is testimony to this fact. For, in his book on Hinduism in South Africa it appears that a large part of his research was culled out from books about the history of the indentured and the later category of merchant Indians. His own empirical research, in turn, focused more directly on the Hindu Indians.

Of the religion of the Hindus in South Africa there exist, thus, Pratap Kumar's book and some other published studies, several of them having been initiated as doctoral research projects on one or other Neo-Hindu religious organisation in this country. There exist also unpublished Masters level studies that deal with one or other aspect of Hinduism in South Africa, usually a North Indian or South Indian religious festival as it comes to be experienced in South Africa. However, this has been on the period, subsequent to the arrival of neo- or reformed Hinduism that sought, with its philosophical inclination, to move away from the ritual based Hinduism. Furthermore there is almost nothing in written form about the early Hindu woman arriving in South Africa, even by women researchers.

In a bid for a more authentic and gender inclusive narrative I have attempted to reconstruct her religious and ritual behaviour based on interviews and the recall and memory of what would now be the

granddaughters of the early woman. This I perceived as a vital research window into the early life world of the Hindu woman.

I chose to interview women from the Tamil speaking South Indian community as the observance of the Māriammen prayer (worship to the goddess Māriammen) happens within the Tamil speaking community. I have also conducted informal interviews with female devotees attending the Māriammen Festival, observed in the month of July in the Māriammen Temple in Mount Edgecombe.

The women I spoke with were all over fifty years old, some as old as seventy. The women were all of similar economic background. The educational backgrounds were also similar in that they were all not very well educated and some were not literate at all. This sample configuration was important as I wished to hear from women who would have not attempted to reanalyse their memories or ritual activities in the light of more recent philosophical religious inclinations but rather share the narratives as descriptions free of such appended meanings.

These women all had fairly clear memories of the religious practices regarding the Māriammen prayer of their mothers and, more vitally of their grandmothers. Retrospectively, they were, thus, valuable conduits of information. Notwithstanding the fact that the number of families performing the prayer was decreasing – either because the younger members of the families have moved away from this particular kind of ritual where slaughter of animals was involved or because they have converted to Christianity – many families continue to perform the prayer. These women interviewed were also respondents in their own right because they continued and perpetuated, as a matter of tradition, much of the ritual observances of their grandmothers.

Historical records reveal that the early Hindu woman who travelled from India would have come from the rural parts of mainly South India, from places like Madras and Calcutta and the surrounding districts. We see that she arrived in small numbers relative to the large numbers of her male counterpart.

Coming from the rural villages and semi-rural small towns or the depressed economic peripheries of the urban areas the Hindu woman was illiterate and came with a particular understanding of her religion. She brought with her what historians of religion working with Hindu materials would refer to as non-Brahmanical or what anthropologists have termed as

indigenous folk religion. At the fore of this type of religion was goddess worship.

4. The Goddess in India

In the context of indigenous Hinduism or village Hinduism practised in India, each village is associated with a particular protective mother goddess. This goddess connotes in very real terms the stability and order of the village and the villagers. She is synonymous with the wellbeing of all who reside in that particular village. Indeed, the tradition teaches that she is 'married' to the village as a whole and, thus, the villagers' welfare is her primary concern.

Kumar notes that in India the goddess Māriammen is associated with smallpox, cholera and other contagious diseases. The goddess is seen as being the causative element in both the processes of sickness as well as healing.⁴ Māriammen, like all the other Hindu goddesses in the folk tradition, is feared and revered at the same time. I had occasion to experience this sense of fear of the goddess while doing fieldwork in India, compiling a tape recording of the devotees attending Māriammen festival. Here I was able to record several of the devotees exclaim to themselves in between snatches of prayer "We should never do anything to offend *Amman* (Mother)" and "*Amman* (Mother) would take care of us."

It would often emerge during the course of my interviews in India that, the goddesses' power here, was tangibly experienced by her devotees. I recall recording an informant's story that she knew of someone who had come from another part of India and settled in the city of Madurai. This individual had apparently failed to understand the power of the goddess.⁵ According to my informant, as a consequence of this irreverence, that person was perpetually visited by misfortune. The informant went on to say that it was only when the individual acknowledged the power of Māriammen and showed deference to her that his long spate of ill luck abated. Although the veracity of this story is something of a moot point,

⁴Kumar, *Hinduism in South Africa*, 88.

⁵I am able to use this festival illustratively because of the goddess Māriammen's connection to goddesses from the folk tradition. For details, see Maheshvari Naidu, "Ritual Space and Ritual Dominance in Nidan," *Journal for the Study of Hinduism*, 2001.

such a recounting underpinned the informant's implicit belief in the part his goddess played in the existential reality of the Madurai community.

O' Flaherty, referring to goddess in general, points out that although the goddess also brings with her elements of destruction, the devotee does not merely desire to placate the goddess but also wishes to have her never leave him. She claims that "if the essential function of the Goddess is to be there for you, you want her there even when she is in her shadow aspect," and that "the only unbearable harm that the Goddess can inflict on the worshipper is to abandon him or her..."⁶ Abandoning the devotee means that the devotee no longer has access to the concentrated power of the deity or to her protection. For the indentured Hindus, in the new and alien land of South Africa, abandonment could quite well be read in religious terms as being catastrophic.

5. The Goddess in South Africa

Rehana Vally says that the crossing of the waters from India was the first part of the immigration process.⁷ The second part began upon their arrival in South Africa, being marked by a process of reconstruction of a world that reflected the structures they knew and, would have been familiar with and with which they were comfortable.⁸ The imperative here quite understandably appears to have been the need for the familiar. What I would like to further suggest is the need for stability and some sort of reassurance. I suggest that in her bid to re-locate both geographically and psychically and ground herself to some manner of stability the Hindu woman saw it as an imperative for the family to replicate certain ritualistic observances that formed a crucial part of the family worldview in her previous home.

This in itself would not be all that unique to communities that are displaced or dispersed or even female members only of communities that are displaced. There is necessarily a remembering and a homing desire that come into play with these communities.⁹ When one looks at the social

⁶Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, 280.

⁷Rehana Ebr.-Vally, *Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South Africa*, South Africa: Kwela Books, 2001, 21.

⁸Ebr.-Vally, *Kala Pani*, 21.

⁹Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996, 197.

topography of twentieth century diasporas one sees that reiterative performances of acts that comprise customs or that which is constructed as custom, tradition, or value is sought to be replicated in the new location.¹⁰

What would have been unique to dislocated Hindu communities like the indentured Hindus arriving in South Africa were the religious exigencies of the *period* in which they initially arrived as well as the exigencies of the *places* from which they arrived. These exigencies are revealing in terms of the kind of Hinduism that would require to be re-articulated in a geographical and culturally foreign land. I suggest that two modes of remembering or re-‘memoring’ operated in the early years of indenture, in other words, from 1860 onwards.

Within the situational reality of where they came from and when they came, emerge two religious imperatives or re-‘memoring’. One was a re-telling of the mythological narratives contained in the Hindu texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The other – that is, a strong element of goddess worship and ritual – is more vital for the purposes of our discussion. The particular folk tradition of goddess worship shows up the position and eminence of women as unique and assertively otherwise. My interview with the following respondent clearly underpins this point.

One of my respondents was Mrs. Tholsiama Naidoo in her late sixties who officiated as priestess for the last five years at the Kālī-Amman Temple in Mount Edgecombe. She informed me that the people who attended the temple were drawn from all walks of life and were from all age groups, and that they were both male and female, although the women were in greater numbers.

The temple itself was an exceedingly modest structure both in size and design, which housed several Amman or mother goddesses. My concern was the goddess Māriammen and the adherents who chose to offer worship to her in this Kālī-Amman Temple. Tholsiama Naidoo narrated that the devotees who came to offer worship to the goddess Māriammen, came especially when sickness and misfortune visited them. She pointed out that special offerings of flowers, fruits, etc., were made to the goddess when any member of the family was afflicted with measles and chicken pox. She added that she was asked to invoke the goddess through trance, which she was able to do, although she stated it was easier on some occasions to ‘call’, as she put it, the trance.

¹⁰Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 197.

She went on to share that the devotees were all in awe of the mother goddess as her powers of healing were unquestioned. “So they come, when they have problems, and no one but mother can help. Mother, indeed, helps them. I have seen it many hundred of times. They will be so sick or so scared of something terrible in their lives and after praying and listening to the trance, and following the advice from the trance, they get better.”

One adds that the trance referred to by the priestess is a kind of self-induced hypnotic state where it is understood, within the tradition, that the person under trance is “possessed” by the goddess and uses that body to “communicate” and offer a blessing to cast away the misfortune or illness of the devotee. As such, the female officiating as priestess here is imperative to the relationship between devotee and goddess. These possessed women are revered as the Divine and they are seen as being able to bless others, to act as oracles and are seen as having healing powers. These women are often regarded with great respect by the believers and are sought out as spiritual healers and counsellors.¹¹

Interviews with several of the adherents who frequented the temple echoed this almost generic description of why they visited the goddess. True they offered worship to the one god known as Siva or Vishnu but their worship to the goddesses was not seen as any way contradictory to this. However, it was evident from their actions and verbal responses that it was to the female goddesses like Mariammam that the devotees turned to in their times of distress and anxiety with the implicit belief that she would take care of them. Again, vital in this devotee-goddess equation is the position of the mediating person in the form of the female priestess. Many of the devotees that I spoke with said that they consulted with the priestess and asked her to invoke the trance to help them with guidance against their misfortune.

The paper chooses as its foci Hindu women in South Africa and folk goddesses, as they constitute an area obviously under researched, because the position of women is stronger in the context of these folk goddesses. That is to say, it is the women who act as mediators between devotee and goddess. These goddesses ‘appear’ to communicate through the female priestesses, who are said to be vested with the task of communicating the devotees’ particular misfortune to the goddess. It is the priestess who, in turn, communicates to the believer, the goddess’ instructions for

¹¹Diesel, “The Suffering Mothers,” 51.

retribution. The phenomenon of goddess worship, I believe, functions as a hermeneutic device in attempting to unpack just how the Hindu woman's religious identity comes to be articulated in South Africa. For this form of goddess worship, whether it is the goddess Māriammen, goddess Draupadi, or the goddess Kālī, was highly pervasive in the early years of indenture and continues to be so. Diesel notes that the women commented on the close connection between the divine females and human females and saw their close relationship with the goddess as adding and contributing to their own identity and worth as women.¹² One adds that in the absence of the class of formal Brahmin priests (as almost no Brahmin was among the early indentured labourers), the early indentured women could comfortably replay the ritual allegiances to the goddesses, in their role as custodians of the shrine, as they would have in the Indian rural villages. The later arriving Brahmin would have also found himself to be a minority. Hence, there would not have been a stress on emphasising the male deities from the Brahmanical tradition, to the exclusion of folk elements of worship from the matriarchal non-Brahmanical tradition. The indigenous goddess tradition, in turn, demands no preordained priestly class. The priests (female) who officiate can come from any class or caste background. There is, thus, no gender or class barrier, leading to the possibility of a "religion with appeal to the marginalized."¹³

In turning to minority migrant communities, Hinduism (in South Africa) was studied ethnographically, while Islam and Judaism (in South Africa) were studied historically by Chidchester.¹⁴ While preferring not to engage theoretically why exactly this would be so, he does add that these considerations are important for the historian of religion. I would like to suggest that one possible reason that the Hindu religion, as it appears in South Africa, has been studied ethnographically rather than historically is because of its predominantly visual ritual-based practices performed to the goddesses and gods.

Prior to 1905 there was very little religio-cultural contact with India. This is another reason why I have chosen to focus on the period. The year 1905 saw the commencement of individuals considered to be Hindu

¹²Diesel, "The Suffering Mothers," 52.

¹³Diesel, "The Suffering Mothers," 43.

¹⁴David Chidchester, "Embracing South Africa, Internationalizing the Study of Religion," *Journal for Study of Religion* 11, 1 (1998), 12.

religious leaders visit South Africa in a bid to spread and strengthen Hinduism here and stem the tide against conversion to other faiths. These leaders came in the intellectual wake of nineteenth century Hindu reformist thinkers who sought to purge Hindus from what they considered as the overly ritualistic performance orientation of Hinduism and the ambiguity regarding a pluralistic worldview. However, the initial form of Hinduism practised was ritual-based and temple-based worship, one aspect of which was goddess worship. Every temple built in South Africa whether dedicated to the dominant male deity of Shiva or Vishnu had a separate shrine to the goddess.¹⁵ There were also temples dedicated solely to the mother goddess like the Mariammen Temple in Mount Edgecombe whose initial temple structure housing the goddess was constructed in 1890.

I suggest that goddess worship was transplanted into the new geographical context for the purposes of ushering in a sense of stability. As such it is a form of communal rather than congregational ritual worship that would see (back in India) the whole village participates to prevent the unfolding of calamities that might otherwise visit the community. As Vally shows us, for indentured communities, travels away from home are also travels away from the organisational principles of certain identity markers such as caste.¹⁶ Vally states that most Indians crossed the waters or ocean fully aware that they stood to lose their caste status. In light of this one can also surmise that observances such as the Mariammen festival and other ritual observances provided a framework for the much-needed 'familiar'.

The women I spoke to were wonderful respondents in their literal responses to questions as to why they still perform this particular worship to the goddess. On an intuitive rather than an intellectual level, they felt that propitiating and offering thanks to the goddess offered a means to sustain stability in their lives and, most importantly, a means of warding off illness and misfortune precipitated by illness. All women recalled the importance of this particular goddess worship in their family. Their recollections were of the prayer, being a time of family gathering, and indicated a sense of religious group identity, associative solidarity, and cohesion. The goddess is experienced as the mother earth, capable of energies of both life and death. The women interviewed appeared to experience the goddess as an imminent part of their lives.

¹⁵Kumar, *Hinduism in South Africa*, 30.

¹⁶Ebr.-Vally, *Kala Pani*, 19.

Interestingly, the goddess Māriammen is a natural structure in the form of an earth mound in both the small Kōlā-ammen Temple (established in 1925) and the proximate larger Māriammen Temple (established much earlier in 1890). In the latter temple, the Māriammen Temple, the goddess is an impressive size, the earth mound¹⁷ towering close to the high ceiling of the modern temple structure that replaced the original wood and iron temple. Thus, literally, the goddess is of the earth and her form is seen as shaping itself spontaneously from the earth. There was a strong sense of this awareness that presented itself among the devotees interviewed at this temple. Many pointed out that this goddess was special as it manifested spontaneously from the ground and unlike the religious statues in other temples that were fashioned by human agency.

The Māriammen prayer is of special importance to the Hindu woman of South Africa. The men participate as well and are usually, although not always, invested with the task of offering the blood sacrifice to the goddess (in other words, with the actual slaughter). The women are involved with the preparation of the offered food and with the laying of the cooked food in front of the deity. In this instance the food was understood by the respondents as an essential part of the prayer and part of the personality of the goddess. Food is nourishing and in the context of severe monsoon and drought, the exigencies of the climate in India, food is healing and life-giving. In South Africa, it appeared that through the material of food the goddess is construed as also being life-giving.

6. Diasporic Journeying

In discussions of diaspora communities certain so-called movements are thought to come into play. It is claimed of diasporic communities that they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and that they continue to relate personally or vicariously to that homeland.¹⁸ The term diaspora connotes community, numbers, and solidarity. Within this

¹⁷These are anthills that the indigenous tradition accepts as manifestations of the mother goddess. Small mounds appear naturally, and around it little shrines are erected. This was the foundation of the Māriammen Temple established in 1890. These sites are also claimed as possessing great healing powers. The earth mound is ritually cared for and accepted as a form of the goddess.

¹⁸William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return in Diaspora," *Journal of Transnational Studies* (1996), 10.

community of numbers comes into play an identity, in this case religious. This reality is shared with others through common sets of meaning in the various ritual performative acts. But can one just have, or does one need to name, say a religious identity? This may seem like a frivolous question but it is framed against the social realities that inscribe the Hindu identity within India juxtaposed to the discourse operating around Hinduism. For one, the category of Hinduism, and the reality or realities it encodes is very much a nineteenth century creation of colonial imagining, which lends itself to interrogation. The term Hindu is older than the term Hinduism, and had, originally, an ethnographic reference. Hindu as a term is barely used by the people whose religious affiliation the term is meant to describe. The term that the Hindus in India themselves preferred was Sanatanists, meaning followers of the eternal religion.

Of course, the people living outside of India readily accept and use this term. It would appear that clusters of circumstances, political and social, precipitate a heightened identity consciousness, which, in turn, bring certain identity markers to the fore. From the women interviewed it became clear that the ritual remembrances, as in the case of the ritual associated with the goddess worship, and ritual performances acted as assertions of some sort of cohesive identity and collective faith in the goddess' care.

Nelson notes that at the core of all diaspora fictional writing is the haunting presence of India. Brah, however, goes on to iterate that the homing desire is not the same as a desire for homeland.¹⁹ It is not so much diaspora as a theoretical concept, in as much as a particular historical experience of diaspora that I am concerned with, in the context of the Hindu woman's journey to South Africa. The women I spoke with in no way saw India in merely romantic terms or as being their true homeland. It was a place they would have loved to visit or loved visiting. In their own way they were able to express to me that they thought of South Africa as their homeland. This was usually communicated in simple terms stripped threadbare of any kind of talk about diaspora or homeland or intellectual or

¹⁹Emmanuel S. Nelson ed., *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. USA: Greenwood Press, 1993; Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 16.

political jargon. This foregrounds Avtar Brah's assertion that not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return.²⁰

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have borne witness to historical events that have seen people whose exodus from their place of home marked by varying degrees of violence and or hope and aspirations.²¹ These are narratives of long travel away from original homelands. One suggests that in spite of personal hardship and the extremes of political realities and circumstances, the particulars of which lie outside the parameters of this research, the indentured Hindu women sought courageously to make South Africa her new home. Avtar Brah speaks of the strong notions of diaspora allied with displacement and dislocation. She refers to this dislocation as being journeys across geographical and psychic spaces, and being transmigration across borders of people's cultures marking a space where new forms of belonging are appropriated. If we were to accept this then it is plausible that the Hindu woman attempted to appropriate a sense of belonging in her new homeland, South Africa through certain aspects of goddess worship like the Māriammen prayer and other goddess festivals. The anecdotal evidences from the women spoken to suggest that the mother goddess, with her strong relationship to the earth and fertility coupled with her powers of healing, was sought out in the new homeland.

7. Conclusion

Having sought out the goddess and her protection in an alien land, worship to the goddess as my respondents revealed, has continued up to present. Thus, at the level of popular religious practice, veneration of the indigenous goddesses is of importance to South African Hindus. This paper, however, has attempted to give voice to the early indentured women and the part that they played in the shaping of the early Hindu religion in South Africa.

Contemporary Hinduism in South Africa is itself a testimony to the mosaic character of Hinduism which is anything but monolithic. For the kind of Hinduism presently practised in South Africa is representative of worship to the indigenous mother goddesses as well as a strong emphasis

²⁰Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 197.

²¹Rosemary George Marang, "At a Slight Tilt to Reality: Reading Diaspora Literature," *Melus* 2 (1996).

of Neo-Hinduism and the Neo Hindu Movements. Hindus in South Africa follow, according to their inclination, ritual-based Hinduism, or rather a philosophical stream of Hinduism.

Without question, South Africa is now very much the home of the immigrant Indians; indeed, South Africa is far from being experienced as an alien land. However, ritual-based Hinduism and worship to the indigenous goddesses as well as the various Brahmanic gods continue as testimonies to the significance of religion in the lives of the South African Hindus. Hinduism in South Africa is vibrantly experienced by the local Hindus. The large number of temples as vital sacred spaces is a palpable evidence of Hindus in this country. The structures of the temple and the colourful ritual and festival activities of the Hindus further colour and enrich the multidimensional and multi faith country that is South Africa.