






Imagining India / Hinduism from Chile
INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com 
Indexed by	Scopus  Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)  DOAJ 
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 3, 2022 Across Cultures: Ibero-America and India
Guest Editors	Ranjeeva Ranjan ¹ & Mala Shikha ²
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Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n3.php 

About the Article

Title	Imagining India / Hinduism from Chile
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Affiliation	Professor, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Author ID	None
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3.18 Pages: 1-7
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n318 
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n3/v14n318.pdf 
Article History	First Published: 17 October 2022
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact 
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services 
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Imagining India / Hinduism from Chile

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Abstract

Indian culture expresses itself in Chile's daily life that, until recently, would have been unthinkable both for its real and mental remoteness. Undoubtedly, this is a consequence of globalization and the rapid flow of ideas and practices of the last decades, but it is also due to the sustained increase in the presence of the Indian community in Chile from the mid-'80s onwards, with the economic opening during that time creating favorable conditions for the increased number of Indian immigration in Chilean society. India's cultural identity is marked by its religious way of life and in general, Hindu immigrants - as a result of the characteristics of Hinduism - have tended to reproduce their culture and religion while having to adjust to local circumstances. Consequently, both are renegotiated. This process implies an enormous effort of adaptability, which is necessary to be able to develop themselves in the new country without having to abandon the cultural baggage they bring with them, creating new strategies of action that at the same time imply and generate new ways of relating and redefining their identity referents.

Keywords: Chile, identity, Immigrant, India, Partial Scope Agreement

For some years now, and beyond the obvious geographical and cultural distances, India has "come closer" to us, being today a country which is more and more common in the context of knowledge, and even guiding us to share in some cases, certain customs, and beliefs of Indian culture in our daily life that, until recently, would have been unthinkable both for its real and mental remoteness. Undoubtedly, this is a consequence of globalization and the rapid flow of ideas and practices of the last decades, but it is also due to the sustained increase of the Indian community in Chile from the mid-'80s onwards, with the economic opening during that time in Chile creating favorable conditions for the increase of Indian immigration in Chilean society.

In this way, the good commercial and political relations that Chile and India have traditionally had from 1950 onwards took another step in their history. A history that, although it is true that it is not very broad or robust, is quite stable and harmonious over time, where, logically, there are some milestones that stand out above others in the bilateral construction of relations between Chile and India in these more than seventy years. Thus, quickly and succinctly, we must mention the writer Augusto D'Halmar (1882-1950), General Consul of Chile in Calcutta (today Kolkata) during 1907 and 1908, who became interested in the principle of non-violence (ahimsa) and reincarnation, after touring the streets and crematoriums of Varanasi (D'Halmar, 1935). In addition, it is worth mentioning that Chile was the only Latin American country to participate in India's Independence ceremony on August 15, 1947, sending the diplomat, physician and writer Juan Marin (1900-1963) as its official representative (Marin, 1956). A couple of years later, Marin wrote

The Eternal India and took charge of organizing the first Chilean diplomatic (and business) mission in India, which turned into the embassy in 1956, with the writer Miguel Serrano Fernandez (1917-2009) at the head.

We also know that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Chile in 1968, and in 2005, President Ricardo Lagos was the first Chilean president to make a state visit to India. This exchange of an activity that was repeated with Michelle Bachelet in 2009, in return for the visit made a year earlier by Pratibha Patil, the first woman to be elected president of India. As a consequence of these positive diplomatic relations, in recent years a series of collaboration agreements have been signed in various economic and other matters, plus a Partial Scope Agreement, which has been extended a couple of times since it was first signed in 2007, currently giving tariff preferences to more than 2,800 products in total¹. Thus, India, its history and its religious and secular cultures, today, are somewhat more familiar to us Chileans, most of the time these are only "representations" mediated by other voices and visions, sometimes distant and diffuse, either from the Indians themselves or from non-Indians, which lead us to imagine Indians / Indian religions from the south of the world.

One of the visions that persist with greater force in our environment is related to the religious identity of the Hindu community of Santiago de Chile, with some of its continuities and ruptures. Although this is not the time to detail conceptually relevant categories such as diaspora and migration, nor to delve into the complexity of the concept of Hinduism (for the above, see Sharma n.d.; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999; Luarte, 2012; Flood, 1998, among others), it is enough to add that whether we understand Hinduism as a homogeneous and unitary religion; or on the contrary, we approach it as a set of religions, with diverse practices and beliefs, it is characterized -in either of the two meanings- by a firm sociocultural hierarchy. We call that the Varna system combined with the jāti, which fixed all relationships and day-to-day life beyond the strictly religious from our narrow point of view. This norm is given among Hindus themselves, and also with others, with foreigner. In this sense, Hinduism is a religion that not only contains a belief system but also has real or practical applications in daily life through obligations and customs that go beyond religiosity (Flood, 1998).

One of the clearest manifestations of these components is the presence of a strong and complex ritual activity, which obeys pre-established rules, and which by its very nature establishes limits and differences. Thus, for example, the traditional Hindu ritual, which varies depending on the group of which it is part, must comply with specific and unalterable rules of form and substance (space, time, participants, prayers, ingredients, etc.), in order to be correctly performed according to the many sacred texts, created by its very act, different socio-cultural and religious identities within its own broad community that we call Hindu.

Now, as it is logical to suppose, the above is only valid on "paper", since every religion - at least in its formal aspect - is delimited by the sociocultural and geographical space in which it is developed (and experienced), so that the particular religious identity of a community will be clearly defined and, to a certain extent, conditioned by these external factors. Thus, we have that religious practices and beliefs are dynamic because the scenarios also vary, transforming and adapting to new temporal and spatial realities. Therefore, clearly, being a Hindu in India is not, because it cannot be, the same as being a Hindu in Chile.

Now, Indian migration has its historical origin in the early twentieth century, when during the first two decades, a few families from the north of the Indian peninsula, especially of Sindi origin (today in Pakistan), began to settle for commercial reasons in Punta Arenas, strategic city of the only natural passages -the Strait of Magellan and Cape Horn-, which connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in those years, until the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Bhai Haroomal, in 1905, was the first of these adventurous traders, eventually forming a chain of stores (17 in total) not only in Punta Arenas but also with stores in Argentine Patagonia and the Falkland Islands (Sinha, 2018). With time and the passing of the decades, others followed, such as Dwarkadas and Tarachand Devandas.

From the 1930s to the mid-1980s, Indian migration numerically speaking turns out to be scarcely important, but not so the movement of their cultural and religious beliefs and practices, which were imported (and adapted) little by little, so to speak, by national writers, artists and "spiritual seekers", in an attitude qualified as eccentric for that time. In the late 1920s, the Suddha Dharma Mandalam was founded; in the 1950s the Santiago Meditation Center of Self Realization Fellowship of Swami Yogananda was formed; during the early 1960s, the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center of Santiago was formed, until reaching more than 30 philosophical and religious movements or associations of Indian origin (Hindu, Sikh, among others) that formally operate in Chile today (Luarte, 2017).

As noted above, since three or four decades ago Indian migration in the country has increased considerably, with a steady flow of professionals and entrepreneurs, working mainly in the IT sector, in Indian companies with representation in Chile and/or in commerce, who come mostly from the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Today, the Indian community in Chile is approximately 3,630 people, considering both NRIs (Non-Resident India) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin)ⁱⁱ. About 60% have Chilean nationality, so it can be inferred how many reside permanently and how many are only passing through the country for a few years and for specific projects. As a result of the reasons and expectations of migration, most of the Indians are based in the cities of Iquique, a free trade zone (about a third of them), and in the capital, Santiago. There is also a small group of Indians located in the Valparaíso region and others still in Punta Arenas, more for reasons of family tradition than labor (Aggarwal, 2015).

In Santiago, Punta Arenas and Iquique, the Indian/Hindu community residing in the country have temples formally and legally established, i.e., they are recognized as religious entities of public law by the State. The first temple was the one in Punta Arenas, inaugurated in 2002 under the name of "Centro Cultural y Templo Hindú de Punta Arenas" (Cultural Center and Hindu Temple of Punta Arenas). Then, in 2008, the "Santiago Temple and Cultural Center" was created, better known as Santiago Mandir and, finally, the one in Iquique was founded in 2011.

In these temples, dedicated to the main deities of the pan-Hindu pantheon, the resident community -together with Chilean friends- meets periodically to celebrate their rites and festivities, and as their own names indicate, they have been able to erect themselves into a sort of cultural centers for the teaching and maintenance of their customs within the community itself, especially for the generation born in Chile and who have only indirect references to India, its cultures and customs (Luarte, 2018).

Particularly, Indians/Hindus living in Santiago de Chile frequent Santiago Mandir, which is run full-time by one of the two Brahmins who serve as priests in Chile (the other is located in Iquique, in the north of the country). Maharaj Ravi Kewlani arrived in Chile with his family in 1995. For 14 years, he lived in Iquique, dedicating himself exclusively to commerce, but eight years ago, he moved to Santiago, where he is the official priest of the Hindu community of Chile and logically he is also in charge of Santiago Mandir, which operates in his own house. Here, beyond certain adaptations in the components of the puja and some concessions in relation to the participants of the ritual, he performs the same functions that would perform a prototype Hindu priest in charge of a temple in India, officiating for example the most popular samskaras, such as marriages, funerals or performing the astral charts for newborns, besides obviously directing all the ceremonial in the celebrations of the many festivities of the Hindu lunar calendar, such as the two Durga puja, Holi, Shiva Ratri, Krishna Janmashthami, but also others, such as Guru Nanak Jayanthi. Along with the above, his mistress is the one who runs the cultural branch of the temple, receiving visitors and teaching weekly Hinduism to the children of the community, in order to maintain the religious tradition despite the physical remoteness with India and, thus, to pass it on to the new generations (B. Ravi Kewlani, personal communication, April 2017). The establishment of a Hindu temple in Santiago meant a change in the internal dynamics, as it aims to place Santiago Mandir at the center of the cultural and religious activities of the Indian/Hindu community in Santiago.

Until then, all celebrations and ceremonies were held in the residences of members of the community who voluntarily opened the doors of their homes, or in social centers such as the Club Sirio and the Spanish Stadium. The establishment of the temple as the main meeting point for the entire Hindu community in Santiago came to signify and retake the traditional role that temples have in India, that is, to be the abode of the deity, but also to be places of celebration and religious and cultural preservation, as well as meeting and building networks and friendships (Younger 2010). In synthesis, Santiago Mandir is becoming a center of cultural, religious and social gathering for the Hindu community, becoming increasingly instrumental in the way their customs, ideas and traditions are re-signified and revitalized in a new context, not only geographically, but also more importantly, culturally and religiously. For the same reason, the maintenance of rituals has become a fundamental part of the reconstruction of sociocultural identity abroad, even if the forms must change and the rituals adapt (B. Ravi Kewlani, personal communication, April 2017).

Thus, the members of this community have for some time maintained frequent and organized relations with each other, meeting periodically not only in the mandir, but also at the Indian Embassy, where they celebrate activities not only of a purely diplomatic or official nature, such as Gandhi Jayanthi (October 2), Independence Day on August 15 or Republic Day every January 26, but also others with a slightly more religious nature and origin, such as Diwali.

Parallel to the role played by the Embassy in community cohesion, the group of Indians who arrived in Chile during the second half of the 1980s formed in September 1993 the "Indian Association of Santiago", which is recognized by the High-Level Committee of the Indian Diaspora, with the aim of "promoting our Indian culture and heritage in Chile and uniting the community", "keeping it busy with very entertaining activities, which make one feel in India" (Oyarzo, 2011, p. 85). For this, an annual membership fee is required to pay for the activities carried out during the year. To mention a few, its associates usually rent a piece of land outside Santiago to celebrate Holi, or they also organize a trip to a nearby coastal city for Ganesh Chaturthi, among others.

As most of the Indians migrated to Chile for work reasons, with an average age of 30 years, their youth was essential in the process of both integration and identity conservation and transformation, as it allowed them to face it in a more moldable way. Many of them have formed their families here. On the one hand, this implies that they were more able to adapt to the new context of life and that their children were born into a household that already included cultural negotiations or, in other words, there were already continuities and ruptures in the Indian identity of the household and its members. On the other hand, this made them the only ones in charge of maintaining and transmitting their culture and traditions to their children, especially when the community was not very large and the official religious authorities did not yet exist.

This is central to the immigrant community because this second generation does not have constant contact with an Indian society where these identity references are the majority and are present day by day. This leads parents to question, understand and select the aspects of Indian culture(s) they want to transmit to their children. But this cultural and religious transmission is not immediate or automatic, but a representation or an image of something, because it implies the reception and renegotiation of meanings, especially because their descendants, living together with the rest of the Chilean population since their childhood, growing up combining part of the cultural patterns of their new social environment and part of the cultural patterns generated by their family environment. Thus, this second generation raised in Chile is composed, on the one hand, of a group that currently ranges from 15 to 30 years of age approximately and are, for the most part, children of immigrants who arrived between the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, on the other hand, they correspond to the children of those who have emigrated from India, have married and formed families in Chile less than 10 years ago, and are, therefore, younger, mainly school-age children.

Thus, the establishment of the temples has meant a substantive change in the internal dynamics, as it aims to place them at the center of the cultural and religious activities of the different communities. Until then, all celebrations and ceremonies were held in the residences of community members who voluntarily opened the doors of their homes or in social centers rented especially for certain occasions. In Santiago, for example, the establishment of the temple as the main meeting point for a large part of the community came to signify and retake the traditional role that temples have in India, that is, to be the abode of the deity, but also to be places of celebration and religious and cultural preservation, as well as meeting, among others.

Obviously, in Chile, it is more difficult to teach them some things that in India would be learned naturally and/or directly, without having to explain the details. In addition, it is also more complex because the immigrants must combine the maintenance of the religious-cultural (self-) identity, but at the same time, it is a priority for them the integration into the new society, because after all they live in Chile and for many of them, their nationality is Chilean. In Chile, their culture, beliefs and practices are a minority, and they are much more exposed to alternative ways of perceiving their reality, of living it on a daily basis and of relating to others. This translates into a permanent work of reconstruction of religious and cultural identities, their own and those of others, which is producing a Hinduism in other contexts, not only geographical but even more relevant, imagined and shaped by mental remoteness (Stasulane, 2020).

In essence, the instances of meeting outside the home, whether in temples, at the Embassy or those organized by the Association, are increasingly frequent and attended, thus strengthening the Indian diaspora in our country, and becoming a fundamental part of the reconstruction and resignification of cultural identity abroad, as they provide the Indian community in the country, concrete opportunities for them to (re)learn about their cultural practices in a different cultural context.

Finally, I would like to emphasize certain points:

- India's cultural identity is marked by its religious way of life and in general, Hindu immigrants - as a result of the characteristics of Hinduism - have tended to reproduce their culture and religion while having to adjust to local circumstances. Consequently, both are renegotiated. This process implies an enormous effort of adaptability, which is necessary to be able to develop themselves in the new country without having to abandon the cultural baggage they bring with them, creating new strategies of action that at the same time imply and generate new ways of relating and redefining their identity referents.
- For such negotiations to tend more towards continuity rather than rupture or elimination of certain cultural and religious traits, the role of the family is fundamental. Thus, the presence of sacred symbols and religious practice in the home is extremely significant in making Hinduism a relevant part of their daily lives, becoming a bulwark of cultural-religious identity: the music they listen to, the way they decorate their places and their parents' daily routines are the first ways in which a child is confronted with a family culture that differs from that of the rest of their classmates, as well as a constant reminder of where they come from and who they are to adults.
- As this depends on an interpretation that varies from household to household, it has resulted in a religion that is more personalized and less communal than it would be in India. This differentiated religion is especially appealing to the younger members of the community, as it allows them new ways of living and enjoying the religion that is not so restrictive, thus allowing them to maintain a Hindu identity that does not necessarily comply with all the rites and obligations prescribed by their dharma.
- Finally, the formation of support networks or voluntary associations is extremely important, as common experiences are some of the focal points around which new bonds develop. In this way, the role of Hinduism, the relationships that develop around it and its implications take on a new face, especially in the midst of the disruption of practicing this "way of life" in a country where they are a minority. Also fundamental in this, especially in the last 15 years, has been the massification of the Internet, as well as digital TV and "Hindu" fashion in the country. Much of the Hindu community in Santiago watches only Indian TV and listens only to Indian music, whether religious, classical or Bollywood. The mass production and distribution of music and images have helped maintain and reconnect a sense of identity by facilitating the immigrant's encounter with Hindu elements from their own home and city. At the same time, they have created online communities with other Indian immigrants in Chile, thus strengthening a sense of identity that combines and allows the coexistence of both religious and cultural realities.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

Notes

ⁱ http://www.sice.oas.org/tpd/chl_ind/chl_ind_s.asp

ⁱⁱ https://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf

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