

## Hindu Chaplaincy in US Higher Education

Asha Shipman

*US campuses generally aspire to be microcosmic laboratories of social, intellectual and spiritual inquiry and practice. There is an increasing awareness among higher education professionals that to fully serve our students our institutions should include among their goals a firm commitment to supporting students' religious, secular and spiritual identities. Spiritual support for Hindu students is in a nascent stage. The programming and support offered by a Hindu chaplain, particularly when it contextualizes and affirms the faith tradition, improves students' sense of well-being and furthermore can insulate them from anxiety and depression. Moreover, as the world grows increasingly interconnected the ability to authentically connect with others from vastly different cultures and worldviews will be a fundamental precursor for success. Hindu chaplains can serve as role models for students on how to successfully navigate the pluralistic social environments that comprise our global community. This paper summarizes the state of Hindu chaplaincy in US higher education, offering key examples, particularly the Hindu Life Program at Yale University.*

*Keywords: Hinduism, higher education, chaplaincy, interreligious dialogue, interreligious education*

### Social and Spiritual Context of the Hindu Population in the US

“...Hinduism is no longer a religion tucked ten thousand miles away safely from our shores where it can be ignored but a vital and growing part of the American religious landscape. To learn something about Hinduism is to learn something about your neighbor, your co-worker, your new son-in-law.”—Anne Monius<sup>1</sup>

There is an increasing awareness among higher education professionals that to fully serve our students, our institutions should include among their goals a firm commitment to supporting students' religious, secular and spiritual identities.<sup>2</sup> Spiritual support for Hindu students is in a nascent stage. To gain an understanding of the spiritual support offered Hindu students on US campuses I explored the history of Hindu Americans in the US and reached out to colleagues in the field of chaplaincy and student affairs.<sup>3</sup> Chaplains and spiritual advisors recounted to me how they came to support (or are attempting to support) Hindu students at their various institutions, from small liberal arts colleges to business schools and large universities. As I navigate these new waters I am blessed with the company of a growing number of Hindu chaplain colleagues. Our roles vary depending on the time and resources we are allotted. Consistent among us, however, is

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Monius, “On the Question of Relevance: Why Twelfth-Century India and Haitian Voodoo Matter,” Harvard Divinity School Convocation address, September 17, 2007, <https://youtu.be/MrDzmIvEo6o>.

<sup>2</sup> “Convergence on Campus: Our Story,” *convergenceoncampus.org*, last modified 2020, <https://convergenceoncampus.org/our-story>, offers a summary of studies on spirituality in higher education. Also see Jennifer A. Lindholm, et al., “A Guidebook of Promising Practices: Facilitating College Students' Spiritual Development,” last modified 2010, <https://spirituality.ucla.edu/publications/promising-practices/default.php>, as an example of responses to these studies.

<sup>3</sup> Including currently employed Hindu chaplains in US university and hospital chaplaincy and members of the National Association of College and University Chaplains, Association of College and University Religious Affairs, and NASPA.

the belief that our work serves a vital need for the Hindu populations we support while at the same time enhancing our wider campus communities. This paper summarizes the state of Hindu chaplaincy in US higher education, offering key examples, particularly the Hindu Life Program at Yale University.

In the early 1960s my parents attended the University of Iowa as graduate students from India; there, my father co-founded the UI India Association, which hosted a Diwali celebration. They were part of a second major wave of Indian immigrant to the United States, many of whom settled here after finishing their degrees. Many, like my parents, had expected to return and settle in India. When they made the commitment to stay and raise families in the United States their roles and relationship with the nation shifted. For my parents that included my father taking on an added avocation of serving as a religious leader for the Indian community in Connecticut. The first wave of Indian immigrants had worked mainly in the California agricultural industry but were treated as temporary labor; they were not allowed to purchase land or marry an American citizen. This second wave, however, was allowed a route to citizenship, so many stayed.<sup>4</sup> Almost four decades later the number of Indians in the US increased sharply by two-thirds when Indian IT workers recruited into the US in 1999 to work on the Y2K crisis found opportunities to work and settle here.<sup>5</sup> While at first the relationship with the host nation was restrictive, isolationist, and minimal, increasingly this immigrant population has brought about a discernable effect on American culture and society. In turn, as might be expected, living in the US has altered the lives of the immigrant population along social, cultural, ethnic and religious lines.

### *Hindus in the US Today*

As Anne Monius suggests in the epigraph to this essay, Hindus are becoming more prominent in the US population. For awhile they were most visible in the medical profession, as taxi drivers, and as 7-11 store owners,<sup>6</sup> but headliners now exist in Silicon Valley, the US Congress and major US corporations, elevating attention on this population in the national radar. How many Hindus live in the US? What are some key demographics of this population? Can data on the overall US Hindu population provide useful insights on Hindu students matriculating at US campuses? The Pew Research Center conducted a series of surveys from 2010–14 targeting Asian Indian, specifically Hindu, adults living in the United States. Useful to note from the start is that of the Indian American respondents to a 2012 survey, 51 percent reported that they are Hindu.<sup>7</sup> This percentage is surprising because in India 81 percent of the population is Hindu, and it has been widely assumed that this pattern would hold among immigrants from India to the US.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Isaksen Leonard, *The South Asian Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997). The Luce-Cellar bill (Public Law 483) allowed Indians living in the US at the time citizenship through naturalization, thereby allowing Indians to own land. In 1965 the US Immigration and Naturalization Act widened the gates for South Asian immigrants in general.

<sup>5</sup> “A Singular Population: Indian Immigrants in America,” February 22, 2017, <https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/articles/chazen-global-insights/singular-population-indian-immigrants-america>.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately epitomized by Apu, the stereotype convenience store owner character in *The Simpsons* television show. See Murali Balaji, “Hank Azaria offers to stop doing Apu. So...thank you?,” *Religion Dispatches*, April 27, 2018, <http://religiondispatches.org/hank-azaria-offers-to-stop-doing-apu-so-thank-you>.

<sup>7</sup> Drew DeSilver, “5 Facts about Indian Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, September 30 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/30/5-facts-about-indian-americans>.

<sup>8</sup> “So How Many Hindus are there in the US?,” *Hinduism Today*, January/February/March 2008, <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1584>.

Language barriers, unfamiliarity with phone surveys, and concerns about citizenship may skew the survey responses, but as will be discussed below, the data serve to fill in some details about a minority demographic that has generally remained ethnographically neglected.

Overall the Hindu population in the US is estimated to be 0.7 percent of the US population, or 2,230,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Data collected from the Pew Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study<sup>10</sup> indicate that the US Hindu population is fairly young (90 percent are between 18 and 49 years old), highly educated (48 percent have postgraduate degrees), and recently immigrated (87 percent). The age range and high percentage of Hindu graduate degree holders is likely a consequence of the US government’s H-1B visa program and an immigration process that favors wealthier applicants.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that sweeping changes in the H-1B program enacted by the Trump administration have significantly decreased the number of H-1B visas initially approved and renewed for Indians and that the pipeline for naturalization is severely backlogged.<sup>12</sup> If this trend continues then the population of Hindus in the US will likely decrease. Students pursuing graduate and professional degrees also contribute to this population; India ranks second among countries sending students to the US for advanced degrees, though after a decade of steadily increasing foreign student enrollment in higher education the numbers dipped in 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the 2014 Pew Center study, the findings regarding spirituality are quite intriguing. Here are a few highlights:

- 41 percent believe in God with *absolute certainty*
- 53 percent say religion is *fairly important* in their lives; 26 percent say religion is *very important* in their lives
- 51 percent pray *at least daily*
- more than half attend religious services *monthly or a few times a year*
- the majority *seldom or never* read scriptures, attend any form of religious discussion group or meditate

Thus, the population is quite pious while at the same time very private regarding their religiosity. Temple attendance is linked to celebrating major Hindu holidays, which are also big

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Cox, and Robert P. Jones, *America’s Changing Religious Identity: 2016 American Values Atlas*. Public Religion Research Institute, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated>.

<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study, Hindus,” 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/hindu>.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Gjelten, “Study Shows The U.S. Attracts An Elite Muslim And Hindu Population,” National Public Radio, December 13, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/12/13/505427739/study-shows-the-u-s-attracts-an-elite-muslim-and-hindu-population>.

<sup>12</sup> Sanduja Rangarajan, “Trump Has Built a Wall of Bureaucracy to Keep Out the Very Immigrants He Says He Wants: ‘It’s really Make America White Again,’” *Mother Jones*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/12/trump-h1b-visa-immigration-restrictions>.

<sup>13</sup> IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, “2019 Open Doors Executive Summary,” November 2019, <https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2019/11/Number-of-International-Students-in-the-United-States-Hits-All-Time-High>; Jodi Sanger and Julie Baer, “Fall 2019 International Student Enrollment Snapshot Survey,” IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, November 2019, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Fall-2019-International-Student-Enrollment-Survey>.

social events in this country. Faith has a way of centering people, offering them a foundation of happiness in good times, resilience in times of duress, and tools to turn challenges into opportunities for intellectual and spiritual growth.<sup>14</sup> Yet being outwardly devout in the US, particularly as a non-Christian, has its potential pitfalls, and the Hindu community has largely aimed to outwardly assimilate with the predominant cultural norms (e.g., not pushing for observances of major religious holidays).

### *Hindu Identity Formation*

Children of immigrants respond to the spiritual and cultural traditions of their familial homeland differently than their parents. Parents may prefer to remain more solidly in the comfort of the familiar values and customs they grew up with while their children naturally gravitate to the activities and traditions of their peers in order to gain a sense of belonging. This process is called *acculturation*. As they grow older, children may feel pulled between parents who place a higher value on traditional Hindu/Indian customs and practices and their own need to assimilate into the normative US culture.<sup>15</sup> Another source of confusion and alienation comes from the way academic textbooks in the US have traditionally portrayed Hinduism as an ancient, outdated pantheistic creed. Textbook presentations of Hinduism focus unduly on social evils such as the caste system, dowry deaths, and female infanticide while ignoring the actual religious tenets and global contributions (spiritual, humanitarian, and scientific) originating in India.

Hindu parents in the US attempt to impart their value system and a sense of their cultural traditions to their children, though it can be a struggle.<sup>16</sup> Some parents teach lessons at home, others send their children for religious education to the increasing number of Hindu weekend schools and summer camps offered by ashrams and temples across the county. As a result, most Hindus growing up in the US do have enough background knowledge about their religion to recognize when representations of Hinduism and India are biased towards presenting archaic social customs. More recently, Hindu-Americans have become more vocal about their experiences defending their faith in school, particularly in classes which address global cultural and political issues in their curriculum.<sup>17</sup> Hindu students in the middle and high school years sometimes find themselves carrying the impossible burden of defending the entire history of India and Hinduism in their classes and during social interactions that veer into faith affiliation. These mischaracterizations alienate Hindu students from their peers and/or their parents and may have harmful personal consequences. As reported by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), “Hindu American students are being singled out, bullied, and ostracized by their peers, largely due to

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<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Snowdon, “Official ‘Well-Being’ Statistics Show Religious People are Happier Than Atheists,” *The Huffington Post UK*, February 2, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/02/02/office-for-national-statistics-well-being-data\\_n\\_9138076.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/02/02/office-for-national-statistics-well-being-data_n_9138076.html).

<sup>15</sup> Sheeba P. Thomas, “Asian Indian College Students: Relationship between Parent–Child Communication Difficulties and Internalization,” PsyD diss., University of Antioch, 2014, <http://aura.antioch.edu/etds/169>.

<sup>16</sup> Murali Balaji, “For a New Generation of Hindu American Parents, a Changing Model of Religion and Culture,” *Huffington Post*, August 28, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/murali-balaji/for-a-new-generation-of-h\\_b\\_5732380.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/murali-balaji/for-a-new-generation-of-h_b_5732380.html).

<sup>17</sup> Kavita Pallod, “I’m Hindu. I knew my textbook was wrong. Life is hard for Hindu tweens. Texas schoolbooks make it worse,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/The-textbook-said-things-about-India-I-knew-were-8331986.php>.

academic curricula that reinforce negative and inaccurate stereotypes.”<sup>18</sup> Personal pride in their faith tradition can be hard or impossible to outwardly express and even harder to maintain internally under such adverse conditions. As HAF reports, for many young Hindus the response is to publicly downplay their faith adherence in order to blend in and avoid being bullied.

For Hindus untrained in liturgical Sanskrit—and that is most of the Hindu population—the sacred texts themselves present a challenge. English translations have their own political motivations; many popular editions date from the nineteenth century, are written by non-Indians, and exist in near-Biblical, semantically vague or impenetrable language. Divergence among translations makes it difficult to perceive which are authentic representations. Products of their eras, many texts include hierarchical, patriarchal ideals that contradict each other. This is certainly not a problem limited to Hindu sacred texts; however, Hindu students find this disconcerting and confusing. Internet resources are easier to access but often lack citations or relevant information about the organization or individual posting the information. Some temples and Hindu ashrams offer discourses, classes and summer camps to help parse the literature, particularly the Bhagavad Gita. However, numerous philosophical streams are lost in translation. Few Hindu adults, lay or religiously trained, are schooled broadly enough in Hinduism, religious studies, and global history to offer a nuanced, contextualized sense of the religion or how the wisdom found in the scriptures can relate to contemporary issues. Too often the message delivered is that the texts are divinely revealed and must be accepted as so without question. This rigidity puts people off. Thus, it is not surprising that the Pew Center reports that 60 percent of Hindu adults in the US disagree that the Hindu scriptures are the literal word of God and that the majority *seldom/never* read scriptures or attend any form of religious discussion group.

Away from the public gaze, ritual practices and traditions continue to play a central role in anchoring and sustaining the lives of Hindu families in the US. Without such sentiments none of the Hindu temples in the US would have been built and their children’s camps would not be flourishing. For Generation Z, entering college today, the relationship with their faith is different than that of their parents. They are the most diverse generation in American history and highly connected with each other and the rest of the world. They are also more actively and publicly devout than preceding generations; 78 percent assert a belief in God and 47 percent participate in organized religious events.<sup>19</sup>

When students matriculate as college and university students they are leaving the family structure and adding the new dimension of “College Student” to their social identity. They often quite naturally re-create family roles (brother, sister, cousin) but these roles operate within a social structure with often very different parameters and social expectations. The degree of alignment with the patterns of a normative culture is called cultural consonance. The closer the alignment (that is, the more acculturated the person is), the easier it is for the individual to navigate the systems and feel successful and content. People naturally want to feel like they belong and are valued by the people in the spaces and places they occupy.

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<sup>18</sup> Hindu American Foundation, “Classroom Subjected: Bullying & Bias Against Hindu students in American Schools,” May 2, 2016, <https://www.hafsite.org/resources/classroom-subjected>.

<sup>19</sup> Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

## **Hindu Chaplaincy**

“‘We’re at a crossroads,’ said [Adeel] Zeb, who was elected recently as the first Muslim to lead [a] national group of college chaplains. ‘If you start defining a chaplain as a spiritual healer, an ethical leader and emotional healer on campus, regardless of anyone’s faith traditions, if you start focusing on the human emotions and the human spirit, it enables more diverse possibilities.’”<sup>20</sup>

Chaplains observing a growing Hindu population on their campuses may wonder how to fit Hinduism within a multi-faith environment, what the community’s needs are, and how they may evolve. Often Hindu students begin by asking for support to celebrate two pan-Indian favorite holy days: Diwali (aka Divali or Deepavali), the Hindu Festival of Lights celebrated in the fall, and Holi, a spring festival with agrarian roots marked by flinging colored powders. If my own research is any indicator, such culturally-oriented events remain focal for these groups.<sup>21</sup> A typical next step for these student groups includes an interest in exploring the spiritual aspect of these two holy days and expanding the holy days they celebrate. That is often when the need for a Hindu chaplain first becomes evident.

Very few Hindus are currently appointed to provide support for Hindu students on US campuses. Most hold part-time positions; some are paid, and some are voluntary. These individuals vary occupationally and include Hindu monks, college faculty, and graduate students, as well as laypersons leading otherwise full professional lives. The University of Southern California (USC) likely has the largest campus population of Hindu students—around 2300—in the US. Their Office of Religious Life chaplains, numbering more than sixty, are mostly part-time volunteers. Three Hindu chaplains at USC support very different program streams. Bharathwaj Nandakumar has a part-time paid appointment; he advises the Hindu Student Organization and leads USC’s pujas (worship services). The two volunteer part-time positions are funded externally; one is held by Swami Atmavidyananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order who heads the nearby Vedanta Society, and another newer position is held by Tahil Sharma and explores Hinduism and social justice. Several external Hindu organizations also offer programming to USC’s Hindu student population. By contrast, Wellesley College has approximately one hundred Hindu students, and Hindu Chaplain Shrestha Singh is a part-time staff member of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life.<sup>22</sup> She supports Darshana, a Hindu undergraduate group, along with South Asian groups interested in promoting culture, dance, and LGBTQ issues.

Only three institutions (Yale, Princeton and Georgetown) currently staff a full-time Hindu chaplain. Georgetown and Princeton’s chaplaincies mainly support several hundred undergraduates apiece. The Hindu Life programming at Yale supports a similar sized

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<sup>20</sup> Rosanna Xia, “Most college head chaplains are Christian. At USC, a Hindu leads the way,” *LA Times*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-usc-chaplain-20170403-story.html>. Adeel Zeb is the current President of NACUC.

<sup>21</sup> From the spring of 2017 to the fall of 2018 I interviewed twenty-four individuals working in higher education and providing spiritual support to Hindu students on the phone, via email, and in person. I also engaged in a number of informal conversations using the same communication methods. The twenty-four interviews represent twenty-two different programs. Individuals I communicated with were supporting Hindus but they themselves were not necessarily Hindu.

<sup>22</sup> Shrestha has since left Wellesley.

undergraduate population as well as graduate and professional students and post-docs (estimated at five to seven hundred people). Princeton supports the longest-running full time academic Hindu chaplaincy in the US. Vineet Chander, the Coordinator for Hindu Life at Princeton, took on his full-time role in 2008. In 2016 two other academic institutions hired full-time Hindu chaplains; my position at Yale University as Director of Hindu Life evolved into full-time and at Georgetown University Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan became their Director of Hindu Life. Each of us are employees of our university. Thus, while our primary support is towards our Hindu communities we function as full-time staff in our chaplaincies, offering support to students regardless of their faith affiliation(s).

*The Hindu Life Program at Yale University*

When I joined Yale University in 2013 my primary role was to develop a Hindu Life program that supported members of the Hindu community at Yale. The Chaplain’s Office, placed squarely in the student affairs side in the operational hierarchy of Yale University, mainly supports undergraduates. Thus, the initial focus was to foster the Yale Hindu Students Council, an undergraduate Hindu organization affiliated with the office since 2005. They hosted events relating to Hinduism and Indian culture. Until that point the events were enthusiastically attended by a fairly limited number of people and two graduate students in succession had advised the HSC Board. By 2012 burgeoning interest in HSC events, particularly Diwali puja, motivated the University Chaplain to create a part-time staff position, modeled on Princeton’s hire of a Coordinator of Hindu Life in 2008.

In my job interview with the Hindu Students Council Board members, I asked them what they were looking for in a Hindu chaplain. The response was that they needed “someone to be there for us.” Hindus are ethnic and religious minorities in this country—very successful by most metrics, but there are issues that can feel hard to explain to a non-Hindu or someone unfamiliar with Indian culture and family structures. It became clear that the students sought a mentor fluent in Hindu spiritual and cultural traditions and US campus life, and thus able to help students discern how being Hindu fit into their undergraduate experience.

During our first retreat we considered the role HSC should play on the Yale University campus. At that time several socially-oriented and performance-based South Asian groups existed. Where did HSC fit into this mosaic? An association with the Chaplain’s Office meant automatic categorization as a religious group. However, for Hindus it is often the case that religion and culture intertwine. The consensus was that HSC should celebrate the diversity of Hindu beliefs and practices by offering spiritually, culturally, and socially relevant activities to students that reinforced a sense of identity, community, and comfort (sense of home and nostalgia). Celebrations of holy days occurring during the academic year and religiously themed talks were important in keeping them grounded and offering a valuable perspective in an otherwise hectic and challenging environment. The group had enjoyed hosting the more pan-Indian cultural events such as Holi and Diwali which drew campus-wide participation. They also wanted to experiment with social mixers featuring Bollywood movies, mehendi, and popular South Asian cuisine.

The last task of the retreat was to form a mission statement to reflect the values and intentions of the organization. Periodically the statement gets re-evaluated, but it has remained essentially the same:<sup>23</sup>

The Yale Hindu Students Council aims to foster an environment of Hindu spirituality through an open community of religious practice and cultural expression. We organize events throughout the year to promote an awareness of Hinduism within the Yale and New Haven community. Our events are open to all, meant to stimulate an exchange of ideas on religion, and are above all educational.<sup>24</sup>

### *Celebrating Holy Days*

But if there is a festival—everyone is there. It isn't the free food.... It is feeling close to home.”—Bharathwaj Nandkumar, Hindu chaplain, USC

Students were interested in learning about the philosophy and meaning behind a *puja*, the most common form of Hindu ritual worship. With Rama Navami, an important holy day, on the horizon, I proposed we hold a puja workshop intended to prepare us for hosting this specific puja. I invited Dr. A. V. Srinivasan, a primary founder of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society, which built the first Hindu temple in Connecticut, to conduct this workshop. Prior to the consecration of the temple, Srinivasan (who is also my father) functioned as the priest for the community. More recently he has written many books on Hindu philosophy and ritual worship, including how-to books for celebrating major Hindu holy days<sup>25</sup> and Hindu weddings, and the popular text *Hinduism for Dummies*.<sup>26</sup> The philosophy behind his books is that anyone should be able to conduct a puja, and this dovetailed nicely with the HSC students' tradition of student-led, participatory pujas. During the workshop we discussed the philosophy and mechanics of puja-style worship, read through Srinivasan's *Puja to Sri Ramachandra* book (appropriate for Rama Navami), and practiced chanting the Sanskrit mantras.

Based on this experience the students felt prepared to host a Rama Navami puja. The celebration drew a large crowd of American-born and international Hindu undergraduates, graduate and professional students, faculty, and staff—a significant change, since up to then most attendees had been undergraduates. Since then the celebrations of holy days continue to be tweaked as these lunar-based celebrations shift into and out of the academic calendar and as different students take on the role of leading the ritual services. For example, some years Krishna Janmashtami starts the puja programming for the academic year, other times it is Ganesh Chaturthi. If both of those holy days occur earlier in August we instead begin the academic year with a puja to Maha Saraswati, the patron Goddess of learning, wisdom, music and speech. We also end each semester with a puja or aarati (devotional hymn) to Maha Saraswati in advance of exams. The major holy days we celebrate include Navaratri, Diwali, Gita Jayanthi, Shivaratri, Holi, Hanuman Jayanthi, and Rama Navami. I encourage students to incorporate family practices into the religious programming; for example, one year we included a special aarati used by a Board

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<sup>23</sup> In 2019, the group became the Hindu Students Organization.

<sup>24</sup> This formulation dates to 2013. The current version may be found at <https://www.facebook.com/yalehso/about>.

<sup>25</sup> A. V. Srinivasan, *How to Conduct Puja to Sri Ramachandra* (East Glastonbury, CT: Parijata Publications, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> A.V. Srinivasan, *Hinduism for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

member’s family during the Navaratri Homa. In recent years I have “workshopped” pujas, offering brief explanations for the stages of the service. I often do this if we have invited a non-Hindu faith group to our celebration, but sometimes just as a reminder that there is a logic behind these rituals. Given the number of follow-up questions I typically receive, it seems like a very useful practice to incorporate from time to time. The students often personally invite their Hindu professors to these events, sometimes hand-delivering printed invitations. Faculty presence adds a special dimension to the celebration and furthermore validates the importance of faith in students’ minds.

*Hindu Spiritual Programming on other US Campuses*

Sometimes Religious Life offices rather than students initiate the celebration of major Hindu holy days. Syma Sheik is an Intercultural Community Advisor at Hampshire College with a part-time appointment. Initially hired as an Islamic advisor, she expanded her programming to include Hindu, Bahai, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, and Zoroastrian students. First Sheik assessed the holiday calendars for these faith traditions, and then she spent time in the Hampshire dining hall talking with students about how they celebrated at home and the foods associated with the festivities. International students were keen to participate, and the informal conversations morphed into planning sessions as students became eager to share their experiences with the wider campus community. The group focused on the festival calendar with a degree of linguistically-oriented pastoral support. Sheik, fluent in Urdu and Hindi, emphasizes the power of conversing with international students in their native tongue, which allows them to convey emotions and ideas that do not easily translate into English. The international student population has grown, and Sheik’s events have gained a following among students within the local Five College system, many of whom eagerly anticipate Hampshire’s Holi celebration.

Reverend Kate Smanik is currently Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Colby College. When I interviewed her in March of 2017 she was Director of the Center for Spiritual Life at DePauw University. Rev. Smanik related how getting things off the ground for the Hindu campus community at DePauw felt a bit tenuous. There were, and continue to be, a very small number of Hindu students on campus. At the time Diwali was organized by the International Student Association and Holi was organized by students who had gone to India on trips with faculty members with the goal of bringing that particular festival experience back to campus. Programming for Hindus expanded when a Hindu student joined an interfaith group she led and a new temporary hire in her office arrived with experience organizing Diwali on another campus. She deputized them both to organize that year’s Diwali celebration.

The staff member’s influence during the one-year appointment was significant. They catered from a restaurant in Indianapolis and secured permission from public safety to do ground fireworks, which is apparently easy to do in Indiana! “I think it was puja, meal, fireworks...,” Rev. Smanik recalls. “The students needed a vocabulary, and one good solid experience. [That year at Diwali we hosted] 40–50 people—it felt like a massive win.” Since then the celebrations at DePauw have expanded in scope and nature, adding even more fireworks and drawing increasing numbers of participants.

The program at DePauw is an example of a multi-faith approach dictated very much by student numbers and interest. Rev. Smanik stated: “They absolutely will not form a Hindu Students Association. They refuse, saying: ‘Our religious practice is too varied, too different, we

don't really know what we'd organize around. We really like getting together for Diwali and Holi. That's what matters. That's all we want.”

Why might that be? Festivals are fond reminders of home and family. Past experience, unfamiliarity with the modern chaplaincy model, and the maelstrom of everyday college life may all contribute to minimizing spiritual engagement. Further, their families likely made it very clear that they expect their child to focus on academics rather than extra-curricular activities. Life is very busy in college, so celebrating these pan-Indian events may feel like enough. A strong Hindu Life program, however, can create opportunities for respectful, open-minded spiritual discernment in support of identity formation and overall emotional wellbeing within the natural context of the university.

At the University of Southern California (USC) Bharatwaj Nandakumar, a computer scientist specializing in video game programming, mentors the HSO and leads their pujas. USC Dean of Religious Life Varun Soni recruited him specifically because Nandakumar is a USC grad familiar with the HSO and campus culture, and because Soni felt that students might relate better with someone from an entirely non-academic perspective.

Nandakumar recounted: “[A] number of students ... came to speak to me during orientation.... I work on Call of Duty (a popular video game) [so they see me at orientation where] when I wear game t-shirts [and then later] they get a shock when they see me do the puja.” The t-shirts may indeed open the door for conversations about faith, particularly among students who may be uncertain about their self-identity as Hindus. Nandakumar encourages students to question and critique the practices as a part of their personal faith journey. He asserts, “I am happy to fit into that role to explain that you can follow whatever religion you want—you can be an atheist—you are exploring.”

At Georgetown, Br. Sharan finds that the Hindu students prefer learning about Hinduism from an academic perspective, and he is well equipped to meet that need. A Hindu monk of the Vaishnavite Nimbarka tradition with a PhD in Sanskrit from the University of Edinburgh, Br. Sharan offers classes with a rigorous grounding in Hindu theology that provide Hindu students a common vocabulary with which to engage in interfaith dialogue. This approach is particularly suited to Georgetown, a firmly Jesuit institution with a high student participation in organized religion and interfaith work.

Another example of connecting scholarship with practice specifically within the campus community comes from Emory University's Office of Spiritual and Religious Life. The OSRL draws from their cadre of graduate students to fill the role of Religious Life Scholar, supporting Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist undergraduate student groups. Because they research within their faith tradition they are able to offer students a more academic perspective. As Rev. Lisa Garvin, Associate Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life, described: “They are bridging study and practice and providing this advisory support to student organizations. They really...lean more to the scholar role. It's very organic depending on the [particular Religious Life Scholar].... [The support] differs based on the tradition and what the students need.” Early in his tenure, Ved Patel, Emory's 2017 Hindu RLS, sensed that the undergraduate Hindu students had no relationship with Religion faculty at Emory who specialized in Hinduism. He arranged a faculty

lecture series addressing topics of student interest including “How Hindu Scriptures Influence Everyday Life.” In this way he encouraged students to ponder the relevancy and agency of their faith tradition.

*Pastoral Counseling*

In my experience Hindu students, particularly undergraduates, often find their way to my office because they are struggling to reconcile their understanding of Hindu spirituality and/or their family values, traditions and expectations with their new college environment. Sometimes students feel their religious beliefs are ridiculed, in class and within their nascent social circles. A first-year student setting up a small puja altar in her room may face very specific queries from her suitemates about her beliefs. And sometimes Hindu students are actively targeted for recruitment by other faith groups. Working with students so they can eloquently and confidently express their own beliefs provides them with the tools to go deeper into their own spiritual inquiry as well as the ability to confidently participate in a dialogue about religious beliefs and practices.

Increasingly students ask me questions about social issues brought up in class such as caste, environmentalism, immigration, and equal rights and how they relate to Hinduism. A student may find it difficult to relate—even if his ancestry is Indian or Hindu—but still be compelled to weigh in. Hindu students facing these questions and those who are inclined towards social involvement may benefit greatly from a conversation with a Hindu chaplain who can provide guidance about Hinduism, social issues and activism.

Another potential challenge for Hindu students is their lack of experience with dating or social activities outside the home. Counseling students regarding their own boundaries, safe practices, and alternate programming empowers them and makes it easier for them to join in the social scene at their own pace. They also may form deep friendships with other Hindu students through involvement with Hindu Life programs. Another issue not specific to being Hindu, but fairly common, has to do with navigating the college workload. Sometimes students who were at the top of their class in high school struggle in an academic environment replete with high achievers. Strategies they relied on to be admitted to the university may need refining as they adjust to a faster-paced and more competitive mode of learning. While in conversation students may express how they are feeling challenged, which allows me to first assure them that they are in good company and then direct them to appropriate individuals and resources as needed.

I also support students who are grieving the passing of a family member, particularly challenging for international students who may not be able to return home for the death rituals. They may find comfort in sharing memories, in talking about family dynamics and traditions. They may want to chant mantras related to the soul’s passage and they often want to ponder larger questions about death and mourning. I strive to offer students a comfortable, safe space where they can pour out their worries, hopes, and fears to someone familiar with their full context: their Hindu/Indian family traditions and cultural norms *and* those of the campus culture.

Such pastoral counseling, particularly when it enlarges students' understandings of their cultural context, improves their sense of well-being and can also insulate them from anxiety and depression.<sup>27</sup> I often characterize that part of my work as nurturing the hearts and souls of the students so that they can attain the clarity and certainty to succeed, not only as students but as whole persons.

*Bridging Connections among Religious, Spiritual and Secular Identities*

A key mission of our Chaplain's Office is to promote cross-cultural dialogue as a means towards common understanding and, ultimately, respect and healing. In support of this mission the Yale Hindu Life Program, in collaboration with five campus partners, sponsored a play with Muslim and Hindu characters grappling with issues of faith, political ideologies, class, gender, race and educational inequity, and feelings of alienation. The central message was that interfaith dialogue may happen at any time and that while overcoming internal biases and understanding another person's lived experience is a struggle, it is a vitally important skill as we navigate our increasingly diverse world. This message is particularly important for our Hindu students to hear. There can be an ironic inherent disconnect among Hindus regarding interfaith dialogue. Because a key tenet of Hinduism is the acceptance of all faiths as legitimate and true paths to the Creator, Hindus often gloss over the need to be able to explain their beliefs in terms comprehensible to people of other faiths *and* they may not invest much time learning about other faiths. Huge opportunities to connect with others may go unnoticed.

In the past several years there have been increasing opportunities for interfaith engagement with various faith and identity groups on campus. One deeply meaningful exchange involved the Hindu students attending a Shabbat dinner at the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale one Friday night and the next week hosting the Jewish students at a Saraswati puja in the Hindu Prayer Room. Both events featured sharing sacred songs, blessed food, and lively discussions about faith as integrated into everyday life.

An important element to fostering interfaith engagement is encouraging students to express their beliefs within the context of their own personal journey rather than as exemplars of their religion. The Yale Chaplain's Office hosts IFFY, the Interfaith Forum at Yale.<sup>28</sup> The goal of IFFY is to bring together undergraduate students who are interested in grappling with life questions from a deeply personal spiritual perspective. Many of the Hindu students who participate in Hindu Students Council events also enjoy participating in IFFY because it offers a safe space for self-expression and an opportunity to gain multiple perspectives. Rev. Kate Smanik aptly encapsulates the appeal of this type of program: "To identify with any of these religious communities has always been inherently dangerous and is now more so. And on top of it they all require things of our students that our students are not always complying with and they don't always know how to navigate the emotional fallout of that."

Because many of these questions and challenges are shared across faith traditions and because students have grown up living in a religious plurality, pondering these particular issues

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<sup>27</sup> Eliza Noh, "Casualties of the Model Minority Myth: The Role of Racial Ideology in Asian American Female Suicidality," invited lecture sponsored by the Connecticut Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission, Legislative Office Building, Hartford, CT, April 12, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> "Interfaith Forum at Yale: Yale Chaplain's Office," <http://chaplain.yale.edu/interfaith-forum-yale-iffy>.

within an interfaith setting can make sense. Faith-centered shared contemplation on expansive matters such as success, happiness, and relationships can broaden their perspectives.

*Stocking the Spiritual Toolbox*

Multifaith conversations may be extremely rewarding for students. However, their ability to participate will depend on their own spiritual grounding. For the past three years I have hosted a thematic Dharmic Discussion speaker series. Invitees for the first year were recruited as role models for how to be a practicing Hindu while deeply and fully engaged in contemporary American life. Murali Balaji spoke on the intersection of Hinduism and social justice, a topic deeply informed by his work as a journalist and Director of Education with the Hindu American Foundation. His talk “Searching for Praxis: Are Faith and Social Justice Movements Irreconcilably Disconnected from One Another?” explored the history of social justice movements in the US and how Mahatma Gandhi and teachings in the Bhagavad Gita inspired activists such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

The next speaker, Vineet Chander, shared anecdotes from his personal spiritual trajectory and offered insights from his ten years in Hindu chaplaincy at Princeton. In his own Living Dharma series, he applies concepts from Hinduism to real life issues such as dating, partying, failure, and vocation. Chander’s Living Dharma presentation on “Balancing Spiritual Values and Contemporary Campus Life” clearly resonated with students who extended the Q&A session into dinner and beyond.

Our third speaker, Sujata Prasad, an internist and clinical instructor at the Yale School of Medicine, presented on “Seva in the Slums: A personal journey volunteering with FXB Suraksha.” Dr. Prasad offered a vivid portrait of slums and the disadvantaged but admirably durable people she supports during her volunteer trips to India. She offered examples of the cases FXB pursues and spoke of her experiences as transformational.

The themes for the next two years were gratitude and resilience, mainly in reaction to the socio-political landscape of our nation. For these lectures I enlarged the lens to include speakers from the Ramakrishna, Sivananda, and Bhakti traditions. Each of these invited speakers helped demystify Hindu concepts and exemplified how Hindu theologies and praxes are globally active and relevant. These formal discussions bolstered students’ ability to engage in richer and more deeply informed intra- and interfaith conversations.

*Supporting Graduate and Professional Students and Postdocs*

Postgraduates represent the largest segment of the Hindu population at Yale. Most come from abroad, but actual numbers are hard to find as the university only publishes data on country of origin, not religious affiliation.<sup>29</sup> My best guess is that there are over five hundred Hindu graduate and professional students, postdocs, and associate researchers in the Yale community. If

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<sup>29</sup> “International students by country and region,” Yale University Office of Institutional Research, [https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/w020\\_internl\\_enroll\\_bycitz\\_0.pdf](https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/w020_internl_enroll_bycitz_0.pdf).

Yale Diwali puja attendance is any indicator, the medical school seems to have a high concentration of Hindu professionals.

There is some degree of overlap in the kind of support this population might need; acculturation issues certainly arise, as do circumstances involving discrimination and harassment. A number of graduate students have come to see me about clashes between parental expectations and their own perceived life trajectories. Community affiliation stands out as a central need. Postdocs may feel quite isolated because they are often still single (and not in the mood to date) or pursuing their research while their families remain at home. Also, their projects are independent rather than part of a coordinated academic program with built-in student support. Beyond their affiliation with their lab or department, they may feel little connection with the university. In the 2015–16 academic year, with the support of a colleague who works with the postgraduate population, I began systematically reaching out to South Asian graduate student groups about the Hindu Life and Chaplain's Office programs. From these meetings I developed a better sense of the population and, perhaps most important, knowledge of their publicity conduits and platforms. This outreach had demonstrable effects; the next fall the numbers of postgraduate students at our events noticeably increased, particularly at ritual celebrations. In more recent years post-graduate participation in all forms of programming has expanded, as have requests for individual pastoral counseling.

One program in the fall of 2016 drew students from the law school, medical school, and FES, as well as postdocs from biology and chemistry labs. There is a tradition in India of Hindu communities jointly fashioning a huge clay statue of Ganesha the Elephant-headed god for Ganesh Chaturthi. Some community members collect clay, others fashion the internal structure, and still others shape, color and decorate. The ephemeral ritual object is worshiped and then immersed in a body of water. The ritual symbolizes the transitive nature of the body and the connections between the sacred and secular while accentuating unity within the community. Based on this tradition, I arranged a clay Ganesha-making activity in our technology-free arts and crafts zone called Breathing Space.

Breathing Space isn't easy to find, but twenty-five hardy souls made their way to us and spent about two hours kneading, rolling, pinching, and pressing clay while laughing and sharing a combination of familial Ganesh Chaturthi traditions and their experiences with various schools and departments on campus. The undergraduates listened intently, appreciative of the rare personal insights into graduate life. That evening we set the clay Ganeshas alongside the Ganesh murti for the duration of the puja and then students took their creations home.

Another event which appealed to this community was a rangoli event held by a South Asian graduate student organization in advance of their Navaratri garba. Members gathered on the stone patio in front of Sterling Memorial Library and created intricate designs with chalk and colored powders. Some participants brought their parents, while others (including me) brought their small children. The Hindu Life Program sponsored chai and samosas and I took the opportunity to soak up the sun while catching up with members and meeting newly-arrived students.

For the postgraduate community such programs and events are often where my pastoral care initiates particularly if they, like many Indians, are less comfortable with seeking counseling

or discussing personal matters outside the family. We discuss challenges and celebrate both academic and social milestones, such as visa applications, lab dynamics, research, writing, conference presentations, job offers, marriages and babies...and soul-searching regarding all or any of these when they fail to manifest as expected. Whether or not they follow up with a conversation in my office or at a local café, my goal is that these students see me as a resource who understands their cultural and spiritual background as well as the bumpy nature of graduate life.

## **Summary**

US campuses are microcosmic laboratories of social, intellectual, and spiritual inquiry and practice. Events in the world affect the population at Yale; students’ experiences at Yale will eventually have global repercussions as they graduate and enter the larger society. Part of the Yale University Mission Statement includes a commitment to providing opportunities for students through a “free exchange of ideas in an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community of faculty, staff, students and alumni.”<sup>30</sup> These groups are far more diverse than in previous history, making the Chaplain’s Office commitment to “fostering respect and mutual understanding among people of different faiths and cultures as well as actively promoting dialogue within the University” vitally important.<sup>31</sup> As the world grows increasingly interconnected the ability to authentically connect with others from vastly different cultures and worldviews will be a fundamental prerequisite for success. Having a Hindu chaplain enhances the university mission and community in three essential ways.

- Vedantic philosophy teaches that all faiths are true paths to the Creator; thus a Hindu chaplain should be very comfortable working within a multifaith environment. A Hindu chaplain who can engage with people from various religious, spiritual, and secular communities presents Hindu students with a role model for how to successfully navigate the pluralistic social environments that comprise our global community.
- A Hindu chaplain who can clearly articulate and contextualize Hindu beliefs and practices—and offer a safe, explorative forum to do so—will be able to guide Hindu students in their own personal discernment. Acknowledging and nurturing themselves holistically will enhance students’ emotional balance and improve their college experience. This will also offer them a foundation and perspective for engaging in interfaith dialogue. In a similar vein, a Hindu chaplain can help demystify and correct Hindu concepts for non-Hindus.
- By cultivating a Hindu community, a Hindu chaplain provides a sense of a home away from home for Hindu students. This bolsters their confidence in exploring and more deeply engaging with curricular and co-curricular offerings. It also diminishes feelings of alienation and loneliness.

As Br. Sharan adeptly affirms, “there are benefits across the board—whether you talk about faith, mental health, emotional health of students or the depth of perspectives they are exposed to at University. All is augmented by having a Hindu Chaplain around.”

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<sup>30</sup> “Yale University Mission Statement,” <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement>.

<sup>31</sup> “About Us: Yale University Chaplain’s Office,” <https://chaplain.yale.edu/about>.

The core of my work at Yale has been to build and nurture a vibrant Hindu campus community. The programming and support the Hindu Life Program offers is designed to be uplifting and to connect undergraduate students and postgraduates with like-minded individuals who share their religious beliefs and values and cultural and ethnic traditions. Participation offers opportunities to strengthen their sense of identity and feelings of cultural consonance in a communal, fun, and caring way. It takes some time for a program to gain momentum and for things to seem less tenuous while yet remaining experimental and accommodating. Seven years down the road I have a sense that this fertile ground I've been laying is finally bearing fruit. Each year there seem to be more first-year students self-identifying as Hindu and the programming has a wider reach into the campus community. The members of the Hindu community are increasingly keen to actively interrogate and mine our vast traditions to move towards an understanding of how faith contributes to an authentic, meaningful, and happy life.



*Dr. Asha Shipman is the Director of Hindu Life and Hindu Chaplain for Yale University. She is an experienced educator, having taught for almost two decades at the high school and university levels. Dr. Shipman joined the Yale University Chaplain's Office in 2013 and in 2016 she became the second (and only female) Hindu chaplain with a full-time university appointment in the US. She is a contributor to the first book on Hindu chaplaincy in the US entitled Hindu Approaches to Spiritual Care. Dr. Shipman is the founding Chair of the North American Hindu Chaplains Association.*

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