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### A New Look at the Traditional Hindu Family

A battle cry of, “LUBRIS!” and there was a flash of brown hair and dirty shirts running down the hall as one tackled the other. This was a regular occurrence in my father’s household as he grew up, just a crazy game of wrestling among brothers. Sometimes, they were able to drag my grandmother into it as well, but most of the time it was just the three youngest boys. It is small traditions like these that end up creating a family’s regular habits and more, but the larger, more community focused traditions are what make up a religion. Recently, I had to travel to India for my grandmother’s funeral, and I got to see my family’s traditions in action during the preparation, cremation, and ceremony. This seemed to be incredibly different from the things I have learned in this class, where we have had the opportunity to be educated on the many different religions of the world and how they all play a role in creating different habits within a culture and a family. Traditionally, Hinduism has been about improving the self<sup>1</sup>, trying to separate the soul from the body, trying to liberate it so it can return to Brahma, but from what I saw during my time in India for my grandmother’s funeral, there are many, many, different ways to be a Hindu.

My grandmother was a wonderful woman. She loved her family with all of her heart and soul, she gave her nine children everything she had. My father was the very last of her children, so naturally, he was the most spoiled. Once he started going to school, she would bring him a healthy, homemade lunch every day in a stainless steel tin, called a *thaali*. On test days when he was particularly nervous, she would wear his favorite blue and gold sari, and it would make him feel a little more relaxed. When he got older, she decided that she would send him to the United States so he could have more

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<sup>1</sup> Not to say that the practice of hinduism that I have been given the opportunity to observe within my family was not centered around improving the self, it was just for different reasons than the traditional ones that we have learned.

opportunities, so he came to Utah to live with his sister, my aunt. He met my mother and once I was born, my grandmother channeled all her love into me.

I was not her first grandchild, but she always told me I was her favorite. She would come visit my family for long extended periods, and I would not leave her side ever. She did the usual grandmotherly things, give me candies and play with me, but she also acted as a parent when she was here. My parents had me when they were both still working full time, and so when she was here it was like a special treat. I would wake up in the morning and smell *dosas* (my favorite indian dish when I was young) and rush out to greet her good morning. Then the real treat was spending the day with her. I remember always tracing the patterns and designs in her colorful saris as we sat in the park--they were breathtaking. We would take walks in the park and she would tell me of all the Gods and Goddesses that maintained the world. She loved Ganesha, the child of Shiva with the head of an elephant, and Saraswati, the Goddess of books and learning. I remember once when I was eight or nine, I had slipped on a book and accidentally ripped the cover off. I cried and cried to my parents, claiming that Amma (that's what I called her) was going to be so angry with me because I was disrespecting Saraswati. It was then that my father told me that no one would be angry with me, for the Gods are all just there to act as a sort of moral compass. Suddenly all the comic books I had read with my grandmother and my father were a much more prominent part of my life. Whenever I had a decision to make, there was more pressure because I would (and still do) recall the crimes and punishments of the gods. My perspective on everything changed then; from where my place was in the world to what I personally believed in. I then took the stories she told me and the comic books about the Gods and Goddesses my dad and I read together not as truth or historical events, but as a moral guide for when I was in trouble or confused as to what I should do.

During my research, I stumbled across a comic book concerning the life of Mahatma Gandhi<sup>2</sup>. He was seen as a religious and political figure, and that was impressed upon my grandmother's children and

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<sup>2</sup> See McLain, Karline. I have decided to include this in my paper because of my grandmother. I feel like I have embedded her personality in this paper, and she idolized him.

her grandchildren. He was an important person in all of our lives. The fact that this article is about a comic book of him also intrigued me, as my whole family loved the concept of learning through comic books. Gandhi was the ultimate representation of a Hindu who used the ideas of karmic action to better the world as much as he could, and it worked. Seeing him and his story of what he fought for represented in a comic book form reminded me so much of what my family has made a tradition of by now. We learn about our own culture through the comic books, not through praying and receiving answers by talking to the gods. It is a very nontraditional way to go about things, yes, but it is how we do things.

My family does not speak of karma in the way that it seems to be revered and singled out in all that I have previously learned and read. Yes, the concept of karmic revenge is present in our lives, but it seems to be more of a threat than an incentive. In Jessica Fraizer's *Ritual and Practice in Hindu Studies*, she begins with the explanation of karmic action being the center of a Hindu's mind, but not in the traditional sense of right and wrong, as I have read elsewhere. She describes it as not simply right and wrong, "but instead mapped onto multiple grids" which include everything from merit to attached and detached action to foolish conduct.<sup>3</sup>

During my family's traveling hours, my dad took the time to explain to us what we were going to expect. None of us (besides him) had ever been to an Indian cremation ceremony before, and it was going to be different than the traditional Western funerals we had heard about and been to. In the Hindu tradition, there is preparation for the ceremony. As my grandmother had already passed before we could even get on a plane, my family who had already been able to make it to India were responsible for washing her body in a mixture of ghee (clarified butter), yogurt, honey, and milk. Then it is washed with water, and the holy water of the Ganges river is sprinkled on the body. During all of this, her head was pointed south and an oil lamp was lit, along with pictures of her favorite deities, Saraswati and Ganesha. The priest is present for all of this, and is chanting things in Sanskrit to help the body separate from the

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<sup>3</sup> See Fraizer, pg. 1

soul. The body was then dressed in her favorite sari, the blue and gold one my dad and I loved. Once we arrived, my dad was responsible for repeating the chants, as he is considered a Brahmin. I could not understand most of it, as I do not understand or speak sanskrit, but I did have my uncle translate some for me. The chanting was mostly focused on the things we have learned in class: that this body was one step closer to escaping samsara and attaining moksha. After this was done, we covered her body in a white sheet because she had died after her husband. My aunt explained to me that the body would get covered in a red sheet if she had passed before her husband.

We held a wake before her cremation, during which she was in a casket and we celebrated her life and accomplishments. My aunt sang a beautiful song in Hindi that celebrated death, and some of my grandmother's friends shared some charming stories of her, my cousins shared poems that they had read and reminded them of her. In the casket, my grandmother had turmeric on her forehead, holy basil on her chest, and a ring of flowers around her neck. She remained in our favorite sari, until the cremation. At the end of the wake, we placed rice balls, or *pinda*, by her casket.

If you are not a baby, saint, or a child, then your body is to be cremated so it can return back to the atmosphere, and the soul can find a new body that it deserves. My family always talked about reincarnation, and that was another "incentive" to be a good person. When I was young once, I saw an ugly toad, and would not stop mentioning it to my grandmother. She explained to me that it was very bad in its past life, and that is why it is now an ugly, stinky toad. Reincarnation is very important in the Hindu religion. In the encyclopedia article written by J. Bruce Long, he goes into exactly what my family believes. Reincarnation is the "the law of *karman* (action), a universal law of nature that works according to its own inherent necessity."<sup>4</sup> Also, in the Brill Dictionary of Religion, the main focus of reincarnation is to have good karma.<sup>5</sup> This is the retribution for good or bad deeds, this is what is most important in the concept of reincarnation. Basically, do good, be good, and you'll get the good things out of life. In class,

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<sup>4</sup> See Long, J. Bruce, page 7677

<sup>5</sup> See Zander, History, section 3.

we talked about reincarnation being the one thing, the one cycle that everyone wanted to end. From what I have seen about my family's traditions, the goal is not to end the cycle, but to be reborn as a human so you can continue to do better in the world, to inspire more people and create a good place to live in. To achieve this, you just be a good person! Respect the world, respect your family, your elders. If you follow the path that the *devas* (gods) have set out, you will continue the cycle, always as the most influential as you can be. Long describes reincarnation more as a path to liberation, and honestly, that is probably the most common way that Hindus see it and why they practice. I asked my aunts and uncles what they thought of my grandmother's life, as I had only known her in her last 19 years. They all agreed that she was a very selfless, respected woman. She was independent and strong-willed, and was always looking out for others. She valued education and ensured that all of her children had master's degrees, not just for their own well being, but also so they can go out and do good things for the world. She always put her family first, always thought of her children and her grandchildren; she did the best she could. With that opinion, I believe that she has been reborn so she can do more good.

During the cremation, it is traditionally only the men of the family that are allowed, so I was not permitted to accompany my grandmother's body as I had been with my aunts. There was more chanting in sanskrit about the liberation. The ceremony immediately following the cremation is called Shradh, and it is the ritual that one performs to pay homage to one's parents who have passed. It lasts one week, and it is to help the soul find its way to its next life. There are many food offerings as the soul is still hungry, and the oil lamp remains lit so it can find its way. During this ceremonial week, two of my uncles traveled to the Ganges river and spread my grandmother's ashes in the sacred waters.

I feel that it is important to state that through my recent travels and experiences, I have learned so much more about my family and my culture than I could have dreamed. I saw that my family's practice is not so much different than other Hindus but simply abridged to fit our lifestyles. It is, however, different from traditional hinduism. We do not follow a very strict set of rules, and those that we do follow improve

our family as a whole. This experience has brought me closer to my family in ways that I could not be more thankful for. My uncles who have lost their way in terms of what my grandmother, and their mother, set out to raise them as were brought back to her ideas by all the questions I asked, all the answers they were more than happy to give. My grandmother held a very special place in my heart, and my family's, so traveling to India for the first time for her cremation was a very difficult thing for everyone. While we were all grieving, I took the opportunity to learn even more about her. My aunts and uncles all shared stories of her, things I had never heard before, like when she used to read to all of them comic books as well, or how she would go out of her way to do special things for her children, because she loved them, and for others, because they deserved to feel happy too.

In the end of it all, my experiences have shown me that religion is practiced in so many different ways all around the world. I have seen firsthand the ways in which it impacts people's lives, from how they live to why they continue to do their best. My family has told me that practicing Hinduism has given all of us a chance to improve the world as much as we can. I have never heard any of them say that the goal is to never come back. The ultimate goal is to make the world the best place we can, that is why we return to it.

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