

Hinduism and the Religious Identity of Southeast Asian Youth

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Hinduism is a unique phenomenon that gave rise to many schools of thought and worldview systems. This is a religion of universal principles that gives its adherents free rein to search for the truth. The theological aspects of Hinduism are highly universal and allow anyone who believes and is ready to believe to find rationalising arguments. The article examines the flexibility of the Hindu canons, their plasticity with respect to the individual, the ability to gain one's own knowledge, as well as the ability to avoid fanatical observance of the religion tenets. The main distinguishing feature of Hinduism is its ability to adapt to living conditions, which makes the religion very popular and accessible. Hinduism does not condemn its followers; it merely regulates moral principles and creates a highly religious community. The results of the survey showed the main religious problems of the immigrants living in the United States. The materials of the article can help to develop the solution to the main problems that religious individuals face when they are outside their country, as well as to identify the factors influencing the youth's self-identification. The study can also help to find out whether the transformation of religious identity should be resisted and considered as "scolding" the main tenets of Hinduism. The survey is an objective study of the psychological attitude and identity of Hindus as it involved different social groups.

Key words: *Religious identity, Hinduism, Multicultural environment.*

Introduction

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that has an unofficial "status" of a very ambiguous religion. There are several interpretations to the same question and all of them are correct. The lack of a unified theological system allows attributing Hinduism to a universal religion, which makes it interesting in all aspects (Fox, 2016). The homeland of Hinduism is the Hindustan Peninsula;

it is there that the largest number of adherents are concentrated. Hinduism (Barnes et al., 2010) mainly comes from the Southeast region, and a large number of its followers live in North America, Great Britain, France, and Africa.

The migration flow of the Indian population is massive due to the globalisation processes. Migrants from India constitute the second largest diaspora in the world (25 million people). However, the Chinese diaspora ranks first. Consequently, the migration of Hinduism to other countries has a fairly impressive scale. The Hindu population is the third largest in the world, after Christians and Muslims (Pew Research Centre, 2017). The number of Hindus is more than 1 billion people, which is about 15% of the world's population (Barnes et al., 2010). It is estimated that by 2030 the number of Hindus may grow by 0.2%, which is 1,267,290,000 people (Barnes et al., 2010). Migration processes “settled” Hindus around the world. The largest number of Hindu emigrants is concentrated in North America (Barnes et al., 2010).

Migrating Hindus bring Hindu traditions to the cultures of different nations. The expatriate Hindu community is quite young. The average age of Hindus in Europe is 34; in the USA – 30 (Barnes et al., 2010). This is also one of the youngest diasporas in the world. High religiosity among the migrants is a stable indicator (Liow, 2016; Fomina et al., 2018). Given the rather young age of the diaspora, it can be confirmed that the spread of Hinduism in the world is impressive (Pew Research Centre, 2017). Hinduism adherents follow their religious principles and spread their traditions around the world.

If we compare the data of sociological studies on religious identification, the Hindu diaspora is highly religious compared to many other communities. For example, 31% of Jews and 56% of Christians consider themselves religious people compared to 87% of Hindus (Pew Research Centre, 2018). A 2014 survey of Protestants (Baptists, Evangelists, Lutherans) showed that more than a third of the respondents could not accurately identify their religion (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Presumably, religious views are transformed towards a decrease in the sacralisation of religion in all emigrant communities. Assimilation and adaptation processes inevitably take place outside the traditional religious environment.

The issue of religious self-identity is very important and relevant in the modern world. Religious scholars and sociologists have been exploring this problem since the 1950s. As the problem becomes acute due to the increased number of migrants, systematic research is being conducted. Sociological studies allow analysing the current situation and make it possible to identify problematic issues.

Let us consider the 2014 survey. “Demographic indicators for the Asian population in the United States” (Barnes et al., 2010). The objectivity of this study, however, does not provide interpretations in the context of religion.



A positive attitude to the achievements of civilization and the acceptance of the conditions for being in other countries that are not traditional for Hinduism make up a developed scheme based on the tolerance towards human interests. The transformation of religious principles is a regular and irreversible process, which led to the emergence of new belief systems, trends, and sects. In the vast majority of cases, they are highly tolerant of communities and contribute to the adaptation of a person to sociocultural reality.

Given the psychological component of religion, the transformation of religious beliefs takes place in the multidimensionality of Hinduism phenomena based on ensuring the emotional comfort of the adherent. For example, any instability (economic, political, moral and ethical) should be compensated by faith. Subjection to the laws of mass culture through religious aspects makes social adaptation more comfortable.

The survey took place during the week-long Diwali festival in New York that is better known as the “Festival of Lights”. This is the only place where a huge number of Hindus from all states of America gather together. Thus, it was decided to conduct a sociological study during this period. It should be noted that the study involved different social strata of the Hindu diaspora living in the United States.

When exploring the main aspects of the stay of Hindus in other countries, the penetration of Hinduism into Western culture can be noted. The East-West synthesis has been generating new spiritual requirements in the context of neosocial institutions. The transformation of religious canons, the modification of practices, ceremonies, is by no means perceived as a degradation of religious morality. Moreover, Hinduism reassures the Man of his place and brings him closer to the gods.

Methods

South Asian Americans Lading Together is the organization focused on the Hindu diaspora (SAATWA, 2020), which initiated the survey showing a serious interest in the problems of its community. A sociological study conducted by the South Asian Americans Lading Together public organization in cooperation with the American Association for Public Opinion (AAPOR) (2020) and the Gallup International Analytical Institute (Analytics & Advice About Everything That Matters, 2020) aimed to analyse existing problems of their fellow citizens in order to subsequently develop effective solutions and address existing challenges.

The survey involved 918 people: 350 people were interviewed at the festival and 568 people took part in an online survey. The participants are mainly second or third generation young people born in the United States. Mostly they are children of immigrants from India, Nepal,

Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The age of the respondents ranges from 14 to 37 (57% of men and 43% of women; 98% are heterosexuals, 2% are LGBTA).

Table 1: Information about participants

School students	13%
College students	26%
University students	29%
Employed	47%
Unemployed	7%
Temporarily unemployed	16%

The majority of the respondents noted their *participation in religious rites*. Considering the peculiarities of living in the USA, the term “rite” describes saying a prayer, visiting a temple, participating in events, etc.

Table 2: Responds about understanding of ceremonial acts

Completely understand the essence of the ceremony	37%
Understand some aspects	42%
Understand the ceremony, but do not attach importance to it	23%
Do not understand the language	31%
Do not understand and do not care	12%
Are willing to understand, but do not have time to learn it	46%

One of the main research questions was the *question related to the language* (in the Hindu community, the national language/languages gradually disappear; those who were born in the United States or another country cannot speak it).

How important is it for the modern youth to know the language to understand religious rituals, attributes, and symbols? Can the ignorance of the language affect religious affiliation?

Table 3: The answers on questions related to the language

Can understand and speak the language, as well as read in it	10%
Understand the language and can speak it	13%
Can understand and speak the language, but can't read in it	17%
Can understand only the main idea	21%
Do not understand the language	39%

Is Hindi important for understanding religion by young people of the second and third generation born in English-speaking countries?

Table 4: Answers on question about Hindi

Practise only in the family circle	42%
Practise with the family and Indian friends	35%
Do not practise	23%

The answers may suggest that high religiosity within the Indian diaspora may encourage young people to learn their native language to fully understand the rituals.

Have you ever read religious texts in Sanskrit? Do you think Sanskrit reading makes you more religious?

Sanskrit reading as the main sacred text for every Hindu is very important (84% of the respondents). However, according to 87% of the respondents, Sanskrit *reading* is not the main symbol of Hindu faith. In addition, Sanskrit texts are very difficult and require the understanding of the ancient literary language. About 90% of the respondents find Sanskrit difficult to learn.

Will they teach their children Hinduism?

About 83% of the respondents believe that they will cultivate Hinduism in their children; 78% of the respondents believe that Hinduism is a religion-based lifestyle and will teach their children the basic principles of Hinduism.

Do they want to achieve maximum spiritual evolution? Do they believe in the duality of human nature?

About half of the respondents (49%) are deeply confident in the spiritual heritage of their previous mental states (karmic heritage); 41% are sure that without faith, the soul degrades to a primitive state while 10% do not believe in reincarnation.

How important is going to the temple or other ritual places for you?

Most Hindus prefer to pray in the temple. The importance of prayers, rituals, ceremonies in a cult place significantly increases, especially in a foreign country. Not everyone has the opportunity to visit temples regularly. The answers also demonstrated that the place for praying is not so important - it can be done even in a mosque or a Christian church.

Table 5: Results of questions about temples

Would like to have an opportunity to visit temples regularly	87%
Visit temples once a week	5%
Visit temples once a month	9%
Visit all festivals	21%
Rarely visit temples	28%
Do not have an opportunity to visit temples at all	25%
Can pray in another place	12%

Hinduism family values were developed for millennia; they are thoroughly rooted in the mentality of an emigrant community. Thus, 78% would like to reproduce the same family model they grew up in. The authority of parents and their opinion regarding marriage are very important for Hindus (74% will marry with the *parental consent*); 34% of the respondents trust the choice of a partner to their parents (the groom/bride should be chosen by the parents). Most Hindus (81%) want to start a family with co-religionists, although they do not mind premarital relations with young people of other faiths; 73% of males are confident in their decision to marry co-religionists, and 57% of females are ready to marry a person from another religious community.

Sixty-seven per cent of the respondents accept *divorce* in a bad relationship; 33% will continue their family life even with bad relationships.

Ninety-eight per cent of the respondents noted that *family planning* is a very important aspect; 46% tend to believe that pregnancy is a gift of God and will accept it; 72% are in favour of birth control contraceptives; 27% consider abortion to be acceptable and not contradictory to religious principles; 78% are set against abortion and consider it unacceptable based on religious beliefs. About 40% of young people do not condemn homosexuality in society, positioning their heterosexuality in 98% of cases. In their opinion, the free choice of one's own sexual orientation cannot be opposed to faith.

Hinduism approves of *vegetarianism*. More than half of the respondents (54%) agree that vegetarianism is an integral part of the confession and follow a plant-based diet. Young people believe that being a vegetarian means being a good Hindu. Given the enormous popularity of the vegetarian lifestyle in the West, 36% of the respondents consider it a healthy lifestyle. There are only 10% of Hindus who are not vegetarians.

The attitude to *alcohol* in Hinduism was developed based on restraint. The question was formulated in order to get discussion answers. About 46% of the respondents believe that drinking alcohol does not prevent them from being a good Hindu. At the same time, 28% are



sure that alcohol is a serious barrier to the true faith. About 26% of young people have doubts and cannot give a clearly defined answer. There is a similar situation with smoking.

Are people ready to change religion for the sake of career growth?

The modern world dictates the conditions for a comfortable social life when the professional self-realisation of an individual takes place; 98% of the respondents agree with this statement and do not see any obstacles in terms of religion to promotion. Moreover, 86% of the respondents agree that career is a more important for a modern person than a high degree of religiosity; 93% do not believe that the study of religious texts can somehow help them in professional activities. The gender-based Hindu family code, where a woman is a mother raising children and should not work, was taken into account. At the same time, 78% are not ready to change their religious beliefs for the sake of career growth; 21% were not certain; 6% refused to answer, and 5% are ready to change their religious beliefs.

Results

Language

The results of the survey showed that knowledge of the native language/languages is not critical for most respondents. The fact that living in an English-speaking environment does not encourage young people to learn their native language should be considered. Moreover, certain religious rituals were understood only after being transcribed into the English alphabet. The results of the survey showed that language learning is not predominant in most cases related to the religious aspects. Most people prefer the ceremony to be interpreted in English; they find it more appropriate as it simplifies the understanding of Hindu rituals. The survey results demonstrated that clarification of rituals may be more effective for understanding ceremonies.

The Hindu diaspora in the USA also faces the dilemma of choosing a temple based on the “closest” one principle, as well as teachings according to the principle of more accessible ones. For example, the Upanishads often transform their religious preferences towards the Bhagavad Gita. This is due to informational aspects and factors of staying in the area where the distribution of teachings and places of worship is limited.

Table 6: Results about knowledge of the native language/languages

Teaching	Know well	Understand	Read/learned about	Have some relevance to life
Bhargavad Gita	67%	29%	25%	32%
Ramayana	62%	48%	24%	15%
Vedas	38%	13%	7%	9%
Upanishads	22%	17%	5%	6%

The results show that young people are more prone to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita (67%) and Ramayana (62%). At the same time, only a third of the respondents studied the texts. There are much fewer people who read other texts (the Vedas and Upanishads). The interest in their study is even lower. It should be noted that the Bhagavad Gita teachings (English versions) are presented in different forms. There are books, media, and websites translated and adapted to the best understanding of the Scripture.

The questions related to karma showed that the karmic heritage contributes to the crystallisation of one's own awareness of the spiritual nature of the religious individual. Half of the respondents honour one of the main canons of Hinduism (Samsara) and are ready to bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. A small number of the respondents demonstrated the opinion that karma is a myth to create greater attachment to ritualism and tighten “religious behaviour”. The sceptical attitude to the concept of karma is due to some disappointments, the understanding of the fatalistic essence of karma, and the impossibility of getting rid of the previous/future spiritual heritage.

When asked if there is a place of worship (altar) in your house for praying or ceremonies, 96% of the respondents answered positively. This place is canonical and sacred for Hindus. It should be noted that physical appearance does not matter: some people have an altar with a number of huge sculptures or other attributes while others - a card with the image of the god/gods. It is a *sincere* prayer that forms the main attributes of a Hindu. Some incompatibility between the concepts of the temple, attributes and the attitude of believers towards them can be traced. Sincerity is a purely spiritual category while a temple and attributes are materialistic. The nihilism of fetishes (altar, temple, attributes) shows the strength of the inner/spiritual fullness of Hinduism.

The questions related to the importance of temples and staying at a place of worship during ceremonies show that there is no clear line in this aspect and in Hinduism itself. About 90% of the respondents hypothetically would like to be able to visit temples. But, once they find themselves in a multicultural and multi-religious environment, they experience a certain shift of emphasis. There are objective reasons for this:

- There is no opportunity to attend temples. (People from many Hindu settlements cannot physically do this as the nearest temple can be several hundred kilometres away);
- The desire to visit a place of worship is limited by lack of time and work-related issues;
- Inconsistency of teachings with their own religious beliefs;
- Misunderstanding of some rituals.

The majority of the respondents noted that they want to raise their children in the Hindu tradition; 83% will teach Hinduism to their children. Given the difficulties in the linguistic aspect, young people are optimistic and confident that new creative forms of learning will be found.

Family Values

Table 7: Responses about family values

Question	Male	Female
Would like to have a traditional Hindu family	78%	83%
Will marry with parental consent	56%	74%
Will marry a person from their community	73%	57%
Accept divorce (when the family relationship is bad)	67%	45%
Would like to have a wedding ceremony according to Hindu canons in a Hindu temple	71%	85%

The majority of the male respondents noted that they want their wives to be exclusively from the Hindu community. Women consider it acceptable to marry a non-Hindu. Many respondents believe that even if they *marry* a person of another religion, they will be faithful to Hinduism. The high interest in the canonical Hindu rite of wedding should be noted. About 80% want a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony. Divorce is unacceptable in Hinduism; it is perceived subjectively, and the decisions made will depend on individual views on the “happy marriage”, “unhappy marriage”, “humility”, “love”, “sexual relations”, and “partnership” categories.

Homosexuality, Contraception, Alcohol

Table 8: Responses on questions about contraception, homosexuality, abortion

Question	Male	Female
Are in favour of contraceptives	70%	79%
Are against abortion	73%	87%
Do not mind homosexuality	43%	39%

Current views on family planning are driven by economic, social, and religious principles. About 80% of the respondents prefer the use of contraceptives as an effective method of birth

control and believe that this does not contradict religious beliefs. In many cases, abortion as an unwanted pregnancy solution is in conflict with religious beliefs.

Same-sex relationships are described in many Hindu texts and have a rather complicated classification; in most cases, they are perceived as a mixture of two sexes, which gave rise to the emergence of ideas about the third gender (prakriti). Therefore, to condemn homosexuality is to condemn nature. About half of the respondents believe that sexual orientation does not affect religion, especially from the perspective of democratic social morality.

Vegetarianism, Alcohol

Table 9: Answers about vegetarianism and alcohol

Question	Male	Female
Vegetarians for religious reasons	55%	57%
Vegetarians to lead a healthy life	34%	27%
Do not have an opportunity to be vegetarians	11%	16%
Do not drink alcohol for religious reasons	24%	35%
Believe that drinking alcohol does not prevent them from being good Hindus	56%	37%

Young people are sure that all Hindus should be vegetarians. This is an integral component of the religion based on the ethical ideals of non-violence (ahimsa). However, taking into account the characteristics of Western culture, the concept of vegetarianism has been transformed into a new image, which should be interpreted as a healthy lifestyle. A small number of respondents are not vegetarians due to the issues related to work, studies, and lack of time.

Mostly all religions *do not recommend* the consumption of alcoholic beverages as this is an obstacle to achieving spiritual perfection. The question is of a provocative nature and the answers of the young people were mixed. They are sure that Hinduism does not prohibit drinking alcohol, but only gives the right to choose. Women are more judgemental in relation to this issue. Men find drinking alcohol acceptable while women completely deny it. It can be concluded that those people who preferred not to answer the question do not equate alcohol with religion.

Career

Table 10: Responses on questions about job and career

Question	Male	Female
Are ready to change their religious beliefs for the sake of career growth	5%	1%
Are not ready to change their religious beliefs for the sake of career growth	79%	68%
Believe that religion is not an obstacle to career	99%	94%
Cannot answer the question	26%	19%
Prefer to spend their time on professional development rather than religious texts	97%	89%
Are willing to work (women)	81%	92%

The answers showed the importance of professional perspectives for young people. *Career* is the dominant aspect in any situation regardless of religious beliefs. The provocative nature of the questions meant to decrease the importance of religiosity. The respondents' answers show the objectivity of career-related social attitudes. The youngest survey participants were mostly unable to answer the question. This is not surprising as they are under parental care and most likely do not understand the importance of the question.

Gender positions in the career-related question should also be noted. Social adaptation has modified the concept of female attachment to family obligations for raising children and keeping the house. Most young girls and women prefer vocational training in order to get a good job and equality in the relationship. Professional self-realisation is important for both men and women.

Discussion

The Hindu diaspora is highly religious and highly cultured (Fox, 2016). The main aspects of the symbol of faith, which contribute to spiritual growth and self-improvement, lead to the achievement of true forms of mental being (Klostermaier, 2007). This was confirmed by the survey involving young people of the second and third generations born in America.

There were good reasons to conduct research during the Diwali festival as the celebration itself is an important religious action. It should be noted that such festivals are held not only in India, but in many cities around the world (London, Singapore, Cape Town, Toronto and others). Pilgrimage is one of the important aspects of the festival (the festival in New York gathers Hindus from different cities and states of America). This allows us to presume that the sociological study will demonstrate maximum objectivity within different social groups.

The results showed that the survey involved different social groups, which was the desired goal when planning the research. Classification by social level made it possible to draw more objective conclusions compared to other similar studies on religious identity. For example, if we look at the ISKCON studies (International Society for Krishna Consciousness, also called the Hare Krishna movement) (Filkina & Filkin, 2015), the results are pretty one-sided as they only show the opinions of Hare Krishna followers (Rochford, 2007). Given the multifaceted nature of Hindu religiosity, it would be unreasonable to assume that they are typical of the whole Hindu community, even if we consider that the studies were conducted in different regions of the United States and Great Britain. In addition, in recent decades, the share of Krishna followers in the Hindu community has decreased significantly (Filkina & Filkin, 2015).

Migration studies on the settlement of Hindus in the world (Barnes et al., 2010; Pew Research Centre, 2015) can only provide statistical information on the spread of Hinduism. They do not show the entire religious component of Hinduism and do not delve into the essence of religious assimilation in the new society (Gao, 2016). Economic indicators, the quality of life, and the psychological climate associated with material wealth (Fradkin et al., 2014) do not always contribute to maintaining the authenticity of religious beliefs.

The analysis of the study results demonstrates that some aspects tend to be changed. For example, there are fundamental changes related to gender in Hindu traditions and associated with career opportunities for the female population (Klostermaier, 2007). About 90% of women want to make a career within immigrant communities; in Southeast Asian countries this figure is much lower (23%). It can be assumed that there was an evolutionary leap that separated religion from a career and enabled women to feel mental comfort in their professional life.

Analysing the results associated with the religious idea about the family (Fox, 2016), we can confidently make clear statements. Family values are sacralised according to Hinduism principles (Klostermaier, 2007). A family as a social unit remains a very important component for the young generation of Hindus. Given the democratic nature of the Western lifestyle and its free perception of the “family” concept, family values are unique and quite stable in Hindu communities (Fradkin et al., 2014).

The attention should be paid to the preservation of national languages. There is some degradation in all social groups. There is no special need for speaking a non-national language in the English-speaking environment; however, there is a need to read religious texts in the original language. The identification of national ideas is not possible without the knowledge of national languages (Liow, 2016). Self-identification of religious beliefs should be more

fundamental. This can be ensured by preserving the national language (Fox, 2016; Fomina et al., 2019).

The stereotypes of Western life and the objective reasons associated with visiting temples do not allow the adherence to proper rituality, even if there is a strong desire. The responses show that following attributes is not considered to be important. There are tendencies towards the modification of traditions. Hindus who have got used to their new environment continue to pray to their gods, but do it differently. When a student rides the subway wearing headphones and focusing on his/her own thoughts, he/she prays to gods. People can pray sitting in their cars when they are in traffic jams. It is possible to immerse oneself in meditation in a safe office place when there is a spiritual need for it.

The study did not take into account the problems of racial perception. How does a black person feel among peers? How do interracial conflicts interfere with psychological comfort in education? How does a Hindu feel in a radically minded youth community? Can professional activities be hampered by national differences? A new and more in-depth study can provide the answers to these questions.

Conclusions

Sociocultural adaptation contributes to the transformation of the psychological nature of the individual, as well as social groups. In terms of religiosity, this phenomenon increases the potential modification of the main symbols of faith and the emergence of new interpretations of the religion adapted to different social conditions. The religious component, as the basis for the formation of human behaviour in society, mainly reflects the psychological aspect of each community. It should be noted that modern religious trends do not regard this as a collapse of traditional dogmas. Moreover, the main task of all religious institutions is to accept modifications and adapt to the new realities of life.

This is not about losing of faith or the weakening of its significance in the life of the Hindu diaspora. Assimilation takes place within the second and third generations of emigrants. This makes religion more flexible. The flexibility of the new religious identity preserves the form and the inner fullness of Hinduism; it eliminates fanaticism in matters of materialistic attributes, gender differences, karmic heritage, and religious practices.

It should be noted that the facet of an individual's religious identity is becoming increasingly ephemeral in the conditions of rapid globalisation. Young people, as a social community, do not show interest in the fundamental and deep study of Hinduism. Superficial knowledge of religious teachings is a specific feature of the Hindu diaspora. Hindus are not completely aware of the content of their religion despite being very religious. Some religious dimensions are



neutralised, which necessitates the adaptation of some canons in a multicultural society. The deprivation of religious identity (in the context of the knowledge of canons) cannot be condemned as there are objective reasons for this. They are dictated by time and the conditions of staying in a particular culture.

The high spread of Hindu worldviews in the West should be noted. There are popular philosophical theories, a universal enthusiasm for yoga, the practice of vegetarianism as a lifestyle, and workshops on meditation. It is safe to say that the philosophy of Hinduism flatters Western people; it has modified Western culture by adding a certain amount of exclusively Hindu spices.



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