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Darśan, Decoration, and Transnational Hindu Homes in the United States

This article explores the Hindu notion of *darśan* as it plays out in the worship and religious home decoration of Hindu immigrants from India living in the United States. It is also about transnational networks—maintained through physical travel and the Internet—that make it possible for Hindus to decorate their houses in a certain way, either by downloading religious posters through the Internet or through the transportation of objects between the country of origin, India, and the country of residence, the United States. Finally, this article is concerned with the immigrants' visa status and argues that "permanent" and "temporary" residency of the immigrants must be taken into consideration when discussing the types of transnational lives experienced by Hindu immigrants in the United States, which directly impacts the way they decorate their homes.

KEYWORDS: *darśan*—home decoration—immigrants—material culture—South Asian diaspora—transnationalism—visa status

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The focus of this article is on the Hindu notion of *darśan* (which means "sight"), specifically as it plays out in the worship and religious home decoration of Hindu immigrants from India living in the United States. This article is also about transnational networks—maintained through physical travel and the Internet—that make it possible for Hindus to decorate their houses in a certain way, either by downloading religious posters through the Internet or through the transportation of objects between the country of origin (India) and the country of residence (United States). By transnational networks I mean the multiple ties and interactions that link people across the borders of nation-states in spite of the great distances between the origin and destination (Vertovec 1999, 1). My focus on the Internet in this article is not so much on how it enables the interaction between people but on the way the Internet as a technological tool overcomes physical distance and enables the dispersion of religious pictures across the globe in easily accessible and cheap ways.

While what I am describing as "transnational" is narrow in scope (that is, limited to physical travel and the Internet) and focused mainly on one type of home decoration that is the display of religious objects, it nonetheless opens up an important line of discussion pertaining to the close channels maintained between people and places that make it possible for material culture to get from one country to the other in ways that are more personal, rooted in individual beliefs, and go beyond simply the commercial manufacture and export of material objects in the global market.

The article raises important questions about what these objects are, why they are important, and where they are displayed. Moreover, it addresses where and how they are bought. The opinions and words of people interviewed for this article will be drawn upon to answer these questions. I conducted interviews in both English and Hindi. In most cases, interviews with South Indians were conducted in English and with North Indians in Hindi, which were then written down in English in my field notes. Most of the interviews were recorded, but I should also add that my tape recorder did not always capture all the information presented here. Sometimes, informants would give me information after the tape recorder was turned off. At other times, additional data was provided a day or more later when I met my collaborators outside of their homes in a local park or when going

for a discursive stroll. My daily journal notes therefore are the best source of documentation for the project described and analyzed here. Although many of the people with whom I worked were reluctant to sign any written forms, most gave me verbal permission to use their real names. Nonetheless, unless noted otherwise, I have decided to use pseudonyms here for the sake of consistency.

In addition to the issues expressed above, I am also concerned with the immigrants' visa status, so I argue that the "permanent" and "temporary" residency of the immigrants being studied must be taken into consideration when discussing the types of transnational lives experienced by Hindu immigrants in the United States. Visa status, as I will argue, has a direct impact on the way Hindu immigrants decorate their homes.

The fieldwork for this article was conducted over the course of four years—between 2010 and 2014—in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Plainsboro, New Jersey. The homes I observed in Salt Lake City were independent houses owned by permanent residents, while the fieldwork in Plainsboro, New Jersey, was conducted in residential apartment complexes that I would like to term "IT Enclaves." By this I mean that the majority of the apartments (about 65–70 percent) in the residential complexes I researched were rented by Indians between the ages of 30–45, who were "consultants" in different IT companies around New Jersey and New York City. They manage to make a living in the United States on temporary work visas called H-1B. These consultants are hired by American companies to work on IT projects that can last anywhere from a few months to a couple of years.[1] Most consultants rent one- or two-bedroom apartments for their families in such apartment complexes. The most popular residential complexes are those that allow immigrants to sign short-term leases so that in case the project loses funding and is withdrawn, resulting in the consultant being forced to find a new project in a different geographical area in the United States or return to their home country, they can vacate the apartment without severe penalties.[2]

Darśan: Worship through Sight

The Hindi word *darśan* means "sight," with the implication of auspiciousness. In Hinduism great emphasis is given to visual interaction between deity and worshippers. Devotees wish to see and be seen by the gods, and believe that they will benefit from doing so (Babb 1981, 387). Therefore eyes tend to be shown as big and prominent on the faces of the *mūrtī*s (iconic images). This is why the creation and opening of the deity's eyes plays an important role in the consecration of the enclosed *mūrtī*s when a temple is built (Eck 1981, 5–6). Furthermore, *mandir*s, the term used for Hindu temples in North India, whether established in public neighborhoods or in the homes of individual practitioners, are inaugurated with a special prayer that is believed to instill life (*jīv*) into the images. Only after this ritual are gods in the *mandir* able to see their devotees and bless them. *Darśan* is believed to establish intimacy between the deity and the devotee. This intimacy blesses the devotee with the deity's benevolent gaze and provides the devotee with

divine protection. The gaze that carries with it divine power is commonly referred to as *dṛṣṭi kī dhār*; that is, the flow of auspicious sight, something believed to be emanating from the deity's eyes that can be consumed and taken into the body of the devotee through his or her eyes. As a result, the devotee can "unite" with the deity and gain some of the deity's power (Babb 1981, 388). Although *darśan* of the god or goddess is something to which the devotee aspires, even a small glance of the deity is supposed to have the power to bless the individual. This becomes apparent at various popular pilgrimage spots such as Shri Venkateshwara, located in the southern Indian town of Tirupati, where the devotee is able to get just a quick peek at the Tirupati *mūrtī* before being whisked away by the priests and the security patrolmen surrounding it. However, even that short glance at the *mūrtī* is considered successful for devotees who travel from all over the country and abroad to receive Shri Venkateshwara's *darśan*. The site is so holy that an earlier generation of Indian immigrants banded together to have it reproduced in Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, as the first Hindu temple in the United States (Clothey 2006, 30–57). It was inaugurated in 1976, after some years of painstaking construction guided by architectural specialists from Tirupati itself.

My focus in this article is not so much on the process of how *darśan* transactions take place as it is on the way my informants explained their decisions of placing religious objects in locations within the house where *darśan* of the deities becomes accessible to both the family members as well as their guests visiting the home. I concentrate on the way receiving *darśan* becomes an important criterion in the decision regarding the placement of the domestic shrine where the family members pray daily. I also discuss the strategies employed to determine the places where religious images in the form of posters (see figure 3), key holders (see figure 5), refrigerator magnets, and other popular religious paraphernalia are displayed as ornate decorations on the walls of Hindu homes to create a sacred environment. In addition, this article questions how these religious objects are acquired, transported, and accommodated inside houses in the United States. Although I use the term "home decoration" more generally, my focus is specifically on religious decoration and the notion of *darśan* made possible through the display of religious material culture.

Hindu *mandir*

As mentioned above, the Hindu domestic shrine is called a *mandir* in the Hindi language; *mandir* can refer both to public temples as well as to domestic shrines in individual homes (see figure 6). The presence of the domestic shrine is extremely important for Hindus. One reason for this is because even in India, the religion has never been "institutionalized," in the sense that Hindus are not "required" to belong to a specific temple, pledge offerings, or register their children in religious Sunday school classes. Religion for Hindus is more internalized, something one has to live always and observe with rituals whenever possible (Seshachari 1999, 20). According to one informant, a shrine enlightens the

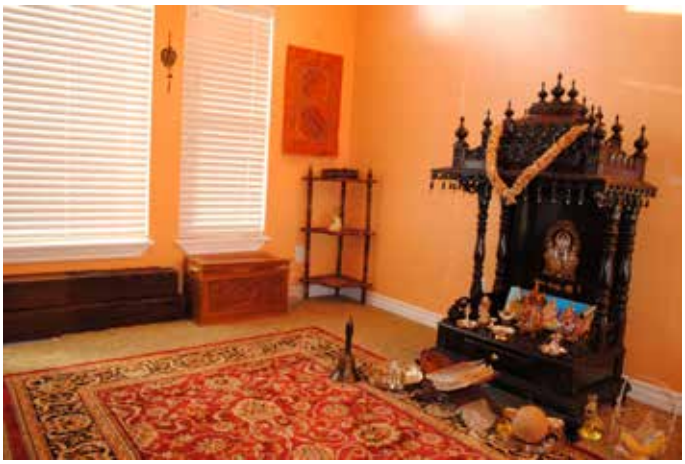

FIGURE 1. A *pūjā* (worship) room with a traditional wooden *maṇḍap* (a small pyramid-shaped structure) in a permanent resident's house in Salt Lake City, Utah. All photos taken by the author, 2010.

FIGURE 2. A glass cabinet built specially for the *mandir* in Salt Lake City, Utah.

FIGURE 3. Krishna poster in a temporary resident's apartment in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

house and fills the members of the household with satisfaction. "At least that one minute, two minutes, three minutes, whatever prayers we do, at least we get that satisfaction. Without that we don't go out, we don't start the day," he said.

Hindu shrines, most commonly, consist of small bronze, brass, or clay images called *mūrtī*s and framed pictures called *tasvīr*s of many different gods and goddesses, as can be seen in FIGURE 6. Each god and goddess has his or her own powers. For example, before an exam students pray to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge; similarly, prayers to Lakshmi request wealth; to Ganesh, good beginnings, and so on. As one informant said, "Each day we have a need for all these attributes, so we keep *mūrtī*s of different gods in our shrine so that we can pray to them and receive their blessing."

The *mūrtī* of the family deity, commonly referred to as *kuldevatā* (clan deity), which is the largest, is placed in the center. Smaller *mūrtī*s of other different gods and goddesses are placed on either side of it. Sometimes there is no central image of the family deity, so all the *mūrtī*s are placed one behind the other without any specific order; *tasvīr*s are usually hung on the sidewalls or put next to *mūrtī*s. In spite of the lack of a fixed pattern of display,[3] the presence of certain *mūrtī*s, such as Ganesh, the god of auspicious beginnings, and Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, are very common.

When immigrants come to the country for the first time they usually bring with them at least two *mūrtī*s—one each of Ganesh and Lakshmi.[4] However, as time goes on, especially for those who decide to stay in the country when they apply for permanent residency, their ties to their new homeland deepen. As a result, the size of the *mandir* begins to increase as they receive *mūrtī*s and objects of worship from friends during festivals and auspicious occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries. Also, when Hindus visit India they buy *mūrtī*s there because they are far cheaper than those available in Indian stores located in the United States. Most Hindus try and buy at least one *mūrtī* of popular deities in an Indian *mandir* where they are worshipped so that they can later use those images during that specific deity's birthday or festival. For example, a *mūrtī* of *bāl* (baby) Krishna is worshipped on *janamāṣṭamī* (Krishna's birthday), of Lakshmi on *dīpāvalī* ("festival of lights"), of Ganapati on Ganesh *jayantī* (birthday), or of Durga during *navarātrī* ("nine nights" festival), these being the more popular ones observed by Hindus in the North American diaspora (KOROM 2000). Regional gods such as Ayyapan and Santoshi Ma are also kept in many *mandir*s, so *mūrtī*s of these deities are usually either bought in India or requested to be brought by relatives visiting from India because they are not as easily available in the United States. Over the years, the collection of *mūrtī*s received as gifts or personally bought from abroad increases so much that I heard informants complain that they have to request friends and family to stop giving them more.

Especially in relation to size, what made *mandir*s of permanent residents so elaborate was not only the growing number of *mūrtī*s, but also the presence of a large *maṇḍap*, a small pyramid-shaped structure, to house the *mūrtī*s. On the other hand, immigrants on temporary work visas such as the H-1B and uncertain of how long they are able to stay in the country, had smaller "transient" *mandir*s

FIGURE 4. Paper cut pyramid-shaped roof over the *mandir* in a temporary resident's apartment in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

FIGURE 5. Key holder with Ganesh image in a temporary resident's apartment in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

FIGURE 6. An *āsan* (seat) placed in front of a *mandir* set up inside a cabinet in a temporary resident's apartment in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

that could easily be packed up and taken back to the home country. By "transient" I mean that their *mandir*s consisted of comparatively fewer *mūrtī*s and were set up directly on low tables or cabinets covered with a cloth rather than in large and expensive *maṇḍap*s. In order to accommodate a symbolic roof, many Hindus had cut paper in the proper architectural shape and then pasted it onto the roof above the *mandir*.[5] While I do not want to generalize and say that the presence of *maṇḍap*s was strictly confined to permanent residents and homeowners (which it was not), I would like to stress that since *maṇḍap*s, especially the traditional wooden ones, tend to be larger and heavier, their presence in permanent residents' homes was generally more common.

However, these days, steel "portable" *maṇḍap*s that can be dismantled, fit into a suitcase, and reassembled with ease are gaining popularity in both permanent and temporary residents' houses. These portable *maṇḍap*s are available both in India and Indian stores in the United States. Due to cheaper manufacturing costs, most Hindu religious items, including *mūrtī*s, are now made in China, from where they are exported globally.[6] Yet most Hindus I met preferred to buy the traditional wooden *maṇḍap*s from India because they were made of "pure" substances like sandalwood. This, I was told, was due to the fact that devotees prefer giving the deities things that are purer in nature.

A trend practiced among immigrants who had received their Green Card was to first buy a house. This usually consisted of a town house or a single-family home, depending on the financial resources of the couple. After buying a home, the couple immediately made a trip to India to buy things for the house. These often included objects like the wooden *maṇḍap* from shops in their hometowns that were reputed to make handmade, good quality items, unlike those made in China that are available in Indian stores in the United States. During a morning walk, an informant who is a personal friend of mine named Mansi Bhide, had elaborated by saying, "In India, we know the shops from where to buy 'nice' things. We know what is available where." Furthermore, India also provides a broader variety of religious items in addition to cheaper prices for the same items bought in the United States, which means that one can buy more things.

Why is temporary and permanent residency such an important factor in deciding the way a home is decorated? One reason for this is the "precarious" nature of the H-1B visa, which is one of the most popular visas given to immigrants working in the United States. As noted earlier, most immigrants that I met were consultants in the IT industry. I have decided to focus on this visa because an immigrant working on an H-1B is eligible to apply for a Green Card. Yet I describe the visa status as "precarious" because an H-1B visa is given for only six years. After that if an immigrant wishes to continue working in the country, the company in which the immigrant is employed has to apply for a Green Card. Until the Green Card arrives, the immigrant's H-1B is extended by one year or three years depending on the company. Furthermore, if the immigrant loses his job (especially these days due to increasing budget cuts), the immigrant must either find a new job or he and his family must leave the country almost immediately. Very frequently the

FIGURE 7. A portable steel *maṇḍap* in a permanent resident's house in Salt Lake City, Utah.

immigrant, who is in a position of desperation to save his visa status, agrees to move to a different state in the country at very short notice. In such situations the ability to be able to pack up a *mandir* and other household items with ease becomes an urgent priority.

I should also add that although the H-1B visa is for six years, it must be renewed every three years. If the immigrant pays a visit home during those six years, for instance, the visa has to be renewed. At such times, there is the possibility that the U.S. visa is rejected. In these cases, the immigrants may have to ask Indian friends and neighbors to sell their furniture for them and ship their *maṇḍap*s to India. On the other hand, once the immigrants get their Green Card, which can take anywhere between one to ten years, their stay in the United States becomes secure. For this reason, most immigrants wait until they have their permanent resident status before they buy their own houses. Home decoration, especially in relation to religious artifacts that cannot be sold or given away due to their sacredness, are therefore frequently bought and displayed depending on visa status.

Darśan achieved through set up, location, and display of the *mandir*

Traditionally domestic shrines are often placed on a low table on the floor because Hindus worship and pray sitting down rather than standing up. In front of the shrines is placed a mat called an *āsan* (seat) on which the devotee sits to pray. Informants explained that the *āsan* has several functions, which include helping the devotee to concentrate (*dhyān karnā*) on the deity being worshipped. It also prevents clothes from getting dirty. Above all, however, as one informant stressed, unless the devotee sits on the *āsan* to pray, the prayers do not reach the deity. This ability to sit and pray provides devotees with opportunities to gaze

deeper into the faces and eyes of their gods in a manner that is physically more comfortable for the devotee and encourages him or her to sit longer in the company of the divine.

Furthermore, this act of "sitting down with God" indicates the respect and devotion that earns the worshipper the necessary benevolence and protection of the deity being worshipped. One informant had summarized the sentiment saying, "We do so much work standing. We should take at least a few minutes a day to sit down with God and pray to him peacefully." Due to lack of space, especially in rented apartments, it is sometimes difficult to place the shrine on the floor. At other times, informants said they feared their small children might touch the lit *dīpak* (lamp) that they light as part of daily prayers and get burnt if the shrine is on the floor. Under circumstances such as when children are present, worshippers place the shrine on one of the higher shelves of a bookshelf or mount it on a wall in a small *maṇḍap*. When this is the case, they pray standing up rather than sitting down in order to maintain eye contact with the deities on display.

In the case of permanent residents, the *mūrtī*s were frequently kept inside a *maṇḍap* that was placed on a low table or directly on the floor. On the other hand, in the case of temporary residents, the *mūrtī*s were either placed directly on a low table covered with a cloth or inside mid-sized cabinets. Low tables or cabinets were definitely the more preferred items of furniture to set up the *mandir* because it was explained that it provided better *darśan*. Here I should stress that I would see *mandir*s set up on small bookshelves too, but three-foot high cabinets and low tables were considered more "ideal." Neeta Basu, a temporary resident living in a rented apartment in Plainsboro, New Jersey, told me that earlier she had placed her *mūrtī*s on a bookshelf, but she did not like that. She explained why in the following manner.

> There was no eye contact with God. It was like worshipping on levels—first one row then second row. That did not give me satisfaction because then I had to stand and worship so that I could see all my gods at the same time. So, I decided to place my *mūrtī*s inside a low cabinet instead, so that all *mūrtī*s could fit on one surface, and I could place all the *pūjā kī samagrī* (items used for worship) below in one of the cabinet draws. (personal communication, 16 June 2010)

Another resident in Plainsboro, Seema Iyer, again a temporary resident in New Jersey living in a rented apartment who had also placed her shrine on a bookshelf, told me that she too had wanted a small two-foot cabinet, but could not find one.

> But we had just arrived from India to the United States and this was the best option at that time, so we used it. I didn't find a cabinet. Maybe I should have searched some more. But we had so many other things to do at that time. This was the best thing we could get. (personal communication, 4 June 2010)

The low height of the table or cabinet ensured greater accessibility to the eyes and face of the deity during the traditional *pūjā* (worship service) that guaranteed the proper *darśan* of the pantheon. While temporary residents often "made do" with what they could find during the uncertain duration of their stay in the United

States, sometimes even setting the *mandir* up in kitchen cabinets, they made every effort to accommodate the deities in what they considered the "proper way" until they became permanent residents, allowing them to purchase their own houses.

Along with issues of how to worship and on what to display the shrine, beliefs associated with where to place the structure inside the house also held central importance. Although traditionally shrines were set up in the innermost parts of the house (HANCOCK 1999, 87), I did not see this trend followed in the rented or owned houses I observed during fieldwork. *Mandir*s were most frequently set up in easily accessible parts of the house where the public could see them when visiting.

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE RIGHT LOCATION OF THE *MANDIR*?

Purity (*śudhatā*) and impurity (*aśudhatā*) are significant notions that play a very important role in the location of the domestic *mandir* (SRINIVAS 2002, 368; RAHEJA 1988). Keeping the *mandir* in a location of the house where impurity can be avoided can ensure the required state of purity. For instance, certain rooms in the house are considered more appropriate to place the shrine than others because they are considered more *śudh* (pure). The master bedroom, especially of a young married couple, is never considered a suitable location. Hindus never place the shrine in the master bedroom, where a couple is sexually active. Even though sex is not considered polluting in Hinduism, it is certainly embarrassing, since deities can "see."

Since many women traditionally stay at home to look after the house, menstruation is another deciding factor in the placement of the domestic shrine. In Hinduism, menstruating women are considered polluted (HARPER 1964). When telling me reasons why they had placed the shrine in the location they did, women stressed over and over that a shrine should be kept in a "corner" where it is visible and accessible, but also out of the way so that during menstruation, even by mistake, they do not come into contact with any part of the *mandir*, for it must remain pure.

Traditionally, a separate *pūjā ghar* (room) to conduct worship is considered ideal, and immigrants with large, independently-owned houses who can afford to spare a room often have one. A separate *pūjā* room also enables the family to control who touches the *mandir* (HANCOCK 1999, 89). However, immigrants, whether as homeowners or those renting apartments, very frequently cannot afford to spare a separate room solely for the purpose of worship. In these situations, some Hindus place the shrine in the kitchen, because after the *pūjā* room, it is considered the most *śudh* room in the house (SRINIVAS 2002, 373). Customarily, Hindus only enter the kitchen after a bath. Menstruating women do not set foot in the kitchen. In India, many Hindus live in extended families, in which other women like the mother-in-law and sister(s)-in-law cook food during that time. Furthermore, Hindus do not step into the kitchen with shoes on; therefore, if the shrine is in the kitchen no one will come near the it wearing shoes, which are considered polluting. There is also a tendency to wash the hands thoroughly before doing any work in

the kitchen, which also guarantees that the *mandir* will only be touched with clean hands.

During the course of my research, however, I found that very few Hindus had placed the shrine in the kitchen, in spite of the need for *śudhatā*. For one thing, kitchens were considered too small. Furthermore, most Indians, especially those young consultants who have arrived more recently, live in nuclear families in the United States. Therefore, even during menstruation, women have to enter the kitchen to cook. In a majority of the cases, temporary residents, especially those renting one or two-bedroom apartments, had kept the *mandir* in the area between the kitchen and dining table or in a corner next to the dining table, which was both accessible and visible and yet could be easily avoided. Others who had decided to set up the shrine in the kitchen explained that they placed it in a "corner" of the kitchen and avoided that corner during their menstrual cycle.

Going back to the idea of the cabinets as suitable furniture to set up the *mandir*, informants also explained that cabinet doors, unlike a bookshelf, provide the *mandir* with extra protection against menstruating women. One informant explained that the doors of her *mandir*'s cabinet are always left fully open so that her family can continuously "see" the deity and receive its *darśan*, but she partially closed it during her period to ensure purity. Many Hindus I met did not like to close the cabinet doors completely because to leave the gods in complete darkness was perceived to be disrespectful. It also blocks the deity and devotee from seeing each other, thereby disrupting the flow of auspicious vision. This rule of the cabinet doors is a fuzzy one, since some Hindus who practice the ritual of putting their gods to sleep in the afternoon and at night close the doors of the cabinet completely. For the purposes of putting gods to sleep, some Hindus also buy *maṇḍap*s with doors.[7] While it may be argued that the gods cannot see the devotees when they are asleep, one informant said that she did not believe in closing the doors on the pantheon at all because she wondered how the gods could breath. While the focus of this article is on "sight," my informant's comment nonetheless highlights the fact that once the *mandir* has been established, the gods are considered "alive" in every aspect of the word. They are fed, bathed, and worshipped, and it is precisely with this *sevā* (selfless service) that the deity's benevolent gaze is achieved.

In one independently owned house in Salt Lake City, Utah, the woman of the house, Rashmi Rai, found an innovative way to work around the problem of wooden cabinets. She explained that she wanted to set up her *mandir* in the kitchen. However, she did not want to buy a separate cabinet because her kitchen was too small. Therefore, she decided to set up her *mandir* in a *maṇḍap*, and then keep it inside one of the built-in wooden cabinets in the kitchen next to the refrigerator. Although the cabinet doors were always left open, she closed them during her period. However, she felt uncomfortable locking her deity away inside the cabinets, thereby interrupting the interface with the divine. To solve the problem, she removed the wooden cabinet doors and replaced them with glass ones. As a result, even though she closed the shrine door completely

during her period, she did not eliminate the deity's *darśan* (personal communication, 9 May 2010).

Of course, homeowners are definitely at more liberty to make such changes than those who are renting. Yet, concerns over the resale value of the house in the future often prevents them from accommodating the *mandir* in ways they would like. For example, in addition to removing the wooden cabinets, the woman mentioned just previously initially wanted to also remove the granite counter below the cabinet so that she could set up the *mandir* on the floor. The contractor cautioned her against it, since he said that if she wanted to sell the house in the future, a missing counter top in the kitchen would hurt the resale value of the house. Even if she decided to replace it later, she probably would not have gotten the same countertop design. Such practical dilemmas become issues of grave concern when planning the installation of a *mandir*.

If *darśan* is such an important aspect of *mandir* display, why do Hindus not just place it in the living room? This is because one does not know if a female guest coming into the home is menstruating or not. During parties it is also very common to serve alcohol, which is not considered appropriate in front of the deities, who will "see" the consumption of alcohol, which is thought to be impure. The benevolent gaze between the devotee and the disapproving deity will be interrupted due to the fact that the intoxicated devotee will avoid the deity's eyes out of guilt. In many large, independently-owned houses, though, I frequently found that Hindus had converted one of the guest bedrooms immediately to the right or left of the front door into a special *pūjā* room. They explained that in such cases guests entering the house could receive *darśan* easily, even while keeping menstruating women from getting too close to the shrine, but at the same time allowing her to receive the auspicious sight of the deities housed in the set-off room.

Receiving constant *darśan* is also the reason why basements are not considered suitable locations to set up a household *mandir*, in spite of the fact that they can provide ample space and can be avoided by menstruating women. Hindus explained that the basement is a space below the main floors of the house they commonly use. By placing the deity on a floor below them, they would feel as though they were literally "walking on the deity" (*bhagvān pe cal rahe haiṅ*), which would be a sign of disrespect. Showing subservience to the social and divine hierarchy is an important aspect of Hindu culture. One way that this subservience is shown is by touching the deity's feet (Babb 1981, 396). Placing deities below human feet would thus show disrespect and attract the angry eye rather than the benevolent gaze.[8] On the other hand, attics in townhouses, condominiums, or independent houses, although at the highest level of the structures, are also not suitable options for the *mandir* for reasons explained below.

Hindus prefer the *mandir* to be set up on the floor where they spend most of their time, so that they can continually see their gods and goddesses. Diya Sarkar in Plainsboro, New Jersey, explained that she had earlier set up the *mandir* in the attic of her condominium, but then her family would have to "go out of their way" to the attic to pray, since the attic was used only irregularly. God and *mandir*

should not be isolated. Rather they should be easily accessible to all, both to family members and guests. While they lived in their old condominium, Ms. Sarkar did not change the location of the *mandir* because she did not want to disturb the deity housed within it. However, when her family moved to their new townhouse, she set up their *mandir* in the small corridor between the formal living room and kitchen, exactly opposite the front door, so that family members and guests entering the house could receive *darśan* immediately upon entering.

Ms. Sarkar also placed a study table next to her shrine because she believed that it was "good" to "see" the deity while working. She explained in the following manner.

> Whenever you sit to do some work or study you should not look towards a blank wall because knowledge will be blocked and will not come to you. That's why you should study looking at something open—study facing a window so that all that knowledge comes to you. An alternative to an open window is facing the shrine. When children are studying, even if you don't want to, when your eyes get tired you move them. As soon as you move them, they should automatically fall on something nice. That is another reason I wanted it in the study room more than any other place. (personal communication, 26 July 2010)

Here I would like to argue that the deity's gaze is not just benevolent. It also removes obstacles and provides knowledge (*jñān*). In the case of the children studying, their gaze meeting that of the deity helps them share divine vision which is insightful, knowledgeable, and has the ability to remove obstacles standing in the way of a child completing her homework. In general, I found that the study room, mainly in independently owned houses, was a popular choice for keeping the *mandir*. Since many of my informants had very small children, the study room mainly constituted a space for the husband to work and also contained the family computer and printer. Just like in the case of my informant's children doing homework, the deity's insightful gaze toward her husband's work ensured financial security and prosperity.

Religious imagery outside the *mandir*

Although the *mandir* constituted one of the most important aspects of a Hindu home, religious display was not restricted to the *mandir* alone. Images of deities were also displayed as decoration on interior walls in the form of posters, Hindu calendars, refrigerator magnets, and key holders. Some religious artifacts were even hung outside the front doors of homes. Similarly, large and small *mūrtī*s, especially of Ganesh (remover of obstacles), were also kept at the entrance of the house. While these were not worshipped in the traditional sense like *mūrtī*s and *tasvīr*s in the *mandir*, I would like to argue that these images nonetheless constitute what I have been describing as *darśan*. By this I mean that the religious images devotees display on walls that I label here as "decorations" are hung so that

the intimate gaze between the devotee and the deity is maintained even outside the immediate environment of the *mandir*.

My intention in what follows is once again to focus on describing the strategies employed and decisions made by my informants to consciously display certain *mūrtī*s and posters in specific locations of the house. The decisions were made to facilitate a constant interface with the household deities. In the next section, I would like to discuss religious decoration consisting of posters and *mūrtī*s, two of the most conspicuous types of material objects on display in Hindu diasporic homes located in the United States.

Religious posters and *mūrtī*s in secular settings

By religious posters I mean "god pictures" that I found frequently displayed on the walls of the Hindu homes I visited. I am using the term "god picture" for posters generally to include both the expensive and cheap varieties I found hanging in temporary and permanent residential homes. Such chromolithographic god pictures, which are ostentatious in India as well (Pinney 2004; Jain 2007), depict gods sitting solo in typical poses of blessing, but sometimes accompanied by their respective consorts and companions. Another category depicts epic moments in the earthly careers of the deities of the Hindu pantheon. Such action posters are based on mythological tales originating in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. This latter type of poster is by far the most common. Images from the *Bhagavad Gita* with Krishna giving moral instruction to Arjuna before the epic battle narrated in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna dancing with Radha and other *gopī*s (cowgirls) at the *rās līlā* (circle dance), and *bāl* Krishna eating butter are just a few examples of narrative events depicted in such decorations.

What is the significance of these god pictures and why are they displayed? God posters in a traditional sense have come under much attack by art collectors and connoisseurs, as well as educated, Westernized Indians, who dismiss them as kitsch and question their artistic value (Smith 1995, 24). Yet, referring to what Smith (1995) has termed "omnipraxy," a populist version of this tradition that is inconspicuous, casual, informal, and unmediated by specialists is followed by a large majority of Hindus both in India and the United States, who display these posters throughout their homes, on the dashboards of their cars, and also on the front doors of their houses. Since they are mass produced, they are sold cheap and sometimes even distributed free (Smith 1995, 24). Furthermore, since they are portable, they are especially popular among temporary residents in the United States who do not want to invest in expensive items of home decoration that they may have to carry back to India when they depart. With the popularity of the Internet, these days the god pictures are usually downloaded for free. As a result, technology has further increased the "mobility" (Babb 1995, 3) of religious objects, which enhances the sacred power of the object rather than diminishing it precisely because of its ubiquitous presence (Inglis 1995).

Permanent residents and homeowners generally have more expensive versions of these images bought or shipped from India to ensure better quality and price. For instance, an image of the *rās līlā* in one homeowner's house was hand painted on cloth by an artist, decorated with silver thread, framed, and hung near the dining table. On the other hand, a similar image of *rās līlā* in the form of an unframed paper poster was pasted on the wall opposite the front door of a temporary resident's two-bedroom apartment.

Unlike the *mandir*, the question has been raised of whether these posters, both the expensive and cheap variety, are indeed religious. Are they worshipped? Should they be treated with the same reverence as the *mandir*? The answers to these questions are contextual in nature, since they vary depending on the practices and beliefs of the families who have displayed them in their homes. The casual placement, or their combination with other secular decorative objects, in many cases argues for their nonreligious function (Smith 1995, 36). For one informant I met, the religious pictures on the walls in her living room in the United States were simply decorative. She did point out, however, that to her mother who visits her from India, these images evoke the presence of divinity and are therefore religious.

Why is there such a marked difference in attitude toward the religious sanctity of such images? One primary reason is that unlike the *mandir*, there is no ritual to establish the animated qualities of religious posters. They are simply hung or pasted on the wall in a secular fashion, without any prescribed sacred activity. Whether a prayer is said before doing so is left to the discretion of the person pasting them up on the wall (Smith 1995, 36). Yet scholars such as H. Daniel Smith, Stephen Inglis, and others who have studied these posters in India have observed the application of *kumkum* (vermillion powder) or the lighting of incense near the posters, which indicates even to the casual observer an element of sanctity. To some, the prints are venerable by virtue of the subjects they portray (Smith 1995, 35). This suggests that to many these posters are indeed religious. In my own research, I did not find any signs of *pūjā* performed for religious posters. However, one informant explained that it does not matter whether a religious image has been consecrated or not. As long as you begin doing *pūjā* to a religious image, the deity automatically enters into it. In the same way, if one stops doing *pūjā* to the *mūrtī*s in the *mandir*, the deity departs from its sanctified shelter.

In one rented apartment in New Jersey, where I found the *mandir* near a dining table and at least one picture of a deity in every room, the woman of the house, Sheetal Kumar, explained that her mother had told her that a deity should be present in all rooms of the house. Since they were temporary residents and were not sure how long they would stay in the United States, she had simply downloaded and printed the pictures of various gods and stuck them on the walls. In some places she had also cut out religious images from old Hindu calendars and stuck them on the walls, a practice quite common among lower-income households in India. She explained that these images satisfied the dual purposes of mundane decoration (that is, to cover blank walls) and sacred device (that is, to provide

darśan). Sacred and secular functions are therefore fulfilled simultaneously. This breakdown of the sacred and the profane in the strategic use of material objects in Hindu households assists us in understanding why the strict dichotomy between these two categories of reality are permeable within popular religious praxis.

In addition to these god posters, large and small *mūrtī*s also adorned the houses of immigrants with whom I visited. The images were often placed in secular settings such as the corner of the family room, near the entrance, next to souvenirs and family photographs from a trip to Europe, or next to a table lamp in the living room. What differed was that permanent resident homes contained larger, heavier, and more expensive varieties of statues (that is usually made of bronze or an expensive looking metal). In addition to reputed shops in India, informants explained that many of the items on display in their homes were also bought at exhibitions frequently held in large Indian cities, where organizers brought folk artists from various rural regions of the country together under one tent to sell their merchandise. This contemporary handmade folk art frequently depicted images of pan-Indian deities, especially Ganesh and Krishna who are very popular deities in different regions of India. Stephen Inglis has termed the standardization of the images of some deities a "national aesthetic" (1995, 67). The emergence of this new national aesthetic draws Hindus everywhere into a common vision of the divine, especially as Hindus find themselves increasingly mobile within their own country to become part of regionally diverse Hindu communities both at home and abroad (Inglis 1995, 67).

One informant told me that Ganesh's pictures, *mūrtī*s, and posters are especially popular because he is a kind and forgiving deity. Even in posters depicting him as wearing sunglasses and playing the drums or the guitar, he will not be offended and his gaze stays benevolent. Krishna is likewise popular in posters because he has a handsome and charismatic personality. He is also considered a fashionable and curious God, who likes to "see" what is going on throughout the house. In fact, devotees buy him extra *netra* (eyes), so that he can "see more."

Rashmi Rai in Salt Lake City, Utah, bought a large three-foot *mūrtī* of Ganesh from a shop in Bangalore to keep in a corner of her family room. She explained that nowadays shopkeepers in India have also started to manufacture items that are easier to maintain in the United States. She explained it in the following manner.

> For instance, bronze items get black over time. Now if a bronze *mūrtī* of a god gets black, it is considered very inauspicious. But unlike India, regularly washing of these *mūrtī*s is not possible because there is no time or additional domestic labor to help. So now these shopkeepers manufacture bronze items, but also add some other metal so that these *mūrtī*s don't get black. They even ship the *mūrtī* for you, no matter how large it is. (personal communication, 9 May 2010)

While the transnational network of commercial manufacture and trade is beyond the scope of this article, it is interesting to note the impact and changes that the American way of life has had on the production and export of these religious items so that they can be easily transported and displayed in the United States.

Why do Hindu immigrants display these religious images? What religious aspects do they satisfy? My argument is that, like the *mūrtī*s in the *mandir*, these decorative images with obvious religious overtones also satisfy the various aspects of *darśan* that I have been discussing thus far. In addition, within a new cultural and transnational setting they sometimes evoke newer emotions of sentimentality concerning a certain nostalgia for the homeland. They also serve the purpose of educating children brought up in the United States about Hindu religion. As a result, religious imagery also takes on more personal and localized attributes.

Darśan through religious posters and *mūrtī*s

For most immigrants, *mūrtī*s and god posters outside of the *mandir* satisfy both aspects of *darśan* and decoration. One homeowner, Sumathi Nayar of Salt Lake City, had set up her large *mandir* in the study room. The priest from the Hindu temple had been invited to suggest the best direction for the *mandir* to face. He also properly established the *mandir* with ritual prayers. However, her mother, who visited her new home from India, was concerned that the *mandir* in the study room was not visible to her daughter, who spent much time in the kitchen. In India *darśan* of the deities is somewhat easier because houses tend to be smaller, with a more open and expansive floor plan (that is, less internal walls dividing rooms), which makes the *mandir* easily visible from a variety of vantage points. But in the larger segmented housing styles of the United States, the *mandir* becomes hidden, even though an appropriate space is usually dedicated to it. Due to this fact, the mother bought and brought Sumathi a large one-foot Ganesh *mūrtī* to keep on a table in a corner near the dining table on her next visit. This way the mother felt satisfied that her daughter would receive continuous *darśan* of the deities while she worked in the kitchen (personal communication, 15 April 2010). For intimacy with the divine, it is not just important to consecrate a *mandir*. For most Hindus, the deity should be a treated as a member of the family. By keeping him or her restricted to the *mandir*, the devotees, although eager to show their subservience to the deity, "lose out" on the compassion and benevolence transferred through the divine gaze by keeping him or her hidden in one room or a specific corner of the house alone.

Kritika Shetty, in Plainsboro, New Jersey, had explained to me that a *mūrtī* bigger than the index finger should never be kept in the *mandir* because such a *mūrtī* is powerful and requires greater *sevā* (personal communication, 6 July 2010). Such larger *mūrtī*s usually belong to a temple where a priest, who is thoroughly devoted to the image, looks after its needs. The kind of service rendered by a dedicated priest is obviously difficult in a domestic *mandir*. If one owns or is gifted such a large *mūrtī*, it is thus better to keep it in a secular setting so that it is not worshipped in a traditional sense (that is, with a formal *pūjā*). Such an arrangement would still allow for the image to provide *darśan*. While this belief was not uniformly expressed by all of the Hindus I interviewed, I never did find excessively large *mūrtī*s in the domestic *mandir*. Most larger *mūrtī*s were placed mainly next

to other secular objects. At the same time I must also add that some Hindus would place ritualistic objects such as food offerings (for example, dried fruit) and lamps (although unlit on a daily basis and mostly for decoration) in front of the largely ornamental *mūrtī*s, which indicated that even though the *mūrtī*s were not worshipped in the traditional sense, they were revered as sacred images nonetheless.

In addition to the entrance, other locations for the display of religious imagery included walls facing the central sofa, near the dining table where the family ate, and even next to the television that is very central in modern households. In one instance a temporary resident in Plainsboro, New Jersey, pasted and downloaded an image of Hanuman directly on the wall opposite her young son's bed so that as soon as he opened his eyes, he met the eyes of the deity. The mother explained that looking into the eyes of the god first thing in the morning ensures an auspicious beginning to the day. Another mother, Riya Rajan, from Plainsboro, New Jersey, placed a Krishna painting on the wall next to the television in the living room where her son watched cartoons. She explained to me that this picture had become her son's favorite since he had watched the animated children's movie *Krishna*. Since watching the movie, every time his eyes fell on the picture hung diagonally across on the wall next to the television, he recognized Krishna. Even outside the house, he can spot a Krishna image and know who he is (personal communication, 17 June 2010). For this devout mother, images of a deity hung in secular locations, such as next to the television, become ways of educating her son about Hindu gods in an alien environment where Hindus are a small religious minority. *Darśan*, in this sense, also constitutes a vehicle for pedagogy.

Just like young mothers used god pictures as a way to educate their children, older mothers, like Sumathi's, whose children were new immigrants in the country, brought god images from India to install in their married children's houses. For these children, such images gained sentimental value that got associated with the family member who first presented them. Suman Shah in Plainsboro, New Jersey, was gifted a large one-foot *mūrtī* of Ganesh by her mother on one of her visits to the United States. When the *mūrtī* was opened, the family realized that Ganesh's trunk was turned to the right rather than to the usual left. *Mūrtī*s of Ganesh turned to the right are considered very powerful and require more rigorous *pūjā* rituals that are not possible in the house. Her mother suggested that she should donate the *mūrtī* to the local temple so that the priests could look after it. However, Suman did not feel like parting with it, since the mother had taken the trouble of traveling such a far distance with it. She eventually decided to place the *mūrtī* on the kitchen counter directly facing the front door so that the eyes of the guests entering immediately met those of the deity, allowing for a *darśan* transaction to occur (personal communication, 28 July 2010).

The transnational networks that wove my informants together as families and co-worshippers were maintained through travel and material exchange between people who shared similar experiences abroad. Transnationalism is an important factor that links the sacred and profane worlds of such sojourners, for it is a vehicle for them to decorate their homes creatively, while also infusing the selected images

with the power of *darśan*. Auspicious vision, being transactional in nature, further allows for personal meaning and private sentiments to connect people, devotees, and deities in an intimate and subjective circle of relationships.

In addition to posters of gods in typical poses of blessing, it was also common to find photographic representations of the temples and *mūrtī*s of Venkateshwara in Tirupati and Sai Baba, the saint of Shirdi, two of the most popular pilgrimage places in India, hung either as framed or pasted as unframed posters in *pūjā* rooms or even stuck to refrigerator doors in the form of magnets purchased as sacred souvenirs at the sites. I would argue that these photographic representations gain new meanings in the United States, since they often satisfy "vicarious" pilgrimages (Bharati 1963, 165; Diehl 1956, 250) that may otherwise have been done in person annually or at least frequently enough if the family resided in India. In other words, by receiving material objects from an established pilgrimage sight, it is as if the receiver had gone there personally. This is a ritual substitution, something that is quite common in India.

I found that immigrants with green cards and citizenship definitely made more frequent visits to India than temporary residents. But expensive flight tickets, young children, and insufficient holidays at work often prevented immigrants from going home as often as they wanted. Since most temporary residents hoped to earn as much money as they could while on their temporary stay in the United States, trips to India were infrequent and pilgrimages were reduced even more. As a result, if a friend or relative visited these pilgrimage sites, they bought souvenirs in the form of magnets or posters that were portable and light enough to carry and distribute to friends in the United States. Even though these days images can be easily downloaded on the Internet, for most immigrants, posters and magnets bought from the site itself added a flavor of localized authenticity to the image in addition to being appreciated as gifts. Thus through wide distribution, the chance to obtain such mementos—and by extension, the chance to "stand before the deity"—was no longer limited to those who had made the journey (Inglis 1995, 70).

In addition to *mūrtī*s, paintings, and posters placed in secular settings inside the house, images of deities were also frequently pasted or hung on the front doors of houses to make entry an auspicious event. The two most frequently found images on the front door were Ganesh and Hanuman. Even though their gazes looked outward rather than at the devotees, informants explained that *darśan* was still the constituting factor for their display outside the home. Aparna Nayak, a temporary resident in Plainsboro, New Jersey, explained that as she closes her front door her eyes and the god's eyes meet and she feels a mental peace that the house will be safe in her absence (personal communication, 8 June 2010). Aparna also had a Ganesh *mūrtī* on the dashboard of her car, whose presence assured a safe drive for her and her family. Similarly, when she returned home her eyes met his eyes and her reentry into the house began well. I also frequently noticed key holders with divine images hung by the front door so that the devotee "sees" the deity's face before leaving the house. Those who placed Hanuman at their front door said that his strength protects the house. One informant explained that one of the most

sought after Hanuman pictures to put on the front door was the one in which he is portrayed with five heads, each one gazing out in a different direction to secure the house from all sides.

Conclusion

Hinduism is a very accommodating religion. Even though the pattern of home decoration I discuss in this article was shared by a large group of people, there were certainly houses that broke the pattern. For instance, in some houses Hindus had intentionally kept the *mandir* "hidden" inside cupboards, arguing that religion was "private." In other cases, Hindus involved in emerging cults were advised by their gurus not to keep any religious *mūrtī* in the house. While these exceptions certainly existed, they were few in number. For most Hindus among whom I conducted research in Utah and New Jersey, religion constituted an important part of their lives, and the concept of *darśan* helped to fulfill their sacred duties in ways that satisfied both sacred and profane decoration.

My concern in this article has been not only to discuss the notion of *darśan* as it plays out in the practice of Hindu worship and decoration inside a devotee's home, but also to highlight the fact that it is necessary to pay attention to the transnational networks between people, places, and objects that frequently transcend geographical boundaries. Transnationalism marks the pattern of religious decoration and exchange that I have described and analyzed. The home, then, as a space of religious expression and devotion, becomes an important place to observe the ways these sentiments associated with gods, people, and places play out in intimate and creative ways.

Interviews

PSEUDONYM	DATE OF INTERVIEW
Basu, Neeta	16 June 2010
Bhide, Mansi	18 June 2010
Iyer, Seema	4 June 2010
Joshi, Priyanka	28 June 2010
Kumar, Sheetal	3 August 2010
Nayak, Aparna	8 June 2010
Nayar, Sumathi	15 April 2010
Rai, Rashmi	9 May 2010
Rajan, Riya	17 June 2010
Sarkar, Diya	26 July 2010
Shah, Suman	28 July 2010
Shetty, Kritika	6 July 2010

Notes

1. There has been much written on this process of hiring IT professionals from India to work on projects in the United States. For more information on this process, please refer to Xiang (2006). While not all IT professionals are hired through "Body Shops," (for instance many arrive through big IT companies in India such as TCS (Tata Consultancy Services), Infosys, and Wipro, the growing literature on this subject does highlight the many bureaucratic uncertainties and insecurities that IT professionals and their families face when they arrive in the U.S. as contracted labor.

2. While I was conducting fieldwork in New Jersey in the summer of 2010, the memories of the recession of 2008 were constantly recounted as being the worst that the neighborhood has seen. Since many IT projects abruptly lost funding, companies were forced to let these consultants go, and many families left almost "overnight" by leaving much of the furniture in the dumpster. Ravens Crest, the residential apartment complex where I had done my primary fieldwork, was one among many others on Plainsboro Road. The complex had become extremely popular, since it allows tenants to sign three-month leases as opposed to others that made six- or one-year leases mandatory.

3. H. Daniel Smith (1995) has pointed out that even though combinations of divinities vary greatly from shrine to shrine, the particular combination of sacred images employed has a powerful association to those who worship at that shrine.

4. Since Ganesh is a god of auspicious beginnings and a remover of obstacles, Hindus commonly bring a *mūrtī* of him when they travel to the U.S. to begin their journey on an auspicious note. A *mūrtī* of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity, is also popularly carried abroad, since she is worshipped on *dīpāvalī* (the festival of lights), one of the most important Hindu festivals.

5. The significant aspect of having a roof over a god's head was explained to me in different ways. In the words of Priyanka Joshi, one of my informants, "There should be a roof over the god's head because when he has a roof over his head, he will keep a roof over our heads" (personal communication, 28 June 2010). According to some more scientifically-minded informants, the pyramid shape of the *maṇḍap* attracts magnetic forces that infuse the *mūrtī* with energy.

6. For more information on the growth of the Chinese economy and the low manufacturing costs due to cheap labor, see Sharma (2013). The greatest demand for Chinese-made *mūrtī*s is during Hindu festivals when the Indian markets get filled with "Made in China" statues. Their popularity is primarily due to the cheap price, in spite of the low quality.

7. This practice of putting gods to sleep in the afternoon and night is especially prevalent among those who worship *bāl* Krishna, since he is considered a baby and requires more attention. He is also woken up with a clap of the hands and fed food in ways that resemble that of feeding a baby with tricks and entertainment.

8. As Babb (1981) has also argued, gazes are not always benevolent. They can even be angry if provoked by the devotee. Some deities such as the god Shiva or the goddess Durga are particularly known to have short tempers and can get angry easily if disrespected in any way.

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