The Cultural Identity of Working Hindu Married Women in the South African Diaspora in the Context of Goddess Worship during Navaratri

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Abstract
South Africa is blessed with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hindus being the minority in the South African Diaspora, have to face many challenges and problems to preserve their identity in terms of religion, culture and tradition. Hindu women are traditionally perceived as mothers, educators and nurturers to maintain the Hindu value system in their families. This paper demonstrates how working Hindu married women in the Stanger area of KwaZulu-Natal make use of Hindu festivals such as Navaratri to keep alive the Hindu value system, the religion, culture and tradition of their ancestors, despite pressures from the drive to westernize and globalize that comes from the rest of South African society.

Introduction
The diverse South African population has its own distinctive identity with its own set of beliefs, customs and traditions. To reconcile cultural identity is a quest that
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especially women have to strive for. My attention in this paper is focused on the awareness of Hindu married women in an enclave situation and how they represent themselves during the Hindu festival of Navaratri\(^1\) to maintain their cultural identity. Cultural identity in this sense encompasses religion, culture and tradition. My close interaction with the working Hindu married women in the Stanger area on the North coast of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa provides the basis for the insight and understanding of the maintenance of their cultural identity through the celebration of festivals such as Navaratri. The data collected during the interviews is representative of the greater population of South African Hindu married women. The data collected was used to draw conclusions, linking the festival of Navaratri with the role of South African Hindu married women. My preliminary interviews revealed that working Hindu married women perceive themselves in a variety of contexts such as dress, language, food, religion and culture. This is so because they are strongly influenced by their traditional value system, with which they identify consciously and unconsciously.

In an academic study of this nature, a clear understanding of some of the concepts involved is essential. According to Prabhakaran (1994); Vedalankar (1972) and Zaehner (1962), a person who is a Hindu, follows the Hindu religion that is Hinduism. It is very difficult to precisely define what Hinduism is. But scholars agree that Hinduism is the way of life of a Hindu (Hulmes, 1989; Kumar, 2000; Metha, 1972; Vedalankar, 1979; Zaehner, 1962). A Hindu is one who believes in God and is able to understand, discover and worship God through the medium of festivals, ceremonies and rituals. The legends and myths associated with the above possess high moral significance and form the basis of Hinduism.

The assumption is that the identity of Hindu women could have evolved over the years. Barot et al. (1999) points out the fluidity of culture when he argues that the contemporary world is a dynamic one in which a large range of complex forces combine to shape the particular identities of individuals. Hence tradition and culture have undergone transformation due to the above forces (Kuppusami, 1983). This argument echoes the assumption that working Hindu married women’s cultural identity could have changed over the years. It is to this end that this paper purports to investigate the evolving nature of working Hindu married women’s identity and the factors that may have contributed to the manner in which they perceive themselves. The study revealed, among others, influences such as multiculturalism, multilingualism, education, globalisation, contacts at work, media and the general social milieu that could have impacted and is still

\(^1\) Navaratri is the festival of 9 nights dedicated to the Mother Goddess in her different forms as Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati.
impacting on the cultural identity of Hindu married women and how these women define themselves in the face of such influences. My hypothesis is that although Hindu women maybe western in their outlook, many select religio-cultural festivals to identify themselves culturally. Western in this context means that the British, coming from the West (Western Europe) introduced their way of life that included among others their education, dress, customs, practices, ideas and interests.

Many writers (Duley and Edwards, 1986; Mohanlal, 1998; Mukhopadhayay, 1995; Sweetman, 1995) claim that Hindu religion and culture are intertwined, interdependent and inseparable. Mukhopadhayay (1995) further explains that assumptions about culture and gender are rooted in religious concerns and focus on cultural practices especially during religio-cultural festivals, which reinforce the power of men by appealing to tradition. Thus this study further explores how power relations in patriarchal Hinduism is exercised during religio-cultural festivals and provide explanations for the changing identities of Hindu married women.

Legends and festivals are the flesh and blood in the anatomy of the culture of any nation. There are many festivals in the Hindu calendar and Navaratri is one of the very important annual festivals. It usually falls in the Hindu month of Asvina (September/October). Navaratri is a term of Sanskrit derivation, developed by combining two words, ‘Nava,’ meaning nine and ‘rathri’, denoting night. Navaratri literally means the festival of nine nights.

Many Hindus view God as Father while others may see God in a myriad of ways. Among these the Motherhood of God appears to be the most charming and the sweetest. The mother-child relationship is an unparalleled bond of affection. However, Hinduism stresses the motherhood of God. The relationship with one’s mother is the dearest and closest of all relationships. Hence, it is most appropriate to look upon God as Mother. Worship of the Divine Mother therefore becomes easy and spontaneous (Kuppusami, 1983). The festival of Navaratri is observed over nine days, worshipping the Mother Goddesses in this appealing form.

Navaratri is observed in honour of the consorts of the Trimurthi, when the Universal Mother is worshipped in three ways – as Durga or Kali, she is the

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2 Trimurthi is the threefold Deity – Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer.
3 A Hindu Goddess, the slayer of demons.
4 A Hindu Goddess with fierce and destructive characteristics also regarded as the benevolent Mother.
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consort of Shiva⁵ who is the destroyer; as Lakshmi⁶, she is the consort of Vishnu who is the preserver; as Saraswati⁷ she is the consort of Brahma⁸ who is the Creator. In the context as the consorts of the Trimurthi, the Divine Mother is noted for her submission to the male principle, acting as an essential undercurrent of creation. She is gentle, erudite and wise, a perfect wife and mother – the ideal Hindu female. Yet as Durga or Kali she is strong and independent. Although the different Goddesses are the manifestations of one and the same energy, these different forms are conceived in order to elucidate and emphasize the different functions they have to discharge.

The Coming of Indians to South Africa

Many of the colonial era Hindu immigrants, who arrived 145 years ago, were illiterate in the western sense and coming from small villages, brought with them to the South African Diaspora, in their memories knowledge of their religio-cultural practices relating to festivals that prevailed in their villages. The indentured Indians were a highly heterogeneous population. The majority of them were either Hindi⁹ speaking Hindus from the Northern Provinces of India who emigrated through the port of Calcutta or they were Tamil¹⁰ and Telugu¹¹ speaking Hindus from the Southern Provinces who came by way of Chennai (Chirkut, 1993). From 1875 onwards, a second stream of immigrants, the ‘Passenger Indians’ or traders followed the indentured labourers. The passenger Indians were predominantly Gujarati¹² speaking Hindus and Urdu¹³ speaking Muslims mainly from Bombay and Surat in Western India.

Navaratri: Legends, Traditions and Rituals

According to Krishna (2003) when the early food gatherers and grazers in India settled down to produce food, they praised the earth as the Mother Goddess of

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⁵ Shiva is one of the great Deities of Hinduism, part of the Trimurthi.
⁶ The Hindu Goddess of health, wealth and prosperity.
⁷ The Hindu Goddess of knowledge and learning.
⁸ Brahma, a Hindu God, unlike Vishnu and Shiva, He is seldom worshipped. He is the Creator aspect of the Trimurthi.
⁹ One of the 4 main languages brought to South Africa by the indentured labourers from North India.
¹⁰ Tamil is one of the languages spoken by South Indians.
¹¹ One of the 4 main languages brought to South Africa by the South Indian Hindus.
¹² Gujarati is one of the languages spoken by Hindus who came from Western India.
¹³ Urdu is related to Hindi but with many Persian words. Mainly spoken by Muslims.
fertility. As the people built settlements, they needed protection from evil spirits, disease and pestilence. So they worshipped Durga whose name means fortress and who protected them. Krishna (2003) further explains that as people required continuing prosperity, they worshipped Lakshmi, Goddess of prosperity and health. With settlements came learning and literature, represented by Sarasvati. Thus the indigenous culture combined with the Vedic culture became the contemporary Hindu religion (Krishna, 2003:46). What is important is that everything essential for survival was feminine and identified with the Goddesses.

According to Marchant (1996), tradition has it in myths and sacred writings that demons and monsters were causing great hardships to the pious and polite minded sages of yore. They appealed to the Divine Mother for help. The Mother undertook the war to protect the sages but the war could not be easily determined. Thus, the war was prolonged for nine days and only at dusk on the tenth day, the demons were overpowered and the sages re-established in their proper places. Thus it can be argued that this festival marked the culmination of the struggle of righteousness in victory. The demons were nothing but the personification of evil.

Navaratri is celebrated all over India and in the Hindu Diaspora in different ways but the basic aim of the celebration is the worship of Shakti (power and strength), meaning the Divine Mother in Her aspect as power. It is Mother Shakti that works through all of us. The nine days of Navaratri are equally distributed among the three manifestations (Durga or Kali, Lakshmi and Sarasvati) and the tenth day, Vijaya Dasami, meaning victory is taken as the day of victory when evil was overpowered and banished by the Supreme Mother for the welfare and the continuous prosperity of the world (Maharaj, 1994).

The first three nights are dedicated to the worship of Shakti, the multi-faceted Goddess, the consort of Shiva and also known as Durga or Kali. To understand the inner significance of the festival, it is necessary to know what Shakti is. According to Kuppusami (1982), Shakti is the power of God and therefore there is no difference between God and his power. Sivananda (1987) explains that truly all beings in the universe are Shakti worshippers whether they are aware of it or not. For there is no one who does not love and long for power in some form or other such as wealth, strength and energy.

Vedalankar (1979) explains that one of the legends associated with the origin of Navaratri is that it commemorates the victory of Goddess Durga over a demon called Mahishasura. The Gods invoked the Goddess and asked for help.

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14 The ancient Hindu religion which evolved around 600 BCE – 400 BCE.
15 Shakti literally means energy. A name for the Goddess (as consort or supreme being), which can be used generically.
The Goddess, astride a tiger fought the demon and cut off his head. As Kali or Durga, the Divine Mother is the destroyer of evil qualities, vices and defects. Kali or Durga is the creative power or energy of the Spirit. She creates, preserves and destroys the entire universe from the spiritual point of view. She destroys all our evil qualities in order to create in us divine qualities. In pictures of Mother Kali, we often see Her with one foot on the breast of the sleeping Lord Shiva. Sivananda (1987) says that the scriptures tell us that this means that Shiva, the Supreme Being, who remains static or motionless, while His manifestation is represented by Mother Kali who is ever dynamic. Thus Mother Kali is shown dancing on the body of Lord Shiva.

The second three days of Navaratri are spent in the worship of Mother Lakshmi, the bestower of wealth and prosperity. The spiritual seeker however, is interested mainly in spiritual wealth; meaning divine qualities like love, compassion, good health, generosity and calmness which are really priceless and cannot be exhausted.

On the last three days, devotees pray to Mother Saraswathi, the bestower of divine knowledge. On the ninth day, Saraswathi puja\(^\text{16}\) is performed when all learning equipment such as books, pens, writing material and musical instruments are placed on the altar for Mother Sarasvati's blessings. Gifts are also given to Gurus (teachers) as mark of respect. A child beginning his first lesson of the alphabet begins it on this day. This marks the conclusion of Navaratri.

Finally, the tenth day or Vijaya Dasami, meaning victory, is celebrated in honour of Devi\(^\text{17}\). Devi is representative of all things, and her aspects are many. The many manifestations of Goddess worship in Hindu tradition have combined in the worship of Devi. As Shakti, she is the progenitress of the universe. She is all pervasive and powerful. She is addressed as the primordial energy, animating all things (Kuppusami, 1983). As Parvati\(^\text{18}\), she is the dutiful partner of Shiva, enjoying domestic felicity. As, Kumari\(^\text{19}\) she is the virgin and most pure. As Lalitha\(^\text{20}\), she is the resplendent beauty. As Durga, she is the war Goddess perpetually at war with evil. In accordance with the Hindu predilection for bringing together seemingly contradictory aspects of life such as the protective and destructive forms, the terrible and the tender facets, we see the Mother of the

\(^{16}\) Puja is worship to a Deity and/or its visible image in an atmosphere of devotion.

\(^{17}\) Devi is the name for the Goddess; often used in a generic sense.

\(^{18}\) Parvati is a Hindu Goddess; often used in a generic sense.

\(^{19}\) Name for Hindu Goddess.

\(^{20}\) Name for Hindu Goddess.
Universe as Kali. As Kali, she devours time and is the destroyer of evil. So the Mother Goddess has an aspect to suit every human exigency.

Hindus make a special effort during Navaratri to show their deep gratitude to the Divine Mother for the skills they possess (especially in India). The potter shows his love by making special images, the painter by drawing pictures of the Divine Mother and the musician through his musical instruments. Although outwardly, worship of the Mother is a celebration of triumph, to the spiritual seeker, there is deep inner meaning. On the tenth day or Vijaya Dasami, the devotee celebrates the triumph of having moved from the ignorant state to the enlightened state. This day marks the triumph of spirit over matter and victory of divine qualities over evil qualities.

Navaratri celebrations in North Western India (Gujarat) are famous in that the evenings are dedicated to the fascinating *garbha*\(^\text{21}\) dance. Both males and females dance around earthen lamps while singing devotional songs accompanied by rhythmic hand clapping. Navaratri is a period of fasting in South India. It is known as Dusshera, also known as Vijaya Dasami which is celebrated on the tenth day of Navaratri. Dolls called *Bommai Kolu* are decorated and placed on the altar representing the Goddesses (www.hindu.com, 2004). The celebration of Navaratri takes place with great devotion in temples and shrines when sacred hymns are sung and talks are delivered on the Goddesses. It is common for Hindus to read and recite from the scriptures as well. Gifts of clothes, coconut, sweetmeats and fruit are offered to the Mother Goddesses.

Maharaj (1994) maintains that our disbeliefs as well as our vices retard our spiritual progress and it is for this reason that we have to prostrate before the Mother and pray to her incessantly to give us insight and strength to see through the evils that dominate us and shun them. Perhaps, it is for this reason that it has been emphasised that we invoke the blessings of Shakti. Just as a mother cannot bear to see her child suffering from misery and hastens to its rescue when it cries helplessly for assistance, similarly, the Divine Mother promptly rescues her devotees from distress. The surest and the easiest method of pleasing the Divine Mother is the cultivation of the idea that every woman without distinction of caste, creed or religion is but Shakti herself and should be worshipped like the Mother (Maharaj, 1994).

\(^{21}\) The dance performed during Navaratri festival by Gujarati men and women.
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The Role of Hindu Married Women in the Celebration of Navaratri Festival

The study revealed that the role of Hindu married women as mothers is very important in the preservation and survival of the Hindu value system. From an early age, Hindu women are involved in various religio-cultural activities and the celebration of Navaratri is no exception. They are given a solid foundation in domestic rituals by their mothers and grandmothers who prepare them for wifehood and motherhood, a role in which a woman’s identity finds completion (Metha, 1970). Thus it can be said that Hindu women have been exposed to the teachings of their mothers and foremothers who have deeply internalized traditional customs and rituals with particular reference to the festival of Navaratri.

The mother interacts with the children and imparts to them the culture, tradition and customs of the family unit and society (Singh, 2004). Hence, Hindu women are expected to carry out most of the devotions in the home and the Navaratri festival is no exception. It is the women in the home who are involved in preparing for religio-cultural events, although some men do assist in the preparations. The burdens of motherhood are most of the time heavy for working women. They have little time to relax because of the multiplicity of their roles. Despite their daily chores, many of the interviewees agreed that they achieved fulfillment and joy in preparing for Navaratri. They also indicated that the practice of rituals and traditions during festivals such as Navaratri are gender related. Hindu women’s role as “cultural custodians” is strengthened during Navaratri and they see it as a component of their cultural identity.

In many Hindu families, roles and responsibilities are gender-based. Because of this, many of the women in the study believe that their forebears institutionalised gender roles and they see their expression in Navaratri as a way of maintaining their cultural identity. Maintaining the traditional norms in the home, accords Hindu women respect and honour from their husbands and families (Singh, 2004). Hindu women experience a form of patriarchy where the traditional ideology operates powerfully in the home, which is the private sphere (Bhopal, 1997). Patriarchy is exhibited by the internalised ideology of gender roles, consisting in the dominance of men and subordination of women. This ideology plays a strong influence in the continuation of the contentions of traditions such as the glory of respect and status of wifehood and motherhood that many of the women in the study view as central to their cultural identity. The majority of the interviewees come from homes where patriarchy is institutionalised and male domination internalised. Indigenous knowledge, related
to religio-cultural functions are also associated with patriarchy and identified reasons for gender roles. However, the research revealed that some working Hindu married women, through empowerment and advancement in education are breaking away from the clutches of patriarchy and bringing about modifications in cultural practices for the observance of Navaratri. Another reason cited by many of the interviewees for modifications in cultural practices is the absence of the joint family system. This notion can best be summed up in the words of Metha (1970:70).

The greatest preserver of tradition, custom and cultural practices was the joint family system. It is impossible to transmit the feeling of symbols and tradition where the joint family sentiment is absent.

An examination of the interviewee’s narrations revealed that they perceived the construction of gender identity as a means of maintaining their cultural identity. The women in the study also revealed that cultural identification was not a gender role expectation of Hindu men. The general perception is that the construction of masculinity in Hinduism allows men not to and they are not expected to assist in preparations for festivals and ceremonies. Traditionally it was and still is the case that preparations for Navaratri festivals are seen as the role for females.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This section presents data from in-depth interviews with working Hindu married women in the Stanger area of KwaZulu-Natal that has a predominantly Indian population. This investigation is also guided by qualitative research methodology. Weedon (1987) argues that poststructuralist theory provides a suitable framework to understand and analyse the impact of culture on the cultural identity of women. This could also apply to Hindu married women. Poststructuralist theory also offers mechanisms of gender, gender roles and power relations in culture such as when observing the Navaratri festival, and its impact on the cultural identity of Hindu women.

Twenty-four working Hindu married women, in the age range of twenty five to sixty years in the research made up a purposeful sample as they were specifically selected for inclusion in the study. Through their narratives they provided detailed reflections of their beliefs and the significance of the myths and rituals associated with Navaratri in relation to their Hindu identity.

Data was collected through in-depth/face to face interviews and non-verbal communication, focus group discussions and participant observation. Data
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gathered through in-depth interviews can be representative of the greater population of Hindu women in the South African diaspora so that conclusions can be drawn from that population (Rudestam and Newton, 1992). The interviews, which consisted of open-ended questions, were conducted in English. The interviews took approximately one to one and half hours, were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Analysis and interpretations were done to the major themes and patterns in the study.

Navaratri: Women’s Festival - Discussion of Findings

The celebration of the yearly cycles of Hindu festivals such as Navaratri is convincing proof of the dynamism of Hinduism in the South African Diaspora. Many Hindus of the different linguistic groups (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Gujarati), in the Stanger area, where the research was undertaken, observe the festival together, irrespective of its regional variants, rituals and beliefs. For many Hindu women, the arrival of the lunar months of Asvina (September/October) evokes the pleasure of Navaratri, an annual nine-night (ten day) festival as its name implies.

The determination and efforts involved in the festival as indicated by the interviewees, and from other knowledgeable sources, commences with the worship of Durga for three days, invoking her Shakti (power and energy) for the removal of the obstacles in our spiritual path. Krishna (2003:47) argues that Shakti is a symbol of womanpower, the primeval feminine force, the power and energy underlying the cosmos. She further explains that unfortunately this has not always translated itself into respect for womanhood. The next three days are devoted to the worship of Lakshmi and the last three days are dedicated to Sarasvati.

My concern in this study is with the festival’s manifestation and its role in influencing women’s cultural identity, as Navaratri is essentially a women’s festival. This is because women play a more active role in the festivities. Moreover, the Deities worshipped are females. What emerges from the discussions with the interviewees is that while large-scale events associated with the festival may take place in temples, it also has a significant domestic component for all Hindus (particularly women).

Interviewee A explains:

The fasting, the rituals and the nine days of prayer to the Divine Mother, gives me a lot of confidence as I pray for my family. I recall the days when we never went to temples for Navaratri, but presently I look forward to going to the temple on the days I can. I offer special
prayers for the nine days to the Mother Goddesses as well. The music, the singing, the whole atmosphere in the temple is one of peace and harmony that is good to relieve the tension of work and a relief from the everyday mundane activities. Interacting with the people at the temple makes me conscious and aware of my Hindu identity.

The above passage indicates, like all the interviewees, that the festival is of interest not only because it has moved to the temple but also because it is in itself a vehicle for Hindu women to preserve their cultural identity. Presently, the festival incorporates improvisation on earlier practice, such as celebrating at temples. Rayaprol (2000) demonstrates that festivals like Navaratri in the diaspora, where several domestic rituals were traditionally performed at home in the presence of the extended family are now performed at temples. Many of the interviewees observe a strict fast for the nine days, which in some instances means abstaining from meat dishes, whereas in some cases it includes abstaining from eating any solid food or liquids and eating a vegetarian meal in the evenings for the nine days.

The general pattern pertaining to Navaratri prayers in many families in the study includes the cleaning of the home and decorating the shrine in a simple fashion, arrangement of the murtis or images of the Goddesses and the other Deities and adorning them with flower garlands. Women perform daily acts of worship to the Goddesses, lighting the lamp, offering arti and praying for peace and prosperity.

There are many interesting variations noticed in the way Navaratri prayer is performed at home level. The study revealed that many Hindi speaking women choose one of the nine days (usually over a weekend) to perform special prayers to the Goddesses by offering keer, halwa, puri (deep fried bread), fruit, coconut, betel leaves and betel nuts. This prayer at home level is performed as a family and may involve close relatives and friends. It is the lady of the house who performs all the rituals. This concurs with Kumar’s (2000) research that with regard to domestic rituals, men are significantly less inclined to participate than women. The woman places nine sets of the halwa, puri, keer and other puja items

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22 Ceremonial waving of a lamp or camphor before an image of a Deity in the context of worship.
23 Keer is rice pudding.
24 Pudding made of flour, sugar and ghee.
25 Leaves of betel pepper, which Hindus offer with other offerings to Deities.
26 The areca nuts, eaten with betel leaves and lime. Indians offer betel nuts together with betel leaves and other offerings to Deities.
on a large banana leaf, lights the camphor and prays to the Goddesses also offering Them the various preparations. An additional set of offerings is for Deeh (commonly referred to as Deeh Baba) who is believed to be the gatekeeper and the guardian Deity of the village (Sitaram, 2005). This set of offering is distributed to the males. When the prayer is over, the sets of halwa and puri on the banana leaf are distributed to the married women present. The significance of distributing the sets of halwa and puri to married women demonstrates the gendered aspects of Navaratri being a women’s festival. The rest of the sanctified food is then distributed as prasadam27 to those present. This variant of Navaratri prayer is exclusively a Hindi speaking cultural trait, but women from all the Hindu linguistic groups participate in the Navaratri prayers at the local temple. Gifts of clothing and jewellery are also offered to appease the Goddesses.

The South Indian (Tamil and Telugu speaking) interviewees informed that they performed the Navaratri prayers at their shrine, offering sweetmeats, fruit, milk and other puja commodities to the Goddesses. Speaking with the Tamil and Telugu interviewees, one does not get a clear picture of the events and characters in the myths involving the origins of the festival. There are some conflicting views about certain details. For instance, the interviewees were not familiar with the display of Kolus (dolls) representing the goddesses with certain themes. Many of the South Indian interviewees were also not familiar with Dussera festival, also known as Vijaya Dasami which is celebrated on the tenth day of Navaratri. This signifies the victory of Lord Rama28 over the demon Ravana (who had abducted Sita29, Lord Rama’s wife) by the burning of the effigy of Ravana (Ganeri, 1997; Mamdani, 1998; Marchant, 1996). Although these variations of events and themes do not always fit in the South African context, Navaratri reveals an interesting perception of women in the worship of Shakti in the South African context. Not all the original individual myths are preserved in the South African Hindu community.

Although all Hindus in the Stanger area celebrate Navaratri together at the local temple, the Gujarati celebration of Navaratri acquires an added zest, because it is associated with the garbha dance. I attended celebrations at more than one venue in Durban (where there is a large Gujarati community) and my observations on this festival coincided with the narratives of the Gujarati interviewees and documentary sources. The origins of Navaratri, in the Gujarati context, are also associated with the Divine Mother in her different manifestations for the nine

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27 Consecrated food, which has been offered to the Deity.
28 Lord Rama is believed to be the 7th incarnation of Vishnu. Hero of the Ramayana.
29 Lord Rama’s wife. Heroine of the Ramayana.
nights. Both men and women perform *Havan*\(^{30}\) for the nine nights. The Goddess Durga (Shakti) is the focal point of interest and the *garbha* dance is performed with great enthusiasm, around an earthen pot. The pot has holes around its sides and contains a burning wick, the light of which is visible through the holes (www.hindu.com, 2004). The concept of the *garbha* is the symbol of Shakti and is also associated with fertility. Clapping or tapping the feet keeps time. The *garbha* is an event in which both men and women participate and the rhythm is achieved by the clash of the sticks carried by the dancers.

Hindus celebrate the nine-night (ten day) period of Navaratri in diverse and colourful ways, while the basic form of the festival persists, which is to celebrate the glory of Shakti. Kumar (2000) explains that Goddess worship in general is a Pan-Hindu phenomenon and exists in India among Hindus of all linguistic groups in rural and urban areas and also in the Hindu diaspora. Its origins are traced all the way back to the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500, BCE).

The prayers at the local temple start about six o'clock in the evening and end at about ten o'clock at night. Of the twenty-four interviewees, ten stated that they definitely went to the temple on the ninth night of Navaratri. Eight others tried to attend only if and when they could find the time. The final six did not go to the temple at all during the festival. They instead offered their prayers at home. On the ninth evening, many Hindus in the Stanger area, including many of the interviewees, congregate at the temple and offer their prayers to the Goddesses of Navaratri, who they believe remove violence and evil. Hancock (2004) points out that there is this school of thought that suggests that the worship is our endeavour to come face to face with the turmoil and conflicts within each of us. For this we seek the grace of the Mother Goddess.

Ladies and girls come out in glowing colours in their *saris*\(^{31}\), *salwaar kameez*\(^{32}\) and other accessories, to participate in the Navaratri festival at the temple. *Rangoli*\(^{33}\), at the entrance of the temple, livens the atmosphere of the festival. As the evening light fades and the sounds of devotional singing, music and the jingle of the brass bells of the temple are heard, the lamps are lit. Offerings of *halwa* and *puri* also take place at the local temple where I was a

\(^{30}\) Havan involves fire offerings of samagree, grains, ghee and petals to the Deity.

\(^{31}\) A length of cotton or silk draped around the body and worn as a main garment by Indian women.

\(^{32}\) Long loose dress known as kameej, which is worn over salwars, which are pyjama like trousers.

\(^{33}\) These are traditional designs made at the entrance of homes and temples on auspicious occasions.
participant observer. The women hold out their trays of sweetmeats, fruit, coconut and milk in their outstretched hands and rotate them in front of the images of the Goddesses and pray for the welfare of their families. Arti is offered in praise of the female Deities, accompanied by music. The scene is visually compelling and the smell of broken coconut, camphor and incense fills the air, as does the fragrance from the fresh flower garlands that adorn the murtis.

There is a high degree of communal harmony amongst the Hindus in the Stanger area when celebrating festivals like Navaratri. The temple is the centre for religio-cultural activities. Navaratri has now become more congregational in the Stanger area, and facilitates the participation of women in both private and public spheres. South African Hindus with particular reference to Stanger, have predominantly associated the Navaratri festival with Shakti i.e. Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati, the manifestations of the power of the Goddess. My assertion is that the women’s participation and the status that the Navaratri festival confers on wives and mothers create a vehicle for Hindu women to express their cultural heritage and identity.

The study also explores the self-consciousness associated with the festival in terms of a gendered perspective against the background of Hinduism as a patriarchal society. Numerous studies (Bhadouria, 1995; Kumar, 2000; Metha, 1970; Singh, 2004; Vedalankar, 1960) claim that during the Vedic period (about 200 BCE), Hindu women occupied a very important position in the family and society and were equal to men in many aspects. Although Hinduism was dominated by the patriarchal system, women were honoured as central figures. This is reflected in the following quotes:

Their husbands, brothers, fathers and brothers-in-law should nurture women with tenderness. Where the women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased. But where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. (www.attributetohinduism.com, 2004: cited in Manusmriti, Sloka, 55).

Similarly, Bhadouria (1995:3) claims that:

The extent to which women in their form as mothers were regarded and revered is clear from the over-whelming number of figures discovered from the early pre-historic sites in the Indus Valley.

The sentiments in the above quotations reflect the ideals of the Hindu religion in relation to the role of women. It reflects the Hindu woman as a Goddess,
deserving worship. But the above quotations are binary views and reflect a negative image of Hindu women. This portrays the subordination and repression of women in a male dominated patriarchal society. Ironically, later during the post-Vedic period women were denied the right to be educated and thereafter the condition of women declined (Singh, 2004). They were subjected to certain disciplinary laws such as the laws of Manu:

The wife should ever treat her husband as God, though he may be characterless, sensual and devoid of good qualities. (Manusmriti, 55:54, cited in Mohanlal, 1998).

The wife should follow the word of her husband. This is the highest duty. (Yajnavalkya, 1-18, cited in Mohanlal, 1998).

It is only when a woman displays devotion and loyalty to the husband in the most adverse conditions, will she be bestowed with honour and status in the Hindu community. Thus Manu’s laws deprived women of their power and dignity. The Manusmriti forms the basis of this patriarchal ideology of how women are viewed in Hindu culture. This also shows how the laws of Manu play a prominent role in the continued subordination of Hindu women by their male counter part. This underlines or displays the ambivalent position of Hindu women where the Hindu texts deify the same woman and simultaneously deny them gender equality. Although many traditional societies are part and parcel of the modern technological worldviews, the laws of Manu are still alive to some extent in the sub-conscious minds of many Hindus. Bannerjee’s (1979) research reveals that we cannot see much strength in what Manu had written on women and that it cannot be universally accepted for all times and that Manu’s influence upon Hindu society persists till this day, no matter where Hindus have settled in the diaspora. This dichotomy of theory and practice in Manu and his adherents creates the dilemma for women and all enlightened people.

Shah (1995) states that Hindu religion has not created conditions in which women can become aware of themselves. She says that on the contrary, religion and culture have actively promoted her subordination. Furthermore, it has undermined her ability to rise collectively against injustice by creating discord and disunity within her ranks.

The construction of cultural identity and understanding of the paradox of idealisation and oppression of Hindu women are hinged on the recognition that cultural identity is perceived in both social and cultural forms. In addition, due to complexities surrounding the constructions of identity in the patriarchal domestic
sphere, the interviewees were given the opportunity to describe how the Navaratri festival, based on religio-cultural practices shaped their perceptions and status. However, despite the discrimination that women suffer, Hindu women have their honoured place in the home. Perhaps Hindu women need to be reminded of their power. Indian literature, including Hindu epics such as the Ramanaya\(^{34}\) show women asserting themselves – Keikeyi\(^{35}\) negatively and Sita positively. Domination can only continue as long as the dominated allow it. But there must be a balance of interests. Femicracy (female domination) is just as potentially harmful as male domination or patriarchy.

Interviewee B reports:

> During Navaratri, we pray to the Divine Mother for Shakti (power and energy) in the form of Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. Just like how, I had faith in my own mother to take care of me, similarly I have faith in the Divine Mother to take care of my family and myself. In this way, we women identify ourselves with Mother Shakti who enhances our confidence to take care of and guide our children along the right path. The nine days of Navaratri create awareness for Hindu women of the power of the Goddesses. Likewise, Hindus need to become aware of the Shakti (power) of Hindu females as wives and mothers because Hindu culture does not have equal standards for men and women.

Holding the same view of female identification with God, Interviewee C explains:

> Navaratri is a festival that I look forward to. Worshipping the Mother Goddesses gives me confidence and makes me feel important as a wife and mother. In Hindu society, women may be consulted on many issues in the home, but men take the final decisions in most cases. In many aspects, the women are to be obedient and follow the wishes of their husbands. During Navaratri, all Hindus (men and women) worship God as the Divine Mother whom we women identify with. But on the other hand, in many cases, we are not treated equally with men.

The Hindu religion is one of the world’s religions that includes the worship of God in the female form. The above accounts and those of the many interviewees, help to understand how the festival articulates with forms of cultural consciousness of women, showing how the female aspect of God can be

\(^{34}\) The Hindu epic in which the central figure is Lord Rama, the 7\(^{th}\) incarnation of Vishnu.  
\(^{35}\) Lord Rama’s stepmother.
beneficial to female identification. The narratives reflect and perhaps help to understand that it is through these various attributes of the Goddesses that the patterns of behaviour have evolved into the character of Hindu women. The Goddess had to be docile, tolerant and non-threatening. Thus Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati were recommended as role models for Hindu women. It is in the name of the Divine Mother that Hindu women unconsciously reflect on their most basic social obligations. Hancock (2004) says Hindu women keep the peace, raise children and promote gentleness and maintain cultural memories.

Oral accounts and documentary sources suggest that Navaratri reinforces the strength of Hinduism, particularly for women. Sivananda (1987) asserts that the power behind creation is Shakti in its three aspects: Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. We have to invoke this Shakti in the Goddess who is believed to guide and help us to gain victory over evil. One’s own mother is the combination of all that the Divine Mother provides us with, such as energy, wealth and intelligence. She constantly desires our advancement in life. Likewise, the mother represents all three Goddesses that we worship during the Navaratri festival. She nourishes the child, provides the necessities for its growth, teaches the child what it should know and what to avoid and leads her/him onto the path of righteousness.

Navaratri: Changes in Religio-Cultural Practices

From the time of the first generation of Hindu immigrants to the present, the celebration of Navaratri has continued in some form or the other. Nevertheless, many changes have taken place, both in nature and in ritual practice. The narratives of the Hindi interviewees indicate that in the past, the emphasis was not basically on the worship of the Divine Mother only. The symbolic distinctions as explained by Interviewee D (Hindi) is as follows:

My grandparents and parents referred to Navaratri as Navarathan. I remember in my parental home, one convenient day out of the nine days was set aside for the worship of all the Gods including Hanuman and the Divine Mother. No Navaratri celebrations were held in temples in those days.
The narratives of the Gujarati interviewees suggested that much emphasis was placed on the basic idea of the Divine Mother in her manifestation as Goddess Durga over the nine-day period. On the ninth day, the majority of the Gujaratis in Stanger (as in the past) met at one of the member’s homes, where the concluding prayer was held together with the performance of the garbha dance.

There was a gap in the sequence of the traditions and rituals as to how the Tamils and Telugus celebrated Navaratri in the past. The interviewees explained that Lakshmi and Sarasvati were worshipped on the day allocated according to South Indian festivals in the Hindu calendar and not during Navaratri. The majority of the South Indian interviewees informed that in the South African context, the fine distinctions of how they celebrated Navaratri in the past have become irrelevant. It is through the broadening scope of the religio-cultural organizations, the Neo-Hinduistic Movements and through their education that they have come to understand the significance and worship patterns of Navaratri. However, Navaratri is the time for Hindu women to take stock of their lives, to realize their potential and emulate their role model – Shakti. Unless this is done, the message of Navaratri is lost.

**Conclusion**

In the Shakta tradition of Hinduism, all power is Shakti, which is female, fundamental and feminine and infuses life. The Deities for knowledge, power and wealth are not males but females. Each of the three principal Gods of the Trimurti: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer, cannot proceed with their work without Shakti. The Divine Mother, who is believed to be Shakti, is the supreme power of God and assumes many forms. Lord Brahma, without the grace of his consort Sarasvati cannot perform His duty as creator. Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth is an essential companion of Lord Vishnu. Shiva as destroyer needs enormous power and energy and this is what Durga provides him with. Here we see male Deities complemented by their female counterparts. Hence in Hindu ritualistic worship of God, both male and female are seen as equal, but not in the reality of Hindu society.

Whilst Hindu Goddesses are associated with knowledge, wealth and power, in Hindu society, a woman’s power is largely confined to the domestic sphere. Despite the ambivalent position and status of Hindu women, the Goddesses are vital to understand how Hindu women are viewed in society. But Hindu women need to extend this power or Shakti to other aspects of life. For example, Durga’s exhibition of female fury in the slaying of the demon Mahishasura reflects the
potential of the female to break free of the male domination. Feminist poststructuralism offers an analysis of how the imbalance between male and female can be challenged and transformed. It is these qualities of independence and defiance that Durga or Kali represent as a female, but at the same time glorify the devoted wife such as Parvati. Durga/Shakti is neither a demon nor an object to be feared. She annihilates the demons that haunt us before they can endanger the world (Krishna, 2003). She is the perfect female, powerful and active, giving women what society has denied her: respect, strength, intellect and knowledge. Like the Goddesses, Hindu women are also custodians of culture in their homes and society, but who simultaneously transmit the ideology of independence and capability.

The findings of the study revealed that the characteristics of Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati have left their impact on the lives of Hindu women. The poststructuralist perspective helps to understand the impact of the significance of Navaratri and how Hindu women uplift their status to identify themselves with God female. Feminist poststructuralism helps to theorise the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of Hindu women and how they shape their socio-cultural lives. Moreover, Mohanlal (1998) maintains that identification of Hindu women with the Goddesses and their elevation to supremacy at ritual times gives them respite from patriarchal structures. This is an important feature of women’s psychological well being as well (Sokoya, 2003). Whilst identifying with the Goddesses motivates Hindu women, it also supports their trust in their own power and in the power of other women. Perhaps a realization of their own innate power makes them silently acquiesce in the male domination, just to keep the peace. As discussed in previous studies (Prabhakaran, 1994; Mohanlal, 1998; Singh, 2004) Hindu women identify themselves by worshipping the Goddesses, but their research did not include the perceptions of Hindu women from a gendered perspective and details of the Navaratri festival in relation to the ambivalent position of Hindu women. The new findings will contribute to knowledge on Hindu women and identity in relation to festivals such as Navaratri.

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