NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS IN FIJI
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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The following study seeks to answer the question whether during the last three decades or so — that is, in the context of rapid modernization and globalization since independence (1970) — there have been any developments in the non-Christian religions of Fiji that resemble developments in the Christianity of Fiji. Specifically, the main feature of these developments in Christianity is the growth of Pentecostal, fundamentalist, and conservative-evangelical churches characterized by expansionist strategies based on aggressive preaching and proselytizing. These churches have rapidly increased in membership — mainly at the expense of traditional mainline churches — and their message focuses on miracles, healing and the ‘gospel of prosperity.’ They often discourage their adherents from engagement in the political field, attack cultural and religious plurality, and reject modernization as ‘ungodly’ while at the same time selectively making use of it for the purposes of expansion and propagation.

For this purpose, the organizations selected for study are institutionally representative of ‘mainstream’ non-Christian religions (like the Fiji Muslim League or the Shri Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha) or of specific traditions in these religions (like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or Brahma Kumaris). Not all non-Christian religious organizations existing in Fiji could be taken into consideration — for example, the TISI Sangam and the Ramakrishna Mission are missing. However, those organizations with the greatest impact in Fiji society — if not in terms of numbers of adherents, at least with regard to their publicly perceived impact — have been included. The survey covers only Hinduism, Islam, and Bahá’í. The Sikh community has been omitted (for a short overview see Singh 1976; Simran 1993), as has the Chinese community (see Fong 1974).

The presentation of the organizations in this survey follows the same self-evident pattern in each case: after brief introductory remarks on the general background of the organization and its development in Fiji, a short overview is given of its basic beliefs and practices, its organizational structure and resources, its activities, and the challenges it faces. The survey concludes with brief reflections on the findings.

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**HINDU COMMUNITIES**

Shri Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha (SDS)

**General Background and Development in Fiji**

The most significant impact on the development of the Hindu tradition in Fiji was made by the rapid disintegration of the caste system as a consequence of indenture (Jayawardena 1972; Geraghty 1997:18, with further bibliographic references. For Hinduism in Fiji generally, see, for example, Wilson 1975; 1997): “Caste, a distinguishing feature of Hindu society, could not be maintained; it was dealt a severe blow even before migrants left India” (Ali 1980:17, cf. Ali 1979). Another aspect worth mentioning is that among the Hindus, the sense of maintaining a religious identity was less developed than it was in the Muslim communities. This may be due to the fact that in Hinduism a great variety of traditions and religious practices existed side by side; for example, as well as a (re-formulated) Brahmin tradition through which the highest caste tried to regain religious authority and social leadership, there was (and still is) a strong adherence to other strands. Among these were *Ram Bhakti*, a popular movement based on the great Hindu epic *Ramayana* (see Somerville 1979), and a quite separate form of ‘cultural Hinduism’ which in its popular manifestations was influenced less by Ram Bhakti or similar traditions than by local traditions with their belief in ghosts, spirit possession and ‘supra-natural’ events of all kinds, traditions that cannot be clearly traced back to a specific thread of Hindu heritage (see, for instance, the memoirs relating to this in Colpani 1996: 69ff). All this is not to mention a diversity of practices in the context of rural Hinduism (see Mayer 1973:60ff, 144ff and passim; Sandwith and Sandwith 1959; Sahadeo 1974; Brown 1983).

Due to this lack of a religious ‘corporate identity,’ diversification among Hindus was more strongly experienced than among Muslims. From the 1920s on, however, processes of differentiation and growing complexity began to affect the overall spectrum of Fiji Indian society (Garrett 1989:154ff), although they had begun before that time. While Muslims began to establish religious bodies and build mosques, a number of Hindu *sadhus* and small religious bodies were active in providing at least an informal infrastructure that would be instrumental in preserving Hindu traditions. With the abolition of the indenture system, “Fiji Indians turned from industrial and political action to religious and social questions” (Gillion 1977:104). This caused internal tensions both within the Indian community, generally, and between, as well as within, the various Indian religious communities. In the context of growing Hindu-Muslim tensions, efforts were made to unite the various Hindu groups. For this purpose the Maha Sabha was founded in May 1928. It was controlled by representatives of the Arya Samaj who were known for being more strictly anti-Muslim than the Hindu traditionalist Sanatanis. The radical activism of the Arya Samajists and related bodies put the Sanatanis on the defensive, but in the early 1930s the tables were turned. This was mainly due to the arrival from India of two Pandits, Pandit Ramchandra
Sharma and Pandit Murarilal Sastri. “The two criticised the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Maha Sabha and the Sangathan movement for causing dissension” (Gillion 1977:110), and in a medium term perspective, the Sanatan strategy proved successful against their co-religionist opponents who, due to their aggressive policy, lost influence among the wider Hindu population in Fiji.

The communities of South Indian origin tried more or less successfully to stay away from these conflicts. They established the Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam (=TISI Sangam: see Pillai 1971), made up of local groups around Nadi in 1926, and the Madras Maha Sangam in Suva, Navua and Rewa in 1927 (later, in 1936, it was renamed Then India Valibar Sangam, the South Indian Young Men’s Society). These groups were engaged primarily in the field of education. In 1937, responding to an invitation by the TISI Sangam, representatives of the Ramakrishna Mission arrived in Fiji. As the Ramakrishna Mission was not specifically a South Indian organization, the attempts of Swami Rudrananda, a leading figure from 1939, to make the TISI Sangam a Ramakrishna Mission agency, caused further tensions within the Sangam. Reacting to the strong Tamil dominance, Hindus of South Indian Telugu origin took the initiative to establish the Dakshina India Andra Sangam (South Indian Andhra Society) in 1941, with the aim of furthering the Telugu language and culture in Fiji (Krishna 1973). Because of these developments, the institutional variety of Fiji Hinduism today is quite complex (an overview of the most important ‘established’ organizations can be found, for instance, on the website of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry/diaspora division: http://www.indiaday.org/link-fiji.htm. For other organizations of mainly South Indian origin see, for example, http://murugan.org/research/goundar.htm, http://www.telugudiaspora.comtelugu_associations.htm or http://www.tisisangam.org).

For the purpose of roughly categorizing the variety of Hindu traditions in Fiji, it may still be helpful to use Somerville’s model of “a three-tier Hinduism: 1) Brahmin, marked by rites and prestige; 2) Ram-bhakti, marked by ‘devotion in an open fellowship’; 3) Secularist Hinduism, which simply accepts that in some sense its underlying culture is Hindu” (Somerville 1979:ii; cf. Garrett 1989:158ff).

The Fiji Hindu Society was founded in 1976 and serves as a kind of umbrella association for ‘mainstream’ Hinduism in Fiji. Its three main aims are: “to give a new dimension and vigour to Hinduism,” “to promote the teaching and learning of Hindu philosophies and principles,” and “to protect and develop the Hindu values of life both ethical and spiritual” (Bushell 1990:39; on publications of the Hindu Fiji Society, see its newsletter Omkar). Various Hindu groups are affiliated, most of them belonging to the Sanatan tradition. At present, however, the Hindu Fiji Society seems to be functioning with a very low profile. For representatives of other organizations, the Fiji Hindu Society is currently of no significant relevance.

Historically speaking, we could say that a Ramayan-based type of Sanatan Dharma represents, in a way, the basis of Indo-Fijian Hindu communities. Ironically enough, while Ram-bhakti was originally deeply rooted in the lower Hindu castes, in Fiji it was men from the Brahmin caste who acted as spiritual leaders of this type of ‘mainstream Hinduism.’ However, they did not try to reproduce the caste system as it was still functioning in the Indian homeland. As mentioned above, in the 1920s and early 1930s the Arya Samaj failed to put all Hindus under one Mahasabha in Fiji. “Meanwhile, Ramayan Mandalis grew in
local influence, with a minimum of organization" (Somerville 1979:56). During the 1930s there were further attempts to unite Fiji Hindus, a fact that was reflected in a series of nationwide Sanatan Dharm conferences. But it was only in the late 1950s that the Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha could be established as a kind of centralized organization of local mandlis (a mandli is a circle of people, a local 'congregation'). In 1958, 80 representatives from all districts gathered in Samabula to form the Akhil Fiji Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, a name changed to Shri Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, Fiji, in 1966 (Somerville 1979: 121, 128). So “Ramayan Mandlis began as informal fellowship groups, but became part of a highly structured organization” (Somerville 1979:166). In summary, we could say that the Ramayan Mandlis formed the foundation on which SDS rests. This makes SDS dependent on local branches and expressions of popular Hinduism — or even more: its raison d'être rests on the viability of the local mandlis.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

In some ways SDS represents traditional mainstream Hinduism, at least if compared with the Arya Samaj. Unlike that reform movement, Sanatanis practise many rituals (they ‘worship idols,’ as this is generally expressed). They have a temple in each district or even in each village, and meet on Tuesdays. The Arya Samajis, however, meet at central meeting places on Sundays. There is nothing distinctive about SDS that would make its doctrine or practices ‘deviant’ from mainstream Hinduism — SDS itself represents mainstream Hinduism! This ‘mainstream’ is very broad, and for our purposes it would not be worthwhile to go into the complex details. Even the rough overview given in Interfaith Search’s publication Fiji Faiths (Bushell 1990:44-42) does not cover the whole broad spectrum of Hindu beliefs: Brahma as Supreme Being and absolute reality; samsara as the cosmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; moksha as liberation from this cycle; karma as the law of cause and effect, pre-determining the individual’s destiny in rebirth, the reincarnation of atman — the ‘self’ or the soul; devas as gods in all shapes and manifestations; gurus as spiritual leaders supporting one’s search for salvation, etc. The spectrum of Hindu beliefs and practices goes far beyond these aspects, and we could also mention popular forms of Hindu life like, for instance, the “holy torture rituals” (Sahadeo 1974), although these are not at the centre of SDS’s concern. Though it is not a church, as an umbrella organization SDS does in some ways resemble a church, at least in its function as a religious body embracing plurality, on the one hand, and as representing its constituency to the outside, on the other.

Organizational Structure and Resources

SDS can be characterized as an umbrella organization par excellence: it not only accommodates any (Indian) ethnic group whatsoever, but also, as an organization representing a ‘universal religion,’ is open even to non-Hindus. In a way even the Sikhs are considered part of the movement — and anyway the frontiers between Hinduism and Sikhism are not impermeable, as can be seen by the fact that in an international network of Hindu temples, Sikh temples are included as well (see http://www.mandirnet.org/temples_list/lookupcsc.php?country=Fiji&state=&city=&Formresult_Page=1#result). Generally, SDS uses religious and ethnic categories in a rather loose way, as the TISI Sangam is referred to as both a group apart and also as being a part of the SDS. These ‘open frontiers’ towards outsiders may reflect a distinctive Hindu claim to be capable of somehow integrating any religious tradition.
Another aspect is that SDS has a very low corporate profile. Despite the fact that it is formally organized in a structure similar to that of other religious organizations, this institutional format seems to be of minor importance. It is the local branches and maybe even more the mandlis, the small congregations, that matter, and the national body is seen more as an umbrella organization dealing with issues of concern for the whole Hindu population of Fiji.

At present there are 33 branches of SDS, each made up of several mandlis, and there are meetings every month or every two months. Students have been and still are sent to India. One of the major aims of SDS, however, is to start its own system of higher religious learning in Fiji. This has recently begun, with the first class having graduated in February 2003. In order to attract students, SDS tries to provide instruction without taking fees, covering the costs by means of fund raising.

SDS's views of modern media are ambiguous. On the one hand, for example, TV coverage of religious observances is recommended for the useful publicity it provides, but on the other hand, it is said, people spend so much time watching TV that they have no time for their own participation in religious observances.

Both women and youth are represented in the national body. Theoretically, a woman may even become National President of SDS, but, in fact, women's participation in SDS activities is very low. This is explained by pointing to cultural circumstances that are not helpful for women — travel restrictions, for example. The integration of youth, however, is well provided for, as the President of the Youth division is automatically one of the Vice Presidents. So there seems to be adequate representation, taking into consideration the fact that young Indo-Fijians are usually not very much engaged in SDS activities (or Hindu religion generally).

Due to the low institutional profile and the very loose structure of SDS, there are no tensions between various groups. For the same reasons, however, no specific SDS corporate identity has yet developed. Though the organization is “thinking of individual membership” (Baskar 2003, interview by author), so far this has not materialized. It is hoped that by tightening the institutional structure, the members will be obliged to contribute more regularly to the running costs: “when it comes to [financial] contributions, they are very slow.” One of the future projects of SDS is “to say clearly what they have to contribute” — even if it is only a dollar a person per year. So far, most income is from fund raising and voluntary donations. Financial accounting procedures begin at the local level and branches must send their financial reports to the national body for checking.

As for its international relations, SDS is hoping to establish closer relations with Indian organizations. So far there has been little success in this. At present the only relevant connections with India are a few through the Indian embassy and some more informal links through Pandits and teachers who visit from India for certain periods of time. SDS is in close contact with the Indian embassy, which is planning to open an Indian cultural centre in Fiji. The main objectives of international co-operation are, firstly, to secure better access to religious publications, and, secondly, to have closer ties to India for training purposes. With regard to training, SDS has established close relations with institutions in Gurukul and is approaching the Indian Government for scholarships (Pal 2003, interview by author).

SDS experienced a major increase in membership after Fiji's independence, but after the events of 1987 emigration brought a slight decrease. This numerical decline was countered by a qualitative rise in religious observance, however: “those who were here got
more involved in religious activities,” and especially after the Sunday Ordinance of 1987 that curbed public movement, “all people could do was to participate in religious activities” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). This trend has continued until today.

SDS has no specific outreach programmes, but most of the organized Hindu groups are in some way members of this vast organization. There may be some small groups that for one reason or another are not under the umbrella of SDS, but most are. This is reflected in an increase of membership at the grassroots level. For instance, the number of member mandis in the Suva branch has grown from 20 to 40. One of the reasons given for this development is that people today are better informed than before, when they were sceptical about SDS as an umbrella organization and feared that something would be taken from them.

Membership in SDS is very open and not at all exclusive — any ‘sympathizer’ is welcome and may participate in the religious activities. SDS has not made any impact among urban Fijians. In rural areas, however, some Fijians come and participate in religious activities, though they may not become official members of the SDS branches. From the SDS perspective, Fijians generally have “sympathy and respect” for the organization (Baskar 2003, interview by author).

The impact of Christian new religious groups and especially of Pentecostal churches is felt by SDS, as their members are targeted by those groups. This is accepted with a kind of ‘calm concern,’ with the SDS clinging to its view that it cannot stop anybody leaving and that it is up to anybody to decide which religion to join. Due to the broad and open policy of SDS, it may be the case that some people join the Pentecostals but still continue to be members of SDS, or that a person attends a Christian church while his wife continues to worship with SDS or vice versa. With this attitude SDS validates its motto: “We never try to convince people to join our religion — all religions are the same” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). Conflicts among religions, generally, are considered to be based on misunderstandings. Against this background, the work of Interfaith Search and attempts to achieve national reconciliation are highly commended, as greater respect among the religions has emanated from this work.

Activities

Like other religious organizations, SDS runs schools. It also takes care of most temples, or rather it is temples that form the ‘grassroots’ of SDS. Generally speaking, SDS focuses its attention on ‘religious activities,’ that is, all kinds of (mainly ritual) practices that are part and parcel of Hindu everyday life, as well as major or minor festivals and ritual performances in the life of the larger Hindu community. Social concerns seem not to be very high on the agenda. In the political field, SDS is quite cautious, which may be partly due to its low profile and barely institutionalized character. In matters that directly concern SDS, its national body will speak out and address the public. But generally “we are quite careful as to what we are saying … As a religious body, the last thing we want is to get into politics” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). The move to provide higher religious education in Fiji and to attract young people to SDS (or to keep them from turning away from their Hindu heritage) are very high on the agenda. In the field of education, SDS tries to raise awareness of the traditional Hindu heritage. This is done, for example, by sending teachers to SDS schools in order to revive those cultural traditions. But SDS also conducts activities in an area beyond the religious. Quite a number of ethnic Fijians seem to be attracted to events (such as concerts) arranged by SDS, and so it is claimed that the organization also provides
a “cultural contribution to Fijian society” (Pal 2003, interview by author). But education is regarded as one of the most important areas for which SDS has a responsibility: all problems should be addressed through education. “This should start from the home. Each member should be able to teach their children how to behave in society”. But the problem is that “they’re not teaching their children while they are very young” (Pal 2003, interview by author). Consequently, SDS tries to support the families by providing educational facilities and by reminding them of their responsibility towards their children. All these efforts are supported by the publishing of religious periodicals (for example, Sanatan Samachar; Sanatan Sandesh) and information material on Hinduism.

Challenges

The last mentioned activities point to areas that seem to pose major challenges to SDS: there is concern about a loss of traditional cultural and religious values. These values are seen to be challenged when Hindus drink alcohol, abandon traditional food habits and traditional ways of dressing, no longer sing traditional religious songs, and so on. “Sanatana Dharma always preaches that to be a real Sanatani, you should be no meat eater” (Pal 2003, interview by author). Nevertheless, SDS seems to take a very pragmatic stand on these challenges; for instance, drinking alcohol is discouraged — at least in situations where it may affect religious observances — but it is thought that a forceful crusade against it would be counter-productive. Likewise, as long as young women dress decently there is no pressure put on them to dress in the traditional sari. A kind of resigned compromise is made: “the times are changing very fast. We have to adjust ourselves ... to suit the younger generation” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). The youth are considered very important for the future of SDS, and this may explain such a liberal attitude. If the youth can be won for SDS, “then the future is bright — new ideas have helped us” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). Even so, the currently occurring loss of young people is seen as a major problem because it affects the whole community: “The young generation are trying to move away from the extended family and that affects the older people” (Pal 2003, interview by author). What is meant is that because of this moving away, the social security system provided by the extended family no longer functions as it should.

Like other non-Christian organizations, SDS faces challenges deriving from the events of 1987 and 2000, which caused a continuing emigration of its constituency. It is probably because of this background that SDS sees itself as playing a vital role for its members as a religious body in the context of problems that are regarded as being political in nature. According to its own understanding, the SDS aims to support Hindus “to live in this place and to live in harmony,” especially in view of conflicts with a religious-ethnic dimension.

Religious bodies are one idiom through which we can really dissipate these racial feelings. Towards that [end], our religious body will do everything we can to promote good will, to promote understanding among each other, and basically, that’s what we are doing. We are running various schools, and in some schools we’ve got more Fijians than Indians, and we’re also keeping in touch with the ministry, with the government ... It is our function to cooperate with the government of the day, whoever becomes leader (Baskar 2003, interview by author).

As for the emigration of Hindus, SDS has made an interesting observation, “that those people who have gone from here have become more religious there. When they leave this country, then they realize what they are missing”. Much to the surprise even of insiders, many emigrants have kept up or resumed relationships with people in Fiji, which is explained
by the impression that “overseas, life is fast — that’s what makes them more religious. ... Many haven’t been members here — there, they relate [to SDS]” (Baskar 2003, interview by author).

**Conclusion**

It is remarkable that SDS, which claims to be a religious body representing ‘one of the oldest religions,’ does not just cling to primordial values but is both very ‘liberal’ towards its own constituency and quite open-minded towards the outside world of both Hindu and non-Hindu groups. Religion generally — and even religion beyond the normal religious boundaries — is held in very high esteem: “Religious activities are one of these things through which we as human beings can try to understand each other better” (Baskar 2003, interview by author). The general policy of SDS seems to be characterized by pragmatism — both as to political and religious questions and also in reference to its constituency and to ‘outsiders.’ This may be partly due to SDS’s specific character as an umbrella organization *par excellence*. On the one hand, it is in a way representative of the whole pluralistic spectrum of ‘Hinduism,’ in which the boundaries of what is Hinduism are not clearly drawn. On the other hand, it is a primarily *religious* body that relates to ‘outsiders’ not only in the field of religion but also of politics. But in all these dimensions, SDS is characterized by a high flexibility: rapid social changes and the effects of modernization and globalization are felt as a challenge, but are dealt with in a very flexible way. Flexibility and pragmatism could thus in a way be regarded as principles of SDS’s policy planning. Because of its general ‘liberal’ orientation, SDS seems not very susceptible to fundamentalist or radical influences. The presence of Hindu new religious groups like Brahma Kumari or Hare Krishna is considered as adding variety to Hinduism but not at all as a threat, and former tensions with the Arya Samaj have been overcome. Maybe it is the low organizational profile that makes it difficult to give an exact description of the role of SDS both for its constituency and for ‘outside’ agencies in the fields of politics or religion. But the major challenges for SDS do not come from globalization and modernization, even if the consequences are felt, especially among the youth. Rather, the major challenges derive from the general political situation in Fiji which gives Indo-Fijian Hindus a continuing sense of instability. Even in this, however, optimism prevails: a pragmatic and flexible optimism that is based on the conviction that SDS as representing Hinduism as ‘one of the oldest religions’ is here to stay.

**Arya Pratinidhi Sabha/Fiji (AS/Fiji)**

**General Background and Development in Fiji**

Arya Samaj (“Society of the Pure, Noble”) is an organization that came out of a Hindu reform movement seeking the resurgence of Vedic religion as true, ‘original’ Hinduism. It was founded in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Sarasvati (1824-83). The basic idea was to cleanse Hinduism from what were regarded as unreasonable superstitions and non-Hindu influences, in order to revive the religion on the basis of the Vedas, the Holy Scriptures of Vedic religion.

Followers of the Arya Samaj were among the earliest Indian immigrants arriving in 1879, though the organization did not make its presence felt before the turn of the century. At first there were no educated instructors to impart the teachings of Dayanand Sarasvati to the immigrants in Fiji. But the ideas of Arya Samaj were disseminated by a few Arya Samajists who read Dayanand Sarasvati’s “Satyarth Prakash” and shared its message with
their fellow Hindus. Officially, the Arya Samaj in Fiji dates back to 1904 when it was established in Samabula (Bushell 1990:33ff; for more detailed information see, for example, Bilimoria 1985). Unlike traditional mainline Hinduism—represented by groups such as the Kabir Panth, the Ramananda Panth, the Nanak Panth and the Sanatan Dharm—which put emphasis on ritual and religious practice—the Arya Samaj gave attention to matters beyond outward visible observance by focussing on the quest for Hindu identity, striving for a renaissance of Hinduism through modernization and reform.

The tendency towards a growing complexity and differentiation in the Fiji Indian communities after the abolition of the indenture system (as mentioned above) brought about a significant spread of the Arya Samaj (Garrett 1989:157ff). The second half of the 1920s witnessed the arrival of Hindu activists from India, who joined hands with like-minded persons in Fiji, receiving support from the mainly recently arrived Gujarati commercial community and starting to agitate against non-Hindus as well as against Hindu traditionalists. It was the high tide of bodies like the Hindu Maha Sabha (dominated by the Arya Samaj), as well as the Arya Samaj itself, which, under the leadership of the Fijiborn Vishnu Deo, promoted the cause of a renascent Hindu India as well as of the freedom of Indian Hindus outside the subcontinent. This fuelled intra-communal strife and conflict with non-Hindus and traditional Hindus, and the tensions were further enflamed by the militant activities of local Hindu groups, the Hindu Sangathans. In the middle of the 1930s tensions between the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharma Sabha faded, giving way to a more peaceful engagement in social, cultural, and political affairs. It is appropriate to talk of “a sort of a dialectical interaction” between the two streams of Fijian Hinduism—due to “the reforming efforts made by the Arya Samaj and also the return of the religious sanctions of Hinduism through the Sanatan Dharma Sabha” (Biligomia 1983:38).

**Basic Beliefs and Practices**

Arya Samaj propagates a ‘rational’ doctrine which is supposed to be accessible to human insight and reason. Many basic beliefs are shared with mainstream Hinduism—the existence of God as the source of all knowledge, truth and blessings: *karma*, the aim of life, namely *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth and re-birth, and so on. There are also specific principles of conduct which Arya Samaj members should follow, and specific forms of worship which should be observed, like the morning and evening prayers, a common prayer once a week, and the *Hawan*, a fire ceremony for the purpose of purification, to be conducted on a daily basis. “In practice every Arya member is required to live an ethically disciplined life at all times” (Bushell 1990:36).

Arya Samaj teaching focuses on four tenets of Hindu faith: *artha*, ‘good life,’ involving *pet*, appropriate livelihood, and *dharma*, life according to the cosmic order, entailing *izzat*, the betterment of social reality. Consequently, Arya Samaj was engaged in education, establishing *gurukul* centres where a concept of holistic education based on Hindu principles was pursued. Until today, therefore, education and ‘religious preaching’—a kind of ‘enlightened’ instruction in religious knowledge informed by modern thought mediated by a Hindu ‘reformist’ tradition—are the two pillars of Arya Samaj’s activities. In the Fiji context, as for any other place where Arya Samaj is active, the teachings of Dayanand Sarasvati are the major point of reference for the doctrines held and practices (such as the *Hawan* ceremony) followed in Fiji. There are also some publications in English and Hindi, especially prepared for Fiji, that introduce the principles of Dayanand Sarasvati’s teachings.
Organizational Structure and Resources

AS/Fiji has a very strict system of membership: one becomes a member firstly by paying a small membership fee (a couple of dollars a year), and secondly by following the principles of Arya Samaj as they have been laid down by Swami Dayanand Sarasvati. Due to its policy of “exclusive membership” (Dutt 2003, interview by author), AS/Fiji is made up of only a couple of hundred active members. The minimum number of members to become a registered body as a local Samaj is 21. While the official members are very few, there are many people in their families, and many practising without being formal members, so that AS/Fiji enjoys a broad constituency amounting to many thousands. The potential increase in membership during recent decades, however, has been negated by emigration. Among the members there may have been minor variations in the details of religious practice, but generally speaking AS/Fiji is highly integrated and there are no minority groups.

AS/Fiji is made up of local and regional Samajs — communities — and seems to be built “from bottom to top”. It possesses a constitution, written in English, but is not a very strictly instituted organization. Some Samajs may be “not directly affiliated” to AS/Fiji, but are nevertheless “part of the same system” (Dutt 2003, interview by author). Each local Samaj is represented in the annual General Meeting, in which the officials are elected and the executive board appointed: the patron, the president and three vice presidents, the general secretary, a financial secretary, and assistants — all of them from the local Samajs.

Both women and youth are well represented in AS/Fiji’s organizational structure, with the presidents of the women’s and youth wings being members of the executive board. The involvement of youth is regarded as being in “not a very developed state right now” (Dutt 2003, interview by author), but, in accordance with the teachings of Dayanand Sarasvati, women have equal rights. They are considered “a very, very important part of the system,” and it was in Samabula that the first school for girls was opened.

As to leadership training, AS/Fiji has educated its Pandits in India until now, but only two have been trained in recent years. One of them is still actively working for the Samaj, while the other has left. In January 2002, however, AS/Fiji started a course in Vedic knowledge, and after one full academic year the first student graduated and received a certificate. Up to the present time AS/Fiji has trained ten students as ‘basic teachers’ of Vedic knowledge in the schools. Modern media and information technology are regarded positively, especially for educational purposes, though an AS/Fiji website has not yet been set up (for the closest website see http://www.aryasamaj.com/aust.htm). AS/Fiji makes use of modern media, and subjects like computer science are part of the curriculum in its schools.

Some members of AS/Fiji have expressed concern about attempts by other groups — mainly Protestant fundamentalist groups — to draw people away from the organization. Though these groups have apparently made an impact in some areas, it is only minor and the leadership of AS/Fiji seems not to be too alarmed about it. As far as conflict with other Hindus or with Muslims is concerned, the organization says that it experiences none, or hardly any, and that if conflict exists it is due to communal rather than religious factors. It is felt that there is a growing interest in AS/Fiji’s teaching, though nothing like a revival or a significant increase in religious attendance could be observed. This growth in interest is thought to be a consequence of better education, which gives people “more options to look at” — “in the old days, they were limited” (Dutt 2003, interview by author).
The financial resources of AS/Fiji come from membership fees and local voluntary donations. Only in disaster situations is there likely to be financial support from overseas. The schools run by AS/Fiji are self-sustaining, running on fees and government grants. The overall income is a little greater than the expenditure (there is some income from renting out properties, and the organization has a very small share in an international company), so that the financial situation allows for modest institutional development.

As for international relations with other Arya Samaj groups, AS/Fiji has contact with the International Arya League (Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha) in New Delhi, India, which is the main body of the Arya Samaj movement (see http://www.aryasamaj.com). However, AS/Fiji neither pays fees to the League nor has any formal arrangements with it, and does not even attend its meetings. It is only in matters of importance that there is any correspondence between AS/Fiji and the League. There are cordial, though informal, relations with Arya Samaj groups in Australia and New Zealand, since most of the members in those countries have come from Fiji in the last 20 years, and there are also loose links with the Arya Samaj in Canada and the USA.

Activities

In accordance with AS/Fiji’s emphasis on ‘enlightening’ its followers, the focus of its activities is on education and the imparting of Vedic knowledge. The organization runs many schools for both girls and boys. It has also published books and brochures dealing with the Society’s history, presenting issues of current concern to AS/Fiji (for example, the *Arya Convention Volume* 1998; Arya n.d.), and providing religious instruction (such as the Vedic Prayer Book 1999, which is based on the writings of Dayanand Sarasvati and is published in an interlinear English and Hindi format). So the organization is concerned not so much with ‘outreach’ beyond the Hindu community as with preaching to people who are already Hindus. Indigenous Fijians have not so far been attracted to AS/Fiji, though according to its own understanding Arya Samaj is based on “very universal principles to invite anyone” and is “directed towards no particular programme for any particular group” (Dutt 2003, interview by author). Nevertheless, it is mainly the more educated Hindus who join. Evidently these people are especially interested in a religion that focuses less on ritual traditions and more on intellectual traditions according to Swami Dayanand Sarasvati’s reform programme.

At present AS/Fiji does not conduct any significant outreach projects. Every quarter a small educational pamphlet containing information on the teachings of Arya Samaj is published and circulated in a few thousand copies to the members and beyond. Through informal communication channels, people are invited to participate in the weekly prayer gatherings, but there is no public preaching or house-to-house visits — AS/Fiji would not have the capacity for that, anyway.

Social problems are a concern for AS/Fiji, but there are no special programmes for dealing with such issues. As it is thought that these matters are the government’s responsibility, AS/Fiji tries “to point it out to the government to do something about it” and to “assist in terms of financial assistance” (Dutt 2003, interview by author).

Challenges

In AS/Fiji gatherings the land problem is one of the most burning issues. The religious disturbances are also still of major concern to the members, and AS/Fiji feels that this has
repercussions in other areas such as education, where it is feared that the idea of a “blueprint on racial lines” may prevail. In the area of religious observance, AS/Fiji deplores the impact of modern eating habits and sees a certain conflict between modern lifestyles and Vedic traditions. Here there is a kind of ‘realistic resignation: “we have lived with it. ... We can’t stop them”. Nevertheless, AS/Fiji looks optimistically into the future, except with regard to the political situation, where the opinion of its members seems not to be so unambiguously positive. The organization, however, is very much engaged in contributing its share to the development of Fiji, especially in the area of education: “We’ll do what is right” — and this is manifested, for example, in projects such as “building a school right at Samabula” (Dutt 2003, interview by author).

Another area of concern for AS/Fiji is its plan to set up a Vedic Training Centre for educating teachers in Vedic knowledge. So far there is no building for this purpose, and a classroom in one of the schools is used. AS/Fiji is quite realistic about its potential for institutional development in Fiji, and considers itself “unlikely to grow very fast in terms of numbers” (Dutt 2003, interview by author). Clearly, it is the slow but ongoing emigration resulting in a loss of members — or at least a stagnation in membership — that poses the most serious challenge to the future of AS/Fiji.

Conclusion

Despite its comparatively apologetic origins in 19th century India, AS/Fiji seems to work along very irenic lines, seeking not debate but dialogue with other religious traditions. There have been conflicts with fellow Hindus during Fiji’s colonial period, but these have been overcome and are now evidently in the past. Nevertheless, there are still deeply rooted differences in doctrines and religious practices between AS/Fiji and traditional ‘mainstream’ Hinduism, especially from the organization’s own perspective: “We as Arya Samaj have practices different from the orthodox Hindu ... We don’t worship idols.” It is interesting to observe that the notion of ‘idol worship’ is used here as a kind of negative community marker applied to non-Samajists. This terminology is also used by Christian groups about Hindus generally. Evidently AS/Fiji wants to differentiate itself clearly from mainstream Hinduism. This is characteristic of Arya Samaj in India and other parts of the world, rather than just a strategy of sidling with the critics of ‘idol worship’ in Fiji for political reasons. This is made clear by the fact that the relationship between Samajis and Sanatans is considered cordial, at least in AS/Fiji’s ‘official’ view — “our membership is drawn from the Sanatani groups” (Dutt 2003, interview by author) — and attributed to developments that have brought about a more positive Sanatani attitude towards the Samajis: “They see something good in Arya Samaj” (Dutt 2003, interview by author). However, it is not unlikely that this cordial relationship results not so much from an internal drive of Hindu organizations towards more cordiality and intra-religious co-operation as from external pressure and common challenges: all Hindu groups are facing the problem of continuing emigration, and there is uncertainty about the political stability of Fiji in the future.
International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Fiji (ISKCON/Fiji)

General Background and Development in Fiji

The International Society for the Promotion of Krishna Consciousness — also generally known as the “Hare Krishna Movement” — was established in 1966 and had reached Fiji as early as the 1970s. It was in July 1974 that the founder of ISKCON, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), asked a well-known Fiji businessman, Deoji Punja, to support the society’s efforts by building a centre for its work. This materialized in 1977 when the Sri Krishna Kaliya Temple in Lautoka was opened and other centres in Suva and elsewhere were established (Das 1989). Recently another major temple has been opened in Suva.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

ISKCON understands itself as a religion beyond the religions: “This religion is not for Hindus, it’s for the soul. The soul can be in an Indian body, in an American body, in a Chinese body” (Das 2003, interview by author). At the very heart of ISKCON’s beliefs and practices is salvation, that is, liberation of the soul from the cycle of death and re-birth: “So we are teaching how to get out of this material world” (Das 2003, interview by author). According to ISKCON’s teaching, every human being is by nature a spiritual entity closely related to God. Because of envy this spiritual entity has come into the material world, where it must go through various stages of life in different species before it can be reunited with God. The final state, gained by liberating oneself from the material world through spiritual perfection, is interpreted in terms of a ‘pure Krishna consciousness.’ All the efforts of believers are directed towards this end.

Organizational Structure and Resources

There are four centres of ISKCON in Fiji, controlled by a Governing Body Commission with headquarters in Lautoka. There, during the annual assembly, members are appointed to look after the various branches. In Fiji, the National Council is made up of the presidents of all the temples along with six trustees and other members of the council who care for the daily operations. For leadership training there are courses and schools, mainly in the USA, and within Fiji ISKCON/Fiji offers internal courses, although these are not regularly visited. Currently ISKCON/Fiji has about 1,000 officially registered and initiated members, people who have been given a new name and have gone through the first stage of initiation into ISKCON. Modern media are regarded as a positive means of spreading ISKCON/Fiji’s message, and there is an excellent ISKCON/Fiji website (http://www.iskconfiji.com/). Women have equal rights, and youth is represented very well — ISKCON/Fiji is, as elsewhere, made up mainly of young people. The organization is financed by donations as well as by the income from its restaurants. Normally a contribution of 10 per cent of a member’s income is expected, but “it’s very hard to get that”. There is no financial support from overseas centres. It is expected that members will share the financial burden, as it is considered a principle that “if people pay, they benefit” (Das 2003, interview by author). The finances are accounted for on the national level.
ISKCON/Fiji claims a slight increase in membership during the last ten years. In its own view this is due not to political developments but simply to the fact that “we are going out for more preaching”. No impact has been made on Fijians, because, in the opinion of the organization, “our way of living is very difficult,” that is, very disciplined (“no meat, fish or eggs, no drugs, no illicit sex, no gambling”), and also because of a lack of outreach to ethnic Fijians (“we’re not trying that much”), a very different way of life, and the Fijian perception of ISKCON/Fiji: “most of them feel this is an Indian religion” (Das 2003, interview by author).

Activities

Though ISKCON/Fiji claims that “we do not care about members” (Das 2003, interview by author), it nevertheless practises outreach by means of magazines (for example, see the periodical The Krishna Sun), public preaching, chanting, inviting people to gatherings and lectures (Dass 2003, interview by author), and providing food — both free of charge in the temples and commercially in the restaurants (for more details on ISKCON objectives and activities in Fiji, see Das 1989:4f). In this sense it is one of the most ‘missionary’ Hindu movements. ISKCON/Fiji does not target specific groups; all religions are regarded as good and as providing spiritual guidance for people on different spiritual levels. Nevertheless, its membership in Fiji is drawn mainly from Hindu Indo-Fijians.

In a way, the practice of providing food free of charge in the temples could be regarded as a social activity, though it is not seen in this way by ISKCON/Fiji itself. Social care and similar activities in this field are seen as short-term temporary remedies to human needs, whereas ISKCON/Fiji claims to provide “the eternal solution” for all human beings: “to make them God-conscious so that they go back home and never come back,” that is to leave the cycle of birth, death and rebirth and return to God, to the eternal spiritual soul, to whom the individual soul belongs. On a practical level, ISKCON/Fiji wants “to teach people about how they should lead a simpler life. … Our philosophy is simple living, high thinking … When people become God-conscious, they manifest divine qualities” (Das 2003, interview by author).

Challenges

ISKCON/Fiji realizes that various (Christian) new religious groups attract a lot of people, and attributes this to their focus on healing. This is not seen as a real threat, however, as according to ISKCON’s philosophy it is only a small number of people who can reach perfection anyway, and the new groups are seen like any other church or religion — as providing spiritual guidance on lower levels, while ISKCON/Fiji offers the solution that leads to eternal salvation.

Internally, a challenge is seen in ISKCON/Fiji’s lack of full-time preachers, which again is due to a lack of funding. Evidently ISKCON/Fiji saw better times some years ago when there was enough funding to provide a dozen full-time activists who organized the organization’s outreach from Lautoka. This change seems to be reflected in a decline of strict observance: even active members lead a ‘normal life.’

Through its restaurants, ISKCON tries to counter the disintegration of the traditional Hindu vegetarian tradition — something that is also warmly welcomed by other Hindu groups. In other respects the negative impact of modern culture is not considered a challenge, as according to ISKCON/Fiji’s philosophy and cyclical four-ages doctrine, “all those things
have been forecast in our Scriptures: ... religion will go down and become zero at the end of this age, ... this will increase. ... it will continue unless everybody becomes God-conscious”. It is deplored that people “don't read books” — evidently referring to Holy Scriptures — and consequently, do not know about the basic moral values. This observation is combined with a sharp criticism of religious leaders: “spiritual leaders are not teaching as it really is. ... They change according to their interests ... their interest is not to link the spirit soul to the Lord, the Super Soul ... they have their own agenda ... they want big followers and all things like that” (Das 2003, interview by author).

Conclusion

At the very heart of ISKCON lies its message of the individual salvation of the soul — this is its “main purpose: to stop the cycle of being born again and again” (Das 2003, interview by author). All activity is directed towards this end — from offering lectures to running restaurants. ISKCON is sceptical about social work, which is regarded as providing just a short-term solution. Nevertheless, the offering of free food in the temples could be regarded as a kind of charitable project. Despite its claim that there was a slight increase in membership in the last ten years, this is not a significant development, and it is somewhat countered by a decrease in strict religious observance. Despite its apparently individualistic orientation, ISKCON/Fiji is fully a part of this world, and with its restaurants it presents a comparatively high profile in Fiji’s public life. On a global level, and consequently in Fiji, too, ISKCON has gone through a movement away from a rigid, radical religious ‘sect’ that was even charged with brain washing and violence against its members, to a movement that in some areas is even considered part of the ‘normal’ Hindu spectrum. As a modern movement, ISKCON cannot be regarded as simply a product of modernity in an affirmative sense, or on the contrary as a phenomenon denying modernization and change. Generally, ISKCON has profited from globalization and modernization but not to such a degree that it could be compared with the success stories of new religious movements in the Christian context. It is too small to affect public life through its de-politicizing effect, and despite its dynamic beginnings, its missionary zeal has given way to realistic acceptance of its comparatively limited impact. So ISKCON/Fiji is characterized by a ‘pragmatic’ view of everyday life realities, on the one hand clinging to its aim of leading individual souls to perfection and salvation, against all odds, and on the other, acknowledging that it is part of Fiji society.

Brahma Kumaris/Fiji (BK/Fiji)

General Background and Development in Fiji

Brahma Kumaris (“The Daughters of Brahma”) was founded by a retired businessman, Brahma Baba (1876-1969). Inspired in 1936 by a series of revelations and visions that gave him insights into the nature of the human soul, the essence of God and the process of the world, Brahma Baba decided to share this revealed knowledge in teaching and meditation. In the same year he established the “World Spirituality University” in Karachi, Pakistan.

After the partition of the Indian subcontinent, he and a community that had gathered around him moved to Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India, in 1951. He entrusted the leadership of the organization to young women who still hold these positions today. After the early 1970s, Brahma Kumaris expanded rapidly beyond its Indian homeland, and at present its
membership is supposed to be about half a million people worldwide (Brahma Kumaris 1998:26; see also the organization’s website: http://www.bkwsu.com/; for a general analysis see Walliss 2002). Today, Brahma Kumaris presents itself on three levels: (1) as an international “World Spiritual University” with about 3500 branches in 70 countries; (2) as a “worldwide family,” and (3) as a global organization that coordinates international projects with the aim of “creating a better world where people live in peace and harmony” (Brahma Kumaris 1998:6).

In Fiji, Brahma Kumaris is one of the youngest religious groups, having started only in 1983. So far it has had an impact only on Indo-Fijians and on some tourists who come and visit the meditation centre. In 1986, BK/Fiji participated in several projects — meditation on the radio, prayers for peace, joint programmes with the UN, etc. — that made it known to a broader national audience. Over the years, apart from the first decade when there was not much recognition of Brahma Kumaris, the number of members has neither significantly decreased nor increased; there may have been periods when BK/Fiji aroused more outside awareness — during festivals, or at times when the outreach yielded fruit — but generally the number of adherents has remained stable at the low level of about 100.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

What is specific about Brahma Kumaris is that the centres are run by ‘sisters.’ The founding father considered that women, being teachers of their children, were especially capable of imparting knowledge to others. The starting point of Brahma Kumaris teachings is the recognition of the intrinsic spirituality and goodness of human beings, who are encouraged to rediscover that goodness within themselves and to acquire a spiritual awareness that will help them to develop spiritual attitudes and behaviours conducive to the betterment of humankind. This is taught through meditation courses based on Raja Yoga (‘kingly Yoga’), with a comprehensive curriculum comprising topics such as meditation, self-realization, consciousness, relationship with God, natural spiritual laws, principles for a spiritual lifestyle and development of spiritual values. Apart from those courses, which may vary from country to country and their differing cultures, there is a variety of lectures, short-term courses, and workshops on topics such as positive thinking, stress-free living, self-management for quality of life, and so on. On a global level, Brahma Kumaris seeks cooperation with other international bodies such as the UN or the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Interestingly, in its public presentation Brahma Kumaris gives a very low profile to its teachings and puts more emphasis on its courses and programmes that seem specifically suited to meet ‘modern’ demands and expectations. Its teaching is basically the philosophy of the Raja Yoga, comprising elements such as karma, re-incarnation, the soul as conscious, blissful and light energy, history as a drama of world cycles, and so on. God is prepared “to help the soul to recognize its highest potential and to aim for perfection by practising the art of living. This practice brings a change in the whole of humanity” (http://www.bkwsu.com/about/phl3a.html), according to the Brahma Kumaris motto, which is: “When we change, the world changes” (Brahma Kumaris 1998:3). In a way, the doctrines of Brahma Kumaris are traditional Raja Yoga in modern guise, fitting the situation of the world of today. As a kind of “applied philosophy,” Brahma Kumaris offers an educational programme of imparting twelve “living values”: co-operation, freedom, happiness, honesty, humility, love, peace, respect, responsibility, simplicity, tolerance, and unity.
Organizational Structure and Resources

In Fiji there is a centre in Suva (run by a Sister) and one in Lautoka, as well as a sub-centre in Nausori. The local centres are under a National Coordinator, and there is a Regional Coordinator (in Australia). The headquarters of Brahma Kumaris worldwide, with a Chief Coordinator as administrative head, are in India, while the second administrative head in London is responsible for coordinating the overseas centres. BK/Fiji has no institutions of higher religious learning but has retreat centres where participants undergo sessions of meditation but not a programme of formal training. In the Brahma Kumaris headquarters in India, however, there are plans to establish courses leading to a formal qualification with certificates acknowledged by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University in India.

BK/Fiji is financed by voluntary donations from its adherents. Income and major expenditure (rent and so on) are listed in annual and monthly accounts. Overseas support can be obtained only in exceptional cases, for example, for buying or renting houses that could be used as meditation centres. BK/Fiji is supported by the regional coordinating office in Australia, which was responsible for getting the work started in Fiji. Generally speaking, BK/Fiji is financially self-sustaining. There is no formal membership: whether people attend once or twice, or every week, and whether they take courses and continue with meditation programmes or not, is left to them. Currently the core group of adherents or active sympathizers is very small, probably not numbering more than about 100 persons, as mentioned above. Though both men and women participate equally in BK/Fiji, men are more involved in its activities. This is considered untypical of Brahma Kumaris and explained by the observation that in the specific Fiji context, men have “more freedom to move around” (Sister Arveena 2003, interview by author). The centre in Suva used to have a specific youth class and offer retreats for young people, but this was not kept up. The majority of BK/Fiji adherents are middle-aged persons.

Activities

The focus of BK/Fiji’s work is on ‘educating souls,’ which is done through meditation courses as the very core of its activities. To make itself known, BK/Fiji uses all kinds of media: there are two Hindi radio programmes and one in English, and topics such as positive thinking, stress management, self-management and living values are dealt with in books, on videos and on DVDs, all of which can be purchased in the bookstore of the meditation centre. Once or twice a year the meditation centre offers a retreat for its members, focussing on instruction in meditation practice. In recent years BK/Fiji has also started to reach out to business communities by offering programmes on positive thinking and stress management, and to schools by presenting living values programmes. It is planned to run these courses for teachers, parents and students. More specific training sessions for educators will aim at explaining how the 12 basic values (see above) can be incorporated in their teaching. For the implementation of this plan, BK/Fiji is in close contact with the Ministry of Education, but because of organizational problems the co-operative effort has not yet materialized. According to the coordinator of the meditation centre in Suva, “this programme is totally based on values, and has nothing to do with our teaching” (Sister Arveena 2003, interview by author). In accordance with Brahma Kumaris worldwide, on every third Sunday of the month the meditation is specifically dedicated to world peace.