

# The Neo-Hindu Hustler and the Department of the Environment: Ethnographic Reflections on making the political legible in an urban setting<sup>1</sup>

Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj  
Yale University

*First draft. Comments welcome. Please do not circulate or quote.*

“Get our God off your shoes”.

- *Words boldly written on a bright placard carried near London’s Knightsbridge tube station.*

One early Sunday morning on June 2005 a demonstration of protestors gathered just down the road from Harrods and Harvey Nichols, two iconographic stores indicating the prestige and quintessentially elite London borough. Their target, however, was not these commercial giants, but the French Embassy located just off Brompton Road W1. The protest was ostensibly organized to convey their outrage at French fashion house/manufacturer Minelli. One pair of the shoes launched for Minelli’s summer 2005 incited controversy: they were printed with Lord Ram’s image.



During the protest, police lined the street, and many carried placards, sang jai shri ram, and played the dhol punctuated with the syncopation of cymbals. When I saw the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a preliminary exploration of the notions of urban charisma and infra-power. The emphasis is to understand what it means to be political in an urban setting as a moment of transnational subject making. Comments and suggestions on the draft are welcome.

march, at its outset, there were about 150 people present. The organizers, of course, claim over a 1000. Likely the March participants numbered somewhere in between. Regardless of how many turned up, participants may not have realized that Minelli had issued a statement and that they would withdraw the sale of the shoes. Despite this triumph, the organizers of the march decided to proceed with the event.

Speaking about Minelli's apparent offer to withdraw the infamous shoes from sale, [spokesperson from organizers] added, "Minelli have yet to respond to our reply let alone offer a full apology. We will not stop this campaign until they have made it clear that they recognise the offence that they have caused, acknowledge their responsibility in a public apology and outline how they intend to move forward from here. There are also the wider issues surrounding this campaign about the treatment of Hindus in France itself. The French government have yet to respond and clarify how they intend to address this. The protest will continue." [sic]  
<http://www.hinduforum.org/Default.aspx?sID=45&cID=59&ctID=43&IID=0>

This press release was issued by the Hindu Forum who quoted the main protest organizers: the Hindu Human Rights Watch. Both organizations are umbrella bodies claiming to represent variously Hindus in the UK, Hindus worldwide, and 1 billion Hindus. As the campaign mounted these organizations helped to circulate materials and information via the web, such as, instructions on contacting Minelli headquarters in France with draft letters (see appendix for a sample). The web forums circulated additional actionable items: not to fly Air France, boycott of French goods, and instructions on letter writing campaign to prevent Paris 2012 Olympics bid (with email addresses for Olympic committee members).

This protest connects multiple ways of modern transnational subject making in the public sphere. Central to the revised purpose was a protest of the religious intolerance demonstrated by the French. The main example given of French intolerance was not the headscarf but the differential taxation levied against Hindu temples. Basically, temples are not subject to the same tax advantages as the Catholic Church, and this is considered a human rights abuse. In the words of one of the supporters:

“We condemn the fact that a religion that pre-dates Christianity by thousands of years has not been recognized as an accepted faith tradition by the French Government,” explained Dr Girdhari Bhan, President of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK. “It goes against all accepted norms of human rights in the democratic world.”

<http://www.hinduforum.org/Default.aspx?SID=45&cID=59&ctID=43&lID=0>

The protest against the French in the name of human rights through Hinduism, is a recent example of how amorphous, informal and changing networks coalesce to produce one moment in which the political becomes legible in urban life. It is one of a growing number of moments in which transnational religious activism enters public spheres. I take as the central premise of this exploration of urban charisma the question: what does it mean to be political (in the full array and larger implications of this term) in transnational urban and because of an urban setting? The central dynamic is the rhizomatic network in which individuals perform their authority in ways that are only possible in an urban setting. Individuals produce and position themselves to create a sociality linked to legible, illegible, and partially legible rhizomatic intelligibilities. As such, of course, there are connections to older forms of social networks, lineage, kinship, etc. In this article, I seek to explore links for thinking with rhizomatic networks vis a vis socio-structural networks. In particular I focus on religion as an organizing principal for young Hindus who claim a minoritarian expression, representation in the public sphere that points up the larger project of the diversification of democracy. For my argument, minoritarian agency creates multiple public spheres which move towards homogeneity because of heterogeneity.<sup>2</sup>

For my own work in London, the idea of urban charisma helps me out of certain dilemmas regarding the links of individual agency and ways of thinking about resistance and protest for Hindus. What is most interesting to me is the emphasis on the individual

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to flag that this piece does not explore how religious beliefs and practices have become more/less salient. I seek to understand how claims for religion are political moments of transnational subject making in an urban secular (re)public.

as a purveyor of a certain type of knowledge which can be called upon to gain occasional public authority. This understanding helps to unpack the hegemony claimed by the March organizers- of a homogenous group of Hindus who protest against injustices to religion. And instead reveals it to be a coterie of individuals who activate both new and old social networks in order to claim a shared public voice against a perceived threat.

### ***Hindu Public Spheres in London: hustler and the public inquiry***

It is important to understand how an ethnic minority transnational religion, such as Hinduism, becomes part of a modern (re)public. In doing fieldwork in London amongst Hindu families and young Hindus there were many opportunities to observe how their understandings of what it meant to be a Hindu could emerge in the public sphere. These included for instance: competing on a Asian ethnic program quiz show with a saffron flag, holding regular meetings with National Jewish Students organization to ban Hizbut-al-Tahrir from speaking and organizing at SOAS and the LSE, events around keeping Bhaktivedanta manor open for public worship, and public marches/protests, opening of the swaminaryana temple in Neasden, comedy sketch programs from Goodness Gracious Me. In this article I concentrate on two such moments to further explore the ways in which informal urban leaders create intelligible spaces in which to be political.

I have elsewhere argued for understanding of the establishment of a Hindu diaspora as a community “in moments” which is fractured and yet claims for itself a timeless presence (Raj 2003). The two moments in this article further reveal how the discontinuous network coalesces in moments which involve public spectacles. Let me introduce the two main ethnographic cases by way of substantiating the connections and elucidating the argument. The first example I offer morphs the sub-title of the conference: neo-Hindu hustlers. In this instance, the hustler is a young man studying at the LSE. The second example offered below is related to the right of public worship at Bhaktivedanta manor- an ISKCON temple just outside NE London (M25 Motorway). In particular, I explore larger implications of the public inquiry into the right to worship held by the Department of the Environment. The hustler and the department of the Environment are linked through a protest march held in the streets of London.

## **The Neo- Hindu Hustler and the Anthropologist**

“I am a political Hindu”

These words were spoken by a young student organizer who recognized that he was linking his rhetoric to discussions of Hinduism, but, not to the beliefs and practices of Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> It was one in which he led a group of students to slowly change the landscape of Universities across London, South East England, and finally all of the UK. Their aim was simple: to establish separate Hindu student groups in all universities, distinct from South Asian Groups.

The authority claimed by the young man simultaneously connects to others' experiences by going beyond specificity, ensuring that the young people become followers of a vision. The multitude of personal ways that people experience Hinduism, with many different temples scattered across London's landscape has created caste, language, and class differences in temple membership and management. The hustler that I concentrate on here is not interested in the temple, or its parochial politics. Instead, recognizing that there are many different imaginings of being Hindu, he interprets and positions himself as able to create yet another meaning for being Hindu: the political Hindu.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, the young man was the group leader. He was carrying a full course load at the LSE aiming to become a solicitor. He spoke with amazing speed, as if speech itself might obfuscate his main work and purpose. In fact, he was a young man who was full of purpose. His fellow students would sometimes joke about his energy, only in awe of how much time he could devote to the cause of creating separate Hindu societies while doing very well in 'uni'. Working with him was very frenetic, I would receive a phone call saying that he had learned about a meeting with the Jewish Students association and that I was welcome to attend- they would meet at 3. It took me some time to figure out how I had come to be in the loop with this young man, until I realized that my interest in

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<sup>3</sup> Although others have historically examined Hindu reform movements this very specific reform reflects a moment in time when democratic transnational urban public cultures demand a representation of group-ness which eclipses the need for discussions of praxis or faith.

<sup>4</sup> It was a result of fieldwork with this group, and this young man in particular, that I recognize instantly Hansen's use of the term hustler and the ideas of infra-power. The hustler can create and sustain authority which comes from his own experience of the urban space.

his extra-curricular activities and his introductions of me as a researcher from Cambridge University, both functioned to lend credence to his work and general purpose. He created links with others which placed himself as the central hub for all activity. If he was not at the center, he delegated key information about the activity to his team of closest group supporters.

Furthermore, he did not merely aspire to be a youth student organizer and actively pursued links beyond the university campuses. He was keen on being called upon to represent youth. To be considered a voice of London's Hindus. This hints also at the importance of exploring the scalar in our understandings of the local urban authority produced by individuals. Their reach is simultaneously carried far beyond immediate concerns and can be linked to larger transnational, national activism. I have explored elsewhere how their activities link to a global hindutva movement (Raj 200?). Let me here elucidate further an example in which the hustler began to encourage other young people to actively explore what it meant to be a Hindu.

The text of his main speech delivered across London campus settings further clarifies his understanding of being a political Hindu. I have elsewhere examined this speech using van der Veer's notions of the ethnicization of religion (Raj 2000). The young man's words and charismatic presence created shared meaning via a sense of threat from Britain and London streets. One afternoon I received a phone call inviting me to a talk at UCL. When I met him on campus, we were joined by a local student who had arranged for the room. They did not know each other, but were linked through mutual friends. Walking down the hallway to the lecture room we passed a poster of his talk, the student who had organized it, pointed it out and added "we tried to get the word out as best we could". The confidence of the young man was direct and focused; he reassured the other student that it was good that they were doing this. For him, what was most important was that people took away the message and began to think about things so that they could establish their own group and carry its own momentum. The title for the talk: 'Who the Hell do You Think You Are?'. It had been delivered around the UK to various 'Hindu Socs' by this young Gujarati male. He had written it, he said, inspired to get young people thinking about who they were, especially at a time when they were thinking

about these things anyway at university. The talk questions and discredits the various labels which these young people are known which ignore their 'Hinduness' as a primary aspect of their urban public identity.

Let me quote at length from the speech, to give you a sense of his words. These were delivered in a riveting fashion, entirely enrapturing the small group who had come to listen to the talk.

“So let me turn to the first label and it is a very convenient label, the term Asian which the media and also politicians and even ourselves tend to use and tend to relate to. Now this term Asian if you look at it in detail is a geographic term, it refers to people of the Indian subcontinent, India, Bangladesh Sri Lanka, Pakistan. But in addition to that it also includes China, Burma, and a whole host of other countries. My parents most definitely are from the Asian continent but clearly I am not. Having said that, this term also has some serious repercussions for us. Let me just give you a few examples.

Salman Rushdie when he wrote the book *Satanic Verses*, the newspapers had headlines 'Asians call for Rushdie's head'. During the gulf war, widespread support for Saddam, and, most recently, in East London, 'Asian thugs murder White boy'.

It was not my community that called for Rushdie's head.

It was NOT my community that supported Saddam Hussain.

And it wasn't Hindu youths that hacked to death that White boy in East London.

If anything, if they can be called problems at all, they are clearly Muslim problems not Hindu problems. Now what I am saying is that here we need to be fair in our labeling if ever there is a Hindu problem then we should ask the media to define it as a Hindu problem but not a blanketing effect as an Asian problem.

Then some people might argue that 'yes there are some common problems that all of us as people with Brown skin or Black skin face and one of them is racism'. Yes when it comes to these sorts of issues when it is common to all the different ethnic communities, whatever ethnic means, in this country. Then we should come together, have a dialogue and put up a united front and this is where [our organization], which is an organization which I represent has been working alongside with the national union of student's to combat this problem of racism along with other youth groups and

organizations. So what I am saying is that we should have fair labeling rather than a blanketing effect.

If Asian is too wide a term then let us look at the next, so called alternative. And that is the term Indian, which again many of us might choose to use. Indian is a geopolitical term which refers to a land mass on the Asian continent. Very few of us go to India every year, most of us are probably born and brought up in this country, those that do go, a lot of us probably hate it. And we don't have any Indian rights according to the constitution of India, we are British citizens. Having said all of that, India does have a very special place for all of us. For example, one of the most important things is the one about our cultural ties. India for us has a very significant position in our lives. Everyone has to have roots somewhere. For example the British, they crossed the whole of the world: Australia, India, the West Indies and so on, but when the time came to come back, they came back to Britain, that little island, because that is where their roots are. For us, India is the place of our roots.

Now having partly rejected Indian as a term that we label, the next term is British. In the Mahabharat on several occasions, if you have seen the video for it as well, there are many references that say that you must owe your first allegiance to the country in which you reap your benefits from. That country is your karmabhoomi, the land of your actions, and that is where your first allegiance lies. We, most of us are born and brought up in this country, we benefit through the education system in this country, the national health service and all the other rights that we are conferred. And therefore according to our Hindu Dharma, a concept which I will go into a little later on, Britain for us is our home. And that is nothing to be ashamed about. Some of you might say, 'OK fine, in very idealistic terms you can say that, but Britain is a racist country'. Here I recall a conversation that I had with Nirj Dewa who is a Conservative MP of Sri Lankan origin in one of his more sober moments he said to me that he regarded Britain not as a racist country, but as an ignorant country and therefore he said that it is up to us to be able to educate the communities in this country. The so called British community in this country about what we mean to be Hindu and through education we can eradicate these so called racist tendencies. Also if we look throughout Britain, Hindus have been a boon to this country not a burden. If you look through the achievements of our accountants, our

doctors, our businesses we come up on top of the table and therefore we should make it clear to these people that yes we are British and yes we are making a very active contribution”.

Ultimately the national organization, largely through the efforts of this young man and his immediate group the UK currently 48 groups, and fifty-one in Europe as a whole.

According to the group’s website:

[It] has gone from strength to strength based upon the hard work of its members. Its vision is simple; to create a dynamic and vibrant platform for Hindu youth to come together and participate in a wide range of activities. The last nine years has seen a network of ... branches evolve across educational institutions across the U.K. This has resulted in a sense of pride, pro-active action and support amongst Hindu students. [Our] vision for the future is to build upon this, by ensuring that the vision of [our group] reaches every Hindu student.

[We] provide religious, cultural and academic activities on the local and national level.

Locally, societies hold a wide range of events from festival celebrations, antakshree evenings, debates, talks, dinners, cultural shows, raas garbars and mandir visits.

Nationally, the group has organized: An annual lecture with an international speaker -- Youth Conference for members (past topics include "Hinduism and Science" and "Hindu Contribution to World Thought and Philosophy") --Sewa Week, a charity fundraising week

In the past, we have also organized a cultural trip to India called "Roots"

This movement which began in the early 1990s established ‘Hindu Socs’ at the LSE, SOAS, Birmingham, Cambridge and Oxford. Their call for separate Hindu platforms on UK campuses during the 1990s has grown into ‘the largest Hindu Students movement in Europe’ ([www.\[the group\].org.uk/](http://www.[the group].org.uk/)). The organization’s vision statement is sufficiently broad to cover their cultural and political activities:

build the foundations for a strong and vibrant Hindu community by establishing a youth orientated pro-active agenda. Through its activities [it] aims to promote Hindu unity and to propagate the eternal relevance of the Hindu way of life ([www.\[the group\].org.uk/](http://www.[the group].org.uk/)).

This vision also involves ‘creating a better understanding of Hindutva’ (Message from Chair, InForum March/April 1999, p.6). To this end, the nation-wide body holds annual general meetings, runs an email discussion group, has two regular publications (HUM and InForum), maintains WWW page, sustains links with organizations in India and America, and is involved in various ‘pro-Hindu’ activities.<sup>i</sup> Furthermore, as a large and very well organized association, they are often called upon to represent the views of Hindu youth in the national media, inter-faith committees, and government groups (such as the National Youth Agency and the Interfaith Network). It also maintains active links with The National Union of Students and the Union of Jewish Students.

Importantly, they do not actively participate in any ritual practice as an organization; they draw from a variety of Hindu students, those who are vegetarian, those who eat meat, as well as those aspiring to be vegetarian. Both Vashnavaites and Savites are active as well as a variety of castes. Their purpose is promoting Hindu identity rather than any specific religious behaviors, or rituals. Their aim, then, is not internal reform, per say, but rather, external representation (i.e. what it means to be a Hindu to non-Hindus) and the activities during the early period concentrated on Hindu representation.<sup>ii</sup>

Their activities, marches, publications, talks all help to explore how transnational subject making in the urban public sphere invokes a Hinduism devoid of praxis. His concern was not to reform practice, or engage with certain ways of being Hindu, but to claim being Hindu in multiple public spheres and to reject the other labels by which these young people could be known. The informal networks between university students allowed for this strong national organization to emerge and flourish. Their engagement with Hinduism was totalizing and essentializing. At its core was that one should feel free to publicly claim one’s Hinduism. The reason that this could emerge as a possible and primary identification was because of the ways that he posited it in opposition to other groups, with which the young people were in contact. As a backdrop to this was the

activism of Hizbut-al-Tahrir who were also attempting to establish themselves in UK campuses. The unpredictable scales of networks emerged as the group pursued links with National Jewish Students groups, the Bhaktivedanta manor, and the RSS. These larger events helped him to create a view of Hinduism under attack from within the UK and from other religions, particularly Muslims. It was in experiencing himself as a minority in a new city that convinced him of the need to be primarily Hindu. And, I would add, his call to take up and make primary a religious marker was also a way to claim to be national, to be British, and a minority without challenging the ‘narration of the nation’ (Bhabha). Youth identification shifted from being ‘Asian’ to ‘British Hindu’. The alteration indicates one way of becoming a transnational subject entirely implicated by the ways that minoritarian agency can manifest in an urban setting. The claim for Hindu politicizes religious affiliation.

In 1990s multicultural Britain cultural difference and peculiarities matter, the goal for these young people has become to distinguish themselves from other Asians and gain political representation as an interest group (thus highlighting the ‘religious’ as opposed to ‘ethnic’ identity)<sup>5</sup>. This engagement with a religious identity is inevitably essentialising<sup>6</sup> in its claim for agency and resistance. This may be inevitable given that identities, although changing through time at any one moment must claim fixity and adherence of meaning<sup>7</sup>. Interesting are the modalities through which this fixity is linked to a dialogue with the public sphere which inevitably morph authority into a public resistance. As an informal urban leader, he required a constant engagement with the public sphere in order to consolidate his authority and purpose.

One critical event was the March organized and held in support of Bhaktivedanta Manor (below I outline the reasons for the march).

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5 This fracture and articulation is not restricted to the youths, it is also occurring for parents. The recent creation of “pan” organisations which are concerned with representation and interpretation reveals this concern amongst the parental generation (Muslim parliament, and the Hindu Council U.K, two such organisations which are overtly religious yet have formed with the explicit attempt at political organisation).

6 On the implications of the essentialisation of cultural identity see Daniel A. Segal ‘Resisting Identities: A Found Theme’ in Cultural Anthropology 1996.

7 The articulations of identity and identification are explored in Stuart Hall ‘Who Needs Identity?’ in Questions of Cultural Identity Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay(eds.) (1996, London: Sage).

### **The Hindu Student March - held April 1, 1995**

Picture the following scene in London's Russell Square (near SOAS). A young man is painted blue, wearing a dhoti and mukhat, carrying a bhansari, and peacock feather all indicating that he is the god Krishna. The Krishna figure is behind black prison like gates carried by two students. In front of the gates with the key was another young man dressed in a suit and tie, wearing a face-mask of John Major (then PM).

Ultimately the march was organized in defense of the Bhaktivedanta manor, but this intention was not entirely clear from some of the posters/event publications which had on them the words: 'Rape of Religion'. The flyer for the event included a unfocussed small picture of an Indian woman, who is being helped up or being hit down (depending on one's interpretation) by a police officer (which occurred during the largest March for the Manor held in 16 April 1994 in which 36, 000 people participated). The predominately Youth March with police escort wound from Russell Square to the Department of Environment (outside the minister's office, John Gummer). After speaking to young people enroute, I realized that many did not attend the Manor regularly, not even on the disputed date of Janamastmi. I bring this to light only to point to the images of a changed Hinduism and despite the fact of not attending the temple, the allegiance and the space in which young Hindus feel they need to act. A Britain which calls on them to be ambassadors of a faith has also allowed for a general recognition of Hinduism, and for self, and for a unity in a religious nominal identity. As such it exposes the connections and indeed the placards carried included references to Hindus paying taxes, Asian owned business, and even, voting Tory (along the lines of "I am Hindu, I vote Tory"). The March was a claim for being British Hindu. One young woman on the March said who had never even been to the disputed temple said to me: "they don't even understand us. We are not going to take this like our parent's did, we are going to fight for our rights".

### **The Department of the Environment**

The march was one day in a much longer standing dispute. During my fieldwork I attended the Department of Environment public inquiry of the Bhaktivedanta manor held in Hertfordshire. The Inquiry lasted for over 6 months and considered an appeal

regarding building a public access road to the Temple located in Letchmore Heath just off the M25 in North London. To have been elevated to this level, there was quite a long history. Worthy of a paper in itself, let me briefly sketch the main historical nodes. In the 1970s the temple building and land were donated by George Harrison (of Beatles fame) to ISKON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). In the early 1980s local residents and the Local Council complained about the use of the space for public worship and it had been established as a theological college. For one day in the year they celebrate with great fanfare the birth of Lord Krishna. It had become a pilgrimage site for Janamastmi (Krishna's birthday).

I had met a number of people involved with the temple. Some were devotees; others had become bramcharya and were more active in the temple. The legal teams representing both sides of the dispute (i.e., local town and the temple) at the hearing were joined by residents of Letchmore Heath, Temple resident priests, ISKON devotees, and members of the UK Hindu community. These meetings were often confrontational in tone and many reflected poorly on Letchmore Heath's perceptions of Asians and Hindus. The statements made by the residents, while attempting to oppose public worship at the temple as a Green Belt issue, were couched in assumptions and misunderstandings of Asians in Britain. The arguments slipped from a green belt issue to 'ensuring a traditional rural environment' to 'a perceived desire to ignore the rules of the land', to 'questioning the rights of Asians as British citizens - democracy only operates if everybody operates on the same standards'. Other comments included: "people coming from inner-city areas don't know how to drive in rural areas, especially around horses", and "It's not English, it's not the way we do things here. We are peaceful diplomatic people and this is not the way". "I was incensed as I was unable to cross the lane with my dogs". "[The temple] is only accessible for those Indians who are wealthy enough to own cars". "The Krishna movement cannot control numbers...it would open floodgates to followers from all over the country". The tone of these official statements submitted to the inquiry was dire at times. However, when those with whom I was sitting made their own comments in reply to what was happening on the official stage the hearing became congenial and fun. Most of all the public hearing exposed the traditional nativist

arguments which stressed a quintessential British-ness in opposition to the Hindu and Asian. It was one that was linked to horses, dogs and rural pristine England.

The temple website, of course, archives the event in specific terms:

The Public Enquiry lasted over six months and included speakers for and against the proposed access road. The temple was well represented by political and religious representatives, and even many local villagers supported the proposal.

Then the waiting. The temple went into the start of Shrila Prabhupada's Centennial year (1996) with no clear indication as to when the decision would be given. In the meantime, worshippers continued to visit, despite being branded as criminals for breaking the enforcement that included Janmashtami 1994.

Without warning, the report from the Department of the Environment was issued, granting planning permission for Bhaktivedanta Manor!

Upon hearing the news, devotees could hardly believe it.

In his concluding report, the Secretary of State acknowledged that '[the temple] is unique in the UK because there is no comparable alternative place for teaching, worship and meditation; and the level of provision of these religious facilities is to an exceptionally high standard. Furthermore, the close association of the Hare Krishna movement's founder with the Manor makes it a special, if not unique place . . . so that association must continue.'

The campaign increased the fame of Bhaktivedanta Manor. It also increased the estate from 17 acres to 70 acres, with the purchases of the additional land for the access road, which also provided more festival parking space and more room for the temple cows.

The devotees would like to acknowledge that this historic victory would not have been possible without the keen and prolonged support of many temple managers, congregational members, residents, donors, and local and national businessmen and politicians.

May Lord Krishna bless them all.

Pro- Hindu activism amongst second generation youth, and the spread of hindutva reveals the connections between ethnicity, religion, and modern global social movements. In Britain, the Hindu diaspora is in the process of becoming, defining itself as a religious minority within an ethnic minority. Simultaneously, Hindus are increasingly conscious of being a part of a global Eternal Religion whose members are found in over 65 countries of the world as well as the subcontinent.<sup>iii</sup> Although syncretic elements are apparent, the move in the diaspora is towards fixity and rigidity through a proscription and prescription of the boundaries of Hindu identity. Moreover, there are pan-Hindu links that are created through individual organizers which link different strands into a common purpose.

The fieldwork instances offered above reveal the many public spaces in which being an ethnic minority, and being a religious minority enter into a public sphere. The paper explores how engagement with the public offers an oeuvre to think about the kaleidoscopic ways in which different strands of modern transnational subject making occurs in and through public cultures and how discussions of ethnic minorities are implicated by notions of modernity. In using the term public cultures, I combine two notions: the idea of multiple public spheres and public culture. Via Habermas, a rejection of the Frankfurt school and a rethinking of Foucault and Elias, Appadurai and Breckenridge define public culture as: “a set of arenas that have emerged in a variety of historical conditions that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state”. They further clarify that public culture is “not a type of cultural phenomenon but a zone of cultural debate” (1995:5). I take as a central premise of that debate the ways in which difference is invoked, acted out, upon and engaged with.

The examples of Hindu youths organizing events, Hindu Marches, and the public inquiry are all instances of Hindu activists who see themselves as part of a larger philanthropic organization involved with political lobbying- endogamously addressing ‘lack of pride in one’s identity’ while exogamously responding to the typologizing of multicultural Britain which renders them Asian first, only and primarily without any stress on religious identity (all Asians are taken as one). Each example addresses the

multicultural politics of Britain in a slightly different way via claims to an unchanging constant tradition. As such, they reveal the competing ways in which the politics of transnational subject making are constituted in urban public spheres.

### **Resistance, difference and globalization**

To understand modern transnational subject making we need to understand what determines the forms of engagement with public dialogues on difference, connections to transnationalism, and the ways that difference is inflected with modernity. The main concepts we have for this is representation, agency and resistance. The seemingly *inward* focused Hindu groups promote a unique identity under threat; their activities could be interpreted as ‘in resistance’ to a contrapuntal modernity in which they are inevitably ‘caught’.

This leaves us with an understanding of the diasporic subject as in a perpetual state of resistance, which assumes a certain fixity of culture and cultural difference. One premise of transnational subject making is an understanding of culture as pure units, untainted and unencumbered by overlaps. Thus to interpret the actions as resistance in representation, with which these groups are concerned, in fact renders each form as partial and incomplete. They are always a minority responding to a negative stereotype by holding up placards, or the Hindu activists will always be undoing a negative stereotype by positing a positive one in its place. Outside of resistance what alternative forms of understanding do we have? How can we address the contested politics of representation in the public spheres through the seemingly parochial concerns of religious groups who want to promote their cultural difference?

There is no unitary, isolated clear-cut struggle of contestation against the other or the process of othering. To borrow a mixed metaphor, the weapon of the weak may or may not be a weak weapon (Adams 1998:327), but for those committed to exposing public cultures, ‘resistance’ as a conceptual tool requires a more unitary subject-making and coherence in group identity than is possible in transnational public spheres. We live

in an era of social difference, in which bridging otherness is an assumed starting point. Representations are a crucial aspect of defining difference and othering; the responses to dominant stereotypes are not necessarily singular. As such, a straightforward examination of contestation and resistance is not possible.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, global processes have rendered uninteresting and ineffective local based struggles that do not respond to a wider global hegemony. Ethnic minority recognition is not straightforward nor prescribed; just as the politics of contestation are not obvious, shared, nor situated only in a local instance.

In a world of globalization and celebrated differences, we live through increasingly complicated life experiences and interconnected histories. Changing international economic and political conditions have created a world of expatriates, immigrants and refugees in which “questions of identity and culture are spatialized in new ways” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3). Transnational connections of people, the ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai) are one window into exploring the socio-cultural changes commiserate with globalization. The volume and rapidity of the movement of people, ideas and information defines the twenty-first century. The resultant displacement and diasporas reconfigure identity in new ways that have compelled social scientists to rethink how they conceptualize the ‘object’ of their collective knowledge.

**In my work, this is not about how individuals claim and create spaces of intelligible power around which there is an effervescence of activity that may have a transnational connection. Rather, that their urban activities as political Hindus create as very specific intelligible space in which one is seen as persecuted, misunderstood, and collectively the target of a claim to human rights abuses. For the neo-Hindu then, the activism shifts between collective displays on the streets from which people gain a sense of to halls of bureaucracy and corporatism– the department of the environment, unjust taxation laws and French Fashion houses. In exploring the ways in which informal leaders create intelligible spaces within which to be an active Hindu, the rhizome emerges as the connections between many nodes- that of being a religious minority, that of distinguishing oneself from other religious minorities (most often in terms of class distinctions), that of claiming the**

**transnational and global for oneself (as connected to 1 billion Hindus), as well as, of subsuming religious practice. For at the end of the day, this is not about how to be a Hindu, or one's beliefs, or praxis but how being a Hindu connects to wider debates about multicultural citizens who can participate in the project of democratizing public spheres.**

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<sup>i</sup> During fieldwork such activities included but were not limited to supporting the Bhaktivedanta manor efforts to keep the site open as a place of worship; joining a Hindu March to John Gummer's (Minister of Environment) London government office; competing on a BBC general South Asia knowledge quiz show (QAsia) with a saffron flag as its group emblem; supporting SEWA international; and holding regular meetings and activities with the National Jewish Students to ban Hizbut-al-Tahrir from speaking at London campuses.

<sup>ii</sup> The non-emphasis on ritual reform renders this substantially different from current and previous revitalization movements in the subcontinent. For a thorough review of current reform movements in India, see McKean 1996. For an historical perspective of Hindu religious reform based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arya Samaj movement in North India see Jones 1976.

<sup>iii</sup> This figure is found in the introduction to Clarke et al. 1990.

<sup>iv</sup> For examinations of humor as a 'weapon of the weak' see Dundes (1985:456), Kurti (1988).