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## Religion and gender: the Hindu Diaspora in Portugal

Inês Lourenço <sup>\*a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *CRIA – Centre for Research in Anthropology, Lisbon, Portugal; FCT - Science and Technology Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal*

### Abstract

As perpetrators of what is considered traditional knowledge, Hindu women in Portugal are assigned a new status through religion, thus replacing male *pujari*. Furthermore, they guarantee the nationalist ideology within transnational networks abroad, sustaining the perpetuation of conservative models. This article focuses on the Hindu Diaspora in Portugal, and specifically on the role played by women in the construction of gender and religious identities, who, entrusted with new social and ritual responsibilities, contribute towards the cultural replication of their traditional community. As anthropological studies on gender in Diaspora show us, the assignment of religious roles are used to recreate women's social status in the "host" country.

**Keywords:** Hindu Diaspora; Hinduism; Gender; Portugal; India, Postcolonialism

### Introduction

The Hindu community of Santo António dos Cavaleiros (in the Greater Lisbon area, Portugal) possesses a cohesive group structure, in part due to the diversified work of cultural reproduction at the social, economical and regional levels, carried out almost exclusively by women, whose activity is essential for the consolidation of the group's identity references. These women, considered the safeguards of the group's traditional identity, assume the responsibility of transmitting traditional references involving the negotiation of social statuses and manipulation of the religious structure, and taking upon themselves the task (in the sense of fulfilling the *dharma*<sup>1</sup>) of maintaining, and thus inevitably transforming what they consider to be the group's traditional references within this new territory.

This essay aims to convey an anthropological perspective on the Hindu Diaspora in Portugal by combining notions of religion and gender, a formula that provides a

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\* Email: Inês.lourenco@iscte.pt

privileged insight into the dynamics of perpetuation and transformation of ideological and gender practices throughout this group's adaptation process to Portuguese society.

Studying a Diaspora should not imply isolating the primary analytic categories. Other elements that are intrinsically connected to the process of cultural reproduction have therefore not been excluded from the ethnographic work on which this essay is based: caste, social mobility, family and language. Likewise, combining the study of this group with the surrounding social space has also been taken into consideration, as well as the transnational element and all the aspects associated with it, bringing into our analysis the multi-local dimension that characterizes the Diaspora.

Religion, as the expression 'Hindu community' itself indicates, is one of the key defining features of this Diaspora and of the community that is the object of this study, thus distinguishing this group from others which, despite sharing the same country of provenance, have different religious and cultural features. According to Cohen, despite maintaining that it is not possible to claim the existence of strictly religious Diasporas, the consolidation of a diasporic consciousness is comprised of a few essential elements, amongst which he points out religion. The author's position is particularly bound with the fact he considers religions to concentrate a variety of cultural contexts while at the same time finding that most universal religions, except the Jew and the Sikh, don't mythologize and idealize their origin (Cohen, 1997: 189).

Vertovec, however, adds Hinduism to the two religions made an exception by Cohen in this context. Unlike religions such as Christianity or Islamism, the Hindu religion assumes a strong association with a national territory, in the sense that virtually all Hindus are Indians. The feeling of a bond with India in the form of spiritual reverence, of the great sacredness attributed to religious locations and the geography itself, is enough to demonstrate the significance of India's civilizational heritage in the consolidation of this Diaspora. It is equally sufficient to allow the possibility of claiming the existence of a Hindu Diaspora (Vertovec, 2000:4).

We must also point out that even though Cohen does not acknowledge the existence of religious Diasporas, he states that «religions can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness» (Cohen, 1997: 189). Other authors mention the pertinence of the religious category in consolidating the diasporic structure, as in the case of Clarke *et. al.* who include religion in their analysis of South-Asian Diasporas:

*Religion:* proportion of faiths (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain Christian); presence or activities of sects or movements within these traditions (such as

Swaminarayanis or Sai Baba devotees among Hindus, Suni or Ismaili Muslims, and moderate or pro-khalistan Sikhs); extent of organization; existence of centres of worship; prevalence of priesthood abroad (Clarke *et. al.*, 1990: 6).

Roger Ballard considers religion an essential element in the consolidation of *Desh Pardesh*, an expression he uses to describe the construction process of the social, cultural and spatial dimensions of South-Asian Diasporas in London (Ballard, 1994). Martin Baumann mentions the establishment of *Little Indias* carried out by this population, where Hinduism is not simply maintained but transformed through reinterpretations of this religion and its reification (cf. Baumann, 1998).

Religion acts as a preferential device in the consolidation of the Hindu diasporic identity and simultaneously as a means of transformation and re-creation. Likewise, gender is also a key element in any approach to diasporic terrains, which constitute a privileged context for the observation of changes in gender roles, particularly of the increasing responsibility placed on women in their community's cultural reproduction. Clear shifts in the feminine status in terms of the formal structure and public sphere, as well as in the areas of artistic practice, political involvement and religious domain have been observed within the Hindu Diaspora (cf. Rayaprol, 1997). The diasporic logic of mobility in itself influenced the reconfiguration of gender roles. Resettling in a new social and cultural environment that has different views on the role of women, combined with the media's increased impact, influences their movements inside their group, however discretely they appear to occur. Nevertheless, processes of mobility can also promote feminine and masculine labelling, given the need to preserve gender statuses (cf. Glick Shiller, 2007) and become a means to ensure the logic of family institutions. An example of this was the phenomenon that resulted from the shortage of women in the communities initially established in Trinidad, which led to disruptions of traditional family life and the group's social norms. When the arrival of women corrected this imbalance a reestablishment of family life that acted as a source of social cohesion was observed (cf. Cohen, 1997). Alongside this development, the freedom and autonomy of the few women who were previously a minority in Trinidad diminished as a consequence of male efforts to reinstall the patriarchal family system.

The internal complexity and specificities of Hindu Diasporas will surely open a variety of paths through which women experience new statuses, even if conditioned by conservative and patriarchal logics. In India and in the Diaspora, women assume

religious tasks that were previously male dominated, altering traditional gender roles albeit within a patriarchal social structure. Furthermore, the acquisition of these new tasks fosters freedom from male dominance and greater openness to socialization. Speaking about Hindu women in a Diaspora therefore implies analyzing their relation with the religious sphere, in which images of female autonomy and conservatism that are influenced by nationalist ideologies and are subtly integrated in these women's daily activities are simultaneously present.

In the context of the Hindu Diaspora, religion and gender are deeply related. Religion can potentially lead to gender equality, though in most cases it implies women's submission to men. Women from the first generation to settle in Canada developed mechanisms of asserting their identity and feminine pride by resorting to a few chosen religious traditions such as the reverence women are paid through their image as mothers or goddesses (Dhruvarajan, 1999: 47). By identifying themselves with goddesses, women gain a favourable status, thus promoting specific states of femininity. This connection between female divinities and their devotees takes place within the domestic sphere, through the *pujas*<sup>2</sup> and *vratas*<sup>3</sup>, as well as in the local temple, the Shiva Temple, through visits and spiritual practices<sup>4</sup>.

### **Reconfiguring Hinduism**

The development by women of empowerment strategies through attempting to equal men in the performance of ritual tasks is not exclusive of the Diaspora. Neither is transforming ritual practices connected to gender statuses. Nevertheless, the diasporic setting is propitious to the emergence of new ritual tasks bestowed upon women who thus gain privileges over the religious activity and ritual practice. (cf. Knott, 1986; 2000 and Rayaprol, 1997). Hinduism's Brahmanical and male predominance has relegated women to a secondary role. Even during the Vedic period, when women performed some duties in the ritual practice, these were minor when compared to the ones practiced by men. However, when access to the Vedic texts was restricted during the classical period, and their reading was only allowed to male Brahmins, women were excluded from the public religious sphere, and their action limited to the domestic space (cf. Young, 2002).

Throughout the last two centuries, in India as well as outside it, Hindu religious practices have suffered repeated changes. The notion of Hinduism, largely due to the expansion of the Diaspora, has over the last few decades been given various

interpretations and definitions that incorporate various currents and trends, most notably the expression Sanatan Dharma, used to describe Hindu religion in the Western sense of the term, which became popular among the Hindu communities established outside India. The emphasis on rationalizing creeds and practices and the progressive decrease of the so called “lower tradition”<sup>5</sup>, substituted by the “higher tradition” of the Sanskrit<sup>6</sup> and Brahman trends, and the resulting importance placed on the *bhakti*<sup>7</sup>, are the most noticeable characteristics of diasporic Hinduism.

Due to its adaptation to new social settings, diasporic Hinduism has lately been described as a shifting religion, included in a transformation process called «new Hinduism» (Eck, 2000), «American Hinduism» (Eck, 2000; Kurien, 1998), «British Hinduism» (Knott, 1986: 58) or «Ecumenical Hinduism» (Williams, 1996: 238). Some contexts provide a more clear setting for the manifestation of these changes in cult and ritual, as in the Canadian case where the role of the *guru*<sup>8</sup> has become preponderant and substituted Hinduism’s ritual and devotional diversity, simplifying it and concentrating it in the spiritual doctrines of the guru figure (cf. Coward 2000; Williams, 1996).

In the United Kingdom, the new meanings of the Hindu ritual are characterized by changes in the rhythms of *performance* and in the specialists’ roles (cf. Knott, 1986 and 1987). The demand for new responses to external pressure caused a transformation of the ritual, which acquired new forms in order to preserve religious tradition and adapt it to aspects of the new surrounding cultural context that are considered essential for the vitality of any religion (Venkatachari, 1996: 198). Similarly, the inclusion of new holydays in the religious calendar, the adaptations made to the lunar calendar – so that celebrations are adjusted to the western calendar and schedules – and the transformation of festivities to suit each community constitute the experience of religious life in the Hindu communities scattered around the world.

Most authors agree on the weight of religion in the constitution of Hindu communities on Diaspora, emphasizing the centrality of women’s roles regarding their group’s religious replication. In this respect, I will rely on Kim Knott’s perspective to establish a clear articulation between the notions of gender and religion: «In order to understand fully the nature and development of Hinduism in Britain it is essential to hear separately from women.» (Knott, 2000: 98). For Knott, the new form of British Hinduism, more open to the participation of young people and women, gives women new public responsibilities and opportunities for leadership, thus becoming essential to

listen to dissenting voices – mostly young and female – to understand the transformation process of British Hinduism and interpret it (Knott, 2000: 97 – 98)<sup>9</sup>.

Interpretations of Hinduism on Diaspora arose from the growing need to solve the doubts posed by second and third generations regarding their own religion, and led to the development of religious and cultural organizations. Kurien shows how the emergence of devotional and educational groups - *satsang* and *bala vihars* respectively – was meant to face an absence of proper cultural channels of transmission of Indian values to the young who had no direct contact with India (Kurien, 1998).

The process of institutionalizing a reinvented form of Hinduism, to which the negotiation between personal and cultural identities, of values and practices acquired in and outside the home, was aimed to build new, more structured forms of interaction. (Kurien, 1998: 44). Narayan also mentions the difficulty in reproducing tradition without investment in the community's formal education: «it is always difficult to perceive oneself clearly and to articulate one's faith and tradition to oneself, the community and to one's children especially if one has had no formal training or education in the field» (Narayan, 1996: 172).

The transformation of traditions always results from processes of adjustment to the circumstances found in the new places of settlement. In view of this, individuals find the need to remember physically and geographically distant traditions so that they can later adapt them to the new place of residence, thus creating new traditions for themselves and their descendants. This theme is thoroughly analyzed by Raymond Williams, who illustrates it through the metaphor of the sacred thread, according to which this thread symbolizes the process of religious transmission down the generations (Williams, 1996). Therefore, according to Williams, the Hindu tradition would resemble a bundle of threads – similar to the sacred thread used by Brahmans – representing the various historical configurations it has undergone throughout time. According to this perspective, the process of religious transmission is considered an essential task in Diaspora. The youngest are the target of these transmission processes, usually befalling on the second and third generations the investment on education.

The production of dialects of power and resistance that result from globalization, fostering negotiations that mobility legitimizes, reveals new and old oppressions but also opportunities to defy them through a claim to citizenship. These dialects produce new men and women who redefine territories of regional, national and individual

identity, thus producing new histories with multiple agendas (cf. Sarker and Niyogy De, 2002: 2).

Diasporic heterogeneity must not be ignored in favor of dominant patterns. Neither must member's identities, particularly women's, who are traditionally cast in stereotypical images that are built on reified models of femininity. The Diaspora should be conceived of as a space for the creation of new identities that surpass usual patterns. Women are key elements in those processes:

It is no wonder that there is no homogeneous South Asian minority or community, even though the media sometimes portrays migrants and their children in this way. Nor is there one South Asian woman's experience, though again the media may portray the South Asia woman in the Diaspora as oppressed by patriarchy, secluded and ill-educated. For every women from a conservative family who fits this description there are South Asian women who go out to work, who increasingly control their own incomes, who are themselves educated and see that their daughters are educated, who are rising high on major issues, such as working conditions, treatment of women and human rights. This mirrors, of course, the changes also occurring on the subcontinent, where women are now a force to be reckoned with in public and political life, as they have always been in the domain of the family (Brown, 2006: 174).

### **Religion and Gender: negotiating identities in Diaspora**

Women's role in Hindu cultural transmission is a constant element throughout different Diasporas (cf. Knott, 1986, 1987, 1996, 2000; Rayaprol, 1995, 1997, 2001; Pearson, 2001; Hole, 2001). The ethnographic case presented here aims to show how women accepted that task, throughout a process in which new forms of Hinduism were developed through the combination of traditional values with new elements that were introduced by the influence of the countries where these communities settle in. In the Hindu case, religion is one of the key features of cultural identity reproduction, whose transmission relies on the preservation of certain values and the elimination of others. The principles of female conduct are considered essential within this process of transmission and are often the cause of tension between generations, thus requiring negotiation. This negotiation involves some compromise on the part of parents regarding their daughters' behavior, giving them some freedom in terms of dress codes or socializing with friends. Among the more conservative families this negotiation is virtually inexistent, often resulting in acts of disobedience that can have serious consequences. Parents' expectations do not always match their daughters', marriage being a frequent source of disagreement.



Marriage within the caste or at least within the religious community is one of the principles of female conduct, just as are the tasks most obviously connected with the domestic family space. Young women's adoption of western values goes against these rules of behavior and could in theory seem to threaten the moral structure of families, and consequently the survival of the group's identity. Family structures try to control the actions of their young girls, a control the latter feel in their everyday lives within a context where there is a strong spatial concentration of Hindus, and where older women are permanently watching over the activities of young females. In cases like this, working outside the family environment of their residential area acts as an escape to community pressure. The growing arrival of Hindu women top the work market derives from the negotiation of gender roles, which involves combining family life and what is considered their main role as women with the new emerging roles – managing and ensuring the family's well being –, results in their more active involvement with the surrounding society.

Older women in their turn are responsible for maintaining order within the family group while negotiating new responsibilities in the sphere of religious activity. Their performance, considered vital for the preservation of religious practice led to the transformation of their gender status, as the acquisition of new ritual roles demonstrates. These women's knowledge of the religious texts and their importance as transmitters of such knowledge has concrete consequences, namely taking charge of organizing rituals and religious celebrations of the Hindu calendar; acting as priestesses and presiding over rituals such as the *hawan*<sup>10</sup> and *katha*<sup>11</sup>, thus defying both male exclusiveness regarding ritual performance and their own widower status, which Hinduism traditionally considers extremely unfavorable and implies the exclusion of widows from the ritual sphere<sup>12</sup>; and finally, acting as the vehicles through which goddesses manifest themselves, receiving and embodying these divinities, which communicate with the followers through these women's words and body language in very specific ritual events through the enactment of performances of possession.

In many ways, women assume the *dharmic* task of religious transmission while simultaneously firmly consolidating their power through religion. On one hand, the code of female conduct, the *stridharma* (*stri* = woman; *dharma* = duty), seeks to regulate female behavior based on the idea that the unstable, weak and impure nature of women must be kept disciplined. Accordingly, a woman must marry and become an exemplary spouse, never letting herself be controlled by her own nature, as dictated by

the *Laws of Manu*, the most ancient Hindu law code. On the other hand, religious teachings are open to negotiation and change, and may lead to new forms of resistance and opportunities of power for women.

Nevertheless, Brahmanical views on the duties of women are conveyed through the more expedient channels of diffusion such as television or the internet<sup>13</sup>. Even in a context where the impact of Hindu nationalist movements is not directly felt by the communities in question such as the Portuguese case, other means of ideological transmission contribute towards the construction of feminine stereotypes, according to which the woman is held responsible for preserving family. Where lies the proof of female power? In married women's fertility as the warranty of the group's continuity, and therein possibly lies the origin of women's subordination. In her research on a caste of untouchables from Gujarat, Rosa Maria Perez not only demonstrates that women are responsible for social perpetuation, but also that this fact is the reason for the apparent disqualification of the feminine status:

This apparent constancy in the disqualification of the female sex is undoubtedly misleading. A married woman's segregation, her excessive submissiveness, in fact seems to be a smoke-screen for the admission of a power totally concealed by society: the woman is the guarantor of social survival by her procreation. Even if the bloodline is ascribed to the son (an attitude suited to the apparent disparagement of the daughter), it is in fact the son's wife who is responsible for the continuity of the line (Perez, 2004: 100).

Women's power is actually camouflaged under this disqualification:

Therefore we will have to search for the reason why the woman is subjected to this peculiar treatment, by the society to which she belongs in her fecundity, and the reason for the power she retains through it. In other words, the outer signs of segregation, frequently interpreted as a sign of submissiveness, in reality cover up the great power which a woman has as a result of her capacity to perpetuate the family and society in general – a power camouflaged by the apparent disparagement of the woman and the great inequality in the functions ascribed to each sex (Perez, 2004: 100).

Besides their reproductive role, women must also summon divine protection for their home and family, taking vows (*vratas*) to ensure family stability. Single women wish to find a good husband, while married women pray to the gods for their husband's health and longevity, or for the birth of a son. In exchange for these requests, they take vows, make offerings and fast. Placing responsibility for the family's survival on

women encourages them to control the fate of their family and their own through negotiation with the gods (Knott, 1996: 23).

According to Kim Knott, Hindu women in the UK perpetuate vows as a way to accomplish their wishes and at the same time protect their honor, thus fulfilling their duty as women and wives. However, younger women offer resistance to the models their families expect them to follow. Their lives are filled with anxiety over marriage, and sometimes they oppose their parent's attempts to arrange their marriage (Knott, 1996: 24). Resistance to *dharma* may be punished by the family that in extreme cases expel or break contact with them. Secretly eloping with their boyfriends is usually the result of the family's inflexibility and refusal to accept any other fate for their women other than marriage inside the caste or religious community.

The duties of Hindu women in Santo António dos Cavaleiros far exceed, as we have seen, the family and domestic circles. Their *stridharma* was extended to religious performance and transmission and to the responsibility over the survival not just of the family but of the whole group. When asked the reason for having this task as their mission, the women of the *satsang*<sup>14</sup> group explain: «it is our *seva* (service). *Seva* is our *dharma* as well. We must ensure continuity». One of them, a sixty-two-year-old woman, continues:

There is a temple. It is built. If there wasn't one, we would pray at home, it is already our tradition. We have two *agiyaras*<sup>15</sup> a month. Then we also have to read the Bhagavata Purana or Shiva Purana for instance... we have to give continuity. So that our children will follow this path; So they know God, the meaning of the Bhagavata Purana, the Ramayana. We have to teach them.

The education of their descendants is their chief concern, while both the youngest and the oldest consider the transmission of Hindu principles to their children and grandchildren a crucial task, which ensures their group's perpetuation. Contact with the surrounding society is seen as a bad influence, and despite considering it important to prevent children from being discriminated against, they believe that it must be complemented with an education that will teach them their ancestor's religion and cultural references.

Ignorance of the mother tongue is the most obvious sign that children and young people are losing contact with their traditional references. Thus, young and old female groups face the task of filling the gaps in the Hindu education of the youngest. The Gujarati school, which gathers the younger women around the goal of teaching, not just

the language but the mythological references and moral principles of Hinduism as well, acts directly on this problem. The *satsang* group, in a more indirect and broad manner, ensures religious and ideological transmission to descendents and promotes the group's religious dynamic.

The task of ensuring the group's cultural and religious continuity faces difficulties in the confrontation between traditional values and those of their host countries. As Hole observes: «Removed from the familiar, cultural surroundings, women have to balance the demands and impacts of the ancestral culture as well as the impact, questions and cultural demands for acceptance that the receiving culture puts on them» (Hole, 2001: 457-8). In fact, the search for equilibrium between the surrounding society's influence and the preservation of traditional Hindu religious beliefs and practices is, as we have seen, the solution Hindu Diasporas arrive at in order to face younger generation's demands.

At the same time, the increasing responsibility women have in the religious sphere confers them autonomy of action in the process of cultural transmission, altering the meaning of the *stridharma*, extending it from the domestic to the public and communitarian spheres. By embracing the task of religious transmission and divine service (*seva*) as two of their primary duties, women gain new social and gender statuses. Older women are allowed to cross the boundaries of the traditional female sphere due to the freedom derived from their age status. Besides the freedom from behavior constraints imposed on younger women, the former are most of the time out of the reach of male control. Therefore, in the course of the years, women have developed strategies of ideological transmission, ritual practice and management that have become gradually stronger. Segregating men from this process, women have occupied their spaces, having nevertheless leaving the community's official direction, as well as its visibility in Portuguese society, to the male universe.

The existence of a single ritualist (*pujari*) resulted in women's acquirement of the male ritual roles, initially performed by those closest to them, the Brahman widows, and later in their absence, by women from other castes. Asked about its relevance in the process of cultural reproduction within their group, women asserted their importance and claimed that without them the group's identity references would disappear within the next generations. They are therefore conscious of their role's significance and the promotion of their status that resulted from strategies of adjustment of Hinduism to a Diaspora context.

We should nevertheless emphasize that the attainment of autonomy and prestigious roles within the community occurs within a patriarchal logic. Even so, women who move within a sphere of patriarchal dominance should not be looked at through the perspective of subordination implied by this hegemony. It is also necessary to frame this phenomenon within Indian society on the whole. As Kakar and Kakar mention:

To view Indian women solely through the lens of patriarchy, therefore, is to see the resemblance – in fact only superficial – to women in other patriarchal societies. But the image in such a case is always fuzzy and indistinct. Once we use the zoom lens of Indic culture (and its contemporary ferment), however, the picture becomes more focused and nuanced as unexpected details emerge (Kakar and Kakar, 2007:41).

Unexpected details mark their difference from other types of patriarchal dominance:

Thus, for example, in India, caste almost always trumps gender in the sense that a Brahmin woman will have higher status than a low-caste man. Or, to take another example, the powerful role played by mother-goddess in the Indian cultural imagination – and by mothers in the inner worlds of their sons – imbues male dominance with the emotional colours of fear, awe, longing, surrender, and so on (Kakar and Kakar, 2007:41).

When asked about the possibility of a priest remaining in the Shiva Temple, women stated that their public ritual duties would cease to exist. Each gender's traditional duties must only be altered when there is need of adjustment, and this fact becomes clear in the statement given by one of the *satsang* group's main supporters, at the age of fifty-nine:

If in the future there is a fixed priest in the Shiva Temple, it is he who will carry out the work we are doing now; because it is his work, not ours. We won't stop participating, but we will no longer recite the texts. Meanwhile we will not give up this tradition: Chaitra *mahino*<sup>16</sup>, Bhadarvo *mahino*, Janmashtami, Divali, Navratri, Purshotam *mahino*: so far we have never failed because it is our tradition. If a priest ever comes everything goes back to him.

The potential return of this female performance to a future priest therefore implies a recoiling of women's leadership and its "restoration" to male dominance. Male supremacy is nonetheless recognized by the women themselves and transmitted within a conservative and patriarchal context where mythological references serve to corroborate gender roles. Feminine stereotypes are conveyed through nationalist ideology, which albeit indirectly, influences the reproduction of female models based on the idea of

connection between womanhood and tradition. Sangeeta Ray ironizes the essentialist attitude she discovers in the fact that women defend traditional forms of Indian dressing outside of India as a form of identity perpetuation:

Generally, tradition is a hard thing to let go of, and more significant, even if man had to adapt because they were part of the ephemeral public life, women could always be counted on to affirm the continuity of tradition. Thus, if Indian women continue to wear Indian clothes while living in the United States, than the fear of “tradition” and “culture” being contaminated in India is minimal (Ray, 2000: 1-2).

The effect of Hindu nationalist movements on the Diaspora enables the sustention of traditional Hindu patterns that make women responsible for their perpetuation. At the same time, the *hindutva*<sup>17</sup> provides a universal form of Hinduism, fostering a spirit of national communion in communities of the Diaspora through which conservative values are conveyed. The mechanisms of globalization lend a strong support to the dissemination of the nationalist ideological message (cf. Burlet, 2001: 15).

The community in which this study focuses does not possess a sufficiently solid economic basis to proceed with the building of a permanent temple nor to accommodate a resident priest for the next few years, pointing to the likelihood that women’s activity in this sphere will remain a constant in the near future. We must however, take new elements that may lead to future changes into consideration, namely the effect of the ideological dissemination of nationalistic nature, the involvement of youth groups and a more intense contact with the remaining Diasporas; recent phenomena that may change Hinduism, as well as its main actors, in Portugal.

Regardless of the changes that are forthcoming, the important thing to remember is that these women’s autonomy is restricted by a set of notions that, curiously enough, they themselves specifically convey. The vows and acts of abstinence performed on behalf of the family’s well-being, as well as the transmission of mythological references in the domestic and public spheres, transform the gender roles in a context where male dominance is accepted by women themselves and where their subordinate role is inherent to their own *dharma*. The involvement of the Portuguese Hindu Diaspora with its counterparts may bring a strengthening of nationalist ideology that has so far been virtually absent from individuals’ discourse, despite being present in the endorsement of certain values such as the gender roles.

As we have seen, all these transformations are currently taking place, like for instance the regular visits of religious specialists that were practically inexistent when

this research was started, in 2000, and which have been significantly intensified. In an age of swift social change, gender roles remain subjected to the rule of patriarchal control; However, social changes in women's role are inevitable, and the reconfiguring of Hinduism, inside which women build new gender statuses, gives a significant contribution.

### **Final remarks: age status and religion**

The involvement of Hindu women in the religious sphere is a constant fact in their everyday lives, especially if we consider that most women in Santo António dos Cavaleiros don't work away from home. Nevertheless, we find two distinct positions regarding religion: those who repeat what they learnt from their family's elder without questioning its grounds, and those who do question themselves, and seek answers for their theological doubts. Female religious tradition is passed down from older to younger women in a family environment, from mother to daughter and from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law.

Older women master the religious texts, and some even control the traditionally male ritual practice, a knowhow they acquired when their age released them from the family duties. In their wake, younger women perpetuate this knowledge, particularly in the domestic religious practice. But while until recently younger women received this information and accepted it unquestioningly, today a section of young women is not content with repeating the ritual acts and sacred formulas, questioning and searching for answers that the older women cannot give them.

Some younger women resent the fact that many others still lack a critical attitude towards their religion. According to them, without criticism, they cannot deepen their knowledge of the religion they profess. Many young women, not just the older ones, ignore the reasons behind the practice of certain ritual acts and the meaning of the sacred formulas they recite. The fulfilment of the female duty does indeed imply carrying out certain religious acts, often ignoring the reason for them besides having been dictated to do so by the mother or mother-in law, just as the women before them had done. However, not all women accept this mimicry, and amongst younger women who furthered their formal education, whether in Portugal or in India, the need for an understanding of their religious principles is higher. Furthermore, this position widens the existing breach between those who had the chance to continue their studies and

establish a professional career and those who remained confined within their domestic nucleus, deprived of direct contact with the surrounding environment.

The distinction between younger and older women reflects itself in the different spheres and activities associated with each of them. Older women occupy the space of the *satsang*, while the youngest are concentrated in the Gujarati school. Likewise, the spaces and leisure moments are separate: it is common for the Gujarati school to organize parties that are related both to the Hindu calendar and the Portuguese calendar, the latter case including for instance organizing Christmas and Easter brunches and dinners, or Carnival parties. These celebrations for children and teachers do not count of the participation of older women, who consider that it is important for the younger relatives to socialize away from their controlling presence. As a sixty-two-year-old woman refer: «That is strictly for the young. If we go they cannot enjoy themselves freely». Female leisure activities are age-related and connected with women's body language, so that the youngest must control their self-expression while the elder are free from the behavioural constraints in their public actions that derive from the transformations of their gender identity. It is a period of freedom from male control in which female activity transcends the domestic universe extending outdoors and causing a shift in the gender role.

Between the beginning of the reproductive cycle until the end of their procreative powers, women are subjected to strict behavioural rules that restrict their sexuality. Freed from the constraints associated with their reproductive phase, a new period in their life begins in which control over their sexuality has ceased to be a concern and a transformation of their gender identity and corresponding public and private behaviour takes place. The effect of ageing on gender definition is linked to the transformations the body goes through in the course of a lifetime. According to Lamb, exploring gender issues necessarily implies understanding how women interpret, resist and criticize dominant gender ideologies in their society, while at the same time analyzing conceptions regarding physical transformations, identities and forms of power and subordination throughout life (Lamb, 2000: 198).

Looking at gender relations from the perspective of women's experience of their roles in the different stages of life allows us to conclude, according to Perez's thesis (2004), that female segregation serves to camouflage and control their power. The power of ensuring the group's continuity – which according to the author resides in the exclusively female ability to guarantee social survival – assumes new forms in



Diaspora. In this context, it surpasses the merely reproductive task, and women have also made it their goal to ensure the perpetuation of the group's cultural references through their descent.

The foreseeable estrangement of the community's younger members from traditional reference values once again places the task of ensuring the group's perpetuation – not just physical, but cultural and religious<sup>18</sup> as well –, in the hands of the mothers and grandmothers. The concern with their descent and the survival of Hinduism's traditional values are the driving force behind their actions, in the absence of which this community's survival would be impossible: such is the female power. It has become public besides private, and it is proof of women's importance for Hinduism's perpetuation and dynamics of adjustment. The terms perpetuation and adjustment point to the confluence between strategies designed to preserve conservative ideologies – in which gender identities are included –, and the transformation of gender roles in the public sphere. In this sense, women's acquirement of autonomy emerges in a context where they themselves uphold conservative discourses on womanhood.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Socio-cosmic order or moral duty the individual must comply to in order to respect his/her individual and social condition.

<sup>2</sup> Devotional cult to this divinity.

<sup>3</sup> Vows.

<sup>4</sup> The task of feeding the goddesses, preparing the foods offered to them, is one of the various features that are typical of the relationship between women and female divinities.

<sup>5</sup> The terms "high tradition" and "low tradition" were made popular by the Chicago school, particularly by Robert Redfield and Milton Singer (1954) to designate in the first case a set of canonical texts, religious practices and ritual representatives associated with the historical past of a particular group, and in the second case, a group of "low" local religious traditions expressed by local dialects, which differ from the unified body of the "high traditions" of Hindu Sanskrit. Christopher Fuller emphasizes the need to not separate these two levels of Hinduism, calling our attention to their complementary nature: «It is now generally accepted that the religion is not split into two (or more) separate strata, each with its own body of distinctive beliefs and practices. In fairness to Srinivas, Redfield, and Singer, it must be said that they always insisted that the higher and lower strata are interconnected» (Fuller, 2004: 26).

<sup>6</sup> The process of Sanskritization was first formulated by M.N. Srinivas (1956), in reference to the strategies of social mobility employed by certain castes, which implied the adoption of rituals and religious practices of the dominating castes in local hierarchical systems.

<sup>7</sup> *Bhakti* means devotion and expresses the relationship between the devotee and a particular deity. This current was revealed in the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna, the central character of this odyssey, expresses each individual's need to fulfill their *dharma*, while at the same time he teaches the secret of the encounter with the divine by assuming a universal form. This message encourages harmony between the *bhakti* and the *dharma*. The utmost example of devotion towards the deity is fulfilling the *dharma*, however difficult or painful it turns out to be.

<sup>8</sup> The Sanskrit term to designate the spiritual master, whose task is to guide the disciple through his teachings and religious knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> In the process of interpreting Hinduism, Kurien, regarding the reading and discussion of the Hindu religious texts, highlights women's interpretation of the female characters through a feminist perspective which heightens their power (Kurien, 1998: 54).

<sup>10</sup> The cult of fire through a Vedic ritual

<sup>11</sup> A history with a moral lesson usually implying a ritual that includes making offerings to the deities.

<sup>12</sup> The female role in India that finds an approximate Portuguese counterpart is that of «temple attendants» or «pujarini» (cf. Marglin, 1985: 54) in certain tasks where we register the participation of post-menopausal widows aiding in the temples religious duties, which they are allowed to do because, despite their widowhood, their advanced age confers them a status of purity. Such tasks are usually minor duties

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and never imply – similarly to what we observe in Portugal -, presiding over rituals that require the presence of a male priest.

<sup>13</sup> Television shows such as the serial on the Ramayana epic convey a conservative image of women of which Sita is the perfect model.

<sup>14</sup> Group of women aged over 50 who meet to carry out devotional gatherings (*satsang*), and the main focus of my research.

<sup>15</sup> Also called *ekadashi*, the eleventh day of each lunar phase.

<sup>16</sup> Means month in Gujarati.

<sup>17</sup> This term expresses the Hindu essence, the link between Hindu religious heritage and India's national identity. This notion finds its foremost expression in the context of Indian political and religious nationalism connected with the ideological structure of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). The movement known as *hindutva* intervenes through campaigns that trigger feelings of Hindu revivalism, proclaiming this religious source as the foundation of Indian nationalism. Besides their action in Indian Territory, this movement is active in most transnational Hindu communities.

<sup>18</sup> Being young in Diaspora in many cases implies searching for stable points of reference, in a context where religion emerges as a national language (Shukla, 2005: 233). As Shukla points out, some young people reject the flexibility of cosmopolitan identity and try to organize themselves around the identification with the cultural values of the subcontinent, although not those necessarily associated with nationalist movements. However, Shukla points out that: «In all these cases, movements in the subcontinent reach out to their wayward sons, even if they are in a new generation and have a relatively abstracted relationship to the nation (Shukla, 2005: 233) ».