

The Festival of *Deepavali* as Marks of Tradition and Identity for Working, Married Hindu Women: Continuity and Change

Sheila Chirkut
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

As a minority group in South Africa, Indians, face all kinds of challenges, one of them being identity: Are we Indians or South African Indians? Apart from a South African identity, our "Indianness" operates at the level of culture and combines identity patterns such as dress, language, food, religion, culture, music and dance, some of which are fast disappearing. Hindu women are traditionally perceived as "cultural custodians" and are faced with the challenge to embrace other cultures, while at the same time, maintain their Hindu identity. This paper attempts to show how working, married women in the Stanger area of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, choose Hindu festivals - with particular reference to the major festival of *Deepavali* - to keep alive the Hindu value system, culture and tradition and to maintain their cultural identity.

Introduction

Woven into South Africa's diverse and rich cultural fabric, Hindus' maintain and express their own set of beliefs, customs and traditions in the form of festivals such as *Deepavali* (festival of lights). My attention in this paper is focused on the awareness of Hindu working, married women and how they represent themselves during the major Hindu festival of *Deepavali* to maintain their cultural identity. Cultural identity in this sense encompasses religion, culture and traditions. My close contact with Hindu women in the Stanger area revealed that the

identity of “Indianness” has been progressively built in by including many identity patterns relating to dress, language, food, religion, culture, music and dance which are fast disappearing. This maybe so because of lack of documentation and also because indigenous knowledge has been orally transmitted from generation to generation. Interaction of Hindus with people of other cultures has resulted in changes and modifications of tradition.

Hindu women are traditionally perceived as “cultural custodians” and are thus faced with the challenge to maintain their Hindu identity. Tradition and culture has undergone transformation due to social, political and economic forces (Kuppusami, 1983). My hypothesis is that although Hindu women maybe Western in their outlook, many select religio-cultural festivals such as *Deepavali* as a means of constructing a distinctly Hindu, Indian identity. Numerous scholars (Duley and Edwards, 1986; Mohanlal, 1998; Mukhopadhyay, 1995; Sweetman, 1995) claim that Hindu religion and culture are intertwined, interdependent and inseparable. Mukhopadhyay (1995) further explains that assumptions about culture and gender are rooted in religious concerns and focus on cultural practices such as religio-cultural functions, which reinforce the power of men by appealing to tradition.

The Arrival of Indians to South Africa

Many of the colonial era immigrants, who arrived from 1860 onwards, learnt orally of legends, folklore and epics from their forebears. This they passed on to their children in the same oral tradition (Chirkut, 1993). Coming from small villages, they brought with them to the South African Diaspora, in their memories, knowledge of their religio-cultural practices and festivals that prevailed in their villages. The indentured Indians were a highly heterogeneous population. The majority of them were either Hindi-speaking Hindus from the Northern Provinces of India who emigrated through the port of Calcutta, Tamil-speakers from South India, or Telugu-speaking Hindus from the Southern Provinces who came by way of Madras (Chirkut, 1993). From 1875 onwards, a second stream of immigrants, the so-called “Passenger Indians” or traders followed the indentured labourers. The “Passenger Indians” were predominantly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims, Gujarati being the language spoken by Gujaratis as well as Muslims who came from Bombay and Surat in Western India, and Urdu-speakers (language mainly spoken by Muslims with many Persian words).

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This section presents data from participant observation and in-depth interviews with Hindu working, married women in the Stanger area on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa that has a predominantly Indian population. I

chose to base my research in Stanger because, firstly, it's where I reside which made it easier for me to work in a much smaller fieldwork area and thus saved time, labour and expense. Secondly, my close contact with the community revealed that almost all the Hindus are descendents of the indentured labourers (Hindis, Tamils and Telugus) and the voluntary "Passenger" Indians (Gujaratis). Generation is a major factor in continuity and change with regards to Hindu cultural activities in the South African context. All the Hindi, Tamil and Telugu interviewees were of third, fourth and fifth generation while the Gujarati women were of second and third generation.

Twenty-four women, in the age range of twenty five to sixty years (equally represented) from the different linguistic groups (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Gujarati) in the research made up a purposeful sample. They were particularly selected for inclusion in the study on the basis of accessibility and their willingness to respond. Of the twenty four interviewees, only one had grade 10 level of education, seven had matriculation level of education and sixteen of the interviewees had some form of tertiary education. Over the years, many Hindu women in South Africa have progressed educationally, professionally, socially and economically through hard work and perseverance despite years of oppression and discrimination during the apartheid era with particular reference to the Stanger area. Thus the interviewees are currently in various fields of employment such as education, law, commerce and medicine, with some participants being self-employed. Through their narratives they provided detailed reflections of their religious beliefs and the significance of the *Deepavali* festival in relation to their Hindu identity.

In any empirical research, the interviewees selected should be representative of the total population as possible of the concerned society. Data collected through in-depth interviews can be representative of the greater population of Hindu women in the South African Diaspora so that conclusions can be drawn from that population (Rudestam and Newton, 1992). The interviews that consisted of open-ended questions were conducted in English and took approximately one, to one and a half hours were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Analysis and interpretations were done to major themes and patterns in the study. I procured first-hand information through participant observation of the *Deepavali* celebration at community level. This method enabled me to establish the religio-cultural attitudes and activities of the community towards the festival. The observable data was then reflected upon to ensure correctness and incorporated into the analysis.

Weedon (1987) suggests that poststructuralist theory provides a suitable framework to understand and analyse the impact of culture on the cultural identity of Hindu married women and also offers mechanisms for understanding gender, gender roles and power relations which has informed my understanding of the *Deepavali* festival and its impact on the cultural identity of Hindu women. Hindu

women having grown up within a particular system of meanings and values such as the Hindu patriarchal system, which may well be contradictory, may find themselves resisting alternatives. Poststructuralism outlines that as one moves out of familiar circles, through education or politics for example, they can be exposed to ways of constituting the meanings of their experiences. Thus in this way through the process of discovery it can lead to a positive change in social practices such as during the festival of *Deepavali*.

***Deepavali*: Tradition and Ritual**

The Hindu indentured labourers who came to South Africa, listened to the stories from the great epics and classics, told and retold by their forebears, which were also associated with their festivals (Chirkut, 1993). They brought with them traditions, legends and stories specific to those parts from whence they came. It is therefore appropriate to discuss how *Deepavali* was initially celebrated within the context of each linguistic group with its regional variants in rituals and traditions as compared to the present. The characteristics of *Deepavali* are more or less applicable to its celebration in India. However, even conservative Hindus do not observe *Deepavali* in its entirety in the present period in this country. Although almost all Hindus celebrate *Deepavali* regardless of their linguistic background, there are regional variants in actual rituals and practices.

Of all the festivals, *Deepavali* is said to be the most widely celebrated by Hindus throughout the world and involves elaborate preparations. *Deepavali* is a Sanskrit word, *Deepa*, meaning "light" and *Aval*, meaning "a row". Thus *Deepavali* translates as a "row of lights" and, indeed, illumination forms the basis of its observance. It has been suggested that the impact of various factors within the South African context such as multiculturalism, education, the general social milieu and the multi-racial composition of our population has had an effect on Hindus modifying their rituals and traditions in the observance of *Deepavali*.

Although it is unclear, the origin of *Deepavali* can be traced back to ancient India, when it was probably an important harvest festival (Vedalankar, 1978; Marchant, 1996). But as the Hindu religion developed, various mythological stories and explanations were attributed to the festival to give it a religious sanction. Today, this historical explanation is all but lost among the many legends and folklore linked with the origin of the festival. While drawing on the historical background of *Deepavali* traditions in India, I shall discuss the story of *Deepavali* in the South African context as well. *Deepavali* falls on the night of the *amavasya* (darkest night) in the month of *Kartika* (October or November) according to the Hindu calendar when the nights are cold, long and dark (in India). The celebrations are spread over five days in India and each day has a significance related to a number of legends and beliefs. However, the second and third days are of greater importance in the South African context (Vedalankar, 1978).

Deepavali is celebrated for various reasons all over India because different deities or personalities are honoured in different areas. According to Ganeri (1997) and Marchant (1996), the first day of *Deepavali* is called *Dhanteras* which falls on the 13th day of the Kartika month. The word *Dhan* means "wealth". As such, this day is of great importance for the mercantile Gujarati community of western India. Houses and business premises are cleaned and entrances are made colourful with attractive traditional designs called *rangoli* to welcome the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Lakshmi. Lamps are kept burning all through the night. Devotion and acts of ritual worship, *puja*, is performed in the evening when *divas* or *diyas* (small clay lamps used mainly during *Deepavali*) are lit. Gujaratis open new account books and present them to Goddess Lakshmi and they also leave gifts of money and jewellery on the altar for her.

The second day of *Deepavali* is called *Narak Chaturdasi*, which falls on the 14th day of the month of *Kartika*. As the story goes, in certain parts of India, especially in the south, the occasion is attributed to the destruction of the demon, Narakasura. It is believed that on this day, Lord Krishna (8th incarnation of God Vishnu) killed this tyrannical demon king (Vedalankar, 1978). Kuppusami (1982) gives details of the exploits of Narakasura, which represents him as a fearful demon who kidnapped a large number of maidens and had them imprisoned in a semi-dark dungeon. It is believed that God came in the form of Krishna, killed the demon king and freed the maidens to the inexpressible joy of their parents. Thousands of *divas* were lit to express the great deliverance. Kuppusami (1982) further explains that the demon is possibly the south west monsoons which cause havoc by flooding a good part of India and therefore, *Deepavali* which comes at the end of the monsoon, was celebrated in ancient India to express the joyous relief from the tyranny of the deluge.

Traditionally the second day of *Deepavali* is of significance to the Tamil and Telugu communities in South Africa. While some of the south Indian interviewees knew the story of the destruction of Narakasura, they were more familiar with the association of *Deepavali* with the story of Lord Rama (7th incarnation of God Vishnu) in the great Hindu epic, *Ramayana*. With the result that the South Indian community celebrates *Deepavali* a day earlier than the north Indians because it is believed that Lord Rama and his wife Sita, when returning from Lanka (present Sri Lanka), passed through south India first. But in South Africa all Hindus celebrate *Deepavali* on one day. Another striking feature is that many Tamils and Telugus still follow the tradition of purifying themselves on *Deepavali* morning with an oil bath using three different kinds of oil. However, a careful observation of the general pattern of rituals and celebrations amongst the Tamils and Telugus reveals an interesting structure. Based on the oral information from the interviewees and observations, it is evident that due to the cultural contact between the Tamils and Telugus, a certain amount of cultural fusion has taken place between these two south Indian communities. The impact of this blending

is evident in the similarities between their rituals.

An interesting ritual is performed by the Hindi-speaking community, both in South Africa and in India on the night before *Deepavali* (second night). An old clay lamp is lit and placed on a refuse heap some distance away from the home. Kuppusami (1983) points out that the Hindi-speaking community in South Africa place an old lamp outside in honour of Yama (the god of death) who will not visit the household. But on the contrary, Marchant (1996) offers another version of this belief in India. She says that on the evening before *Deepavali*, one lamp is lit to welcome Yama as *Deepavali* is the only time when he is honoured and the spirits of the dead can return to earth. It is believed that the single lamp will help the souls of the dead to find their former earthly homes. However, irrespective of what the myths and legends are, the one lamp is always lit in honour of Yama except if someone in the family, or dear to the family, has died in the course of the previous year.

Another important and very popular origin of *Deepavali* is professed by the Hindi-speakers of north India who worship Lord Vishnu as the supreme deity, a great Hindu deity believed to be the "Preserver". This falls on the third day of the celebrations. Legends about Vishnu tell how he incarnated in a human form whenever there was chaos on earth to bring about righteousness. Marchant (1996) explains this favourite *Deepavali* story about Vishnu taken from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Rama was the eldest son of a king in north India but his step-mother wanted her son to become king instead, so she exiled Rama into the forest for fourteen years. One day a demon king called Ravana kidnapped Rama's wife, Sita. In order to rescue his wife, Rama killed Ravana. By then Rama's exile was over and, to welcome him, people lit clay lamps along the roads and windows. It is believed that Rama returned to Ayodhya (his kingdom in north India) on *amavasya* night. This custom and tradition of lighting *divas* has continued since then. Kuppusami (1982) believes that Rama's glorious reign as king subsequently marked the removal of the spiritual darkness from the world, which gave way to light.

The third day of *Deepavali* is the most important day for Lakshmi *pūja* and is devoted to the propitiation of the goddess by all Hindus. Despite the fact that this day falls on *amavasya*, the day is regarded as most auspicious. It is believed that when Lakshmi was born from the ocean, abundant treasures emerged from the waters. Hindus leave all the doors and windows open and make sure there are shining lights at every door and window so that Lakshmi can easily find them. This self-enlightenment is expressed through the twinkling *divas* that illuminate the homes of the wealthy and the poor. When the sun sets and the ceremonial worship completed, sweetmeats are offered to the goddess. Gifts are exchanged, men, women and children dress in new clothes, some go to temples and others visit friends and family. To the Hindi community in South Africa, *Deepavali* is both a sacred, devotional act to Lakshmi and symbolic of the return

of Rama and Sita from their exile. Based on the narratives of the interviewees, while *Lakshmi puja* was common to all the interviewees in the study, it was more special to the Hindi and Gujarati interviewees. On the basis of my observations, the study points out that almost all Hindus in South Africa celebrate *Deepavali*.

The fourth day of *Deepavali* is *Govardhan puja* (performed mostly in north India), which is associated with Lord Krishna. As Marchant (1996) recounts, the people of Gokul, the place where it is believed that Krishna spent most of his time, used to celebrate a festival in honour of Lord Indra, the god of rain. However, Krishna discouraged this practice and Indra, in great anger, sent a deluge to submerge Gokul. But Krishna saved Gokul by lifting up the Govardhan Mountain and holding it over the people as an umbrella. Today, Hindus in north India build cow dung hillocks, decorate them with flowers and worship them.

It is imperative to note that only a few of the interviewees knew the legend of the *Govardhan puja*. Although a north Indian tradition, *Govardhan puja* was not observed by the north Indians in Stanger. One of my interviewees suggested that perhaps one reason why it was not observed was that our forefathers did not see it as important to perpetuate this tradition because of time and their socio-economic status. However, an interesting finding identified during the in-depth interview was that *Govardhan puja* was observed by only one of the women in the study who is a Hare Krishna devotee. She explained that she did not observe the *Govardhan puja* at home but attended the function at the Hare Krishna temple in Durban. She pointed out that the *puja* was not observed in the traditional manner but a cake in the form of the Govardhan Mountain is worshipped and later eaten as *prasadam* (consecrated food offered to Krishna). The Hare Krishna Movement observes all festivals associated with Lord Krishna. The day after *Deepavali* (fourth day) is of much significance to the Gujaratis for whom the new year begins and is marked with prayer and rejoicing.

The fifth and final day of the *Deepavali* festival is known as *Bhaiya Duj*. As the legend goes, Yama, visited his sister, Yami on this day. She put the auspicious *tilak* (red dot) on Yama's forehead, garlanded him, fed him special dishes and they enjoyed themselves to their hearts content (Marchant, 1996). While parting, the siblings exchanged gifts. Since then, this day is observed as a symbol of love between brothers and sisters. To almost all the interviewees, the fifth day story of *Bhaiya Duj* was unknown. This finding prompts me to state that, given the specific socio-economic situation of Hindu immigrants, it is quite understandable why this tradition was not perpetuated or for the simple reason that perhaps they found it irrelevant. Thus, it is necessary to mention that according to documentation and observation, *Deepavali* is observed over five days in India, while in South Africa Tamils and Telugus observe it for one day, Hindis observe it over two days and Gujaratis over three days.

There are many myths and legends explaining the origins of *Deepavali* and many share common elements such as the triumph of good over evil, new begin-

nings and prosperity. The principal characteristic of *Deepavali* is the lighting of clay lamps. Various kinds of sweetmeats are prepared and exchanged with friends and family. Hindus believe that gifts of sweets encourage people to think sweet things about them. A variety of vegetarian food is prepared as most Hindus are vegetarian on this day. For *Deepavali*, homes and yards are cleaned and decorated. In many homes brightly coloured designs called *rangoli* are created at the entrance. The festival heralds joy and merriment for children and adults, men and women, and the rich and the poor when enmities are forgotten; family and friends meet and enjoy the feeling of closeness brought about by the celebrations.

Traditions and Rituals in Transition

The themes of *Deepavali* convey what Hindus believe to be important in religion and culture. Moreover, Hinduism centres on the worship of God by prayer and by celebrating festivals such as *Deepavali*. The interviewees responded to the question on some of the similarities between *Deepavali* as observed in the past and how it is celebrated presently. All the women in the study share similar perceptions about the festival, as expressed by Interviewee A:

Deepavali brings back good memories. I still remember how we celebrated *Deepavali* when I was a little girl. Although it is not the same anymore, I am still very particular in maintaining certain traditions. I make sure that I light the one lamp, the evening before *Deepavali*. I am also particular about the rituals when preparing the prayer place, cleaning and dressing the images of the Gods and praying together as a family. All these are important to me as a Hindu married woman for my identity, as to who I am and where I come from.

Discussing the basic rituals, Interviewee B explains:

Deepavali celebrations are not the same anymore like how it used to be in the past. The festivities are no more spread over two to three days but it is for one day only. When doing my *Deepavali* prayer, I make sure that I follow the basic rituals. I clean, dress and anoint all the idols in my shrine and pray together with my family, with offerings of milk, fruit and sweetmeats to the deities.

The observations of the interviewees point out that *Deepavali* celebrations do not go on for three days but are confined to just one day. All the Hindi women

in the study explained that the central, common practice is the lighting of the one clay lamp in the evening before *Deepavali*. Marchant (1996:13) maintains that this is to welcome Yama, the god of death, as *Deepavali* is the only time when Yama is honoured and with accorded respect.

The study reveals that observing the basic rituals and traditions during *Deepavali* has a unique influence on the perceived identity of Hindu women in the Stanger area. The women in the study believe that cleaning their immediate environment and decorating the entrance of their homes with *rangoli* will welcome the gods and bring good fortune. Praying together with the family helps to promote feelings of unity and instils a sense of security and belonging. These women's experiences show that they prioritise, and take pride in, following the basic rituals and traditions as they see it as a commitment towards their culture, thus maintaining their group identity and gendered status. I believe that the fear of loss of identity compels Hindu women to strive for the preservation of their cultural identity. Similar findings revealed in previous studies by Metha (1970) and Mohanlal (1998) support the present findings where Hindus identify themselves by observing rituals and traditions during festivals to retain their cultural identity, revive Hindu culture and keep it alive.

Because of Hindu women's socialisation, the women in the study believe that this is how their forefathers institutionalised gender roles. Feminist poststructuralism offers insight into understanding how these women see their gender roles and make use of festivals as a way of maintaining their cultural identity. It also offers a useful framework for understanding gender roles and power relations in the family and how they identify themselves through the celebration of festivals within their various role frameworks. Feminist poststructuralism is a useful theoretical tool in that it exposes strategies employed by men to sustain male hegemony, as hegemonic relations in the families of the interviewees are representative of what prevails in the majority of Hindu families. The study revealed that the practice of rituals and traditions are gendered with Hindu women being the primary transmitters of culture and religion which, in turn, leads to greater participation by them in festivals as an essential component of their cultural identity. The majority of the interviewees came from families where patriarchy is both institutionalised and internalised.

A striking similarity amongst all the interviewees that emerged from the study was the observance of Lakshmi *puja* for *Deepavali*. Apart from the myths and legends pertaining to the festival, the interviewees cited Lakshmi *puja* as being of paramount significance. However, there are variations in the rituals and worship patterns by the different linguistic groups. Only two of the Gujarati interviewees observed Lakshmi *puja* on the first day, which is known as *Dhanteras*. One of the interviewees who came from a business background described the process: a few coins are dotted with *kum kum* (vermillion powder used in worship), together with some gold jewellery, rice and flower petals are offered to the

goddess Lakshmi, and left at the shrine for three days. After three days have passed, the money is put away until the following year to be used in prayer and the jewellery is worn. On this day, *divas* are lit and placed at the entrance of the house both at the front and back doors to welcome Lakshmi.

On the third day of *Deepavali* which is celebrated by the Stanger community as *Deepavali* Day, all the Hindi interviewees perform Lakshmi *puja* in the evening with milk, fruit and sweetmeats. Gifts of clothing and money are left on the altar for the goddess. The Tamils and Telugus also worship Lakshmi on this day but with no elaborate rituals, and make simple offerings of fruit or sweetmeats. While Lakshmi *puja* is common to all linguistic groups among the Hindus, one finds that the Gujaratis and Hindis worship her more fervently during *Deepavali*. The findings revealed that Tamils and Telugus place a greater emphasis on Lakshmi day, which is observed sometime in the month of August.

The setting off of fireworks in the evening of the festival is one important common practice that has survived amongst all Hindus with minimal change. The change is that its variety and effects have become technologically advanced. From a gender perspective, the tasks of purchasing, organising and the displaying of fireworks are allocated to the men and boys in the family. The handling of fireworks by males in the family suggests that females are the weaker sex and reinforces the assumption that men are braver than women. Clearly, tradition and culture is used to legitimise gender roles and stress the difference between the biological make-up of men and women.

Changes in Cultural Practices

Although many cultural norms and traditions continue to be honoured, the study reveals that certain practices in the celebration of *Deepavali* are rapidly changing. Below are some of the responses of interviewees as well as rationale for modifying and changing some of their cultural practices when observing the festivals. One significant change in the celebration of *Deepavali*, as mentioned earlier, is that the festivities are now confined to one day only. As *Deepavali* is not a national holiday in South Africa as it is in India, Interviewee C is content with celebrating the festival for only one day:

It is a good idea that all Hindus celebrate *Deepavali* on one day only. We are given one day away from work for *Deepavali*. I feel one day is sufficient for the basic prayers and the festivities. We are not living in India and times have changed now. Festivals, particularly *Deepavali* can be quite expensive to celebrate. The elaborate preparations for rituals, clothing, food and fireworks does cost a lot of money.

Hindus in their workplaces, schools and universities are allocated one day's leave of absence to celebrate *Deepavali*. Being working wives and mothers, and living in a multicultural environment, the interviewees agreed that it was impractical to celebrate *Deepavali* for more than a day, as time was one of the main constraints. Another reason cited by the interviewees for the celebration of *Deepavali* to be confined to one day was that of finance. Exploring the reasons as to why *Deepavali* is celebrated on one day only, the findings revealed that some of the interviewees did not know much about the myths, legends and beliefs (though they knew the most important ones) related to *Deepavali*. They were not aware that in India and in some places in the Diaspora, it is celebrated for five continuous days that are linked to a number of related stories, myths and legends. This can be understood against the background of the historical context of the arrival of Hindus from India. Most of the immigrant Hindus came with their memories filled with what had been told to them by their parents and grandparents about rituals, ceremonies and festivals. Due to the socio-economic status of South Africans, as a result of government policy, immigrant Hindus could not adequately sustain religio-cultural ties with India. This led to their ignorance of religio-cultural reforms at the time of their immigration that was at the beginning of the neo-Hindu period (Prabhakaran, 1994). The indentured Hindus did not have the socio-economic resources nor the time to celebrate their religio-cultural festivals and to adhere to all the rituals and practices on a large scale. However, this does not mean that Hindus who wanted to follow the rituals and traditions for two or three days (with particular reference to the Hindus and Gujaratis) could not do so.

All the interviewees said that they endeavoured to maintain the essential rituals on the one day, which they regarded as more important than engaging in festivities over a number of days. Taking into consideration the level of education amongst the interviewees (the lowest level of education was grade ten while many had tertiary level), all the women were knowledgeable and respectful of their religious traditions, but also displayed confidence in rejecting what they felt was outdated and irrelevant. What is significant is that they had the desire to perform the appropriate rituals and prayers at this auspicious time. Although many of the interviewees do not follow the same rigour of the homes they came from, due to their Western education, they are not emotionally alienated from Hindu values and way of life in celebrating festivals that give them their cultural identity.

Deepavali Cuisine

Many Hindus prepare vast amounts of food as visitors are expected throughout the festival. The most important *Deepavali* fare is sweetmeats that are always served on auspicious or festive occasions such as religio-cultural festivals. Ac-

ording to the interviewees, changes and modifications have been brought about in the making of sweetmeats as Interviewee D recalls:

When I was at school, the making of sweetmeats for *Deepavali* was a big occasion. My mum, aunts and cousins usually got together to start making sweetmeats a week or two before *Deepavali*. There was a lot of excitement while learning and at the same time making the sweetmeats. Now I have cut down on making too much sweetmeats as I do not have the time. However, I do get some assistance though minimal, from my husband especially in preparing the ingredients. I also buy some to supplement the quantity I make.

Many of the interviewees (sixteen out of the twenty four) said that because they were working, they did not have the time to make all their sweetmeats and had to buy some if required. However, eight of the interviewees did try to find time to make all their sweetmeats a week ahead and enjoyed it to some extent. Incidentally, these were the older women in the age group of forty-five to fifty-five years. Sweetmeat making was, in the past, seen as something that contributed to the atmosphere and feeling of the auspicious day. The narratives and experiences in the above passage, and of many of the other women in the study, indicate that the traditional practice of sweetmeat making for *Deepavali* is changing. These findings are new in contrast to previous practices and can be attributed to the nuclear family. The majority of Hindu women are now working and living in nuclear families and have very little time to make their sweetmeats as it entails a lot of work and is very time consuming. However, four of the interviewees indicated that they did get some assistance from their husbands, though minimal. This change can be seen as one of gender role transformation to some extent. Nowadays, many housewives make varieties of sweetmeats at home and some supplement the family income by making and selling sweetmeats. Sweetmeat making is a highly specialised skill, and an interesting new phenomenon is that in some higher socio-economic households, sweetmeat making has become competitive and is a mark of status.

Another change is that traditionally, only vegetarian ingredients are used to make sweetmeats. Interviewees revealed that many Hindu women have begun to replace traditional sweetmeats with cakes and biscuits which contain eggs. Four of the interviewees (Tamil and Telugu speaking) also admitted that they resort to this practice. One the interviewees indicated, as a departure from sweetmeats, that the latest trend in *Deepavali* gifts is chocolates. Bhargava (2004) points out that speciality chocolates in the shape of *Deepavali*-related symbols, filled with traditional sweetmeat mixtures is not new. Most Indians, particularly those living in the West, have been giving chocolates at *Deepavali* for some time and the trend is now fast

growing in South Africa as well. Hence, we see a significant change in chocolates complementing traditional sweetmeats which, to some extent, reduces the traditional identity of women in the field of cuisine. The cultural practice of the distribution of sweetmeats to family and friends as a gesture of goodwill is also waning. However, the majority of the interviewees did distribute some sweetmeats to close family and friends but not as much as in the past.

The study revealed that it is primarily women who are involved in preparing for *Deepavali* and the making of sweetmeats. These women have little or no opportunity to rest or relax because of the multiplicity of their roles in comparison to men.² Performance of domestic chores such as cooking (in this case sweetmeat making) is considered to be traditionally feminine. Despite daily domestic chores, many of the working women interviewed expressed some degree of satisfaction with the task of making sweetmeats. Findings show that many of the interviewees aspired to sustain and adhered to distinct gender roles as a way of maintaining their Hindu, cultural identity.

Absence of the Joint Family System

One of the reasons cited by the interviewees for the changes and modifications of cultural practices in the observance of *Deepavali* is the absence of the joint family system. Reflecting on the absence of the extended family, Interviewee E comments:

We were familiar with stories from the epics because before *Deepavali* or any other festival for that matter, my grandmother would tell us why the festival was celebrated. I remember her telling the stories of Rama and Sita, Lord Krishna, why we pray to Goddess Lakshmi and many other legends of the mythological past. It was very interesting as it made *Deepavali* more meaningful. Now we are living in nuclear families. I wonder how much of the traditions and customs will be carried forth by our children?

Including Interviewee E, eighteen out of the twenty-four interviewees had grown up within an extended family environment. Whilst some did not live in the same house as their extended relatives, they kept in close contact with them and remained part of a closely-knit family unit. Older members of the extended family (especially the women) talked of the meanings of rituals and recounted the myths so that everyone was aware why the day was sacred. What was apparent in the narratives of the older women (fifty to sixty years of age), in particular, was that during their childhood, the female members in the extended family created the *Deepavali* atmosphere. We see a greater involvement of women in

their role as guardians of cultural traditions in Hindu families, Rayaprol's, (2000) findings throw some light on the contention that it is the women in Hindu families who are entrusted with the task of passing on the cultural value system to the next generation. Many of the women in the study also indicated that *Deepavali* was not the same as it used to be when it was celebrated together in the joint family system. Against the background of these new findings, my interpretation is that this atmosphere is lacking in homes of nuclear families where there is neither the same contact with relatives, nor the presence of older family members. The interviewees felt that more than just one or two people are needed to foster the kind of persuasion and influence needed to create the traditional atmosphere. Some of the interviewees who came from extended families learnt the rituals and prayers through observation, as Interviewee F recollects:

Through observing my mother and grandmother, I not only learnt the rituals, but gained knowledge of the practice and also got a feeling for them which I never lost. The knowledge I gained did not mean classical or metaphysical concepts of Hinduism but just expressions of the way elders worshipped the Gods and Goddesses.

The above interviewee's experiences indicate that knowledge of the rituals alone is not enough to integrate them into a way of life. Those interviewees who had acquired knowledge about traditional rituals by emulation supported this view. However, some of the interviewees said that in spite of knowing the significance of many of the rituals, it was no longer possible to incorporate them into the daily routine of their lives as working women because they found that some of the *Deepavali* rituals practised in the past were not applicable in the present day. These rituals included, amongst others, the oil bath which is no longer practised by many Hindus of south Indian origin as well as lighting less clay lamps and more wax lamps. Here I see the nuclear basis of the family as isolating and not conducive to the traditional discipline. This isolation can be aggravated if one is living in a multicultural society. The above finding, which is new to previous research, will contribute to the body of literature in the South African context.

Deepavali Attire

The narratives of many of the interviewees reveals that the daily dress code for working Hindu women is generally Western but the majority still wear the traditional attire of Hindu women: the *sari* or *salwaar kameej*³, especially for religious-cultural functions such as *Deepavali*. Interviewee G shares her experience regarding traditional dressing for the festival:

I believe dressing in traditional clothes for *Deepavali*. I look forward to shopping for *Deepavali* clothes for myself and for my daughters and it is always Eastern outfits. *Deepavali* is a special occasion when we women can express our cultural identity in the true sense and one way of doing this is by wearing traditional clothes that are very symbolic. We wear Western clothes every day and as a mark of respect for our religion and culture, I believe in wearing a *sari*, especially to perform the rituals and prayers.

The above interviewee's views, which were shared by all the interviewees, reveal that working Hindu married women are generally loyal to their traditional attire and take pride in wearing them but circumstances do not always allow them to do so on a daily basis. Socio-economic considerations demand that women find employment and they often dress in what is comfortable or prescribed by the employer. Traditional Hindus are always conscious of religio-cultural dress habits. The tradition, particularly in performing rituals is to wear full-length pieces of clothes. Hindu women usually wear a *sari*, which expresses a certain kind of spirituality (Srikantha, 2001). There are some variations in these dresses but full-length covering of the body especially during religious functions is important according to Hinduism. Traditional clothes worn during *Deepavali* for many Hindu women, it seems, is an external symbol of an inner divine experience. The relative importance of the traditional Indian attire can be seen as an outward representation of respect for their religion. Still used widely by Hindu females, the *sari* and *salwaar kameez*, particularly during festivals like *Deepavali* constitute a complex heritage of Hinduism that the Hindu immigrants brought with them together with the cultural mores of their homeland and therefore the appropriation of this historical dress can also be seen as a form of social expression. Hindu women have developed its usage, attaching to it an encoded vocabulary that signifies their Hindu identity, gender and adherence to belief. Hindu women's traditional attire serves as a visual representation of their cultural identity.

The reason for changes of traditional dress differed among the interviewees. Some of the interviewees indicated that when important festivals like *Deepavali* are celebrated, in some cases, the emphasis is on the superficial display of wealth, especially amongst the higher socio-economic group. Identities in the Diaspora, like in South Africa can become blurred in the multicultural terrain. Here we see how identity has been transformed and reconstructed in clothes. To what extent is visual identification a matter of belief by those who employ them, or are they the subjects of considered choice? It can be said that traditional attire is largely constructed and to some extent valorised in the form of culture. One of the concerns expressed by the interviewees was, to what extent the youth (future Hindu women) will retain the traditional attire particularly during festivals.

On the other hand, though the majority of Hindu women wear the *sari* for *Deepavali*, the men can be found in Western clothing. The study of gender is also a study of power in Hinduism, and religious and cultural meanings are intertwined with the understanding of gender dynamics. Gender identities have been created and valued in the Hindu cultural context. Thus Hindu men are not expected to adhere to traditional dress code for *Deepavali*. The dress code of men is a complex issue: even in India, urbanised men use shirts and pants while the women remain in their traditional attire. Men do sometimes make a point of wearing traditional *kurtas*/pyjamas on festive occasions. For many Hindu women, traditional dress for *Deepavali* is primarily a religious and cultural identity.

***Deepavali* in the Socio-Cultural Context**

Traditionally, the focus of *Deepavali* is the home and not the temple. It is a time for family gatherings, exchange of gifts and greetings, and entertaining friends. Findings of the study however, contradict this as it was found that this cultural aspect is not much adhered to and is becoming obsolete. Reflecting on extended family relationships, Interviewee H says:

I have observed that the tradition of visiting and greeting family and friends for *Deepavali* is dying away. Many people keep to themselves. Young married couples do not attach traditional obligations to older members of the extended family. There is not much of families getting together for family lunches. I remember my mum and aunts (those who lived close by), getting together at our house and preparing *biryani* (rice dish served on important and auspicious occasions) for the annual *Deepavali* lunch for all the aunts, uncles and cousins, living near by. But now I find it difficult myself to call on family and friends as preparations have to be made for the evening prayer and the lighting of the lamps. Many of our immediate families are not living close by, but I do wish them telephonically.

The above passage explains that in the present time when pressing problems are teeming, it is difficult to nurture the goodwill amongst the family that existed in the past. In the past, members of the extended family lived in close proximity. But over the last forty to fifty years, Indian families have been exposed to processes (such as the Group Areas Act) that have disintegrated the joint family system and given way to nuclear families. I see two further factors that have played an important role in this connection: first, contact with Western society and Western education, and secondly the process of urbanisation which has

contributed much to the relative increase in the proportion of women as wage earners. Career pursuits and educational status have contributed to younger family members settling in other provinces or even other countries. Hence one can see the decline of direct contact with members of the extended family. On the other hand, several of the interviewees mentioned that, though the extended family had shrunk, they only visited close relatives. Uncles and aunts were not really regarded as members of the extended family. These women indicated that they did not feel obligated to maintain relationships and that it was impossible to treat all members in the extended family with honour and the same status. Some of the interviewees said that wherever possible, they tried to maintain this social practice but expressed regret that it was phasing out as an inevitable consequence of the nuclear basis of family life, as well as new expectations within the nuclear family. Findings revealed that the cultural practice of strengthening family ties during *Deepavali* is in the process of transformation. Singh's (2004) and Mohanlal's (1998) research on Hindu women supports the experiences of the women in the study that the extended family has become considerably eroded in South Africa, due largely to Westernisation and education. The new findings throw some light on the transformation of this social institution. This can be seen as being bound up with the attainment of socio-cultural freedom by women when isolated from the patriarchal extended family to make their own reasonable and practical decisions. From the poststructuralist point of view, these women because of Western influences, education and work patterns, through the process of discovery have introduced changes in socio-cultural practices relating to *Deepavali* in consonance with altered circumstances as well as their priorities.

Lights and Candles

In the early days, the lighting of clay lamps called *diyas*, or *divas*, marked the festival of *Deepavali*. The lamps were lit and arranged in rows to illuminate the entire surrounding. *Divas* filled with oil and wicks were a common sight to signify the symbol of the triumph of good over evil. However, the celebrations have undergone several modifications in South Africa with clay lamps being replaced by candle or wax lamps. Like many of the women in the study, Interviewee I explains:

I find it a pleasure to use ready-made candle lamps for *Deepavali* instead of the traditional clay lamps. I also use stainless steel lamps. But I do buy at least a dozen or two clay lamps to keep at the prayer place for Lakshmi *puja* and inside the house as well. I believe it is very symbolic to maintain the use of traditional clay lamps to mark the ob-

servance of *Deepavali*. Use of clay lamps gives me a sense of traditional Hindu identity as wife and mother. But I prefer to keep candle lamps at the windows, doors and around the house because no wick or oil is required and it is not messy at all.

The above statement reflects sentiments that are shared by the majority of the women in the study, and shows that they perceive the lighting of the clay lamps as an important religio-cultural practice because it is the most auspicious day for Lakshmi *puja*. Lighting the clay lamps plays a significant role in the lives of the interviewees in maintaining the traditional *Deepavali* atmosphere in the home. It also gives them a sense of identity as Hindu married women in accomplishing their role as wives and mothers.

Present findings indicate *Deepavali* celebrations have been altered by modern commercialism. The majority of the interviewees said that they preferred using candles or stainless steel lamps but they continue to use a few clay lamps for traditional reasons. Here we see a touch of modernity in the celebration of the festival of lights, as candles are becoming commonplace these days. Marchant (1996) asserts that multi-coloured electric lights are now used to decorate streets in towns in India as well as in the Hindu Diaspora in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa. My findings revealed that women prefer wax lamps as they are economical, convenient, tidy, timesaving and of course very practical and easy to handle. Here one can see the fluidity of culture as Hindu women have departed from the traditional cultural practice of using clay lamps according to the needs and requirements of their changing environment and circumstances. But on the other hand, they have still managed to maintain many of their basic rituals and traditions. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, Hindu women have brought about a positive change in the religio-cultural practice, replacing traditional clay lamps with candle lamps. Two out of the twenty-four interviewees (age group fifty to sixty years) said that they do not use any candles, only clay lamps. They believe that the emphasis of *Deepavali* is on illumination, which means to light the road for the goddess Lakshmi with traditional clay lamps. Despite the emphasis on their careers and the impact of education, there are still some Hindu women who are traditionalist in their beliefs.

The lighting of *Deepavali* lamps is gendered as it women who usually light the traditional lamps. This is a traditional pattern among the Hindu community and has been handed down for generations. Thus it can be said that Hindu women are constantly conscious of their domestic responsibility with particular reference to *Deepavali* and fulfil their gendered roles.

The Assimilation of Western Norms

A radical change revealed by the interviewees through their observations is the eating of meat and consuming of liquor amongst the younger generation of Hindus. The observations of some of the interviewees represent the interviewees' general viewpoints. According to Interviewee J:

In present times, it seems that *Deepavali* means different things to different people. To some Hindus (particularly the younger generation), celebrating *Deepavali* means eating meat and drinking alcohol. I have observed this in the nearby Indian township where some Hindu families have meat dishes and some men have strong drinks on *Deepavali* day. I have also observed some older men in my extended family having liquor on *Deepavali* evening in the name of celebration. Such practices attach a very negative feeling for this important auspicious day.

The picture presented in the above passage, and by all the interviewees, is one of concern about the lack of religious and traditional feelings by some Hindus for the observance of *Deepavali*. The interviewees' observations indicated that once the morning prayer had been performed on *Deepavali* day some Hindus, particularly the male youth, do not continue to observe the auspicious day in the traditional manner. This means that once their religious duty is complete, the festivities proceed by eating meat and drinking alcohol. The interviewees attributed this to them not being appropriately educated in relation to Hindu cultural practices. The interviewees' observations conveyed that these changes are inextricably bound up with notions of changing lifestyle due to modernisation and Westernisation where alcohol is seen as complementing any celebration. This was not practised by Hindus of the earlier generation. Since *Deepavali* is a celebration, people express this by eating meat in addition to consuming liquor. In some cases, Hindus entertain friends from different cultural backgrounds during *Deepavali*, and therefore often have barbecues, which is a Western influence. Bridgraj's (2001) studies reveal that our youth are ashamed of their culture and traditions and claims that they are becoming too Westernised. This, in my opinion, points to the urgent need for instruction about culture and religious observations.

Waves of Change: Celebration of *Deepavali* with the Community

The festival of *Deepavali* is becoming increasingly attractive to people outside of the Hindu religious community. Surendra (2001) asserts that the social and cul-

tural context in which festivals were celebrated in the past is changing rapidly along with the communities and people who celebrate it. This is due to the impact of environmental, social, economical and political influences. Presently, *Deepavali* is becoming a multicultural South African community affair. Moreover, the general community, at least in the Durban metropolitan region and other smaller towns such as Stanger are being more and more drawn into the celebration of *Deepavali*. Local government authorities are hosting *Deepavali* for the entire community. I envisage this as an important instrument for harmonious community relationship.

In Stanger, celebrations at community level were started ten years ago by the *Deepavali* Committee and is supported by all the religio-cultural organisations in the area. The annual function is celebrated on a grand scale at the Stanger Manor Sports Ground to accommodate the massive crowd that turns up for the event. Similar events are hosted in most major cities and towns (particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng where the largest number of Hindus reside) across South Africa. The *Deepavali* celebration in Stanger also has an official imprint as leading officials of the government participate in the celebrations. The celebrations in Stanger take place on the Saturday before *Deepavali* because on *Deepavali* day the focus is on the home and family. It offers an opportunity for people of different religious and cultural persuasions, different races and diverse personal interests to come together and strengthen their bonds of friendship. The start of the function is the switching on of the special street-lights a week before the celebration. The street leading to the grounds and the pedestrian bridge on the Maphumulo Highway is lit up by decorative lights symbolising *Deepavali*. The celebration begins in the morning at about ten o'clock with a colourful street procession that almost brings the town to a standstill. In a glittering array of colourfully displayed floats, the procession makes its way through the town. As it is customary at all Hindu functions, the performance of the *havan* which involves offering of grains, ghee and petals into the fire, is essential and begins at about two o'clock. On a personal note, I felt very pleased by the presence of four local priests from the different linguistic groups (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Gujarati) who were given the opportunity to perform the *havan*. This I believe is to ensure the spirit of unity to prevail in the community.

Entertainment has always been an integral part of the celebration. A suitable and well-integrated programme, catering for all linguistic groups and for people of different cultures is put together. The classical dances display traditional Hindu culture, while *Bollywood*-style singing and dancing reflects contemporary Hindu culture with elements of Western influences. Many of the interviewees accepted the assimilation of Eastern and Western elements in the programme. As the character of *Deepavali* changes, some traditions have become redundant. The resulting loss of culture and alienation is bound to be compensated by other forms of cultural expressions i.e. a new culture which has a carnival-like theme.⁴ It is interest-

ing to note that the views of all the interviewees in the study concur with the findings that explore the changes in the celebration of *Deepavali* over the years.

Despite the celebration taking on a Western flavour, I experienced a strong sense of goodwill and togetherness. As mentioned by the interviewees, I could see that everyone was enjoying the music, glitter and glamour of the celebration. The Hindu community, while identifying themselves specifically as Hindus, were at the same time identifying themselves with the larger South African community. In my view, this acceptance and respect for the cultural system of different groups of people in the Stanger area is a positive development. Over the years the committee has ensured that distinguished speakers who are experts in the field of religion and culture are invited to deliver talks at the function. However, I need to stress that over the last ten years, there has only ever been one, woman guest-speaker. Traditionally, management of such functions in the Hindu community lies in the hands of males but over the past few years, there has been the conspicuous presence of women on the *Deepavali* committee. The research revealed that women have begun to play a central role in the management and organisation together with the men. Here one sees the renegotiation of public/private spheres of Hindu women. In short, the public face of the *Deepavali* celebration is often that of both men and women. Women are well represented on the committee (about 40%). They play central roles in the religious, cultural and catering sub-committees such as drawing up the cultural entertainment programme, choice of items and interviewing artists, something that is quite rare in many such organisations.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that working, married women are preserving Hindu traditions and rituals when celebrating the festival of *Deepavali*. Weedon (1987) suggests that according to poststructuralist theory, culture opens up to change and identifies strategies for change. Thus it is significant to note that although the basic traditions and rituals are still performed by Hindu women, simplification, changes and modifications have taken place over the years due to social, educational, political and economic influences. Because of Western cultural influences, Hindu women have merged certain aspects of Western culture and incorporated them into their socio-cultural and religio-cultural traits. For instance, these changes among others include traditional outfits being replaced by Western attire and candles are used instead of traditional clay lamps. The making and distribution of sweetmeats is not fully practised today, and lack of time means that the coming together with family and friends to exchange gifts is becoming less of a feature of the celebration. As much as *Deepavali* traditionally focuses on the home and family, it is now also celebrated at community level on a vast scale, bringing people of different cultures together. It is evident

that Hindu women are trying to nurture and maintain their group cohesiveness and Hindu identity through religio-cultural festivals that contribute towards the maintenance of Hinduism as well as their cultural identity within the larger multicultural community.

Notes

1. In an academic study of this nature, clarification of some of the concepts involved is essential. According to Prabhakaran (1994), Vedalankar (1972) and Zaehner (1962), a person who is a Hindu, follows the Hindu religion, which is Hinduism and believes in God and is able to understand, discover and worship God through the medium of festivals, ceremonies and rituals.
2. What is also significant is that men are usually assigned with the task of distributing the sweetmeats while the women remain at home.
3. A long, loose dress worn over pyjama like pants
4. See www.hindunet.com

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