

“We Knew It!”

Caribbean Hindu Responses to Restrictions of Touch during COVID-19

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On March 16, 2020, I received a message on social media from some of my Surinamese and Guyanese Hindu friends, who shared an image file that commented on the hygienic precautions and regulations enforced in an increasing number of nation-states during the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. The images and backgrounds varied and had been adapted to personal taste, including Hindu symbols such as the aum sign or depictions of Hindu deities. They generally included the following text (web figure 15.1):

When Hindus were wishing each other with Namaste—They laughed.

When Hindus were washing hands and legs before entering home—
They laughed.

When Hindus were worshipping Animals—They laughed.

When Hindus were worshipping Plants Trees Forests—They laughed.

When Hindus were primarily having Veg diet—They laughed.

When Hindus were doing Yoga—They laughed.

When Hindus were worshipping God and Goddess—They laughed.

When Hindus were burning the dead—They laughed.

When Hindus bathed after attending a funeral—They laughed.

Well guess what?? Nobody is laughing now.

So It’s Rightly Said; #Hinduism Is Not A Religion, It Is A Way Of Life

(Author unknown)



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The text and its related images were widely shared on social media, among not only Caribbean Hindus but Hindus worldwide. In India, the text seems to have been shared particularly by Hindu nationalist groups. In the Caribbean, Hindus forwarded the message to show their pride in being Hindu, which has to be seen in light of the fact that they live in post-indentureship societies where, for more than a century, Hindus have been experiencing stigmatization and marginalization as followers of a minority religion.

Caribbean Hindu Claims to Superiority

In the predominantly Christian colonial societies of the then British and Dutch Guiana, Christianity was linked to the notions of “civilization,” “education,” and “respectability” (Stoler 1989; Wilson 1969). From the perspective of the colonizers, only Christians were considered “civilized,” while Hindus were regarded as “uncivilized” and “backward” and thus inferior (Kloß 2016; Vertovec 1994; Williams 1991). Consequently, Hindus have been subjected to and concerned with Christian efforts of proselytization ever since the arrival of Indian indentured laborers in the Caribbean between 1838 and 1917; such efforts continued well into the twentieth century. Even today, some express the need to constantly justify and defend their practices and beliefs in light of the dominant Christian ideals.

Not all Caribbean Hindus accept this stigmatization, however; some actively challenge it by emphasizing the sophistication and authenticity, and hence superiority, of Hinduism. In their efforts, they are increasingly supported by conservative Hindu nationalist ideologies, promoted in diasporic Hindu communities worldwide. In the Caribbean, discourses of Hindu superiority and the proclamation of “greater” knowledge in comparison to Christianity are commonly used to contest and subvert the local socioreligious hierarchy and notions of respectability (Kloß 2017).

In this context of marginalization, my Caribbean Hindu friends shared the image files as a comment on COVID-19 measures around the globe in general, but also as a means of claiming (global) Hindu superiority. The message itself listed nine sociocultural norms and practices that are said to be among the central aspects of the Hindu “way of life.” By proclaiming that—unlike Christianity—Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life, Caribbean Hindus often emphasized the “truthfulness” and “authenticity” of Hinduism in opposition to other “religions,” particularly Christianity. For instance, during my ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, many Guyanese Hindus referred to “religion” as a kind of orthodox structure that is imposed on a community and “cast upon”

people (Kloß 2019). They understood “religion” as something formal and inauthentic. On the contrary, they referred to “spirituality” as a “way of life,” suggesting that it emanates “from within” a group or person. Hinduism, as a kind of spirituality and way of life, was considered more “natural” and “authentic” than Christianity, as it had not been imposed on Indians during colonialism, and affects all spheres of a person’s life.

With regard to the “When Hindus . . .” text and images, the statement that Hinduism is a “way of life” thus may be understood as a challenge to Christianity and, more broadly, to the “West,” which Caribbean Hindus often generalized as Christian. It furthermore added to the emphasis pandits usually give to the scientific credibility of Hindu philosophy and astrology, often suggesting that Hindu science is superior to “Christian” or secular science.

Bodies, Touch, and Pollution in Hinduism

All practices referred to in the message were related to notions of pollution, (im)purity, hygiene, and touch. While even non-Hindus can easily relate some practices—such as bathing, washing, and the burning of the dead—to “hygiene” or precautions during the pandemic, other references require more contextual knowledge. For example, the practice of “wishing each other with Namaste” refers to the customary Hindu greeting, during which a person presses their hands together, fingers pointed upwards and palms touching (web figure 15.2). During this greeting, no physical contact occurs between the parties involved and the risk of pathogen transmission is minimized.

From a Hindu perspective, the polluting capacity of the “Western” handshake is obvious—and not only in times of COVID-19: all bodies are considered to be “polluted” to varying degrees. Additionally, bodies are conceptualized as permeable and open (Böhler 2011; Holdrege 1998), divisible or “dividual” (Marriott 1976). They are perceived as constantly emitting substances, particles, and energies into their surroundings, and as simultaneously receiving substances and energies from other emitting entities. While such transmission may occur without direct contact, physical touch is thought to concentrate the flow of substances and energies, intensifying the exchange. Tactility thus is considered a particularly effective and influential mode of exchange, with either negative (“polluting”) or positive (“purifying”) implications.

The message widely shared online suggested that although Hindus have been ridiculed for their greeting practices in the past, during COVID-19 even non-Hindus finally realized that the namaste greeting is indeed a “better,” “cleaner,” and “healthier” mode of greeting. By sharing the “When Hindus . . .” text and

images, Caribbean Hindus challenged the allegedly higher status of Western/“Christian” practices and knowledge, claiming superior knowledge and status in local and global social hierarchies.

In addition to discursive negotiations on a global level, touch continues to be of particular importance in the context of Caribbean Hindu practices. COVID-19 has impacted Hindu ritual practices by increased restrictions on touch and the need to observe social distancing, influencing sociohierarchical contestations within religious communities.

Ritual Touching

During ritual veneration of Hindu deities (puja), auspicious energies emanate and spread into the atmosphere from the site where the sacrificial fire burns and the fire offering (*hawan kund*) takes place. These circulating energies, substances, and blessings enter human and other physical bodies. My Hindu informants explained to me that the closer one sits to the altar and ritual, the more energy one receives (Kloß 2021). The amount received becomes gradually less the farther back one sits in a temple. To receive and spread these energies, people in the congregation raise their right hands and arms during the offering of resin incense (*sambrany*) and clarified butter (ghee) and fan the air with wavy movements.

While every person who is present during puja and sensually involved in the ritual proceedings receives some auspicious energies, the person conducting the offering (*jajman*), members of the offering unit, and the pandit receive the most blessings. Commonly, the *jajman* is touched on the shoulder by his or her attending spouse and children. Although energies may be transferred via the atmosphere, touch remains an effective means of intensifying and facilitating interpersonal transfer. This mode of connection ensures that all touching parties involved will receive energy. It is even common during puja for all members of a congregation to move closer to the *hawan kund* to touch a person in front of them, so that in this way all become physically connected to the ritual agent and form a temporary unit (web figure 15.3).

Questions of touch—particularly the question of who may touch whom during the ritual process—have been carefully regulated in Hindu communities and are tacit knowledge among members of the congregation. However, with the increasing restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, questions regarding the accessibility of temples, particularly indoor temples, have been raised. In the past, “impurity” has been a category of bodies on the basis of which access to temples was denied. People were categorized temporarily as “impure” if they had consumed “rank” (polluting substances including meat, eggs, and

alcohol) prior to puja, had not bathed and changed into clean clothes, or were menstruating. During the initial months of the pandemic, the number of temple visitors had to be restricted to adhere to health measures and to take into account a heightened risk of “polluted” bodies. In this way, only a select number of people were allowed access to a temple during puja, without the possibility to congregationally touch and form ritual units. Notable exceptions were priests, ritual practitioners, and ritual offering groups, usually consisting of members of one household who were allowed to touch. It is likely that these novel impositions (re-)structured social hierarchies in the religious communities and led to renewed competition to qualify as “deserving” members of a religious community who may still receive auspicious substances and energies via touch (Kloß 2016).

Regimes of Touching

Restrictions and regulations of touching and not touching have always been influential and relevant in Hindu concepts, hierarchies, practices, and rituals; one only has to think of the category of the “untouchable” to find evidence of this. But COVID-19 made Hindus and non-Hindus alike drastically aware of the fact that human touch and regimes of touching are part of all (national and local) body politics and are intrinsic aspects of biopower. Touch is always part of the social practices, strategies, and mechanisms through which power relations and power asymmetries are (re-)constructed and redefined. This not only is the case for religious or ritual contexts but also relates to public health and medical practices. One example is the policing of women’s bodies during pregnancy through various modes of touch (from caressing the belly to obstetric violence) and by a variety of social actors, including midwives and physicians, family members, friends, and strangers in public contexts (Foucault 1973; Duden 1993; Lupton 1999). COVID-19 has changed the perception and recognition of the relevance of touch to public health, leading to adjustments of safety measures and modes of surveillance.