ABSTRACT

Indo-Caribbean Hindu Practice in Queens:
Ethnomethods of Constituting Place, Practice and Subjects

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This is an ethnographic study of how Hinduism in diaspora is constituted in Queens, New York City in 2006-2007 by immigrants from Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname. Because of the unique historical development of Hinduism in the Caribbean, there are several reasons for looking at Indo-Caribbean Hindu practice in the United States: (1) it represents an interesting case study of the development of Hinduism in its movement from India; (2) it provides insight into the issues faced by a twice-removed Indian diasporic population; and (3) it deepens our knowledge of the character and development of Hinduism in America.

Operating within the literatures on diaspora, Hinduism, and anthropology of education, I argue that that both “transplantation” and “transmission” are inadequate frames for approaching the problem of how Hinduism is (re)established abroad by migrants. I propose that Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology provides an alternative framework for understanding how people work together to render religious activity accountable to forms “back home” as well as to different contexts made relevant in the adopted homeland. The data presented provide an account of the methods, procedures,
and resources by which people organize settings which provide for the accomplishment of that which is recognizably “Hindu.”

Drawing on one-year of observations of temple life, Hindu functions in home and public contexts, informal discussions as well as interviews with Hindu religious experts and lay persons, I show how Hindus, especially in the context of migration, must figure out together how to practice Hinduism. Hindu immigrants must find out about the their circumstances within their adopted homeland, set up their own conditions for practice, and work at becoming known as Hindu to relevant others. Throughout my documentation of demarcating an ethnic neighborhood, building a temple, organizing routine religious functions, and becoming known as a Hindu pandit or teacher, I point to how these processes involve education. By examining how Hinduism is accomplished in the details of practice I provide an opportunity to rethink education, thus disrupting commonsense notions of equating education with socialization or schooling.