

ROLE OF DEV MANDIR IN BRIDGING THAI AND HINDU COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY BANGKOK

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ABSTRACT

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Hinduism in Southeast Asia, specifically in Thailand, and its influences on culture, society and politics is not a new area of study in the field of social sciences. A number of studies in the past have focused on Hinduism and its influences in Southeast Asia. These studies however have been focusing specifically on cultural and religious influences but only from a historical perspective. Far less attention has been paid to contemporary Hinduism, especially in Thailand, and how the younger generation of Thais has adopted aspects of Hinduism in their daily lives. This research paper is an attempt to fill this gap by focusing on modern aspects of Hinduism within the Thai context. In particular, this research paper examines how a contemporary Hindu temple, known as Dev Mandir, in Bangkok has come to serve as a center of religious faith for two separate communities: one Hindu and one Thai. Dev Mandir is an important diasporic Hindu temple located in the heart of Bangkok and acts as an important bridge between the Hindu and the Thai communities within the capital. The methodology utilized within this research involved the use of semi-structured interviews with practitioners and devotees as well as personal observations done closely during important religious ceremonies and events at the Dev Mandir. The results from the interviews and observations show evidence of acculturation and counter acculturation among the Hindu and self-defined Thai Buddhist visiting Dev Mandir on a regular basis.

Keywords: Bangkok; beliefs; brahmins; Dev Mandir; Hinduism; temple

1. INTRODUCTION

India has long had relations with the other nation states of Asia. Links date back 2000 years, resulting in the formation of Indian kingdoms on the Indochinese Peninsula and pre-modern Indonesia. Southeast Asia people incorporated Hinduism and Buddhism into traditional culture patterns, adjusting these foreign belief systems to fit with their own specific needs and outlook. From the 13th century onwards external influences such as Theravada Buddhism and Islam began to have an impact on ordinary peoples. The process was only much later reflected in the indigenous writings of courts and monasteries (Agarwal, 2011).

This interaction between the peoples of India and Southeast Asia continues up to the present time including the presence of the Indian diasporic communities in Thailand. The formation of the Indian diasporic community in Thailand is not new but goes back to the 18th century with the presence of different linguistic minority groups such as the Bohras and Tamils among others. The Bohra Muslims were from Gujrat while the

Hindus and Muslims arrived from Tamil Nadu and were the earliest group of merchants arriving in Thailand. The economic and political transformations in the late 19th and early 20th century (during the British colonial period) led to massive migration of people from the Punjab region. According to Mani (2006), economics, droughts, agricultural crisis, and unemployment in India's countryside encouraged Indian migration to Thailand as migrants were forced to look for greater prospects. Additionally, political issues such as the Indian partition in the late 1940s played a significant role as well. In Thailand, being a relatively calm country with familial ties to historically settled migrants, it was easier for political refugee families to establish their new homes after the partition. In addition, the economic prosperity of the established migrants enticed other Indians to seek their fortune in Thailand. In most cases, migrants followed the route of their interrelated predecessors. Indian women in particular often migrated to Thailand as a result of their marriages to Thai-Indian males. The above mentioned reasons for the Indian migration to Thailand are considered as causative determinants to Thailand's increased immigration. Indians who arrived in various regions of Thailand often found Bangkok more appealing for capital appreciation and eventually permanently relocated there. Because there was an established Indian community in Bangkok, it was easier for new migrants to reside here (Nakavachara, 1993: 957–959). The diasporic Indian communities are highly heterogeneous and religiously diverse ranging from Hindus to Muslims and Sikhs. For the sake of clarity, the focus of this research is limited to the Hindu diasporic community in Thailand. The reason being that Thailand has historic religious influences of Hinduism and historic interactions of diasporic Indians and Thais at the Hindu temples in Thailand.

In this paper, the authors are particularly interested in the extent to which Hinduism is perceived as an alternative spiritual choice for the Thai people. This approach differs from other studies that have attempted to emphasize the assimilation of ethnic minorities into majority populations. Indeed, our aim is to offer a view of counter assimilation and to show Thai communities have benefited through the adoption of Indian beliefs and practices. Our interest in this topic arose when we noticed a large number of Thais visiting Hindu temples on a regular basis. Previous research in Thai studies has mostly focused on the influence of Hinduism on Thai arts and literature, but not on the importance of diasporic Hindu temples in the daily lives of people in the Thai community. To fill this gap, the authors have chosen the Hindu Samaj Temple (also known as the Dev Mandir) located in the Sao Ching Cha area of Bangkok as a case study. The temple resides in an area close to where the Indian communities are established and showcases the Hindu faith, and the contributions Indian culture has made to Bangkok. Established in the early 1920s by a group of expatriates, the Hindu Samaj Association was meant to build a spiritual, social and cultural community for the diasporic Hindu community. Inaugurated in 1925 on the day of Vijaydashmi¹ the association was initially located on the Langwang Burapha road and only in 1969 did it move to its current location.

The temple has the idols of all the gods and goddesses in order to accommodate the needs of different people worshipping different Hindu gods and is therefore also known as Dev Mandir. The temple serves the needs of a mixed ethnic community – mainly Punjabi Hindus but also a growing number of Thais. The temple is located in an area which is considered to be the heart of Bangkok surrounded by Thai and Chinese temples. This makes it easier for people from other communities to visit. In addition, many businesses have arisen to fulfill the religious needs of people visiting the temple. There is also a school run by Hindu Samaj under the same premises which moved to the current premises in 1948.

Findings from the observations and interviews have been divided into four sub-sections: commonly known Hindu temples; commonly known religious activities; commonly known deities; and the reasons why the Dev Mandir is commonly known among the Thai worshippers.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative methodology incorporating Geertz's perspective of culture. Clifford Geertz (1973) sees cultures as having webs of meaning and further posits that an accurate understanding of culture depends on an interpretation focusing directly on attempts to define the real meaning of things within that given culture. Geertz suggested the best way to do so is through 'thick description' with importance given to context and surroundings, and articulating meanings within the web of culture. Inspired by Geertz's approach of thick description, the researchers applied a case study approach to collect data in an effort to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomena of Thai Indian hybridity. In doing so a group of regular visitors at the Dev Mandir were interviewed and observed to explore the idea of Thai-Hindu hybridity. The data collected for this study was based on semi-structured interviews over a period of two months between September and November 2011 and personal observations conducted between August 2011 and December 2012 at the Dev Mandir. Interviewed participants were regular visitors of Dev Mandir and randomly selected

¹ Also known as Dussehra, marks the celebration of the victory of good over evil when the demon King Ravana was killed by Rama.

at the temple premises. The participants were self-described as “Thai” with no identification to South Asia beyond their interest in Hinduism and participation in temple activities. A total of twenty-two people were interviewed: 12 males and 10 females. The majority of participants were single and came to the temple on a regular basis. Some had been coming there for as long as seven years while others had only been attending ceremonies for two years or so. Only four were new visitors to the temple. A majority had learned of the temple from families or friends. Many of the rest came after being advised to do so by astrologers or mediums. Four had searched for temple information on the internet. Two were nearby residents. The findings from the semi-structured interviews were divided into themes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview findings indicate cross-acculturation (Redfield et al., 1936), a process in which the close contact of individuals from different cultural backgrounds leads both to modified behaviors and hybrid beliefs. Acculturation, a process of systematic cultural change of a society carried out by a dominant alien society with direct contact between individuals of each society (Winthrop, 1991: 82–83). The individuals of a minority culture learn the language, habits, and values of a dominant culture through the process of acculturation (Winthrop, 1991: 3). A part of this can be attributed to Buddhist and Hindu belief systems which, as Trilok Chandra Majupuria (1987: 29) notes, are sufficiently similar to facilitate a conversion. Local syncretism may be another factor, however. Both Chinese and Indian religious practices were ‘equally respected by Thais’, in urban Bangkok and Siamese society as a whole was fertile ground for the growth and expansion of Chinese and Indian religious cults (ibid. 108). Thais periodically joined Chinese and Hindu religious festivities while immigrants found Theravada Buddhism familiar.

At the court level, Hindu Brahmins played a prominent role in conducting royal ceremonies and the practice still continues today. The majority of the royal court Brahmins are descendants of Indian migrants from centuries ago who intermarried locally and fully acculturated in Thailand (McGovern, 2017). On the ground level, the Thai devotees are not particularly well aware of the Hindu religious principles. Most of the information the Thai devotees have regarding Hindu practices are based on information received from fellow visitors at the Hindu temples in Thailand. Generally, a Thai devotee does not read or learn the concepts from religious scriptures or from the Brahmins due to the language barrier. The purpose of their visit as evident from our research is to follow their personal belief and curiosity about Hinduism rather than to gain proper religious knowledge. This, however, does not create any sense of incongruity among the individuals visiting the Hindu temples while also practicing Buddhism at the same time.

Several scholars have presented the complexity of the Thai religious situation which is highly syncretic, often combining elements from several traditions. This allows an individual in Thailand to simultaneously hold beliefs from different traditions (Kirsch, 1977; Terwiel, 1976). Barend J. Terwiel (1976: 391) has observed how the Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements have intermingled in such a way that it is difficult to find a distinction between the two.

3.1 Hindu temples known to participants

The participants not only knew Dev Mandir but also visited other Hindu temples in Bangkok and elsewhere. The temples are widely known among both Hindu and Thai devotees since they are pure Hindu temples established and run by Hindu Brahmins. Among all the most popular is the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, over 100 years old, located in the heart of Bangkok on the busy commercial centre street of Silom. It was interesting to see that all of the research participants were aware of this temple and had visited the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple as well. The reason for this is quite obvious, since according to our observation anyone visiting Silom must pass by this temple and is bound to admire its beautiful architecture. It is because of its prime location that the temple is highly visible, easy to locate, explore, and easily accessible for all to be part of its religious activities. Additionally, the temple is famous for its annual festival of Dussehra where a huge number of Thais participate in the procession held in the evening. They will walk along the procession (see Figure 1) and try to get the sings from deities and the Brahmins (see Figure 2). The festival is very well known among the Thai community and from our observation each year over 90% of the attendees and spectators of the procession are self-defined Thai Buddhists. Most of the attendees are regular participants who join the festival every year and bring along their friends and family members. The exact dates of the festival are generally announced by the temple through public posters and the websites but more often the worshippers would inquire about the dates through their friends or inquire directly at the temple itself. The idol of Uma Devi is the main deity in the temple and those devoted to Uma Devi would pay their regular respect at this temple.



Figure 1: Thai Devotees Participating in the Dusshera Procession
Courtesy: Pichai (2023)



Figure 2: Brahmins Giving Their Blessings to Devotees During the Dusshera Celebration
Courtesy: Pichai (2023)

Since the Sri Mariamman Temple has a much longer history in Bangkok, our observation and interviews indicate that the Sri Mariamman Temple is usually the beginning of the involvement of Thai devotees with Hindu practices and festivities. Only later had they either learned or received information about Dev Mandir (see Figure 3 and Figure 4) from other people, such as friends or relatives. For the participants in this study, Dev Mandir is where Vishnu and Lakshmi are the chief statues of the temple. The purpose of their visit is to worship Vishnu and Lakshmi. Out of all the participants, at least one had visited all six Hindu temples, except Dev Mandir in Chiang Mai because of its location in a faraway northern province.



Figure 3: Sign at the Entrance Indicating the Dev Mandir Temple



Figure 4: The Entrance to the Dev Mandir Temple

Paying respect and visiting shrines/temples is a common routine of Thai devotees. It is easy to notice ubiquitous spirit houses or shrines as they are a common site in both urban and rural areas of Thailand. Known as *Sarn Phra Phum* (spirit shrine) and *Sarn Chao Thii* (abode of the spirit lord of the land), they are built by households and businesses as a guardian shrine for the spirits residing in the area. Providing a home to the guardian spirits and paying respect to these spirits brings protection and prosperity to the owner. The belief in guardian spirits is animistic and comes from the Hindu folklore. In fact, the ritual of erecting such a shrine is done by a Brahmin who assigns the time and day of the ritual according to the astrological calendar. Daily offerings are made at these spirit houses and every passerby would offer their respect with a *Wai*. It is common for the Thais in this area to visit these shrines more often than the Thai temples as they are more commonly found. Thus, the routine practice of paying respect at shrines continues along with visits to Hindu temples. The devotees would visit temples whenever possible. The reason is that the worship at the temple is much more elaborate and at the same time provides an opportunity to meet and learn new religious principles and practices from their friends as well as from the Brahmins. Hindu temples or small Hindu shrines are easy to find and locate. Therefore, the curiosity and eagerness to gain practical benefits attracts a lot of Thai devotees to these different Hindu temples.

3.2 Commonly known religious activities and festivals

As for the knowledge regarding Hindu festivals, among all of the annual festivals, Vijaydashami (Dussehra) is most commonly known. This religious event is held annually at Sri Maha Mariamman Temple with a huge attendance of devotees. The most attended Hindu festivals include Maha Sivaratri, Navaratri (see Figure 5), Krishna Janamashtami, Deepavali, and Ganesh Chaturthi respectively.



Figure 5: Devotees joining the Navratri Puja Held at Dev Mandir on April 6, 2011.

It appears that regular visitors to the Dev Mandir and the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, who have studied Hindu cultures and traditions, are aware of all the religious festivals either from the Hindu calendar or through the calendar prepared by the temples themselves. Five participants reported that they regularly attend these religious ceremonies whenever possible. They even know certain Hindu rituals which are rarely known among other Thais such as Vaikunta Ekadashi², Saraswati Puja³, Holi, and Satya Narayan Puja⁴. Apparently all of these rituals are specially arranged at the Dev Mandir and our participants would attend these rituals on a regular basis. Because of their regular participation the participants have learned more about the correct ways of performing the rituals. They are not acting as the host of these rituals but attend them as and when organized by the temple.

3.3 Deities commonly known to the Thai worshippers

An interesting finding for us was that all of our interviewees had been worshipping Hindu gods already prior to their first visit to the Dev Mandir in Bangkok. Among all the Hindu deities, Ganesh⁵ is the most commonly worshiped deity. It should be noted that most Thais are far more familiar with Ganesh when compared to other deities. In addition, Ganesh is worshiped in certain institutions as well. Many people attending these institutions or graduating from there continue to worship Ganesh at home. Other commonly known deities after Ganesh are Kali⁶ and Siva⁷. In comparison, Vishnu and Lakshmi are reported to be the least worshiped Hindu deities among the Thai worshippers.

One of our participants mentioned that he had been performing his worship of Hindu gods prior to his first visit to the Dev Mandir, however, his style of worship was in accordance with the southern India routines. It is to be noted that the Dev Mandir is a north Indian Hindu temple and some of the ways of conducting Hindu rituals may be different to the southern Hindu temples. On the other hand, our remaining twenty-one

² Vaikunta Ekadashi is the most important Ekadashis and an auspicious day dedicated to Lord Vishnu and falls on the eleventh day of every lunar fortnight in traditional Hindu calendar.

³ Saraswati Puja is a religious festival arranged for the annual worship of Saraswati. Mostly, participants in this event are Brahmins, musicians, philosophers, and students.

⁴ Satya Narayana Puja is the worship of Narasimha on the night of full moon every month. Shaligram Shila, which is a sacred stone resembling Vishnu, is used in the worship.

⁵ The elephant headed deity who is first to be worshiped in Hindu traditions. He is known to be the Lord of success and the remover of obstacles, rides a mouse and comes in 32 different forms.

⁶ A powerful female Hindu deity having a very fearful image however is known to be a loving and caring mother to her devotees. She has four arms, with a sword in one hand and the head of a demon in another. The other two hands bless her worshippers, and say not to fear. She has two dead heads for her earrings, a necklace of skulls, and a girdle made of human hands as her clothing. Her tongue protrudes from her mouth, her eyes are red, and her face and breasts are sullied with blood. She stands with one foot on the thigh, and another on the chest of her husband, Shiva.

⁷ He is third deity of the Hindu triad or Trimurti, known to be the Destroyer (of evil) and regeneration. As a destroyer he is dark, appearing as a naked ascetic accompanied by demons, encircled with serpents and necklaces of skulls. As an auspicious and reproductive power, he is worshiped in the form of Shiva lingam. Usually he is depicted as white, with a dark-blue throat, with several arms and three eyes. He carries a trident and rides a white bull. His consort is Parvati.

participants followed the common Thai practice of using candles, fruits and flower garlands within their pattern of worship. Although they have enquired about the correct ways of worship from Brahmins, their practices remain somewhat unchanged. The Thai way of worshiping includes offering fruits, garlands, and others which are placed in front of the deities and then prayers are recited by the devotee. On the other hand, Hindu worship starts with the prayers first and then offerings are made while the Brahmins chant the mantras. At the same time, Hindu worship forbids the offering of meat or eggs to any Hindu deities while this is a common practice in the Thai traditions. With their regular visits, the Thai devotees have learned about these differences and adopted some of the practices like using incense instead of Thai joss sticks and offering milk and flowers as suggested by Brahmins.

Since prayers are important in Hinduism, three of our participants put extra efforts in adopting Hindu ways of worship and on their own found prayers in Sanskrit from the internet. Additionally, they were familiar with other prayers that were suggested by people who introduced them to the Dev Mandir. Most of the prayers are written either in Pali or Sanskrit using the Thai alphabet and are taken from other Hindu temples. After coming to this temple, they usually switch to the prayer recital, which is usually distributed at the temple itself.

All participants regularly visit the temple between 3.00 p.m. and 8.00 p.m. which is after work or school. The first group, which includes the majority of participants, visits the temple 2–3 times per week. The second group comes there 3–4 times per week. The last group visits the temple 1–2 times a week. Interestingly, there is one participant who visits the temple almost every day from Monday to Saturday after work for four years and she indicated that her frequent visits were due to the location of the temple which is within the proximity of her home. Sunday is an exception as it is the only day-off from work for this participant which she usually spends on her home chores and personal relaxation.

It was evident from the interview that these participants visited the temple on a regular basis. The reason for their visit was to better their lives. The most common personal problem that brought them to the temple was related to financial security. Either they had financial commitments which they could not fulfill due to lack of enough finances or they reported having problems at the workplace which would lead to financial problems in the near future. They were initially advised by either their friends like Ms. A⁸ or by astrologers like Mr. K⁹ to make an offering to the Hindu gods at this temple. They offered a garland and milk as the most common offering initially. Upon regular visits and worshiping the Hindu deities, all participants agreed that their lives have become better. Since their financial situation has become much better, they have become much more devoted to the deities in Dev Mandir. The majority of the participants reported that they make special offerings on important days like on their birthdays or on festivals related to their favorite deities. They increasingly participate in all the rituals and ceremonies. However, they did not know the meanings of a lot of rituals that are conducted at the temple and, in some cases, they even had their own meanings for such rituals. A few do inquire and try to understand the real meanings of conducting the Hindu ritual but language sometimes becomes a barrier. But for the majority, the Hindu rituals are something divine and for the betterment of human lives. Therefore, the visiting Thai devotees did not feel neglected or ignorant in any situation whatsoever. In addition, from time to time, the Brahmins would (themselves or ask others) interpret the meanings and procedures when a big number of Thai devotees attend the rituals. Overtime they have learned more from Brahmins, committee members of Hindu Samaj, and also the fellow devotees about Hinduism. This has made it possible for them to adopt the basic principles of Hinduism as explained in Bhagwad Gita and Ramayana which include the belief in one God in many forms; all human beings are divine, religious harmony, notion of Karma¹⁰ and Moksha¹¹. Mr. P and Ms. M¹² have gained important knowledge of the Hindu texts: Bhagwad Gita and Ramayana after visiting Dev Mandir and have adopted its principles in their daily life. This follows the Geertz's (1973) approach which advocates 'thick description' explaining that one must understand the meaning that a system of symbols and actions has for a group of cultural actors.

Also when the interviewed participants were asked about the aarti¹³ conducted at the temple every single day, none of them understood the implication and significance of the event. A few explained that it is a worship of Hindu deities either at dawn or in the evening. The rest of the participants reportedly believe that

⁸ Ms. A is a regular attendee at the Dev Mandir. She was interviewed on September 13, 2011 at the Dev Mandir.

⁹ Mr. K is a small business owner who is also a regular attendee at the Dev Mandir. He was interviewed on September 15, 2011 at the Dev Mandir.

¹⁰ Deeds that define the cycle of cause and effect.

¹¹ The ultimate goal of life according to Hinduism. Means liberation or the freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

¹² Mr. P and Ms. M were interviewed on September 16, 2011 at the Dev Mandir

¹³ It is an integral part of any Hindu ceremony. An act of offering love and devotion to the deity, believed to bring power and blessing to the devotees in return. It involves using symbols that represent the five elements of the universe: earth, air, fire, water, and ether. A conch shell filled with water is blown to represent water and ether. Incense and flowers represent earth and waving of a fan represents air. The aarti lamp is lit which represents fire and is moved slowly in front of the deity.

it is a ritual to offer fire to Gods so that their lives are also brightened with the blessings they will receive in return. Thus creating their own meanings for the ritual conducted. However, the Brahmins do try to explain the correct meanings whenever possible. In addition, they also get help from the fellow Thais who have been visiting the temple very often and have learned the correct meanings over time.

According to Hindu traditions, aarti is one of the sixteen steps, also known as *shodasha upchara*, of any ritual. It is performed at the end of the prayers or any auspicious ritual. The purpose is to please the deity and to rectify any mistakes done during the prayers or ritual. Aarti completes a devotee's prayer. It usually involves lighting five small lamps made from cotton wool soaked in ghee (clarified butter) or sometimes camphor¹⁴ may also be used in place of cotton. The lamps are placed in a small metal tray, usually made of silver, bronze or copper, and lit. The tray with these lighted lamps is rotated clockwise¹⁵ in a circular movement in front of the deity in order to wave the light to illuminate each part as well as the complete form of the Lord. The aarti (see Figure 6) thali (tray) is rotated in a full circle moving from the *Anahat¹⁶Chakra¹⁷* to the *Adnya Chakra¹⁸* of the deity. This allows the devotees to admire the beauty of the deity. Hymns will be sung along as the aarti proceeds. These have been composed by the Saints and are basically written in praise of the deities. The entire procedure is a spiritual experience for any worshiper as his/her spiritual emotions are awakened during aarti.



Figure 6: Pandit. Lalit Vyas Performing the Evening 'Aarti'



Figure 7: Devotees, Mostly Thais, Offering Respect (Dandavat Pranam) to the Hindu Gods After the Evening Aarti

The *prathana* at the end of the aarti follows with a *Shastang Dandvat Pranam* (see Figure 7). It is a way of offering respect and surrendering ones' self to god. Danda-vat derives from Sanskrit and means lying on the floor like a stick with arms stretched out towards the deities symbolizing a complete submission reminding the devotees to respect and worship god. Such a posture has medical significance. It involves prostrating and touching eight specific parts of the body on the floor which is a yogic posture and a central asana¹⁹ of Surya Namaskar²⁰. It reduces anger and stress, relieves back pains, increases flexibility of the spinal cord, and stabilizes the mind.

The Thai devotees reportedly did not understand the meaning of the prayers (*prarthana*) which are recited after the aarti. The word '*prathana*' derives from two words '*pra*' and '*artha*' which means pleading eagerly. The prayer helps the devotee to express his helplessness through respect, love, plead and faith. However, the Thai devotees have their own meaning for the prayers which for them are chanted to salute and offer respect to Hindu deities at the temple and to receive blessings from them. The prayers are chanted every single day after the aarti in the morning and in the evening.

The regular visitors have learned to chant the prayers in the correct manner by listening and memorizing it. However, some Thai devotees that know these prayers have written them down in the Thai language (see Figure 8) for the convenience of other Thai devotees so that they can read and recite them along

¹⁴ Represents burning of individual desires without leaving a trace as one takes refuge in the presence of god.

¹⁵ Because the earth moves in a clockwise direction and so the frequencies in the environment will not create any resistance to the movement of the lit lamp.

¹⁶ The fourth chakra (in the 7 chakras), rests in the center of the chakra system. It lies in the center of the chest and is the balance point which integrates the world matter with the world of spirits.

¹⁷ Chakra is a connection of metaphysical and biophysical energy which resides in the human body along the spinal cord. The human body is known to have 7 chakras from the bottom of the spine to the top and each one has its own properties. Each chakra spins and draws the universal life force energy in order to balance the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health.

¹⁸ Sixth chakra, at the center of the forehead between the eyebrow

¹⁹ Refers to posture in Yoga.

²⁰ Translated as Sun Salutation meaning praising Sun for the purpose of good health and prosperity

with others at the temple. The Thai version however does not explain the meaning of the prayers. During this field research, it was observed that some of the eager visitors asked questions to the fellow visitors or the Brahmins regarding the prayers and other activities. Here the language acted as a barrier in communication between the Brahmins and the Thai devotees. The Brahmins are recruited directly from India and some of them are not fluent in the Thai language. Therefore, they cannot easily explain the meanings of these prayers to the Thais. However, the Brahmins would seek the help of visitors who are bilingual to translate and answer any questions the Thai devotees may have.

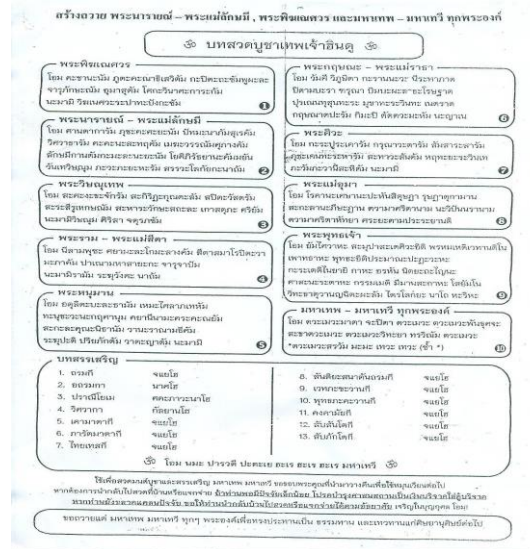


Figure 8: Brahmin Applying 'Tilak' to Devotees

When asked about the significance of Tilak,²¹ none of the respondents reportedly understood the significance and implication of marking tilak (see Figure 8) on the forehead, receiving holy water, and aarti. However, the understanding of our interviewees was that the tilak was a holy blessing from the divine. Under the Hindu traditions, the tilak is a ritual mark placed on the forehead in between the eyebrows. This particular point is important as it is the location of the third eye (ajna chakra). Tilak is generally a smooth sandal paste having a cooling effect and thus has a medical significance. By marking the tilak, it nullifies the heating effect that generates during concentration and meditation.

Nonetheless, all of the participants agreed that the methods are divine and are the means of receiving blessings from gods. In fact, it was observed that occasionally Thai devotees would take the holy water²² home for their sick relative or friend and would also ask the Brahmin to give extra blessings for the speedy recovery of the sick. For them, the holy water is considered to have the healing power as it has been ritually offered by the Brahmins to gods and therefore blessed by gods. In addition, the Thai devotees would also ask the Brahmins for the garlands and fruits that are already offered to the gods. They believe that since these have been offered, they are blessed by the gods and taking them back home will bring good luck and protection. The fruits will be consumed and the garlands would be kept in their own places of worship at home for some time and later disposed of as they dry.

The authors suggest that in order to resolve this communication barrier, the temple should print a Thai version of the prayers (see Figure 8) along with the meanings and correct ways of reciting the prayers and performing the rituals in general. A religious guidebook would be really beneficial as the number of Thai devotees visiting this temple on a regular basis is growing on a daily basis. It will make it easier for visitors to understand the 'do's and don'ts' and follow the correct ways of performing rituals. The temple committee and the devotees who are bilingual could work together for the benefit of the entire religious society.

3.4 Why Dev Mandir?

All the participants agreed that the atmosphere of Dev Mandir is very peaceful and is proper for meditation. Since the temple is comparatively bigger in size and is divided into different floors, more seating area is available for the visitors. Other temples like Sri Mariamman do not have much seating area available.

²¹ A mark of auspiciousness is put on the forehead with sandal paste, sacred ashes or kumkum (red turmeric) generally marked by the Brahmin as a blessing.

²² Known as *Charana-amrit* in Sanskrit.

This may be because Sri Mariamman is located in the business area and is only on the ground floor and thus does not have enough space to facilitate large crowds. Because of its location there is no room for the expansion even if the temple may want to. As for the other temples, like Vishnu Temple, it is big enough to accommodate a large number of both Hindu and Thai devotees. However, the location of Dev Mandir is in the center of the city and thus easy for people to locate and travel to after their work. They do not have to waste a lot of time traveling as the temple is located on Siripongse Road which is not as busy as that of the Vishnu Temple. In addition, most Thai Buddhists are familiar with Wat Suthat which is located just opposite the Dev Mandir and thus it is easier for them to visit both of the temples at the same time.

The devotees visiting Dev Mandir feel more comfortable and relaxed without any strict rules and obligations. Moreover, Thais are welcome to attend daily-prayers and worship at the temple. Brahmins are generous and friendly to devotees. In addition, they are not obliged to make donations. At the same time, no statues of Hindu deities are sold at the temple therefore it gives a feeling to the devotees that the temple is non-commercialized. An additional unique attribute that attracts the Thai devotees to the temple is the singing of the hymns or devotional prayers by the Brahmins every evening before the aarti. The singing is accompanied by musical instruments played live by the Brahmins themselves. Even though the meaning of these hymns may not be known to the non-Hindu devotees, they are seen as soothing to the soul. A number of people will come early to the temple in order to listen to these devotional songs. Some have got so attached to it that they could actually sing them along with the Brahmins. As can be seen in Figure 9, regular Thai devotees join in singing devotional songs along with the musical instrument played by a Hindu devotee. Also seen in Figure 9 is how the Thai devotee is reading through a piece of paper where the hymns are scribed in Thai to make it easier for him to recite. When we interviewed the devotee, he mentioned that the Thai script he was reading was written in Thai by a fellow Thai devotee with the help of the Brahmin working at this temple. We further asked him if he knew the meaning of the words he has been singing to which he replied that he wasn't familiar with the meaning of each word but rather that the sentences were written in praise of the deities.



Figure 9: A Thai Devotee Singing Devotional Hymns in the Evening Gathering for Aarti

Several visitors come to Dev Mandir regularly to worship Vishnu, Lakshmi, Durga, and Shiv Lingam. They believed in the miracles of the Hindu deities and that their wishes would be granted. The temple also has the names of each of the idols written in Thai and a short description is scribed to make it easier for the Thai visitors to identify and learn about the deities. Several people brought their own statues or pictures of deities for the Brahmins to mark the tilak. The interviewees reported that none of the Brahmins called for money or charity when the statues were brought into the temple for tilak. Therefore, it can be said that money is not a concern at the Dev Mandir, which acts as the strength of this temple. Devotees are free to make any amount of donations they want. The participants suggest that the reputation of Dev Mandir is strong and positive because those visiting the temple always have favorable comments.

4. DISCUSSION

For this research, all of our participants were self-defined Buddhists who did not have any intention to convert to be a Hindu. This has been possible for them since Buddhism does not have any rules or obligations that impede them from worshiping other religions. In Southeast Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism have a long history of their interrelationships. Later it became a norm for the Thai Buddhists to worship gods and angels from other religions. They have not been forced to do so; however, there has been such a strong assimilation

of the two religions historically that worshipping Hindu gods and angels has become a common practice. In fact, it is so common that sometimes the Thais themselves cannot differentiate between the Buddhist and Hindu gods.

In regard to the worship of Hindu deities among the Thais, the majority agree that, in Thai society, the worship of Hindu gods is very common. In fact, from the observations of the authors, for many Thai devotees some of the Hindu Gods are Buddhist therefore local meanings have been given to these gods. For example, Brahma for most Thais is their own god and Brahman shrines are found all around Thailand. Other examples include Ganesh, Rahu²³ and Indra. Most Thai temples will have the statues of at least one of these Hindu gods where offerings will be made on a regular basis as well. For the devotees they are even considered as Buddhist deities. When the researchers asked a Thai devotee about Rahu and Hinduism, the respondents' first question was 'is Rahu found in Hinduism as well? I thought Rahu was a Buddhist deity'.

Over time a rising interest in Hinduism among Thai devotees may be a consequence of a need to expand their knowledge of Hinduism. Advanced technology and communication now facilitates the accessibility of information. Several Thais are now using the internet to search for locations and maps of the Hindu temples. In addition, there is more media coverage of ceremonies and rituals organized by the Hindu temples in newspapers, magazines, and television. The devotees also get to learn about Hinduism from their friends and relatives. A minority opinion suggests that Thais worship Hindu deities for blessings and success. Social and economic problems and difficulties in life have driven many Thais to find a new spiritual sanctuary. With a long presence of Hinduism in Thailand, it was easy for our interviewees to see Hinduism as a way to get an answer for their miseries. Interestingly, one participant gave quite a straightforward answer in this regard. According to Mr. J²⁴, it seems that an increasing number of Thais are visiting Hindu temples because of the belief that Hindu deities could fulfill their wishes. This sort of belief suggests the materialistic needs and thoughts among Thais. In addition, there is a small number of Thais who are truly interested in learning and studying Hindu doctrines and philosophies for the noble truth which is the core principle in Hinduism.

Religion is a main source of personal, emotional and spiritual security in Asia. As we may see, science and technological development alone cannot solve the problems in everyday life and society and may cause additional difficulties for humanity. Religion in the East, especially in Thailand does not mean only the dominant religions, rather it includes local beliefs which have been adopted, particularly, in this case from Hinduism. This is a case of one part of the hybrid providing something the other does not. Buddhism itself has many hybrids in itself, where good fortune and misfortune are explained, however there is no short-term reason oriented program provided in order to change one's bad fortune. Hinduism and Hindu temples thus become one many potential alternative spiritual choices among others in Thailand.

The visitors, who were interested in religious philosophy, agree that Buddhism and Hinduism share the same goal which is to understand the noble truth of life. However, the use of words and languages has made them distinct. And yet, the doctrines of Buddhism and Hinduism do not conflict with each other. The participants in this study believe that both Buddhism and Hinduism have the same origin even though their cultures, traditions, and rules are somewhat distinct.

Acculturation: Thai devotees

Each visitor has an idol of their favourite God which they will worship at home. They have a little shrine within their homes which will have an image of Buddha and of a Hindu deity. Each day offerings will be made and these may or may not be in accordance with Hindu traditions. They will offer flowers and milk on a regular basis. A number of them would also carry a small image of Ganesh or Lakshmi in their wallet. Others would have an amulet of these gods which they would always wear around their necks. This, according to the respondents, provides protection and good fortune especially in financial matters. It should be noted that the Dev Mandir does not sell any amulets, photos, or statues of any gods/goddesses. Devotees would bring their own statues, amulets, or photos of Hindu gods and approach the Brahmins to purify these with the Hindu rituals. According to the participants, doing so adds to the power of these religious objects and makes them even more divine. Moreover, Indian style of dressing has also been adopted especially during the major Hindu festivals whereby the Thai devotees will be dressed in Indian dresses and would perform Hindu rituals. A number of both the male and female devotees are found dressed up in Indian dresses. The females would usually wear red or pink Indian *saris* as those two colors are associated with the Goddesses. The males on the other hand would wear light cream colored *Kurtas* (Indian style shirts). Their adoption of Indian dressing style suggests their participation in the Hindu culture. It shows their admiration of the Hindu culture on one hand

²³ According to Hindu astrology, Rahu is one of the invisible planets (Ketu, the other one). The two bring the enemies of the Sun and Moon, swallowing them and causing a solar or lunar eclipse at certain times of the year. The planet can have a negative impact on life and can be pleased through worship and chanting of a mantra to prevent the negativity.

²⁴ Mr. J runs his roadside food stall a little further from the Dev Mandir. He was interviewed on September 30, 2011 at the Dev Mandir.

and the preference to blend them into the Hindu identity. The Indian dresses are only worn when participating in religious rituals rather than in their daily life. However, there was a Thai family who was dressed in Indian clothing each time they visited the temple.

Yet another example of acculturation would be that several of these devotees have turned themselves into vegetarians and consume Indian food occasionally. Vegetarian diet is considered to be a healthy diet and thus those who have switched to a vegetarian diet have understood its health benefits. The regular visitors to the temple have learned that meat cannot be offered to Hindu deities and consumption of vegetarian meals especially on the day of religious rituals is highly recommended. The devotees are not forced but are only recommended to do so by the Brahmins. Some of the devotees eat vegetarian meals at least once a week, usually on the day they were born as it is easy for them to remember the day itself. This is a big change as the general Thai population is not vegetarian.

Counter acculturation: Dev Mandir

On the other hand, the temple has also adopted and accepted the Thai practice of offering a Bai Si²⁵ (*Baci*) to the Hindu gods. 'Bai' (buy) is rice in Khmer while 'Si' (sri) means spirituality in Sanskrit. A Bai Si is prepared on a tray with a cone made of banana leaves placed in the center. The cone is decked with flowers into layers. The numbers of layers have to be in odd numbers such as 3, 5, 7 or 9 as these are considered to be auspicious numbers. An ancient belief is that the Bai Si tray is prepared for the ceremony to bring back balance and harmony in the lives of people experiencing sickness and dangers. Later, the Bai Si tray was adopted in several ceremonies such as welcoming events, weddings, Buddhist ordination ceremony and the worship of spirits, gods and kings.

According to Phraya Anuman Rajadon (1988), the Bai Si tray has combined the Hindu belief of Mount Kailash and Shiva's abode with Buddhist salvation. In the North and South of Thailand, the use of Bai Si tray is taken from Lanna, Lan Chang and Khom cultures. However, Brahmins would prepare and offer the Bai Si tray in both public and royal ceremonies in the central part of the country. It may be that Hindus are not familiar with the offering of Bai Si by Thais for the worship of gods. Likewise, Thais are also not accustomed to the use of non-stemmed flowers with two separate colors for worshipping such as red rose, marigold, leaves and a folded red lotus with no stem. All of these flowers and leaves for Hindu gods are prescribed in the Vedas. For example, Bermuda grass is for the worship of Ganesh while red basil leaves are for Vishnu. The leaves of bael fruit (stone apple) are offered to Shiva. Therefore, the devotees are getting to learn about these offerings and adopting them accordingly. On the other hand, the temple also allows the Thai devotees to offer Bai Si. This gives us evidence of acculturation and counter acculturation whereby the Thais and the Hindus have adopted the beliefs and behavior of each other's religions.

Among the several devotees interviewed, there were a few who had visited the Dev Mandir for the first time and were there to worship Vishnu and Lakshmi as suggested by their friends. They shared their mysterious experiences with us. Some of them had perceived some mysterious signs yet others have dreamt of some Hindu deities like Uma (Dakshayani), Shiva, and Vishnu. They mentioned that these deities instructed them to observe the rules, meditate, chant prayers, and not to break the five precepts in Buddhism. Apparently, these are practices in Buddhism instead of Hinduism. However, the four participants believe that their lives became better after they followed the instructions given to them by the Hindu gods, which allowed them to practice Buddhism more strictly. This finding supports positive syncretism between the Buddhists. Such syncretism has been noted earlier by Skinner (1957) between the Chinese and Thai community in Thailand whereby there is an adaptation of customs to become partly Chinese and partly Thai.

The temple also supports religious ceremonies organized by the Thais in the temple area. The organizer needs to take permission from the committee and donate a small amount of money as the charges for the facilities, water and electricity usage. An example would be of Ganesh Chaturthi which was organized by Thai devotees in the temple grounds in September 2011. Permission was taken from the temple authorities, Brahmins from the temple were invited and several witnessed the performance of the rituals to celebrate the birth of Ganesh (see Figure 10 and Figure 11).

²⁵ An indigenous Southeast Asian ritual performed mainly in Thailand and Laos. It is a metal bowl piled high with cones of banana leaves and marigold flowers, white string, candles, and incense sticks.



Figure 10: Celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi at Hindu Samaj, September 3, 2011
Courtesy: Pichai (2011a)



Figure 11: Pandit Lalit Mohan Vyas Blessing the Devotees During Ganesh Chaturthi, September 3, 2011
Courtesy: Pichai (2011b)

The Thai devotees are also welcome to attend and even arrange free lunch or dinner at the temple. However, it is not very common for the Thais to organize such feasts in the temple. Usually they would make donations to the temple as their share to feasts normally held every Sunday or on special days. Lately, a few have organized their weddings at the temple compound. The purpose was to hold a traditional Indian wedding even if both the bride and the groom are Thais. Although neither side understood the meaning of the traditional ways of performing an Indian wedding, for them it is a different experience and more divine in nature. They are fascinated by the elaborate wedding ceremony as they have either seen one within the temple or watched it in Indian movies. Therefore, they would like to have a personal experience of the same. Another thing that adds to their curiosity is how Indian couples can be with the same partner for their lifetime. One reason they see is that it might be due to the religious marriage ritual which makes the bond even stronger. For them Hindu weddings are much more religious and divine as they are conducted by the Brahmins chanting sacred mantras and making offerings in a more traditional way. By doing so they can receive the blessings from gods and the Brahmins as well, who would act as the mediators between gods and the married couple. They feel that they will have a harmonious and happy married life. Generally, most Thai devotees prefer to hold the marriage rituals within the temple itself. They may then have a dinner reception at a hotel afterwards. This is due to the fact that the guests joining the ceremony may not be familiar with Indian food. If the host arranges Thai food, then it must be vegetarian as meat is not allowed in the temple grounds and the majority of the Thais are non-vegetarians. Therefore, it might be difficult for the host to please the guests.

In some cases, the marriage might be organized at places outside of the temple grounds and Brahmins are invited to conduct the ceremony. The host has to take permission from the temple to allow the Brahmins to perform the rituals. The host will then arrange a special vegetarian feast for the Brahmins conducting the ceremony. All the ritual objects needed will be arranged and taken to the nuptial site by the Brahmins themselves. The host will learn from the Brahmin about the steps of conducting the ritual beforehand. Also during the ceremony, the Brahmins would explain the meaning of each ritual held in Thai, the translation is either done by the Brahmin himself or with the help of a translator.

5. CONCLUSION

Religious places of worship have always played an important role in bringing the people from the two different cultures together and creating hybrids of the two. Dev Mandir located in the heart of Bangkok acts as an important bridge among both the Thai Buddhist and Hindus. The devotees at this temple are regular visitors and have increased their knowledge about Hinduism through interaction with their friends, fellow visitors, and the Brahmins. With this regular interaction, the Thai devotees have adopted Hindu ways of worship and broadened their knowledge of the religion. Their devotion over time has become so strong that some visit the temple every evening to join the evening aarti. The findings suggest that the majority of the devotees joining the evening aarti are in fact Thai devotees. The main reason for their visit to the temple was to solve their financial problems and the participants did report gaining practical benefits after visiting the temple. This also increased their devotion to the Hindu gods. In addition, a small Hindu shrine is maintained at home in par with Buddha's images and is worshiped on a regular basis. Images of Hindu gods, amulets, or a small statue are carried along for protection by participants. The findings suggest that Thais have continually adopted Hindu beliefs as part of their daily lives.

The Indians living in Thailand have adopted Thai culture but often maintained their own religion, Hinduism, as evident by the presence of hybrids. The Dev Mandir temple is an important place of worship among the Thai, has been able to create devotees and serves the needs of both Thai and Hindu devotees. It has incorporated changes according to the needs of the Thai devotees. Moreover, the temple regularly organizes Thai religious festivals and ceremonies. Participating Thais have become a regular part of the Hindu festivals and ceremonies throughout the year. Thus, the Dev Mandir temple is playing a very important role in bringing the Thais and Hindus closer and thereby creating the Thai-Indian hybridity. This research aimed to provide evidence of Hindu hybrids within the Thai community and the role played by a Hindu temple in formalizing this hybridity in contemporary Thailand. Evidence of religious diversity with the presence of Buddhist, Chinese, and Hindu religious practices in Thailand has been presented by Bun and Kiong (1993) and Kitiarsa (2005) showing Chinese assimilation and hybridization of popular religions in Thailand.

Acculturation homogenizes the minority group or culture into the dominant culture creating hybrids among the alien cultures. However, this research helps us to conclude that, in the case of Thailand, there is acculturation as well as counter acculturation where the minority of Indian culture and community has had a huge impact on Thai society in addition to the Chinese Thai community. Further research in this area will be beneficial by incorporating other important Hindu temples in Thailand visited by an increasing number of Thai devotees as well as interviewing a larger pool of attendees at the Hindu temples.

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