Chapter 12
Interfaith Dialogue in Silicon Valley: Odia Women as Catalysts of Change

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ABSTRACT

Silicon Valley, known as the technology hub of the USA, has emerged as a medley of places of religious worship. It has become a home to wealthy Indian Americans and to many gods and goddesses who have come to reside there as well. Indian Americans have contributed significantly to the mushrooming of temples in this region. This chapter attempts to answer the following questions: How does diaspora provide a space to reconstruct the identity of the women practitioners? How does religion enable them to negotiate their roles in the public space? In this chapter, the author argues that Hindu women in the diaspora play a very significant role in selectively performing religious rituals in public places of worship as brought from their homeland. In performing these rituals, women are creating a distinct space in mainstream public culture to reconstruct their identity and agency beyond their roles as homemakers and professionals. In this specific case study, Odia women living in Northern California are not only reshaping their traditions but are engaged in interreligious dialogue in Silicon Valley corporate culture.

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INTRODUCTION: INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO SILICON VALLEY

One often wonders why there is so much talk about interreligious dialogue in the context of religious practices in today’s society. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the notion of dialogue has become increasingly common in understanding different religions to promote mutual respect, open dialogue, and to positively engage with different religions other than one’s own. “The category of inter-religious dialogue may be used to refer to any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions” (Cornille, 2013, p.XII). Diana Eck, one of the premier advocators of inter religious dialogue in the 21st century, observes that “the term “dialogue” conveys a mutuality of speaking and listening, the kind of communication that rises above, or perhaps penetrates beneath, the chatter of words and the shrill media discussion. It suggests a genuine openness to hearing the concerns of the other in his or her own voice, just as we wish to be heard” (Eck, 2017, p. 27). She is not alone. Another similar voice is that of Martin B. Baumann who states that “Interreligious activities as the encounter between representatives of different religious traditions and interfaith meetings as an expression of an increasing reflection on the relation and mutual impact of living side by side in a rapidly expanding multi-faith society did not begin in any significant way in European countries before the 1970s” (Baumann, 1998, p.1).

The 1965 immigration act played a very important role in introducing non-Christians, like Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, to the North American religious fabric, which was predominantly known as a White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) country. It opened the door to people from many areas of the world who had been subject to restrictions, beginning in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Over the years, this policy was expanded to include all of what was then called “Asia”. In 1965, this changed. As President Johnson said when signing the bill into law, “It corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American nation”.¹ This new immigration policy opened up the doors to talented and accomplished Indian engineers and doctors who immigrated to America. After completing their professional degrees, many of them settled down in different parts of the United States. Furthermore, many scientists and engineers came through Canada to live in the USA to build a better future. A majority of them went back home to get married and brought back their wives to raise a family in the host country. They brought not only their economic and political dreams with them, but also their gods and goddesses. Indian engineers and doctors took the initiative to purchase land and build temples. For example, Fremont Hindu Temple and Livermore Hindu Temple in the Bay Area were built in the early 1980s. A group of these professionals took it upon themselves to take a second mortgage on their primary homes to invest in building these temples.
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