

8 Translating spiritual experience into environmental stewardship at Jamaica Bay, New York City

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Introduction

There is a certain emotional draw to praying at the Bay, even if it is just standing there, closing my eyes and chanting a mantra. The world could not survive without our bodies of water; through them life is sustained.

(Aminta Kilawan, co-founder of Sadhana)

Globally, populations are increasingly migrating to urban environments (United Nations 2017), requiring a rethinking of the management of and access to shared natural resources (Atkinson 2003, Roy 2009). Furthermore, shifts in migration patterns and the introduction of new communities in urban contexts also require an investment in cultural resources (Peters et al. 2010). As communities settle in new environments, cultural factors such as language, traditions and religious practices are critical in laying a foundation and developing a sense of place (i.e. the meanings attached to a spatial setting) but may need to be adapted and transformed to fit new contexts (Jorgensen & Stedman 2001, Antonsich 2010). In some cases, these transformations draw upon new landscapes and natural resources (Berkes 2012, Anderson 2014) to create cultural keystone places – defined as “places of high cultural salience for a particular group of people at a particular time and critical to their identity and wellbeing” (Janowski & Ingold 2012, Cuerrier et al. 2015). In one such case, Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities have adopted the waterfronts of Jamaica Bay in Queens, New York as a cultural keystone place, and specifically as a proxy for the sacred Ganga River in India. The present chapter draws upon fieldwork, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, conducted during the summer of 2018 with members of the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community in New York City. We describe how Jamaica Bay has been imbued with spiritual value for this community over the past 30 years or more, and perhaps more significantly, how the adoption of Jamaica Bay as a symbol for the sacred Ganga River (also called The Ganges in anglicised form) has resulted in an emergent grassroots movement towards environmental stewardship (Semple 2015).

Background

The Indo-Caribbean community can be traced back to the early 19th century when the British established a system of indentured servitude where Indians were, at times, forcibly removed from India to work in the Caribbean territories to fund the growing sugarcane plantations (Younger 2010). Typically, these working agreements were comparable to slavery (Tinker 1974). These forms of “indentured labour” continued until 1917, during which time the influx of Indian communities to countries such as Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname brought with them their sense of home in the form of traditions, cultures, languages and religious practices (Manuel 1998, Verma 2008). Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities exemplified their cultural resilience by adapting and transforming within these Caribbean environments, re-articulating their Hindu traditions to correspond and reflect within these new environments (Haraksingh 1984, Ramnarine 1998). Surrounded by the *Kala Pani* (black water; i.e., the ocean), the ancestral home was distant, yet the power of beliefs sustained until one incident in Guyana changed the Hindu religious landscape. A prominent priest from Guyana, Jamsie Nadioo, orated this story to Stephanides in the 1980s. The story was frequently mentioned by interviewees. It tells of the emergence of Mother Ganga (also referred to as Maa Ganga or Ganga Ma), a key Hindu goddess, coming to her devotees (Stephanides & Singh 2000). Here is an excerpt of the translation:

The people who came from India brought the book with them. They came to Albion Estate as “bound coolies” and worked six days a week. One or maybe two months after they arrived, one of the children became sick and no doctor could find the remedy. When they were not working on Sunday, they all went to the river bank to chant to the Mother Goddess. They prayed to Mother Ganges:

“Divine Mother Ganges, we left India and came so far. We came to a different country and we have problems. Will you please listen to our prayers and shower us with your blessings. Oh Mother Ganges, please come to us. We have problems”.

Then Mother Ganges came, and one of the gurus began to read the mantra from the Mariamma Talatu and one of them became ecstatic with her presence. Mother entered his body and everybody prostrated themselves before her and asked her:

“Divine Mother, can you tell us what is wrong?”

“You have all forgotten me and you have neglected my worship, so I made this child sick. Now, go to a clean place where there are plenty of cattle, and make my temple there and pray to Mother Kali. Get a bucket of water with turmeric, neem leaves, and flowers, bathe the child with it, and the sickness will pass away”.

They did so and the child got well. They then promised to worship the Mother from that time on. That is how puja came to this country.

This ancestral anecdote is one that is retold today in many Indo-Caribbean Hindu *mandirs* (Hindu temples) and *kovils* (Shakti temples). The memory of worshipping at the waterfronts of these powerful and sacred rivers in India, such as the Ganga, was realised and replicated by these Hindu communities. The healing effects of Mother Ganga, as a deity residing in the water, was a critical moment in the way water worship became an intimate and continued process for the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community.

After immigration reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it became somewhat easier for immigrants to settle in the United States. People from the Caribbean began to migrate north (Roopnarine 2003). At this point, Indo-Caribbean communities started settling in the Borough of Queens in New York, predominantly in Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, and Jamaica. For these twice-migrants, the divine Hindu reality of worshipping the natural elements of air, water, space, fire and earth accompanied them to the Caribbean and to New York City (Min 2013). In New York City, certain areas of the Gateway National Recreation Area within Jamaica Bay became cultural keystone places for worshipping, and more importantly, a proxy for the sacred Ganga River (Figure 8.1).

This ancestral memory has persisted and culminated in distinct expressions and direct experiences that are now present at Jamaica Bay. Hindu devotees have been coming to these beaches to pray, perform *pūja* (worship), seek guidance and truth, and offer sacred items for any number of Hindu deities (e.g., Mother Ganga, Ganesha, Hanuman, Sarswati). Scattered along these beaches, sacred relics vary from fruits, *diyas* (small clay pots), *saris* (fabric), plastic and aluminium items, *jhandi* flags (a flag symbolising a deity) and *murthis* (statues) of Hindu gods and goddesses (Bisram 2011) (see Figures 8.2 and 8.3). By leaving these offerings at the beaches, Jamaica Bay has become a central sacred space for Indo-Caribbean Hindus to interact with the divine. Once these offerings are placed in the waters, they are purified, and it is generally understood that the sacred relics should remain in the pure sacred waters. See de Mendonça (Chapter 8) for a description of how devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions make use of beaches along Copacabana beaches in Rio, Brazil to worship and pray to the goddess of the sea.

The adoption of Jamaica Bay as a sacred space by the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community has not been without tension, however. Over the past decade or so, conflict within the Hindu community, between other residents, and with government officials arose due to sacred items being left as offerings at the beaches (Van Hooreweghe 2012). Many within the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community believe that touching or throwing these sacred offerings away is sacrilegious. For the surrounding non-Hindu community, there is a disproportionate amount of blame placed on Hindu communities for the pollution of the beaches. Though these sacred items are not the primary cause of the pollution at Jamaica Bay (Hartig et al. 2002), nor are they the only types of items left behind (i.e., there are many secular examples as well, such as wrappers, soda bottles, etc.), they are visible reminders of the presence of the



Figure 8.1 Map of Gateway National Recreation Area with the three areas of worshipping demarcated in white.

Indo-Caribbean Hindu community (Stabroek News 2011). The authoritative manager of Gateway National Recreation Area, the National Park Service (NPS), is often the first to encounter these visible reminders at several worshipping sites at Jamaica Bay. For these NPS rangers, they are left in a precarious position, because the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community have the right to worship freely at these beaches. As one former chief of Gateway National Recreation Area stated:

My feeling has always been you can handle this [leaving offerings at the beaches] very easily – you talk to people. Every time I've spoken with people they're very polite and very nice, you know look you cannot leave this trash here – the tinfoil, the saris, the ... you gotta take it out, it's a National Park. And most people do it.



Figure 8.2 *Murthis* are left on the beaches after a *puja* at the Gate National Recreation Area.
Source: Garcia, Zach.

NPS has made attempts to productively bridge barriers between resident groups and the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community, but our work and others suggest that natural resource managers in urban ecosystems may need to develop new approaches for engaging with multiple users who construe these areas in diverse ways (McMillen et al., Chapter 12). With the reinterpretation of sacred spaces in cities, communities and managers may have to continue to revisit their role and adapt their approaches to natural resource management, by drawing on cultural resources and community engagement.

Within the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community, a group of community organisers, community experts and organisations, such as Sadhana (<https://www.sadhana.org>) and the United Madrassi Association (UMA; <https://www.madrassi.org>), are pushing the boundaries of their religious practices at the beaches to explore the interface between spiritual and environmental accountability. Sadhana is a non-profit coalition of Hindus worldwide wanting to



Figure 8.3 The beach at Gate National Recreation Area has sacred items scattered along the beach front. Source: Garcia, Zach.

assert a progressive Hindu voice into public discourse. Sadhana is a platform for Hindus to advocate for progressive social values and social justice. Since 2012, Sadhana has been conducting monthly cleanups at Jamaica Bay which were inspired by the annual Earth Day cleanups conducted by the Federation of Hindu Mandirs composed of Indo-Caribbean Hindu elders. Similarly, the UMA is a progressive non-profit organisation committed to bringing about unity in the community, within the Madrassi diaspora, the greater Hindu community, and other NGOs, NPOs and grassroots organisations. They have hosted clean-up events, known as *Dharti Amma* Day (Mother Earth Day), several times a year where volunteers join and clean the oceans and beaches of all trash – religious and non-religious items. UMA volunteers are taught to do the cleanings with zero judgement towards those who have left offerings or littered the ocean or beaches. UMA's goal is to inspire change and bring an end to the practice of throwing unwanted and broken *murthis* in the ocean. One youth

group, Shakti Samaj, has also played a significant role in teaming up with both Sadhana and UMA at their various community events. Both of these organisations, Sadhana and UMA, organise regular clean-up efforts (Sadhana 2018) in partnership with NPS and other community groups. These organisations reach out to various temples and other Indo-Caribbean organisations (Shakti Samaj) to promote environmental awareness at the beaches while collecting sacred items and disposing of trash.

In the current study, we ask what values drive these individuals (interviewees) and organisations (Sadhana, UMA and Shakti Samaj) to invoke environmental stewardship at Jamaica Bay as a form of their spiritual experiences. One important component of the Indo-Caribbean Hindu environmental groups is promoting an understanding of Hindu spiritual epistemologies of Jamaica Bay. We also investigate what this means for natural resource managers who supervise the land and residents who use the same space for recreation.

Gateway National Recreation Area, Jamaica Bay

This work took place in the Borough of Queens, New York, within the Gateway National Recreation Area (managed by NPS) as well as other open spaces under different jurisdictions in this area of Jamaica Bay. Various spots within Jamaica Bay and other waterways in New York City are used for worship, of which we looked at four (refer to Figure 8.1). These sacred areas were chosen due to their relatively high level of engagement by devotees.

Spring Creek Beach

This area sits at the north end of the Joseph P. Addabbo Memorial Bridge (Cross Bay Boulevard). The jurisdiction of this land belongs to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The beachfront on the southern and south-western fronts are the responsibility of NPS. Accessibility to the beaches can be complicated – there is limited access on either side of the bridge. The bridge covers a strip of beach, providing privacy for worshippers to commune with the divine waters (Figure 8.4). On the eastern side of the bridge, individuals can park on the highway or access street parking. Both sides of the bridge have small human-made paths which guide the user to the beachfront. The stretch of beachfront at Spring Creek is 0.9 km. Apart from worshippers, recreational users such as fishermen, couples and water-sport users occasionally use this beach. As of August 2018, trash receptacles were not present at this beach.

North Broad Channel Beaches

This area, which is at the end of the Joseph P. Addabbo Memorial Bridge (Cross Bay Boulevard) is split into two. The jurisdiction for these areas falls under NPS. One beach resides on the western side, and another is on the eastern side. Both beaches possess a parking lot that can accommodate roughly



Figure 8.4 Spring Creek Beach. Source: Garcia, Zach.



Figure 8.5 Western area of North Broad Channel. Source: Garcia, Zach.

30–40 vehicles. With these parking lots, it is easily accessible to worship in these areas with a large group. The two beaches are connected by a small strip of narrow land underneath the Joseph P. Addabbo Memorial Bridge – this area is low-hanging and not welcoming for individuals hoping to pass underneath easily. The main open beach areas are for various gatherings: *pujas*, picnics and parties.

Western Area of North Broad Channel

This area has a small concrete gazebo structure to the northern end. Worshippers occasionally have ceremonies at the gazebo. In front of this structure, there are two post boards that contain a variety of information (Figure 8.5). This beach area stretches for 0.4 km. There were eight trash receptacles as of August 2018 around the parking lot.

Eastern Area of North Broad Channel

This beach has a similar layout to its western counterpart, but without a gazebo structure. This stretch of beach faces John F. Kennedy Airport with planes taking off every few minutes. This beach stretches for 0.3 km. The opposite side (southern end) of the beachfront is forested area (Figure 8.6). There were six trash receptacles as of August 2018 around the parking lot.



Figure 8.6 Eastern area of North Broad Channel. Source: Zach Garcia.



Figure 8.7 North American Broad Channel Beach. Source: Garcia, Zach.

North American Broad Channel Beach

This area is about 6.1 km south from the other worshipping areas. North American Broad Channel Park is at the beginning of Cross Bay Veteran's Memorial Bridge. There is a parking lot at the northern edge of the park. From the parking lot, there is a concrete pathway that leads to three baseball fields, after which narrow footpaths develop and they lead straight to the water. There is a small walk through grasses that eventually turn to a sandy cove; a private and ideal place for worship (Figure 8.7). This park is managed by different entities. The baseball fields are managed by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC DPR), while the beach fronts are the responsibility of the NPS. Like the other beaches in Jamaica Bay, the Cross Bay Veteran's Memorial Bridge provides privacy for worshippers. The stretch of beach is fairly short – 0.3 km.

Vegetation provides a safe barrier from the curious or invasive gaze of onlookers. Worshipping is generally done in the morning, because of morning *surya* (sun) oblations and because it is less populated with people who could potentially disrupt the *puja*. Ceremonies vary depending on the time of year and circumstance. Permit prices differ based on gathering size and whether an NPS staff member is needed on the premises during the event.

Devotees worship at Jamaica Bay on a weekly or monthly basis. Apart from these worships, the sacred relics being bequeathed to the water vary as well. Items left for the divine include: fruits (bananas, limes, coconuts), milk, leaves (neem), *kheer* (rice pudding), incense, *ghee*, cane juice, *saris*, *murthis*, *jhandi* flags, *jhandas* (bamboo sticks) and flowers. There are also other items left with spiritual or religious intent in the vicinity. However, one cannot always definitively distinguish between Hindu and non-Hindu offerings left at the beaches. Due to the multiuser interface at these beaches, various spiritual and religious individuals and groups (Spiritual Baptist, Shango Baptist, Santería practitioners, and Voodoo and Hoodoo practitioners and followers) practice ceremonies and also offer items to the ocean at Jamaica Bay (Vertovec 1998).

Examining worship practices

For this study, we interviewed nine individuals from the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community who regularly worship at Jamaica Bay (three women and six men). The two distinct denominations in Indo-Caribbean Hindu culture were represented, *Sanatan* and *Shakti* (see Kloss 2016 for descriptions). All interviewees have experienced worshipping, praying and conducting rituals at the beaches for the majority of their lives. Indo-Caribbean Hindu organisations gave us the names and contact information of 14 Indo-Caribbean Hindu temples in the Borough of Queens. Interviewees were selected by contacting these *Sanatan* and *Shakti* temples to see if anyone was available to speak about worshipping practices at the beaches. After contacting these temples, a list of individuals who frequently pray at the beaches and a list of community leaders were given. This study had an uneven gender distribution of interviewees because of cultural norms within the community, which made it simpler for the first author (who identifies as male) to contact and meet with men than to conduct interviews with women. Additionally, one pandit (*Sanatan* priest) from Chennai, India, was interviewed (man), as were one worker from NPS and one community organiser from Jamaica Bay (both men). All quotes mentioned in this study are gathered from Indo-Caribbean Hindu interviewees: Aminta Kilawan, Vijah Ramjattan, Devin Udairam, Varuna Sahabir and Malini Chunnilal. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone. These confidential interviews were semi-structured with the intention of exploring engagement at Jamaica Bay, connections to the ecosystem and personal anecdotes at the beaches. Observational data was based on visits to each of the beaches more than 25 times from 22 May 2018 until 19 August 2018. Photos of the beaches, surrounding areas and contents left by worshippers of various spiritual and religious sects, and recreational users were taken. Detailed ethnographic notes were taken after trips to the beaches and attendance at community events (including religious events and visits to temples).

After observable data was collected, weekly debriefs with United States Forest Service (USFS) research partners were conducted to discuss these notes.

Temples and other religious and spiritual events were documented and then synthesised based on our observations. These observations provided a reliable context of cultural elements within the community and grounded our interpretations. They allowed us to communicate competently with Hindu temples, leaders and community members in a well-intentioned manner.

Spiritual experiences and environmental values in Jamaica Bay

Our qualitative analysis identified key elements involved in transforming environmental values among these community organisers and organisations (Sadhana, UMA and Shakti Samaj). Our results are grouped into two larger themes of *spiritual experiences* and how these experiences inform the *transformation of environmental values*. Within the first theme of spiritual experiences, interviewees placed heavy emphasis on the cultural, religious and historical background of worshipping at the waters, and the relationships being developed by worshipping, communing and healing through various acts to the spiritual resource of the Mother. In the second section of our results, we consider how environmental values are being transformed based on these spiritual experiences.

Spiritual experiences at Jamaica Bay

Community members were drawn to interact and convene at Jamaica Bay for many reasons. As described,

There are forms of creation after we pray. Yeah ... there is creation. There, on a spiritual level, it uplifts you, in terms of creation, for whatever reason, when you're done praying at the beach when you leave and you go home, you see a change in a lot of things, you see like good stuff happening, you get good omens all around you. So, it's like a creation of good – and the destruction of bad. So, everything you went there for is abolished. The negativity is abolished.

(Devin Udairam, a devotee)

The experiences at the beaches culminate as a call, reaction and then response from the divine. As one worships in this natural environment, a call is given to the divine. Interviewees then describe the unique reactions occurring at the beaches within the context of their specific Hindu denominations, *Sanatan* or *Shakti* worship. These unique reactions can be in the form of simply praying to a deity or a ritual practitioner manifesting a deity. Interviewees then elaborated on the powerful responses that come from the deities that reside in the waters – healing effects, abolishment of negativity, etc. It is the interconnectivity of all flowing water that directly connects interviewees to the divine

power of the Mother. The relationship of calling, reacting and responding with the divine Mother lays the foundation to the transformative environmental changes (clean-up efforts) that are occurring at the beaches.

Worshipping, communing and healing

The Ganga Maa is in my heart, the purity of the divine Mother is in my heart, and all of the Devatas and Devis, Christ, and Allah, they're all in my heart. I could just close my eyes and be anywhere in the world.

(Vijah Ramjattan, president of United Madrassi Association)

When asked how long have they been coming to the beaches to worship, most stated that they have been coming as long as they can remember. This pattern is one that runs deep within the devoted community – the water at Jamaica Bay flows with the ritual memory of ancestral traditions. Ways of worshipping at the beaches vary for each devotee. Arguably, each *puja* is unique. Larger groups gather at the water to perform *pujas* for special ceremonial occasions such as *Visarjan*, *Durga Puja* or *Karagam Puja*. Hindu ritual celebrations of life called *sanskars*, performed from birth to death, also take place here. These events can hold special significance in one's life – for example, the *mundan sanskar*, the ritual cutting of a child's hair. In Indo-Caribbean Hindu culture, interviewees mentioned the necessity to either have this event performed at the waters of Jamaica Bay or place the hair in the water after the ceremony. The generational reoccurrence of these ceremonies at the waterways of Jamaica Bay illustrate how these practices have grounded and oriented generations of devotees (Chapple & Tucker 2000).

One unique feature of the region is the diversity of beliefs, even within the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community. Two forms of worship dominate this community – *Sanatan* and *Shakti* worship. Both of these forms of worship follow the Vedic texts (Hindu scriptures). It is not to say that there is no overlap between these groups – many people subscribe to certain rituals from both forms of worship; however, there are worshippers who strictly adhere only to *Sanatan* or *Shakti* worship. Strict *Sanatan* worship conforms to the Vedanta scriptures and the deities within those texts. *Sanatan* worship could be simplified as being more of a symbolic semblance of the limited pantheon of Hindu deities within the Vedic scriptures. For example, when *Sanatan* worshippers commune at the beaches, mantras will be read and there is a symbolic offering of items to the water via fruits, flowers and other small sacred articles. *Shaktiism* includes the Vedic Hindu pantheon, but it also incorporates South Indian folk deities (Mariamma, Kateri and Sangili Karuppan); and for some *Shakti* temples in Queens, they include a wide range of spiritual figures such as the prophet Mohammed, the prophet Jesus and Buddha.

What distinguishes *Shaktiism* from *Sanatan* worship is the centrality of the Mother – the female energy, particularly Mother Kali. In addition, manifesting

a deity in the body of a ritual practitioner is a significant feature in *Shakti* worship. In a *Shakti* worship at the beach, *tappu* drums (South Indian snare drums) will beat fiercely while rituals are performed to guide the deity into the human vessel – blessed coconut milk, turmeric and ocean water are mixed to provide a concoction of energetic power which is poured over the deity's head to stay connected to the vessel. At this point, the devotees approach the divine and call upon the deity for guidance and healing. This interaction is known as "looking after". The spiritual conversation that is held for a *Sanatan* or *Shakti* worshipper with the Mother is an integral part of one's connection to the actual place, Jamaica Bay. The response given by the Mother in whichever form brings forth a sense of personal wellbeing.

Natural resource: the Mother

When I was younger ... I was born with asthma, severe asthma. And, the doctors gave me one month to live. My mother and father went to a priest, a *pujari*. And the *pujari* told them take me to the waters, bathe me in the water. And pray to the Mother, to purify the child to live. So said, so done ... one month they gave me to live – they [the doctors] took it away. They [the doctors] said, they don't know how. They [the doctors] don't know why, but the child's healthy again. I opened my eyes, I wasn't breathing properly. I was incubated. And then all of a sudden, I came back. So that's my significance to Mother, she is my mother. And I put everything in my life. I owe it to her, the Mother of Ganga.

(Devin Udairam, founder of Shakti Samaj)

The image of the Mother takes various personal forms for devotees, just as the Mother, herself takes various spiritual forms. One may hear her name as Mariamma – which is the South Indian folk goddess. It is believed that the characterisation of Mariamma gave rise to Mother Kali (McDermott & Kripal 2003). Therefore, there is the tradition of conceptualising both of these goddesses as one; and then, the other forms (Ganga and Kateri) branch from the centrality of Mariamma (Kali).

A popular form of the Mother that takes shape in *Sanatan* and *Shakti* worship is Mother Ganga. Mother Ganga is the presiding deity over the Ganga River in India (Chapple & Tucker 2000) – her symbolic presence is encapsulated in the waters at Jamaica Bay. She is known as the healer of blockages, sustainer of life and a force of absolute purity. Water is an aspect of Mother Ganga's absolute purity – in this way, the water is a purifying force for the devotee as well. This purification for the devotee takes shape in cleansing oneself with the water. In *Sanatan* worship, common offerings to Mother Ganga include items from *pujas* or by-products from prior *pujas* – these items (e.g. *havan* ritual can include any of the following: seeds, incense, *ghee*, milk or curd) cannot be disposed of in the trash; therefore, these *puja* items are taken to the waterfronts at Jamaica Bay.

When invoking deities in the physical or symbolic sense, there is an understanding that the direct link to the supreme, in any form, takes place at the waters. The devotional pilgrimages (either daily, monthly or yearly) are based on an intimate cause and effect relationship with the deity. Devotees share the causes of pain in their lives, either in the symbolic or manifested (physical) form, with the deity. The action of communicating with the deity through *pujas*, prayers or bathing elicit a spiritual call that releases directly into the urban environment (Svendsen et al. 2016). Interviewees mentioned a variety of responses from the divine, which include blessings, inspiration, protection, peace, success, happiness and enlightenment. For example, Mother Ganga is represented in the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community as a goddess of fertility. For devotees wishing to conceive, prayers to Mother Ganga bring the hope that conception will occur. In a broader sense of this relationship, there is a positive connection being continually strengthened with the Mother and the devotee at the beaches. The healing properties stimulated by these prayers cannot be understated. The Mother in all senses is an all-powerful entity that provides strength, guidance and healing to her devotees when called upon. This relationship takes form in a filial bond with the deity, her residence in the natural environment, and for some devotees, this process of Mother and child translates into a filial reciprocity with the surrounding ecosystem.

Environmental values informed by the spiritual experience

So it's not only a Hindu issue, it's a human issue, it's a society issue, it's a Jamaica Bay issue, Jamaica Bay is made up of everybody, not only Hindus.
(Vijah Ramjattan, president of United Madrassi Association)

Based on these spiritual experiences encountered at the waters at Jamaica Bay, the individuals and organisation leaders within the Indo-Caribbean Hindu community are actively attempting to articulate a new understanding within their religious ecology. They are attempting to build upon their deep-seated Hindu connections to the natural world to evoke environmental change, by taking steps to initiate discussions on environmental accountability in terms of their spiritual beliefs and experiences. The environmentally driven spiritual values evoked by these individuals and organisations allow other devotees to become more ecologically grounded and aware. In other words, they enrich environmental stewardship by employing rhetoric around one's obligation to the Earth and to the universe through eco-spiritual worship (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). The values of responsibility, loyalty and volunteerism are becoming entrenched within Sadhana, UMA and Shakti Samaj. However, in terms of their own Hindu beliefs, key tenets of *seva* and *bhakti* are being revisited. *Seva*, defined as a "loving service", is a service performed unto many (Haberman 2016). The sense of *bhakti* is a "devotion to a god in the Hindu tradition. This devotion takes various forms, emotional outpouring in song or ecstatic dance, literary production, or exchange with images of a deity"

(Chapple & Tucker 2000). *Bhakti* and *seva* in a worshipping sense are rearticulated to encompass an eco-obligation. That is to say, *bhakti* and *seva* are actively performed for not just the sake of the deity, but it is reciprocally performed to ensure the purity of the environment, the Mother and the self. Our interviews revealed four distinct elements that harness this new sense of eco-obligation to directly transform environmental values within the community: people-place relationship, heightened sense of environmental hazards/perceptions, spiritually driven environmental participation, and knowledge reconfiguration and sharing, which are each highlighted below.

People-place relationship

I want them to know a lot of us West Indians are doing this damage; there are West Indians who are trying to clean it up, I don't want us to be viewed in any which way that we are bad people.

(Devin Udairam, founder of Shakti Samaj)

The importance of the waters is spiritually valuable, yet, the religious ecology – Jamaica Bay itself – is important for these worshippers as well. A sense of ownership is formed by devotees at Jamaica Bay, as they emphasise the historical legacy and resiliency of worshipping at the waters in the Caribbean and in Queens (McMillen et al. 2016). There is a strong sense of love and respect for this area, as one individual expressed, “I want mainly, I want to see the beach cleaned because of the religious and spiritual and emotional feelings I have towards it”. This strong sense of people-place relationship informs how devotees shape their experiences and understand the cultural significance within these spaces.

Ownership over one's community, traditions, and consequently, sacred offerings are also a part of this religious ecology. When asked about the most serious environmental issues at the beach, interviewees mentioned that the sacred items left at the beach are a major concern. For those individuals and organisations initiating discussions at community events and at temples, there is a larger topic around communal transgressions at the beaches. There is a sense of ownership and guardianship over the sacred offerings because the items are a part of the community. The offerings are transfixed within the forms of *bhakti* and *seva* to the deity, and in turn, are an ecological imprint within the spiritual landscape. For example, at UMA cleanups, Shakti worshipping volunteers are encouraged to be dressed in their traditional *Kovil* attire – yellow and white garments. Cleaning the beaches dressed in the same outfits worn while conducting rituals at the beaches and in *Kovil* is aimed at placating community tensions. The local community will see that those, who they think are responsible for the pollution, are also engaged in cleaning up the environment. UMA beach cleanings also involve ritual *tappu* drumming, singing, music and traditional food. For these individuals and organisations attempting to promote

environmental discussions, the spiritual landscape is not separate from the ecological landscape, it is one. Therefore, there is a push for *bhakti* and *seva* to uphold both the spiritual and ecological vitality of the environment. As one *pujari* mentioned, the ownership he feels over his temple congregation overflows into the environmental integrity of the beaches, “But now, you know it’s my people, so I make sure that they pick up after themselves, I’m very strict on it now”. This sense of guardianship over one’s congregation connects to the environmental attitudes this *pujari* holds to ensure that this place of worship remains free of items. His sense of *bhakti* and *seva* extends to incorporate an eco-obligation for the environment. This form of accountability for the beaches by Indo-Caribbean Hindus works to the advantage of NPS, because as one NPS employee mentioned, “I mean we just don’t have staff to do anything else, we have too many sites to take care of, we just, we need the community help to do it”. The individuals and organisations interviewed focus on the sheer importance of their worshipping space, and the protection of it – a religious ecology where their grandparents and parents communed.

Heightened sense of environmental hazards/perceptions

People don’t know these things and I think with communication and awareness, then they’ll realise the effect that they’re having on the environment. But they are thinking, oh, my little bit of, my one yard of cloth or whatever, what damage can it do?

(Varuna Sahabir, pandita at Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir)

Interviewees shared their perceptions of the environmental effects both sacred items and general pollution had on flora and fauna at the beaches. We observed a spectrum of perspectives of what should and should not be left at the beaches by NPS, community groups and Indo-Caribbean Hindu individuals and organisations. For instance, one prevailing notion is that *prasad*, a religious offering, which can be in the form of rice, fruits or other blessed foods given to the water eventually become food for wildlife at Jamaica Bay. For these devotees, the act of making these offerings is one that nourishes the Earth and its creatures – a loving form of *seva*.

However, others believe that leaving any food item at the waters disrupts the ecological cycle for flora and fauna due to the pesticides and other residual chemicals on these foods. Sadhana and UMA strive to educate worshippers that the good intention (*seva*) placed at the waters is sufficient – the physical act of feeding wildlife is not necessary. Another individual expressed that he came to worship one day, and he saw that the same garbage bags from the following week was still there. It was a moment for this devotee to begin thinking about the impacts of slow accumulation. Another devotee expressed similar thoughts that if everyone brought a sacred offering one weekend – the cumulative impact of those offerings in one weekend would compromise the ecosystem.

Spiritually-driven environmental participation

Because you're at the water, the Mother is right next to you. Pray to her while you're doing these things, certain things that you're picking up – just pray to her while you're doing it.

(Devin Udairam, founder of Shakti Samaj)

For Sadhana and UMA, a large part of their work has been focused on spiritually driven environmental participation with the belief that everyone is endowed with a sacred presence within. When communing at the beach, a devotee acknowledging a deity is a greeting of one's inner ecology with that of the outer religious ecology. If environmental efforts are undertaken at the beaches, the devotee is performing *seva* on behalf of the deity and its divine Earthly creations. Consequently, the devotee is also benefitting, because their spirit is gaining fulfilment by providing *bhakti* to the deity. As stated before, there is a call, reaction and response process that takes place at the beaches. In spiritually driven environmental participation, one more step is added – devotee reaction. This process becomes a call to the divine, a reaction from the divine, a response from the divine and then a reaction by the devotee which becomes the eco-obligation of *seva* or *bhakti*.

This reactionary process was beautifully captured by one worshipper, "You see the Mother, you see the ocean, you're looking for this truth, you have to find it – but without realising it, it's in you". This process is seen as an innate sense of finding truth through one's own actions. This reactionary step can be expanded as a way of accessing new pathways to guide other devotees to partake in caring for the environment as a part of spiritual devotion. *Bhakti* evokes the filial piety of the Mother-child relationship where the Mother looks after the child and the child, in turn, cares for the Mother. In the push for environmental stewardship, *bhakti* and *seva* become a force of caring for the Mother as an environmental figure. When environmental outreach programmes are completed at the beaches, such as cleaning the beaches, these organisations incite the symbolic acknowledgement and appreciation from the Mother for having done a service unto her, the Earth, and oneself. These individuals and organisations urge devotees to trust based on the notion that the divine wants the worshipping area clean.

A more encompassing environmental take on *bhakti* and *seva* is situated within these discussions. As one individual described, "I say devotion in motion. I let that be my way of praying – active worship. I feel like that purpose is higher". Eco-obligations of *seva* and *bhakti* are intertwined with the active forms of environmental cleanup. Rather than offering a sacred item, the devotee is offering themselves as a vessel to clean the beaches. UMA beach clean-ups are unique in this way, because the participating *Kovils* and devotees are instructed to view the clean-ups as an act of *puja* where they serve the divine by cleaning and serving what the divine has created.

Knowledge reconfiguration and sharing

It's said that one should lead by example, so why not start now? Every small change we make today, creates a bigger and better change for tomorrow. With this, we can ensure that we create a better world for not only now, but for generations to come. The example we set today, will lay the foundation and instill the values for tomorrow's generations. If we all go a little, we can make a big difference. God gave us this world and it's our duty to protect and take care of it. That's how I look at it.

(Malini Chunnalil, Shakti Samaj clean-up participant)

We observed two forms of knowledge reconfiguration and sharing. On one hand, existing beliefs are reconfigured and retold to take a more eco-friendly form by bridging science and spiritual beliefs. On the other, organisations, individuals and temples challenge the status quo by sharing eco-centric information across various platforms. There have been discussions in these communities of reworking how deities are viewed and perceived. For example, as one *Shakti* worshipper explained the connection between Mother Ganga taking various divine forms at the beach and the various molecular forms she can also take – water as a liquid, solid and gas. With this reinterpretation, there is a re-emergence of the Mother and her direct being as water. This perspective could reformulate how water, in general, as a healing power, must also be respected and pure in all forms. There is a new relationship created whereby the spiritual entity of Mother Ganga, not only resides in the water but she, herself, is the water.

This reworking can take shape in how devotees perceive offering items. Rather than placing objects in the water and harming it, offering a “pure mind” could be sufficient devotion. In the above example, there is a blending of the scientific and Hindu cosmology to promote environmental awareness. Another act of knowledge reconfiguration comes in the form of restoring the *murthis* and *diyas* left at the beaches. Items that were left at the beaches due to their “brokenness”, are collected during clean-up events and restored (painted, glued, decorated etc.) to have a new sense of “sanctity” or sacred life. Sadhana has hosted several art workshops in the community and at the Jamaica Bay Visitor Centre to restore these offerings. These workshops fill a gap in the community in terms of access to art opportunities, but they also help to develop personal connections to these items. In 2019, a Canadian Indo-Caribbean artist, Dr. Andil Gosine, developed an exhibit to explore the deep connections of the offerings left at the beaches and to understand the connections of nature and faith (Vasquez 2019).

Knowledge sharing comes in the form of pamphlets and social media. Sadhana developed two comprehensive handouts to share with both worshippers and NPS staff. The first pamphlet incorporates the reconfiguration of what should and should not be left at the beach. The second pamphlet is unique in

that is was co-developed with NPS – this pamphlet has a tone that not only speaks to Hindu devotees, but it conveys the sanctity of Jamaica Bay to a non-Hindu visitor. These pamphlets are given to devotees that come to the beach and to temple congregations.

UMA also offers educational material through literature to educate the community on eco-friendly worship. UMA began the *Murthi* Rescue Mission: Our *Murthis* Are Not Garbage campaign where unwanted *murthis* are picked up free of charge and confidentially from anyone in the community (<https://www.madrassi.org/>). UMA has also posted videos on social media to show how sacred items left at the beach can negatively impact the ecosystem and beach users. Thousands of viewers have watched these videos, sparking hundreds of comments. Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities in Ontario, Canada and Florida also have commented on these social media posts, mentioning the same situation at lake and ocean fronts. These approaches enlist the eco-obligation to the Mother and the environment, in the form of *seva* and *bhakti*, but also enlighten people on the ecological impacts of the offerings.

Conclusion

On the shores of Jamaica Bay exist rich and varied practices of spirituality. The Indo-Caribbean Hindu community of the greater New York area view this site as a manifestation of Mother Ganga, a key goddess within Hindu theology. Jamaica Bay has become enmeshed within the cultural, traditional and religious practices of this community, not, however, to the detriment of its ecological integrity, as some have suggested (Dolnick 2011). Rather, our work suggests that this community's religious practices can lead to ecological connections and deepen community members' sense of place. These environmentally inspired values are being kindled amidst temples, personal discussions and over social media. Many of these values are outlined in this study, yet personal and familial values for these water-worshipping practices transcend this study. Reshaping and re-articulating environmental values within a spiritual context, where nature is already worshipped, is one route for environmental promotion, like in the case of Indo-Caribbean Hindu devotees who also practice environmental stewardship. There are a number of paths forwards. Some of our non-governmental research participant-informants indicated a need to conduct a quantitative assessment of Hindu artefacts left behind in these areas compared to general litter left at the beach. The comparison of the number and volume of sacred items versus general litter may help (a) understand the impact that clean-up efforts sponsored by Hindu organisations in the area are having; (b) identify pre-existing ecological issues at the Bay, distinct from the spiritual practices conducted by Hindu communities and (c) promote discussions between Indo-Caribbean community members and other local communities (fishers, boaters, bird watchers etc.) who can sometimes be at odds with the Hindu practices observed at the beach (Landor 2008, Van Hooreweghe 2015). McMillen et al. (Chapter 12) similarly explores how creating platforms

to share sacred relationships provides opportunities to engage with a diversity of environmental issues.

Future research might also involve a larger investigation of other spiritual systems engaged at Jamaica Bay and their environmental attitudes towards the Bay – some of these spiritual systems include Voodooism, Hoodooism, Shango Baptist and Spiritual Baptist. Additionally, a wider exploration with Indo-Caribbean individuals and organisations in Canada, Florida and California who also engage in worshipping practices at waterbodies might broadly demonstrate the role of community-based structures in shaping religious ecologies. Finally, future work should aim to understand and bridge the needs, priorities and key concerns of the diverse set of land managers, stewards and stakeholders involved in the Bay. In addition to the need to research and understand managers' perspectives that were not covered in this chapter, there is an opportunity for co-learning and knowledge exchange that could be facilitated in a collaborative workshop, discussion or "competency group" setting. Such an engagement would build upon the existing collaborative relationships that have been developed, for example, between Sadhana and NPS in co-hosting stewardship events and co-creating brochures for the public. A forum for open dialogue could be used to build further trust and a shared vision for Jamaica Bay.

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