

The Temple Bull Controversy at Skanda Vale and the Construction of Hindu Identity in Britain

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The temple bull controversy at Skanda Vale, a small monastic-cum-devotional complex in rural West Wales, first received public attention in April 2007 when Shambo, a black Friesian bull living in the Skanda Vale complex, tested positive for bovine tuberculosis. The UK government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs deemed that the bull, as a potential transmitter of the disease, posed a threat to human and bovine health and therefore must be slaughtered. The Skanda Vale residents challenged this decision; they demanded to be allowed to quarantine Shambo and restore him to health through medication. In the following weeks, which culminated in Shambo's killing on July 27, Skanda Vale found itself at the center of a widely publicized campaign, which briefly transformed it from a little-known and avowedly eclectic devotional community in a remote part of the country, to a politically engaged "Hindu" organization mounting a legal challenge to the policies of the Welsh government and winning supporters from as far away as India, Russia, USA, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland.¹

The battle (both moral and legal) over Shambo was fought on a number of different fronts. At the most elementary level, this was a battle between the monks at Skanda Vale, deeply unhappy to lose their cherished bullock, and government officials, determined to curb the spread of bovine tuberculosis at any cost. At a second level, it came to be recast as a conflict between the forces of *dharma* (the just and the righteous) and *adharma* (the unjust and immoral). At a third level, this became a conflict between Britain's so-called "Hindu community" fighting to protect its religious freedom and Britain's secular state supposedly denying Hindus this right. My aim here is to explore these different levels of conflict and examine the meanings and symbols brought into play by the contesting groups; this in turn provides insights into three critical developments: first, the transformation of Skanda Vale's identity from an eclectic spiritual organization into a "Hindu" religious group; second, the public representations of Hinduism, and of a supposedly unified Hindu community in Britain, that emerged in the course of this controversy; and third, the voices of dissent and disagreement over Hinduism and Hindu *dharma* that emerged in its aftermath.

About Skanda Vale

The official name for the community at Skanda Vale is “The Community of the Many Names of God” (henceforth “the Community”). The Community’s emblem carries symbols from a number of different religious traditions and includes the Hindu symbol “om,” the Muslim crescent and star, the Christian cross, the Buddhist wheel, and the Zoroastrian fire symbol.² The vast majority of monks and nuns forming the Community are white Europeans from Christian or secular backgrounds. These individuals, when entering monastic life, undergo not the Hindu renunciatory ritual but instead take Franciscan vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty. They are attired in robes which bear some similarity to the habit of Franciscan monks. On numerous occasions when my students and I have visited Skanda Vale on study trips and asked the monks questions about the Community’s religious identity, the replies have invariably been that they believe in the path of devotion and service, but that their endeavor is “spiritual” rather than “religious,” and that they would hesitate to define themselves as strictly Hindu or Christian or as belonging to any other such category.³ As evidence of their respect for all religions, rather than for any one to the exclusion of others, they often point to the symbols displayed in their Skanda shrine, which draw not just from Hinduism but also from Christianity, Sikhism, and Islam.

Alongside this tendency towards self-definition as an eclectic, all-inclusive faith, however, the Skanda Vale community also has some distinctively Hindu elements. The late founder of the Skanda Vale community was a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu. The three main shrines in the Skanda Vale complex—dedicated to Vishnu, Skanda, and Maha Shakti respectively—which were built in accordance with the founder’s mystic visions and insights, are identifiably Hindu, as are the *pujas* which the community performs at these shrines a number of times each day. The pilgrims attracted to Skanda Vale too are mainly Hindu South Asians in Britain, the vast majority from Tamil backgrounds, and for them Skanda Vale is very much a Hindu place of pilgrimage.

Though scholars have not adequately researched Skanda Vale, the few who have examined this religious complex have struggled to interpret its meaning and significance in terms of familiar categories. The oldest piece of research on this Community was by Donald Taylor (1987) who first described the Community as an eclectic new religious movement, but then went on to regard it as essentially Hindu. Gerald Parsons (1993: 11) identified it as a syncretistic Hindu-Buddhist community with elements drawn from Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, and Islam. More recently Ron Geaves (2007) has argued that Skanda Vale’s belief and practice is based essentially on a Tamil Shaivite *sampradaya*, or tradition, that emphasizes raw *bhakti* focusing on the immediate and the experiential. He concedes, however, that Skanda Vale’s apparent eclecticism is somewhat ambiguous, especially its elements of Christian worship, the Franciscan robes of the Swamis and the unfamiliar silence and discipline in the temples, so unlike other Hindu temples in India and abroad (Geaves 2007: 119).

I would argue that this apparent ambiguity is crucial to our understanding of Skanda Vale and arises not least because of the completely different cultural backgrounds of the founder (Tamil Hindu) and the majority of monks and nuns forming the Community (white European). Because of the evident eclecticism in symbols and meanings at Skanda Vale, the Community eludes definition as a strictly Hindu place of worship. However, because it draws deeply from a rich repertoire of Hindu symbols, meanings, and practices in its rituals and other daily observances, it attracts mainly Hindu pilgrims. I would argue therefore that Skanda Vale's identity rests on a tension between being Hindu and not, or in other words, between being readily classifiable in terms of religious categories on the one hand and eluding all such classification on the other. Interestingly, as the Shambo controversy developed between April and July 2007, the Skanda Vale community both on its web pages and in its representations to the government seemed to incline increasingly towards self-definition as a Hindu organization. The move to slaughter Shambo thus came to be interpreted as not just violating the sanctity of life generally, but also as disregarding the Hindu tradition of venerating cows and bulls as sacred animals. Furthermore, such an act was seen to result in the desecration of Skanda Vale's Hindu temples and therefore of Hindus and Hinduism in Britain. This redefinition of Skanda Vale as now an unambiguously "Hindu" organization was, as we shall see, imperative for mobilizing support for Shambo from Hindu groups in Britain and elsewhere.

Skanda Vale's Campaign to Save a Life

UK government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs sees bovine tuberculosis as an infectious disease that has long posed a threat to both human and bovine life. Over the last fifteen years the incidence of bovine TB has increased significantly⁴ and measures to test cattle for tuberculosis and slaughter infected animals, first put in place in 1935, remain central to the government's strategy to stop its spread.

From DEFRA's point of view, Shambo at Skanda Vale was merely one in a long line of bulls and cows spanning the decades to have tested positive for bovine tuberculosis and been issued a notice of intended slaughter. To spare Shambo's life would be to increase the risk of infection for the national herd. For the monastic community at Skanda Vale, however, Shambo was not just any bull. He was a beloved Skanda Vale resident, whom the monks and nuns had nurtured and cherished since his birth in 2001. Killing him in order to reduce the risk to other cattle was as unthinkable as killing a fellow monk suffering from a lethal infectious disease.

The website maintained by the monks at Skanda Vale carried a web diary with a series of entries for the critical period in 2007 between April 27 (when Shambo tested positive) and July 27 (when officials confirmed that he had been put down).⁵ The entries in this diary offer important insights into some of the grounds on which the Skanda Vale monks fought their battle with DEFRA and the Welsh Assembly

government in a vain attempt to save Shambo's life. The Community based its campaign on three key arguments. First, they argued that bovine tuberculosis is not incurable and that the monks at Skanda Vale were prepared to quarantine Shambo and restore him to health through medication. Second, they pointed out that Shambo was not a farm animal, that he was not kept for commercial purposes, and that it did not make sense to mete out the same treatment to him as to other cattle in British farms which supplied meat to Britain's food industry. And third, the Community argued that animal life counted for no less than human life.

In addition to these three crucial points, the monks further argued that the test for bovine tuberculosis was not foolproof and that further tests would be required to establish whether or not Shambo was indeed infected. The web-entry on May 22 reads: "A rational and constructive approach at this stage would be to carry out further diagnostic tests to find out if he is indeed infected with bovine TB. There are a range of tests available and we hope the Welsh Assembly, appreciating the sensitivity of the subject, will engage positively to enable these tests to take place." The emphasis here on a "rational and constructive" approach is significant. The monks not only expressed their empathy with the government with respect to the latter's fears about the spread of bovine tuberculosis, but also showed a willingness to do the needful in Shambo's case in order to eliminate the risk. Their demand that the government should confirm, using further tests, the presence or otherwise of the tuberculosis bacteria in Shambo's body was subsequently rejected by the Welsh government on the basis that the original method of testing, recognized by the European Union and the World Organisation for Animal Health, was 99.9 percent accurate. Skanda Vale's further request that, in case subsequent tests too came back positive, the government should consider measures other than killing in order to prevent the spread of infection, was also rejected. The Welsh Assembly government argued that there are no antibiotics licensed in the UK for treating bovine tuberculosis in cattle and that there would be no way of testing whether a full cure had been effected after such treatment, which meant Shambo would have to be quarantined for life. The government also argued that isolating an animal with bovine tuberculosis was extremely difficult and required highly specialized facilities found only in "top-level research centres."⁶ Given the long lead time to build such a facility at Skanda Vale, this option was not feasible.

By May 4, the monks had constructed a shed within the main temple in order to house Shambo in isolation from other cattle.⁷ Skanda Vale also started an online petition which the general public was invited to support through a signature campaign, and according to the website, the number of supporters to have signed the petition grew from 600 in the first twenty-four hours to about 20,000 by mid-July.⁸

Perhaps in a bid to keep the Shambo issue alive in the public imagination and to generate empathy for this apparently healthy young animal living under the shadow of a death sentence, the Skanda Vale monks also set up a webcam in Shambo's new lodgings so that visitors to their website could see him live at any time of day or night, by clicking on a link to "Moo tube." Additionally, diary entries began to

include what were depicted as Shambo's own thoughts on his situation. Shambo's first entry on May 11 reads: "Whoa, have I got news for you! They all have been out here today. Tomorrow I hear the Queen is paying a visit. I think I hit celebrity status—do they do Big Brother for Bovines....All the monks tell me my Bovine Buddies are calling in from Russia, the States and even Japan...."⁹ These attempts to humanize Shambo, were not only part of Skanda Vale's strategy to generate support for his cause, but perhaps also reflected the Community's loving attitude to the animals in their care.¹⁰ This attitude was further reflected in a telling comment in the entry for June 30 where the author of the web diary congratulated the Welsh Assembly for finally calling Shambo by his name instead of referring to him merely as a "TB reactor." Right to the last, when Shambo was finally removed by government officials on July 26 from his home in Skanda Vale to be slaughtered, the entries in the web diary maintain this tone of intimate affection for Shambo. About the final few minutes, the July 27 entry says: "At around 7:25 pm, the government officials finally loaded Shambo onto a trailer and drove him away to his death. Shambo gave us one last look from the government trailer. We feel that he understood that his life was not in vain. Many people around the world have been deeply touched by his plight and have questioned their attitude and that of society in general to the sanctity of life...." This entry thanks those who signed the petition, urges readers not to forget that bovine tuberculosis is treatable, and exhorts them to continue to voice their concern about this issue by writing to the Minister for Rural Affairs in Wales. At this level of conflict between Skanda Vale on the one hand, and DEFRA and the Welsh Assembly government on the other, the issues raised are not just about Shambo or about Skanda Vale's animal stock; they also address the question of animal welfare generally. The implication here is that the government's policy on culling tuberculosis-infected animals is fundamentally misguided and that this policy should be questioned and opened to further debate.¹¹

Dharma versus Adharma: The Battle Between Good and Evil

It is noteworthy that in seeking to mobilize support for the campaign to save Shambo's life, the campaigners at Skanda Vale couched their message in the language of *dharma* and *adharma*. Temple discourses delivered to visiting pilgrims at Skanda Vale represented the Community and its supporters as forces of *dharma* (the just, righteous, and moral), fighting a moral and ethical battle against the adharmic (the evil, unrighteous, and immoral) Welsh Assembly government and DEFRA. These pronouncements, which draw upon Hindu conceptions of morality and ethics, are noteworthy, particularly since they served as a means for mobilizing support among Hindus in Britain.

The Skanda Vale web diary reproduces the complete text of two temple discourses, delivered on May 6 and July 1, 2007 (both Sundays). It is usually on Saturdays and Sundays, especially in the summer months, that Skanda Vale attracts large numbers of Hindu pilgrims, who often arrive in busloads from as far away as

London, Birmingham and Leicester, to pray and make offerings at the shrines to Vishnu, Skanda, and Devi. In the temple discourse of May 6,¹² the discursant, Swami Suryananda (also known as Brother Michael) explains the situation in Skanda Vale in the following terms:

We are faced at the moment in the temple by forces of Adharma. By forces of great negativity. And these forces are manifest in the form of the government [and] DEFRA, which is the department for the countryside and rural affairs....

We have put Shambo in the Temple—Shambo is a name of Lord Shiva because Nandi the bull is the vahana [vehicle] of Lord Shiva. The cow and the bull are so sacred animals. Krishna! The love that Krishna has for the cow and the bull. Govinda! Krishna's immense love for the cows and the bulls his whole life was about the universal embodiment of Almighty God. We are in Lord Shiva's Temple. Lord Murugan is the energy of Lord Shiva. We must take every action to safeguard the life of this very special member of our family. It is quite a daunting thing! We do not want to be faced here with a situation where the government are coming here and trying literally though aggression to desecrate the Temple to take Shambo out and kill him....

...We have a duty and responsibility not to allow Shambo's life, our religion and our Temple to be desecrated by the forces of Adharma.

In the closing sections of his discourse, Swami Suryananda explains the larger situation as the result of god's divine *lila* (play). He asks why god has allowed Shambo to be involved in this drama; and in answer, argues that this is God's way of testing the commitment of devotees. This commitment, he argues, can be demonstrated only by supporting Shambo's cause and "acknowledging the sanctity of life in a society where life has been so devalued." "The lord," he argues, "is providing you with an opportunity to serve God, to really come to know almighty God, and to follow Dharma." He tells the devotees that they now have a decision to make.

You can either act or you can not act. As Krishna taught in the Gita, Karma, cause and effect, is either action or inaction. If you don't act and we don't get support it is quite likely that the government will come here—we will try our best to save his [Shambo's] life—but he will be dragged from the Temple and he will be executed. That is a reality which may happen in the next few weeks.

Swami Suryananda then instructs the devotees about the action necessary for preventing this eventuality:

When you go home talk to your community groups, talk to your MPs, talk to the Hindu Council, talk to any Hindu governing body or any Buddhist governing body and make a big drama because unless we make a big drama the life of this bull, Shambo, will be lost. We do not want in any way to be involved in violence or

aggression. This is a peaceful protest, but protest we must, because if we do not make every effort to save his life where is religion, where is spirituality?

In the second discourse on July 1,¹³ the same discursant reiterates the need for action. Once again describing the government's actions as adharmic and "driven by Asuric [demonic] forces," he says:

We have to stand up for Dharma. We have to stand up for the sanctity of life. There have been many people in the Hindu community—community leaders—who have either been silent on this issue or who have been supportive. Now the question you should be asking your temple committees, asking the representative bodies of the Hindu communities in the country [is], "Who do you represent? Do you represent Dharma? Do you represent almighty god? Or do you represent self interest and politics?" What is the purpose of an organization that can not uphold the fundamental tenets of our faith?

The strategies used in these discourses for mobilizing support are self-evident. First, there is reference to Hindu mythology (particularly with respect to Shiva's bull Nandi and Krishna's pastoral background as a young cowherd) to remind Hindus of the sacred symbolism of cows and bulls in Hindu traditions.¹⁴ After making a case for the sanctity of cattle life in Hinduism, the discursant posits the conflict between Skanda Vale and the government as one between those upholding *sanatana dharma* (eternal truth) and those defying it. He then exhorts Hindus to take the side of *dharma* and join forces with Skanda Vale in order to fight the adharmic forces of the government.¹⁵ The conflict as he presents it is not just something remote and distant and therefore of little concern to the visiting pilgrims. Instead, as an instance of god testing each individual and the depth of their commitment to *dharma*, this conflict, he argues, has major implications for each and every Hindu. This moment calls for action in defence of *dharma* (the discursant refers here to the critical juncture in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Krishna urges Arjuna to act in accordance with *dharma*).

The action requested of the visiting pilgrims is noteworthy. This is not just about the pilgrim signing a petition or lending individual support to the Shambo cause. What the discursant exhorts his listeners to do is to lobby powerful individuals and groups who might be able to influence the decision-making of the government. In particular, we find the Community here making a desperate bid to establish contact with organizations of "official Hinduism." I use the term "official Hinduism" in the sense that Steven Vertovec (2000) does, to refer to the articulation of Hinduism by leaders of organizations that claim to speak for all Hindus. The "officials" here are the often self-proclaimed representatives of Hinduism who are concerned with formulating what Hinduism is about and what it means to be Hindu.¹⁶ Underlying Skanda Vale's move to rally Hindus to the cause of *dharma* are two related moves. First, we find here a subtle redefinition of Skanda Vale as unambiguously "Hindu." Second, on the basis of this redefinition, we see an attempt on the part of the

Community to recruit allies from Britain's organizations of official Hinduism, in the hope that representatives of these organizations, as "true" spokespersons for this tradition, might lobby the government in support of Shambo.

This portrayal of the impending slaughter as a violation of *dharma*, and as resulting in the desecration of Hinduism and of a Hindu sacred site, won the Skanda Vale monks immediate support in their campaign against the Welsh Assembly government. The support came mainly from the Hindu organizations they were targeting in Britain and elsewhere, as well as from politicians like Andrew Dismore (MP for Hendon) and David Miliband (then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) who issued statements emphasizing that the Shambo issue was of serious concern to British Hindus since it violated their religious freedom. In no time at all the web diary had begun to list names of office bearers of various Hindu groups, all of whom had extended their support to Skanda Vale in their hour of need. Among these groups were the Hindu Forum of Britain, the National Council of Hindu Temples, the Hindu Councils of Birmingham, Brent and Harrow, the Hindu Cultural Association of Wales, as well as the Hindu Council UK and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK. Spokespersons from these groups wrote to MPs, issued press statements, and raised awareness within their own as well as allied organizations about the Shambo crisis. Meanwhile Skanda Vale monks continued to put out repeated appeals for further support, the wording of the appeal assuming ever more urgency.

In early July, in a highly symbolic move, the Skanda Vale authorities installed a *murti* (image) of the deity in front of Shambo's pen at the rear of the temple. In the July 1 discourse, Swami Suryananda describes this move in terms charged with religious meaning.

We, at the end of the Pooja, will take a special Moorthi [image] of Lord Subramaniam and we will install that Moorthi in front of Shambo because this is the temple of Lord Subramaniam. *He is the sole authority in this temple!* If anybody from the government wants to try to enter this temple they will be challenging the authority of almighty God. Do you know who Lord Subramaniam is? He is the commander in chief of the heavenly forces. He is the destroyer of the forces of Adharma. For somebody to attempt to enter this temple to kill a member of his family would be the highest act of desecration of the sanctity of life.

By setting up Shambo's pen within the main temple, and thereafter by installing an image of the deity before the pen, the Community effectively located Shambo in a space clearly demarcated as sacred. Through the continuous observance of *pujas* (rituals of worship) at what now became Shambo's shrine, this ritual space was given a new potency and meaning. News clips and footage of the goings-on at Skanda Vale in the days leading up to Shambo's removal invariably showed the monks and nuns at prayer before this shrine. This was clearly now a place of religious activity, and there was no way government officials could enter this space

without desecrating and defiling what was obviously sacred.

The Hindu Forum of Britain, claiming to represent 700,000 Hindus in Britain, further added fuel to the fire when its secretary general, reiterating the idea that killing a sacred temple cow or bull was highly sacrilegious and unacceptable to Hindus, now announced that if necessary “the Hindu community” would form a human chain around the bull to prevent its slaughter.¹⁷ This lent the Shambo crisis ever more publicity and bolstered the notion that the so-called “British Hindu community” in its unified entirety was firmly behind the Skanda Vale campaign.

Hindus versus the State: The Legal Battle

When Skanda Vale officially challenged in court the Welsh Assembly government’s decision to slaughter Shambo, the key issue was not about the advisability or otherwise of the government’s culling policy as it applied to cattle generally; it was instead about the rights of members of one particular religious group to enjoy their religious freedom in a multicultural and pluralistic context. The challenge was mounted on the grounds that Shambo’s slaughter would violate Skanda Vale’s “right to manifest their religion.” The claimant acting for Skanda Vale was Swami Suryananda (Brother Michael) who argued on the Community’s behalf that:

for both the Community and the wider Hindu world, if Shambo were to be slaughtered, that would be a particularly sacrilegious act, a serious desecration of their temple and a gross invasion of their right to manifest their religion, a right protected by Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.¹⁸

Article 9 of the European Convention provides that:¹⁹

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

The article provides further that:

Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interest of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Judge Hickinbottom sitting as additional judge at the Cardiff High Court heard the arguments of both the claimant and the defendants (Welsh Ministers acting on behalf of the Welsh Assembly government). The Judge ruled in favor of Skanda Vale

arguing that the government had failed both to engage sufficiently with the issue of the Community's freedom to manifest its religion and to specify clearly what proper public interest objective would be met by Shambo's slaughter. His ruling therefore quashed the government's decision to slaughter Shambo. It remained, however, in the power of the government to reconsider the issue and make its final decision. The Judge made it clear in his ruling that this judgment did not guarantee that Shambo's life would be spared.

This judgment was subsequently overruled when the Welsh Assembly government appealed against it, and an Appeal Court in London upheld the appeal. More than the judgment itself, however, it is the Judge's description of the Skanda Vale community and Hinduism that is of particular relevance here. In his judgment, Judge Hickinbottom asserts in no uncertain terms that the Community is Hindu (section 14). He then describes Hinduism as:

A religion which has been established for many centuries, being one of the oldest monotheistic religions. Whilst believing in a single God, Hindus recognise the different facets of the personality of God, which are represented by a multitude of forms and symbols to be found in their temples [section 14].

Whilst Hinduism has a wide variety of traditions, within these there are fundamental themes and elements. The Community's tradition is of Sanatha [*sic*] Dharma (or "timeless consciousness of God"), as taught by Lord Krishna (a deity worshipped across many traditions of Hinduism) in the Bhagavad Gita (the central Hindu religious text) [section 15].

It is not entirely clear from the wording of the judgment whether this is the Judge's independent pronouncement on Hinduism or whether he borrows his ideas from Skanda Vale's submission. In any case, Hinduism in this representation appears not unlike Christianity or Islam. It is a monotheistic religion, with one central text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Judge goes on to assert that sanctity of life is a fundamental tenet of "the Sanathana Dharma Hindu tradition," the temple bull being of particular symbolic significance in this tradition [Section 17(ii)]. He argues that these beliefs are ancient and well-established and maintained by large numbers of people. This, he asserts, is evidenced by the letters before him from representatives of the Hindu Forum of Britain, the World Council of Hindus, the Hindu Council UK, the National Council of Hindu temples, the Shaiva (Hindu) Federation of the UK, and interestingly, the Institute of Jainology which according to the judgment represents twenty separate Jain organizations throughout the UK.

The judgment is in a sense the culmination of a sequence of developments which shaped the identity both of the Skanda Vale community and of Hinduism in Britain in the course of the Shambo crisis. As per the judgment, Skanda Vale was now unambiguously a Hindu community. Hinduism was a unified religion, monotheistic and with a central text as the basis for its belief and practice. It was furthermore an organized religion with Hindu organizations like the Hindu Forum of Britain and the

Hindu Council of UK serving as the official spokespersons on all matters Hindu and representing the 700,000 Hindus in Britain. The fight over Shambo's life was a fight between not just Skanda Vale and the Welsh Assembly government but between Britain's entire "Hindu community" (supposedly unified and therefore in the singular) and Britain's secular state. By striving to protect its own and Shambo's interests, Skanda Vale was in effect campaigning to protect the rights of Hindus generally throughout Britain.

The judgment however overlooks a number of issues which, though they may have no bearing on the issue of Skanda Vale's religious freedom and the Community's right to preserve Shambo's life, do have a bearing on how Hinduism is constructed in its multicultural, pluralistic British host environment. The judgment overlooks Hinduism's diversity—the diversity of its textual resources, the diversity of its perspectives on god (which include, for instance, nontheistic, atheistic, monotheistic, polytheistic, and pantheistic elements), and the diversity of sources of religious authority. It presumes the presence of a single unified community of Hindus, accepts uncritically the claims of leaders of Hindu organizations that they represent the views of *all* Hindus, and overlooks the crucial point that the 20,000 signatories of the Skanda Vale petition in fact constitute less than 3 percent of Britain's Hindu population.

Hindu Campaigning and Performative Politics

The developments relating to Shambo are one more instance of what Zavos (2008) refers to as concerted "Hindu campaigning" over the last few years in Britain. On a number of occasions in recent times, leaders of Hindu organizations in the UK have mobilized resources in order to construct a seemingly unified image of Hindu identity and have sought to regulate its representation in commercial and state institutions. Such campaigning, Zavos points out, draws upon the discursive framework of the state's multicultural policies which, though they operate within a secular framework, show a degree of ambivalence and vulnerability when confronted with collective demands couched in specifically religious terms.²⁰

Throughout the many stages of its development, the campaign to protect Shambo's life closely followed the "template of action" that Zavos identifies for Hinduism campaigns generally. First an incident is identified as disrespectful of Hinduism or, in this case, threatening Hindus' right to practice their religion. Complaints are presented by one or more organization(s) claiming to represent the Hindu community. These are often accompanied by the threat of direct action of some kind if the offending party (in this case the government) fails to act. The Hindu "community" is described as suffering corporate feelings of hurt and shock. These feelings are articulated in the context of a multicultural society expected to act in a tolerant and accommodating manner. The campaign is publicized in Asian and other mass media, and MPs and other prominent persons are lobbied. The resolution sought is usually an apology tendered by the offending party, withdrawal of an offensive product, or,

in this case, withdrawal of the offending “notice of intent to kill Shambo” seen to curb Hindus’ freedom of religious practice. The desired resolution is of course not always achieved, and failure can have the result either of undermining the authority of these organizations and their leaders or winning them further support from parties who perceive themselves to be grievously wronged.

Campaigns for the protection of Hindu rights led by these spokespersons are an important means by which they generate particular representations of Hinduism and mobilize support for these representations. These campaigns have an important performative aspect (Hansen 2004); through performance, spectacle and publicity, the spokespersons simultaneously create and express the idea of a unified Hindu community, as well as legitimize their own position as its representatives. Through such performance, these individuals seek to convince, persuade, and make things happen in the world, not least by creating public moods and sentiments which also lend them authority and legitimacy. Visibility, as Thomas Blom Hansen reminds us, is of utmost importance here—by supporting causes, staging protests, taking court action and winning media coverage, emerging organizations and their leaders become the focus of public attention. These moments of high visibility are what Hansen (2004: 24) refers to as “generative political moments par excellence” which play a significant formative role in the construction of political identities, notions of collective rights, and views on citizenship.

Voices of Dissent: Publics and Counterpublics

For Hindus in Britain generally, what the temple bull controversy at Skanda Vale crucially demonstrates is the impact that critical events like this one can have on questions of religious identity. It brought Hindus and Hinduism in the UK into the public gaze in a manner reminiscent of a number of widely publicized Hinduism campaigns in recent British history.²¹ The mass media, leaders of organizations claiming to speak for all Hindus, and transnational Hindu networks all played an important role in forging a particular public image of Hinduism based on the assumption and assertion of a Hindu commonality, stripping it of its intrinsic complexity and diversity. As Kim Knott (1987: 165) describes it, the vernacular (the regional, the sectarian, and the caste-based) gives way to a notionally unified pan-Indian and pan-Hindu system of belief and practice and multiple identities give way to a unitary community. These attempts at representing Hinduism as a unified singular community are in turn legitimized by various state, educational, religious, and public bodies which, when they approach British Hindus, invariably assume a certain unity and commonality in Hindu belief and practice.

In the gradual development of Hinduism as a self-conscious tradition in Britain’s multicultural context, we can clearly discern what Vertovec (2000: 106–7) describes as “vis-à-vis dynamics”—where unified collective self-awareness is mobilized and generated vis-à-vis a perceived opponent, in this case, the state and its secular policies on cattle welfare and/or the meat industry. Assumptions of Hindu commonality,

however, do not always go uncontested. When contestation and conflict between different Hindu groups and individuals—over what it does or does not mean to be Hindu, or what counts as Hindu *dharma* and what does not—spills out into the public domain, another kind of vis-à-vis dynamics comes to the fore. Plural and diverse Hindu worldviews, practices, and traditions begin to assert themselves in opposition to ideas and representations of Hindu unity and commonality.

In the case of the Shambo crisis, both the representations of Hindu *dharma*, as well as the representatives, were in fact challenged by dissenting voices. Prior to Shambo's death, no one appears to have spoken out in opposition to what was portrayed as the unified Hindu position on his killing. However, one voice arguing against the Save Shambo campaign made itself heard not long after Shambo's slaughter. In an article published in *New Statesman*, the Director for Education of the Hindu Council UK, Mr. Jay Lakhani, argued that the campaign had in fact sacrificed Hinduism's credibility in the British public domain.²² This writer appeared to share the government's view that no degree of quarantining would eliminate the danger Shambo posed to other cattle and that saving Shambo therefore would have meant posing a high health risk to the national herd. To seek special privileges for animals at Hindu temples, he argued, while endangering the lives of cattle elsewhere, went against the principle of the sanctity of all life.

It is evident from the tone of Lakhani's closing lines that his arguments were made not merely in opposition to the Save Shambo campaign, but also against the stance of the Hindu Forum of Britain, which was staunchly in support of the Save Shambo campaign.²³ In his concluding statement, Lakhani says: "The Hindu Forum has not only managed to dupe Hindus into supporting a misguided campaign but to have duped Home Office ministers and the media into thinking they are fit to represent Hinduism itself."

Lakhani's article unleashed a storm of comments and opinions in the *New Statesman*, many of them emotionally charged, often aggressive and accusatory, from Hindus who clearly had strong views on the issues involved. It became quickly apparent that these participants in the renewed Shambo debate were deeply divided over the question of whether or not cow-slaughter in this particular context was morally defensible. This online debate, launched at one remove from both Skanda Vale and government authorities, became a moral and ideological battle over what counts as dharmic action when faced with a crisis such as this, fought between two main camps—those who saw Shambo's slaughter as an outrage to Hindu sentiments, and others who felt his killing was justified and entirely in keeping with Hindu *dharma*. This debate in turn raised critical questions about Hindu identity and what it means to be a Hindu in a pluralistic and diasporic context. Textual references, mythological stories, Sanskrit aphorisms were all mustered in support of the multiple arguments advanced in favor of, as well as against, Shambo's killing.²⁴ Most importantly, the debate put paid to the notion that there is a unified Hindu community in Britain with shared values and ideas about cow protection in general and the issue of Shambo's slaughter in particular.

These assertions of diversity and difference—though relatively muted in the British context so far—can also have potentially far-reaching implications for the ways in which Hinduism comes to be constructed in its British diasporic context. These “counterpublics” remind us that Hindus and Hinduism are not situated in the official public sphere alone. They are also located in unofficial and semi-official spheres (both in Indian and transnational contexts) where Hinduism and Hindu identity can come to be interpreted in ways that challenge or oppose the “official” version. In response to the official version, these counterpublics generate comment, dialogue and debate, thus frustrating official attempts at simplification, definition, and containment. As John Zavos and Deepa Reddy point out,²⁵ and as the Shambo episode demonstrates, there is thus nothing necessarily definitive and final about public representations of Hinduism and Hindu identity; these are continually created, contested, and reconstituted through imaginative and creative processes which are fluid, shifting, and never-ending.

Concluding Remarks

For the Community of the Many Names of God at Skanda Vale, seeking the support of official Hindu representatives for Shambo’s cause meant aligning Skanda Vale’s identity more closely with an official Hindu identity. This alignment, however, may have been temporary; it is conceivable that with the passage of time Skanda Vale may once again assert its autonomy from religious groupings and classifications. The Community’s Tamil Sri Lankan founder, Swami Subramaniam, its most crucial link with Hindu traditions, passed away in July 2007, leaving a largely non-Hindu community of monks and nuns to carry on his work. The passing away of their founder and spiritual leader could well have important implications for the ways in which Skanda Vale’s identity comes to be defined in coming years.

Following the Shambo affair, a series of subsequent events kept alive, in the public imagination, the association between Hinduism and cow protection. Two further cows at Skanda Vale were put down a month after Shambo’s killing. The cow protection issue took an unexpected turn in January 2008 when officials of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) put down an ailing cow, Gangotri, belonging to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) based at Bhaktivedanta Manor, north of London, once again generating outrage among Hindu representatives from a range of national and international Hindu organizations. The issues this time were different, since Gangotri was not infectious and posed no risk to the national herd. A strongly worded resolution adopted by “outraged Hindu leaders” and addressed to the prime minister, suggested that the government had failed “the British Hindu community.”²⁶ After lobbying RSPCA and DEFRA for a year, ISKCON eventually received an apology from RSPCA for offense caused by their actions. Though a full discussion of the Gangotri controversy is well beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy here that this episode, and the events following from it, once again have far-reaching conse-

quences for the complex ways in which Hinduism and Hindu identity come to be constructed in Britain.

Notes

1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6916077.stm (accessed May 13, 2008).
2. As Taylor (1987) notes, the emblem is not unlike that used by the Sathya Sai Mission, the institution headed by Sathya Sai Baba, one of the most popular “godmen” in India today. This may reflect the Skanda Vale founder’s previous associations with Satya Sai devotees during the twenty-five years that he spent in London prior to his move to West Wales.
3. The phenomenon of religiously unaffiliated spirituality has been the subject of considerable academic debate and discussion over the last couple of decades. For an overview of this literature, see Chandler (2008).
4. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/abouttb/index.htm> (accessed May 12, 2008).
5. <http://www.skandavale.org/shambo.htm> (accessed March 6, 2008).
6. <http://www.assemblywales.org/hom-pdfviewer?url=dat070626-c> (accessed May 13, 2008).
7. According to the website, they were then visited by the chief veterinary officer for the Welsh Assembly, the head of the tuberculosis policy unit, and the head of public health, all of whom apparently found the isolation and biosecurity measures taken by Skanda Vale satisfactory.
8. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6916077.stm (accessed May 13, 2008).
9. “Shambo’s blog,” as this section of the web diary came to be called, carried his reflections on why the government wanted to have him killed, as well as information about his background, explaining how his mother Shivani came to Skanda Vale from a nearby farm six years before, pregnant with Shambo, how he was born twenty weeks after her arrival, and how though she would not initially trust the monks, she gradually learnt to relax in their company. An entry carrying her photograph explains that she had one last calf after Shambo, after which she “retired” and settled down to a “very leisurely life.”
10. See Hurn (forthcoming) where she discusses Skanda Vale’s anthropomorphization of Shambo designed to secure public sympathy for his cause.
11. Elsewhere in the pages of Skanda Vale’s web diary, there is reference to the considerable support received by the Skanda Vale community from a number of farmers in Wales who shared their concerns about the government’s policy on the slaughter of infected cattle. However, as Hurn (forthcoming) indicates, some farmers also spoke out in favor of the government’s culling policy, noting the extent of danger that they felt an infected animal presents to the national herd.
12. http://www.skandavale.org/articles/discourse_by_swami_surya.htm (accessed March 6, 2008).
13. http://www.skandavale.org/articles/discourse_by_swami_surya_1st_July_2007.htm (accessed March 6, 2008).

14. On the Hindu veneration of the cow, see for instance van der Veer (1994: 86–94). Even though the cow remains a sacred symbol in contemporary Hinduism, in fact significant numbers of Hindus eat beef—a fact often overlooked in much polemical writing on the cow protection issue. Moreover, despite their veneration by Hindus, cows in modern India are usually abandoned after their reproductive years and can be seen wandering the streets of India’s towns and villages in conditions of malnourishment and neglect.

15. The political use of cow symbolism has considerable precedent in colonial India. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the protection of the mother cow became a central issue in the Indian nationalist movement, creating a rift not merely between Hindus and the British but also between Hindus and Muslims. When the colonial government did not accede to the demand to ban cow slaughter in India, this was interpreted as an insult to the deepest religious sentiments of the Hindus, and the result was largescale agitations and rioting. The disturbances relating to cow protection continued in phases till the 1920s when a temporary truce was forged between Muslims and Hindus. See, for instance, van der Veer (1994: 86–94); Freitag (1980, 1996: 215–23); Zavos (2000: 81–87). Also see Jaffrelot (1996: 204–210) for an account of the political use of cow symbolism by Hindu nationalists in the 1960s. That cow protection remains a highly sensitive issue is evident from the hostility that some Hindu nationalists directed at a recent book, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, by the historian D. N. Jha, examining cow killing in early Vedic society; see author’s preface in Jha (2002).

16. The British government has in recent times shown an interest in developing dialogue with a range of religious groups. In the case of a tradition like Hinduism with no centralized authority, this invitation to dialogue has meant that self-styled spokespersons have stepped into the arena, claiming to represent, and speak unambiguously for, “Hinduism” as a reified and monolithic construct, and indeed for *all* Hindus.

17. A number of newspapers took up this theme, reporting that members of the “British Hindu community” were threatening to form a human shield to protect the sacred bull at Skanda Vale. See, for instance, the report in the *Guardian* on May 10, 2007, “Temple Campaigns to Save TB-infected Bull,” available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/may/10/animalwelfare.ruralaffairs> (accessed May 12, 2008).

18. Approved Judgment of the High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division, Administrative Court, before Judge Hickinbottom sitting as Additional Judge of the High Court, CO Ref CO/56522007, dated July 16, 2007.

19. http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/pdf8/fco_europeanconventionhumanright (accessed May 12, 2008).

20. See Nye (2001) for an excellent account of the ambiguity of multicultural politics in Britain. He warns that the Human Rights Act of 1998 (which led to the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into British Law) would have fairly limited consequences if the static and reified view of cultures inherent in the idea of multiculturalism becomes bound up with a static and essentialist view

of religion. See also Kurien (2007) for an insightful account of the interplay between multicultural politics and the construction of an organized, standardized, and politicized Hindu identity in the US.

21. There have been a number of "Hindu campaigns" in the recent past in Britain, documented for instance by Nye (2001) and Zavos (2008), but none have attracted as much nationwide coverage in the popular media as the Shambo incident.

22. <http://www.newstatesman.com/200708010004> (accessed March 6, 2008).

23. *New Statesman* had published on the same day an article by Ramesh Kalidai, the General Secretary of the Hindu Forum of Britain, in support of Skanda Vale's campaign. See <http://www.newstatesman.com/200708010003> (accessed March 6, 2008).

24. Interestingly, an organization called the Sangh Samachar, which claims to be "keeping track of the Sangh Parivar" (the "family" of Hindu rightwing organizations in India with branches overseas), came out openly in favor of Jay Lakhani and against the Save Shambo campaign. The Sangh Samachar, referring to the stance of the Hindu Forum of Britain as "a lot of bull to save a bull," openly dismissed their views. Furthermore, citing the work by historian D. N. Jha alluded to earlier (note 15), it questioned whether the cow protection agenda was indeed essentially Hindu. See <http://sanghsamachar.wordpress.com/2007/05/10/a-lot-of-bull-to-save-a-bull/> (accessed March 6, 2008).

25. See "The Public Representation of a Religion Called Hinduism," <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/hinduism/resources/index.htm> (accessed April 30, 2009).

26. <http://www.justiceforgangotri.org/2008/02/05/community-tells-pm-government-has-failed-British-Hindus> (accessed April 30, 2009).

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