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**Divine Games and Rituals: How Tamil Saiva/Hindu siblings internalise their faith through play**

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**Abstract:**

This paper contributes to our understanding of how siblings in diasporic settings teach and learn from each other. It draws upon data from a longitudinal ethnographic study (2009-2013) exploring how children become literate through faith activities across four communities in London. The study examines children’s emerging faith literacies, focusing on ways in which they are socialised into their faith at the site of worship, the religious education class and in their homes. This paper focuses on one of the four participant families who are part of the Tamil Hindu community in London and traces how siblings begin to internalise learning through play linked to their faith at home. Using the example of two children constructing their Temple from plastic building blocks to act out appropriate religious rituals, we show how the children acquire cultural knwledge important both for faith membership and their everyday lives.

**Keywords:** faith, objects, play, siblings

**Introduction**

Play and faith are generally considered to be two very separate areas of a child’s life. In fact, in some cultures and religions, the very idea of ‘playing’ as opposed to ‘practising’ faith can be seen as paradoxical and even blasphemous, with play being considered a light-hearted activity and thus not acceptable to apply to religion, for which the child is expected to adopt a serious attitude in regard to its teachings and practice. Play is, however, an integral part of Hinduism; for instance, the Tamil Hindu hymns outline different ways in which God can be seen by devotees; some saints treat God as a lover, others as a parent and some even as a friend in which a playful relationship with God is described.[[1]](#endnote-1)1 God is also often described in religious literature as ‘playing’ with devotees’ lives and there are many stories in which devotees engage in a witty repartee with God. There are also stories in which God is seen to be ‘playing games’ with devotees, often to test their devotion. Aside from stories like these in which God uses play as a medium of communication with devotees, religious literature also gives us tales of God as a child playing: the stories of God Vishnu as Lord Krishna paint a picture of his naughty antics as a child – stealing butter with other children, lying and eating mud. Thus a notion of a playful God gives credence to play itself as a valid form of religious expression. This is further emphasised in the Tamil Hindu community as there is a prevalent sentiment that God is closest to children and can even be seen through their speech and play. Therefore, a child’s play especially in faith is encouraged by parents and is seen as being a part of practising and performing their religious activities.

Against this backdrop, our paper examines ways in which children begin to internalise faith membership through play. Importantly, faith is viewed as a *cultural practice* (Wenger, 1998) where children acquire membership.Thus we do not discuss how children learn religious beliefs themselves but the way in which they internalise the rituals, procedures, chants and language of their faith through their reproduction in play.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

This paper draws upon and connects three distinct groups of studies: those viewing learning as taking place within a sociocultural framework; work on the role of siblings as mediators of learning; and studies arguing for play as a key feature of children’s ability to make sense of the world and to learn from it.

***A sociocultural perspective on learning***

Within this approach, learning is viewed as inherently part of the social, cultural and historical context of which a child is part. Learning thus takes place across three planes; the sociohistorical (the historical context in which a family, community or cultural group is situated); the interpersonal (between individuals in a family, community or group) and the intrapersonal (within the individual her/himself) (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, ‘mind’ is viewed as ‘interiorised culture’ and ‘culture’ as ‘exteriorised mind’ (Cole, 1996). According to this view, we bring both our family and group cultural understandings and history to our interpretation of current events (Bateson, 1979) which then become our intrapersonal knowledge or our ‘personal sense’ (Vygotsky, 1962) informing our everyday lives. Language, too, is not just our own, but rooted in dialogue, as expressed by Bakhtin (1981) who stresses the cyclical nature of learning: we gain a community or cultural group through communicating with others and our voice returns to reinterpret and transform the understandings of the group.

A sociocultural perspective calls upon different concepts which help us to understand the relationship between faith as a cultural practice, as well as play and learning as presented in this paper. One concept is that of *funds of knowledge* as described by González et al. (2005) who revealed a complex and detailed knowledge by Mexican families in the US. This knowledge was handed down between generations as part of becoming a member of a *community of practice* (Wenger, 1998). Linked with this is the concept of *prolepsis* (Cole, 1996) which is used to explain the process of transmission of knowledge across generations in families and communities, whereby caregivers use experiences from their own past to project into their children’s futures. Finally, studies on the transmission of learning between both parent, grandparent and peer generation through siblings use the concept of *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976), whereby adults gradually remove support to a young child similar to the pieces of a scaffold; *guided participation* (Rogoff, 2003) which stresses the active rather than passive nature of the child; or *synergy* (Gregory, 2008) whereby both partners in a dyad, especially siblings and grandparents are equal in the learning process as they play or work together.

The data and analyses presented in this paper will show how the above concepts can be valuable tools in analysing the ‘play faith’ activities which are presented here. We ask: What funds of knowledge are children gaining in becoming members of the faith community and in what ways is this knowledge passed down, both across and within the same generation of members?

***The role of siblings as mediators of learning***

A sociocultural view of learning also sets considerable importance upon the role of *mediators* in enabling novices to gain membership to a cultural practice. In the case of becoming a member of a practice involving participants of a roughly similar age, this may simply be a more knowledgeable person (e.g. a golf or French teacher in a group of adults etc.). However, faith practices are unusual in that they are highly intergenerational as well as involving complex language, rules and rituals which need to be followed by members of all ages. In order to learn these, children often attend formal faith classes at the place of worship and are taught by teachers who act simultaneously as mediators of the practice. If children make mistakes when performing rituals or praying, they learn through direct teaching by the faith teacher, observation of more experienced or older members or by correction from their parents. Siblings are thus not generally considered to be competent mediators of faith, especially if they are close in age.

However, this assumption may well be mistaken. Siblings who are together in the process of becoming members of a faith practice are likely to share common ‘cultural recipes’ (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993) as well as an incipient knowledge of rituals and symbols which they might develop together. Drawing upon work with young Bangladeshi British siblings living in East London, Gregory (2008) shows how both older and younger siblings learn from each other as they ‘play school’ together. Older children learn by practising what they already know, explaining clearly to their younger ‘pupils’ and pitching their teaching one step beyond the younger child’s knowledge. Younger children learn new skills and knowledge in a safe environment before they need to perform in school. Gregory refers to this process as *synergistic*, whereby siblings act as adjuvants in each other’s learning. In other words, older children ‘teach’ their younger siblings and at the same time develop their own learning. In this way, children ‘internalise’ or appropriate cultural learning through interpersonal interaction or ‘play’ which then becomes part of their intrapersonal knowledge. The questions concerning cultural mediation below are: How is faith internalised through sibling play and what might be the role of siblings as mediators of faith through play? How might this differ from other types of sibling play, such as ‘playing school’?

***Play, faith and learning***

The type of play in question is sociodramatic play, sometimes called imaginative or role-play. Originally the domain of researchers into cognitive and social development, this is play where ‘a child’s greatest achievements are possible … achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality.’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 100).

Perhaps best known is Vygotsky’s (1978) work in this field. Using the example of a child who is able to transform a simple stick into a horse and see him/herself riding on it, Vygotsky explains how this act of *transformation* demands a *representation* of the stick. In other words, the stick *symbolises* the horse. This symbolism will be crucial as the child begins to write and sees that the stick (or the horse) can be represented as marks or as words on the page. In other words, this type of play demands ‘a mental transformation of objects, actions and situations’ (Owocki, 1999, p. 11). Vygotsky argues that through the use of symbolism, the child becomes a head taller than in reality. As such, play enables children to control some corners of their worlds, referred to by Erikson (1972) as the ‘microspheres’ of their experience. They try out roles, express feelings and fears and even make life as they would like to have it (Erikson, 1972; Kuschner, 2012). In this paper, we ask: What symbols are offered to children through faith activities and how might the transmutation of objects, symbols and metaphors in faith activities be reflected in children’s play? What other skills and knowledge might children be learning as they practise and perform their incipient knowledge of faith during play activities?

Viewed as a cultural practice, faith offers members a particularly diverse range of symbols. Rituals are associated with complex symbols; faith artefacts signify special meanings which become part of children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ permeating their everyday lives. In the same way, everyday items take on a special significance when they travel to the place of worship and are blessed or become gifts for God. Thus we see the clear overlap between the three theoretical frames outlined above. Children become members of a cultural practice through symbolic play with their siblings which is at the same time a scenario for practising and performing the cultural rules of the faith, community or group.

**Methodology**

The excerpts presented in this paper come from a larger body of data collected during the longitudinal ethnographic study: ‘Becoming literate in faith settings: Language and literacy learning in the lives of new Londoners’ funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (2009-2013). The larger study is focused on four faith communities in London: Bangladeshi Muslim, Tamil Hindu/Saiva, Ghanaian Pentecostal and the Polish Catholic community. The project follows sixteen children (four from each community)over three years, aged between four and twelve at the start of the project, as they learn language and literacy through faith activities*.* The families were all active members of the religious community with children between the ages of 5 and 12 at the start of the project. All had expressed an interest to be part of the project following an invitation letter. Although this paper focuses on the home, the full data set spans both formal and informal settings; the faith class, the place of worship and children’s homes and examines both individual learning as well as sibling and intergenerational learning between grandparent or older community member and child. It is important to note that the larger project was not an ethnography of play but of children’s language and literacy learning. However, play emerged as a significant aspect in the learning of some sibling dyads, one of which is presented below.

Permission for filming, photographing and interviewing children was obtained from parents at the beginning and throughout the course of the longitudinal study. The researchers developed a very good working relationship with the families who took part in the research. At each stage, parents were consulted for their consent and kept informed of how the data was going to be used. Parents were also shown work for their permission before it was made public. At the end of the study all the families signed letters of agreement, allowing project members to use the data gathered for public dissemination. In the agreement, we asked families to decide on the use of pseudonyms and where requested we have used pseudonyms. However, in this case, pseudonyms are not used as parental permission was granted to use the children’s first names and images from the video data.

In the first stage of the study, researchers first interviewed parents in order to explore the themes and practices that took place in the home, place of worship and the religious education classes (Sunday Schools). Then a child from each family was selected and interviewed; the children produced mind maps through the course of the interview which corroborated and expanded upon the practices which were brought up in the parents’ interviews. From the mind maps grew the scrapbooks – one was given to each of the 16 key children. They were encouraged to use them creatively to explore their religious practices; each time the researchers met the family, the progress on the scrapbook was monitored, praised and encouraged. For the second stage of the study, the children were observed by the researcher in all three spaces; they were filmed and photographed in their home, in the Temple and in the religious education classes and detailed field narratives were recorded. The children were also given a digital camera and a flip camera to capture data in these spaces on their own. The third stage was intergenerational, the children became the interviewers and the researcher filmed the child interviewing their grandparent/older member of the community on their religious practices. Finally, researchers conducted an interview reflecting on the study with the children and going through their scrapbooks with them, recording their ideas, inspirations and interpretations of the work they had produced.

The sibling dyad in this paper are Bharathy, a ten year old boy and Bairavi, his five year old sister when this play episode was recorded. They frequently ‘play faith’ together, often using plastic building blocks to construct a Temple and then acting out different rituals, ceremonies and celebrations. Religious play was a theme that appeared in all of the initial interviews with the Tamil Hindu parents. The researcher then asked the children themselves if they played using faith themes. Some of the older children mentioned in their interviews that they enjoyed and ‘played’ around in the Temple and during festivals, but that they did not engage in socio-dramatic play with religious themes. The younger children however did talk about their fantasy play using characters and stories from their faith. They engaged in both solitary play and play with siblings. The siblings whose play is detailed below had a stronger play relationship than in the other three families as they played together on a daily basis, sometimes with religious context, sometimes without. This was observed by the researcher and mentioned in both the parents' and child interviews. It was also visible in the scrapbooks as toys were drawn (e.g. a Hello Kitty kitchenette, play trucks and cars) to indicate their favourite games. Moreover, the children’s video data shows the siblings playing together quite naturally. They pray and play together, acting out and re-enacting different and significant aspects of their lives as a way of integrating and creatively combining elements of their understanding through the medium of play. The rich relationship between play and religion is further reinforced through the grandparent interviews where the grandparents mention the same play practice showing how the divine games are played by children throughout the generations.

This paper uses video and photo data collected by the researcher and the family, interviews conducted by the researcher with the parents as well as by the child and his grandmother and a scrap book entry. The researcher obtained permission from the family and from the children in particular to film their play. It was filmed by the researcher as the children were quite excited to show the researcher an example of how they play ‘Temple’ together. It also made more sense for the researcher to capture this moment as it was quite natural for the siblings to play privately away from their parents whilst their parents were busy, therefore it would have been unusual/unnatural for the children to play as they would have done whilst their parents filmed them. The video was edited by the researcher so that inconsequential elements were cut out allowing analytical focus to be applied to the play interaction between the siblings that provided significant data for analysis.

Below, we first introduce the context and the children as typical examples of those working with us from this community. Then, we present two layers of one activity: Layer One reveals some of the funds of knowledge held by the family through interviews with the parents and the grandmother as well as a scrap book entry; Layer Two shows learning between the siblings as they collaborate during construction and socio-dramatic play.

**The Context and the Family**

Tamils from Sri Lanka have been migrating to the UK since 1940 for mainly one of two factors: education or war. However, since the outbreak of the Sri Lankan civil war in 1983 the number of Tamil Sri Lankan immigrants fleeing persecution has risen sharply. These Tamils have also brought with them a strong impetus to preserve and keep alive their contested culture. Therefore, the community found it needed larger and better equipped spaces to practise their faith and teach the Tamil language to both immigrants and second/third generation British born Tamil children. To illustrate the importance of the Temple in the lives of Tamil Hindus, there exists an old Tamil adage “Koil illa ooril kudiyirukka vendam” meaning “don’t go to live in a town that is without a Temple”.

One such Temple is the London Murugan Temple in Newham which is consecrated to Lord Murugan, an important deity to the Tamil Hindus. In 1984, the local Tamil Hindu community purchased the land and transformed the existing property into a temporary Temple. The present Temple was built on the site of the existing Temple and commemorated in 2005. It has been built following the architectural style of monumental Temples in South India. The Temples in UK have a strong sense of community with priests from Temples all over London attending each other’s Temple’s religious events. There are also many informal links between the Temples across the UK and they play a vital role in the lives of Tamil Hindus.

The children whom we meet below come from a family of devout Saiva Hindus. [[2]](#endnote-2)2 Their father arrived in London directly from Sri Lanka twenty two years ago; his wife followed ten years later and has now lived in the UK for twelve years. They both come from the same part of Northern Sri Lanka and have a strong affinity towards Lord Murugan; coming from the town that has the Nallur Murugan Temple – one of the most famous Murugan Temples in Sri Lanka. Here in London, they now live very close to London Murugan Temple and the Temple becomes a focal point for the raising of their children to be Saivite. The parents do this by encouraging religious activity, conversations and education in the home.

**Layer One: Developing faith knowledge at home through play**

The parents' interview (11/12/2010) illustrates how Bharathy (10), alone or with his sister Bairavi (5), engaged in recreating religious services and celebrations as part of their play routines at home. Bharathy's father describes below how his son transformed the steps of their staircase at home into the 18 steps for the Ayyappan Festival (the nine nights festival) by using small building blocks as lamps and placing them on either side of the steps. After adorning the 18 steps with the play lamps, his father recalls, Bairavi started imitating the praying practices he had observed at home and in the Temple.

Excerpt 1

Father: so he put all the steps both side (pointing to the staircase behind) blocking the steps

Arani: in the stairs?

Father: yeah like a steps, steps 18 steps and a blocks, blocks he uses as lamps

Arani: like these the Lego blocks those? (Pointing to a set behind his chair)

Father: yeah, yeah small, small every pieces for like a lamp

Arani: ok

Father: and he say he steps 18 steps and he's praying

Arani: aw!

To this, Bharathy's mother adds how her son routinely transforms everyday objects into artefacts commonly used for devotional purposes in his playful routines. As his mother explains, Bharathy chooses objects that resemble the size and shape of the religious objects; for instance, he uses a cone to represent a lamp that has been lit for ceremonial purposes. He then imitates the praying practices he has observed his father do at home and the priests in the Temple. Note that transliterated Tamil is in bold and the translation in English is in italics.

Excerpt 2

Mother: **avan ange parkrthukku** equal **aana** toys**a kondupoiruvaan ippa** lamp **mari kondupovaan anthe** cone **vaicha ithu ithu anthe theepam kaata** *he takes the toys that are equal to what he sees there (at the Temple) now he takes a cone to represent a lamp for this for this to show the light*

Arani: ah! Ok, ok, ok

Mother: **athe mari kondu** *so like that he takes*

Father: though I do exactly the same way **Iyar** *priest* does he does

Mother: **ennandu adukuraan endu theriyathu adikkipottu** *I don’t know how he puts it together but he puts it together and* (laugh)

Arani: ah that's quite amazing!

Father: probably my mind as well I used to play those days as well

Arani: oh right! Ok

Father: yeah I showed you the one I was playing with

Arani: yes the little the lamp yeah

Father: yeah so that is as well and on top of it we seen it isn't it?

Arani: yeah

Father: that all is in the mind

On this and other occasions, both parents reminisce about how they as children used to do something similar. Father reminds Arani, the researcher, of the little lamp he showed her in one of her previous home visits and which he creatively used in his childhood to re-enact religious festivals and rituals. He comments on how through repeated observation and re-enactment both he at the time and Bharathy seem to have internalised the religious practices and routines they observed in the Temple and at home and were able to reproduce them in their play, concluding that "all is in the mind".

Arani inquires further into Bharathy's transformations of everyday objects into religious ones for playing 'Temple'. Mother recalls how Bharathy used his building blocks to construct the gopuram, the tower-like structure iconic of the Temples, and the split Temple doors and how he placed a plastic toy statue of Lord Ganesh to resemble the shrines with the images of the deities inside. Her narrative serves as the backdrop for the children's building of the Temple described in the next sections.

Excerpt 3

Arani: I remember you saying that once that they built a small tent or something

Mother: yeah

Arani: and then they went

Mother: **anthe** blocks**a kopuram maari katti athukulala** *he took the blocks and made it into a kopuram and in that*

Arani: ah! Ok

Mother: **poi vaasal ellam pirichu** *he went and split the door*

Arani: (laugh)

Mother: **pirahu partha athukula anthe** you know the toy **anthe Pillaiyaar silai** the plastic**ille irrukum** *then if you look inside there you know the toy that plastic statue of Lord Ganesh is in there (resembling the shrines with the idols of the deities inside)*

Arani: oh!

Mother: **athuk konde athukule vaichu** *he took that and put it inside*

Father: kept inside kept it

Arani: (laugh) **si! appa thukku ellam poosai ellam nadakumo?** *Really! So does he do prayers for that all too?*

Father: oh! some of the **manthiram**s *mantras*  he knows

Mother: **ellam ellam nadakuthu! ellam nadakkum silathuhal** *it all it all happens! It all happens sometimes*

Arani: he knows! Ok

Father: yeah

Mother: oh yeah

As we shall also show in the next sections where Bharathy and Bairavi co-construct a Temple with plastic building blocks and then recreate a religious service in their garden, not only is Bharathy able to reproduce key elements of the Temple in his construction (e.g. the gopuram, the split doors, the statues of deities), but he also seems to have learned and is able to recite certain prayers, such as the mantras, sacred utterances and sounds whose delivery has spiritual significance. Notwithstanding, the significance of the building blocks for the children's faith-inspired play can be further gleaned from the fact that Bairavi includes them in one of her drawings for the scrap book about the children's everyday faith practices she and her brother created. In her interview with Arani, she describes her drawing in the following words: "I've drawn me and my brother a door and the Lego blocks".

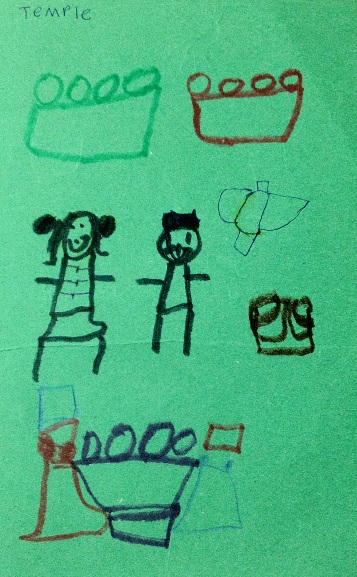


Figure 1: Bairavi’s drawing from the children's scrap book showing the plastic blocks, the two children and the symmetrical towers on either side of the Temple

Bharathy's re-enactment of religious services and celebrations resonate with the memories of his grandmother. In the interview with his grandmother (15/02/2012) Bharathy asks her among other questions if she ever played faith games when she was a child growing up in Sri Lanka. The grandmother responds enthusiastically thus:

Excerpt 4

Grandma: Yes! At home we play really fancy dress up like a priest! With the holy thread, making a really nice God statue out of stone, dressing the God statue we made with a sari! Making a garland of flowers to go on it as well, mm we buy sweet rice, bananas and betel leaves and nut, we put these as an offering in front of our statue, then we place the God on our shoulders and go around everywhere imitating the chariot festival, we ask money from the locals too! Like that we play over there! We would celebrate ten festivals, we would! There when the real festival was going on, we do that really well! Do you play like that? No, isn't it?

Bharathy: Yeah when I was younger I played like that

Grandma: You played like this when you were younger! Ah! We would play like this really nicely till we got really big!

**Layer Two: The nature of sibling interaction during construction and socio-dramatic play**

In Layer One above, we showed how each child interacted with objects themselves, creating symbols for important artefacts using plastic building blocks and other everyday objects. But a further crucial step in this process of learning is the role played by the *interpersonal* interaction between individuals. In Layer Two of analysis we focus on how this begins to take place between one set of siblings through collaboration during construction and socio-dramatic play.

Of pivotal importance is the construction of the Temple building before any socio-dramatic play takes place. The children’s mother explains that this is always an essential part of the children’s play. The Temple changes on each occasion it is reconstructed, improving each time. It is, therefore, flexible, often having a different name and built using different coloured plastic building blocks. It is the construction that provides the backdrop for the performance and play.

The flexible nature of the final Temple construction may result in a flexible nature in the roles the children take. At first, the older boy is dominant and commands his younger sister to do certain things, whilst Bairavi, his younger sister, lets him take control, obediently following his instructions:

Excerpt 5

00:00:01 Bharathy takes the yellow building block from Bairavi's hand and puts it back in the box full of plastic building blocks.

00:00:03 **Bairavi**: (Taking another yellow building block) don't do that! Just tell me what to do

00:00:07 **Bharathy**: (Moves the box to one side) I'm gonna be this side. You come here. (Bairavi moves) no, actually, stay here (moves the box of building blocks to the side) yeah

00:00:12 **Bairavi**: (Bairavi moves back) Oh! You're doing it on everything I'm…

00:00:12 **Bharathy**: Pass it then!

00:00:13 **Bairavi**: What?

00:00:14 **Bharathy**: Not that one, that one.

00:00:16 Bairavi gives Bharathy the green building block.

However, we might be mistaken in judging the older boy as unsupportive of his younger sister. Later in this episode, the children’s roles subtly change to become *collaborative* with the second attempt at an improved structure. Here they first work on different sections individually and then come together at the end to finish the model. Their collaboration results in a more sophisticated Temple complete with its own Tower and Gate which their first Temple did not have. Bharathy sets about creating the steps again whilst Bairavi works on the Tower and Gate.



Figure 2: Bairavi and Bharathy are working together to complete their Temple Here Bairavi is passing her Tower to Bharathy to place behind his steps

After moving the Tower to the back of the Temple, they arrange the Gate at the front; in a reversal of roles from the first attempt, Bharathy now learns from his younger sister Bairavi who takes the role of the instructor showing her brother how to make it symmetrical.

Excerpt 6

00:03:28 **Bharathy**: Ah, just put it like that (placing the green building block on top thus securing the gate but there is more of the green building block on the left side than the right and a gap in the middle)

00:03:32 **Bairavi**: No, I, Nooo! No, like thiiis (taking off the green building block)

00:03:33 **Bharathy**: What?

00:03:44 **Bairavi**: Take it off (Bharathy removes the building block), put it together (Bairavi places the two red pieces together), that's how does it go too, (Bharathy adds the green plastic block on top again) then it's fine, let's take them first! (Takes the plastic figures)

00:03:49 **Bharathy**: Ok, they're going to go up! (Takes the plastic figures up the stairs)

00:03:50 **Bairavi**: (Laughs)

00:03:57 **Bharathy**: And they're going to pray to the God

00:03:59 **Bairavi**: (sings song) dha dha dha dha (as she takes her figure up too)

00:04:01 **Bharathy**: Yes! Finally it's done (places a piece of paper on top)

00:04:04 **Arani (researcher)**: Ok, and what's that, Bharathy?

00:04:06 **Bharathy**: The name of the Temple

00:04:08 **Bairavi**: (Reads out) Sri Lakshmi Temple

This *collaborative approach* continues as the children carry their Temple into the garden as a more appropriate space to conduct their role-play.



Figure 3: Bharathy using a ball as a lamp, circulating it clockwise in front of the Temple



Figure 4: Bairavi tearing up pieces of paper and using them as flowers, which she is throwing onto the Temple

Using their model, the children now recreate the poosai (prayer service) that they see regularly in the Temple and do themselves at home. Two essential actions occur at a poosai; the first is the priest circulating clockwise a single-flame decorative oil lamp around the statue of the deity in the main shrine of the Temple. The congregation will be witnessing this and praying; after the poosai is finished the lamp is carried out so that the devotees can pray to it. The second is the throwing of loose flowers by the priests onto the statue of the deity accompanied by chanting of mantras, this signifies that the poosai has finished. We see below how, in their play, *both* children pretend to be the priest. Bairavi first rips up a blank white piece of paper into little pieces. She gives some to her brother and both of them begin their play by throwing the paper/flowers onto the Temple with two hands like the priests do. Bairavi accompanies this action with “Dhum” sounds like the drums in the Temple that play during the main poosai whilst Bharathy chants “Om” repeatedly to represent the priests’ chanting, “Om” being one of the holiest utterances in the Hindu religion. He completes the play by walking with the football which represents the oil lamp clockwise round the Temple as he has seen the priest do at the Temple, and exclaims “finished!” to end the play.

Excerpt 7

00:04:21 **Bairavi**: (Laughs and throws torn bits of paper to represent flowers with Bharathy) It's flat ants. Weee dhum dhum dhum dhum (laughs)

00:04:26 **Bharathy**: (Chants while circulating a football at the Temple to represent the oil lamp) Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om

00:04:27 **Bairavi**: I don't want to stand over there

00:04:37 **Bharathy**: (Goes around the Temple with the ball twice) Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, finished!

# Discussion and concluding thoughts

In this paper, we have taken a sociocultural view of *internalising* learning. This view is aptly summarised by Cole (1985) who refers to the ‘internalisation’ of knowledge as the process whereby cultural ways of thinking are demonstrated in action, how individuals appropriate them, so that they are transformed from being social phenomena to being part of our own *intrapersonal* mental functioning. We are not, therefore, interpreting learning in a transcendental sense and did not probe into the children’s spiritual thoughts or about whether they were thinking about God as they played. Our study was not about children’s religious beliefs, but about their learning – and particularly about their *language* and *literacy learning* as they engaged in religious activities. Through their play, the children both *practise* and *perform* the rituals and routines of their faith. Thus we regard the children’s ability to act out these rituals and to take over the roles of both the priest and congregation, using appropriate language and artefacts as symbols as showing an internalisation of cultural learning.

This data exemplifies a number of the theoretical concepts defined earlier in our paper. Interviews with the children’s parents who conclude that "all is in the mind" referring to the repeated observation and re-enactment of the faith practices by the children illustrate Cole’s (1996) belief of ‘mind’ as ‘interiorised culture’ and ‘culture’ as ‘exteriorised mind’. The children’s play also shows how the language and rituals of cultural practices may be transmitted through *prolepsis* across generations, regardless of how far families move across the world. Knowledge of these rituals and ceremonies provide an example of considerable *funds of knowledge* in the children’s lives. Finally, both our interviews and the play excerpt provide an illustration of Vygotsky’s (1978) work on *transformation* and *symbolism* through play activities.

The play excerpts above contribute to those arguing for children’s play to be viewed as *serious* learning and are important, therefore, to both social practice and theory. Those practitioners and academics supporting this idea argue for children’s formal school education to begin only when children have had ample time to explore and ‘play out’ cultural practices through play provision in pre-school (Sylva et al., 2004). Theoretically, we see how, for children, ‘playing faith’ might be one way of practising it. It would be a mistake to try to generalise this across all faith communities. Situating our findings within a sociohistorical and sociocultural approach enables us to understand both the importance of the Hindu faith for the London Tamil community as well as its ‘playfulness’ for members, as shown earlier in this paper. Other faith communities might view play and its role in religion differently. In an earlier issue of this journal, Truong and Mahon (2012) reiterate the importance of acknowledging the particular cultural context in which play takes place, stating in their methodology that ‘studying play in its cultural context is absolutely essential to understanding it as a cultural activity in a particular community’ (p. 80). This recognition is also reiterated by Göncü (2007) and Rogoff (2003) who note that, although some universals exist, play takes “distinctly different forms in different communities” (Rogoff 2003, p.149). These forms are sometimes described as ‘cultural scripts’ during play (Kirova 2010).

The sibling interaction we see is very different from existing examples of siblings ‘playing school’ (Gregory and Williams, 2000). Siblings playing school in those instances have a rigid hierarchy; the child teacher remains in command and ‘teaches’ her ‘pupils’. During ‘playing school’ activities, the school building itself is unimportant; the aim is to practise or ‘teach’ skills and a body of knowledge, a ‘curriculum’ that is permanent and fixed. During ‘playing faith’ activities, however, the edifice itself of the Temple is crucial. Through its construction, children internalise what happens there plus the symbolic knowledge it contains. It is almost as if knowledge itself resides within the Temple which, as an edifice, is integral to the imaginative play within it. By constructing the Temple together, the siblings practise and internalise a knowledge of the rituals, objects and magic that it embodies. The socio-dramatic play taking place is thus an integral part of the construction itself. We also see how the children’s roles are flexible; in spite of the older boy’s earlier commands to his sister, he gradually collaborates on an equal footing. Thus, we see initial *scaffolding* by the older child becoming a *synergy* through a *collaborative construction* of the Temple; the older brother has a greater manual dexterity and models for his younger sister how to construct the various parts of the Temple to scale, whilst the younger child has a better eye for the symmetry of the Towers, which the older child accepts. Thus we see in action the cyclical nature of learning referred to earlier in this chapter (Bakhtin, 1981). Interestingly, although the Hindu priest is always male, both siblings equally play out the role of the priest, the older boy demonstrating the actions of the priest more elaborately. This synergistic learning is different from that seen in ‘playing school’ activities; in ‘faith play’ the siblings both learn to negotiate their equal yet different roles whilst in ‘play school’ the older child is in authority. In the latter case, the older girl learns through her ‘teaching’ whilst the younger child learns through being taught.

For these children, as for all our Hindu families, the physical presence of the Temple has the central place in personal expressions of faith. This may well strengthen children’s religious imagination. Our study did not extend to the children’s mainstream schools, but we begin to see from the above how faith membership gives children a treasure trove of symbols upon which to draw in their secular lives. It remains to teachers to uncover and benefit from this in their classrooms.

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**Notes**

1. 1 Tamil Hymns are a compilation of devotional poems about Lord Shiva composed by

   the four Tamil saints: Thirugnanasambanthar, Maanikavaasakar, Thirunaavukarasar and

   Suntharamoorthy Nayanar in the 7th-9th Centuries. In their hymns each saint describes a

   different relationship with God. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Saivaism is a branch of Hinduism that believes Lord Siva is the principal deity and all

   the Gods are manifestations of Him. It is very popular in Sri Lanka and in Southern

   India too. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)