

**“CHILDREN HAVE THEIR OWN WORLD OF BEING”:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN’S ACTIVITIES  
ON THE DAY OF SARASWATI PUJA**

SEMONTEE MITRA

Apart from Diwali<sup>1</sup> and Durga Puja,<sup>2</sup> few Hindu religious festivals are organized and celebrated publicly in the United States. Saraswati Puja is one such festival. Saraswati Puja, also known as Vasant Panchami, is a Hindu festival celebrated in early February to mark the onset of spring. On this day, Hindus, especially Bengalis,<sup>3</sup> worship the goddess Saraswati, the Vedic goddess of knowledge and wisdom, music, arts, and science. She is also the companion of Lord Brahma who, with her knowledge and wisdom, created the universe. Bengalis consider participation in this puja<sup>4</sup> compulsory for students, scholars, and creative artists. Therefore, Indian American Bengali parents force their children to participate in this festival, whereas they might be lax on other religious occasions.

As a participant-observer of this recent Indian festival in Central Pennsylvania, United States, I found that the cultural scene—the collective, communal celebration of Saraswati Puja—was not as simple as children of foreign-born parents following a transplanted tradition and gaining ethnic identity. On the contrary, I noticed that Indian American Bengali children typically indulged in activities such as games that are not traditionally part of the religious observance in India. Their interactions, both in and out of the social frame of a religious ritual, especially Saraswati Puja, reveal that in America the festive day has taken on the function of a children’s day of freedom from parental rules and ethnic regulations. Thus, the day of freedom raises the following critical questions: Why have these children’s agency and cultural practices emerged? How has it affected the performance of this festival in Central Pennsylvania?

This article analyzes the ways in which Indian American Bengali children separate their activities from the religious festival while defining the festival as an adult observation, and use the given space and religious-cultural setting to create their own world of fun and freedom. In addition, I analyze the various kinds of games and activities chosen by different age groups. These groups of Bengali children not only indulge in traditional games like singing games or chasing or tagging games, but also use technology to play games, for example different kinds of video games including strategy games. These children also participate in what I call “adventure tripping,” an act which involves no age or gender division unlike other games and activities. These trips originate with a mystery and a prolonged discussion about it, thereby encouraging every child to know the unknown, see the unseen, and enjoy the thrill of participation through a process that shares a structure and function very similar to legend tripping. I examine how all these games and activities reflect the changing meaning of religious festivals for second generation Indian American Bengali children and also their social and psychological developments through these games.

**Saraswati Puja Setting: The Socio-Religious-Cultural Frame**

Saraswati Puja is an indoor ritual that only recently has been organized by Bengali organizations in the United States. *Sampriti*, the Bengali Community of Central Pennsylvania, began organizing observances of the festival in 2012. Other organizations in metropolitan areas, including Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore, have sponsored public celebrations only since the late twentieth century or early twenty-first century. From the viewpoint of central Pennsylvania organizers, Saraswati Puja serves two purposes: an occasion for socialization and handing down Bengali traditions to second-generation Indian Americans. In 2013, the year I participated and observed the festival, it was organized in the community hall of West Enola Fire Company. The hall was divided into five parts: the stage (for cultural program), puja area (where the goddess was placed and also the space used for the sit-and-draw event), an audience zone, dining area, and storage area (to store extra tables and chairs). The storage area was separated from the rest of the space with a temporary partition wall. There was also a large kitchen where the members of the association, including men and women, cooked lunch and dinner. The children who took part in the dance program used another separate space beside the stage as a dressing room. Though the area was divided, the children occupied the entire space, except the kitchen. They were strictly forbidden, however, to get close to the deity or enter the storage area.

Thirty children attended the puja along with their parents. Most of them came in early with their parents in Indian ethnic dress: frocks, salwar kameez,<sup>5</sup> and kurta pajamas.<sup>6</sup>

Age group	Girls	Boys	Total
4 years	3	0	3
5-7 years	5	2	7
8-12 years	6	6	12
13-14 years	4	2	6
15-17 years	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>30</b>

Once inside the building, they were on their own because their parents were busy with the ritual. As fostering tradition is one of the main objectives behind organizing this puja, a cultural program was planned for the children, where they were the performers. They enthusiastically performed Indian dances and songs wearing traditional attire. A “sit-and-draw” event was also organized for children under the age of fourteen. They were given a sketch of goddess Saraswati that they had to fill in with colors. They shared the colors among themselves which gave rise to small clusters of children within the larger group of children. Their paintings were later exhibited on one of the walls of the hall, which became a topic of conversation among the children between the ages of six and nine. The

sit-and-draw event was followed by a cultural program. It started with a short speech on the goddess Saraswati by Dr. Jeffrey Long, professor of Hinduism at Elizabethtown College (Pennsylvania), and member of Sampriti. During his speech, Dr. Long mentioned that on the day of Saraswati Puja, all academic and creative materials, including books, notebooks, laptops, pens and pencils, and musical instruments, should be left with the goddess for her blessings on those materials. He also explained that to excel the rest of the year, students should *not study* on the day of the puja. Children took the "no-study day" as the essence of this religious ritual.

Children in India, especially in West Bengal, also look forward to this day of Saraswati Puja as a "no-study day." On this day, many children visit their schools and colleges in ethnic dresses (girls wear saree or salwar kameez and boys wear kurta pajama), as many schools and colleges (only in West Bengal) organize and host this puja. Children feel free from all restrictions as they dress up like adults, go to schools with their friends, have elaborate lunch provided by the schools, then visit friends' houses or meet other friends and spend the whole day together. Many children, who have the puja at home, spend most of their time helping other female members in ritualistic arrangements. While talking to Bengali children in India, I learned that they fast (until the morning ritual is over), pray, and help their mothers to organize the puja at home because they feel that if they can prove their devotion to the goddess on this day, they can achieve success in the next academic year by putting in some hard work on their part. Apart from the religious fervor, Indian Bengali children also associate this day with freedom, but their freedom is quite different from that of Indian American Bengali children. Indian Bengali children have the freedom of space as they go to school and visit friends.<sup>7</sup> They usually do not indulge in any kind of games on that day, while Indian American Bengali children are accompanied by their parents and surrounded by adults all the time. However, Indian American Bengali children find out ways and indulge in activities that are not supervised by adults.

Given the license to organize themselves without parental supervision, Indian American Bengali children engaged in various games and activities either individually or in groups. Due to the variation of children's ages, their games and activities also varied. They formed their own groups based on their ages. Though they were in a religious ritualistic environment, their engagement with the ritual was limited to what their parents asked them to do. By their actions, they understood the festival to be a children's day of freedom that served as a stark contrast to their everyday lives as well as other occasions.

The use of games and activities within the frame of religious festival raises the question of how the meaning of play within the religious festive frames changes. Indeed, the establishment of the children's frame within the adult controlled frame of religious festival has caused tensions at the border of children's frame because adults, who surround these children, expect them to be a part of the festival so that they can hand down Indian tradition to them. But, as mentioned earlier, these children consider this day to be the day of their freedom. Therefore, in the context of Saraswati Puja, participating children are primarily redefining the meaning of not only the religious event, but also the space through their activities.<sup>8</sup>

As a guide to ethnographic observation, I gave attention to the play frame formed by different groups of children. The idea of the play frame used as a strategy of boundary-maintenance in cultural situations in which tension exists between groups in hierarchical relation to one another points to folklore, such as the performance of games, as key evidence of addressing such tension in symbolic forms. According to folklorist Simon J. Bronner:

The act of framing captures a narrative as well as action that have a bearing on the perception of the event from the perspective of the participants and assorted viewers. Consequently, frames refer to the ways insiders and outsiders comprehend activity as a deep cognitive structure in addition to viewing, and strategizing, what occurs behaviorally. (2010:275)

In my observation, children framed activities that designated social boundaries by age, and in their games separated themselves from their parents. Although these children were involved in the religious rituals, they, through play frames, variously projected their interests as well as complexities in the scene as children with little or no experience of the homeland.

### **Children's Activities**

Right after finishing their dinner, the children went for a short trip into the storage area (behind the dining area separated by a temporary partition wall), which was strictly forbidden. Another children's activity, which was common, was playing video games on portable devices. Children formed groups based on their ages to chat and play together all day long. Girls, up to the age of four (a group of three), were playing "Ring Around the Rosie" until lunch. Five to seven year olds formed a different group. This group had both boys and girls. They played a variety of games. Chasing and/or tagging games were the most favored. They were the most active group as they always engaged in some kind of running game. Children who were between eight and thirteen years old formed two groups, one of boys and the other of girls. Boys were either engaged in playing video games, spinning tops, fighting, or simply chatting throughout the day. The group of girls (ages eight to ten) was playing tag games, video games, chatting with one another, or most importantly was trying to eavesdrop on the conversation of their older sisters (ages twelve to thirteen). Boys and girls above thirteen years sat together and talked about various matters (school, news, fashion). Some of the boys (between twelve and fourteen) played with spinning tops. Boys between eight and twelve years also joined them. The two adolescent girls were seen mostly sitting and chatting.

A question raised by this observation is the continuity of the games played by children with Indian and American traditions. Beginning with William Wells Newell in the nineteenth century (1884), scholars believed that traditional games were on the verge of being extinct. In the twentieth century folklorists posited that in contrast to a view of children as passive vessels of static traditions, they actively adapted traditions and changed them and that is evident in my observations

as children performed various games without a clear distinction to their ethnic sources (Bronner 1988:12). There are a variety of reasons for these changes. First, I noticed an interchange between girls' and boys' games. For instance, games like tag and spin tops have gained more favor with the girls and the boys with time (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 1961:21). Second, many games reflect trends in the larger surrounding American society. For example, violent and/or strategic video games were considered standard fare. Third, expanding technology has brought a major change in the tradition of games. The advent of television and the increasing preference for suburban living have influenced the children to separate from each other, and appear to have "conspired toward considerable desuetude in traditional children's games" (Sutton-Smith 1961:37). Keeping these in mind, I will discuss all the games and activities that Indian American Bengali children participated in on the day of Saraswati Puja.

### *Singing Game*

Children, especially girls, who were four years old, played "Ring Around the Rosie" all day long. The last line "We all fall down" was the most exciting part for them as they were trying new gestures for falling down every time. For example, sometimes they jumped before falling down, and sometimes they just sat down; after falling down on the floor, they stayed on the floor for a few minutes (sometimes rolling and sometimes simply lying) and then started playing the game afresh. But, every time, the falling down was accompanied by smiles and giggles.

Folklorist Leah Rachel Clara Yoffie (1947) observed that children at the end of the nineteenth century played more traditional games than at the time she collected lore in the 1920s, which follows Newell's devolutionary view. But this does not hold true in my study. All the four-year-old children were engaged in playing the traditional singing game of "Ring Around the Rosie."<sup>9</sup> The game never disappeared, although the stigmatization of tradition as American society modernizes might contribute to a perception of its displacement (Bronner 2011:27–36).

However, on the day of Saraswati Puja, this game was played in a highly collaborative manner and with mutual support and fussing about the rhyme, body movement, and falling down. Simon J. Bronner mentions that "rhymes can appear especially playful and colorful" and through the innocent enactment of children many "real-life issues are raised in rhyme" which the children are completely ignorant of (1988:51). This is so true for this singing game:

Ring around the rosie,  
Pocket full of posies,  
Ashes! Ashes!  
We all fall down

This rhyme, according to some scholars like Peter and Iona Opie, refers to the Great Plague that happened in England in 1665 or with the Black Death in England that happened earlier in 1347-1350 (Opie 1985:221–22). A rosy rash was

said to be a symptom of the plague and posies were the herbs that were carried for protection. The final "all fall down," interpreted as death, actually happened as a result of the plague (Opie 1985:365). But the four year olds playing this were completely ignorant of this gruesome and somewhat dated popular interpretation.<sup>10</sup> More relevant for their purposes was the use of the rhyme as a recognizable American tradition to socially engage one another. The rhyme and the rhythm made them giggle and encouraged them to have different body movements. Bronner contends that the actions of standing and falling down became a creative performance, a celebration of youth identity for them (2011:199).

### *Chasing and Tagging Games*

Children belonging to the most active age group, five and seven years old, formed a separate clique of their own. This group had both boys and girls. They played a variety of games. Before lunch, they were all engaged in chasing or tagging game. After lunch and the sit-and-draw event, they were engaged in looking at what others have painted. All their games included some physical activity, for example, a chasing game, or tagging game. It is significant to note here that the chase was led by the boys and followed by the girls. No girl was ever followed by any boy at any point of time of the game. This is a reflection of the patriarchal society that permeates contemporary American life. Even in Indian society, men are considered superior to women. A male member is usually the head of the family and is expected to earn the bread for the family; women are considered unequal and in need of care and protection by the male members. Women usually obey and follow their fathers and husbands when making major decisions. Perhaps witnessing this at home, these children have understood this to be the way of the world and that girls should follow boys, especially when they are playing a game that includes following somebody.

Girls between eight and twelve also played tagging games (freeze tag), but they did not include the children younger to them in their game. They considered themselves to be grown-ups, so they did not even care to include "babies" (a term used by an informant to describe any younger children) in their group or games. In his book *American Children's Folklore*, Simon J. Bronner claims that by indulging in "the non-singing variety of game that involves running and chasing," children develop their thought processes as well as their bodies (1988:175). Brian Sutton-Smith and B.G. Rosenberg have similarly observed the crucial role that chasing games have played throughout in their study of sixty years of games. Arguing that the physical activity of running and chasing, "the theme of pursuit and capture," is one of the basic motifs of the American culture (1961:25).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is evident that tag has historically been more popular among girls, but more recently has found equal favor among both boys and girls. Chasing and tagging games are quite popular among children because they can involve a large number of kids and can be played anywhere.

These games are popular because in lieu of such games, children get the opportunity to explore new territories and interact with one another, especially boys with girls and vice versa (see Bronner 1988). The "it" figure in the game

is significant because "it" is the one with authority. The children run away from "it" but they also invite the authority figure to chase them in order to bring them back to base or within their boundaries, which reflects parental guidance and control (see Schwartzman 1976). But the question that arises here is whether the "it" authority scale is more Indian in which there is a strong parent and expected obedience by the child or American in which there is a weak parent emphasizing independence by the child. I claim it is both for these children. Living in America, Indian American Bengali parents appreciate the importance of independence and value it, allowing their children to do things the way the children want to do. At the same time, because these parents grew up in Indian society, they cannot give away the authoritarian part of parenthood. Many of these children go to Sunday schools at the temple to take classes on Indian languages, classical dance, and music. These children also have to live up to their parents' expectations when it comes to studies and choosing a career, which underscores my participants' frequent display of independence and authority displayed throughout their games.

#### *Spin Top, Video Games, and the Fight*

Boys thirteen years and above, indulged in playing with spinning tops. Boys between eight and twelve years also joined them. Some of the girls of various age groups also joined them, but as viewers. The girls did not participate in the games. Spin top was played and enjoyed more as a competition and not as any other game.<sup>12</sup>

Video games, on the other hand, were played by almost everybody, regardless of age or gender. Not all of the children brought their gaming consoles, so they took turns at holding the electronic devices. It is significant to note here that although the boys were sharing the gaming devices, the girls had individual devices for themselves and so no sharing was required. A fight broke out all of a sudden between two boys (ages thirteen and nine) who were brothers. The reason behind the fight was not known initially, but later on an eight year old girl informed me that the fight and the eventual crying were strategies to attract the attention of the parents and get the device back by manipulating the authority of the elders.

Education and technology scholar Royal Van Horn notes that video games have won a major share of the children's toy market and have become a major pastime for boys between eight and eighteen years of age (1999:173). Other researchers, including Simon Gottschalk (1995), claim that prolonged exposure to video games, especially violent video games, can result in aggressive behavior increasing feeling of anger or hostility, and a decrease in pro-social behavior. Along the same line, the non-electronic activities that I observed resulted in more socialization and less aggressive behaviors.

Although some scholars argue that video games are the major pastime activity of the boys, I claim that it occupies the girls as well and have been integrated into traditional play, considering the fact that video games played on electronic devices are distinguished from other folk activities by their proprietary individualistic characteristic. The games played by boys and girls may vary, but they are

equally prevalent between both genders. The fight that broke out between the two brothers might be more than just a way for the younger brother to get the device from the older brother. I contend that such a behavior is a reflection of the aggression that happens due to prolonged exposure to violent/strategic video games (see Anderson and Bushman 2001). On the other hand, I noticed that the parents used time on the devices as "bribes" to their children. I witnessed parents making a deal with their children on the day of Saraswati Puja; for example, a mother told her son, "If you finish up your lunch quickly you will get to play video games, but you have to finish everything on your plate before that." This indicates that video games have gained relevance in society which is more than just a pastime or a distraction; it has become coinage in a token economy for children and has become distinct from other forms of play that have more of a reference to social and traditional usage.

### *Chatting and Gossiping*

Teenagers between thirteen and seventeen years of age were mostly engaged in chatting and gossiping. They were mostly talking about fashion, style, career paths they would like to take, teachers, rumors, and television shows. Children between eight and thirteen formed two separate groups: a boys' group and girls' group. While the activities of the boys' group were the same, the girls' group had a further division. The girls between eight and ten were not included in any of the discussions of the girls between eleven and thirteen. The former group (sub-group) was not even allowed to be near or around the latter group of girls. But it was completely opposite with the boys. Boys talked and chatted either with other boys irrespective of age, or with girls of their own age or older. However, girls between eight and twelve were very interested in the discussions of their elder sisters who were young teenagers. As they were not allowed to be a part of the latter's group, these young girls always tried to sit as close to their sisters as possible only to eavesdrop on their conversation.

One of the major topics of discussion among the girls between eight and twelve was speculation about what their elder sisters were saying in their absence. Then one of them would comment, "I know they talk about nail art" or fashion or music videos. This not only reflects the curiosity that these young girls have, but also the impact of mass media on younger generation. Their world is no longer limited to dolls and fairy tales; they are more eager to grow up and do adult activities.

The discussions about career path and objectives reflect that these young adolescents are highly encouraged by their parents for higher degrees and are thus, goal oriented. It also reflects their family's economic status and the peaceful and happy relationship that they share with their parents (see Schwartzman 1976). Healthy relationships between parents and children promote the ability to make desirable choices and a greater ability to sustain those choices and achieve desired goals.

### *Adolescent Activities*

One of the two young adolescent girls, whose parents are separated, spent her entire time either helping her mother or talking to her friend, another girl, in the puja. Both the girls took care of the children during their lunch and dinnertime. It was their responsibility, as all adults were busy with puja, to see what the children needed and they also helped young kids to finish up their food properly.

Psychologists Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg argue that children living with a single parent tend to take household responsibility earlier than is done by children living with both parents (2001:297). They further argue that such children exhibit lesser degree of participation in any religious or secular activities. But my participants were very involved in religious as well as secular activities, in the sense that they were always eager to help their mother.

### *Adventure Trip*

After finishing their dinner, the boys between eleven and fourteen decided to make a trip to the forbidden area of the hall, the storage unit. Both adolescent girls followed them. Girls between eleven and thirteen followed the adolescents and their sisters (eight to ten years old), always curious about their elder sisters, also followed them. When everybody went inside, the younger children also wanted to peep in to see what was going on inside. Thus all the children became a part of this adventure tripping. The children remained unnoticed even after their entry into the storage unit until there was a loud thud sound. Being a storage room, it had piles of tables and chairs, and somebody did something inside and a few chairs fell down to the ground. With this crash, their "trip" came to an end. While the younger kids were frightened, the older kids were embarrassed and tried to put the blame on the little children as it attracted the attention of their parents and adults came running to them to check if anybody was hurt.

This mystery-shrouded adventure trip shares structural and functional aspects with legend trips that are well defined by folklore scholars Elizabeth Bird (2004), Bill Ellis (1989), and Patricia M. Meley (1991). Structurally, a legend trip is divided into three parts: the introduction where children/adolescents discuss about the place they are about to visit; the second part consists of the actual visit and discovering things unknown and unseen; the final part involves telling and retelling of the experiences at the site. For the children, I observed, the storage unit was a part of their discussion since morning due to three major reasons: first, it was a forbidden zone; second, they did not know what was inside it; third, they wanted to find for themselves what was inside it and why it was forbidden. The children successfully made the trip and later on, they discussed their experiences. Thus, like all other legend trips, this adventure trip also shares the tripartite structural pattern of legend tripping.

Referring to the functional aspects of legend tripping, Bill Ellis states that adolescent "legend trips" is in part a "ritual of rebellion" in which they escape the authoritarian world (1983:64). Patricia Meley (1991) claims that the function of

legend tripping is "primarily recreation" (6), noting that such trips have a "social aspect" associated with them in which children do things together (11), and that "a 'typical' trip almost always includes a mixed-sex group of adolescents" (17). I identified all these characteristics closely associated with the adventure trip that the children under my observation made to the storage unit. The boys between eleven and fourteen actually initiated the trip, thereby portraying traits of "rebellion" against authority. Though it was an act of rebellion, Meley notes that through ritualization of the rebellion the children make their challenge to the adult authority manageable and comprehensible and so is not considered as a delinquent activity (1991:21); this stands true for my participant children as well. This trip also acted as an escape from boredom for the children as they spent their entire day within that demarcated indoor space and wanted to do something exciting that would rid them of their boredom.

### **Interpretation of the Activities**

Based on the discussions so far and limited by lack of comparative ethnographic material on Indian children's activities in an American society, I have some general interpretation of the children's activities I witnessed on the day of Saraswati Puja. The adult-enforced context of religious ritual limited children's activities, but children, nonetheless, controlled the space within the hall by engaging in activities of their choosing. They could not play outdoors as they were not allowed to by their parents. But this does not mean that they did not play outdoor games. The entire space became their territory and through their various activities throughout the day they exercised their freedom and blurred the space boundary.

As the group of thirty children was a mixed group with children belonging to various ages and gender, I observed the following. The children formed several small groups based on their age and gender. The girls had separate groups based on their ages and inter-mixing of those groups was very limited. The younger girls were always either eager to emulate the activities of older girls or eavesdrop on their conversation. They also indulged in cooperative games like "Ring Around the Rosie" or simply sat and chatted. Unlike girls, the boys' activities were not restricted to any specific age and they always tended to play in a larger group. The games that the boys played (spin top and video games) encouraged competition, so the more the number of competitors, the intense the competition grew. The boys' games (especially video games) continued for a longer period of time, despite the fight, as compared to the girls. However, only chasing or tagging game involved both boys and girls.

There are several reasons behind such divisions and distinctions of the games played by the boys and the girls. The games the boys played continued longer because they could resolve their differences quickly and resume the game without having any ill feeling. For example, the two brothers, who fought for one video game, were playing together sharing the device once their mother resolved the fight. Thus boys quarrel all the time, but not at the cost of terminating the game. On the other hand, the girls could not continue with one game (tagging for example) for long because either they easily got bored or could not resolve the

disputes that arose while playing. As the girls' games did not give rise to disputes, they "gain[ed] little experience in the judicial process" (Lever 1976:483). Even when problems arose, they put very little effort to resolve quarrels or problems, and their games broke up abruptly.

The games and activities of the boys and the girls can also be interpreted in terms of social and psychological development. Boys' reflected their organizational skills necessary to coordinate the activities in a group of large number and diverse people. Furthermore, their experience in controlled competitive situations tended to improve their interpersonal skills and their ability to handle competition and competitors. Girls, on the other hand, who either played in small groups or tried to emulate their sisters or adults in general (when discussing about fashion trends and beauty tips or helping their mothers or taking care of other kids), tended to develop social and emotional skills. They reflected more socially constructed feminine traits of nurturance, spontaneity, and cooperation. Restricting themselves age-wise and sharing secrets bound them together and made them emotionally dependent. Therefore, any breach or quarrel disrupted such bonds and they stopped playing altogether.

## Conclusion

No matter where the children are or with whom they associate, they establish a boundary around themselves with play that can be called, as anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1999 [1972]) originally suggested, a "play frame." The children separated their play from the religious festival and defined the festival as an adult observation, even though the festival allowed the play frame to form. The point of tension occurred when an altercation occurred and the adults had to intervene. It could have undermined the continuation of the frame but after its resolution, the frames resumed. In effect, the children redefined the meaning of space and religious ritual by their activities. The engagement with tradition by the children, even if different from the way the adults perceived it, allowed the children to sustain their separateness and freedom from regulation, even if temporarily. They redefined the space by blurring the boundary between indoor activities and outdoor activities. Though they were restricted indoors, their activities were not just indoors. They played outdoor games indoors. They also controlled the entire space by the end of the day through their adventure tripping.

Moreover, redefinition was not only restricted to space; the children gave a new meaning to the religious ritual itself. I claim this because the children I observed were in a tricky situation. They were surrounded by adults throughout the day who expected them to be a part of the religious festival so that Indian culture and tradition are handed down to them. But they used the religious framework in a different way to exercise their own will. Taking advantage of their busy parents (due to the religious ritual and social gathering), they used this day as the day of social freedom from ethnic filial piety. Or in other words, the children converted the meaning of the ritual to one challenging hierarchy. To a casual observer, this claim might seem paradoxical because the children appeared to be dressed more in line with Bengali tradition, but their "framing" activity served to communicate

a different role to one another. My interview with them revealed that they did not get such an opportunity in other social gatherings mostly because they did not get so much of time together (as the social gatherings are restricted to one afternoon or evening unlike this one which was an all-day event). Another paradox is that this freedom is in a context of being more spatially restricted than in other religious festivals. Children in other religious and social gatherings are given a separate space where they can indulge in their activities.

Finally, the children not only did change the meaning of the ritual, but also reflected various behavioral traits passed on from one generation to another. It is perfectly clear how their games and activities portray their psychological development, their relationship with their parents and the society in general. The increasing popularity of this festival indicates more complexities as it portrays a celebration of Americanism for second generation Indian American, while first generation adults get to reflect upon their homeland roots.

## NOTES

1. Diwali is a Hindu religious festival celebrated during autumn every year. It is popularly known as the “festival of lights” because it signifies the victory of light of darkness.

2. Durga Puja is a Bengali religious festival that celebrates the worship of goddess Durga. It is a five days’ festival celebrated with great pomp and show. This festival signifies the victory of good over evil.

3. Bengalis are an ethnic group of the Bengal region (now divided between West Bengal, India and Bangladesh). It is said that they have evolved from a mixture of Aryan race and Austro-Asiatic people. Their native language is Bengali and they are concentrated mostly in the states of West Bengal and Tripura of India and Bangladesh.

4. Any religious ritual performed by Hindus is called a “puja.”

5. Salwaar kameez is a traditional outfit worn by women all over India in different styles. It originated in south and central Asia. Salwaars are loose trousers with narrow ankles. Kameez is a knee-length top with varying neck patterns.

6. Kurta pajama is a traditional outfit worn by Indian men. Much like salwaar kameez, kurta pajamas are also worn in different styles. Kurta is a loose knee-length shirt-like outfit worn by men. Pajama is a loose trouser.

7. Recently, this festival has taken the shape of Valentine’s Day in West Bengal as teenagers go out on dates all dressed up.

8. To study the whole cultural scene (Saraswati Puja celebration) I adopted certain methods. As a non-participant observant, I witnessed the children in all their activities and noted down the games they were playing. I tried to be as close to them as possible, but the moment they realized that an adult is around them, they changed the subject of discussion. This is truer for the teenage girls. Boys did not feel much bothered whenever I was around. The younger children had no time to sit and talk, so I observed their play. During my observation, I asked children about their activities that day. The younger children avoided answering, but children between eight and ten eagerly responded. Being unable to listen to

the conversation of the teenage girls, one of my informants provided information on her elder sister's conversation with her friends. I separately interviewed the adolescent girls. The purpose of my interview, in general, was (1) to find out what role *Saraswati Puja* played in their lives (2) the difference from other holidays when they also get a chance to play and spend time with friends and (3) their rationale for choosing particular activities.

9. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1961) have provided the rank of this game: "54th (1896), 41st (1898), 25th (1921), 89th (1959)" (24).

10. Many folklorists have reasonably argued that the nursery rhyme "Ring Around the Rosie" was not created because of the "Black Plague" that hit western Europe in 1347 and had killed nearly one third of its population by 1350. Though the rhyme has elements referring to the plague, yet the plague was not the reason for its creation. There are several other versions collected by Charlotte Sophia Burne (1883), William Wells Newell (1884), and Alice Gomme (1898), which do not indicate any connection with the plague. Additionally, this rhyme was first published in 1881 by Kate Greenaway (illustrator) in *Mother Goose or The Old Nursery Rhymes*; folklorists in favor of this argument disagree with the fact that children recited this rhyme continuously for over five centuries, yet no one felt the importance of mentioning it between 1347 and 1881.

11. They further claim that with few exceptions girls show higher ranking in these games between 1856 and 1959: girls ranked tag game 3rd in 1896, 1st in 1921, and 3rd in 1959; for boys tag was 7th in 1896, 4th in 1921, and 2nd in 1959 (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 1961:25).

12. In "Sixty Years of Historical Change" Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1961) mention that with time spin top has lost popularity among the boys; it ranked 12th in 1896, 10th in 1898, 15th in 1921, and 133rd in 1959 (27). They further state that girls have developed keen interest in such games and perhaps this is the reason for the decreasing interest of the boys in spin tops (21).

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Craig A., and Brad J. Bushman. 2001. "Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature." *Psychological Science* 12 (5):353–59.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1999 [1972]. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." In *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, edited by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, 314–28. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bronner, Simon J. 1988. *American Children's Folklore*. Little Rock, AR: August House.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008-2009. "Fathers and Sons: Rethinking the Bar Mitzvah as an American Rite of Passage." *Children's Folklore Review* 31:7–34.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. “Framing Folklore: An Introduction.” *Western Folklore* 69 (3/4):275–97.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011. *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Brunvand, Jan Harold. 2012. *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends, Updated and Expanded Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Burne, Charlotte S., ed. 1883. *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings*. London: Trubner & Co.
- Foster, Josephine C. 1930. “Play Activities of Children in the First Six Grades.” *Child Development* 1 (3):248–54.
- Gomme, Alice B. 1898. *A Dictionary of British Folk-Lore: The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (Vol. 1). London: David Nutt.
- Gottschalk, Simon. 1995. “Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction.” *Symbolic Interaction* 18 (1):1–18.
- Greenaway, Kate. 1881. *Mother Goose or the Old Nursery Rhymes*. London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co.
- Griffiths, Mark. 2005. “Video Games and Health.” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 331:122–23.
- Hofferth, Sandra L. and John F. Sandberg. 2001. “How American Children Spend Their Time.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2):295–308.
- Horn, Royal V. 1999. “Violence and Video Games.” *Technology* 43:173–74.
- Lever, Janet. 1976. “Sex Differences in the Games Children Play.” *Social Problems* 23 (4):478–87.
- Meley, Patricia M. 1991. “Adolescent Legend Trips as Teenage Cultural Response: A Study of Lore in Context.” *Children’s Folklore Review* 14 (1):5–24.
- Newell, William W. 1884. *Games and Songs of American Children*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Opie, Iona and Peter Opie. 1951. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *The Singing Game*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Schwartzman, Helen B. 1976. “The Anthropological Study of Children’s Play.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5:289–328.
- Stutley, Margaret. 2006. *Hindu Deities: A Mythological Dictionary with Illustrations*. New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian and B. G. Rosenberg. 1961. “Sixty Years of Historical Change in the Game Preferences of American Children.” *Journal of American Folklore* 74 (291):17–46.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1989. “Children’s Folk Games as Customs.” *Western Folklore* 48 (1):33–42.
- Yoffie, Leah Rachel Clara. 1947. “Three Generations of Children’s Singing Games in St. Louis.” *Journal of American Folklore* 60 (235):1–51.