

Diasporic Ritualists:

An ethnography of Karva Chauth in Montreal

William Maloney

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Religions and Cultures

Presented in Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Religions) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

© William Maloney, July 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: William Maloney

Entitled: Diasporic Ritualists: An ethnography of Karva Chauth in Montreal
and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Religion and Cultures)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to
originality and quality.

Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Chair

Chair's name

_____ Examiner

Examiner's name

_____ Examiner

Examiner's name

_____ Supervisor

Supervisor's name

Approved by _____

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director Professor Lynda Clarke

_____ 2025

Dean of Faculty Professor Pascale Sicotte

ABSTRACT

Diasporic Ritualists:

An ethnography of Karva Chauth in Montreal

William Maloney

This thesis explores the roles, meanings, and functions of the Karva Chauth ritual as practiced within Montreal's South Asian diaspora. Drawing on participant observation and interviews, I demonstrate why the ritual can be understood as a site of tension, and how it functions as a lever for alleviating that tension—enabling participants to manage emotional strain, negotiate relational dynamics, and assert agency through structured symbolic action. I argue that Karva Chauth's ongoing relevance lies in its capacity to transform tension into a generative resource—enabling participants to manage uncertainty and renegotiate tradition through performative devotion, aesthetic authorship, and collective ritual engagement.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Approaches to the Study	2
Methodology	6
Thematic Findings	15
Gender Roles	18
Generational Shift.....	19
Adaptation and Innovation	20
Spirituality, identity and community	21
Discussion	22
Ritual Tension.....	23
Ritual Negotiation.....	29
Ritual Power	34
Ritual Reciprocity.....	41
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	50
Appendix.....	54
Information And Consent Form	54

Introduction

In a busy suburb of Montreal, on a lunar day rooted in ancient calendrical cycles, South Asian women gather at the Hindu Mandir to observe Karva Chauth—a ritual of devotion, fasting, and collective performance. The vibrant aesthetic of saris, the rhythms of sacred songs, and the sounds of social media notifications illustrate how the diasporic ritual unfolds at the intersection of memory and modernity.

This research examines the Karva Chauth ritual among Montreal’s South Asian diaspora, focusing on its cultural relevance and symbolic functions within the diasporic context. The central research question is: What are the roles, meanings, and functions of the Karva Chauth ritual at the Hindu Mandir in Dollard-Des Ormeaux?

This research argues that Karva Chauth’s ongoing relevance stems from its capacity to transform tension into a generative resource—enabling adept participants to alleviate anxieties and renegotiate tradition through performative devotion, aesthetic expression, and communal solidarity.

Methodologically, the study is rooted in ethnography. Through participant observation, interviews, and reflexive engagement, I explore how participants reimagine ritual within a hybrid cultural landscape. While much existing scholarship centers Karva Chauth in its South Asian origins, this study examines its evolution under diasporic conditions—where migration, gendered agency, and community dynamics reshape how ritual is practiced and experienced.

Approaches to the Study

This thesis draws on intersecting perspectives from ritual theory and diaspora studies to analyze Karva Chauth as a dynamic, contextually embedded practice. Central to this framework is Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization, which conceptualizes rituals not as static repetitions of tradition, but as embodied, strategic actions that negotiate social realities.¹ Bell's approach allows Karva Chauth to be understood as an evolving performance that reflects diasporic tensions and participant agency.

Complementing this is Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which offers tools to examine how ritual acts—such as fasting, aesthetic self-presentation, and communal participation—constitute gendered identities. Within Butler's framework, these repeated embodied acts are not mere expressions of identity but are constitutive performances that reshape relational and gender norms in a diasporic setting.²

Diaspora theory further supports this analysis. Avtar Brah's notion of “homing desire” frames Karva Chauth as a practice that sustains emotional and cultural continuity across geographic dislocation.³ Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as discursively constructed underscores that rituals like Karva Chauth are not about preserving an “authentic” past, but about generating new meanings through symbolic performance in shifting environments.⁴

¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98.

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191; *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 152.

³ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 16.

⁴ Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 65.

In addition to these primary theoretical anchors, the thesis incorporates insights from Roy Rappaport and systems theory⁵ as developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy⁶ and Donella Meadows.⁷ Rappaport's view of ritual as a stabilizing force that communicates and sustains social meaning through costly, repeated actions enriches the interpretation of fasting as a form of relational investment. Systems theory provides a structural lens for analyzing Karva Chauth as a functional ritual system, revealing its internal operations and its role within broader social mechanisms.

Together, these frameworks position Karva Chauth as a ritual of negotiated tradition—one in which emotional, relational, and cultural tensions act as catalysts for transformation and innovation.

Complementing this theoretical foundation is an ethnographic framework that explores South Asian women's votive practices in the diasporic context, focusing on their evolving meanings and functions within the Montreal community. Key components of this framework include reflexivity and reciprocal anthropology.

Juelskjær, Plauborg, and Adrian's *Dialogues on Agential Realism* inform my thesis by framing research as an ethically entangled practice that requires response-ability.⁸ Karen Barad's "Agential Realism" views knowledge production as inherently intertwined with values and

⁵ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 131.

⁶ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1968); Donella H. Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute, 1999).

⁷ Donella H. Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* (Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute, 1999).

⁸ Malou Juelskjær, Helle Plauborg, and Stine Willum Adrian, *Dialogues on Agential Realism: Engaging in Worldings through Research Practice* (London: Routledge, 2021), 11.

material realities. Reflexivity emphasizes the researcher's critical engagement with their positionality and the co-construction of knowledge with participants. In this framework, ethics, ontology, and epistemology are inseparable, highlighting the researcher's responsibility to acknowledge the entanglement of material, social, and cultural elements in shaping the research process.⁹

Reciprocal anthropology continuously refines research strategies based on fresh insights gathered during fieldwork, embodying a dialogic and participatory approach that is central to the methodology of oral history.¹⁰ Derived from the Greek word *parallaxis*, meaning alteration, the term *parallax* has been adapted by Anne Raulin and Susan Carol Rogers as a metaphor to describe reciprocal anthropology, emphasizing the juxtaposition of outsider and insider perspectives to achieve a heteroglossic understanding of cultural dynamics.¹¹ This reinterpretation highlights how different viewpoints on the same subject can reveal new insights, enabling a dialogical and comparative approach in anthropological research.¹² This method enables responsiveness to new information and evolving contexts, crucial for deeply understanding cultural dynamics.¹³

⁹ Juelskjær, Plauborg, and Adrian, 2021; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 353.

¹⁰ Anne Raulin and Susan Carol Rogers, eds., *Transatlantic Parallaxes: Toward Reciprocal Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998); Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

¹¹ Raulin and Rogers, *Transatlantic Parallaxes*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ High, *Oral History at the Crossroads*, 195.

This research's interview process saw shifting perspectives between researcher and participants which reshaped the dialogue. As new insights emerged, I adjusted my questions and interpretations, to enable a co-construction of data with the research participants.

Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, introduces the concept of heteroglossia, emphasizing the coexistence and interaction of multiple voices, perspectives, or discourses.¹⁴ It resonates with the collaborative and reflexive practices of Henry Greenspan and Steven High, who emphasize shared authority and the co-creation of narratives.¹⁵ High, for instance, illustrates how projects like the Montreal Life Stories evolve iteratively through continuous feedback loops with participants, integrating emerging themes and adapting research strategies to the needs of the community.¹⁶ While my research addresses less sensitive topics than those of Greenspan and of High, the principle of revisiting, refining, and co-creating aligns closely with their shared emphasis on adaptive methodologies. Like iterative coding in software development, iterative adaptive ethnography involves the constant revising and reworking of the research framework, making it a dynamic and collaborative process that values partnership and shared authority.¹⁷

Steven High's methodologies in *Oral History at the Crossroads* owe much to Henry Greenspan's pioneering concept of "recounting," which emphasizes the importance of iterative, evolving dialogue over static, one-time testimony. Greenspan argues that deep understanding emerges through sustained engagement, where each conversation builds upon previous ones,

¹⁴ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

¹⁵ Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, 7.

¹⁶ High, *Oral History at the Crossroads*, 208.

¹⁷ Ibid.

revealing layers of meaning that cannot be captured in isolated encounters.¹⁸ He highlights the collaborative nature of this process, where both the interviewer and the participant work together to shape understanding, creating a dynamic interaction that transcends mere extraction of information. High extends this framework in his *Montreal Life Stories* project by embedding shared authority and adaptability into his oral history methodology, ensuring that participants' voices continually inform and refine the research process.¹⁹ Both scholars underscore that recounting and oral history are not fixed declarations but fluid, dialogic processes that evolve through ongoing relationships, rooted in mutual trust and collaboration.

Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic approach to explore the roles, meanings, and functions of the Karva Chauth ritual within the South Asian diasporic community in Montreal. By immersing myself in the community's cultural and religious practices, I sought to capture the nuanced experiences and interpretations of the participants.

The primary setting for this research is the Hindu Mandir in Dollard-des-Ormeaux, in the suburbs of Montreal. This temple serves as a cultural and religious hub for the Indian community, hosting various events and rituals, including the Karva Chauth Ritual (*Puja*). In addition to the ritual itself, the temple organizes pre-Karva Chauth gatherings, which include festive activities such as the singing of traditional songs, dance contests, henna application,

¹⁸ Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, xv.

¹⁹ High, *Oral History at the Crossroads*, 195.

dressing in traditional attire, and communal meals (*Mehndi Mela*). These events offer insight into how traditional practices blend with contemporary cultural expressions.

Karva Chauth is a traditional Hindu ritual primarily observed by married women in India. It is celebrated annually on the fourth day after the full moon (Chaturthi) in the month of Kartik, typically falling in October or early November. While it is not a mainstream ritual across all regions of India, Karva Chauth is widely observed in certain communities and holds a captivating cultural importance, particularly among married women who undertake the fast for the health, longevity, and prosperity of their husbands. The preparations for Karva Chauth begin several days before the fast. Women gather to prepare the necessary ritual items, including the *thali* (ritual plate) and henna. These preparations often take place in social gatherings, which may include the exchange of gifts. In diasporic communities, these events are sometimes organized as *Mehndi Melas*, festive gatherings centered around the application of henna and communal preparations for the fast. On the day of Karva Chauth, women abstain from both food and water from sunrise to moonrise, refraining from household or professional work to focus solely on the observance. They dress in new saris and traditional jewelry, often with assistance from their husbands. The ritual begins with a communal puja, typically held at a temple (mandir) or other designated spaces. Women sit in a circle with their *thalis*²⁰, placing ritual offerings in the center. The *thalis* are passed in a counterclockwise direction, completing seven turns while a prayer is chanted. This movement is accompanied by rhythmic recitation or music, and represents a central aspect of the ritual. The ritual culminates with the auspicious moonrise. When the moon appears, women view it through a sieve before turning their gaze to their husbands. The fast is

²⁰ A round platter used to serve food, also used to refer to an Indian-style meal made up of a selection of various dishes which are served on a platter. *Thalis* are often used in south Asia for ceremonial purposes.

broken when the husband offers water and food to his wife, signifying the conclusion of the ritual.

The ritual is rooted in devotional narratives that emphasize themes of marital fidelity, sacrifice, and the spiritual power of a wife's prayers. Stories such as those of Queen Veeravati, who restored her husband's life through her strict observance of the fast, and Karva, who saved her husband's life through her devotion, are central to the practice.

I engaged in participant observation to gain an immersive understanding of the ritual and its associated events. This involved observing the sequence of rituals, interactions among participants, gender dynamics, and the use of sacred and social spaces. I documented the subtleties of participant behavior, group dynamics, and environmental contexts. To help out, I volunteered to teach musical workshops at the Temple, providing children with the opportunity to explore and learn piano, brass, woodwind, and string instruments.

Data collection relied on field notes, audio recordings of interviews, and visual documentation of the ritual and its associated events. These tools captured the participants' experiences and the contexts in which they occurred. I conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of seven participants, including individuals of different genders and generations. These conversational interviews, lasting about an hour, allowed flexibility to explore meaningful threads shared by participants. Questions explored participants' memories, interpretations, and the ritual's significance in both their personal and communal lives. Reflexivity helped me navigate how my identity shaped the research process, ensuring ethical integrity and authentic representation.

My positionality as an outsider, both in terms of gender and cultural background, introduced certain dynamics into the research process. Engaging with a community where Karva Chauth is predominantly a women-centered ritual created moments of discomfort, particularly when interacting privately with married women. I was aware that, culturally, these interactions might be viewed as inappropriate or awkward. However, by building rapport with community elders and ensuring transparency about the purpose and confidentiality of the interviews, I was able to navigate these dynamics respectfully. My decision to give the participants pseudonyms in the final thesis further eased concerns and encouraged openness during interviews.

Reflecting on the entire process, I am confident in the ethical responsibility I upheld throughout the research. After completing the fieldwork and drafting my findings, I returned to the community to discuss my interpretations. Receiving their approval on the direction of my thesis was affirming. The fieldwork experience strengthened my confidence as an ethnographer. It allowed me to witness the complexity and beauty of ritual practices and the nuanced ways participants navigate cultural, spiritual, and gendered expectations. The process of writing the thesis felt less like a struggle and more like composing a song that had been building within me throughout my time in the field.

My first impressions of the Karva Chauth ritual at the temple were shaped by a vivid sensory overload, characterized by an overwhelming convergence of vivid colors, sounds, and lights. The vibrant hues of the women's dresses, the intricate arrangements of the temple, the paintings adorning the walls, and the carefully curated *puja* items—especially the fruits and decorative plates—stood out starkly against the industrialized landscape along the Trans-Canada Highway that brought me there. This striking contrast between the outside world and the ritual

space emphasized how the temple functioned as a sanctuary of color and spirit within an otherwise harsh and utilitarian environment.

My spouse had been invited to take part in the ritual, and I found myself assisting her by carrying her purse and bags containing various ritual items, ready to provide them if needed. This practical role positioned me in a supportive capacity, which felt unexpectedly awkward, as I was not accustomed to being in a supportive role. The situation reminded me of past experiences when accompanying my spouse to her architectural work sites, where she was the authoritative figure, directing construction workers and making critical decisions. In both contexts, I found myself stepping back, reflecting on the shifting dynamics of leadership and support based on context and expertise.

A moment that offered insight into the ritual's social dynamics occurred when I observed a couple of ritual elders skillfully managing the arriving participants. Ritual elders organized the women into groups of about twelve, guiding them through the ritual sequence with practiced ease. These elders took on the role of ritual experts, demonstrating leadership and authority as they ensured that each group performed the circular motion of the ritual plates correctly. The plates, containing symbolic elements like candles, were passed around in a circle while ritual songs were sung.

This combination of circular movement and collective singing created a mesmerizing atmosphere, reminiscent of Brahmanic rituals that I had studied previously, where skillful mediation between the human and the divine was crucial. I observed that participants responded positively to the ritual elders' guidance, perceiving it as enhancing the sacred atmosphere. This observation parallels ritual theory suggesting that precise performance can amplify spiritual

attraction, echoing Bell's understanding of ritual efficacy.²¹ I knew then that I was witnessing the type of ritual I had dreamed of during all the years I studied anthropology.

Moreover, the realization that my spouse's participation and her need for me as her ritual assistant indirectly integrated me in the ritual as a supporting participant. It also made me aware of the many other spouses supporting their partners during the ritual.

Although my research's main focus is based in the field of women in religion, it dawned on me during the research process that incorporating the perspectives of a few men could be beneficial as I uncovered the peripheral role they (including myself) had during the ritual. The interviewees consisted of women participants named Asha, Meena, Priya, and Sunita, two male participants named Sanjay and Kiran, and an unmarried young adult male devotee named Rajiv.

Asha

Asha is a woman in her 50s who has lived a life rooted in both Indian and Canadian cultures. Asha, now married and a mother to one son, began her journey with cultural practices as a teenager in the 1990s, when she and her family moved from India to Montreal. Growing up, Asha was exposed to the traditions of her heritage, experiencing the rituals both in India until her teens and later as an adult in Montreal.

According to Asha, her motivation to participate in this study stemmed from her perspective of having witnessed the evolution of cultural practices over several decades and

²¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 131, 141; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 89. Bell argues that ritual efficacy emerges from the ritualized body's practical mastery of culturally structured environments—an embodied knowledge shaped by disciplined repetition. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, she shows how ritual specialists consolidate symbolic power by internalizing and reproducing these structures in ways that sustain their authority.

across two countries. She shared her worry on the contrasting experiences of performing rituals within India's rigid and socially demanding community settings versus the lack of enthusiasm and motivation to maintain these traditions among newer generations in Montreal. Her insights illustrate how cultural practices evolve when removed from their original context.

Meena

Meena is a woman in her 40s and the younger sister of Asha. Sharing the same family background, Meena also grew up experiencing the blend of Indian and Canadian cultures, having witnessed her mother's move from India to Montreal in the 1990s. While Meena does not consider herself as religious as her sister, she appreciates and enjoys the social and communal aspects of temple activities.

Meena's enthusiasm for participating in this study arose naturally when she learned that her sister was involved. Known from her elder sister Asha for her curiosity and openness, Meena expressed genuine interest in sharing her experiences and learning more about the research. Unlike Asha, Meena does not perceive any significant challenges related to religious or cultural practices, but she does bring a distinct perspective shaped by her more flexible and sociable approach to temple involvement.

Priya

Priya is a woman in her 40s who recently joined the community as a first-generation immigrant to Montreal. As an accomplished engineer and mother of two, she has quickly become an active and enthusiastic participant in temple activities, particularly enjoying Bollywood-style

performances. Priya's passion for dance and cultural expression has made her a vibrant presence at community events.

Although she initially felt uneasy about participating in the interview, her apprehension was alleviated after discussing the process with a friend who had already been interviewed. Encouraged by this reassurance, Priya agreed to share her thoughts and experiences. Despite her skepticism about the effectiveness of the Karva Chauth ritual itself, she embraces the social and entertainment aspects of the associated events, finding them a refreshing break from her professional life. Priya especially values the opportunity to perform and to watch others showcase their talents, appreciating the communal atmosphere and the sense of celebration.

Her willingness to balance skepticism with open participation highlights a modern, pragmatic approach to tradition, where cultural engagement is valued not just for its religious significance but also for its social and recreational benefits.

Sunita

Sunita is a woman in her 50s who holds a pivotal role within the community, often addressed as "Mataji" out of deep respect and reverence. In traditional Hindu culture, being called "Mataji" signifies not only honor and admiration but also acknowledges her status as a guiding, motherly figure. Sunita's participation in this study was motivated by the reciprocity she values deeply—just as she appreciated my gesture of teaching music to the temple's children during the spring break camp, she felt it was important to support my research efforts. More than any other participant, Sunita exemplified the principle of giving back to those who invest in the community. She went out of her way to explain to me the power of reciprocal action within the

Hindu Mandir community—how, through cooperation, they get to accomplish events that are vital to the well-being of each member.

Sunita's role in the community goes beyond participation; she is a natural leader, stepping in to coordinate temple activities and mediate conflicts when necessary. Whether it's managing energetic children during gatherings or resolving misunderstandings between community members, Sunita's firm yet fair approach has earned her respect and trust. She was the most helpful in facilitating my work by explaining my intentions to others.

Sunita's no-apologies attitude and her willingness to ask difficult questions such as skills that can benefit the community—both of me and any newcomers to the temple—reflect her deep commitment to maintaining harmony and integrity within the community. Her presence as a protector and peacekeeper leaves a lasting impression.

Sanjay

Sanjay, a respected elder in his 60s—not one of the husbands of the female participants—brings deep religious knowledge and long-standing community involvement. His participation in this study was motivated by a strong sense of reciprocity, aligning with the ritual values he upholds in family and community life. While he reported no present struggles with cultural practice, his reflections emphasized the importance of continuity and gratitude in sustaining meaningful traditions.

Kiran

Kiran, a man in his 40s, is deeply religious and well-versed in Hindu scriptures, particularly the Bhagavad Gita. At the temple, he takes on an informal outreach role, welcoming newcomers and

encouraging deeper involvement. He was the first to volunteer for an interview—not one of the husbands of the female participants—motivated by a desire to share his knowledge and support interfaith understanding.

Though he viewed Karva Chauth more as a socially driven, marital ritual than a spiritual one, he acknowledged its communal importance and its ability to draw people into the temple community. He emphasized that Hindu rituals uniquely foster bonds not only among families but also between humans and the gods, offering a layered sense of belonging. Kiran clarified ritual details, linking theology with practice.

Rajiv

Rajiv, a recent immigrant in his 20s, participated as an observer due to his unmarried status. His reflections expressed a desire to one day engage in the ritual fully, seeing it as a path to both spiritual and social integration. Though his fluency in English was limited, he offered valuable insights into the symbolic foundations of Karva Chauth, highlighting its aspirational significance for newer community members.

Thematic Findings

I employ thematic analysis to explore the ritual's roles, meanings, functions, and evolution. I use thematic analysis to decode patterns in responses. This makes use of interview data to uncover how the ritual influences individuals' self-concept and their role in the community. This analysis will assess how the ritual reinforces marital and social bonds, and shapes personal and communal

identity. I analyzed the resulting data thematically to identify recurring patterns and core themes across the interviews and observations.

The study explores the Karva Chauth ritual and its changes over time. Using the ethnographic data shared by the interviewee participants, it focuses on tracking key elements of the ritual assemblage, the transmission of knowledge, the pressures of information transfer, the evolution of the ritual structure, novelty generation, selection pressure, and the examination of functions.²²

Maria Laura Frigotto's book, *Understanding Novelty in Organizations: A Research Path Across Agency and Consequences* (2018), provides analytical tools that can be adapted to understand how new ideas and practices emerge and gain legitimacy in religious contexts.²³ The mechanisms of diffusion, translation, and innovation strategies are particularly relevant for analyzing how religious rituals evolve and incorporate new elements over time.²⁴

Functional theory in this study explores how the ritual serves the community and self, by strengthening marital bonds, social bonds, and identity. My research draws upon Beatrix Hauser's concept of personification of functions within religious rituals.²⁵ This approach acted as

²² Matt J. Rossano, "The Essential Role of Ritual in the Transmission and Reinforcement of Social Norms," *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 3 (2012): 529–49; Meng Li Wong, Mikhail Prokopenko, and Angela R. L. McLean, "On the Roles of Function and Selection in Evolving Systems," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 3 (2023): e2210895120.

²³ Maria Laura Frigotto, *Understanding Novelty in Organizations: A Research Path Across Agency and Consequences* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 154.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Beatrix Hauser, *Promising Rituals: Gender and Performativity in Eastern India* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2020), 35, 242, 248.

an example for me to understand how rituals, while seemingly rigid and structured, are subject to personal interpretation and adaptation by their practitioners.²⁶

Hauser explains how regular participation in rituals can empower individuals, particularly women, to exert control and influence within their social world.²⁷ Her work on gender and performativity in Eastern India significantly informs my analysis of how ritual empowers women participants.²⁸ The concept of “ritual agency” emerges here, reflecting participants’ capacity to shape rituals in ways that reflect their personal identities and circumstances.²⁹

By analyzing the data, I uncover the agency and factors that lead to new functional aspects within the ritual.³⁰ Hauser describes this process as personalization, an authentic integration of personal dimensions into the ritual framework.³¹

Drawing on Anne Pearson’s research, which offers a detailed narrative and insightful analysis of women’s experiences in votive rituals, my study aims to understand both the personal and communal dimensions of the ritual, particularly in reinforcing social bonds and shaping identities.³²

Laxmi Tewari’s *Splendor of Worship* illuminates the significance of women’s vrat rituals in Indian culture, emphasizing their role in transmitting religious heritage and shaping social

²⁶ Hauser, *Promising Rituals*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wong, Prokopenko, and McLean, “On the Roles of Function and Selection.”

³¹ Hauser, *Promising Rituals*, 64.

³² Anne Mackenzie Pearson, “*A Study of the Puranic Vratas*” (master’s thesis, McMaster University, 1983); Anne Mackenzie Pearson, “*Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind*” (PhD diss., McMaster University, 1992); Anne Mackenzie Pearson, *Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

norms.³³ Tewari's ethnographic research is another precursor to my thesis. She highlights how these practices preserve cultural traditions and serve as pivotal avenues for women's spiritual fulfillment and communal bonding.³⁴

Gender Roles

A major theme revealed in the interviews is the negotiation of gender roles. The participants describe how traditional expectations of women's dependency on their husbands are increasingly questioned by contemporary women. Karva Chauth serves as a compelling site for examining the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity in the construction of gender roles. Traditionally, the ritual underscores patriarchal norms by positioning women as responsible for safeguarding their husbands' well-being through acts of self-sacrifice and devotion. However, contemporary reinterpretations reveal a shift wherein women increasingly reframe the ritual as a voluntary, personal expression of affection or spiritual practice, rather than a prescriptive, gendered duty. This evolving engagement with Karva Chauth exemplifies broader socio-cultural processes through which women negotiate identity, agency, and relational dynamics within—and sometimes against—established normative frameworks.

The narratives from the interviews reveal that Karva Chauth is a gendered ritual that fosters both interdependence and reciprocity between spouses. Women like Asha, Meena, and Priya describe how the ritual has evolved over time, particularly with respect to gender roles. They acknowledge that in previous generations, women were more dependent on their husbands, both financially and socially. However, despite changing gender dynamics, many women still

³³ Laxmi Tewari, *A Splendor of Worship: Women's Fasts, Rituals, Stories, and Art* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991), 7–9.

³⁴ Ibid.

voluntarily observe Karva Chauth as an act of devotion, reinforcing their emotional and spiritual bonds with their spouses.

Several participants described small acts of reciprocal care by their husbands during Karva Chauth—what I refer to as sympathetic fasting. In these cases, husbands either fast alongside their wives or assist throughout the day by preparing ritual items, driving them to the Mandir, or carrying supplies. Some also played quiet support roles during the ritual itself, standing nearby or helping manage their children, purses and bags. For instance, a participant expressed sadness when younger family members showed indifference to ritual significance and recounted how the presence or absence of her husband during the ritual deeply affects her participation. Some women noted that the gender equation had gradually shifted as a consequence of women having more autonomy in Canada.

Generational Shift

While earlier generations accepted rituals like Karva Chauth without resistance, many women today critically assess their relevance, asserting greater financial and emotional independence. A participant-related tension is the generational shift in attitudes toward tradition. Elders adhered to rituals without question, but younger generations are more skeptical, leading to anxiety about the continuity of practices in the future. The participant, Meena, reflects concern that their children might not value or maintain these customs.

Additionally, there is a critique of the shift in societal values, particularly the perceived increase in individualism among the younger generation, described as more “self-centered” and less family-oriented compared to the past.

Participants reflected on how Karva Chauth felt different due to its new contextualization in Canada. While some lamented the declining importance of the ritual among younger generations, others saw it as evolving rather than disappearing.

Adaptation and Innovation

The interviews also reveal cultural adaptation pressures faced by diaspora communities. Rituals are adapted for practical living abroad, such as sourcing religious items from local ethnic stores or modifying fasting practices due to work obligations. This adaptation is closely linked to emotional expectations and potential disappointments within family relationships.

Another notable theme is the balance between maintaining traditional practices and embracing modern practicalities. Participants navigate between strict ritual expectations (such as not cutting food on fasting days) and the realities of modern life where such rules may be impractical without domestic help.

Unlike their mothers, who followed the rituals more rigidly, modern participants adapt aspects of the fast to fit their lifestyles. Some mentioned how they now used smartphones to track moonrise times, sent pictures of the celebrations to relatives abroad, and relied on social media to organize community gatherings. Another adaptation was the growing emphasis on the pre-ritual *Mehndi Mela* (henna gathering), which allowed participants to enjoy socializing before the day of fasting. Women saw this as an enjoyable and empowering addition to the traditional observance.

Spirituality, identity and community

For many women, Karva Chauth is as much a test of personal endurance as it is an expression of faith. Priya and Sunita described how fasting instills a sense of inner strength and discipline, reinforcing self-control. The fasting aspect of the ritual was described by them as a method of developing patience, gratitude, and mindfulness toward one's partner and family life. It was also understood as a spiritual practice in its own right, a practice that is being watched by the gods themselves, a practice that can awe the divine.

Asha described how the vibrant presence of women in saris, henna, and jewelry transformed the ritual into a moment of collective spirituality. She notes how the sight of so many women engaging in the same ritual fosters a sense of shared strength and spiritual energy. The aesthetics—candlelight, sacred chants, the aromas, and the rhythmic movements of the *thali*—create an atmosphere that reinforces both personal devotion and communal belonging.

Overall, the interviewees highlighted the ancient continuity of the ritual, particularly the role of fasting and its alignment with the lunar calendar. They expressed a strong belief in the esoteric significance of lunar cycles, which they saw as dictating not only the timing of Karva Chauth but also biological and spiritual rhythms.

A recurrent theme was the number 108, which was frequently referenced by Asha and Meena in connection to Hindu cosmology and sacred texts. Asha explained that in Hinduism, the number 108 is considered highly auspicious, as it is said to represent the distance between the Earth, Moon, and Sun in proportional calculations long before NASA's discoveries. Asha, Meena and Sanjay invoked these ideas as evidence of their faith in the ritual's ancient wisdom, emphasizing that their ancestors' understanding of cosmic balance was embedded in the

practice.³⁵ The act of fasting until moonrise and actively searching for the moon was also mentioned as a defining experience. Older participants described the excitement of looking for the first glimpse of the moon, sometimes anxiously scanning the sky, especially on cloudy evenings. Some shared how their mothers or grandmothers would refuse to eat if the moon was obscured. However, Priya was more pragmatic, relying on moonrise schedules rather than strict visual confirmation.

The interviewees highlighted the communal aspect of the ritual as a vital source of social support and a means of nurturing solidarity and shared identity among participants. Gathering together at the temple created a collective atmosphere where women shared experiences, celebrated their cultural heritage, and strengthened social bonds.

Some participants expressed pride in the ritual's aesthetic power—bright saris, intricate henna, ornate jewelry—while other participants highlighted the ritual's symbolic meanings as important to them. Participants enjoyed the visual splendor of Karva Chauth as part of the ritual's communal atmosphere.

Discussion

Karva Chauth, as practiced within the South Asian diaspora of Montreal, reveals ritual as a dynamic and regenerative system—a mechanism through which tension, negotiation, power, and

³⁵ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. This aligns with Rappaport's distinction between canonical and self-referential messages, where enduring symbolic structures coexist with context-specific adaptations.

reciprocity interact to sustain cultural continuity across shifting contexts. This discussion unfolds through four interrelated sections, each examining a distinct facet of this regenerative process.

First, Ritual Tension explores how emotional and social frictions animate ritual performance and meaning, transforming vulnerability into solidarity. Second, Ritual Negotiation examines how participants—especially women—navigate, reshape, and at times reconfigure inherited roles through acts of relational authorship. Third, Ritual Power analyzes the embodied and aesthetic dimensions of Karva Chauth, showing how participants assert agency through symbolic labor and performative action. Finally, Ritual Reciprocity considers how mutual support and symbolic exchange close the ritual cycle, anchoring emotional resonance and facilitating the continuity and adaptation of diasporic tradition across temporal, geographic, and generational terrains.

Together, these sections illustrate how ritual tension catalyzes its renewal—demonstrating how diasporic communities actively reweave tradition through cycles of emotional investment, negotiation, and collective authorship.

Ritual Tension

Karva Chauth is animated by relational tensions—marital, social, and internal—that drive the ritual’s vitality and necessitate resolution. Its collective performance transforms friction into emotional resonance, recalibrates identity, and sustains cultural continuity. Like musical dissonance, ritual tension can create emotional intensity and structure the moment. They act as charged states of potential, structuring the ritual as a dynamic system where identity, meaning, and relationships are continually recalibrated through performance.

One of Karva Chauth's mechanisms lies in how it channels these tensions—social, marital and individual—into shared action. While ritual tension may often manifest subtly, its foundational role should not be underestimated. Rituals, especially those grounded in soteriological frameworks, function as existential technologies designed to symbolically or spiritually transcend death. Thus, soteriology is one of religious ritual's principal generative forces. The pressure of mortality operates as a persistent source of symbolic innovation and ritual stability, driving communities to ritualize, sacralize, and institutionalize practices that promise continuity beyond biological death. In the context of diasporic Karva Chauth, the underlying emotional architecture remains linked to the human desire for preservation, renewal, and transcendence — a desire deeply rooted in the existential structure of being.

In the days leading up to it, some participants navigate uncertainty: fear of missteps, unfamiliar groupings, an occasional relational strain between spouses. Karva Chauth begins under emotional pressure, which becomes a driving force for its symbolic and relational function. These tensions generate the need for resolution, making the ritual an emotionally functional one.

Building on Catherine Bell's understanding of ritualization as a strategic and situational process, I argue that internal tensions are essential drivers of ritual innovation.³⁶ While Bell frames ritualization as embedded in ongoing negotiations over power and meaning, my findings suggest that in diasporic contexts, the tensions themselves act as generative forces — stimulating

³⁶ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 218-223.

adaptive modifications that revitalize ritual coherence, as catalysts for evolution. In diasporic communal settings, mistaken interpretations, misunderstandings, and disbelief can erode shared understanding, creating tensions that paradoxically work against the very unity the ritual seeks to establish.³⁷ In other words, the very process of collective prayer ritual can provoke resistance, misalignment, or conflict, not despite but because of the effort to unify.³⁸ The families that make up the community at the Hindu Mandir come from different regions of India, places that developed their own subtle religious variations and understandings. The ethnographic findings reveal the participants' diversity in terms of South Asian provenance, diversities that the temple organizers need to be aware of and ultimately deal with when conflicts arise.

One of the participants, Priya, shared a sour experience during one enactment of the ritual, her candle on her *thali* began to flicker out. An experienced participant swiftly relit it with ghee, preventing disruption. The quiet coordination and attentiveness of the group transformed what could have been a break in the ritual into a shared meaningful moment. Priya describes relighting the candle as a metaphorically significant act, which took on metaphorical significance, echoing the mythological story of Queen Veervati where life is brought back from darkness and loss. She said that the women in the circle nodded in quiet acknowledgment of the moment, reinforcing the ritual's symbolism of endurance, renewal, and divine intervention. When I inquired about this, the participants underscored the importance of being prepared—of having all the tools needed in case such circumstances occur.

³⁷ D. Lawrence Kincaid, *The Convergence Model of Communication* (Honolulu, HI: East-West Communication Institute, East-West Center, 1979), 31.

³⁸ Ibid.

What might have been viewed as failure instead became an emotionally meaningful act of mutual care, sustaining ritual integrity and revealing that the ritual operates as a system that maintains coherence by redistributing, rather than resisting, internal tension—absorbing disruption and transforming it into renewed connection. The emergency ghee bottle, used to relight a flickering flame, became a quietly essential part of the ritual and symbolically reaffirmed continuity through a venerated substance. As a ritual implement, the ghee bottle functions as a material expression of tension alleviation, offering symbolic repair within the ritual system.

Once the participants activated the Karva Chauth ritual, anxieties started to alleviate, and the resulting completion of the ritual brought comfort and content. The circular motion of *thalis* having been completed, its power now channeled back to the participants. Ritual success can be then judged by its dynamism and its popularity. Reinvestment in the next Karva Chauth event is its gauge.

To understand how Karva Chauth maintains a balance between tradition and adaptation, Lévi-Strauss's distinction between “cold” and “hot” societies provides an essential framework. “Cold” societies seek to conserve cultural structures against the pressures of historical change, while “hot” societies embrace transformation as a driving force of development.³⁹ This tension is vividly visible in the Karva Chauth ritual I witnessed: elders work to preserve core symbolic elements—fasting, religious narratives—while younger participants adapt the experience through digital tools like moonrise-tracking apps and performative social media sharing.

³⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 309.

Bernard Stiegler's analysis of modernity complements this view by emphasizing how contemporary technologies disrupt traditional forms of collective attention and memory, accelerating symbolic entropy.⁴⁰ In diasporic contexts, however, this technological mediation does not necessarily dissolve tradition. Instead, when selectively integrated—as seen in the ritual adaptations at the Hindu Mandir—it enables the community to sustain ritual coherence amid cultural change. By selectively incorporating digital tools, participants shape the ritual's evolution without compromising its cultural integrity. In doing so, they enact a quiet negotiation, diffusing the tensions between tradition and transformation, and allowing Karva Chauth to maintain its emotional and symbolic vitality within a changing world.

One participant interpreted the directive to avoid touching knives or scissors during Karva Chauth as symbolic of underlying marital anxieties, suggesting it may reflect cultural notions of vulnerability within the spousal bond. Ritual narratives surrounding Karva Chauth reveal its lore entangled in ominous oral tradition accounts.⁴¹ The rule may reflect an embedded recognition that the husband's well-being is tied to mutual respect and care.⁴²

Being a ritual for spouses leaves many on the margins of the ritual. Unwed individuals can only observe from its outside. It is much worse than waiting in line to buy tickets for a music concert. One might wait four hours for concert tickets but a decade to participate in the ritual. Rajiv's exclusion from participating in the ritual had a visible effect on him, as he expressed a

⁴⁰ Bernard Stiegler, *La Société Automatique, Volume 1: L'Avenir du Travail* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 89.

⁴¹ Tewari, *A Splendor of Worship*, 89-98. In her ethnographic study, Tewari reveals many tension-filled narratives relating to Karva Chauth. She describes an oral narrative where a husband physically assaulted his wife after learning she had secretly broken her Karva Chauth fast. He believed her transgression had endangered his life, revealing the ritual's immense symbolic weight and the psychological pressure placed on women's ritual fidelity.

⁴² Jeffery D. Long, "Rights, Roles, and Reciprocity in Hindu Dharma," in *Religious Studies Book Series, vol. 1*, ed. Jeffery D. Long and Christopher Chapple (Orange, CA: Chapman University Digital Commons, 2025). The roles of debt and reciprocity in social systems.

longing to one day enter a marital relationship and earn the community's respect. This sense of aspiration and hope for the future was apparent. Rajiv's perspective as a bachelor observing the ritual from the outside offered a unique and insightful angle on the cultural practices being studied.

Several participants expressed that keeping the tradition alive in Canada is a struggle, especially among younger generations. "There's a general disconnect from religious ritual for some," one woman noted, "and it does not always feel the same as I remembered in India as a kid." And yet, the ritual is not fading—it's shifting. Many women described how new brides, in particular, were embracing Karva Chauth, drawn in by its visibility on TV and the internet. The digital circulation of the ritual—Bollywood films, influencer reels, and community WhatsApp groups—has helped it take root in a diasporic context.

This reflects what Stuart Hall (2019) and Avtar Brah (1996) identify as a central tension in diasporic identity: the longing for home that is not necessarily about returning to a geographic place, but about connecting to something symbolically anchoring.⁴³ "It's for community," one woman told me. "It's powerful." The ritual, she explained, gave her a sense of recognition and power—a space where emotional bonds and cultural memory came together. For others, the fast itself felt deeply spiritual, even though it was happening far from where their mothers or grandmothers once practiced it.

⁴³ Hall, *Essential Essays Volume 2*; Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189.

Karva Chauth transforms marital, social, generational, and diasporic tensions into sites of emotional articulation and identity negotiation, demonstrating how collective ritual practices actively reconfigure tradition within dynamic and evolving cultural frameworks.

Ritual Negotiation

My participant observation convinced me that even when excluded from formal religious hierarchies, women hold significant authority within religious ritual spaces.⁴⁴ Sered emphasizes how women often act as spiritual mediators, using rituals to maintain social cohesion and subtly reworking inherited practices to assert agency within ritual spaces.⁴⁵ She demonstrates that women often become ritual experts by subtly reshaping practices to serve their own spiritual and social needs, without overtly challenging traditional structures.⁴⁶ It is open to variation, negotiation, and even resistance. In the case of Karva Chauth, each choice—whether to fast, to refrain from fasting, or to demand reciprocity from one's spouse—becomes a performative moment that subtly resignifies gender norms, recoding what is expected into what is possible. Rather than simply affirming pre-existing gender roles, Karva Chauth at the Hindu Mandir can be understood, following Butler, as a performative reiteration of inherited gender norms — a practice that re-enacts it in ways that open it to subtle transformation and subsequent re-iteration.

This pattern of ritual negotiation is not unique to Karva Chauth. Across diverse diasporic communities, rituals similarly undergo creative adaptation to sustain relevance and emotional resonance. While Karva Chauth offers a vivid case of ritual negotiation in the South Asian

⁴⁴ Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 135, 139; Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

diaspora, similar adaptive processes characterize diasporic rituals more broadly. Among Muslim American families, for instance, Ramadan practices are continually renegotiated across generations, as youth reinterpret fasting and prayer to balance tradition and contemporary life.⁴⁷ In the Afro-Latin diaspora, devotion to the Catholic saint Martín de Porres blends Catholic liturgy with African-derived aesthetics to sustain ancestral memory and community identity.⁴⁸ Such examples show that diasporic rituals are dynamic, negotiated performances through which communities sustain identity, solidarity, and agency. Karva Chauth thus exemplifies a broader diasporic phenomenon: the continual reimagining of tradition as a site of tension, adaptation, and transformation.

In this framework, agency does not arise through the reworking of inherited practices. A ritual act that appears submissive may actually be a carefully negotiated performance—one that retools cultural codes for new ends. Similarly, Hauser notes that ritual participants often adapt and personalize their performances in ways that grant them interpretive authority.⁴⁹ This demonstrates how powerful performativity can be in enabling ritual participants to negotiate agency within inherited cultural frameworks.

Another participant, Priya, described how the *Mehndi Mela*, an event where women gather to apply henna and prepare for the ritual, has become a highlight of the celebration in Montreal. “It’s a way for us to connect before the fast,” she said. “We do the henna, share tips, we eat good food and just have fun together. It is becoming popular.” This adaptation reflects

⁴⁷ Mona M. Abo-Zena and Randa A. Hassan, “Intergenerational Transmission and Negotiation of Religious Rituals: An Ethnographic Case Study of Ramadan Practices Across Three Generations,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 195, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020195>.

⁴⁸ Cristobal Padilioni Jr., “Refashioning Saints in the African Diaspora: Memory, Materiality, and Meaning in the Devotion to Martín de Porres,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 2 (2018): 224–252, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.6.2.0224>.

⁴⁹ Hauser, *Promising Rituals*.

how women construct new layers of meaning that resonate with their diasporic experiences.⁵⁰ As Catherine Bell explains,

Ritual can be a strategic way to ‘traditionalize,’ that is, to construct a type of tradition, but in doing so it can also challenge and renegotiate the very basis of tradition to the point of upending much of what had been seen as fixed previously or by other groups. ... Such innovations may be subtle or dramatic; they may radically reappropriate traditional elements or give a very different significance to standard activities; they may overturn meanings completely through inverted practices.⁵¹

Rituals construct identity as much as they express it. In the embodied repetition of sacred gestures and communal rhythms, participants come to inhabit roles that were not fully formed before the ritual began. One participant, Priya, described how sprinkling water from her pot initially felt “unusual” the first time she did it in another ritual because she was not used to “sprinkling water at nothing,” but watching others made her feel it was the right thing to do. Over time, she said the gesture began to feel grounding—complementing the presence of fire and earth. Thus, emergent participation becomes a means of negotiating both individual identity and ritual integration.

These acts of participation also reinforce gendered identities while allowing women to renegotiate traditional roles.⁵² While Karva Chauth traditionally centers on a woman fasting for her husband’s longevity, several participants described how the ritual has shifted in their households. Meena, one of the younger women participants mentioned that her husband now fasts alongside her. “It used to be just me,” she explained, “but now he more often joins in. It is a great feeling to know my husband acknowledges my hard work and on Karva Chauth, he knows

⁵⁰ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 30.

⁵¹ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 110.

⁵² Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 154-155.

he needs to get me something like a gift, or many, and I do not work, it is a time for me.” This trend exemplifies Catherine Bell’s concept of ritualization, where embodied practice becomes a form of negotiation and authority.

Backed up by the tradition of the ritual, participants negotiate and can even downright demand acts of gratitude from their spouses. Ritual actions such as fasting serve as emotionally and physically costly behaviors that, according to Rossano, are especially powerful in communicating sincere intentions.⁵³ Because they require effort and discipline, these gestures are seen by others as credible displays of commitment—whether to one’s spouse, community, or spiritual framework. Their cost deters insincere participation and amplifies the trustworthiness of those who endure them. Fasting could be used to assert importance, signal dissatisfaction, or demand attention. Participation can sometimes be made conditional on partner behavior, and husbands responded accordingly.

As Butler suggests, performativity includes the possibility of resignification—of reworking inherited scripts. Participants who condition their fasting on spousal behavior or modify traditional expectations embody this dynamic. Their acts are negotiated expressions of power and identity.⁵⁴

A single symbolic gesture—like the choice of a dress that drew census as being out of fashion and lackluster—subtly recalibrated communal expectations. I noticed the shift more clearly when a fellow participant quietly pointed out the faux pas: the dress lacked sparkle, containing “nothing shiny,” and seemed visually disconnected from the energy of the event.

⁵³ Rossano, “Essential Role of Ritual,” 529.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

Viewed through systems theory, such things function as leverage points: small interventions that shift social dynamics and reinforce collective norms. Meadows identifies these as “high-leverage points [...] where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.”⁵⁵

In a publication released around the same time as Meadows’s ‘Leverage Points,’ Klein and Wolf (1998) offer a different take: instead of seeing leverage points as static fulcrums for change, they frame them as strategic “holds” in a complex environment—akin to grips used in rock climbing.⁵⁶ These holds depend on context, experience, and the dynamic relationship between the actor and their environment. Identifying leverage points is a skill shaped by familiarity with the system, offering fragments or starting ideas for meaningful rebalancing actions, often enacted unconsciously or intuitively. Thus, seemingly small ritual actions—such as fasting, adornment, and symbolic support gestures—serve as leverage points through which participants negotiate relational and communal expectations.

However, while many women found empowerment in the ritual, not all participants experienced it in this way—one participant was not so impressed by the ritual, expressing a sense of needing to fulfill family expectations as the main reasons she participated. Nonetheless, this does reveal that empowerment and pressure can coexist within the same symbolic act but not within the same person.

Recognition and reciprocity were not always free from complexity. While participants described acts of mutual care and celebration, there were also moments where contributions—though praised as altruistic—seemed to arise from more implicit structures of expectation. The

⁵⁵ Meadows, *Leverage Points*, 17.

⁵⁶ Gary A. Klein and Steve Wolf, “The Role of Leverage Points in Option Generation,” *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics, Part C: Applications and Reviews* 28, no. 1 (1998), 157–160.

community publicly acknowledged one participant, for instance, for her role in designing event posters for the temple's upcoming gatherings. While the praise appeared heartfelt, its timing and repetition suggested that communal gratitude may also serve as a soft form of social leverage—where obligation is framed as devotion. In this sense, ritual reciprocity occasionally blurred with symbolic economy, where esteem, status, and labor circulated in coded exchanges. Building on the ritual's activation of relational tensions, participants negotiate tradition and agency through performative adaptations.

Ritual Power

Women, as the creators and sustainers of ritual, actively shape evolving practices through their agency and aesthetic decisions. This is particularly evident in the diasporic context of Karva Chauth, where participation becomes a form of ritual authorship. Elders like Sunita—referred to by many as Mataji—embody a distinct form of ritual power rooted in experience, community recognition, and embodied authority. As a ritual leader, Sunita guides participants through sequences, organizes ritual groups, and mediates behavior in emotionally charged spaces. Her influence extends beyond instruction; it manifests through presence, poise, and the emotional weight she carries within the community. Her authority, derived from experience and community recognition, provides her with social capital.⁵⁷ In the context of Karva Chauth, this expertise is visible in the way women guide and shape the ritual's practice within the diasporic community. Each year, Sunita gathers the community at the Hindu Mandir, exemplifying the concept of women as cultural custodians who preserve rituals and adapt them to new contexts.⁵⁸ Yet,

⁵⁷ Lyda Judson Hanifan, "The Rural School Community Center," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67 (1916), 130–138.

⁵⁸ Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 90.

alongside this guidance, women are also creatively reshaping the ritual to reflect their own experiences and values. This trend toward self-assertion exemplifies how Karva Chauth, while grounded in tradition, is being reinterpreted as a space for negotiating recognition, and shared responsibility within marriage.

Community members often approach Sunita with the traditional gesture of *pranām*—touching her feet to seek blessings. However, in keeping with her modest nature, Sunita consistently stops them from performing this act, demonstrating her belief in humility and equality despite her respected status. Her refusal of deference is itself a ritual act—one that reinforces her leadership through reciprocity rather than hierarchy.

Sunita's power is amplified by her personal legacy: an extensive family of children and grandchildren, all of whom have achieved academic and professional success. This distinguished background, combined with her active community involvement, has established her as a trusted advisor on both religious and social matters. Her ritual leadership is rooted in a kind of socially embedded charisma. Rituals such as Karva Chauth derive their power from the ability of symbolic acts to become emotionally and culturally resonant—an authority that is felt rather than enforced, and one that clearly manifests in Sunita's role. In diasporic settings like Montreal, women like Sunita practice a form of aesthetic and relational authorship.

Women in the diaspora exercise a distinct form of ritual power through the aesthetic dimensions of Karva Chauth, positioning themselves as agents in control of symbolic capital.⁵⁹ The *sari*, the *mehndi*, the *puja* space, and the choreography of devotion are acts of creative

⁵⁹ Lyda Judson Hanifan, "The Rural School Community Center," 130–138; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 220; Faber Birren, *Light, Color, and Environment: A Discussion of the Psychological and Physiological*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969), 19.

authorship. Participants make deliberate visual choices that present and reinforce social and cultural value through ritual performance. A participant, for example, had recently sold intricately embroidered shawls at the *Mehndi Mela* pre-ritual event; the following week, I observed one being worn during the ritual—an instance of aesthetic authorship in action, where diasporic women curate and actively produce the visual language of devotion. Although the shawl's vivid blue color sometimes contrasted against the sea of red themed dresses and implements, its ability to attract attention was appreciated by the participant who wore it. In Montreal's diaspora, ritual authorship—following Sered—becomes a strategy for navigating hybridity and renewing tradition outside institutional sanction.⁶⁰

In diasporic settings, aesthetics become a primary mode of cultural authorship, standing in for lost geographies.⁶¹ This authorship was evident in how participants reflected on their own ritual and karaoke presentations.⁶² One woman shared that while she was content with her aesthetic choices this year, she had already begun to think about “upping her game” for the next iteration. For her, ritual aesthetics were a personal and emotional register—“appearances are important.” “My family needs to look nice, this is a very important part of social life.” This sense of visual authorship was intimately tied to inner reflection. She also described contemplation as embedded in the process of fasting and adornment.

These ritual forms express shared values while strengthening group identity, as participants become emotionally bonded through synchronized, embodied actions such as

⁶⁰ Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 30.

⁶¹ Uzma Durrani and Kirsi Niinimäki, “Colour Matters: The Emotional and Cultural Dimensions of Colour Perception,” *Journal of Consumer Studies* 45, no. 3 (2021), 221–222. Color serves as a powerful cultural signifier. While red is traditionally linked to marital auspiciousness, its meaning is constantly being re-negotiated through individual choices.

⁶² The karaoke presentations happened at the *Mehndi Mela* (henna gathering) night prior to the Karva Chauth ritual.

fasting, adornment, and collective movement. Rossano (2012) notes that synchronized rituals generate emotional and symbolic unity, reinforcing group cohesion.⁶³ In Karva Chauth, the synchronization of ritual gestures, fasting, and aesthetic labor fosters an atmospheric consensus—in affect and perception. Like the cheering crowd in a stadium, participants sense their own cohesion through the very act of enactment, their presence amplifying one another’s commitment.

Participants use the *sari*, *bangles*, and henna as symbolic expressions of the participant’s disciplined effort, moral commitment, and emotional authority. Beauty here is structured visibility, a visual rhetoric of commitment and control that resonates across the relational field. This is where aesthetic labor becomes a mode of power. As Bloch observes in his discussion of ritual costume, external appearance functions as a revelation of internal transformation: “Costumes [...] are a revelation of the inner self.”⁶⁴

These ritualized actions are, in Rossano’s terms, deliberately enacted behaviors that signal commitment to shared values and beliefs.⁶⁵ Because Karva Chauth requires physical participation, meticulous preparation, and time investment, its participants use ritual to visibly affirm their marital and cultural commitments. This costliness makes the act symbolically rich and socially persuasive—a visible contract with the sacred and the communal. Bell suggests that a ritualized body is one trained in embodied schemes that allow it to navigate and subtly reshape

⁶³ Rossano, “Essential Role of Ritual,” 538.

⁶⁴ Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 17; Marilyn Strathern, “The Self in Self-Decoration,” *Oceania* 49, no. 4 (1979): 241–57; Michael O’Hanlon, “Handsome is as Handsome Does: Display and Betrayal in the New Guinea Highlands,” *Oceania* 53, no. 4 (1983): 317–33.

⁶⁵ Rossano, “Essential Role of Ritual,” 529.

social contexts, gaining a measure of influence within them.⁶⁶ In this sense, aesthetic labor becomes a form of quiet power—embodied, relational, and symbolically rich.

While not all participants articulated belief in the literal efficacy of the ritual, many conveyed a shared sensibility: that Karva Chauth “contains powerful aspects,” particularly in its potential to offer some form of protection for their husbands in the year ahead. This conviction was not uniformly grounded in metaphysical certainty but rather in emotional logic—what one woman described as the feeling of the “uneasiness you are free from once you have completed the ritual.” Her voice carried decisiveness as she asked me, “Can you imagine? If you skip it and something happens? How would you not blame yourself forever?”

From the standpoint of my fieldwork, this sense of agency was felt and enacted in the details of the day: women prepared, planned, and performed with the understanding that their actions could shape what comes next. The ritual was, in effect, a small investment in future safety. As one participant noted, “Even if we do not know if it really protects, it gives some feeling of protection, sometimes strong.” In that light, Karva Chauth becomes a ritualized interface with uncertainty—a performative way of influencing the future. Its power lies in offering participants a structure of action within the modifiable terrain of human experience.⁶⁷

The ritual’s force emerges from its capacity to convert vulnerability into composure, dread into decisiveness, and helplessness into agency. Karva Chauth ritualizes agency over uncertainty, using commitment, aesthetic labor, and reciprocity to forge a symbolic relationship

⁶⁶ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 220.

⁶⁷ Jairo Ramos, Eugene Caruso, and Leaf Van Boven, “Temporally Asymmetric Psychology: Prospection, Retrospection, and Well-Being,” in *Temporal Asymmetries in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack, and Alison Fernandes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 31.

with the future. As Jairo Ramos, Eugene M. Caruso & Leaf Van Boven argue, the future is the modifiable terrain of human experience, and it is precisely this malleability that lends ritual its operational force.⁶⁸ To act ritually in the face of the unknown is to reclaim narrative authorship over what has not yet arrived—this is the ritual’s power, in intentionality.

While the ritual was not framed in terms of fear, its shared intent was rooted in the desire to mitigate whatever threats could be softened through devotion. The importance of the husband’s life provided the emotional focus, but what emerged in the collective experience was something more: women described the ritual as “meaningful,” and “magical,” a space of connection imbued with character and vitality.

Most interviewees understood the benefits of the ritual to include emotional and spiritual effects. A participant noted that she believed it is more important to feel safe than to feel sorry if anything does go wrong in life. This language of reassurance points toward a deeper function: the management of existential uncertainty, particularly concerning the death or loss of a spouse.⁶⁹ Karva Chauth, through fasting, storytelling, and prayer, offers women a way to engage with the unpredictable nature of mortality through structured ritual.

Although the prospect of a spouse's death rarely appeared directly in the words of Karva Chauth participants, it lingered as a silent presence—felt more than named, embedded in the ritual’s structure and intention.

⁶⁸ Jairo Ramos, Eugene Caruso, and Leaf Van Boven, “Temporally Asymmetric Psychology: Prospection, Retrospection, and Well-Being,” in *Temporal Asymmetries in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack, and Alison Fernandes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 31.

⁶⁹ Pearson, “Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind”, 10. Anne Pearson highlights how women experience votive rituals like Karva Chauth as sources of psychological comfort, autonomy, and embodied spiritual discipline, often describing them as practices that offer “peace of mind” and control amid life’s uncertainties.

One participant described fasting as "an old friend" that brought her closer to the divine. Another reflected on her son's disinterest in the ritual, not with anger but with sadness, sensing the slow unraveling of something important. "It's not just for now," she implied—"it's part of what holds everything together: married couples and families." Others described the ritual with pride and awe. "It adds magic to life."

These reflections suggest that Karva Chauth operates by transforming death's presence—rendering it manageable through beauty, belief, and repetition. Through this lens, Karva Chauth may be read as a culturally embedded tool for mitigating the anxiety of death—one that transforms fear into faith, isolation into solidarity, and uncertainty into legitimized structure. A tool whose mechanism consists of existential regulation, functioning through the conversion of emotional volatility into ritual structure.⁷⁰

The story of Queen Veervati, often referenced in Karva Chauth mythology and by the interviewees, reinforces this symbolic structure. When the queen is tricked into breaking her fast early, her husband dies—only to be restored through renewed ritual discipline and divine intercession. Although mythic, this narrative encodes a logic of ritual consequence and cosmic accountability that subtly informs the emotional stakes of the fast. The story of Queen Veervati, embedded within the Karva Chauth ritual, encodes a kind of ritual contract—one in which the consequences of breaking the fast affirm the stakes of ritual discipline and the belief in cosmic accountability. Many participants mentioned that they associate the ritual with the Queen Vervati

⁷⁰ Michael Nichols, "Dialogues with Death: Māra, Yama, and Coming to Terms with Mortality in Classical Hindu and Indian Buddhist Traditions," *Religions of South Asia* 6, no. 1 (2012), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.v6i1.13>. This ritualized encounter with mortality finds further resonance in Michael Nichols's comparative analysis of Yama, Māra, Hindu and Buddhist personifications of death. Both traditions, Nichols notes, depict death as a powerful but ultimately negotiable force—one that can be resisted or transcended through righteous conduct and spiritual discipline.

story and they also mentioned that they were unaware of the other stories I encountered during my research when I shared them with the participants.⁷¹

Ritual Reciprocity

My ethnographic fieldwork revealed many quiet but meaningful acts of reciprocity woven throughout the Karva Chauth ritual and its surrounding events. I observed women assisting one another during the ritual —as mentioned before, for example, when one participant’s candle flickered out and another stopped to relight it with ghee — as well as husbands carrying purses, tending children, and dressing formally to support their wives. Participants spoke of volunteering at the temple as a way of “giving back” for the ritual services they valued, and described the ritual itself as a moment when husbands were expected to recognize and reciprocate their wives’ devotion, giving them what several women called “leverage” in the marital relationship.

Many South Asian religious traditions emphasize reciprocity as a core principle — a dynamic I observed not only in participants’ language about the divine and the temple, but also in their interpersonal interactions during the ritual.

Rajiv reflected that Karva Chauth “does not apply” to him—that rituals like Karva Chauth only begin to matter after marriage. Several participants expressed similar feelings: the ritual enters your life not by choice, but through status, that the ritual comes along with marriage. While the ritual might begin as something inherited or expected, many participants described how it started to feel meaningful on its own terms. The aesthetic atmosphere, the preparation, and the time spent with others made the day feel important. Nonetheless Rajiv was present to

⁷¹ Tewari, *A Splendor of Worship*, 7-9.

lend his support to the participants. When asked about this, Rajiv shared with me a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, that “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” My interviewee had only praise for everybody who contributes to communal well-being, made even more urgent by its diasporic disposition.

Shifts in meaning often deepen over time. Participants, reflecting on these gestures of mutual support — from husbands, fellow ritualists, and the temple community — spoke with pride about the ritual. Even those who described fasting as difficult said they looked forward to it again. Memories of preparing together, waiting for the moon, or simply being part of something bigger seemed to stick. These moments carry emotional momentum, nostalgic energy, the lingering sense of confidence, warmth, and connection sparked by successful interaction rituals.⁷²

While the excitement is highest at the peak of the ritual, it leaves behind an “afterglow” that participants carry with them. These moments and their symbolic weight become resources for future rituals, fueling a chain of recurring participation and deepening investment over time.⁷³ Successful rituals generate a lasting emotional charge and recognizable symbols of belonging, both of which become regenerative resources that participants draw on to engage in future rituals—creating a repeating cycle of similar collective experiences.⁷⁴

Each experience of the ritual fuels the next. Participation becomes part of a rhythm that gathers strength through the repetition of the religious ritual. This repetition transforms the ritual into a mnemonic device—a symbolic enactment of “what ought to be” that renders social norms

⁷² Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 102-107.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

emotionally resonant and easier to recall. Embodying shared values in action, rituals wield the power to reaffirm and reactivate those values, anchoring them in memory and behavior.

Some participants described being moved by the ritual in ways that were hard to define. There was a sense of reverence, or of stepping into something sacred or special. One participant mentioned the feeling of being connected to “ancient origins,” and another described being “impressed” by the depth of it all. Participants emphasized the importance of the moon, of waiting for it during the end of their fast. One participant mentioned how she began noticing the moon phases, paying more attention to its presence in the night sky. These moments of quiet intensity are part of what keeps the ritual alive; they act as “feedback” loops embedded in the ritual system, leaving traces that shape how people connect with moon-bound traditions—both as personal inclinations and as shared celebrations among those attuned to lunar rhythms and religious doctrine. The ritual draws upon this intrinsic human-lunar connection, allowing participants to collectively charge that bond with meaning and intention, projecting it toward future well-being as a kind of protective shield. In this way, environmental elements like the moon become active forces woven into family and communal life, deepening emotional ties and reinforcing the ritual’s strength across generations.

This is especially clear in how participants describe the ritual: volunteering to prepare food for the community, contributing their time without immediate reward, enduring discomfort as an offering. Over time, these acts of giving become felt rhythms, absorbed by the body. Being exposed to meaningful reciprocity structures their actions, emotions, and relationships. Such

ritualized participation also fulfills what Rossano, drawing on Baumeister and Leary (1995), identifies as a foundational human need—the need to belong.⁷⁵

In both ancestral and modern contexts, ritual offers a pathway to social inclusion, guarding against the psychological harm of isolation.⁷⁶ In this way, the power of reciprocity is internalized—it moves through the ritualized body, shaping how participants relate to others and to the tradition itself. This is the kind of power that does not need to be named; it works “mutely,” shaping both identity and social order. Ritual being both conservation and creativity, means that every time the ritual is enacted, something old is carried forward and something new is born. Thus, the Karva Chauth ritual is reconstituted and renewed by its participants, through reciprocal participation.

Karva Chauth’s ritual reciprocity can be viewed figuratively as exhibiting an elastic quality, akin to the behavior described by Hooke’s Law — the principle that the force required to extend or compress a spring is proportional to the distance it is stretched.⁷⁷ In this figurative sense, communal and relational bonds within the ritual context flex under tension, adjusting to evolving relational pressures, yet seek to return to an equilibrium of mutual recognition and support. This elasticity is symbolic: it reflects the community’s capacity to absorb strains without rupture, sustaining ritual coherence across shifting diasporic realities. As participants engage in fasting, symbolic labor, and devotional performance, they generate symbolic potential energy. The greater the fasting effort and aesthetic or emotional investment from the participants, the

⁷⁵ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995), 497–529; Rossano, “Essential Role of Ritual,” 530.

⁷⁶ Rossano, “Essential Role of Ritual,” 530.

⁷⁷ Robert Hooke, *Lectures de Potentia Restitutiva, or of Spring Explaining the Power of Springing Bodies* (London: John Martyn, 1678).

more symbolic energy accumulates within the ritual system, structured for eventual release at the ritual's culmination; however, exceeding the system's resilience threshold risks disruption.

Upon ritual culmination—through communal acknowledgment, celebration, and symbolic acts of reciprocity—the stored symbolic energy is released, restoring balance within the community. However, the system does not simply return to its original state. Ritual systems exhibit features akin to *hysteresis*: the post-ritual community retains traces of the experience in the form of strengthened relational bonds, renewed emotional commitments, or subtle shifts in social dynamics.⁷⁸

Viewed through this lens, diasporic ritual communities emerge as resembling 'nematic' social fields, that is, flexible yet coherently aligned formations, whose dynamic negotiations of tradition and modernity sustain cultural continuity across geographic and generational displacements. Just as nematic phases exhibit collective orientation without crystalline rigidity, diasporic ritual communities sustain coherent symbolic trajectories through fluid, elastic negotiations of meaning, identity, and memory.⁷⁹

Just as nematic fields tolerate and even structurally incorporate local disclinations (defects), diasporic ritual formations can sustain localized disagreements, reinterpretations, or hybridizations without losing their coherent symbolic orientation. These divergences are normal

⁷⁸ Hysteresis describes the dependence of a system's current state on its history of previous stresses, often causing delayed or persistent effects even after external conditions change. The notion is drawn here from material physics, where such phenomena are observed in field-induced transitions of nematic liquid crystals. See Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, *The Physics of Liquid Crystals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 88.

⁷⁹ See Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, *The Physics of Liquid Crystals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 7; see also Frédéric Hammer, Youjun Lu, Jianling Wang, Yanbin Yang, Benoit Famaey, François Leclercq, and Chervin F. P. Laporte, "Andromeda's Asymmetric Satellite System as a Challenge to Cold Dark Matter Cosmology," *Nature Astronomy*, published April 21, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-025-02480-3>. For a cosmic-scale analogy to nematic structuring across complex systems.

and expected in nematic phases — they do not destroy the overall ordered field but add complexity to it.⁸⁰ Similarly, in biological systems, the growth of neurons depends on sustained mechanical tension across their membranes. It is this internal tension that drives their extension, allowing flexible adaptation without sacrificing structural coherence. In both cases, whether social or biological, it is elastic tension that enables growth.⁸¹

Through this cyclical modulation, ritual reciprocity emerges as the culminating stage of a dynamic engine of communal regeneration—closing the loop by fortifying relational bonds, deepening symbolic investment, and ensuring that diasporic traditions like Karva Chauth persist, adapt, and flourish across shifting temporal, geographic, and generational terrains.

Conclusion

Karva Chauth in Montreal offers a clear view of how ritual evolves through everyday practice. Its continuity depends on the choices and actions of those who sustain it—participants who take on roles as cultural caretakers, aesthetic organizers, and negotiators of meaning. Through layered performances, subtle adjustments, and ongoing investments the ritual remains coherent while allowing room for transformation. In this way, Karva Chauth operates as a form of strategic adaptation: tradition is not abandoned, but refined and repurposed, balancing continuity with innovation in response to diasporic conditions.

⁸⁰ Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, *The Physics of Liquid Crystals*, 125.

⁸¹ Prashant K. Purohit, “Tension Dependent Growth and Retraction of Neurites,” *Biophysical Reviews and Letters* 10, no. 1–2 (2015): 63–74, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793048015400053>.

The research questions concerning the roles, meanings, and functions of Karva Chauth at the Hindu Mandir in D.D.O. revealed a layered system of ritual engagement. Women revisit and reinterpret their bridal identities, taking on roles as performers, caretakers of tradition, and agents of cultural innovation. They become ritual engineers—balancing authenticity with expressive authorship—ensuring the ritual resonates with both inherited memory and present-day values. Through this ritual, they assert agency, express care within intimate relationships, and cultivate communal bonds—sustaining the ritual’s relevance within the diasporic context.

Marital expectations are animated by ritual, generational divides, and the layered pressures of diasporic life. These forces shape how it is enacted and interpreted, surfacing through moments of tension, hesitation, or adaptation. Tension becomes generative, functioning like a lever that fosters relational depth, emotional resonance, and symbolic renewal. Whether it’s a change in a spouse’s travel plans, a digital search for the moon, or a carefully chosen sari, participants use these gestures to reaffirm or adjust their roles within both family and community.

Ritual power here accumulates in small, symbolic acts. A shared fast, a spontaneous act of support—operate as points of leverage within larger relational systems. The meaning of Karva Chauth is often felt through these micro-negotiations, where emotional weight and social recognition are recalibrated in real time. Over time, this process creates a form of recursive participation—where each enactment reinforces the next, embedding ritual knowledge in memory, practice, and relationship.

Participation also extends beyond the ritual itself. Through pre-ritual events, mentorship, and shared preparation, women shape the communal atmosphere that holds the ritual together.

Aesthetic choices, storytelling, and embodied discipline all contribute to a collective memory that strengthens the ritual's presence year after year. In this way, Karva Chauth becomes a performative expression of belonging, one that crafts "home" not as geography but as cultural practice.

Karva Chauth in the diasporic setting moves through structure, flexibility, and repetition. Its form holds tension, accommodates change, and remains responsive to the shifting conditions of marriage, memory, and migration. The ritual endures because participants continue to find utility, meaning, and emotional rhythm in its enactment, often amplified by digital tools that enhance coordination and participation.

Like the chakras that spin thread through calibrated tension, Karva Chauth draws its strength from the symbolic pressures of devotion and negotiation. In each enactment, participants weave meaning into the ritual fabric—sustaining identity, agency, and care across generations.

This thesis contributes to the emerging study of diasporic ritual systems through an in-depth ethnographic account of Karva Chauth as practiced in Montreal's South Asian community. It demonstrates how the ritual operates as a responsive, adaptive system—negotiating identity, gender roles, and belonging within a transnational context. By centering participants' voices and lived experiences, the study shows how rituals are actively re-authored to reflect diasporic realities. In doing so, it offers a conceptual framework for understanding ritual as both a stabilizing and transformative force within migrant communities. Further research could explore the growing phenomenon of sympathetic fasting by husbands or assistant participants, examining how these emerging practices differ between diasporic and South Asian contexts. Such comparative analysis could illuminate how shifting gender expectations manifest differently

across cultural geographies. Additionally, future studies might draw from sensory anthropology to investigate the ritual's aesthetic dimensions as sensory drivers of mystical appeal and emotional resonance, and as immersive technologies that generate affective and spiritual capital. Finally, expanding the lens to ritual reciprocity, future ethnographies could map how symbolic exchanges of devotion, care, and recognition structure enduring networks of obligation and identity, particularly within diasporic or hybrid communities.

In the midst of its aesthetic beauty and symbolic gestures, the ritual's power lies in how small, embodied acts reshape broader relational dynamics. The repetition of fasting, adornment, and circular movement generate meaning. Identity, care, and agency emerge as outcomes of ongoing participation within a shifting system. This capacity for rituals to harness tension, to transform uncertainty into structure, and to project meaning forward reveals why Karva Chauth remains vital in diaspora: it is a tradition being continuously rebuilt from within.

Bibliography

- Abo-Zena, Mona M., and Randa A. Hassan. "Intergenerational Transmission and Negotiation of Religious Rituals: An Ethnographic Case Study of Ramadan Practices Across Three Generations." *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 195. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020195>.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Baumeister, Roy. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ben Lulu, Noga. "Negotiating Ritual Innovation and Identity: The Bat Mitzvah Ceremony in Israeli Reform Congregations." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 36, no. 4 (2021): 741–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1982456>.
- Bertalanffy, Ludwig Von. 1968. *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*. New York: George Braziller.
- Bickhard, Mark H. 2013. "The Emergent Ontology of Persons." In *The Psychology of Personhood: Philosophical, Historical, Social-Developmental, and Narrative Perspectives*, edited by Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard, 165–180. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Birren, Faber. 1969. *Light, Color, and Environment: A Discussion of the Psychological and Physiological Effects of Color*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Bloch, Maurice. *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Durrani, Uzma, and Kirsi Niinimäki. 2021. “Colour Matters: The Emotional and Cultural Dimensions of Colour Perception.” *Journal of Consumer Studies* 45 (3): 218–230.
- Frigotto, Maria Laura. 2018. *Understanding Novelty in Organizations : A Research Path Across Agency and Consequences*. Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56096-0>.
- de Gennes, Pierre-Gilles. *The Physics of Liquid Crystals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Greenspan, Henry. 1998. *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Hall, Stuart. 2019. *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*. Edited by David Morley. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hammer, Frédéric, Youjun Lu, Jianling Wang, Yanbin Yang, Benoit Famaey, François Leclercq, and Chervin F. P. Laporte. “Andromeda’s Asymmetric Satellite System as a Challenge to Cold Dark Matter Cosmology.” *Nature Astronomy*, published April 21, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-025-02480-3>.
- Hanifan, Lyda Judson. 1916. “The Rural School Community Center.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67: 130–138.
- Hauser, Beatrix. 2020. *Promising Rituals : Gender and Performativity in Eastern India*. New Delhi: Routledge India. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367818333>.
- High, Steven. *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014.
- Hooke, Robert. *Lectures de Potentia Restitutiva, or of Spring Explaining the Power of Springing Bodies*. London: John Martyn, 1678.
- Juelskjær, Malou, Helle Plauborg, and Stine Willum Adrian. 2021. *Dialogues on Agential Realism Engaging in Worldings through Research Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Kincaid, D. Lawrence. 1979. *The Convergence Model of Communication*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Communication Institute, East-West Center.

- Klein, Gary A., and Steve Wolf. "The Role of Leverage Points in Option Generation." *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics, Part C: Applications and Reviews* 28, no. 1 (1998): 157–160.
- Kishwar, Madhu. 2011. "Modernization of Karva Chauth." *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society* 172: 15–22.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *La Pensée Sauvage*. Paris: Plon, 1962.
- Long, Jeffery D. 2025. "Rights, Roles, and Reciprocity in Hindu Dharma." *In Religious Studies Book Series*, Vol. 1, edited by Jeffery D. Long and Christopher Chapple. Orange, CA: Chapman University Digital Commons.
- Meadows, Donella H. 1999. *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute.
- Murphy, Ryan J. A. 2022. "Finding (a Theory of) Leverage for Systemic Change: A Systemic Design Research Agenda." *Contexts: The Journal of Systemic Design* 1. <https://doi.org/10.58279/v1004>.
- Nichols, Michael. "Dialogues with Death: Māra, Yama, and Coming to Terms with Mortality in Classical Hindu and Indian Buddhist Traditions." *Religions of South Asia* 6, no. 1 (2012): 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.v6i1.13>.
- O'Hanlon, M. 1983. "Handsome is as handsome does: display and betrayal in Whagi". *Oceania* 53: 317-33.
- Padilioni Jr., Cristobal. "Refashioning Saints in the African Diaspora: Memory, Materiality, and Meaning in the Devotion to Martín de Porres." *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 2 (2018): 224–252. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.6.2.0224>.
- Pearson, Anne M. 1983. "A Study of the Puranic Vratas". Master's thesis, McMaster University.
- Pearson, Anne M. 1992. "Because it Gives Me Peace of Mind." PhD diss., McMaster University.
- Pearson, Anne Mackenzie. 1996. *Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind : Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Purohit, Prashant K. "Tension Dependent Growth and Retraction of Neurites." *Biophysical Reviews and Letters* 10, no. 1–2 (2015): 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793048015400053>.
- Ramos, Jairo, Eugene Caruso, and Leaf Van Boven. 2022. "Temporally Asymmetric Psychology: Prospection, Retrospection, and Well-Being." *In Temporal Asymmetries in Philosophy*

- and Psychology*, edited by Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack, and Alison Fernandes, 29–61. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raulin, Anne, and Susan Carol Rogers, eds. 2015. *Transatlantic Parallaxes: Toward Reciprocal Anthropology*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Rossano, Matt J. 2012. “The Essential Role of Ritual in the Transmission and Reinforcement of Social Norms.” *Psychological Bulletin* 138(3): 529–549.
- Sered, Susan Starr. *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *La Société Automatique, Volume 1: L’Avenir du Travail*. Paris: Fayard, 2015.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1979. ‘The self in self decoration’. *Oceania* 49: 241-57.
- Tewari, Laxmi G. 1991. *A Splendor of Worship: Women's Fasts Rituals Stories and Art*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- Wong, Meng Li, Mikhail Prokopenko, and Angela R. L. McLean. “On the Roles of Function and Selection in Evolving Systems.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 3 (2023): e2210895120.

Appendix

Information And Consent Form

Study Title: Diasporic Ritualists: An ethnography of Karva Chauth in Montreal.

Researcher: William Maloney

Researcher's Contact Information: Telephone: (514) 686-1914

Email: william.maloney@mail.concordia.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Leslie Orr

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: Telephone: (514) 848-2424 ext. 2065

Email: leslie.orr@concordia.ca

I am a graduate student at Concordia University, and I am inviting you to participate in my research study. This form tells you what joining involves. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to join; if there's anything you don't understand or want to know more about, just ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The research is conducted as part of a master's degree research project, with the objective of producing a thesis that will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field. This research focuses on studying the votive ("vrat") rituals that Hindu women from North India perform. I want to learn about their experiences, the customs they follow, the special items they use in these rituals, and participants' important roles, which aren't often discussed. This research hopes to give new knowledge into these rituals, especially the important role women have in them, and to offer new views on the culture and religion of South Asia. By talking to Hindu women in Montreal, this project hopes to help everyone understand more about women's roles in these rituals, cultural customs, and religious beliefs.

B. PROCESS

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to share your experiences and thoughts about these special religious rituals. You may choose a convenient location for the

interview. I will ask you to talk about how you perform these rituals, the meaning they have for you, and any special items you use during the rituals. Your participation will mainly involve a conversation with me, where you can tell me your story and thoughts in your own words. The interviews will be audio recorded with your consent.

This will take about an hour: 45 to 90 minutes long. Please note that there may be a need for follow-up interviews for clarification purposes.

C. CONFIDENTIALITY

This study will collect some basic information about you, like your age. Importantly, I will keep your name and any details that could identify you hidden, ensuring that your privacy is protected. Your stories and information will only be used to help me better understand your experiences. I will not allow anyone to access the information except me. I will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form. The results of this research will be a guided research project for my masters' thesis at Concordia University. This thesis might eventually be published by Concordia University. I intend to continue studying these rituals during my doctoral studies and eventually write a book about them in the future.

I will protect the gathered information by using secure methods throughout the study. This includes storing any personal details and responses in encrypted digital files, accessible only to me. All electronic information will be kept on password-protected computer, and any papers will be held in a secure location with limited access. Your identity will be kept secret by using fake names or numbers in place of your real name in any report. The interviews will happen in a convenient location for participants to prevent people from overhearing sensitive information. This will safeguard your privacy and the secrecy of the information you provide me. I will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask me to destroy or not to use the information you provided, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want me (the researcher) to use your information, you must tell me before March 15th, 2025. There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking me not to use your information.

E. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Risks:

Discussing personal experiences and cultural practices may evoke emotional discomfort or distress. If you feel uneasy at any point, you can take a break, skip questions, or stop the interview entirely.

Benefits:

Your participation will help enrich the understanding of Hindu votive rituals and the role women play in these practices, contributing insights to academic research in cultural and religious studies.

Sharing your experiences will provide a platform for your cultural and religious practices to be documented and recognized, potentially encouraging greater appreciation and respect for the Hindu community in Montreal and beyond.

F. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

Please sign if you agree to the following:

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print)

SIGNATURE

DATE

F. RESEARCHERS'S DECLARATION

The researcher should sign the following:

I have read and understood this form and I agree to follow the conditions described.

NAME (please print)

SIGNATURE

DATE

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 2425 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca