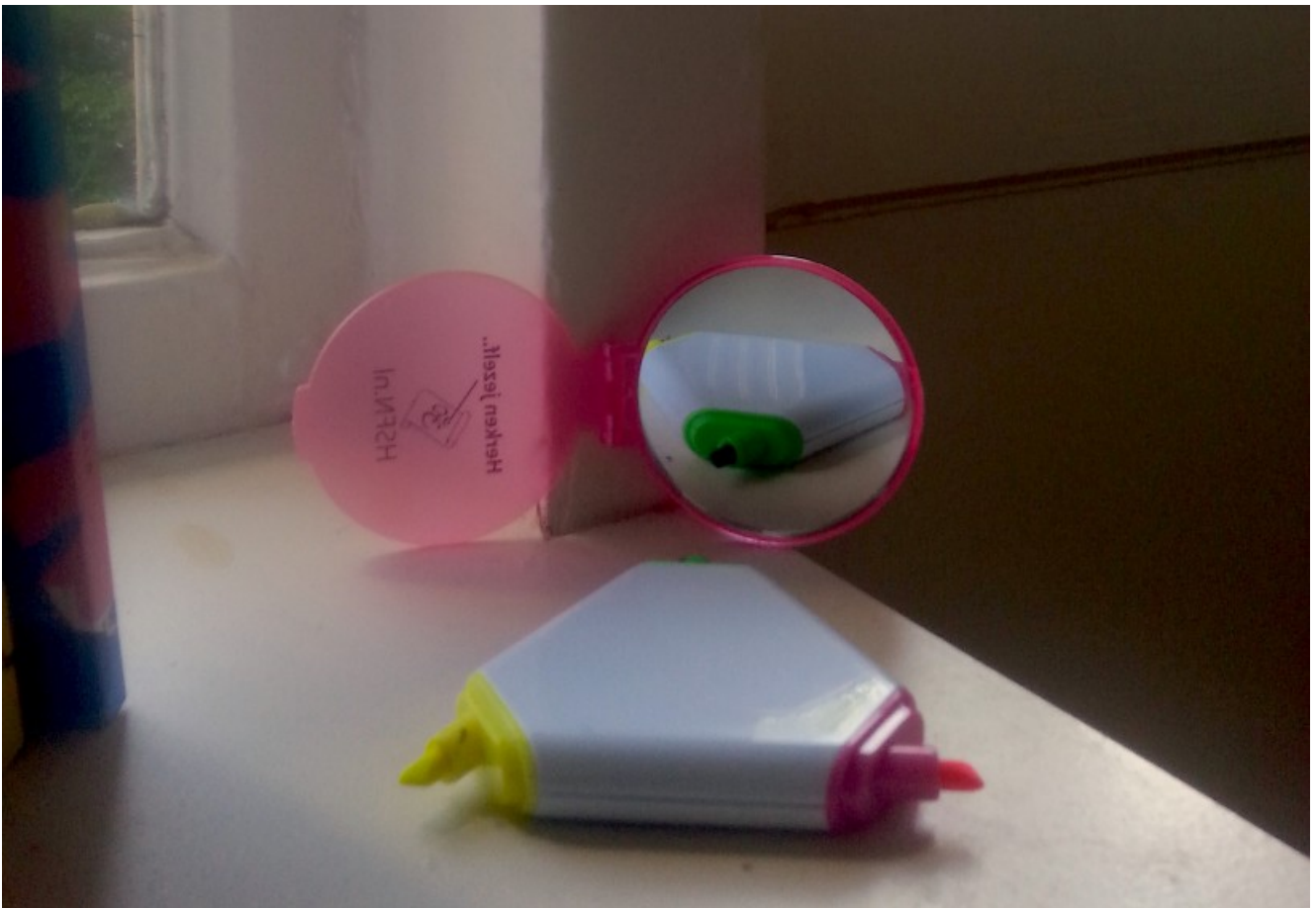




AVMOFA: UNEXPECTED GIFTS AS ANALYTICAL TOOLS

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It is the early(ish) stages of my fieldwork among Hindus from Suriname living in the Netherlands. I am reluctantly attending a question and answer period with a well-known spiritual leader in the community, as I know little about the event. After much money and time spent on public transport, I find myself frantically noting down the questions students are asking. For the most part, they inquire about the 'Hindu way' of approaching societal issues of abortion and gay marriage, into stories and mythology.

I float through the evening without really knowing what it is I am searching for.



When it ends, a young girl slips a gift into my hand as I walk out the door. I look down to see that she had given me. It is a small pink mirror with “recognize yourself” written on the front and a three-pronged multicoloured highlighter with the organisation’s logo printed on it.

After returning home and arranging the items on a shelf, I thought more about how the little pink mirror and the three-pronged highlighter symbolise the importance of two crucial actions that were discussed throughout this evening’s event: recognition and emphasis.

Popular Hindu religion is full of references to recognition as a rite of passage: saints, gods, pious women, and terrifying goddesses—they are all on a path to acknowledge something hidden deep inside. For my second-generation respondents, these stories and legends are their model for their own self-recognition as contemporary Hindus.

After this recognition comes emphasis: The conscious, ongoing decisions about what to ignore, what to celebrate, what to defend, and what to deny.

The whole evening of question-and-answer was, after all, a chance to engage an ‘expert’ opinion about what a Hindu should emphasise.

The mirror and the highlighter, now re-gifted virtually to the AVMOFA, are submitted as ambivalent artefacts that help symbolise as well as analyse my respondents’ paths to becoming ‘Hindus’.

Without these two objects, I may still not know what I was searching for that evening in the Hague.