

Confusing the Issue:

Field Visits as a Strategy for Deconstructing Religious Boundaries

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Introduction

This paper discusses the pedagogical concerns that relate to the fact that the diverse nature of South Asian religious traditions ensures that boundaries between these religions do not necessarily correspond with the clearly delineated ways in which we teach them. We question whether or not the teaching of 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism' as discrete modules excludes or marginalises particular South Asian traditions in the academy which are already socially, politically and economically marginalised. In other words are we, in the higher education sector,

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complicit in perpetuating hegemonic discourses that further exclude already disempowered groups? One strategy we feel that we can adopt in addressing this is through the use of field visits to groups such as the *Ravidassias* and *Ek Niwas*—neither of which fit neatly into the Sikh or Hindu folds (see Takhar, 2005: 115-9 and Jacobs, 2010: 115).

This paper addresses three particular pedagogical issues:

1. The use of field visits as integral to teaching about South Asian Traditions.
2. The concept of confusion, and how confusion can be an important aspect of the learning experience.
3. How to enable students to comprehend the diversity of South Asian traditions and the permeability of boundaries between apparently distinct religious traditions.

The context

We take Religious Studies students to a wide variety of places of worship as part of their learning experience. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on two particular religious places of worship, which directly address the issues outlined above.

The first of these is called *Ek Niwas*, which literally translates as ‘One Place’. *Ek Niwas* is the inspiration of Baba Tarlochan Singh Bhoparai, affectionately referred to as Babaji, and a woman referred to as Mataji. It ostensibly falls into the Baba Balaknath Tradition. Baba Balaknath is the Punjabi form of Āiva’s son, also known as Murugan, Skanda, Subramaniam and Kartikeya (see Geaves, 2007). Consequently it would seem to fall clearly within the ‘Hindu Tradition’. Begun in 1995, and according to Babaji inspired by a vision of Baba Balaknath, on first glance *Ek Niwas* does appear to be a Hindu place of worship, with images (*murtis*) of Baba Balaknath and deities of the Āivite traditions installed against the backdrop of fibreglass mountains and artificial waterfalls.

However, a man who appears to be a *khalsa*¹ Sikh, who is the husband of Mataji, greets us at the door. *Kirtan* on a Tuesday evening

¹ A Sikh who is formally initiated and bears the *pañj kakke*, commonly called the 5 Ks namely: a wooden comb (*kangha*), a steel bracelet (*kara*), undershorts (*kachh*), uncut hair (*kes*) and a sword or dagger (*kirpan*).

or Saturday also sees many apparent Sikhs in attendance. Babaji identifies himself as a Sikh by birth. A closer look at the abundant and colourful iconography at *Ek Niwas* reveals images and symbols more commonly equated with Sikhism. There are, for example, large pictures of Guru Gobind Singh and Baba Deep Singh on one wall. Babaji did have a Guru Granth Sahib installed in a small room up a short flight of stairs. However, because of tension with some Sikhs from a nearby Gurdwara he uninstalled the Guru Granth Sahib.² Nonetheless, there is still the raised platform (*mañji sahib*) and canopy (*palki*) traditionally used for the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib, which are obviously signifiers of the Sikh tradition. As Geaves (1999: 38) observes, *Ek Niwas* reflects the religious life of the Punjab which is frequently characterised by ‘the eclecticism of overlapping folk traditions where the borders of Hinduism, Sikhism and even Islam are considerably blurred’.

The *Ravidassias* are the followers of Guru Ravidass, whose forty-one hymns are found in the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. The majority, if not all, of *Ravidassias* are from the *chamar zat* (caste). Traditionally, the *chamars* were assigned the occupation of working with the *chumuri* (the hide of animals), hence the term *chamar* (literally ‘leather-workers’) and thus positioned in the ‘untouchable’ or *achut* strata of Indian society. As a result of the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus, masses of *chamars* (along with *chuhras*³) adopted the Sikh faith in an endeavour to leave behind the stigma of Untouchability. However, the lower caste position assigned to the Dalits remained upon their adoption of Sikhism. They were represented as different from the higher caste Sikhs through labelling them as ‘Mazhabi Sikhs’ and ‘Adivasi Sikhs’.

Dalit consciousness, especially with the efforts of movements such as *Ad Dharm*, promoted a distinct identity amongst the lower castes as followers of Guru Ravidass. Events in Vienna in 2009 with the assassination of an influential Ravidassia Sant caused uproar

² Many Sikhs objected to the *Guru Granth Sahib* being installed in a place of worship in which images from other religious traditions are installed.

³ This caste were traditionally known as the ‘sweepers’. They prefer to be referred to as the *Valmiki*s since both the terms *chamar* and *chuhra* tend to be used derogatorily by non-Dalit Sikhs and Hindus. For further details about the *Valmiki* community see Takhar (2005: 124-57).

between Sikhs and the followers of Guru Ravidass (see Takhar, 2011). In January 2010, the ‘Ravidassia’ religion was proclaimed and all *Ravidassias* are encouraged to record their religion as ‘Other’ in the forthcoming UK Census. Further tension has been caused as a result of many *Ravidassia Sabhas* across the globe having removed their copies of the Guru Granth Sahib in favour of Amritbani Sri Guru Ravidass (see Takhar, 2011). This contains the writings of Guru Ravidass alone, taken from the Guru Granth Sahib and other texts such as the Pac-Vani. Interestingly however, there are currently no cases of any *Ravidassia Sabhas* having done this in the United Kingdom. It is a question of when rather than if all Sabhas will install the Amritbani Sri Guru Ravidass as the only scripture to be housed in a Ravidassia place of worship.

Field visits and pedagogy

Field visits are integral to learning and teaching Religious Studies at Wolverhampton. It is important that students both hear the insider’s perspective and experience the sacred space of particular religious traditions. It is important that students understand that religions are vibrant and lived experiences, and not simply phenomena that have been superseded by the processes of modernity, secularism and confined to dusty tomes. The lived reality of people’s religious lives can appear to be ‘messy, paradoxical and chaotic (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007: 241) in comparison to the necessarily overly neat presentations of these traditions in the classroom.

Students evaluate the extensive use of field visits in Religious Studies very positively:

Field visits are an essential component in the study of religion.

Coming on the visits I have got to see first hand, not just reading from the books. I feel that I have a better understanding now.

The use of field visits is firmly founded in an experiential learning tradition where ‘the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied...It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being

studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter'. (Keeton & Tate cited in Kolb, 1984: 5)

Confusion and discomfort

However, these direct encounters can also be confusing and discomfoting:

[on visiting *Ek Niwas*] I was not sure that it was a place to pray. There was confusion in my mind. I liked the way that it was completely different to what was in my mind about a gurdwara, a mosque or a temple.

[on visiting the *Ravidass Sabha*] I personally felt very awkward, very uncomfortable... I cannot really explain why.

There are a number of reasons why field visits might cause confusion and discomfort. First, the unfamiliar can be disturbing. Coupled with this is that, despite extensive preparation prior to field visits, students are not necessarily conversant or comfortable with the cultural and religious protocols of unfamiliar traditions. Furthermore, informants at places of worship may use unfamiliar terminology. The discomfort of the unfamiliar might be exacerbated if the student has a strong commitment to a different religious tradition. For example, some Christian students have on occasion expressed conflicting feelings about taking *prasad*⁴ in Hindu or Sikh places of worship. On one hand they do not wish to insult the hospitality of the host, yet on the other feel that it might compromise their own religious commitment. A sense of discomfort can be further exacerbated if there is tension between the student's own religious community and that of the place of worship, for example a khalsa Sikh visiting either the *Ravidass Sabha* or *Ek Niwas*:

⁴ In Hinduism this refers to sweets or other food items that have been offered to an image of a deity (*murti*) and distributed to devotees at the end of worship (*pūja*). In Sikhism this is more commonly referred to as *karah prasad*, which is a sweet made from ghee, flour and sugar prepared in an iron pan, and which is offered in all Sikh places of worship (*gurdwara*).

[on visiting *Ek Niwas*] If I were an observant Orthodox Jew, I would not be permitted to visit other places of worship where there is idolatrous worship taking place.

Confusion can also manifest in a more constructive way that can make a significant contribution to students' understanding of South Asian traditions. This confusion primarily arises because field visits have the potential for students to encounter conflicting accounts, and thereby act as potential for stimulating deep learning. Informant testimony can, potentially, be inconsistent with not only what students read and what they hear from us as teachers, but also at odds with other informants from ostensibly the same religious tradition. Furthermore, places such as *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha* do not fit into the neatly defined categories of either 'Hinduism' or 'Sikhism'.

This confusion can be instrumental in disabusing students of overly simplistic understandings, such as: 'Sikhs believe in this' whereas 'Hindus believe in that'. Nonetheless, we still teach discrete modules on Sikhism and Hinduism, which not only may perpetuate these simplified understandings, but may also be potentially complicit in presenting hegemonic accounts that exclude marginalised voices, downplay diversity and are blind to the permeability of boundaries.

The permeability of boundaries

Roger Ballard (1999) and Harjot Oberoi (1994) have cogently argued that current clearly defined boundaries between Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism are problematic, particularly in the Punjabi context. Oberoi (1994: 1), for example observes:

I was constantly struck by the brittleness of our textbook classifications. There simply wasn't any one-to-one correspondence between the categories that were supposed to govern social and religious behaviour on the one hand, and the way people actually experienced their everyday lives on the other.

Thus within the same Punjabi family, members might variously identify themselves as either Sikh or Hindu, despite the efforts of the *Singh Sabha*⁵ to articulate a distinctive Sikh identity. Many Punjabi

Hindus wear a *kara* for its Sikh significance and have images of Guru Nanak in their homes. This permeability of boundaries is further highlighted by the fact that many Sikhs may attend Hindu mandirs as well as gurdwaras.

The question raised by Ballard and Oberoi is: by teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as distinct modules are we imposing and/or reifying boundaries that actually have little meaning to the lived experience of those we teach about? To couch this question in two other forms:

1. Is the way that we teach religions of a South Asian origin simply a form of academic colonialism?
2. Is there too much discrepancy between emic and etic accounts of these religious traditions?

Delineating boundaries is primarily about categorization. As George Lakoff (1990) points out categorization is fundamental to how we think about the world. Lakoff suggests that the way we categorize things is, at least in part, cultural. Since the work of Wittgenstein, we can no longer accept that categories are objective and neutral conceptual containers with clearly delineated boundaries, in which various phenomena are deemed to belong, or not. Wittgenstein's thinking also challenged the classical theory which suggests that all members of a particular category are equal members of that category. The cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, building on Wittgenstein's thought, developed what has come to be referred to as prototype theory. This theory suggests that all categories have best (prototypical) and less representative members. In other words we can think of core and peripheral members.

Abandoning the categories of Hinduism and Sikhism.

Wittgenstein's and Rosch's challenge to classical category raises two questions in regard to teaching religions of a South Asian origin. First,

⁵ The *Singh Sabha* movement in the late nineteenth century was very much at the forefront of legislative definitions which were later to be adopted, to some degree, in the definitions of a Sikh as stated in the *Rehat Maryada* (see Jhutti-Johal, 2011: 89).

do we need to abandon the idea that these rich and complex traditions are religions? If so, should they be taught in Cultural Studies, History and Anthropology departments and not in Religious Studies? Secondly are the boundaries between these traditions so indeterminate as to be meaningless? If so should we abandon discrete modules on Hinduism and Sikhism? If categories are cultural, then imposing the Western categories of religion on a culture, where quite different modes of categorization are utilized, could be considered as a form of pedagogical orientalism. Furthermore, by teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as discrete modules, we risk presenting prototypical types, and neglecting less representative, but nonetheless important, types that inhabit the twilight zones of the boundaries.

It is an oft cited observation that there is no word that is semantically equivalent to religion in any of the Indian languages. The sort of functional differentiation, which suggests a clear distinction between politics, religion, jurisprudence and so on, of Western societies is not so readily identifiable in the South Asian context. There is a very noticeable discourse, traceable back to the Hindu reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which suggests that Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life. This is also true of Sikhism, which is also referred to as the Sikh *Dharm*, a way of life based on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

The famous cultural commentator Raymond Williams in many of his writings suggests that one of the primary understandings of culture is that culture is 'a way of life'. By teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as religions it could be argued that we misrepresent their place in the everyday lives of Hindus and Sikhs and therefore it would be more appropriate to teach South Asian traditions in Cultural Studies departments. However, the study of the various dimensions of Hindu and Sikh worldviews (Smart, 1995) involves more than culture.

The idea that Hinduism and Sikhism are distinct religions is deeply problematic. Roger Ballard (1999) has argued that in the Punjabi context, religion is characterized by four dimensions: the mystical and spiritual dimension (*panth*), the moral and social aspect (*dharm*), the concept of fate (*kismet*), and loyalty as a vehicle for ethno-political mobilization (*qaum*). In the pre-British period Punjabi religion was almost exclusively focused on the panthic and kismetic but 'religion as a qaumic phenomenon was almost non existent'

(Ballard 1999: 11). Furthermore religious affiliation, in terms of Sikh or Hindu, cuts across these dimensions. Ballard argues that the impact of British rule created a context in which Hinduism and Sikhism were constructed in qaumic terms. This has not only led to the marginalization of panthic and qaumic aspects of religiosity in hegemonic discourses, despite being significant aspects of the lived religious life of Punjabis, but has also contributed to tension and violent conflict between Hindus and Sikhs.

Ballard's and Oberoi's observations suggest that teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as discrete modules not only fails to be consistent with the lived reality of people's lives, but also perpetuates a discourse which marginalizes non-prototypical groups, such as the Ravidassias and those who attend *Ek Niwas*. Perhaps we need to rethink the boundaries between modules and offer modules, such as Soteriology in the Religions of South Asian Origins, Social Aspects of Religion in South Asia and so on, where the boundaries do not promote prototypical types, gloss over lived practices, simplify the complex and exclude the subaltern.

The risk in this strategy is that if we taught a generic module on South Asian religions, then of course there is a danger that Sikhism is perceived as derivative and secondary to the Hindu traditions, and this would be consistent with the Hindu nationalist discourse which represents Sikhism as a form of Hinduism. This denies autonomy to the Sikh tradition and would indeed be unfortunate, bearing in mind that Sikh scholars have successfully defended the 'right' for the Study of Sikhism/Sikh Studies as an academic subject. This being the case, it is not unusual to find Sikhism within the 'Hinduism' section of many pre-1970's books. This denies Sikhism the right to be addressed as the youngest of the six major world faiths.

The Constitution of India, however, to an extent denies this 'separatism' by labelling a Sikh as 'a type of Hindu'. This will present the teacher with a huge dilemma in relation to how they choose to teach Hinduism and Sikhism. It is actually quite arguable as to whether Guru Nanak intended to lay the foundations of a wholly new faith. His being a Punjabi Hindu also has implications when discussing the issue of 'Sikh' identity. However, the pioneering work of Kahn Singh Nabha '*Ham Hindu Nahin*', *We are not Hindus*, and the efforts of the *Singh Sabha* have been paramount in encouraging Sikhs to define themselves

as non-Hindus. This also needs to be taken into consideration when bearing in mind that Sikh students of Religious Studies may have a *Singh Sabha* or *khalsa* background.

Hindu and Sikh, for whatever complex reasons, have become significant focal points of identity, and therefore difference. In Sikhism, *khalsa* Sikhism is the prototypical exemplar and in Hinduism what might be broadly be called *Sanatana Dharma* may be regarded as prototypical. These prototypical forms have become ideologically, economically and socially dominant. It is important that prototypical exemplars are not presented as metonyms for complex and diverse traditions. The challenge for us in the academy is to acknowledge these prototypical forms, and at the same time ensure that these forms are not presented as the normative benchmark, by which all other groups are evaluated as somehow 'less authentic'. In other words we have to take into account, not only the indeterminacy of boundaries, but also the diversity of these traditions.

The challenge of diversity

The challenges faced in raising the issue of diversity are somewhat different for teaching Hinduism than for the teaching of Sikhism. Those who teach Hinduism frequently trot out the mantra that Hinduism has no founder, no universally accepted canon of texts, no creedal statement and no overarching institution. It is often pointed out that there is no single reference point that is applicable to all Hindus. Students are directed to authors, such as von Stietencron (2001), who argue that we should understand Hinduism as a plurality of distinct religions, rather than a single religious tradition. This radical diversity is itself quite a challenge to many students, who often want simplified accounts of Hindu beliefs and practices. There are of course various strategies to address this radical diversity. Field visits to places like as *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*, as well as to the local *Shree Krishnan Mandir* and a nearby *Venkateswara* temple enable students to encounter this diversity first hand.

On the other hand, for those who teach Sikhism, the challenge is almost the reverse. How can we disabuse students of stereotypical characterisations of Sikhs only in terms of the five Ks? Students who

have some prior understanding of Sikhism are very often surprised to hear that there are numerous divisions and sects within Sikhism. Very often, some students have difficulty in visualizing a non-turban wearing Sikh, especially a male, as being a 'true' Sikh. Here, the implications of Guru Nanak's teachings against outward symbols⁶ become important but need to be dealt with utmost sensitivity.

It is important to bear in mind the complexity of Sikh Identity and to get away from notions of the *khalsa* Sikh constituting so called 'orthodoxy' within the Sikh faith. The five Ks do not necessarily symbolize that the wearer is an initiated Sikh. Moreover, the term 'baptized' Sikh has strong Christian overtones and should be avoided when referring to Sikhs who have undergone the *amrit* (initiation into the *khalsa* ceremony). However, the issues of definition surrounding the *Sahajdhari*s, the 'slow adopters', also need addressing. According to the historian Khushwant Singh, a *Sahajdhari* Sikh (one who cuts the hair and beard) is actually a Hindu. So where does this leave a highly significant proportion of the Sikh community (*Panth*) of *Sahajdhari* Sikhs? In terms of the *Ravidassias* (and *Valmikis*) the confusion carries on in terms of the identity of the community. Confusingly some are Sikh/*Ravidassia*, some are Hindu/*Ravidassia*, others are neither Hindu nor Sikh but *Ravidassia*. If a student were to gather informant testimonies about identity, these would be very varied in terms of Hindu, Sikh and distinct identities.

Conclusion

We conclude that overall, the best way forward in teaching South Asian traditions is to both retain the teaching within Religious Studies departments and to continue to teach modules on Sikhism and Hinduism.⁷ We suggest this for three basic reasons. First, turning the clock back is always challenging. Secondly, moving the teaching of South Asian reli-

⁶ Guru Nanak, for example, refused to undergo the *Upanayam*, sacred thread ceremony.

⁷ This does not mean that facets of Hinduism and Sikhism should not be taught in different departments, such as History, Anthropology or Cultural Studies. Nor does it exclude the possibility of some generic modules that compare and contrast aspects of the various South Asian traditions.

gions to other subject areas will inevitably leave lacunae. Thirdly, teaching generic modules that include Hinduism and Sikhism (and Jainism and Buddhism etc.) raises more problems than it solves. However, this means that we must raise awareness amongst students of non-paradigmatic groups, which exist in the fuzzy boundaries between ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Sikhism’. This raises the perennial pedagogical dilemma for teaching South Asian traditions, which is how to achieve the balance between complexity and comprehensibility. We suggest two possible models to this pedagogical challenge, which we have called the *lila*⁸ model and the *samsara*⁹ model. The *lila* model suggests that the pedagogical strategy is to build a simple and even simplistic picture and then deconstruct it to build a more complex picture. In many ways, this is built on a linear understanding of learning. The *samsara* model is built on a more cyclical conception of learning. The strategy is that you begin with complexity and anticipate a degree of confusion at the beginning, clarity only emerging after completing teaching a cycle of interlocking concepts.

We do not advocate either model as being better, but do suggest that no matter which model is adopted confusion is inevitable. However confusion can facilitate deep learning. We are convinced that field visits, particularly to places like *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*, are vital in creating confusion necessary for a deep understanding of the complexities and permeability of boundaries of religions of South Asian origin. In many ways our advocacy of field visits and the constructive fostering of confusion can be summarised by the follow-

⁸ The term *lila* means a ‘game or sport’. It is often used to explain the notion of a joyful creation in which the playful Krishna alternately creates and destroys the cosmos, just as a child builds and then demolishes a sandcastle in order to build another.

⁹ This is the cycle of life, death and re-birth. This model is based on one of the author’s experience of learning *Vedanta* at an ashram in India. After studying for several weeks the author still had not managed to make much sense of what was being taught, and so approached the swami and asked him if he could explain the teaching in a different way. The swami looked at the author imperiously and said ‘just wait’. While this was not quite the answer that was hoped for, the swami was (of course) correct. We cannot, for example, understand the notion of *samsara*, without understanding the concepts of *karma*, *yoga* and *moksa*. It does not matter where in the cycle that you begin, but confusion is inevitable until you complete the cycle.

ing student comments after visiting *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*:

That is what I was trying to figure out. Where do they belong? The more I thought about it—Hinduism and Sikhism are so broad and diverse. Does it need to be like a clear distinction?

If I'm confused then I want to research more about it. This challenges you to understand or try to understand the complexities.

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