

The Life of Hindus in Britain

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General

Some British people ask the question: "Why are there so many Gods? God is only one. We [Hindus] need to explain to everyone that really God is one – there are different incarnations of God, at different times. He has the power to change his shape and form. He did that but still he is one. And when I speak to children I use masks." I say "Look, I am Mrs Misra, I put this mask – now I am something else – but if I move it I am still the same person." – "That's what God is – one." (Vidya Misra, interviewed February 2001)

By Shalini Sharma

What do we really know of the historical experience of different communities of Asians living in Britain? Apart from a few works that have focussed on particular community groups dwelling in particular locales in Britain and a series of migration statistics and encyclopaedic entries, the answer would be, not much. In such a context, the importance of oral history is increasingly acknowledged. The lives and pursuits of ordinary people and the valuable information about customs, culture and priorities that can be gleaned from them are recognised as a valuable source to gain a wider understanding of our past. One such unrecorded history is that of Hindus in Britain. However, a beginning has been made by the launch of the British Hinduism Oral History project by the Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies, which has been substantially aided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Three hundred interviews of first generation migrants are to be conducted across Britain. The questionnaires follow a common format but each interview is unstructured to allow for the interviewee to freely focus on what he or she considers significant memory. The questions probe thought on reasons for migration, memories of the life left behind, first experiences of Britain, the building of social and community groups and the practice of faith in such a context. This forum can be used as both a space where the elderly inform their young descendents of their stories, hopes and fears, and as the first record of the daily experiences of Hindus in "multi-cultural" Britain.

Three distinct types of people have been targeted. Firstly, those people who have overtly made a difference in the lives of Hindus in Britain and are seen to have enhanced the prestige and self-respect of the community in the wider context of Britain. Secondly, the individuals whom "everybody knows" in particular locales, i.e. whom are known in the local communities as outstanding and exemplary figures of their faith. They are seen as the prominent innovators who have raised money for charitable causes, taught community languages, or built temples in their local communities. Finally, this project attempts to search out the voices of those individuals normally silent in historical accounts. These include the perpetuators of faith within the family home, mothers and wives who migrated with their men-folk and established the social customs and culture of a "Hindu" home. Also in this category are the voices of individuals whose experiences lie outside the dominant and officially recognized Hindu communities. These are either people belonging to "lower" caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These stories can be compared in terms of class, caste and regional community to ascertain how united or coherent British Hinduism actually is.

Although only a fraction of the three hundred interviews have so far been conducted, already a wider picture of the story of migration and community building has emerged that far exceeds and contradicts initial expectations. Each story told is rich in memory and detail enabling the future generations to hear, feel and even see for themselves their so-often ill-preserved past.



HE Nareshwar Dayal, Indian High Commissioner speaking at the launch of the project.

L to R: Dr. Gillian Evison (Indian Institute Library, Bodliem, Oxford), Shaunaka Rishi Das (Director, Oxford Centre for Vaishnava & Hindu Studies), Peter Luff, MP, O. P. Sharma, MBE (National Council of Hindu Temples), HE Nareshwar Dayal, Indian High Commissioner, Lord Addington, and Helen Jackson (Heritage Lottery Fund).



Courtesy of: Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies

The first set of issues to be raised by the interviews carried out thus far turn on to what extent a body of individuals exists that denotes itself as Hindu. What does being a Hindu mean? What if anything do individuals in Britain date back to this period. However, what such overt manifestations of faith fail to convey is the extent to which smaller communities of Hindus such as Bengalis and Tamils practice their faith in different ways. Bengali informants spoke of the home as the principally important space for worship and the annual Durga Puja celebrations as the only real public celebration of their religion. Similarly, a Sri Lankan had built a temple in his garden, which is now visited by individuals from all tenets of British society including many Christians and Sikhs. Even within a group of individuals who originated from one region of India, there are many differences as to how to practice Hinduism. For example, the Punjabis are divided into Arya Samajis, Sanatan Dharmis, and various Sampradayas such as the growing faith in Sai Baba apparent amongst Hindus in Britain today.

Home & Hindutva

Since the rise of Hindutva within the Indian polity much research has been conducted on Hindu communalism within India. Studies of the long-term cultural strategies of groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, have alerted social scientists of the political importance of social activity termed as cultural. For, these very groups have attempted to cast the myriad diversities of Hinduism under one hegemonizing net of Hindutva. A common assumption surrounding Non-Resident Indians (NRI) is that they actively contribute to RSS/VHP funds and support the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. The project can explore this postulation. Relations between the ethnic minorities within Britain are discussed and opinions on the possible barriers between communities are sought. Exploding the myth that NRIs are only interested in what is happening in India, each individual to be interviewed stands firmly in the belief that he or she is British. For many India is a spiritual home, a place for pilgrimage, and a place where family and friends still reside. Home, however, is Britain and it is here that political loyalties dwell.

"There was an Indian community. They used to get together. It did not have any temple as such. They would get together

every weekend to sing the songs of prayer to the Lord and I joined their group, you know, we used to sing community devotional songs which gave life quite a bit of peace of mind and eventually we thought you know, we pooled up some money because wages were not high and we thought instead of going from one home to another (we used to arrange satsangs in different homes...) we thought why not make a centre and call it a temple and have some God heads?" (Rajinder Gupta, interviewed January 2001).

The stories these people tell are a chronicle of adapting to the different environment and population of Britain. The remote places that sold proper Indian spices and vegetables and sweetmeats are described, home made flower arrangements with which too adorn deities are fondly remembered while festivals which were as much a social event in which Hindus could meet and share their predicament as well as religious gatherings are discussed. They elaborate on the different stories they could tell their children in order to impart the basic values of good karma and charity. These were seen as more important than daily worship or the learning of Sanskrit. Community languages such as Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, and Tamil are taught, mostly on a voluntary basis, at local community centres or temples so that children become acquainted with their mother tongue. Also interesting however is how some of those interviewed remember learning English. One old Gujarati gentleman picked it up when he was working for the British army in Africa during the Second World War. He would try to decipher the English newspapers and ask his officers for assistance whenever he got stuck.

In fact many of the informants speak of disunity amongst Hindus and the need to organize to gain wider representation in the political landscape of Britain. While they may consider themselves Bengali or Telegu or Gujarati Hindus rather than simply Hindus, all proudly assert themselves as British nationals. The majority see racism as a relatively recent phenomenon. However some remember ugly incidents when initially trying to gain accommodation and employment in Britain. This said, most of the informants tend to dwell on touching kindnesses they encountered when they first came here. One lady even referred to a helpful gesture when she was destitute in the winter of 1969 as sign of God!

These elderly Hindus are also questioned about the direction they think their community will take in the future. Some suggest that Pandits or religious leaders and teachers should be well-versed in English so that the youth do not feel alienated from, and can relate to temple worship as an activity which means more than ritual and convention. Others fear a politicising of their religion and a swamping out of their own particular creeds by the advocates of the wider project of Hindu unification.

This project promises to create a valuable archive from which alternative histories of Britain and its diaspora can be constructed. ◀

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