

It was interesting to read Shalini Sharma's report regarding 'The Life of Hindus in Britain' published in the *IIAS Newsletter* (IIASN 27, p. 23). Apart from its higher philosophies, there is not much interest in the West for Hinduism (cf. Buddhism). The important part of the article was the fact

that finally some kind of concern is raised for Britain's Hindu minority community – in a country where many different ethnicities or religious groups live. Seeking to identify long under-represented peoples through research, building temples, and more such things are indeed positive steps. Inter-

estingly though, Sharma does not mention the large numbers of Nepalese living in Britain. Her report gave the impression that she was emphasizing Hinduism more than the Hindu minority in Britain. If this is so, I am afraid the title does not fit the context. I would like to ask whether a simple interview research on Hindus (or any other minority group for that matter) can bring positive input to people's lives? Or is it just that studying minorities has become today an academic buzzword that has attracted research on Hindus? I believe for actual change there should be a grassroots awareness campaign that can influence the policy makers. Just building a gathering place or writing an academic report that no one sees, except those involved in the research, will not make a difference. Even though the existence of the class system is officially denied, it is clear that in practice British society is still divided into various social ladders. In this light, I find it highly remarkable that 'Westerners' view the 'caste system' in South Asia so negatively while class arrangements and discrimination often based on race are prevalent in their own society. I think the article would have been much more insightful if it had illustrated what the position of Hindus in British society is and showed whether the current research is aimed at finding a 'social space' for minorities rather than just a place for academic talk or community prayer. ◀

Birenda Raj Giri, MA (University of Amsterdam)
nepal@angelfire.com

Reply from the Author

I welcome Mr Giri's response to my research report on 'The Life of Hindus in Britain' (IIASN 27, p.23) for a dual reason. Firstly the initial motive behind writing the report – to introduce the research to interested individuals and consequently encourage the generation of more contacts – could be better facilitated. Mr Giri is correct; I am yet to interview Nepalese Hindus. In this regard I hope he will be willing to introduce me to individuals he thinks should be interviewed. More generally, his reaction presents me with an opportunity to clarify aspects of the research that have perhaps been misunderstood.

The agenda of the research is not to 'bring positive input into people's lives' or to 'simply end up as another unread academic report' (Mr Giri's inferences). Neither is 'actual change for the Hindu community' a driving force behind this work. Such policy-driven agendas make too many assumptions about the existence of a homogeneous Hindu community and a distinct identity of interests amongst such a group.

The research is merely a first step in recording the life stories of first generation migrants who call themselves Hindu. The archive that will hold the interviews could be a database from which research, whether journalistic or academic, can spring. The archive will also be taken back into various community groups in order to teach the significance and practical application of oral history. The theoretical basis of oral history, of capturing the voices of 'ordinary' men and women as opposed to political or cultural 'representatives' is itself an attempt to counter charges of academicism. It is also an attempt to engage with the voices and thoughts of individuals about their faith and their notions of community rather than assuming their consciousness from their class, caste or social positions. While the agency of individuals is philosophically questionable, at least a few aging voices will be recorded and preserved for posterity; voices that quietly challenge sweeping generalizations.

So far, the interviews conducted indicate that there is no such thing as British Hinduism as an all-encompassing aegis. Rather, what is apparent is a very strong and vibrant, numerically dominant Gujarati community which generates much of the temple building and community activity in specific areas of Britain such as Leicester and Neasden. However, smaller centres of concentration constituting more recently immigrated groups such as the Sri Lankan Tamils have also developed in the inner cities. Each group, be it Bengali, West Indian or Swami Narayan, brings with it different practices of worship and religious spaces.

Organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, and the more innocuous Council of Hindu Temples, have been attempting to draw the various Hindu communities together, but members of each organization complain of the disunity and diversity amongst practitioners of the religion. Thus the research extends our knowledge of the lack of homogeneity amongst Hindus in Britain but also draws out what Hinduism means for each disparate believer. The focal question is: What do these people mean when they call themselves Hindu? This is perhaps far more basic than the points raised by Mr Giri, and yet the responses so far have contributed to a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the practice of faith, and the richness of 'ordinary' life. ◀

Shalini Sharma, MA works as a Research Facilitator and is presently completing her doctoral thesis on the politics of pre-Partition Punjab at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.
shalinisharma@email.com

Editors' note >

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