

## Fieldwork Report

In order to complete my fieldwork, I decided to attend a Hindu Mandir. Having made a decision to report on Hinduism, I was informed of the Mandir's annual Diwali festival, which several other students were attending. After sending an explanatory email to the chairman of the management committee at the Mandir, informing him of our intention to attend as student researchers, we arranged to meet and attend the event together. The celebration was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014, and we arrived slightly before the ceremony at approximately 19:15, and left after the firework display at 21:00.

I knew very little about Hinduism before I undertook my fieldwork, however I felt this gave me an advantage because I would avoid having pre-conceived expectations of what I would observe. May explains that "in contrast to testing ideas (deductive), [theories] may be developed from observation (inductive)" (1993, p. 114). I hoped that by taking an inductive, rather than deductive, approach it would enable me to analyse my observations in light of my research, rather than focusing only on observations which confirm or deny my expectations.

I had some difficulty in recording my observations, as I did not feel it was appropriate to make notes during the festival, because of the nature of the occasion. My role as newcomer to the festival made me self-conscious of my actions; however the event as a whole, and even the ceremony within the temple, had a very informal style. Many people who attended the ceremony were moving around, talking to people they knew as part of the community, video-recording and taking photographs; actions done among friends and acquaintances. If I had taken notes in my usual style, with pen and paper, I feel this would have made me more perceptible as an outsider to the community. Although in reality, I could have made short notes on my mobile phone, and it would not have been noticeably different from many of the attendees who were using their phones, it felt out of place to use technology for this purpose when others were using it to commemorate and share their experience.

However I was aware of the necessity to record my observations as soon as possible, should I forget something significant. This was a key concern, and as May has pointed out, the observer often fears they "may have missed something or is being too selective" with their note taking (1993, p. 122). For this reason, as soon as we left from the festival, I conferred with the other students who attended to try and form a comprehensive account of the evening, which I then made notes on. I feel this gave me a substantial set of notes which covered all of the key events of the festival to use as a basis for this field report. However in terms of the information this gave me about the festival, I felt that my notes were somewhat limited. I feel I would have benefitted from engaging more with the community, which I could have done if I had allowed myself more time to plan my visit. For example, the email which I

sent to the Chairman of the Management Committee was sent only a day before our attendance. After the event, I felt it was too late to arrange some type of informal interview to further my understanding of the festival, as I had missed my opportunity to meet the Chairman in person at the event. By arranging our visit so close to the date of the festival, I felt the process was very rushed and I missed the chance to form a relationship with the Chairman, which then further contributed to my feeling of being an 'outsider' and limited my engagement with the community.

I feel the decision to attend as part of a group of researchers made my fieldwork complex, as it changed the nature of my observation. By attending with a group, I was at times distracted by what other members of my group were doing and where they were, and I was conscious of our presence as a whole group. This was particularly conspicuous as we stood out as a separate group within a community setting. While I attempted to distance myself physically from the group of students at times, by sitting further away and engaging with other people who had attended the service, this was largely unsuccessful. Other members of the group were actively attempting to stay together, as I was initially inclined to do because of the unfamiliar setting and event, which upon reflection contributed significantly to my feeling of being an 'outsider', possibly more than any part of the festival itself. If I were to conduct similar fieldwork in the future, I would attend as an individual to avoid unnecessarily putting myself into the 'outsider' category as much as possible.

Another methodological concern which was only raised upon my attending the event, was that of the language barrier. Unfortunately, I am unable to say with any certainty which language the service was carried out in, as I cannot recall enough to be able to research it, although from the research I was able to conduct, I suspect it was Hindi because of the mixed Punjabi/Gujarati attendance (Vertovec, 2000, p. 89), with parts of the service in Sanskrit (Himalayan Academy, 2015). This meant that in order to gain an understanding of the event, I had to rely upon the parts of the service which were in English, and the very kind explanations of a woman sat next to me. This was perhaps the most notable cause of my feeling as an outsider, because while I was involved and made to feel welcome by the woman I was sat next to, I inevitably felt 'left out' from the service because I had very little understanding of what was happening. This feeling was contributed to by the unusual use of English during the administrative portion of the service. At various points when members of the committee had notices, they would be in English, for example, when we were asked to show our appreciation by applause for the volunteers who had arranged the food for the festival. From this it became clear to me that there was an expectation that all of those in attendance would be able to understand English, which matched my expectations before I arrived. Yet there had also been an active choice not to use English as the main language,

even outside of the ceremony, during the administrative portion of the evening. This provoked me into thinking about the nature of Hinduism in Britain, and the similarities and differences this would have from Hinduism in India, and how it there had been a decision to try and preserve tradition. This is common, in the respect that “all puja follow the same basic pattern” (Himalayan Academy, 2015), including the speech and language, and reflects upon a wider Hindu community across Britain.

The Mandir I visited played a key role in the Hindu community since its establishment in early 1970. This is evident from the presence not only of the temple, but also a community centre and dining room, which suggests at a broader role in the community. As well as this, the organisation of a firework display and the invitation to the congregation to partake in food and drink after the ceremony, to which the vast majority of people stayed, indicated that the community is thriving and active. This came across to me very strongly during my visit, particularly during the ceremony. As already mentioned, during the ceremony many people were moving around and talking, in a variety of languages. At one point, I noticed a family arrive and the mother ushered her children to go and greet another family whom they clearly knew. This shows that there is a strong community element to the Mandir.

The significance of the origins of the temple has also become significant in light of my observations. Because of the nature of diaspora, there were many Hindus in Leeds before there was a temple within the city (Vertovec, 2000, p. 87), and as such, the grounds on Alexandra Road were purchased by the existing ‘Hindu Charitable Trust’, a charity formed of “mixed castes, ten of whom were Punjabi and six Gujarati” (Knott, 1994, p. 61). The mixed nature of this group, joined through their diaspora, is reflected in the demographics of the people who attended the Diwali festival. I saw families and couples as well as individuals in attendance, from children to the elderly, with no significant weight towards any age group or gender. More interestingly, I noticed there was a fairly broad range of ethnicities in attendance (including South Asian, English and East Asian) and a large diversity in what people had chosen to wear to the festival. For me, this was the most surprising part of what I observed at the festival. Having adopted modest clothing for the event, I was not surprised so see a number of people wearing *saris* and *kamiz*. I had not anticipated that equally, a substantial number of people had adopted very modern outfits, including a number of young men in band t-shirts and jeans. I also noticed a number of ‘unusual’ piercings (i.e. facial and ‘tunnel’) and tattoos which were readily visible. I noticed one young woman with dyed bright pink hair. For me, this spoke to the vast array of people which the Mandir serves as the local temple to; a result of the Mandir’s history and the history of Hinduism in Leeds.

From my research I have learnt that the area surrounding the Mandir is the “major Gujarati settlement in Leeds” (Knott, 1994, p. 58) although continues to encompass a number of

different Indian ethnicities including Punjabi, and has done since the Hindu community was established (Knott, 1994, p. 26). Upon learning of the different ethnicities, castes and practises found throughout Hinduism, I am surprised I did not see or notice more of this in my observations. In retrospect, I expected to have seen more noticeable divides among the congregation, but this was not the case. The only observation I made, which at the time I thought was caused by the informal nature of the ceremony, was that *aarti*, which was conducted at the end of the ceremony, was not performed by the whole congregation; while some people made their way towards the front, where the plate was being circulated, others began to leave. This strikes me now as unusual because the practise of *aarti* is common to the vast majority of Hindus. Nevertheless, it is unusual I didn't notice more division between ethnicity, caste and practise in my observations, although Vertovec has noted that "in some Punjabi or Punjabi/Gujarati mixed neighbourhoods...a more generalized sense of 'Hindu community' has been established" (2000, p. 25). This has led me to the belief that, because the Hindu community in Leeds is one of diaspora, with diverse and complex origins, differences between Hindus such as those of ethnicity and caste, have little importance in the Leeds community. This however is only upon reflection of a single visit, and to an annual event and not an everyday service. In order to explore this further I would like to attend a number of services over a period of time, and make more detailed notes on how the congregation interact with each other.

Overall, I have found my visit to the Mandir to be very thought-provoking and informative. While I did feel like an outsider during my visit, I also feel like a part of this was caused by my methodological choices, although the language barrier was a significant contributor to this. I feel like through my observations, I have a better understanding of the nature of the Hindu community in Leeds, and its distinctive characteristics which come as a result of it being a community in diaspora.

**Bibliography**

BAPS, 2014, *Opening of New BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir*. [Online]. [Accessed: 28/11/2014]. Available from: <http://www.baps.org/News/2014/Opening-of-New-BAPS-Shri-Swaminarayan-Mandir-6798.aspx>

Himalayan Academy, 2015. *Hinduism Today website*. [Online]. [Accessed: 20/04/15] Available from: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5315>

Knott, K. 1994. *Hinduism in Leeds*. Leeds: Community Religions Project

May, T. 1993. *Social Research Issues, Methods, and Process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Vertovec, S. 2000. *The Hindu Diaspora*. Abingdon: Routledge.