

Fieldwork report
The Sikh Temple, Leeds

I visited the gurdwara on 23rd October 2014. Having always lived in a predominantly white Christian area, this was my first encounter with Sikhism. My main interest within the field of Religious Studies is gender; I had read that Sikhism 'requires obedience to the same rules by both men and women' (Nesbitt: 2005: 110), and wanted to test the truth of this claim during one of the most important events in the Sikh calendar, Diwali.

I emailed a student Sikh Society, seeking information about local gurdwaras that welcome non-Sikh visitors. This was well received, and the Society invited me to join them on their visit to the gurdwara for Diwali. With the plans for my visit finalised, I completed some reading on Diwali as I had always thought it was an exclusively Hindu celebration. In fact, it is one of the biggest celebrations of the year for Sikhs too, commemorating the release of Guru Hargobind after being imprisoned by Mughals for refusing to convert to Islam (Nesbitt: 2005: 129).

The gurdwara was built in 1999, the 300th anniversary of Vaisakhi (Rait: 2003: 199). Sikhs regard Vaisakhi as formative for their identity: it is the date Guru Gobind Singh created the *Khalsa*, providing Sikhs with a collective appearance through the '5 Ks' (Cole: 2004: 41). Until 1999, the gurdwara existed as a Congregationalist Baptist Church in a Grade II listed building. It became a Sikh temple in 1963 (Leodis: 2006). Despite no longer being in use, the church building, which bears the Sikh *khanda* symbol above the porch, still stands as a physical amalgamation of English Gothic Revival architecture, Christianity in Britain, and traditional Sikh symbolism (see Appendix 1). In 1999, the gurdwara moved into a domed building typical of a traditional gurdwara in India (Rait: 2003: 199).

Meeting on campus, I spoke to three Sikh Society members, who ensured that I was aware of the rules of the gurdwara, such as covering my head, but also that I was at ease. They gave me a leaflet explaining what Diwali means to Sikhs published by the British Organisation of Sikh Students, which aims to 'develop, assist and support Sikh youth groups' in Britain (BOSS: 2014). They also gave me a candle to light at the gurdwara; I was struck by their willingness to share their faith with outsiders.

Driving up to the gurdwara, I saw bright lights adorning the building and heard loud Indian music. The car park was full and around fifty people were gathered outside; I could tell that this was to be a big occasion. Although my fieldwork disproved several arguments I had found in my background reading, one concept that proved true was the centrality of family, or *panth*, to Sikhism: Guru Nanak taught that it was only by 'living amid wife and children that one would attain release' (Jhutti-Johal: 2011: 31). My aim was to use non-participant observation whereby 'the observer observes but does not participate in what is going on in the social setting' (Bryman: 2004: 167), feeling that this would offer a greater overview of the proceedings than participant observation. Therefore, I was able to observe the importance of family in Diwali: I observed parents lighting candles with their children and families gathering for photographs outside the gurdwara.

After lighting candles on a wooden table outside, I covered my head with a scarf and entered the gurdwara. Females turned left at the entrance whilst males turned right, each into a small cloakroom to remove and store shoes. We then ascended two flights of stairs to the prayer hall (*diwan* hall) – I wondered what provisions are available for physically disabled Sikhs. I was struck by the grandeur of the prayer hall, a huge rectangular room with high ceilings. Bright white cotton sheets were laid out on the floor for the congregation (*sangat*) to sit on, and the pale pink walls were draped with bright pink and blue sheets of cloth. The Guru Granth Sahib is of utmost importance in Sikhism, treated as a living Guru. It therefore acted as the focal point, 'visible from all points of the room'. (Cole: 2004: 15). It was positioned on

a stool (*Manji Sahib*) inside an elaborate gold dome-shaped structure (*palki*) which was embellished with a royal blue *khanda* symbol. It lay under an elegant deep blue velvet sheet with gold stitching, so could not be seen directly. A white sheet with gold embroidery was pinned to the ceiling directly above. The chief reader (*granthi*), sat behind the *palki*, waving a *chauri* as he read, a fan made of metal and the silvery hair of a horse or yak's tail (Nesbitt: 2005: 39). Someone told me that this wafted negative energies away. The fact that the Guru Granth Sahib lay on a raised platform showed its superiority to the *sangat* seated on the floor, physically on a lower level to it.

We initially queued down the centre of the hall in two lines: one each for males and females. Before my visit, the Sikh Society members had emphasised the fact that males and females would be separate in the hall, yet a gurdwara volunteer (*sewadar*) encouraged us to form one mixed-gender line to help move the queue along more quickly. I thought about the impact of modernity on this set-up; modernity has seen feminist and equal rights movements striving for men and women to have equal status in settings such as the workplace and education. I thus reasoned that these modern movements may have influenced the *granthis* and *sewadars* to continue this wave of gender equality in the religious place too, allowing male and female adherents to mix, thus bringing Sikh practice into 'harmony' with modern feminist movements (Singh: 1993: 257). However, this may have been due to the sheer volume of people on a day as busy as Diwali – I estimated over two hundred people in the prayer hall alone – and the rules may not have been so lax on a non-festival day.

Although I intended to observe rather than participate (participation may have compelled me to focus on my experiences rather than those of the people around me), I felt obliged to pay respects to the Guru Granth Sahib; it is essential in Sikh practice and I feared causing offence by not participating. I placed money in the gold tray before the *palki* and bowed to the text before sitting on the floor on the left side of the hall. People placed money, flowers, milk and chocolate in front of the *palki*, showing their respect for the Guru Granth Sahib.

Similarly, although several paintings by Sikh painter Balvinder Singh hung in the foyer (one depicted Guru Gobind Singh ordaining the first *Khalsa* Sikhs), the prayer hall was bare of images, for the Guru Granth Sahib should be the main focus.

My observations challenged normative models in my background reading. For instance, Cole states that '[m]en and women sit separate from one another [...] for reasons of decorum' in the prayer hall (Cole: 2004: 9). Although this was generally true, I noticed gender mixing: several males sat with females on the "female" side of the hall, and several female children sat with male relatives on the "male" side of the hall. This mixing can be explained through the Mool Mantar, a fundamental Sikh text which begins, 'Ik Oankar', meaning 'one creation' (Shackle and Mandair: 2005: xxvi). 'God sees no difference between male and female form', eliciting belief in gender equality (Jhutti-Johal 2011: 28). Likewise, I observed a roughly even split of males and females in the congregation. Although it may have been coincidental, I wondered whether Sikhism's advocacy of gender equality could be a reason as to why the gurdwara attracted a substantial, and fairly equal, amount of both men and women.

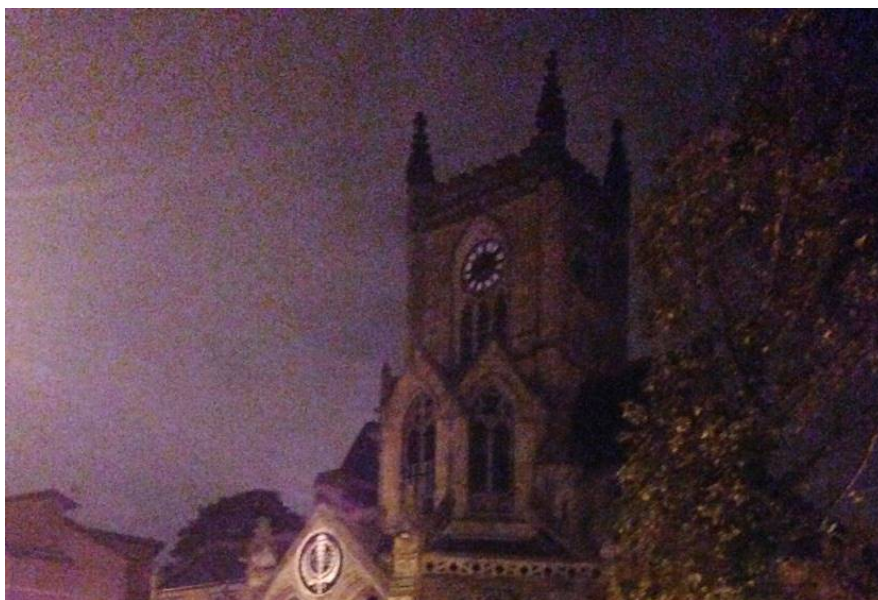
Meanwhile, four men (*ragis*) sang and played instruments such as hand-drums and harmonicas, and gave short speeches in Punjabi. Being unfamiliar with Punjabi, I asked someone what was being said and was surprised to be told that they were discussing YouTube and WhatsApp. Where I expected a formal, traditional religious service, the *sangat* were being encouraged to use contemporary technology to connect with other Sikhs across the globe. Traditions often 'alter and change as people [...] remake their lives in new settings' (McLoughlin: 2009: 558), and I reasoned that *diwan* in diaspora has a stronger focus on phenomena such as communication via the internet in order for diasporic Sikhs to maintain a link with their motherland: they are encouraged to use YouTube and WhatsApp to keep the link between new settings and old settings alive.

As *diwan* was given exclusively by males, I expected only females to serve *langar*. Actually, the kitchen was run by males and females of roughly equal number; women cooked the food and men served it. The night was too busy to conduct fully structured interviews, so I decided to learn more about this set-up by chatting with whoever I could, asking unstructured, informal questions. I asked someone if the *langar* set-up was usual, and was told that there are no norms or rules: anyone, male or female, can cook and serve *langar*. Men and women thus play equal roles, for *seva* (service to the community, often enacted by serving *langar*) is not gender specific. This idea was displayed on an orange banner above the entrance to the *langar* hall which read: 'May Thy name prevail and may the whole human race prosper by Thy grace'. Its concern was not on separating males and females, but on the 'whole human race' as one. After *langar*, men and women mingled again during the firework display.

Woodhead proposes three routes women take to engage with religion, the third consisting of women who juggle domesticity with work; religion helps them reconcile the double commitments of work and home (Woodhead: 2008: 188). In relation to this, a notice board in the gurdwara's foyer contained a flyer for Nari Ekta, an organisation offering I.T. and employability classes. Upon further research, I found that Nari Ekta 'provides opportunities by giving the necessary vocational knowledge, skills and training to unemployed Asian women' (Nari Ekta). In light of Woodhead's theory, it can be seen that Sikhism valorises family life and motherhood as 'a sanctified life' (Jhutti-Johal: 2011: 32) whilst also repudiating the subordination of women evident at the time of the Gurus. Thus, Nari Ekta allows Sikh women to nurture a family, and also become influential, productive members of society: one case study on their website regards an Asian woman who started her own business in partnership with her husband.

Despite this dedication to empowering Sikh women and the fact that 'there is no official teaching that debars women from becoming *granthis*' (Geaves: 2007: 332), I did not see any

female representatives of the gurdwara other than those making *langar*. I wondered whether this was the gurdwara's reluctance to employ females in chief roles, or the reluctance of Sikh females to apply for chief roles. I have since discovered that female positions of power are rarely implemented in gurdwaras because of Sikhism's 'purity/impurity' focus (Geaves: 2007: 332): if a female *granthi* began menstruation whilst reading the Guru Granth Sahib, it would be defiled. Consequently, Sikh 'women were discouraged or even prevented from taking such roles, even though the teachings of the religion permitted it' (Geaves: 2007: 332): with regards to religion and gender, there is often a disjunction between scripture and practice.



Appendix 1: The original site of gudwara, a former Congregational Baptist church. The building still stands and the *khanda* symbol is clearly visible above the porch.

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