**FIELDWORK REPORT**

My fieldwork is based on a visit made to the Leeds Hindu Mandir, located on Alexandra Road, Hyde Park on March 4th 2017.

My desire to research Hinduism was realized in studying for a module on South Asian religions, in which Hinduism was the first topic. Coming from an entirely secular background as well as having studied religion on a largely Western, Judeo-Christian based curriculum prior to university, my awareness of the religion was limited. Much of my understanding was informed by popular iconography and a vague awareness of some Hindu ceremonies and celebrations. In learning some of the key themes and beliefs I was instantly interested, and realized how centralized my conception of religion was on monotheistic, Abrahamic traditions. I hoped that a minimally preconceived understanding of the religion would prove advantageous in my efforts to make objective observations.

I was concerned with the question of what role Hinduism plays in governing the lives of its followers in a specifically British context, given its ‘inextricable roots in the social system and land of India’ (Vertovec, 2000, p.3). Prior to my research on the religion I aimed to clarify in what sense Hinduism is different from popular British religions in this regard, as much of the popular understanding revolves around India’s caste system, and how Hinduism governs what many would consider to be non-religious aspects of life. This emphasis initially directed my observations over the spiritual side of the ceremony I observed; I wondered how the creation of religious communities took place in diaspora given how rooted the tradition is the culture of a different country.

Contrary to the absence of Hinduism in my religious education, census data research from 2011 points out that it follows Islam as the 2nd largest ‘minority religious group’ in Britain, with 1.5% of the population (817,000) identified as Hindu (ons.gov.uk). Within Leeds specifically, 0.9% of the population were reported to self-identify as Hindu (Localstats.co.uk) and planning for the development of the Mandir began in the 1960s following a large influx of the Gujuarti population in the Hyde Park area (Knott, 1986). In the early stages of Hindu settlement, domestic spaces served as places of worship and religious activity, prior to the establishment of temples and a well-connected community. The movement of Hindu worship from private into public spheres was catalyzed by a range of factors; ‘as they gained in wealth, as their social networks were extended and strengthened, and as they grew in experience and confidence in […] making use of public resources’ (Vertovec, 2000, p.128). This was certainly the case in the Leeds Mandir; Knott credits its conception to ‘the formation of a society to celebrate Indian culture and religion’ in 1966 (Knott, 1994, p.61), The Hindu Cultural Society, which eventually formed the trust organization that would fund the institution of the temple.

The first challenge in conducting my fieldwork was finding a way to contact the temple in order to arrange a visit. Some relatively extensive internet research suggested that this might prove difficult- the temple has a limited internet presence, and the official webpage provided by google maps seemed to be no longer active. This meant no email address to contact, and after a few attempts at calling the Mandir’s phone number it became clear that this was also redundant. This was a disheartening start to the process, and raised questions for me about the functionality of the Mandir. I had assumed that having a public place to promote information about upcoming events would be a fundamental part of the organization. As a result of this we went straight to the Mandir to ask in person whether doing fieldwork there would be possible, which felt relatively daunting having had no contact beforehand. There was an immediate sense on arrival however, that my presence was welcome. The man running the reception-like area warmly assured us that the temple would be happy for us to observe or even take part in a ceremony, providing me with a paper program detailing events running throughout the year. This brief preliminary visit instantly helped me gain a greater understanding of the temple’s leadership. It was difficult to identify one clear authority figure, and behind the desk a casual set up of 2 or 3 people saw to different small tasks. Authority roles seemed dispersed amongst a wide spread of members, creating the sense that the Mandir is operated by a close community, as well as serving one. The lack of updated information on the internet seemed to align with this absence of a clear centralized authority, and suggested an emphasis on personal interactions and community.

Encouraged by the kindness I met at the Mandir, I organized an official visit for the next week; at an event detailed in the program named ‘Mata di Chownki’, which I eventually understood to be a mistranslation of the ‘Mata Ki Chowki’ ceremony. Many translations and phrases I have encountered in my research seem to have various alternate spellings due to a variety in dialects. Language barriers later proved to be a significant methodological issue in my research. I noted down much of the information provided on my visit in order to compound with research later, only to realize that alternate spellings and dialectic differences would complicate (or in some cases make impossible) the process of internet searching certain terms. Engaging in further and more detailed questioning might have clarified these terms, or at least provided further information with which I could research.

My main methodological concern was in the question of the role I played as an observer, given that my own circumstance put me in the position of a complete ‘outsider’ to the religion. For a tradition so bound up in culture and community, that ‘challenge[s] our notion of what a religion really is’ (Knott, 1998, preface), the insider vs. outsider question seemed particularly significant; I questioned the ability with which I could interpret the actions of participants with any authority. Knott makes reference to this methodological problem and the two alternate perspectives, drawing a distinction between the ‘two groups [..] *scholars* and *devotees*’ (Knott, p.2, 1998). I felt particularly invasive taking notes and observing people in such a personal space, where 1st generation immigrants had struggled to build and maintain a close community. Reading up on insider/outsider perspectives after my fieldwork, I wondered whether it would have been more beneficial to have engaged in participant observation over my ‘complete observer’ (Knott, 2005, p.246) approach. Tim May presents suggests that the most successful way of engaging with a non-monolithic social group is to, ‘become part of their lives in order to understand how it changes; we must […] record our experiences of those transformations’ (May, 1993, p.163).

The specificity of this methodology to ‘dynamic and changing’ (May, 1993, p.163) communities felt particularly relevant to the Mandir. Intergenerational differences I observed seemed to signal a changing community, and perhaps by interviewing or making some kind of personal bond with members I could have more accurately analyzed differences in their attitudes. I noted throughout the ceremony that much of the leadership, initiation of chants and offerings, were the responsibility of elder members. In addition, I observed differences in etiquette across generations; men and women sat on opposite sides of the temple for example, with women congregated on the left, and men on the right. My research suggested that there is no hard rule enforcing this and that it is not a custom of all temples, yet the majority of the elderly demographic adhered to this gender segregated model. The few anomalies to this pattern were far younger, and I made a similar observation in the way that members were dressed. Generally, the female side of the room were clothed in brightly coloured saris, whilst the men were in distinctly western, non-distinct clothing. I found this to be an interesting contrast, as it deemed women responsible for outwardly projecting their religion into public spaces. Again, the few exceptions to this rule were a younger generation of women, whose attire expressed a more westernized influence. These differences in etiquette seemed a demonstration of how living in diaspora effected younger generations, born into a different environment to their parents.

One point of interest for me was the aesthetics of the temple itself; tucked away in the familiar, residential area of Hyde Park it felt almost surreal to see such a distinctly South Asian structure, scaled down and in direct contrast with the traditionally British architecture of the cultural centre on the property. The proximity of these sacred and profane spaces seemed illustrative of the fine line between culture and religion, which I saw grappled with many other times during my visit. Kim Knott notes these differences in her Community Religions Project, and argues ‘these secondary social and cultural activities […] are only able to take place in the temple because it is first and foremost a religious centre’ (Knott, 1994, p.71). The fact of the Indian architecture serves as a reminder of the aforementioned ‘inextricable’ (Vertovec, 2000, p.3) connection between Hinduism and the subcontinent, creating the sense that the aesthetic choice is a deliberate attempt to re-create or transport the traditional ‘home’ of Hinduism to Leeds. Later research informed me that the Spring Grove Estate in which the Mandir is contained had been bought from the Salvation Army in the late 1960s (Knott, 1994, p. 62), illustrating Leeds’s process of change and transformation into a multi-faith city.

My visit raised questions for me about the process of creating communities in diaspora. Entering the temple, I noted a familial atmosphere in which members at the outset seemed concerned with conversing and affectionately greeting one another to begin with. Having arrived at the very start of the ceremony, it was interesting to note the demographic of members as they arrived. For the first half hour an overwhelming majority of elderly members occupied seats as a younger congregation gradually filled the room, and the assembly remained largely female throughout. Each person greeted their peers in an almost ritualistic manner, assisting elders in finding somewhere to sit or taking coats and bags. There was a definite sense that many of the congregation were relatives or close family friends and that the first hour of the ceremony was scheduled with this in mind; dedicated to the social function of the space. As a result of this intensely personal atmosphere, it was difficult not to feel intrusive or out of place, but my presence at no point seemed surprising to others. This is perhaps a result of the Mandir being the subject of many research projects, student based or otherwise. A man seated next to me expressed interest in what bought us to the temple, and began to tell us about the many years he had worked building a strong Hindu community in Leeds, after having worked on the Bradford Mandir committee. He mentioned many fundraisers which take place to allow costly renovations which aimed to convince a wider spread of Hindu families to take their religious lives from the home and into the public community. Creating and sustaining the community of the temple, he said, was his main concern; he admitted that for him this took precedence over the Mandir’s function as a religious space. I was surprised by this, and found that it served to illustrate Knott’s argument that Hinduism ‘extends beyond culture into other spheres- into the social structure and social life of Hindus’ (Knott, 1998, preface). It struck me that many elderly members who had immigrated and been present for the temple’s establishment must have had similar priorities, not for lack of spirituality but simply in order to create a space where their children were not removed from their own experience.

Ultimately, my visit to the Mandir was hugely significant in shaping my understanding Hinduism as both a religion and a way of life; it showed me how strong communities can be built around a religion in order to maintain an identity in diaspora. Some methodological differences might have resulted in more astute observations; immersing myself more completely into the ceremony for example, or engaging in conversation with more members of the congregation.

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