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## ISSUES IN LOCATING HINDUS' SACRED SPACE

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## Issues in Locating UK Hindus' Sacred Space

### **Abstract**

On the basis of fieldwork in the UK, and in the context of studies of temples in the Hindu diaspora, this article examines the ways in which the sacred is located in Hindus' homes, as well as in public places of worship. Attention is drawn to scholars' concentration on these public places of worship and identification of stages in the development of temples, and to the role of the temple as a resource and a site for negotiation involving both Hindus and non-Hindus. The contested character of the 'sacred' and the increasingly virtual dimension of 'space' are also addressed.

### **1. Introduction: contexts**

Mention of Hindus' sacred space tends to conjure up pictures of Hindu temples. This article's challenges to this are (a) an emphasis on the greater centrality to many Hindus' lives of worship spaces in the home and (b) some attention to the diversity masked by the label 'Hindu' and the implicit in 'space'.

This article's focus is the UK's Hindu *mandirs* (temples) and, in particular, temples in the sense of places of worship that are open to the public. After indicating my connection to the subject, and emphasising the heterogeneity of 'Hinduism', I mention published studies of temples outside India. After this, glimpses of Hindus' domestic *mandirs*, private 'sacred space', introduce a consideration of the other arenas in which British Hindus engage in devotional activity and the question 'why then build temples?' This leads into analysis of temples as sites of negotiation, particularly between Hindu constituencies on the one hand and with non-Hindu institutions on the other. As the article shows, negotiation is characteristic of each of the stages which academic observers have identified in the formation of Hindu communities in the diaspora. I suggest that discussion of Hindus' sacred space in the

twenty-first century requires a look at other burgeoning interfaces between Hindu groups and with society at large, as well as taking account of virtual devotional sites. Finally the concept of Hindu sacred space is deconstructed and changes in the *mandir*'s role are considered.

a) autobiographical

My apprenticeship in ethnographic research commends the transparency of acknowledging how I as author connect with what I am reporting. My experiences include visiting temples in India (1974 to 1993) and ethnographic study of UK Hindu communities (1984 to 1996), especially in the West Midlands.<sup>1</sup> The writing of this chapter coincides with my (Punjabi Hindu) husband's involvement in planning meetings as the Hindu Temple Society, Coventry moves from inadequate premises to a purpose-built temple.<sup>2</sup>

My published research includes accounts of 8 to 13 year old Punjabi and Gujarati Hindus' experience of their family's devotions in the domestic shrine<sup>3</sup> and in public *mandirs* and a discussion of the role of the temple (and its relation to families' domestic shrines) in the identity-construction of the Valmiki community, a caste (*zat*)-specific Punjabi community,<sup>4</sup> who have an uneasy relationship with the label 'Hindu'.<sup>5</sup>

b) deconstructing 'religion'

Reference above to Valmikis and to Gujarati and Punjabi Hindus already points to the danger of treating 'Hinduism' as homogeneous or essentialised. Here Robert Jackson's three-tier model of 'religions' is helpful in introducing 'membership groups',<sup>6</sup> such as denominations and ethnic groups, as a tier between Wilfred

Cantwell Smith's 'individual of faith' and his 'cumulative tradition'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hindus' sacred space is likely to need contextualising and decoding not only in terms of 'Hinduness' but also in terms of the ethnicity (Gujarati, Punjabi etc.) of those involved and their *sampradaya*. By one scholarly definition a *sampradaya* is: 'a tradition focused on a deity, often regional in character, into which a disciple is initiated by a guru. Furthermore, each guru is seen to be within a line of gurus...originating with the founding father'.<sup>8</sup> Examples of well-established *sampradayas* in the UK include the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)<sup>9</sup> and 'the Swaminarayan religion'.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand Hindu organisations and religious buildings in the UK, and the Hindu tradition as a whole, one must pay attention to the significant role of *sampradayas*.<sup>11</sup>

### c) studies of diaspora temples

Discussion of UK Hindus' sacred space, focusing as it mainly will on temples, can be set in the context of earlier accounts of the evolution of diasporic Hindu communities. Studies have focused on temples in Asia,<sup>12</sup> Africa, in particular the frequently caste-based temples of East Africa<sup>13</sup> and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century temples of Natal, South Africa;<sup>14</sup> and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century burgeoning of temples in North America.<sup>15</sup> Raymond Brady Williams situates the establishment of temples in the USA in his five-stage model of religious organizations' 'adaptive strategies' for 'survival in a new cultural ecosystem',<sup>16</sup> and identifies the ecumenical aspect of adaptation, with different groups worshipping together as in Dallas temple.<sup>17</sup>

## **2. Hindu families' sacred space**

However, as Hindu sacred space is not confined to public places of worship, home shrines too figure in both academic reports and twentieth century fiction<sup>18</sup> and their importance must not be overlooked.

a) Home shrines

Fieldwork among Hindus in Coventry revealed shrines, upstairs or downstairs, on a shelf, in a cupboard, or (less often) occupying a whole room. In every home there were 'photos', the usual way of referring to the devotional pictures, which are often brightly-coloured calendar pictures of gods and goddesses. The time that individual adults or children spent in a devotional way varied and might involve only 'doing *jay*' (pausing with the hands together pointing upwards), lighting an incense stick in front of a picture or repeating words such as '*om namah shivai*' (an invocation of Lord Shiva).

The childhood memories of young Hindus all over the UK include being part of, or on the threshold of, older relatives' worship. So, when asked what she would most miss if ever she were to live in a non-Hindu household, eleven-year-old 'Mridula' (from an East African Gujarati family) replied: 'At home my gran would always have a bath and go into her room and pray and all that. I'd miss hearing all the songs she'd be singing... I just sit there outside the door'.<sup>19</sup> Mridula explained that, if she showered, she could sit in Ba's (her grandmother's) room and 'help her out'. My fieldnotes recall: 'Ba would sit cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom in front of a wall unit. By her was a low oil stove on which she heated milk for Krishna. The lowest left hand section of the unit housed the image of Krishna whom she lifted tenderly from between the bedclothes in a small sewing basket which rested on an eight inch long bed'.<sup>20</sup>

As a Pushtimargi<sup>21</sup> Ba's daily *seva* (service) to Lord Krishna included offering him milk and almonds, praying soundlessly on her rosary, bathing Krishna, dressing and adorning him, giving him a full *thali* (steel tray) of food, singing an *arati* song (hymn while circling light before the deity) to the Goddess Yamuna and finally sharing with Mridula and others Krishna's *prashad*, the food that he had graciously left.

To give another example of domestic sacred space: Ritu and Deepak's Punjabi Hindu family participated together in fifteen minutes' worship at about seven o'clock in the evening.

They would squeeze into a small upstairs room in which the shrine, an oblong, open-fronted plywood box, was fixed to the wall facing the door. Sitting cross-legged on the floor parents and children sang together to the accompaniment of Ritu's harmonium and Deepak's *dholki* [drum]... Deepak and Ritu took their turn at standing up and moving a *thali* in front of the shrine, and ringing the handbell vigorously as they all sang in joyful and rhythmic unison.<sup>22</sup>

In Arun's home (East African Gujarati) the shrine was a glass cabinet in the corner of the living room. In a 'diary' for me he reported that: 'The top of the cabinet is covered with red material and on the material there are photos of Laxmi, Radha Krishna, Ambaji and Nine Durgas, and a small photo of Rama, Hanuman and Sita. In the top corner of the shrine is a statue of Lord Krishna'.<sup>23</sup> Arun went on to list the numerous items on each shelf, including two copper pots filled with water from the Ganges and Yamuna, photographs of saints and books – the *Devi Bhagavat* (scripture glorifying the Goddess) and a *bhajan* (hymn) book.

As these excerpts show, Hindus' domestic shrines are diverse and so too is the content and extent of religious activity that is centred on them.

b) satsangs

Private houses were also the setting for *satsangs*, devotional gatherings of (at least mainly) women, often on a weekly basis. Arun's mother attended weekly women's *satsangs*. Weekly *satsangs* took place in Deepak's and Ritu's home in the form of gatherings of ISKCON (Hare Krishna) devotees. Mridula's grandmother, too, periodically hosted a *satsang* in her house. About fifteen women would sit on the floor, singing unaccompanied from their *bhajan* books. They might dance circle dances in praise of Krishna, they performed *arati* in front of Yamuna (whose face would be screened by a shawl) and they received a spoonful of Yamuna water, spiced milk, and sometimes a full vegetarian meal. For the month of the riotous Spring festival of Holi proceedings involved banter and laughter, staining each other's clothes with red powder and being showered with popcorn. When one of the Pushtimargis' spiritual leaders visited from India families made particular efforts to come to the house for *darshan* (the blessing of seeing and being seen by the saint).

c) kathas

Arun's family participated in many religious gatherings. Most memorable were the *kathas* (one-man expositions of the Ramayana) by the visiting Gujarati spiritual performer, Morari Bapu. These events filled parks in Leicester and Coventry with wrapt congregations of many thousands.<sup>24</sup> Video recordings of *kathas* would subsequently be played and replayed at home.



#### d) Pilgrimage: home and abroad

Similarly, recordings of relatives' marriages and of pilgrimages to holy sites in India meant that the home was often the site for relatives to relive and share significant religious experiences. Home viewing allowed for vicarious pilgrimage.

For UK Hindus pilgrimage (*tirthyatra*) has become increasingly feasible and popular since the early days of Hindu settlement in Britain. Thus, when introducing primary school pupils to 'special places' in UK faith communities, the religious educationist, Marianne Heathcote-Woodbridge, focuses on pilgrimage to the river Ganges rather than on visiting a UK temple.<sup>25</sup>

In many cases the performance of a rite at a particular site is part of a *vrata* or vow – often undertaken by a woman for the welfare of her husband or child. Holidays to India combine reunion with relatives and 'taking *darshan*' at a holy place. *Darshan* is glimpsing the divine, usually by seeing the eyes of a deity, and being in the presence of the divine - a benedictory exchange of glances.

### **3. UK temples**

#### a) why establish temples?

Since worship at home is so widespread and significant to Hindus and since, increasingly, UK Hindus visit shrines in India or at least do so vicariously through video and dvd, obvious questions are: why establish temples? and why is the scale of temple construction in the UK greater than ever before? What considerations outweigh the considerable cost and effort necessary to establish and maintain temples in the UK?

As Malory Nye learned during his fieldwork in Edinburgh, a temple is supremely ‘a place for our gods’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, to quote Adam Hardy, a specialist in Hindu temple architecture ‘a Hindu temple is first and foremost a house for a god’.<sup>27</sup> Bimal Krishna das [*sic*] introduces the directory of Hindu temples by explaining that a temple is a *devalaya* (God’s abode): ‘They attract the follower to a place that is considered to be the “Kingdom of God” where one can see God, render service to Him, learn about Him and associate with His devotees so as to make the path home, back to Godhead easier’.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas at home Hindus’ devotion focuses on pictures and small 3D images, plus – on certain significant occasions – the *havan* (sacred fire), most Hindus (other than the ‘protestant’ Arya Samaj)<sup>29</sup> have the most profound reverence for *murtis* (images) that have been ritually installed in a detailed *pratishtapan* ceremony. These are regarded as being more actively pervaded by the divine than domestic images are. Consecrated *murtis* draw worshippers for *darshan* and require daily attention – bathing and food offerings – from Brahmin attendants (*pujaris*), and these requirements necessitate temple premises.

The *pujari* provides services to Hindus outside the temple as well, notably by conducting marriages and funerals (even though in India it would be unthinkable for a temple priest to perform funeral rites, as these are regarded as polluting and are the speciality of a distinct hereditary group of ritual specialists). The *pujari* may also be consulted by Hindus seeking astrological guidance, in particular the drawing up and interpreting of the *janm patr* (horoscope for newborn child).

Despite the evident Hindu drive towards setting up temples, there is also a notable ambivalence about attending them. Younger Hindus express concern at the domination of temples by members of an older generation (often in their seventies), who are reluctant to involve younger people as office-bearers, and the unedifying ‘politics’ and factional in-fighting which are particularly apparent when a temple committee is being elected.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, some Hindu organisations (for a number of reasons, and not only economic ones ) dispense with temples. In many cities the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba gather in homes and hired halls. So too do Radhasoamis,<sup>31</sup> Pushtimargis and the Arya Samaj.

#### b) Academic focus on public *mandirs*

However, since the 1970s it has been Hindu temples in the UK that have provided a focus for many scholarly explorations of the UK’s Hindu communities. Robert Jackson outlined the development of the Shree Krishna Temple in Coventry,<sup>32</sup> and Kim Knott focused on temple rituals in Leeds.<sup>33</sup> Malory Nye documented the Hindu temple community in Edinburgh<sup>34</sup> and Steven Vertovec examined the uses of four temples in London: the Radha-Krishna Temple in Balham, Southall’s Vishwa Hindu Kendra and Shri Ram Mandir and the temple of the Caribbean Hindu Temple Society in Brixton.<sup>35</sup> The temple receives attention too, or at least a mention, in studies concerned with other aspects of British Hindu experience – for example in the lives of Coventry’s ‘Hindu children’<sup>36</sup> and London’s Punjabi ‘middle-class migrants’.<sup>37</sup>

Temples’ prominence in academic accounts of Hindus’ experience in the UK reflects not only the increasing physical presence of *mandirs* but also the fact that they

provide a publicly accessible site for fieldwork, possibly requiring less complex negotiation by the researcher than, for example, ethnography conducted in domestic settings.

Statistics on UK temples differ. Weller lists 334 Hindu organizations (136 of them in London)<sup>38</sup> of which the majority are temples, and explains how total accuracy was unattainable.<sup>39</sup> Nye puts the number of temples in the UK at 250<sup>40</sup> and Vertovec subsequently uses the figure of 303 and ‘over 300’,<sup>41</sup> and (quoting Tambs-Lyche<sup>42</sup>) he mentions that the ‘purported’ first UK temple opened in 1967. Two writers from ISKCON offer lower estimates: Rasamandala Das gave the figure of ‘over 150’,<sup>43</sup> and Bimal Krishna das states that the first (short-lived) Hindu temple in Britain opened in ‘late 1920s’ and that by 2004 there were 141 temples.<sup>44</sup> The figure of 109 in 2001 given by two geographers, Ceri Peach and Richard Gale, is also low.<sup>45</sup> They point out that this equates to five thousand Hindus per place of worship as compared to one mosque for every thousand Muslims.

Phases in the establishment of *mandirs* in the UK follow (necessarily with some delay) the stages in UK Hindus’ demographic growth from the small numbers who migrated to Britain before the Second World War to the present 558,000,<sup>46</sup> in third place after Christians and Muslims. The years of substantial migration that began in the 1950s with the arrival of male Hindus from Punjab, were followed by the most significant Hindu migration to the UK, which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s with the arrival and settlement of families from the newly independent countries of East Africa. Most of these families were Gujarati, with much smaller numbers of Punjabi Hindus. More recently, unrest in Sri Lanka resulted in the arrival of Tamil Hindus in

the 1990s. Although professionals, particularly medical professionals, have come to the UK from many other parts of India, notably Bengal, the largest numbers of Hindus are still Gujarati and Punjabi respectively, and UK temples reflect this in their iconography, calendars of festivals, the provenance of their *pujari* (priest) and style of worship.

Observers distinguish the successive phases of adaptation for a migrant community and phases of development of organisations/ institutions. Perceptively and prophetically, David Bowen characterised the phases of evolution of Gujarati Hindu organizations in Bradford as a ‘dialectic between homogeneity and heterogeneity, unity and diversity’<sup>47</sup> which he proceeds to illustrate by reference to seven organizations founded from 1957 to 1975. For das the sequence includes the conversion of community centres and redundant church buildings, a ‘period of great struggle to establish themselves’, and – most recently – the construction of purpose-built temples.<sup>48</sup> The history of the Shree Krishna Temple, Coventry related by Jackson, plots the evolution from 1964 when ‘a group of Gujaratis began to meet regularly for worship in each other’s homes’<sup>49</sup> to an award-winning temple-cum-community centre.<sup>50</sup> In many cases, the initial stage was a home shrine. One example of a temple which receives many visitors but which is still a domestic shrine, though in an outbuilding, is Guru Kripa Kshetra, a South Indian temple in the village of Middleton Stoney near Oxford.<sup>51</sup>

With regard to the Valmiki community, with its pre-migration history of oppression, the construction of a temple, in Coventry for example, meant the creation of a social centre, the demarcation of a safe space from others’ prejudice, and an assertion of a

community's increasingly proud identity.<sup>52</sup> Intrinsic to this is the temple's distinctive focus and the prominence of distinctive iconography and symbol.

Currently the construction of purpose-built temples increasingly includes temples designed consistently with the tradition of Indian sacred architecture. These include BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir which opened in Neasden, London in 1995 and (in Tamil style) the Shri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple of UK at Tividale in the West Midlands. In Wembley (London) and West Bromwich (West Midlands) too construction is underway. All these *mandirs* involve skilled craftsmen from India. In the case of the Swaminarayan temple the marble and limestone structure was assembled like a giant three dimensional jigsaw. It is the commitment and increasing wealth of the UK Hindu community, rather than – as in the case of many UK mosques – overseas benefaction, that allows construction of impressive buildings, and there is also a competitive element as Hindus see the multiplication of architecturally distinctive Islamic and Sikh places of worship.<sup>53</sup>

The present period of construction coincides with a developing interest in shastric (classical Hindu) principles of design. In Hardy's words 'The temple can then be understood not simply as a static microcosm, or image of the universe, but as a dynamic cosmogony, an image of the process of creation'.<sup>54</sup> *Vastu vidya*, ('dwelling knowledge', the art of architectural location and placement) is gaining in popularity as India's counterpart to China's *feng shui*, as is evident in the publicity for *vastu* practitioners on the internet and recent publications on the subject.<sup>55</sup>

b) sites for negotiation

*Mandirs* in the UK repay study too as sites for negotiation between Hindu communities and between Hindus and members and institutions in the wider society.

Scholars have tended to characterise the temple congregations on which they focus as (more or less) specific to a particular community, whether ethnic or ethnic-cum-caste. Here 'ethnic' can refer to Indian regional roots, for example the Gujaratis studied in Coventry by Jackson<sup>56</sup> and in Bradford by Bowen,<sup>57</sup> or to a prior place of settlement outside India, such as the Caribbean Hindu case.<sup>58</sup> In some instances an ethnically specific temple community consists of only one caste, or a very small number of castes, especially if the *sampradaya* which it serves has a caste-specific following. The Valmiki<sup>59</sup> and some Swaminarayan congregations, for example the Leva Kanbi Patel community in Bolton's Shree Kutch Satsang (Bhuj) Swaminarayan Temple, illustrate this.<sup>60</sup> A number of studies, however, focus on particular temples as sites for negotiating these boundaries and differences, for example the 'Leeds temple'<sup>61</sup> and the Edinburgh Hindu Mandir and Sanskritic Kendra.<sup>62</sup>

It is noteworthy that the widely used term '*sanatana*' (in Sanskrit) and '*sanatan*' (in Hindi), prefixed to both 'Hindu' and '*mandir*', often carries the sense of 'catholic' or – to use Williams's term - 'ecumenical'.<sup>63</sup> In other words *sanatan* temples are non-sectarian and not intentionally specific to, or dominated by, Hindus from particular caste or regional backgrounds, even when they are so in practice.

The planning, establishing and maintenance of Hindu temples impacts on non-Hindu society and involves negotiation with individuals and institution. As Peach and Gale outline, 'British town planning and zoning controls are universal and strictly applied'.<sup>64</sup> They present the 'interaction between minority faith groups and the British

planning process as a four-stage cycle' in the final phase of which 'planners and politicians grasped the advantage of a spectacle in reviving the image of a city'.<sup>65</sup>

When the BAPS (a prominent Swaminarayan group whose full name is Bochasan Akshar Purushottam Sanstha) sought planning permission for a temple on a 30-acre site in Harrow it was disappointed. Hence the relocation, without architectural compromise, to the more downmarket, urban site in Neasden.

ISKCON, by contrast, had not needed to seek planning permission for construction of their temple, as Bhaktivedanta Manor near Watford had been gifted to them by the Beatle, George Harrison. However, the volume of Hindu visitors aroused local opposition and resulted in a protracted struggle with Hertsmere Council, involving a 'long drawn legal battle to remain open'.<sup>66</sup> This was because a 'theological college' had become Britain's most popular site for Hindu pilgrimage, drawing thousands of Hindus at the Janmashtami festival. Malory Nye documents the dispute and eventual legal victory for ISKCON. He locates their struggle for 'the right to freedom for worship in a multicultural society' within British multiculturalism.<sup>67</sup>

Less public and acrimonious negotiation takes place between temple committees and local authorities in order to obtain matching grants for the construction of temples which are also 'community centres'. One example is the Shree Krishna Temple, Coventry.<sup>68</sup>

UK temples are not community centres in name only. Many provide for the elderly, and run language classes in Hindi, Gujarati or other community languages.<sup>69</sup> The premises incorporate sports facilities and increasingly temples serve a wider than Hindu community. For local and national politicians, too, temples provide a platform to affirm their commitment to ethnic and religious minorities and to make contact



with potential voters. For example, in April 2005 the Labour candidate for the constituency addressed the congregation at one Coventry temple during the Ramnavami festival (celebration of the birth of Lord Rama). When Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh made their first visit to a Hindu temple in the UK (in fact the Highgatehill Murugan Temple in Archway, North London) the visit was ‘intended to show the inclusive nature of the monarchy and the Queen’s respect for all religions in Britain’.<sup>70</sup> Local temple management committees co-operate with outside agencies in matters of health, welcoming speakers on illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes which have an unusually high incidence among Britain’s South Asian population.

Once established, *mandirs* become resources for multi-faith religious education, which is a statutory element of the school curriculum. Since the passing of the Education Reform Act in 1988, Hinduism has, by law, been one of the six faith traditions represented in the religious education curriculum of schools in England and Wales, in accordance with Locally Agreed Syllabuses.<sup>71</sup> Temples host visits by parties of school children.

Exceptionally, the particular attractiveness to schools of two *mandirs*, ISKCON’s Bhaktivedanta Manor and the Swaminarayan temple in Neasden, have precipitated their development of educational resources for schools. In the former case nearly twenty years elapsed between the Manor being purchased in 1973 (and the arrival of the first school groups) and the establishment of ISKCON Education Services in 1990.<sup>72</sup> By contrast the BAPS schools programme started in 1995, the same year as the temple opened.<sup>73</sup> Both temples have attained a national presence and significance. To a unique degree among the UK’s temples the Swaminarayan temple in Neasden

attracts local and international tourists and its publicity leaflet proclaims it ‘a London landmark’, quoting ‘National Geographic (Sept 2000)’

During the latter decades of the twentieth century *mandirs* have also responded to the interest (especially in certain parts of the Christian church) in developing inter-faith understanding and co-operation. Inter-faith organisations and initiatives are supported by the work of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, which has published guidance on ‘visiting places of worship’ including temples.<sup>74</sup> Temple committees have reacted to the increasing volume of visits by school and church-related groups with conspicuous hospitality, providing whenever possible refreshment for the visitors and a community member who would field questions.

c) National Council of Hindu Temples

The National Council of Hindu Temples UK (NCHT UK), an umbrella organisation, was set up in 1978 with the stated aims to promote Hindu traditions, maintain uniformity among Hindu temples, and to advise and inform.<sup>75</sup> So, for example, the NCHT was consulted as a ‘stakeholder’ over the labelling of food products as vegetarian. When the Home Office issued a Directive in 2004 on the required standards of written English for priests entering the UK, Hindu temple committees realised that it would be impossible for many suitable *pujaris* (priests) to obtain visas to work in the UK. The NCHT entered into discussion with the Home Office, explaining why Hindu priests did not need proficiency in English at the proposed level: a Hindu priest’s function differs from an imam’s or a Christian priest’s, as his function is performing worship and related rituals in the temple which requires proficiency in Sanskrit rather than in English.<sup>76</sup> The NCHT pointed out that – in the

case of priests in Tamil temples especially – these skills come from training in religious institutions which do not instruct their students in English. If forced to comply with the Directive, South Indian temples could not employ priests with the expertise required by their role.

#### **4. Hindu sacred space: a reflection**

##### **a) What is ‘Hindu’**

Britain’s *mandirs* include many that are *sanatan*, with *murtis* (statues) and iconography representing a range of deities, notably Shiva, Vishnu and Mataji (the mother goddess) and with devotees of several ethnic backgrounds. Other *mandirs* are specific to a *sampradaya*, examples being the Baba Balaknath temples in Coventry and Wolverhampton and the Jalaram Bapa temple in Leicester as well as ISKCON and Swaminarayan temples.

In every case the temple is evocatively Indian. Whether or not the architecture is South Asian the *murtis* are likely to have been crafted in India (in Jaipur, Rajasthan, for example), and most *pujaris* are recruited from India. The worship and socialisation conform to Indian norms. Devotees who comfortably use English in other domains of their life are likely in the *mandir* to communicate in an Indian mother-tongue. The vegetarian food that is cooked and served on the premises will be traditional Indian regional dishes rather than European-style lacto-vegetarian and vegan dishes. The water which devotees receive from a traditional Indian spoon may well contain *gangajal*, water from the river Ganges.

Over thirty years ago one religious educationist observed: ‘The complex religious system known as Hinduism is almost exclusively limited to India and so bound up with the Indian environment and culture that it is almost impossible for it to be taken

abroad'.<sup>77</sup> To some extent the *mandir* provides a public space that is an extension of India.

b) the 'sacred'

The tie between Hindus and India a century ago was primarily the need to avoid the pollution (and lack of provision for maintaining purity) in the world outside. The dilemma of Madho Singh, Maharaja of Jaipur, is nicely described by Richard Burghart – he could travel to Great Britain for the coronation of Edward VII (a potentially polluting journey to a polluting location), 'but only on condition that he did not leave India'.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps there is an analogy between the maharaja's ritually pure boat and supply of Ganges water and (for less princely Hindus) the growing numbers of temples.

But one must not uncritically equate the Hindu emphasis on what is *pavitra* or *shuddh* (pure) with much contemporary western usage of the 'sacred'. The obligation to maintain purity is both more extensive (not only temples but also kitchens should be *shuddh*) and more markedly exclusionary. So, traditionally, many Hindu women would during menstruation and following childbirth avoid cooking and worship at the domestic *mandir* as well as entering a temple.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile social change, negotiation and pragmatism redefine what is and is not acceptable in *pavitra* space. In the UK Hindus nowadays routinely go straight to the temple from the committal service in the crematorium, despite the fact that according to the rules of *sutakpatak* (state of pollution following death and birth) family members are in mourning for ten days and should not enter a temple, and regardless

of the fact that all who attend a cremation should bath and change their clothes before entering a temple. This departure from Hindu norms is attributed to the influence of Sikh practice in the UK. The priest utters a mantra and sprinkles water over the congregation in order to render the polluted pure. Purity and pollution too may be negotiable.

Terence Thomas has usefully challenged what he calls 'a rash' of 'the sacred' in the contemporary study of religions.<sup>80</sup> He argues that it is an inherently theological term, unsuited to a secular study of religions in a post-Enlightenment age. Moreover, by applying this adjective to the religions of 'Others' scholars are exercising 'a subtle form of theological imperialism' of an unSaidian sort. Others advocate a decoupling of 'sacred' from 'religious'.<sup>81</sup> But, as the above discussion suggests, 'sacred' fits comfortably enough with Hindus' sense of a special place and the purity code observed (even if pragmatically) in Hindu *mandirs*.

### c) What is space?

In her novel *Amritvela* Leena Dhingra's character, Meera, concludes her observation of her elderly relative's devotions with the reflection that: 'In India, private spaces are often mental spaces, and as long as I watch contained within myself and am not projecting a mental question, there will be no intrusion, no interruption, and our respective privacies will be maintained'.<sup>82</sup>

A distinction is suggested between a need for actual physical space, or at least privacy, in order to worship and a social conditioning that does away with this need in India. The extent to which a capacity for unselfconscious individual devotion in the presence of others continues in, for example, the UK and in UK-born generations, remains to be seen.

Like ‘sacred’ the word ‘space’ demands attention in a chapter that has primarily concentrated on *mandirs*, domestic and public, and on religious activities in other locations – in physical spaces. Certainly, as noted earlier, modern media, blur the distinctions between often geographically distant sacred and Hindus’ domestic space. In addition to the videos of *kathas* and pilgrimage, Hindus view sacred soaps which bring the Ramayana and Mahabharata acceptably to all generations in the living room and evoke responses of worship,<sup>83</sup> and for some the technology confers on tradition an extra authority.<sup>84</sup>

Increasingly, too, Hindus’ sacred space is virtual space. A google search on 30 April 2005 for ‘online puja’ scored about 173,000 hits. Sites fell into two categories: first, those offering online *puja* whereby the specified deity appears on the screen, together with instructions and the devotee at the keyboard clicks on the bell, incense sticks etc. [www.dfwhindutemple.org/online\\_puja.htm](http://www.dfwhindutemple.org/online_puja.htm) was one of the more basic. A visit to [www.rudraksha-ratna.com/laxmipuja.htm](http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/laxmipuja.htm) allowed the devotee to ring an audible virtual bell as the singing of the appropriate verses comes through the speakers. Second, many sites, such as [www.geocities.com/kaalighat/](http://www.geocities.com/kaalighat/) offered the devotee facilities for ordering worship on his/her behalf in designated temples in India.

A special report summarises the significance of this development in terms of ‘a global Hindu identity’, ‘cyberdarshan’ and ‘recreat[ing] sacred geography in cyberspace’.<sup>85</sup> As an increasing number of devotional sites are springing up the internet is transforming the way Hinduism is practised in India and abroad. While Hinduism’s roots are ancient, the web is providing a new platform to unite a diaspora, relay a sacred image and go on pilgrimage from the comfort of a home computer. The author points to a concomitant shift in authority associated with sacred space: ‘While pundits

and priests transmitted religious identity in the past, software engineers and computer programmers are responsible for most of today's devotional sites'.<sup>86</sup>

d) community

It is sometimes assumed that Hindu temples in the UK are increasingly doubling up as community centres. The concept of UK temples as community centre also calls for discussion, in view of the fluidity of the concept of 'community' and particularly with Knott's call for 'community' to be decoupled from 'locality'.<sup>87</sup> Earlier Vertovec had challenged the equation of temple and community centre by demonstrating the divergent trends at work, and the fact that while some temples cater for particular communities others continue to function in a more 'traditional' way.<sup>88</sup>

e) Interpenetration/ fuzzy boundaries

The 'modern plurality' that observers increasingly identify differs from the 'traditional plurality' of societies comprising distinct cultural communities.<sup>89</sup> Modern plurality refers to the increasing extent to which individuals in a globalised world are multiply influenced through first-hand contacts and the media.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps to an unprecedented degree Hindus' (and others') sacred space is not specific to their own tradition, and perhaps, too, the openness of Hindu tradition leaves Hindus particularly open to experiencing at depth – to 'religious experiences' - in sacred spaces regardless of their designation. During interviews with three young Coventrian Hindus I heard individuals testify to a sense of overwhelming peace in, respectively, Coventry cathedral, St Paul's cathedral and a parish church in London.<sup>91</sup>

Bearing in mind that a distinctively Hindu paradigm affirms the importance of temporal rather than (simply) local space, our understanding of Hindus' sacred space

must include *ashrama* (stage of life) as well as *mandirs* (or indeed ashrams in the sense that the same Sanskrit term now has in English). The time-honoured sequence for high-caste males concludes (when a man has grandchildren) with the stages known as *vanaprastha* (literally ‘forest-dwelling’) and *sannyas* (renunciation).<sup>91</sup> The assumption that an individual’s latter years will be spent in increasing detachment from worldly affairs continues to influence many Hindus’ expectations. In the UK diaspora, as well as in India, stages of life and physical locations can be understood as complementary dimensions of sacred space.

## **5. Concluding reflections**

While *mandir* construction in the UK deliberately evokes, emulates and reworks Indian tradition of earlier centuries, this trend itself is evidence of the pace of wider and deeper change. Peach and Gale’s analysis suggests that not only will the exteriors be increasingly spectacular but also their sites will be sanctioned in more up-market locations. *Mandirs* will continue to index demographic and cultural transformations, and to be a point of contact and an educational resource for non-Hindus as well as providing holy ground and community facilities for Hindus.

Apparently contradictory tendencies will continue – a movement towards homogenised, ‘catholic’, ‘ecumenical’ places of worship and the emergence and legitimation of distinctive sub-groups associated with particular regions of India and specific gods and gurus, such as (in the West Midlands) Baba Balak Nath.<sup>92</sup> The establishment of more and more impressive *mandirs* looks set to coincide with the individualisation of religion that the internet facilitates – cyber Hindus in Hindu cybercommunities, while daily devotions at domestic shrines will also continue, but



whether future generations of grandparents continue to graduate towards increasing devotional activity is as yet unclear.

*Mandirs*, in the UK and elsewhere, seem set to have continuing relevance to Hindus at the time of *sanskars* (life-cycle rites), at the very least as an address at which a religious officiant can be contacted to advise on or conduct the appropriate ceremony. Families with little day to day commitment to Hindu patterns of practice expect the *mandir* to be a point of access to local astrological or ritual expertise.

#### Notes

1. For the studies from 1984-9 see Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt, *Hindu Children in Britain* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham, 1993). For the 1995-6 study see Eleanor Nesbitt, *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), especially chapters 2, 6, 7 and 8.
2. For a photograph of the temple see Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt, *Listening to Hindus* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991) p 48.
3. See Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, pp 94-7 and 116-7.
4. The research is reported in Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Religion and identity: the Valmiki community in Coventry', *New Community*, Vol 16, No 2, 1990, pp 261-74, and Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Valmikis in Coventry: the revival and reconstruction of a community' in Roger Ballard (ed) *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain* (London: Hurst, 1994) pp 117-41, and 'My Dad's Hindu, My Mum's Side are Sikhs': *Issues in Religious Identity* (Charlbury: National Foundation for Arts

Education, 1991) and online at

<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/CASAS/pdfpapers/identity.pdf>.

5. I discuss this in Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Valmiki and the label "Hindu"', in Julia Leslie and Matthew Clark (eds), *Creating a Dialogue: Text, Belief and Personal Identity (Proceedings of the Valmiki Studies Workshop 2004)* (London: SOAS, University of London, 2005), pp 25-31.
6. Robert Jackson *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).
7. Wilfred Cantwell Smith *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1978).
8. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p 134.
9. See Kim Knott, *My Sweet Lord: The Hare Krishna Movement* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1986).
10. This is the subject of Raymond Brady Williams, *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
11. See Eleanor Nesbitt, 'The contribution of nurture in a *sampradaya* to young British Hindus' understanding of their tradition' in John Hinnells and Werner Menski (eds) *Religious Reconstruction and the South Asian Diaspora: From Generation to Generation* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming 2006) and Eleanor Nesbitt and Elisabeth Arweck, 'Retrospect and prospect: *sampradayas* and Warwick fieldwork in religions and education', *Fieldwork in Religion*, forthcoming 2006.
12. For example, on Hindu temples in Malaysia see K. Ramanathan, 'The Malaysian Hindu diaspora and their temples', unpublished paper presented at International Conference on the Hindu Diaspora, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada 22-3 August 1997.

13. P. Younger, 'Behind closed doors: the practice of Hinduism in East Africa' in T. S. Rukmani (ed), *Hindu Diaspora Global Perspectives* (Montreal: Chair in Hindu Studies, Concordia University, 1999), pp 367-86.
14. Surendra Bhana, 'Natal's traditional temples in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' in Rukmani, *op cit*, pp 289-306.
15. V. Narayanan, 'Creating South Indian Hindu experience in the United States' in R. B. Williams (ed) *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (Chambersburg: Anima, 1992), pp 147-76; B. H. Wilson and J. Becksvoort, 'Gopurams over Georgia: why here? Why now?' in Rukmani, *op cit*, pp 329-48; R. S. Hanson, 'Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapatidevasthanam of Flushing, New York' in Rukmani, *op cit*, pp 349-66; and M. Linda, 'Constructing identity: Hindu temple production in the United States' in Rukmani, *op cit*, pp 387-96.
16. R. B. Williams, *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*, (Chambersburg: Anima, 1996), p 244.
17. Williams, *op cit*, pp 238-40.
18. See, for example, Leena Dhingra's evocative description in L. Dhingra, *Amritvela*, (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp 97-8.
19. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, p 116.
20. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, p 117.
21. See Maureen Michaelson, 'Domestic Hinduism in a Gujarati trading caste' in Richard Burghart (ed), *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Milieu*, (London: Tavistock, 1987), pp 36-7.
22. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, p 96.
23. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, p 94. 'Laxmi' is a variant of 'Lakshmi', 'Radha Krishna' is used more frequently than 'Radha and Krishna'.

24. See Eleanor Nesbitt, 'The impact of Morari Bapu's *kathas* on Britain's young Hindus', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol 20, No 2, 1999, pp 177-92.
25. Marianne Heathcote-Woodbridge, *Special Places Their Significance for Believers*, (Birmingham: Christian Education Publications, 2002).
26. Malory Nye, *A Place for Our Gods: The Construction of an Edinburgh Hindu Temple Community* (London: Curzon, 1995).
27. Adam Hardy, 'Architecture of Hindu Temples' in Gwyneth Little (ed), *Meeting Hindus* (Leicester: Christians Aware), p 151.
28. Bimal Krishna das (ed), *Directory of Hindu Temples in the UK, 2004-2006* (Leicester: National Council of Hindu Temples [UK], 2004), p 7.
29. For history of the Arya Samaj see K.W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).
30. Similarly, Hindu shopkeepers on the Spanish island of Grand Canary justified their infrequent attendance by saying that the local temples were places for gossip and showing off one's jewellery, and asked what need there is for temples as God is in one's heart (oral communication, December 2004).
31. See e.g. Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Patterns of pluralism: Sikh relations with Radhasoami' in Joseph T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, Willard T. Oxtoby, W. H. McLeod and J. S. Grewal (eds) *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1988), pp 52-69.
32. R. Jackson, 'The Shree Krishna Temple and the Gujarati Hindu community in Coventry' in David Bowen (ed), *Hinduism in England* (Bradford: The Faculty of Contemporary Studies, Bradford College, 1981) pp 61-85.

33. Knott, *op cit* and 'Hindu Temple rituals in Britain: the reinterpretation of tradition' in Richard Burghart (ed), *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Milieu* (London: Tavistock, 1987) pp 157-79.
34. Nye, *op cit* and 'Temple congregations and communities: Hindu constructions in Edinburgh', *New Community*, Vol 19, No 2, 1993, pp 201-15.
35. Steven Vertovec, 'Community and congregation in London Hindu temples: divergent trends', *New Community*, Vol 18, No 2, 1992, pp 251-64 and *The Hindu Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2000).
36. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*.
37. Dhooleka S. Raj, *Where are You From? Middle-Class Migrants in the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
38. Paul Weller, *Religions in the UK 2001-03* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. 2001), pp 297-356
39. Weller, *op cit*, pp 20-1.
40. Nye, *op cit*, (1995), p 1.
41. Vertovec, *op cit* (2000), pp 97 and 129.
42. H. Tambs-Lyche, 'A comparison of Gujarati communities in London and the Midlands', *New Community*, Vol 4, 1975, pp 349-55.
43. Rasamandala Das, *Hindu Temples* (Oxford: Heinemann Library, 1998), p 7.
44. Bimal Krishna das, *op cit*, p 7.
45. Ceri Peach and Richard Gale, 'Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs in the new religious landscape of England', *The Geographical Review*, Vol 93, No 4, 2003, p 479. Peach suggested that the figure, based as it was on official registrations of premises, was an undercount (oral communication, June 2005).

46. Based on UK Census 2001 for England and Wales..
47. David Bowen, 'Gujarati Hindu organizations in Bradford' in Burghart *op cit*, p 15.
48. Bimal Krishna das, *op cit*, p 7.
49. Jackson, *op cit*, 1981, p 66.
50. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, 1991, pp 60-2.
51. See <http://www.communiGate.co.uk/oxford/gurukripahindutemple/index.phtml>  
(accessed 20 September 2005).
52. Nesbitt, *op cit*, 1990 and 1994.
53. Peach and Gale, *op cit*, p 478.
54. Hardy, *op cit*, p 156.
55. Examples include P. Mc Fadzean, P. (no date) *Vastu Vidya, Studies in Indian Geomancy*, (Institute of Experimental Geomancy ISBN 0 9534163 0 5), J. Pegrom, (no date) *Vastu Vidya: The Indian Art of Placement* (Gaia Books), and G.D. Vasudev, (no date) *Vastu: Astrology and Architecture* [no other details given].
56. Jackson, *op cit*, 1981.
57. Bowen, *op cit*.
58. Vertovec, *op cit*, 1992.
59. Nesbitt, *op cit*, 1990 and 1995.
60. Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Sketches of Formal Hindu Nurture', *World Religions in Education, Journal of the Shap Working Party*, 1986, pp 25-9.
61. Knott, *op cit*, 1986 and 1987.
62. Nye, *op cit*, 1993 and 1995.
63. Williams, *op cit*, 1992, p 247 and Vertovec, *op cit*, 2000, p 130.
64. Peach and Gale, *op cit*, p 479.
65. Peach and Gale, *op cit*, p 482.

66. Bimal Krishna das, *op cit*, p 7.
67. Malory Nye, (2001) *Multiculturalism and Minority Religions in Britain: Krishna Consciousness, Religious Freedom and the Politics of Location* (Curzon Studies in New Religious Movements, London: Routledge, 2001).
68. Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, 1991.
69. See Jackson and Nesbitt, *op cit*, 1986 and 1991.
70. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/england/2029972.stm> (accessed 29 September 2005).
71. In common schools (i.e. state schools) in England and Wales religious education must be provided in accordance with Locally Agreed Syllabuses drawn up by Agreed Syllabus Committees. Teachers are recommended by e.g. the Local Education Authorities' Advisory Teachers, to take pupils to visit *mandirs*.
72. Ross cited in Rasamandala Das, 'Voice or voices? Evaluating the contributions of Hindu organisations to religious education in Britain', unpublished MA in Religious Education dissertation, Institute of Education, University of Warwick, 2005, p 35.
73. Rasamandala Das, *op cit*, 2005, p 42.
74. Weller, *op cit*, pp 73-4.
75. See Bimal Krishna das, *op cit*, 8 for NCHT's history, and <http://www.theredirectory.org.uk/orgs/ncht/html>
76. Other organisations, e.g. Hindu Forum of Britain, also made representations to the Home Office ([http://www.redhotcurry.com/news/hfb\\_hindu\\_priests.htm](http://www.redhotcurry.com/news/hfb_hindu_priests.htm) (accessed 29 September 2005)).
77. John Gay, *The Geography of Religions in England*, (London: Duckworth, 1971).
78. Burghart, *op cit*, p 1.

79. Menstruation and childbirth are regarded as impure states in Orthodox Jewish and Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. For example, many Orthodox women abstain from Holy Communion during their monthly period.
80. Terence Thomas, “‘The sacred’ as a viable concept in the contemporary study of religions’ in S. J. Sutcliffe (ed), *Religion: Empirical Studies: A Collection to Mark the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religions* (Aldergate: Ashgate, 2004), pp 47-66.
81. Hervieu-Leger, 2000, cited in Kim Knott, ‘The sense and nonsense of “community”: a consideration of contemporary debates about community and culture by a scholar of religion’ in S. J. Sutcliffe, *op cit*, pp 67-90.
82. Dhingra, *op cit*, p 98.
83. Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 1995).
84. Nesbitt, *Intercultural Education*, 2004, p 86.
85. Hinduism Online’ (2001) ‘Special Report: Hinduism online’, AsiaSource: AsiaTODAY, 3 January, [http://www.asiasource.org/news/at\\_mp\\_02.cfm?newsid=39841](http://www.asiasource.org/news/at_mp_02.cfm?newsid=39841) (accessed 30 April 2005)
86. For parallels in other faiths see, for the Sikh case, Doris Jakobsh ‘Constructing Sikh identities: authorities virtual and imagined’, *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol 10, Nos 1 & 2, 2003, pp 127-42. For Islam see Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000) and Gary Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).



87. Knott, *op cit*, 2004, pp 67-90.
88. Vertovec, *op cit*, 1992 and 2000.
89. G. Skeie, 'The concept of plurality and its meaning for religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol 25, No 2, 2002, pp 47-59 and Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).
90. This is discussed in Eleanor Nesbitt, *Interfaith Pilgrims: Living Truths and Truthful Living* (London: Quaker Books, 2003).
91. Eleanor Nesbitt, 'Religious nurture and young people's spirituality: reflections on research at the University of Warwick' in J. Erricker, C. Ota and C. Erricker (eds), *Spiritual Education Cultural, Religious and Social Differences: New Perspectives for the 21st Century* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), pp 130-42.
92. See Ron Geaves and Catherine Geaves, 'The legitimisation of a regional folk cult: the transmigration of Balaknath from rural Punjab to urban Europe', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol 20, No 1, 1997.
93. See, for example, Flood, *op cit*, pp 61-5.

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