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Keeping the faith: Reflections on religious nurture among young British Sikhs

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Although young Sikhs are regularly accused of not attending *gurdwara* and not being interested in Sikhism, many young Sikhs are now learning about Sikhism outside traditional religious institutions. Using data gathered as part of a research project studying the transmission of Sikhism among 18–30-year-old British Sikhs, this article explores how young Sikhs are learning about Sikhism in their pre-adult life stage. Examining the influences of the family and the school environment and the various methods used in *gurdwaras*, this article offers a retrospective look on the ways in which young Sikhs are nurtured and socialised into Sikhism, providing an understanding from the perspective of young Sikhs themselves about which methods actually work and why.

Keywords: sikhism, family, nurture, socialisation, gurdwara

Introduction

As a young Sikh growing up in the UK I often heard statements from *gurdwara* (Sikh place of worship, literally ‘the Guru’s door’) stages, which lamented that

young Sikhs were not interested in Sikhism. Speakers complained that young

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people did not attend *gurdwaras*, were not interested in learning Punjabi, and failed to keep the Sikh identity, with parents – particularly mothers – being blamed for not educating their children about their faith. Those who did attend *gurdwara* regularly were praised and highlighted as good examples to the rest of the congregation, although I remember wondering why this was the case, given that I understood that going to the *gurdwara* every Sunday was the normal practice for all Sikhs.

On reflection, it is clear that my upbringing in a family in which all the male members wear turbans and in which regular *gurdwara* attendance is the norm has been a key influence in leading me to undertake research into the British Sikh community. Although there were few opportunities to learn about Sikhism formally as I was growing up in the 1980s, I had a good knowledge of Sikh history compared to most of my peers, because my parents had ensured that my bookcase was readily stocked with books and comics about the lives of the Sikh Gurus. I first experienced formal learning about Sikhism at the Sikh Missionary Society camps (Singh 2011) which I attended from 1985 to 1989 and where I demonstrated my knowledge by winning the competition for best historical essay four years in a row.

This article presents data gathered as part of a wider research project

which explored how 18–30-year-old British Sikhs learn about Sikhism. The focus is on how young Sikhs reflected on their religious upbringing during the pre-adult life stage, the period of life which is divided into childhood (up to 13 years old) and adolescence (13–18 years), with – as many scholars have observed – a decline in religious adherence from childhood to adolescence (Roberts and Yamane 2011, 97). As the majority of today’s 18–30 year olds grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, recent technological innovations such as the Internet did not play as large a role in their religious socialisation as they may play in the lives of young Sikhs today. This article is therefore mostly concerned with the role of the family, schools, and *gurdwaras*.

Methodology

In undertaking this research, a qualitative methodological approach was taken, using a variety of sources as part of the investigation (Denscombe 2007, 37). The main methods included: semi-structured interviews with 30 18–30-year-old British Sikhs who had attended and participated in events organised for young Sikhs; a self-selecting online survey of young British Sikhs; focus groups with Sikh students; and participant observation at events organised for young Sikhs, including Sikh camps and university Sikh society events. The fieldwork was undertaken throughout 2009–2010, with the online survey running from November 2009 to July 2011. The survey elicited 645 responses in total; it had been advertised on discussion forums relating to Sikhism and Bhangra¹ and on

Facebook pages belonging to *gurdwaras*, Sikh camps, university Sikh societies and Bhangra groups in order to reach to as wide a range of respondents as possible. As there is currently no means of obtaining a random sample from all young British Sikhs and as young people are a difficult population to study – they tend to be very busy and mobile (Denton and Smith 2001, 2) – survey respondents were self-selecting and consequently respondents are likely to be young Sikhs with a strong commitment to Sikhism. This is justified by the fact that this research examined how and why young Sikhs engage with their religious tradition and therefore sought the views of young Sikhs who would respond to an online survey relating to the Sikh tradition. Rather than aiming to gather the views of young Sikhs from one or all of the various groups in the Sikh community,² I examine in this article the socialisation of young Sikhs from a variety of sectarian and ideological backgrounds.

Families and schools

Sociologists of religion recognize the role of the family as the primary agent of religious socialisation throughout the life course and as the main influence on individuals' religious choices (Sherkat 2003, 151–158). Indeed, Phil Zuckerman concludes that 'ultimately, religious identity and conviction aren't generally so much a matter of choice or faith or soul-searching as a matter of who [sic] and what one's parents, friends, neighbours and community practice and profess' (2003, 51). It can be argued that of these factors the family is the most important

in religious socialisation, as it determines the types of friends, neighbours, and community to which individuals are exposed to in early life.

According to Pnina Werbner, most accounts of Sikh families in the popular media, including Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), tend to focus on 'the struggles of a younger, British-born generation against arranged marriages imposed by authoritarian, coercive, gerontocratic elders' (2004, 901). References to religion in these accounts usually relate to issues about keeping long hair and the turban, with Sathnam Sanghera in his *The boy with the topknot*³ explaining that despite the other male members of the family not keeping long hair, his mother had 'found God before she had me and decided to raise me as a religious experiment' (2008, 27). Sanghera comments on the 'haphazard nature' of the way he was instructed in Sikhism, stating, 'all that Punjabi classes on Saturday mornings had taught me was how to write "the camel went to the well" in Punjabi' (ibid 197), and he describes his struggles with keeping long hair; he wanted to 'get rid of my long hair because: (i) I was fed up of being teased about my topknot; (ii) I hated the way my topknot restricted my freedom...; (iii) I LOATHED the way it made me look' (ibid). Sanghera's account highlights some of the issues young Sikhs face regarding the effectiveness of religious instruction, the impact of family identity practices, and the difficulties they encounter between the family and school environment.

As Claire Alexander (2006, 259) explains, the idea of young Asians being 'between two cultures' remains the dominant paradigm for understanding Asian

youth identities, although British Asian communities have been established for over 40 years in Britain. She observes that

the notion of 'the second generation' remains intact in the popular and sociological imagination [carrying] with it ingrained ideas of an originary/parental culture and of a 'next' generation trapped between this ancestral homeland and the 'host' country – between old and new worlds. (ibid 271)

Roger Ballard rejects the idea of cultural conflict in favour of viewing young Asians as 'skilled cultural navigators' who have a 'sophisticated capacity to manoeuvre their way to their own advantage both inside and outside the ethnic colony' (1994, 31). Instead of actively navigating, Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt (1993, 174) view these young people as having 'multiple cultural competence', able to use culture as a 'toolkit of resources', employing whichever aspects of their culture they require at a particular time (Vertovec 2009, 72).

Although much of the subsequent work on Asian young people bears the traces of the earlier 'between two cultures' approach (Alexander 2006, 265), the focus is now on 'continuity and change' and on the growth of a 'new culture which is a synthesis of the "old" and the "new"' (Anwar 2002, 189).

Diversity

Above all, as Avtar Brah argues, it is important not to assume that there are discrete British and Asian cultures which necessarily 'clash' (1996, 41). Although

Sikh families may share some elements, many have their own unique way of expressing and practicing Sikhism influenced by their migration experiences, caste, political affiliation, economic status and the extent to which they are committed to the Sikh faith (Hadwen 1995, 72). In addition, many families may align themselves to particular charismatic individuals (*Sants*) or particular ideological groups (*Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Damdami Taksal, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha*)⁴ or belong to other sectarian groups (*Namdharis, Nirankaris, Radhasoamis*).⁵

According to Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla, 'the distinctive social pluralism that pervades Sikh society is to be found not along the familiar cleavages of region, language, ethnicity or class, but in caste distinctions' (2006, 27). Although the concept of caste is generally used uncritically in discussions relating to the South Asian traditions, as Nesbitt explains, the term 'caste' obscures the crucial distinction between a *varna* (the four *varnas* being Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra) and a *jati* (*zat* in Punjabi) (2004, 100). Among Sikhs, it is *jati* rather than *varna* which has become the main distinction, with the *Jats* at the top rung, being landowners, followed by the artisan castes of the *Ramgharias* (carpenters), *Chhimbas* (tailors), *Julahas* (weavers), *Nais* (barbers), *Jinwars* (water carriers), and *Ghumars* (potters) (Singh and Tatla 2006, 28). Ballard explains that *jati* influenced the occupational base of Sikh migrants, as 'Jats were largely concentrated in physically demanding manual work and the Bhatras in small business and market trading, while many Ramgharias had taken advantage of

their traditional skills as blacksmiths and carpenters to become craftsmen in the building trade' (1994, 110).

Although caste may influence religious socialisation in terms of *gurdwara* attendance, this is not as clear-cut as it is often presented, with many *Jats* attending the *Ramgharia gurdwara* in Coventry (Nesbitt 2009, 43) and, similarly, many *Ramgharias* can be observed attending a primarily *Jat gurdwara* in Leeds. Rather than considering caste *per se*, it is important to consider how migration history affects religious socialisation, as speaking the Punjabi language and visiting the Punjab are integral to Sikh children's nurture (Nesbitt 2000, 242) and are factors which are clearly influenced by migration history. Those who have relatives or contacts in India, regardless of caste, are more likely to visit the Punjab as children and consequently to visit sites of Sikh history, including the Golden Temple. For Sirjit (pseudonym) a 23-year-old male from south England, visiting the Golden Temple at a young age had an important impact on the rest of his life as a Sikh:

I was born in the UK—and my family were not particularly religious ... but when I was 6 or 7, I went to *Harimandir Sahib* [the Golden Temple] with my family ... and then when the golden throne of *Guru Granth Sahib* [the Sikh scriptures regarded by many Sikhs as a living Guru] was coming out, my Grandfather got my hand and touched the *palki* [palanquin]—and basically after that experience on that day at the age of six and a half, everything changed. I used to have cut hair, couldn't speak Punjabi very well, I didn't

know anything about *bani* [sacred writings] ... and then on that day I bought four books on Sikh history, which I've still got to this day ... and I used to read them every day – everyone thought it was a phase, like me keeping my hair, giving up certain things to eat, getting up early in the morning ... but eventually after a few months, when things didn't stop, then everyone realised that actually he's taking it for real. - Interview, 18/08/2010

Although it is not possible to generalise about the impact of migration history, Opinderjit Kaur Takhar notes that 'the majority of East African Sikh migrants to Britain are on the whole more religiously inclined than other zats coming directly from India' (2005, 42). Whereas many direct migrants removed their turbans on arrival in the UK (Ballard 1994, 111), male members of East African families tended to keep their turbans on arriving in the UK, having already experienced migration to Africa (Takhar 2005, 42). Survey responses to questions about identity reveal differences between Sikh families according to parental migration history, as Table 1 shows.

----- insert Table 1 here -----

The details in Table 1 highlight that, firstly, the percentage of females wearing turbans in East African households is lower than that in other categories and, secondly, while the percentage of male turban wearers with full beards is similar across all categories, there are differences between males outside this category. In

East African families, the percentage of male turban wearers with trimmed beards (25%) is roughly equivalent to the number of males with cut hair in other Sikh households, indicating that for males in East African households the most common identity outside the category 'male with full beard' is 'turban with a trimmed beard'. This indicates that Sikh children born in East African households generally are more likely to grow up in households in which turban wearing among males is the norm.

The fact that children born in East African households are generally more likely to encounter turban wearers may have an impact on their religious socialisation in various ways. Although ideas of *izzat* or family honour are regularly discussed in ethnographies of South Asians (e.g. Baumann 1996, 103), there is little if any discussion about how issues of *izzat* might affect religious transmission. As *izzat* affects individuals' standing in the community (Jhutti-Johal 2011, 67) and 'following religious "tradition" increases and maintains one's identity and *izzat*' (ibid 116), it follows that families in which male members wear turbans generally have higher status in the community than those who do not. That members of East African families are viewed as being religious may help explain why so few East African females wear turbans. If an East African family has a number of turban wearers and is therefore viewed as being religious, there is little need for female family members to express their religiosity explicitly, as they are 'included' in the males' maintenance of the family's honour. On the other hand, female members of families who do not have this religious status are

compelled to express their religiosity explicitly by wearing turbans, as only keeping the hair uncut indicates the same level of commitment as that of a turban wearer (Singh 2010, 215). However, it is important not to assume that only those who keep the normative Sikh identity are engaging with the Sikh tradition. Mandeep (pseudonym), a 26-year-old young male from the Midlands who regularly speaks at camps and Sikh societies, explained:

My dad was a *mona* [had his hair cut] ... but I remember from a young age that he knew Japji Sahib, Rehras Sahib, Sohila Sahib [the daily Sikh prayers] off by heart. And if we were ever going anywhere in the car, my Dad would say 'it's evening time, let's do Rehras' [the Sikh evening prayer]—he wouldn't cover his head or anything, it was automatic—and all we knew was that you should do Rehras in the evening—and in the morning my Dad would say, 'let's do Japji Sahib [the Sikh morning prayer]' - Interview, 14/02/2010

Rather than simply using external identity as an indicator of a Sikh family's religiosity, it is important to examine other factors, including knowledge of Sikh history and prayer practices. Both have an impact on the religious socialisation of young Sikhs, as does the structure of the household, especially the question of whether the household supports a nuclear or an extended family. As Nesbitt observes, 'parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles contributed to the nurturing of young Sikhs in their faith tradition' (2000, 52), as 'many of the young people referred to hearing an older relative "doing a prayer"' (2000, 69).

Similarity

Many interviewees mentioned that, as children, they had been explicitly taught Sikh practices by their parents. The president of a Sikh society in the Midlands explained that he ‘used to do *Mul Mantar*⁶ from the age of 5 – every day ... that’s what my mum had raised me to do.’ A number of interviewees also noted that the family keeping the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the house had an important impact on their religious socialisation, presumably because hosting the *Guru Granth Sahib* in one’s home is very labour- and time-intensive. As Nesbitt explains (2005 39), ‘most Sikhs do not have a complete hard copy of the scriptures at home, as this means setting one room aside as a mini-*gurdwara*, with family members ensuring that the *Guru Granth Sahib* is opened in the morning and laid to rest for the night.’ For Narinder (pseudonym), a 39-year-old speaker at camps and Sikh societies, these reverential practices became part of her daily routine, acting as a daily reminder of her commitments as a Sikh:

...the house I grew up in with my parents, there was always *Guru Granth Sahib*. Ever since I can remember, my mum does *prakash* [the formal opening of the *Guru Granth Sahib*] before she does anything else. So I had a couple of ground rules as a child, [one of] which was you had to *mattha tek* [bow to the *Guru*] before you came downstairs. - Interview, 08/05/2010

Although not all Sikh households are able to house the *Guru Granth Sahib*, many studies of young Sikhs highlight the importance of iconography; James notes, for

example, that 'pictures of the Gurus, and of events in their lives and places associated with them, decorate the walls of nearly all Sikh homes ... they must be important elements in their developing imagination' (1974, 31). This is supported by my observations in Sikh households, as iconography was present in all of the households where interviews were conducted, ranging from pictures of the Gurus to pictures of notable martyrs in the Sikh tradition and framed translations of quotations of the *Guru Granth Sahib* on the walls. The impact of this iconography on religious socialisation is clear, as Santokh, a 33-year-old male from north England, described:

... my mum would have at least 15-20 photos of the Gurus' pictures in every room – there's probably more pictures of the Gurus and Gursikhs [respected historical Sikhs] than there are of us ... [so] if I come into a room and see the Guru's photo, I'd think they were watching me. - Interview, 09/03/2010

Whereas pictures of the Gurus, in particular Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, are found in a number of Sikh households, families who are inspired by *Sants* [charismatic leaders] or particular Sikhs from history often display pictures of these individuals in their homes. Nurture in families which follow *Sants* appears to be slightly different from that in families who do not, as *Sants* often have the status of a Guru. In her study of Sikh children's ideas of God, Nesbitt and Jackson note that in *Sant*-following families the elevated status of the *Sant* is encouraged by the use of language: 'not only is the same word [*Babaji*] used for all three (Guru, *Guru Granth Sahib* and living *sant*) but the actual living *Sant*

(Babaji) is equated with both the Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*' (1995, 115–118).

Besides iconography, Nesbitt notes that food played an important role in informal nurture, as young Sikh children were 'accustomed to receiving, distributing and eating food in culturally acceptable ways which were distinct from those current in the surrounding western society' (2000, 55). Apart from being distinct from Western society, food practices in the home can also reinforce group membership. As Sukhdev, a 23-year-old female Sikh from south England whose family follows a particular *Sant*, explained, vegetarianism had become an important identifier for her household, distinguishing the family from other households which did not conform to the 'basics of *sikhi*':

Dad used to eat meat, whereas for Mum it was the complete opposite ... and Mum seems to have had the good influence and now they've all stopped ... so in that way this house is a house which has [the] basics of *sikhi*—no alcohol, no meat. - Interview, 18/05/2009

The interviews also highlighted the importance of stories in religious transmission. For example, Param (pseudonym), a 22-year-old Sikh society president, pointed out that

history means so much to me—when I hear about what some of the *shahids* [those martyred for the faith] have done—I get kind of emotional. I think it's magic. I'd love to do something for my religion—I'd love to live the life of a Sikh. - Interview 22/10/2009

Similarly, Narinder highlighted how her 'Mum would read *sakhiyan* [stories] to me before I used to go to bed – and I just couldn't bring myself to cut my hair'. It is clear from these accounts that stories about key figures in Sikh history have an important impact on the religious socialisation of young British Sikhs, causing some to question their own identities when being made aware of the lives of Sikhs in the past. Navdeep, a 26-year-old male from south England, explained:

The one thing that I do recall about my childhood is that my bed-time stories would always be about stories about Sikhs... And when I was in Year 2, about 5–6 years old, I looked in the mirror once and I said to my mum, 'you tell me these stories about all these people, about these great soldiers... This blood runs through my body as well – runs in my veins – so why am I a *mona* [a person with hair cut]?' I don't know what hit me – it was a simple thing, but I thought, 'why don't I keep my hair? If this is what I'm made of as well, then why can't I keep my hair?' - Interview 12/05/2010

A number of scholars have noted the significant role of stories in religious socialisation, among them Keith Roberts and David Yamane who observe that – together with scriptures, moral codes, and the celebration of religious events – stories are important, as they become 'imbedded in the memory and meaning for youngsters' (2011, 95). That the role of stories was mentioned by a number of interviewees indicates that for young Sikhs, the stories of sacrifice made for the faith have left a long-lasting impression, most importantly because of the emotional impact of these accounts.

Stories may also contribute to young Sikhs' awareness of 'different degrees of Sikhness', a phrase coined by Nesbitt (1999) to illustrate how young Sikhs describe more visibly observant Sikhs as 'the English 'proper Sikh' or 'real Sikh', etc. and the Punjabi "*pagwala*" and "*amrit chhokia*" with a small minority applying "Sikh" only to those who were committed to the Khalsa code' (329). The idea that young Sikhs are socialised to be aware of different degrees of Sikhness may help explain religious intensification in later stages of life, when young Sikhs search for greater engagement and aim to become 'proper Sikhs' themselves. A number of the male interviewees who wore turbans while growing up explained that they were aware that removing the turban was not an option for them, especially as other family members acted as 'identity enforcers'; Gurpal (pseudonym), a 22-year-old from the Midlands, recalled this, commenting that 'they used to call my *chache* [Dad's younger brothers] if I threatened to cut my hair'.

School

As Sanghera's (2008, 197) earlier comments illustrate, school becomes the most important 'other' environment outside the family, an environment where young Sikhs encounter plurality and face questions about their tradition. This encounter can be seen as an important factor in motivating young Sikhs to learn about their tradition, as Santokh, the 33-year-old male from north England, suggested:

When I was at school, there were loads of Muslims ... and there was one guy

who was well into his Islam—and he used to give all the *salaam* to his friends—shake all their hands in the morning and never shake ours ... so I thought I need to learn about my own [religion] ... so I went to the central library and I found a book on the history of Sikhs... I remember that being the first book that I read properly

Similarly, Narinder explained how an experience at her Catholic school led her to wanting to find out more about Sikhism:

I was in the choir ... and I thought to myself, 'today I'll get the Holy Communion' ... so I had my hands in the right place ... and I knew from his eyes that the priest wasn't going to give it to me ... and he just said, 'Bless you my child' ... I was so angry—I thought, 'I've done your *kirtan* [singing of religious compositions] for so many years and you don't give me *parshad* [blessed food]?' Then I thought, 'if these *gore* [white people] go to a *gurdwara*, they'll get *parshad* no matter what.' So from then on, every time we used to say, 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', I used to *mattha tek* [bow to the Guru] ... it was an internal rebellion—and I was like 'I'm going to *gurdwara*, I'm going to show my friends, I'm going to talk about Sikhism—I'm going to tell them why I don't cut my hair.'

These examples highlight the impact of a 'moment' when these young Sikhs felt they needed to learn more about their faith. As Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1998) explains, people identify with religious groups in four main ways: 1) communally, by using a 'set of markers (social and symbolic) that define the boundary of religious groups and that allows one to distinguish "those who are

in” and “those who are out” (219); 2) ethically, by having accepted the values attached to the religious message (ibid); 3) culturally, by having embraced ‘the set of cognitive, symbolic and practical elements which constitute the heritage of a particular tradition’ (ibid 220); 4) emotionally, through ‘the emotional experience associated with identification’ (ibid 220). Given the experiences quoted above, Hervieu-Léger’s (1998, 220) following statement applies:

what is new in modern societies is that this intense experience which produces the collective feeling ‘us’, is less and less a result of communal belonging ... [and] is more and more often—and particularly among the young—the moment at which a primary experience of belonging becomes established.

The interview data suggest that although there are various possible experiences and although these experiences need not be as dramatic as those described above, emotional moments are important in understanding why young Sikhs choose to engage with their faith.

The ethnic composition of a school was also important: while there may not be any religious socialisation in schools, interviewees who attended schools which had a number of Sikh pupils all indicated that they preferred to socialise with fellow Sikhs. Similar to the study of Jewish pupils by Jennifer Sinclair and David Milner (2005, 100) who observed that issues of kinship and connection and awareness of difference were the main factors relating to self-categorisation, Baldev (pseudonym), a Sikh female from the Midlands, explained that when at

school, she had felt most comfortable in a kin group:

I can get on with *gore*, but it does make a big difference – even when I was at school I've always had that circle of Sikh and Punjabi friends – I dunno, it's not a safety thing, but I feel more at home, more like able to talk about whatever I want to talk about – Interview, 20/12/2009

Although Tahir Abbas (2002, 83–84) noted that 50% of the Sikh respondents in his study agreed with the statement, 'No, I have never experienced difficulties of any kind' (ibid 84), informal telephone interviews with the organisers of bodies which aim to assist young Sikhs⁷ highlighted that young Sikhs do face issues at school, in particular bullying, due to racism. The issue of bullying has been discussed on a number of Sikh web sites,⁸ with the Sikh coalition, an organisation based in the United States which was born in the aftermath of discrimination against Sikhs following the attacks of September 11th 2001 going as far as to produce a guide about bullying for schools in the US.⁹

The sense of not fitting in is clearly one reason why some young Sikhs are attracted to Sikh camps and other Sikh youth events, as they provide a 'safe space' in which to be Sikh. Few survey respondents mentioned learning about Sikhism in Religious Education (RE) lessons, with one stating that 'we are unlikely [sic] to be taught about our history in British schools' and another noting that a problem with British society was 'that most other religions except sikhism is [sic] taught in schools'. Although the purpose of this article is not to examine the teaching of Sikhism in British schools, it is clear that the amount and

quality of education in Sikhism across the UK varies considerably: state schools are legally required to follow the RE syllabus set by the local authority, which generally states 'that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian', but requires that RE should '[take] account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain';¹⁰ whereas faith schools are free to make their own decisions regarding the form of their RE syllabus (Jackson et al. 2010, 10).

Although it is important to recognize that 'religious education contributes to the religious nurture of pupils from Sikh and other faith backgrounds' (Nesbitt 2001, 148), the extent of this contribution depends on the importance placed on teaching Sikhism by individual local authorities and RE teachers. Given the inconsistency in approach, it is not surprising that many survey respondents stated that they had not been taught Sikhism in school. This is also apparent whenever and wherever I teach Sikhism at degree level: for the past three years, before beginning my lectures on Sikhism for Theology and Religious Studies students at the University of Leeds, I have asked who in the audience studied Sikhism before. Of 100–120 students present, less than five usually indicate that they did. Although this evidence is anecdotal and may result from students not wishing to draw attention to themselves, it is clear that by the time young people reach higher education, many have not encountered Sikhism in school. Where Sikhism is covered in RE lessons, Jackson et al. observe, it receives 'a rather superficial, descriptive treatment focusing on the externals of the religion more

than on the religion's power for transformation in the lives of the individual or its contribution to wider society' (2010, 6).

Gurdwaras

Therefore, it would be easy to assume that young Sikhs must learn about Sikhism in *gurdwaras*. Before examining the types of religious education which occur there, I need to point out that not all *gurdwaras* are managed in the same way. Singh and Tatla (2006, 77) distinguish between 'mainstream' *gurdwaras*, where committee and congregation belong to a variety of castes, and 'caste-based' *gurdwaras*, where committee and congregation belong to a particular caste group. Further, some *gurdwaras* are led by a charismatic individual (*Sant*) or by people entrusted by the *Sant* (this arrangement differs from that of a committee, as this usually involves a process of selection rather than election).

Regardless of type, many *gurdwaras* make efforts to transmit Sikhism to Sikh children (Nesbitt 2000), depending on available resources and the priorities of those in charge. According to Nesbitt (2000), *gurdwaras* generally use the following six methods to transmit the Sikh tradition to young Sikhs:

1. Punjabi supplementary schools
2. specially organised children's services
3. teaching in the main *gurdwara* programme with a focus on children
4. Sikh youth camps
5. formal instruction in the harmonium or *tabla*

6. provision of library facilities

It is important to note that the supplementary classes are not classes in Sikhism but classes which focus on the Punjabi language. This helps to explain Beatrice Drury's (1991) observation that despite attending supplementary classes, many young Sikhs demonstrate ignorance about Sikh teachings. The classes do, however, play an important social role in transmitting Sikh ethnic consciousness to young Sikhs, as Gurdeep, a 23-year-old from the Midlands, explained:

... we used to go to Punjabi class ... 'cos our parents used to send us – we didn't used to want to go first, then we used to go every evening 'cos we wanted to see our mates ... we didn't really learn much, but the main reason we used to go was the social side.

Nevertheless, some *gurdwaras* organise classes in addition to Punjabi classes.

Puran, a 22-year-old male, describes how he spent his childhood attending '*tabla* class, *vaja* [harmonium] class, and Sikhism GCSE class at X [name of *gurdwara*], then on a Sunday Y [name of *gurdwara*] Punjabi school, then Z [name of *gurdwara*] for *Gatka* [a Sikh martial art]'. This demonstrates that Sikh parents may be increasingly willing to send their children to any *gurdwara* which offers the best provision, even if this means attending more than one *gurdwara* on the same day. As Puran further explained, the Sikhism classes were very important in influencing his decision to grow his hair and wear a turban:

Sikhi classes were really influential ... for a young person like myself at the time, it was really welcoming and it was so basic that everyone could

understand ... before the classes I didn't know anything about *sikhi* – I started to get inspired 'cos I started learning about Sikh history and I could see how much people had done for us to be able to stand here today as Sikhs ... so that's when I started to grow my hair.

Despite increased provision, interviewees highlighted issues related to the management of *gurdwaras* and the committee system, which offered little stability to young Sikhs' learning. Puran also referred to this:

... there was a new committee at the *gurdwara*, but they wanted to dominate ... they told ... [the teacher] that he can't teach any more. And it was like, 'why have you done this? You had so much *sangat* [congregation] coming' – and from then it's dropped ... now, it's just 5–6 people.

Puran points to a key issue regarding the religious transmission in *gurdwaras*: for organising classes for young Sikhs, much depends on the goodwill of volunteers who give up their time and have to curry favour with those in charge. The 'chop-and-change' nature of teaching makes little sense to young Sikhs and may be one reason why many events for young Sikhs are now organised outside *gurdwaras*.

Hardev (pseudonym), a teacher of *kirtan*, explained that for many *gurdwaras* provision for young Sikhs was simply not an economic priority:

All the experiences we've had with *gurdwaras* in terms of this kind of activity are very negative. And I'll tell you why that is: it's because this kind of activity doesn't generate any revenue for the *gurdwara*; the only revenue it generates is the people who come to *mattha tek* [bow to the Guru and give offerings] to attend the class. One of the committee members at one *gurdwara*

was extremely supportive; he said to us, 'you don't even have to ask', but he said, 'just be aware that if there's a wedding or *Akhand Paths* [unbroken readings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*], they're generating £2000 whereas this is generating £30' – and I understand that. – Interview 28/01/2010

Here, the distinction between the different types of *gurdwara* is important.

Unlike mainstream and caste-based *gurdwaras*, *gurdwaras* where the management is based on selection rather than election, such as *Sant*-led *gurdwaras*, appear to offer more stability for young Sikhs, as teachers are generally not dismissed if they find themselves belonging to the 'wrong' party following an election. The need to address economic concerns seems paramount in the minds of most *gurdwara* committees, often to the detriment of providing classes for young Sikhs. It is therefore not surprising that many young Sikhs themselves have started to organise events outside *gurdwaras*, which they are free to shape as they wish.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the variety in religious socialisation which young British Sikhs encounter in their early lives. As the site of primary socialisation, the family sets out much of what follows, but there is great diversity within Sikh families, with caste and migration history being important points of difference. While caste had an influence on the occupations of the early Sikh migrants, given the variety of occupations in which Sikhs find themselves today, caste does not appear to determine occupation as much as it once did. It is

also no longer predictable that members of a particular caste attend a particular *gurdwara*, as many Sikh parents now appear to send their children to *gurdwaras* which offer the best facilities.

The structure of the household also has an impact on socialisation, especially if grandparents live in the same household or close by. Migration history has been shown to be an important factor here, too, as there are clear differences in the identity practices of 'direct' and 'twice' migrants. Both factors are linked to the level at which Punjabi is spoken, which in turn influences the type of religious learning which young Sikhs engage with in later life. Further, geography has been shown to be important both for the opportunities of learning about Sikhism, which are open to the family, and for the composition of the classroom at school which young Sikhs attend.

Besides these differences, this article has described a number of commonalities. Nesbitt's analysis of the idea of 'proper Sikhs' is important, as it helps to explain why many young Sikhs who appear not to be interested in Sikhism take on Sikh identity in later life, when they experience a process of religious intensification (Roberts and Yamane 2011, 123) rather than religious conversion. The encounter with pluralism in the school environment is another important factor, as young Sikhs experience emotional moments of both belonging and not belonging.

Finally, this article has discussed the role of the *gurdwara* as a site which primarily offers young Sikhs an environment within which they can simply 'be

Sikh'. As *gurdwaras* are not homogenous communities, the type they represent determines the stability and importance placed on religious transmission. It is clear that for many *gurdwaras* organising events for young Sikhs is not a priority, given the low economic return of these events. Formal transmission organised by the older generation is generally regarded as being of poor quality and appears to be far too unstable, being subject to personal grudges and factional politics, much of which young British Sikhs do not understand or wish to engage with. For these reasons, many events organised by young Sikhs are now held outside *gurdwaras*, in activity centres, schools, and universities. If those in charge of *gurdwaras* are serious about teaching young Sikhs about their faith, they must ensure that the environment they present is both stable and nurturing.

Notes on contributor

Jasjit Singh was a doctoral student at the University of Leeds working on an AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme studentship 'Keeping the Faith: The Transmission of Sikhism among Young British Sikhs (18–30)', in collaboration with BECAS (Bradford Educational and Cultural Association of Sikhs). His research investigated why young British Sikhs wish to learn about Sikhism and how they go about it.

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Notes

¹ Examples of these postings can be found at: <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/phd-research-british-sikhs-18-30-currently-underway>, <http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?/topic/48145-phd-research-into-british-sikhs-18-30>, <http://simplybhangra.com/forum/5-general-chat/271-phd-research-into-british-sikhs-18-30>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mbasiannetwork/html/NF4154526?thread=7157509> (accessed September 5, 2011).

² For further details about some of these groups, see Takhar 2005.

³ Sanghera's *The boy with the topknot: A memoir of love, secrets and lies in Wolverhampton*, published in paperback by Penguin in 2009, was originally published in 2008 by Viking in hardback as *If you don't know me by now: A memoir of love, secrets and lies in Wolverhampton*.

⁴ For further details about the *Akhand Kirtani Jatha*, see Nesbitt 2005, 51); for details about the *Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha* and *Namdharis*, see Takhar 2005.

⁵ Many of these groups are regarded by many Sikhs as being heterodox (see Takhar 2005). For details about the *Nirankaris*, see McLeod (1984); for details about the *Radhasoamis*, see Juergensmeyer 1995.

⁶ The *Mul Mantar* is a statement found at the beginning of the *Guru Granth Sahib*; its translation is 'root formula'.

⁷ These bodies are the Sikh helpline, Sikh Sanjog (Edinburgh), and the Sikh Community and Youth Services.

⁸ See e.g. http://www.rajkaregakhalsa.net/literature/For_Schools_and_Teachers/Helping_Sikh_Children_Dealing_with_Bullying.PDF (accessed 15/11/2011).

⁹ See http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/DOE_Report.2.24.2011.pdf (accessed July 6, 2011).

¹⁰ For further details, see 'Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2010. <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/religious%20education%20guidance%20in%20schools.pdf> (accessed 20/01/2012).