

“My Dad’s Hindu,
my Mum's side are Sikhs”:
Issues in Religious Identity

Eleanor Nesbitt

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Note on the transcription of Indian words

The Roman alphabet consists of fewer letters than the alphabets used for Indian languages. Unlike these languages, English is not written in a phonetically consistent way. In transliterating words from Punjabi and other North Indian languages I have adopted the following compromise. Where a word is already well-established in English I have used the usual spelling e.g. Punjab rather than the less familiar Panjab. Similarly where a Sanskrit form is already widely used I have retained this in lieu of a strict transliteration of the Punjabi e.g. Ramayana, Rama, not Ramain, Ram. I have not used diacritic marks which would allow the reader to distinguish, for example, between the two sounds (dental and retroflex) which approximate to 'd' nor the signs to indicate long vowels. 'A' is always like the vowel either in 'far' or 'pant' (not 'pant'); 'u' corresponds to the vowel in 'moon' or in 'pull' (not to the 'u' in 'undo'); 'i' is pronounced like the vowel in 'keen' or in 'pin', never 'pine'. In quotations from the children's diaries I have retained their spelling of Indian words e.g. p.10 'chapaties'. I have used both 'v' and 'w' to represent the single character which in Indian scripts approximates to both these sounds.

Non-English words, other than proper nouns, are in bold but only on their first occurrence and a definition is provided.

'S' is not added to Indian words to form the plural in Indian languages, but has been added (though not in bold) in the paper in conformity with English usage. There are no capital letters in Indian alphabets. I have, however, used initial capitals for proper nouns and for 'Guru' when this refers specifically to the ten Gurus of the Sikhs or to Ravidas.

Foreword

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The cover of Rod Taylor's book *Educating for Art* shows Eram, a British girl of Pakistani family background, wearing a stunning woven dress which she designed and made herself. At school she failed her 'O' level needlework three times and her teachers had no idea of her actual skill and ability as a designer. It was the stimulus of an artist in residence that gave Eram the confidence and vision to draw on the values and cultural experience of home and school in creating something beautiful, original and, as she remarked, part of herself. Among other things, the story reminds us of the importance and influence of the domestic and community life of young people outside the school. This influence is just as important in religious and cultural education as it is in the arts. Children may have a complex religio-cultural home and community background of which teachers may be only dimly aware, and yet it may be a crucial formative influence on young people's moral, spiritual and cultural identity.

The main purpose of the research reported by Eleanor Nesbitt in this paper was to investigate the place of religious culture in the lives of children and young people from two religious movements within Britain's Punjabi community. The study was part of an ongoing series on the transmission of religious culture in the home and community life of children from a range of communities constituting the Religious Education and Community Project (RECP) – now the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick.

Although there is a small but growing literature on the religious lives of ethnic minorities in Britain, very little has been done on the transmission of religious culture to the young or on the role of religious activity in the lives of children and young people from the communities. The RECP's series of studies on the formal transmission of Hindu culture through supplementary schools (1984-5), on the religious lives of a group of children from Gujarati and Punjabi Hindu families (1986-87) and on Valmiki and Ravidasi children (1988-89), show that Hindu tradition is changing under a complex of influences, but is not declining significantly. These influences not only include the predictable ones of home, school and television, but also the children's participation in domestic and public religious activity. The families' videos of their own traditional rituals, as well as the commercially available videos from India which dramatise Hindu myths and festivals, are also powerful influences. A further impact on children's knowledge and attitudes is made, often at impressionable stages in the young people's lives, by spiritual teachers and relatives who visit from India. Reports of the RECP's earlier work are listed in Eleanor Nesbitt's bibliography and a more detailed account appears in Jackson and Nesbitt 1993.

A second reason for the research was to provide curriculum material for religious education in schools accurately reflecting the life-world of young Hindus in Britain. Research data from the Hindu Nurture studies provided the basis for five Radio 4 programmes for schools, contributions to two books on Hinduism for teachers (Jackson and Killingley 1988 and 1991) and also two books for junior and lower secondary pupils (Jackson 1989; Jackson and

Nesbitt 1990). The publications for young people make available the words and experiences of British Hindu children for study, discussion and reflection by their peers.

A third reason for the research was to show the wide diversity and complexity of religious traditions when studied in the field. The subject matter of Eleanor Nesbitt's paper is ethnically Punjabi but British born children from two caste groupings regarded as low in the traditional Indian scale of ritual purity and pollution. These communities also correspond to two religious movements in ambiguous relationship with the Hindu and Sikh traditions. The research findings question the adequacy of western terminology to categorise the children's ways of life (especially easy divisions between 'religious' and 'secular' areas of experience) and challenge textbook stereotypes about the borderlines between Hindu and Sikh traditions. Eleanor Nesbitt's work demonstrates the complexity and vitality of the British Hindu scene and raises questions about how teachers might present minorities within religious traditions to children and young people.

Our thanks are due to the Leverhulme Trust for their generosity in funding the RECP's two major studies on Hindu Nurture. These laid the foundation for a wider study within the RECP on Ethnography and Religious Education. This was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council for three years to research the religious culture of children from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities in Britain and to develop curriculum material for use in schools. Further information (eg about subsequent publications) is available from the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit. See <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/wreru>. The most recent publication to refer to these studies is Nesbitt 2004.

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Introduction

Summary

Children in school often have to answer the question 'What is your religion?' or 'What religion are you?' Their answers may indicate only that they have learned the acceptable range of expected replies ('Hindu', 'Sikh', 'Muslim' for example) and have learned which of these labels is most appropriate. The questioner may not realise that the term 'religion' does not necessarily have the same meaning for those who are questioned. It is possible that none of the accepted labels describes the devotional allegiance or community identity of a particular child's family. These may be dictated primarily by the family's shared history as members of a caste in the Indian sub-continent. Even when terms such as 'Hindu' or 'Sikh' appropriately describe a family's ritual practices the children's religious knowledge, social attitudes and moral priorities may have much more in common with those of their British peer groups, regardless of ethnic background or formal religious affiliation. Similarly much which Hindu, Sikh and Muslim children regard as intrinsic to their 'religion' can be attributed to the regional cultural norms of South Asia. Certainly there is much that is common to the experience of children of Punjabi background, with whatever faith they identify.

Since 1947 the Punjab has been divided between Pakistan and India. Hindus and Sikhs moved to the Indian side of the border. Many post-war migrants to Britain, from whichever side of the border their families come, regard the Indian state of Punjab as their homeland. The two communities to which this paper refers are Punjabis whose families identify with the Indian state of Punjab.

A significant proportion of the Punjabi population in Britain is currently going

through the educational system. The experience of these young people can best be understood if their families' experience is also taken into account. It is against a background of the religious traditions of Indian Punjab that this paper looks at the religion of Coventry children from two low caste communities, the Valmikis¹ and the Ravidasis. Their accounts of domestic and public devotional practices illustrate the fallacy of perceiving 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' as mutually exclusive categories. The school and other loci of cultural reinforcement and modification are considered and the children's understanding of their religious identity and of God and afterlife are explored. Corporate worship, devotional practice within the family and the children's worldview are examined in relation to each other. The relationship between religious labels and individually synthesized 'religion' is questioned.

This paper results from findings during fieldwork which was conducted during a seven month period of 1988 - 1989 as part of the Religious Education and Community Project based in the (then) Department of Arts Education at the University of Warwick.² Twenty-four children were interviewed. The investigation was relatively small in scale, but the issues raised here are significant for the understanding of children of Indian Punjabi origin in particular, and more generally of South Asian children in Britain and, indeed, they are pertinent to the understanding of children from other communities.

'Punjabi Hindu Nurture' was designed to supplement data already gathered in two earlier RECP studies.³ The term 'nurture' was used to denote the process by which children born into a particular faith community acquire its characteristic practices and beliefs or some adaptation of them (Hull 1984). 'Nurture' as a metaphor from plant and child care suggests sustaining the growing individual so that it develops towards a healthy maturity. It suggests that sustenance is consciously balanced and that

healthy maturity is recognisable as generation succeeds generation. But in this paper attention is drawn to the uncoordinated plurality of influences in children's religious development. We can only speculate on a range of future ways in which, as adults, children's personal philosophy will relate to corporate and domestic ritual activity and to the priorities and values which shape their elders' behaviour.

Hindu or Sikh?

The term 'Hindu' suggests that there are discrete faith communities of people to whom such a label unequivocally adheres. However, any definition of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' is problematic (see e.g. Vertovec 1989) and in the case of Indian Punjabis boundary-drawing between Sikh and Hindu is notoriously controversial (see Nesbitt 1990b). The issues involved in defining a person as a Sikh are clearly identified in McLeod (1989).

The relationship of individual cultic practice to self-identity as Hindu or Sikh can perhaps better be indicated diagrammatically. See following page. Here each segment (a-u) represents a strand in the intermeshed fabric of Punjabi custom and belief. Those observing a - h (indicated by shaded outline) are unquestionably Sikh. People who observe c - h would define themselves as Sikh although not meeting **khalsa** requirements such as uncut hair or having undergone initiation with amrit.⁴ Many Sikhs would also in practice observe features of local Hindu tradition e.g. marriage within caste (l) or the **vrata** of Karva Chauth (k).⁵ Those who observe i - u are Hindu. They will be diverse in their style of **puja**,⁶ their favoured deity etc., and they may include Guru Nanak (h) among their spiritual guides and focuses for devotion. Many Punjabis observe a spectrum of religious practice approximating to c - m. Kalsi (1989) describes clearly the relationship of Punjabi village culture to the current, much narrower definition of a Sikh person in the code of discipline.

In this paper when 'Hindu' is used it refers to characteristics i - u, to individuals practising these and/or using this label of themselves.

When 'Sikh' is used it refers to characteristics a - h, to individuals practising these and/or using this label of themselves.

The Valmiki and Ravidasi: background

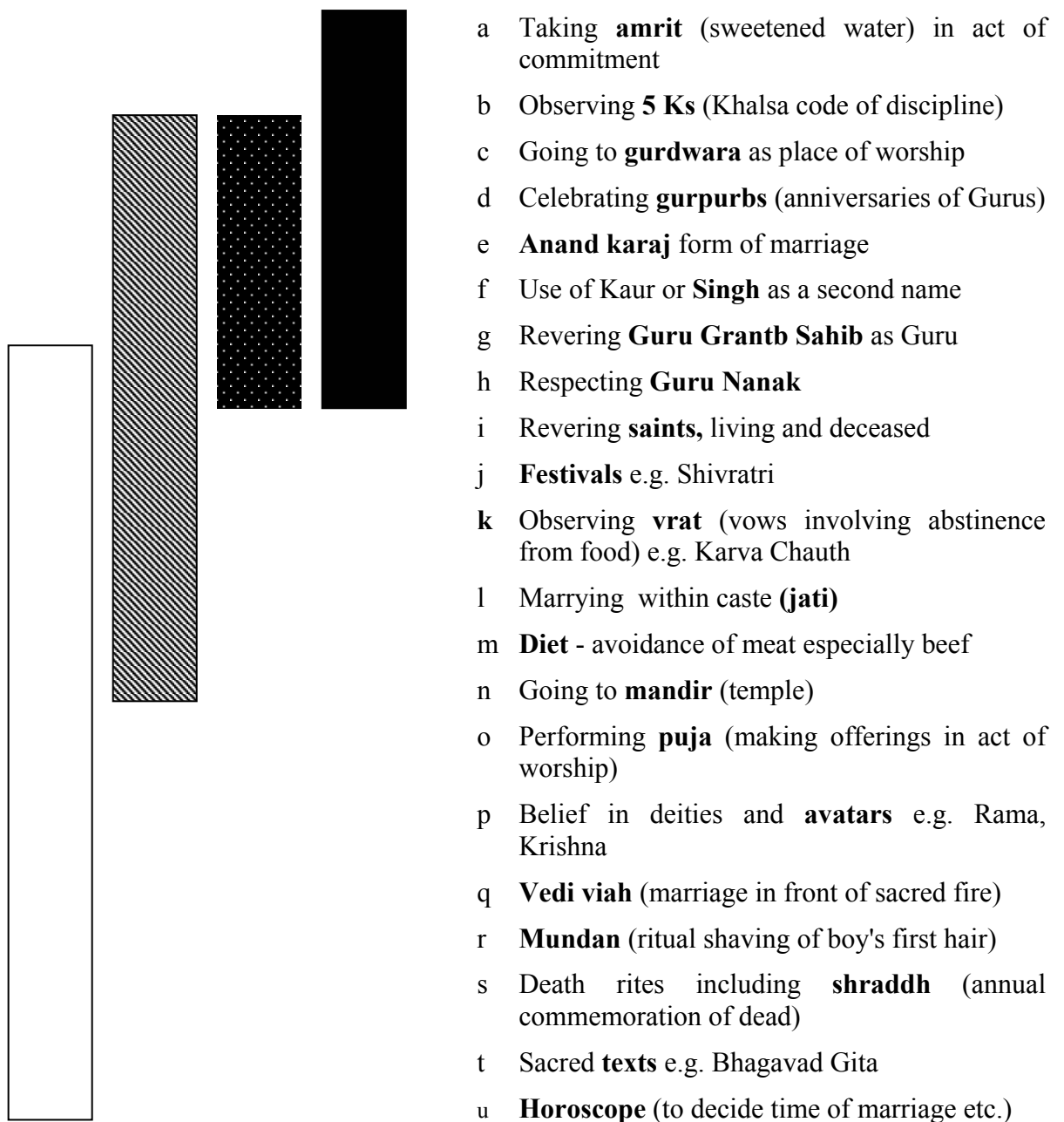
All the children who were interviewed for this project were from either the Valmiki or the Ravidasi community. This fact introduces further complexities in describing individuals as either Sikh or Hindu. Yet most of the children from these communities who were interviewed did describe themselves as Hindu or Sikh and it is into these two categories that schoolteachers slot them. These two communities are structurally distinct Punjabi groups, very low in the traditional hierarchy of castes (**zat**). A **zat** (**jati** in Hindi) is an endogamous group, identified with a particular hereditary occupation. Juergensmeyer (1982) sets these two communities in the context of Punjabi society. The nearest Punjabi equivalent to 'community' in this sense is **zat-baradari**. Elsewhere in this paper I also use the word 'caste' to denote zat-baradari.

In many cases in Coventry - especially among the Valmiki - one parent comes from a family which follows Hindu custom, the other from a family which has adopted a Sikh identity. Many Valmiki parents resident in Coventry originate from the village of Litran where people of the most oppressed caste have become Mazhabi Sikhs. Since, in accordance with custom, their spouses have come from different villages, and these may have been less influenced by Sikhism, children encounter both Sikh and Hindu styles of devotion in the home. One fourteen year old Valmiki girl could articulate the situation:





My dad's Hindu. My mum's side are Sikhs. She has 'Kaur' in her name. All the village were Sikh. They all believed in Sikh gods. In the city where my dad came from they were all Hindus.

The lowest castes have had a particularly shifting pattern of religious allegiance. In previous centuries many socially oppressed

The Hindu-Sikh continuum of belief and practice



Key

-  Those who observe a – h are unquestionably Sikh
-  Those who observe c – h may not meet strict Khalsa requirements but identify themselves as Sikhs
-  Many Punjabis observe this wider spectrum of religious observance
-  Hindu Punjabi forms of belief and practice

people had identified themselves as Sikh or Muslim. They were wooed by the Arya Samaj (Jones 1976) and attracted by the benefits which conversion to Christianity offered. Following the lead of Dr. Ambedkar some opted for Buddhism to improve their situation (Juergensmeyer 1982). Punjab Census Reports from 1881 to the present indicate the range of names which have been used by these two castes. The term 'Addharmi', (literally 'member of the primal religion') was assumed by many first as a religion (1931) which came to be regarded as a caste (1961).

The occupations of the lowest castes were essential to the corporate welfare of the village community, but they were regarded as polluting by the members of higher castes. So both the Valmikis and the Ravidasis have a history of social oppression as untouchable castes. Many dislike any reference being made to the menial jobs with which they are still identified by Punjabis from other castes. They were excluded from the temples of the higher castes and lived in isolation from higher caste people. Reformist movements such as Sikhism and later, in the late nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj, discredited casteism. Since 1950 the practice of untouchability has been illegal in India and 'scheduled castes' have been entitled to positive discrimination in education and government employment. Nevertheless, social stigma still persists both in India and overseas.⁷ It was during their struggle in India in the 20th century for economic and educational parity with more privileged sectors of society that members of these two castes adopted the more prestigious titles of 'Valmiki' (or 'Balmiki') and Ravidasi. 'Valmiki' identifies their caste with the revered **rishi** (sage), Valmik, the composer of the great epic, the *Ramayana*.⁸ The title 'Ravidasi' links the Ravidasis with Ravidas, the fifteenth-century leather-worker, many of whose inspired hymns are incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture revered as Guru by the Sikhs. By Ravidasis he is venerated as Guru and regarded as the Guru of Guru Nanak. For Sikhs of other castes

Guru Nanak was the first Guru and Ravidas was not a Guru but only a **bhagat** (mystical poet).

In both the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities in Coventry caste membership and corporate sectarian allegiance appear to be coterminous (cf. Babb 1972). All who attend the Jagat Guru Valmikji Maharaj Temple in Coventry with its distinctive focus and form of worship, are, apart from occasional visitors, Valmikis. Marriage out of caste remains exceptional. All Valmikis attend the temple, even if only infrequently. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of Ravidasis and the Ravidasi **gurdwara** (place of worship).

The meaning of 'religion'

Religion is a problematic term, particularly when it refers to traditions rooted in India. There is a fundamental mismatch between the European word 'religion' and Indian concepts such as **dharm** which it sometimes translates. Juergensmeyer (1982) analyses **panth**, **qaum** and **dharm**. These three Punjabi terms, each with a different area of meaning, are sometimes rendered as 'religion'. Panth implies following a spiritual leader's path, qaum denotes a faith community such as Islam, and dharm (the Punjabi form of Sanskrit dharma) is the life-style appropriate to one's caste, gender and seniority.

When children and I differed in the meaning which we gave to 'religion' I did not impose my understanding of the word but accepted their use as part of my data. The children who were interviewed did not all separate their experience into such categories as language and religion. Their skill in doing so perhaps shows the extent to which they have acquired the conceptual categories of English. Their marked tendency to use 'language' and 'religion' interchangeably is probably not just confusion but it is true to an understanding of dharm as family customs and duties, ritual and otherwise. Statements such as this Ravidasi eight-year-old-girl's can be understood in this cross-cultural context:

*I've got one friend that's the same
language as me - real Punjabi,*

she prays to the real God that we pray to.

In some cases 'religion' in children's usage refers to everything - food, clothes, skin-colour, watching Indian movies - which differentiates them from their non-Asian peers. Conversely a specific practice might appear to the researcher to be clearly linked to 'religion' (whether the term is used of cultural norms or in its western sense) but it was not so perceived by the interviewee. Thus an eleven year old Valmiki boy, who defined himself as Sikh, denied any connection between his two brothers' uncut hair and religion:

There's two that have got top knots, and me and my brother haven't. So my mum goes, 'Two can have top knots.' I don't think a top knot would suit me ... but my brothers were born with long hair. That's why my mum had to put a little top knot for them.

For the purposes of this research I define religion as the whole set of beliefs, attitudes and values expressed in the practices and lifestyles of individuals living within a community.

I have also included children's views on God, life and afterlife. These are developing with inputs from a much wider social arena than the Valmiki or Ravidasi communities. I also noted the children's knowledge of deities and rituals which are outside their first hand experience.

The interviews

Fourteen interviewees (eight boys, six girls) were from the Valmiki community, ten were Ravidasi (three boys, seven girls). All were between eight and fourteen years of age. For three months twelve of the Valmiki children and eight of the Ravidasi children recorded their experiences in diaries. (In these the festivals of Divali and Christmas figured prominently.) For seven months I was a participant observer in homes, public halls

and places of congregational worship, in order that I might be better able to understand the interview data. The two interviews were devised in such a way as to minimise the imposition of categories and terminology on the children.⁹ In the first the questions were extremely open. For instance children were asked to describe what an average weekday was like for them, 'from the first moment someone gets up in your house'. I then questioned the children on details of religious significance such as domestic worship. In the second interview the children were shown twenty-five devotional pictures and asked to say what came into their mind. These were Indian devotional pictures of a type which are often sold as trade calendars and hung in homes and in places of worship. Islam, Buddhism and Christianity were represented by one picture apiece. This was because I knew that members of these castes in Pakistan identify with Islam, that the followers of Muslim saints (**pir**) include Indian Punjabis and that conversion of low caste people to Islam continues to happen in parts of India. Following Dr. Ambedkar many Punjabis from the most oppressed castes have declared themselves Buddhist. Christianity too has attracted converts from the least privileged classes, including families in Coventry who are related to local Valmikis. The other pictures represented the spectrum of Sikh and Hindu religious allegiance that I had encountered over eleven years among Punjabis in Britain. These included the ten Gurus venerated by Sikhs, Hindu deities familiar to Punjabi Hindus, semi-mythological characters enjoying popular devotion in Punjab - Baba Balaknath and Gugga Pir - and there was also a pendant bearing a portrait of the living Radhasoami master, Charan Singh.¹⁰

Worship: Corporate and Private

Public Worship

In documenting the religious activity of a community their public places of worship are an obvious starting point. As noted above there are in Coventry, in addition to other gurdwaras and **mandirs** (Hindu temples) two buildings owned by the Valmiki and Ravidasi respectively and each used as a place for corporate worship.

All the Valmiki and Ravidasi children reported attending their respective temples, even if only on occasional Sundays or for weddings and I saw all the children there on at least one occasion. Most could not name the holy book(s) which in each case dominate the worship hall and are shown great respect, and they admitted that they could not understand much of the language of worship, but all knew exactly what behaviour was appropriate. An eleven year old Valmiki boy described the procedure:

First we go in, take our shoes off, then put some money down. Then we used to come, sit down. Then when everything's finished they did this special God-food, and then you eat it and then you have to go into the kind of kitchen.¹¹ They give you something to eat there – first the ladies, then the children, then the boys - men.

Other children provided other details applicable in both temples such as covering their heads on entering. Here is an eleven year old Ravidasi girl's written description of going to the gurdwara:

Today we went to the temple. We took our shoes off and walked up to the holy book. We put our money down and prayed. Then we sat down and listened to a man reading the

holy book. Later we had some tea. I and my sisters went back into the temple and listened to some songs. A few minutes later we had some chapaties. We had dahl with our chapaties. My mum and dad helped clear everything up. Then my dad took us home.

They could not say why they went to the particular temple that they did beyond knowing that older family members went there. Children often sit for only short periods. They move in and out between the **langar** (corporate dining area) and the prayer-hall. Although for the most part unaware of the meaning of 'caste' or of its relation to the congregation of which they are part, it is here that caste ties are affirmed through socialisation and (for adults) the caste's self esteem is enhanced through the glorifying of Maharishi Valmik and Guru Ravidas. Children of eight to fourteen years of age have all acquired a behaviour pattern and sense of belonging, though in the words of an eleven year old Valmiki boy 'temple music is boring'.

Some children accepted the temple as a place for expressing gratitude or anxiety and for being blessed:

If you've got a problem you go to the temple and pray and that makes it get better.

(nine year old Valmiki boy)

We went and said thank you to God for our car. We got a new car. You just go in and you have like a cloth which you spread over the part where the holy book is laid down. You pay something and then go down and say thank you to God.

(thirteen year old Ravidasi girl)

The cloth which she mentions is a **rumala**, a decorative cover which is spread over the opened volume of scripture when it is not being read. On special occasions people place a new rumala in front of the scripture as an offering.

An eight year old Ravidasi girl described how she would

give a pound to the gods and I say a name and the "in charge" I'll say to give them good tidings, and that. I say my sister's and mine and my other sisters', 'Sony, Mandip, Harpreet and Gurpreet' and he says 'Sony, Mandip, Harpreet and Gurpreet ... Guru bakshi'. That means 'Guru take good care of them' and that.

In India there are both Valmiki and Ravidasi temples in which worship is Hindu rather than Sikh in style. In Southall the Valmikis' mandir is dominated by an impressive **murti** (statue) of Maharishi Valmik.

However, in Coventry the worship in both temples conforms to a broadly Sikh pattern (see Nesbitt 1990a) although in the Valmiki temple the Ramayana is installed alongside the Guru Granth Sahib and there is less similarity to Sikh worship than in the Ravidasi temple. For example the Valmiki community's Ardas (hymn for which the congregation stand at the close of worship) is a totally different composition as it is a hymn of praise to Maharishi Valmik.

Domestic worship

By contrast with the prevailing norms of corporate community worship, domestic worship, particularly among the local Valmiki families, is often characteristically Hindu - a simple **puja** (act of worship involving the offering of light, food etc. to deities).

The range of domestic prayer and worship reported by children was diverse in character and content. Some Ravidasi children reported lighting an incense stick and praying in front of a religious picture (of Guru Ravidas or Guru Nanak) but none spoke of worshipping in front of a grouping of pictures and/or images. Using the Punjabi word **dhuf** for incense one eight year old girl said:

We really pray to Guru Ravidas

because ... my grandad every day in the morning he gets some dhuf - dhuf is some sort of smell - and he puts it all over the picture and he prays, I don't know what he says but he prays it so quickly.

An eleven year old Ravidasi girl described a Sikh style of devotion:

My mum gets up about six. She has her bath and says her prayers upstairs in a separate room. It's an ordinary room and there's a sort of table there with some cloth on it and it leans down and we just pray there. There's a big book and you cover that. It's a prayer book - big one - it's always covered. My mum and my dad read from it. If I have to call my mum I first cover my head and take my shoes off.

None of the Valmiki children mentioned having a special room for the Guru Granth Sahib but they described occasions on which a copy was brought to the house (see below). Several described in detail worship at the home shrine. An eleven year old Valmiki girl described what happened on Thursday evenings in the 'jay room' upstairs in their house. 'Jay' is a word used for paying homage to the deity.

According to this girl her family pray for about fifteen minutes between 6.30 and 7.30. In the room they have pictures of Krishna, Valmik and others including the goddess 'sitting on a lion' i.e. Ambaji and a book. Her mum would make **karah**¹² or her brother would bring Indian sweets home to be distributed later as **prashad**). Before going in everyone washes their face, removes their shoes and sometimes the girls put a **chunni** (Punjabi scarf) on their heads. Lights are lit. Her dad would read from the book and they would sing. When they prayed, she said, they would move their lips quietly, in their own words praying to God 'to look after our house when we go out'. They would next put their hands together, touch the board and then their head. The board, she explained, is below the pictures 'where the feet of God are' so, although the girl did not say so, this gesture demonstrated

humility and respect. They would then take some of the water which had been near the pictures and ‘spill it outside in the garden’.

The style and content of prayer reported by children may be Sikh even when the grouping of pictures in a shrine suggests a Hindu emphasis. Thus a twelve year old Valmiki girl described herself as Hindu and described the Hindu religious pictures in her kitchen. She said that she prayed morning and evening in words learned a few years before from her mother. She would say the first lines of Japji Sahib once and ‘Nanak nam chardi kala’ five times. Japji starts with the **mul mantar** (Hindi: mantra) the Sikhs’ statement of belief in God. ‘Nanak nam chardi kala tere bhane sarbat da bhala’ is a verse repeated by Sikhs at the end of Ardas. It can be translated as ‘Nanak prays that the Name may be magnified; By your grace may all be blest.’ (McLeod 1984: 103).

She did not know the ‘meaning’ of the words but said that repeating them made her

feel calm, relaxed and I feel I’ve done what I’m supposed to and I can do anything I like.

The peace of mind which children report suggests that they will not lightly abandon the religious practices begun in childhood.¹³ It seems likely that it is public worship which expresses community leaders’ aspirations for their community’s image vis-à-vis other Punjabi communities whereas it is their domestic worship which expresses members’ individual leanings towards certain spiritual traditions. Children grow up as heirs to both the domestic and corporate styles and focuses of worship.

House-warming

In addition to daily and weekly religious activity in the home key events in a family’s life are marked in ritual ways which are often distinctly Sikh or Hindu. For example when Indians move to a new house it is usual to have a ceremony to bless the house. As with daily and weekly prayer children’s

description of the Sikh or Hindu style ritual involved did not exactly correspond to their perception of themselves as Sikh or Hindu. For example a Valmiki girl who classified herself as ‘Hindu Punjabi’ reported that the holy book was brought from the temple. Her granddad had read a portion from it downstairs to bless the house. No meat was allowed in the house at that time. People were invited and had to cover their heads and remove their shoes. She did not say whether the ‘holy book’ was the Ramayana or the Guru Granth Sahib, both of which are kept in the temple, but the rite she described conforms to the widespread Sikh practice of having the Guru Granth Sahib bless the house (Bennett 1990). An eleven year old Valmiki boy (who had defined himself as Sikh) included further detail in his account of a house-warming which had been recorded on video:

They brought this kind of, you know, God’s thing to protect the house, box thing about two feet across. The have God’s book in it hidden. They hung a square thing (with) two lights at the back to shine on the person that reads. Lots of people came. Then after they took it down my cousins’ house they started dancing and everything.

He was struggling to describe the installation of the scriptures on a wooden stand below a canopy - often a sheet fixed to the ceiling. Sometimes when I visited the Valmiki temple only the Ramayana was in evidence and I was informed that the Guru Granth Sahib had been borrowed and taken to the house of someone who had just moved.

None of the Ravidasi children mentioned house-warming ceremonies but as in Coventry their practice generally conforms to the Sikh model it is likely that they too invite people to hear a reading from the Guru Granth Sahib in the new home. One girl’s mother however reported that her own parents, as ‘strict Hindus’ would have a **havan** i.e. a fire would be lit in a metal container and fed with sweet smelling substances while sacred words were recited.

An eleven year old Valmiki boy told me that their house-warming party had been videoed and he reported no ‘religious’ component. A nine year old Valmiki girl’s family had moved a

few weeks before the interview. Outside the front door on each side a short piece of thread hung down. On this had been threaded a lemon with two chillies above and below it. At the time her **bua** (father's sister) had been visiting from Delhi. It was she who had hung these up because 'it keeps bad luck away' and she had instructed the family to leave them, not to throw them away. The girl had a red thread round her wrist which her bua had also forbidden her to throw away. Instead it must eventually be put with flowers in the garden. In addition to the thread a mark of red powder had been put on her forehead. The family had held a havan which, in the girl's words, was 'to kill the germs'. The fire in a metal container had been carried into each room of the house and a video had been made so that the girl's father's mother in India could see the proceedings.

In many cases South Asian families mark a removal with a religious ceremony. In Britain this is unusual in the dominant, non-Asian society. Thus Punjabi children grow up not only with ritual which distinguishes their experience from their peers at times of festivals, birth, marriage and death, but also with a sense of other occasions involving religious ritual and blessing.

Special Family Occasions

During the research period no births took place in the families involved. I was invited to a party, in a hired hall, to celebrate the birth of a baby boy. This consisted of eating, drinking and dancing to **bhangra** music (see Chapter 7). A Ravidasi mother said that boys have their first hair shaved off to make it strong and because the first hair is 'the life of the child'. Her husband had cut their son's hair and this had been taken to India and put in holy, running water. Further research is needed to see whether a **mundan** (Hindu head shaving) rite is widely practised. Clearly for boys who are brought up with uncut hair, on the Sikh pattern, there would be no **mundan** ceremony.

Marriages

All the children referred to marriages. Some described them in detail. All involved the traditional features shared by Punjabi families both Hindu and Sikh. For instance in their respective homes, as in many North Indian communities, the bride and group are beautified with turmeric paste, or gram flour paste, during the week before the wedding day. It is a light-hearted occasion and the paste is supposed to make the complexion more beautiful. On the eve of the wedding the bride's hands and feet are decorated with a paste made from ground henna leaves. This is called **mehndi**.

After the solemnisation they compete in untying threads from each other's wrists and in snatching a coin from a bowl of cloudy water. All the Ravidasis described weddings of the **anand karaj** type. This involves the groom leading the bride around the Guru Granth Sahib while stanzas of Guru Ram Das's **lavan** hymn are sung. (The word **lavan** means circumambulation.) Valmiki children described family weddings of this type and also weddings of a Hindu type in which the

couple circumambulated a sacred fire. These ceremonies are known as **vedi viah**. Vedi means the container for the fire. Viah is the Punjabi for marriage. The nine year old Valmiki girl quoted above described both a Hindu-style family marriage in Britain and a Sikh-style one in India.

Children's descriptions reflected whether they were 'on the boy's side' or 'on the girl's side'. These days, although the bridegroom's mother may sit outside, the female relatives of the groom attend the marriage ceremony, whereas in the past this did not happen. In the days preceding the marriage the preparations in the two households and the songs which accompany significant events differ. The civil marriage, like the engagement, becomes a preliminary ceremony. It is followed by a party including the formal cutting of the wedding cake.

Here the nine year old Valmiki girl describes the preliminaries involving the bridegroom:

On the girl's side they don't have a party then - we have a party on the boy's side ... and first it's maian.¹⁴ You put some sort of gram flour and water together. This happened [at my] mum's cousin's wedding. They mixed it on a board, the women went to the wall and printed some on the wall outside in the garden. Next day you put mehndi on the man, dots and lines on his fingers.¹⁵ Everyone who wanted to [do so] put some on but I don't like it much.

Her twelve year old male cousin described what happened in the run up to his father's younger brother's marriage. In this account 'cream' refers to the yellow paste made with turmeric mentioned above.

Recently my uncle got married. First we had the registration. I went. I had to take a day off school. Following week's time they had a sort of ceremony where all the

sisters clean the brother, put cream on him. You get it in a tin, the paste. This is Thursday. On Friday we had a party. On Saturday early we went to the bride's place and the ceremony started where you put rice in the fire.

Putting grains of rice on the fire is a feature of Hindu marriage ceremonies.

In describing the religious ceremony there was a tendency for children to say that the couple walk seven times around the holy book. In fact in Sikh style marriages (anand karaj) and in many Hindu weddings there are only four circumambulations. A Valmiki girl described the Hindu style of wedding:

It involves fire in a big pot. The bride and groom put rice in. The priest tells them what to do. He puts things in and reads from the book.

The priest feeds the flames with **ghi** (butter purified by being boiled) and **samagri** (a mixture of dry, aromatic plant substances).

A Ravidasi girl described a Sikh-style wedding. In common with other children she could not put a name to the **chauri**, the fan made of yak tail hair, which is waved as a sign of respect above the Guru Granth Sahib.

If you're in the gurdwara where the wedding's taking place you feel bored. The actual wedding is when the priest or person that sits at the top - he has like a stick sort of thing with horse hair, I think it is, on the end in a bunch - he waves it across the holy book and he says out this thing from the book - ceremony or something - and that lasts a long time, say five or three hours. In the middle or near the end they [bride and groom] go round from where the holy person is sitting with the book, because it's like a box where they're sitting, and they go round it. And the brothers of the girl and the people on the boy's side they help them round, like they hold them while they go round and that.

Here she was describing the couple's circumambulation of the scriptures, duly installed on the **palki**, a wooden canopied stand. Custom demands that the girl's male relatives stand at intervals around the palki to support her as she follows her husband. This is public evidence of their approval of the marriage.

This girl then described, without naming it, the concluding **Ardas** (congregational prayer), when everyone stands to pray for blessing after briefly commemorating Sikh pioneers and martyrs.

Children went on to describe the subsequent playful competition between bride and groom. After the marriage the threads, which had been tied round the bride's and groom's wrists on the wedding morning, are untied amid banter and jokes from both sides. On arrival at his house the couple would compete to untie the threads which had been tied earlier in the week at the **maian**.

With reference to these threads a nine year old Valmiki girl described a game involving:

a piece of coconut or silver ball or shell on a thread. The bride and groom have to untie each other's.

Her cousin described this and the sequel:

*The bride is brought here, all the fireworks go off. Everyone's happy and they play a sort of game. First it starts with the bride taking the string off the bridegroom. His sisters tied it when they put the **haldi** [turmeric] on and they put it in the water with a ten pence piece and a fifty pence piece and they have to get the fifty pence piece. It's just misty, so they can't see. [It's misty with] flour. I think [it's] five rounds, isn't it? The person who got it [50p most times [won]]. If you get the ten pence you lose.*

Such contests are the traditional means of breaking the ice between a husband and wife who have probably had no physical contact before this, although the children did not see the fun and games in such terms.

Children did not mention the **milni**, the occasion when the senior relatives of the bride and groom formally meet their counterparts in their future in-laws' family. Boys witnessed the milni which precedes the marriage ceremony when men folk laughingly try to lift their counterparts off the ground. Girls were present when the two mothers and close female relatives embraced, danced and sang mocking songs after a Ravidasi anand karaj ceremony which I attended. Even if unconscious of the significance of the milni children thus grow accustomed to marriages as a visible union of families, not merely of two individuals.

The Valmiki boy quoted above mentioned the party later that night with dinner and:

then everyone starts to go. The next day you have to clear up (the) party poppers, dishes.

A Ravidasi boy was down to earth, describing in his diary his role at the reception for his father's younger sister's marriage. On that day he wrote:

Today it is Aneeta's wedding. I had a two piece suit on. First we went to the temple and then we had tea and something to eat. After the temple we went to the club and I had to do some work. I had a great time. At the end the ladies went somewhere and the men stayed. There was lots of rubbish and we ran out of dustbin bags so me and my cousin went to the shops but they did not sell any.

All these weddings had taken place in England. On her return from India the nine year old Valmiki girl commented on photos of her father's younger brother's marriage which she had attended while she was there. This was the first Sikh-style marriage in the family (as the girl's side were Sikh) but concluded with a Bhagavati **jagran** (night of singing to the goddess) in the bridegroom's house. The marriage, conducted by a **granthi** (the reader of the Guru Granth Sahib) from the Valmiki community, included none of the distinctive Valmiki liturgy which is used in public worship in Coventry. The bridegroom

arrived at the bride's with his **sarbala** (small male relative who accompanies him) on a horse. A band played triumphantly meanwhile.

Valmiki and Ravidasi children become familiar with family traditions which may vary markedly from marriage to marriage. Video (as we shall see below) brings weddings in India and elsewhere into their personal experience.

Funeral rites

In the course of their interviews, children did not refer to funerals although adults described what would take place. The body of the deceased would be in the family's house so that relatives could come and pay their respects. During the research period the Valmikis' community centre was opened and the bodies of members who died were brought from their home to lie there. Men and women come to pay their respects before proceeding to the crematorium. After the cremation a **path** (reading from scripture) took place for a number of days in the home of the bereaved family, concluding with a final reading and **langar** (corporate meal) in the temple.

A thirteen year old Ravidasi girl referred to **masos**, (grief) one Punjabi word (the other is **aphsos**) for when 'people come round to your house and sit and cry and that'. She explained 'I never go to one of them because our parents think that children shouldn't go to things like that'. Not surprisingly children knew less about funerals than about marriages.

Shraddh

Shraddh is the annual autumn commemoration of deceased relatives in the home. While talking about the pictures in the domestic shrine, the nine year old Valmiki girl mentioned that:

We've got a picture of my granddad - because you know people who die, we put pictures of [them in the shrine]. And you know what we do sometimes? We do this every year in September, I think. We

*did it on Saturday. In the morning we have to take a bath and then we have to pray and my mum makes prashad and she makes special things. That's what you do when somebody dies like your parents or your grandparents - shraddh. We light a sort of **diva**, it's made of dough, and [we] put some oil and a wick in it and we light it, and then we put some food on the tray and put it in the cabinet when we pray. And when we've lighted it we each have a turn to go up there and when we do that we have to take a little tiny bit of food and put it by the diva. And my dad said that Hindus believe that the person whose soul has gone is in the flame, and we offer food to it.*

This is a clear account of Hindus' annual respects to deceased parents known as shraddh.¹⁶ Such occasions are less likely than weddings to become known to outsiders but play a similar role in reinforcing family ties and responsibilities which continue beyond death.

An eleven year old Valmiki boy mentioned the inclusion of a deceased relative in the course of the marriage ceremony.

When their other brothers and sisters got married they pray for that person as if they were there. At my uncle's wedding his dad was dead and they prayed then.

Children grow up in homes in which the role of each family member is clearly understood as part of a network of respect and obligation. In death their relations are still honoured.

Festivals

Despite the fact that there are no public holidays for Asian festivals these continue to play a part in children's community life. Even if less prominent than they would be for children in India they still provide opportunities for enjoyment. In the past festivals played a significant role in the socialisation of successive generations within a cultural tradition (Marriott n.d.). School and the media now play increasingly conspicuous roles in cultural transmission. In Britain Christmas has upstaged other festivals and these are marked in a much more cursory way. Nevertheless all the children mentioned celebrating Indian festivals.

It is possible that, had the research period lasted a whole year, more festivals might have been mentioned e.g. Baisakhi, or children would have volunteered more information about some of them, although, on the basis of earlier fieldwork among Hindu children, it is likely that Divali and Christmas would still have been the favourites. All the children mentioned these two festivals. Their references to Christmas are considered below in Chapter 8. Easter, Father's Day, Guy Fawkes Day, Hallowe'en, Harvest Festival, and Shrove Tuesday were each mentioned by no more than one child. Holi, Lohri, New Year's Day, Rakhi (Raksha Bandhan), Guru Gobind Singh's birthday, Guru Nanak's birthday, and the birthdays of Ravidas and Valmiki were all mentioned by more than one child. The accounts of festivals which follow further indicate the extent to which children participate in certain festivals.

Lohri

Lohri (Makar Sankranti) falls on or near January 13th. It is a **sangrand**, the day when the sun enters the zodiac house of Capricorn. In both gurdwaras and in the families' homes the traditional Lohri fare was prepared and eaten - **saron sag** (mustard leaf) **makai-di-**

roti (thick yellow cornmeal chapati) and **khir** (rice pudding). One Valmiki boy had been in India for Lohri and recalled going outside and singing. In Punjab bonfires are lit and families gather around these in the evening to celebrate.

In Britain too, following the birth of a son, families give sweets, especially **rerian** (lozenges of sugar coated with sesame seeds). In the Valmiki temple stories were told - for instance how on this day the churning of the ocean began in the battle of the gods and demons for **amrit** (ambrosia). But none of the children showed interest in Lohri and such stories went over their heads.

Rakhi

About Rakhi, the festival on the full moon night of Shraavan (August approximately), all the children spoke from annual first hand experience. They know the festival by its vernacular names '**rakhi**' or '**rakhri**', the words also used for the decorative thread which a sister or 'cousin sister' ties on her brother's and cousin brother's wrist. The Sanskrit name by which this festival is more widely known is Raksha Bandhan. In the Valmiki family which I visited on this day brothers and sisters gathered together with their children. There were two **thalis** (round steel trays) holding rakhis, Indian sweets, a small round pot of **sindur** (red powder) and a few grains of uncooked rice. Each woman or girl, in descending order of seniority, tied a rakhi on each brother or male cousin in an atmosphere of cheerful reunion. Some male relatives resisted having the **tika** (blob of sindur and dry rice grains) applied to their foreheads but felt no inhibition in receiving the chocolate **mithai** (milk sweet) and cherry **barfi** (milk sweet). Their sisters and cousins received $\text{œ}5$ and $\text{£}10$ notes to share. Photographs were taken and coke was drunk.

While describing what happens one boy mentioned 'a fire' in India, presumably the

circling of an **arati** light (i.e. little oil light of the sort used in worship) by a sister in front of her brother's face as a mark of respect. This did not figure in other children's accounts. In fact the festival appeared to be celebrated in its most basic way. A Ravidasi girl's mother said, 'We do it as a formality. We don't go through all the stages'. The time of day no longer mattered, although adults referred to the fact that the exchange of rakhis, sweets and money should take place early in the morning before girls have eaten anything.

Honorary kin were included - one informant told me that another girl, who had no brother, put sindur, **chawal** (rice) and rakhri (rakhi) on her (my informant's) grandad. Absent relatives were remembered. A gold chain arrived from a sister in Germany and was duly fixed by a local sister. In a Ravidasi family girls tied rakhis on their father and wore rakhis sent for them by their bua (father's sister) in Delhi. No other informant mentioned that girls might also receive and wear rakhis. A Valmiki girl tied a rakhi on her grandfather and received £5. Of the significance a Valmiki boy suggested:

It's the sister who thanks the brother for look aftering.

Another said that it was so he would 'have a long life'.

This festival powerfully affirms and illustrates the bond between brothers and sisters and the regard for cousins as brothers and sisters. The implications for gender awareness are further explored below and in Nesbitt (unpublished paper). Like Divali it is an annual experience which Valmiki and Ravidasi children share with Indians from many other parts of India.

Divali

In 1988 Divali, a favourite festival, marked a higher point than usual in the lives of children from the Coventry Valmiki community. Some of them were to present dances and songs in the newly opened Community Centre in the course of a cultural event staged on Divali

eve. This was recorded by a television crew with a view to excerpts appearing in a documentary.¹⁷ In the prayer hall a passage was read from the Ramayana and the point was made that but for Maharishi Valmik, the composer of Ramayana, there would be no Rama and no Divali. The evening ended with a bhangra (popular Punjabi folk music) group composed of Valmiki lads playing in the community hall which was crowded with people dancing. For Ravidasi and Valmiki children Divali was an enjoyable day. They referred to eating **pakaoras** (spicy vegetable fritters) and Indian sweets, to fireworks, candles and lights and to playing cards. They also mentioned acting in dramas about Rama and Sita at school. One Valmiki boy recalled how in India his male relatives sat together at night playing a game 'like poker with money' while everyone else watched.¹⁸

The Indian custom of leaving a door or window open for Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, to enter the house and shower her blessings, has understandably declined in Britain. However, a Valmiki Hindu boy mentioned the goddess (**devi**) and reported that before going to sleep he and his family light candles and:

the devi's meant to turn the candle out and then you know that she's come like to your house. Last year it did actually go out because, when we were going to sleep, there was like a bit of wind and it just went out. My mum would usually say that that's the devi, when the wind comes in.

Another Valmiki Hindu boy recalled how in India people decorated their houses

with bits of electric lights and candles and flowers that people picked, because we had some in our garden in India. We make a big chain out of them and then hung them around over the doorway around the ledges. People painted a sort of long red path and then I've forgotten which god it was they put in front of it.

In Coventry, he wrote:

It was Divali today and I went to school. When I came back from school I went to get some fireworks. My mum and my grandmother went to get some new pots and pans and some candles; when we got home we lit the candles all over the house in every room and we lit some devi (i.e. oil lights, divas) on the doorstep. Then we prayed and blessed the Indian sweets. After that we went to my grandparent's house. There we lit lots of candles and lights. I called my cousins over to light the fireworks because there was so many.

Valmiki Jayanti

By contrast with such all-India festivals both Valmiki Jayanti and Guru Ravidas's birthday are specific to their respective communities. If temple worship is the desired public face of the communities concerned then these patronal festivals epitomise this. Families attend the temple in greater numbers than at other times of year and it is on these days that local dignitaries from the City Council are invited.

On the full moon of the Indian lunar month of Ashvina, a month before the major Sikh festival of Guru Nanak's birthday, the Valmiki community remember the birthday of Maharishi Valmiki which is celebrated on the following Sunday. This marks the end of a week during which the Ramayana is read daily, but not continuously, in the temple. The previous Sunday the new flag is hoisted. In 1988 all the children stood in the street watching as men climbed a ladder to the roof to replace the flagpole, now wrapped from top to bottom in a new red cloth and topped by a triangular pennant, also of new red cloth, on which the Valmiki emblem, a bow and arrow, stood out in silver. This ceremony was akin to the hoisting of a **nishan sahib** at Baisakhi outside the Sikhs' gurdwaras but the red colour distinguished the cloth from the saffron colour used by the Sikhs. The flag brought particular excitement to the family

whose women folk stitched it and to the family who went home with the treasured cloth from the previous year's flag. One young woman said that they might trim a small child's clothes with pieces of the used flag as **rakh** (protection).

In 1988, but not in other years, children wore round their necks a ribbon to which a colourful emblem was attached. This consisted of a picture of Maharishi Valmiki surrounded by thirteen circles each of which contained an Indian religious symbol such as the Hindu **om**, (a syllable, used in meditation, which resembles an elaborated 3) the **khanda** (double edged sword) of the Sikhs, the wheel of Ashoka, a mace and a swastika (an auspicious Hindu sign).

The celebrations on the Sunday following Valmiki Jayanti drew a large congregation. The usual weekly worship was extended with speeches and hymns in praise of Maharishi Valmiki.

Guru Ravidas's Birthday

Similarly for Ravidasi children the Sunday of or following Guru Ravidas's birthday is the religious high point of the year, the day when their families are most likely to attend the gurdwara. The anniversary falls on the day of the full moon of the lunar month of Magha, approximately February. There is a similar feeling of joyful reunion and community pride. Video and sound cassettes of hymns in honour of Ravidas were on sale outside the prayer hall in 1989.

Thus certain annual festivals strengthen and celebrate the children's identity as members of distinct Valmiki and Ravidasi communities. Some festivals, shared by Sikh and/or Hindu families, confirm them in an Indian, Punjabi, Hindu or Sikh identity. Other celebrations, such as Christmas, Mothering Sunday and Hallowe'en signal their experience as children sharing in the cultural calendar observed by schools and the media - the Christian calendar in secular mode.

Food and Fasting

In Hindu families food carries particular symbolic meaning. Whether or not families avoid beef or meat generally they are aware that abstention from eggs, fish and meat is the ideal regime and the one most appropriate to spiritual progress.¹⁹ In many non-vegetarian families only vegetarian food is eaten on particular days and many individuals observe further patterns of food avoidance in association with ritual acts. Sikhs differ among themselves - some stressing vegetarianism while others point to evidence of meat consumption by the Gurus. However, there is a common feeling that the most spiritual people avoid intoxicants and non-vegetarian food. Indians often make a connection between meat-eating (or avoidance) and caste but no such correlation holds up in practice among Punjabis. As children's accounts testified, Ravidasis and Valmikis, like higher caste Punjabis, were often vegetarian in obedience to the ruling of specific religious teachers.

Vegetarianism

One Valmiki girl said that for some months her family had stopped eating meat, fish, eggs and cake (because this contains egg) on Thursdays. Many referred to abstention from beef and (in the case of Valmikis) to the avoidance on particular days of meat, fish and eggs. One Valmiki girl reported that her father's sister from Delhi fasted on **puranmashi** (the full moon) till night and that her immediate family had no eggs or meat on Tuesday because it was holy. Similarly other Valmiki children accepted that non-vegetarian food was not permissible at certain times, e.g. after worshipping on Thursday or when the Guru Granth Sahib was in the house to bless it. One Valmiki father would not eat meat on Monday or Tuesday because these are the days of Shiva and Devi and 'he follows their teachings'. Valmiki and

Ravidasi children mentioned strict vegetarianism as a feature of Radhasoami teaching. Only one interviewee - a Valmiki - was himself vegetarian because, like his mother, he was a Radhasoami (see note 11). He could not give the name of his religion or its guru, but indicated the picture of Charan Singh, and said they didn't 'eat meat, eggs, fish, anything which contains them things'.

Of the children who knew the term Radhasoami all gave vegetarianism as the one fact they knew about the teaching. For example one Ravidasi girl spoke about a Radhasoami friend whose parents would not let her keep a dog because of their adherence to Radhasoami vegetarian principles. The girl said that her own grandmother, a Radhasoami, wanted to have a separate room as a mandir in their home - a room in which no meat would ever be eaten. Then she would be able to put up the picture of Charan Singh. Her grandson said:

She just started believing in God so much that she became vegetarian.

Children in one Valmiki family mentioned that their mother had become strictly vegetarian after meeting Darshan Das, a controversial religious leader, based in Birmingham, who was killed by Sikhs in Southall in 1987. She

went to the temple once and this religious man told her not to eat meat. From that day she doesn't eat meat.

Some children mentioned eating beef. Two Ravidasis said that they did not like beef even though they were allowed to have it. One Valmiki boy said he wasn't allowed beef because 'Krishna has a cow next to him and it symbolises'. A Valmiki girl said that she could eat anything except beef.

Because God we believe in and because of the cow - because we pray to that animal - we worship so we don't eat it.

A Valmiki boy said that beef was something that they were not supposed to eat but this rule

was met with the conscious compromise of avoiding cooking beef from scratch by instead heating up frozen burgers.

However the nine year old Valmiki girl, reflecting her father's interpretations of history, explained that:

*Some people don't eat meat or beef or egg - in olden days people used to eat beef but someone just came to India and just made up that your mother gives you milk and the cow gives you milk. So if you eat meat that's from a cow then you're going to eat your mother. And I don't think that's really good because in the olden days people just used to eat beef and the priests, the **pandits**, they used to eat beef themselves. They didn't let anyone else eat beef because the cow gives you milk and if everyone starts eating it then all the cows will be finished - my Dad told me.*

Despite the frequent mention of meat avoidance, and the ban on non-vegetarian food in the gurdwara buildings, meat was served at parties, e.g. for weddings and birthdays. The rules on **jutha** seemed more relaxed than in some circles. The general Hindu and Sikh practice conforms to the view that food which comes into contact with anything which goes into another person's mouth is jutha and so it should be avoided. A Valmiki girl contrasted her community with 'strict Sikhs' when she said there were Sikhs who would not share the same plate as another strict Sikh. She herself, however, would 'share a can with a friend'.

Holy food

All the children had a clear concept of food which must be treated with special respect. They referred to this as 'holy food', 'blessed food', 'special God-food', 'God's food' and as 'karah' and 'prashad'. These were their terms for the sweet food distributed in the gurdwara at the conclusion of corporate worship and in their homes after praying at the domestic shrine. They enjoyed this

prashad and the langar (corporate meal). Children are taught not to waste this. A Valmiki boy reported:

You can't waste food there (in the Sikh temple). You have to eat everything up you know, whatever you choose you have to eat.

Describing a marriage ceremony a Ravidasi girl said:

Then we sit down and there's like holy food, prashad we call it, and it's made from butter and semolina, I think. It's powder semolina, and they give that out. You've got it in your hand and you put it to your forehead first before you eat it, saying thank you to God for the food, and then you eat it. You try not to drop it because it's from God. It's blessed by God. You try not to drop it and if you do you pick it up properly.

The special food is not only karah prashad. She continued:

Sometimes they give fruit out which is brought in by people. People bring in tea and sugar and milk, and fruit is very popular. Sometimes, if it's special, they give out sweets.

An eight year old Ravidasi girl mentioned the offering at her home of chapati to the fire during cooking:

At home we make some sort of chapatis, put it on your head [i.e. touch the brow with the hands together in the position of prayer with the chapati between them] and we put some on the gas, leave it burning down there - a little bit with some butter on it.

There is a vestige of the traditional Hindu practice of making an offering to Agni (the fire god).²⁰

Amrit

Amrit (lit. non-dying, ambrosia) is the name given to holy water, water which conducts blessing from a holy place or person to a devotee. Several children referred to this. In

connection with the water around the golden temple an eleven year old Valmiki boy said that people

have a bath in it because it's near a holy temple and should be holy water.

and a fourteen year old Ravidasi girl mentioned that bathing in this was supposed to bring good luck. A Valmiki girl mentioned that at the Golden Temple there is

precious water. It's like amrit and they duck themselves under it. They drink it. You can get amrit in this country as well. It's like when Mum went to Maharaj. He gave her some.

By Maharaj, a title of respect, she meant Darshan Das (see above and Chapter 9). Her mother said that after more than a year they still had plenty of the water and that it 'hadn't gone green or anything':

You mustn't put it in a dirty place or anything like that, got to treat it with respect because it's holy water - not touch it when you're on (i.e. during menstruation).

Her husband said that ordinary water would be added to the amrit if it was running out. In other words the amrit is treated as Hindus treat Ganga (Ganges) river water. Amrit is also the word used for water which has been kept under the scriptures, while they are being read aloud. One ten year old Valmiki girl's mother kept a bottle of this in the domestic shrine. She would sprinkle some around the house and give some to anyone who was afraid.

Vrat

A vrat is a vow. It is common practice for Hindus, usually women, to enter into an undertaking with a particular god or goddess in the hope that this deity will answer their prayer, usually for the welfare of their husband or child. They observe the requirements of the vrat associated with this deity.

Generally this means abstinence from particular foods on the appropriate days, reading or hearing the **katha** (story) which is associated with the vrat and performing the necessary act of worship. Vrat is often translated, misleadingly, as 'fast'.

Karva Chauth

Karva Chauth is a Hindu Punjabi vrat observed by wives for their husbands' welfare. It is also observed by many Sikh women. Two Valmiki girls who described themselves as Hindu said their mothers didn't keep the fast, but two other girls said that their mothers did and that they themselves had started keeping the fast the previous year. One ten year old declared:

I won't next year because you have to get up at 4 a.m. [and eat]. After that you don't even have water. If I was at school I wouldn't do it because if we're fasting on a school day we have to miss all athletics. It's a rule at our school.

She wrote in her diary:

A wife fasts for her husband to give Him a long life. She has to wait until The moon comes out. Then she can break her fast. Karva Chauth comes once every year. At least it isn't an everyday job.

On the evening of Karva Chauth (28th October 1988) the girls went with their mothers to the temple in the evening. Many of the younger wives were dressed in red and gold saris or suits and their hands were decorated with mehndi (a pattern applied in henna paste) and their hair was glittering with jewellery. They offered boxes of Indian sweets when they knelt in front of the scriptures. One young wife had a booklet containing the vrat katha (story associated with the fast) in Hindi. This she read out, translating it into Punjabi. The girls and women went outside and when they saw the first star the girls poured a mixture of water and milk from drinking glasses (see cover), and scattered uncooked rice and sugar on the ground. The women waited until they glimpsed the moon

before doing so. Indoors the prashad of fruits and sweets was distributed.

Fasting was mentioned more often by girls than boys. Only one boy, a Valmiki, mentioned that he had been invited for a meal and then given a handkerchief because a lady was fasting for Santoshi Mata.²¹

Children's experience of their family's religious tradition thus differs according to their sex. By emulating their mothers' behaviour at Karva Chauth the girls actively participate in gender-specific roles. This aspect of their lives is examined further in Chapter 10 and in Nesbitt (1993).

Visual Images and Video

Pictures

Children see religious pictures in the Ravidasi and Valmiki temples and grow up with them in their own homes.²² Although children generally recognised any interview pictures which resembled these in content they were frequently unable to name the figures they presented or to relate any part of the stories which they illustrated. This is in part because of the conventions for referring to gods, Gurus and holy men with deferential titles rather than by their names. Thus adults refer to Gurus as Babaji (a term of respect) and so children do not hear any other name used to refer to them. It would be disrespectful to use a holy person's name in lieu of such a title.

In the Valmiki temple, as children sit with their families facing the scriptures, they see on the wall behind the palki a life size picture of Maharishi Valmik, a venerable standing figure in a red robe. Not only its prominent position and relative size but also the flashing coloured light bulbs around the frame make it the focus of attention. To the congregation's right, beside this, is a smaller picture of Guru Nanak. There are also framed pictures in front of the scriptures. These show Guru Nanak, Guru Ravidas and Maharishi Valmik. The pictures on the left wall relate to Sikh history. They celebrate the role played by Bhai Jaita, a man of the Valmikis' caste. Pictures show his bravery as he courageously bore the severed head of the martyred Guru Teg Bahadur to the tenth Guru, still a child, who blessed him with the words 'Ranghrete Guru ke bete' i.e. 'people of your community are the Guru's children' and renamed him Jivan Singh (Ashok 1979-80).

The pictures along the right hand side of the hall relate to the story of Valmik. They show him writing the Ramayana, providing asylum for Sita and for her sons Lav and Kush.

In the Ravidasi gurdwara, between pictures of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, a large framed colour picture of Guru Ravidas has been placed in front of the stand supporting the scriptures. Other pictures (on the walls) include Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh and the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar. On the wall opposite the Guru Granth Sahib, among other pictures, there is one of Guru Ravidas making shoes. Bhai Santa Singh, who gave his life to save Guru Gobind Singh's by wearing his master's aigrette in battle, is the subject of another picture. He parallels the Valmiki community's Bhai Jivan Singh as an ancestor whose heroism was significant in Sikh history. Thus the point is made that members of these often despised communities played a courageous and decisive part in the history of co-religionists who have persistently marginalised them.

In their homes all the children have religious pictures. In some homes there are pictures of no other type and they are the most dominant feature of the room. When asked to say if there was anything special about her house an eight year old Ravidasi girl said, 'In every room it's got God's pictures.'

In some instances family members have created pictures. This Ravidasi girl drew my attention to a picture of Guru Nanak drawn by one of her aunts. The mother of two Valmiki children had drawn a picture of Guru Nanak, filled it in with sequins and then had it framed by an uncle. One Valmiki boy showed me an oil painting which his father had done of Bhai Jivan Singh carrying Guru Teg Bahadur's head. The calendar pictures captioned 'Aad Likhari Rishi Valmik' (Rishi Valmik the first writer) exemplified the expertise of a cousin by marriage, Kiran Valmiki, whose paintings were commissioned for the Valmiki temple in Southall.

In the Ravidasi homes at least one picture of Ravidas is displayed and in Valmiki homes at least one of Maharishi Valmik. The relative number, size and position of pictures of

particular Gurus, saints and deities gives children an impression of their relative significance. A Hindu or Sikh ethos is created. Frequently the home reflects additional devotional direction or an orientation distinct from that in the community's corporate place of worship.

For example, one Ravidasi family's living room contained pictures not only of the Golden Temple, Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Teg Bahadur but also of Sarvan Das, a revered Ravidasi with many followers (Juergensmeyer 1982 p.84). A Valmiki living room contained pictures not only of Guru Teg Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh and of Maharishi Valmik with Lav and Kush and of Jathedar Baba Jivan Singhji, but also, prominently, of Charan Singh, the guru of the Radhasoami Satsang (Beas). This is the name of the movement based in Beas in Punjab. In another Valmiki home framed pictures of similar dimensions of Guru Nanak, of Maharishi Valmik with Lav and Kush and of Guru Gobind Singh were juxtaposed. In a Ravidasi house, side by side within a single frame, were pictures of Guru Ravidas, of Baba Balaknath (see above and Chapter 9) and of Guru Nanak surrounded by the nine subsequent Gurus. From such arrangements children acquire a sense of the centrality of Maharishi Valmik or Guru Ravidas and of their parity, if not more, with the Sikh Gurus.

The arrangement of religious pictures can also indicate the style of devotional practice in the child's home. For instance in one Valmiki family's living room one section of the shelf unit is a focus for worship as is evident from Krishna with a cow (this picture is garlanded with a pearl necklace) and Gajar Lakshmi (Lakshmi flanked by elephants). In another home pictures of Shiva, Mata (mother goddess Ambe), Hanuman, Guru Nanak and Maharishi Valmik on a kitchen cupboard constituted a shrine. Another girl recalled the pictures in the domestic mandir: Maharishi Valmik, Ganesh, Mata on a lion, Rama, Sita, Lakshmi, Hanuman and her deceased paternal grandfather. In another Valmiki home, half

way up the stairs on a landing, the window sill accommodated the family shrine. The pictures were all framed, two of them in pentagonal frames the shape of a diamond with one corner flattened. From left to right these depicted Ambe Mata, Hanuman, Maharishi Valmik with Lav and Kush (in the central position), Guru Gobind Singh with his young sons and beside this a metal representation of Saraswati, Parvati and Ganesh. In front of these stood a small marble murti (statue) of Hanuman, with a diva (clay lamp) in front of it, a long, narrow, shallow dish with evidence of incense sticks in it, a metal representation of Guru Nanak and a glass decanter three quarters full of water (amrit).

Role of Video

Recent literature on Hindus in Britain and elsewhere notes the relevance of video (see Vertovec 1987). Penny Logan noted the importance of video films to Gujarati Hindu children in London (1989). In her conclusion she suggested that:

Living in this country possibly increases their opportunities for learning about Hinduism, given the availability of the mass media which are not easily available to most Indian children.

Earlier research in Coventry had also indicated how powerful and pervasive a medium video is for cultural transmission in comparison with all others (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993). Research elsewhere in Britain confirms the growing influence of this medium (Gillespie 1989). All the Valmiki and Ravidasi interviewees referred to watching videos of Indian films. They also mentioned information acquired from television viewing (e.g. about Jesus, about life after death). When asked if they watched 'religious' films their replies showed their differing understanding of 'religious' as 'Asian' or 'in an Indian language' or, more specifically, as 'about gods and goddesses'. In any case the adjective had been used in the full knowledge that children understood 'religion' in several ways (see above) and in the realisation that many

action-packed or ‘masala’ movies include visual reference to Hindu festivals, shrines and ritual.²³

When interviewees saw pictures of deities, e.g. Shiva, they mentioned having seen him in videos. They could also describe the **abishekh** (pouring of ‘milky water’) over the **lingam** (cylindrical, aniconic representation of Shiva) although no one knew the name for either lingam or abishekh and only one (a twelve year old Valmiki girl) had actually seen something like this happen:

My dad used to do the puja. When he used to do vrat he used to do that (i.e. pour milk) in the morning on Mondays.

Like those in their homes the pictures shown to the children during interview reproduced the association of deity, symbol and backdrop to be found in the movies. Given different visual representation (e.g. a photograph of an ancient sculpture) children’s recognition might have been slower. The girl who was quoted above commented that in films Shiva is ‘usually in the mountains’ and children said that they recognised Shiva by the cobra around his neck, which they had seen in films too. Film producers and painters of mass produced pictures of the gods are constrained by the strength of popular piety. Though democratising and homogenising disparate traditions they perpetuate ancient convention from which it is not in their interests to depart. They select from these traditions in mutually reinforcing ways. Devotional prints

are especially open to cinematic influences, and this can be seen not only in the figural types, but also in the landscapes used as a backdrop for depictions of deities. The cinema delights in frequent excursions for its heroes and heroines to hill-stations ... now it is common for deities to be placed against such backdrops.

(Blurton 1988: 58)

It is clear that a unified image is presented to children by video film and the religious pictures which they see.

A comparison of Valmiki and Ravidasi children’s ability to name pictures of Maharishi Valmik and Guru Ravidas respectively, and of their familiarity with stories about these two figures, suggests the impact which video viewing can have.

All the Valmiki children recognised the picture and/or name of Maharishi Valmik even though only half could name this. Half the Ravidasi children could name Guru Ravidas' pictures and the rest recognised his picture and/or name. Of the Ravidasis one thirteen year old girl related the story about the Ganga’s gift of bangles and she did not realise its connection with Guru Ravidas.²⁴ None of the other children could think of any story about him despite being shown pictures illustrating three of these. All the Valmiki and Ravidasi children were familiar with the story of Ramayana and some Valmiki children told me traditional stories of him - how he made Kush from ‘rubbish’, how he taught Lav and Kush to fight, how they caught the white horse and fought Rama, how he sprinkled water on the defeated Rama which restored him to life. These stories occur in Valmik’s Ramayana, but not in the Ramcharitmanas, the version composed by Tulsi Das, which is more familiar to the majority of North Indian Hindus. In each case the Valmiki children said they had seen the story of Maharishi Valmik on video.²⁵ No Ravidasi child mentioned a film of Guru Ravidas. It is reasonable to suppose that if and when such a film is available Ravidasi children will become aware of the episodes in Ravidas's life recounted in Darshan Singh (1981) which are illustrated in devotional pictures.

Many popular movies produced in Bombay incorporate festivals, Holi being particularly popular for light relief. So, in describing this festival, two Valmiki girls referred to films:

I would like to play Holi and so would my brothers and sisters. They show how they play it in India in the films. In India they throw colours about. I’ve seen it in films, I went last year and did it.

The films of Nagin and Nagina confirmed widespread belief in snakes which turn into human beings. A Valmiki boy’s elder sister

described a 'massive snake, a nagin' with a 'gold thing' between its eyes, which lives in her mother's village near Jalandhar.²⁶ At night she said, it turns into a person. Local 'people have actually seen it'.

The families in Britain and India record weddings and other major celebrations on video and send them to relatives overseas, so helping to bridge the distance between family members. It is probable (as adults have claimed) that the style, if not the content, of marriage celebrations is partly affected by what people have seen on such video recordings and what they hope will be shown on their own. Through video presentation of religious functions a family's status can be enhanced.

Children are receptive to their tradition as mediated by this modern technology. In this chapter we have noted the various ways in which video is contributing to children's awareness of Indian, Hindu or more specifically Valmiki or Ravidasi culture. Television viewing too has a profound effect, providing for the children a world of values and characters, which they share with all their peers. Daily immersion in the television soap opera 'Neighbours', for example, is a part of their experience which must not be overlooked.

The Childrens' Sense of Identity

School

The world of South Asian videos adds to the cultural distance between Asian and non-Asian pupils at school. One Ravidasi girl said that her best friends were Indian because they had the same interests, namely Punjabi fashion and Indian films, whereas their non-Asian peers all talked mostly about boys. As in earlier research (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993) the role played by school in children's knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs, if not in their devotional practices, was apparent. Teachers, as well as fellow pupils, were responsible for this. Both contributed to Valmiki and Ravidasi children's sense of identity. From non-Asian peers children discovered that they were 'Paki' and from some Asian peers that they were 'lower caste'. Teachers' contribution to children's self-perception is illustrated by a Ravidasi girl who said of her religion:

First I used to say Indian but then my teacher told me that it's not really Indian, it's Sikh, so I start sort of saying, 'It's Sikh.'

As children come to identify more with a particular label so they become particularly aware of what is presented with that label in school. Thus a thirteen year old Ravidasi girl, who defined herself as Hindu, reported that she had learned about reincarnation when her Religious Education teacher spoke about Hinduism:

When I heard it at school I believed in it. It had a great effect on me because it was my own religion and I thought that it was true.

Many children referred to school when asked how they knew the stories of Jesus and of Rama and Sita. In both cases they referred to plays which they had seen or taken part in at Christmas and Divali respectively. In many

Coventry schools the world's major religions are acknowledged in R.E. and assemblies. A Valmiki boy mentioned assemblies at school for 'Gods' birthdays' when they were told:

This was the day when God was born and they tell us what happened to him, how they became gods, how he became god and, like, he wouldn't hurt people.

In making this statement the boy's mixing of singular and plural may well reflect the convention in his mother tongue. In Indian languages a plural is often used to refer to a respected person or deity.

A nine year old Ravidasi girl recited the prayer which her class say at the end of each school day:

Teach me to be pure and true, show me what I ought to do.

This, like the 'secular' prayer used in schools in India, provides a shared form of words which unites children of all backgrounds.

Bhangra

Like viewing Asian videos the children's involvement in bhangra (Punjabi folk dance) distinguished them from non-Asian peers and contributed to their perception of themselves and their religion in the wider sense. In its traditional form bhangra is the virile, flamboyant dance performed by Punjabi men at the time of weddings and harvest. In Britain groups, singing Punjabi lyrics to largely western instrumental backing, have become extremely popular. Children and young people listen to the tapes at home as well as dancing at marriages. One Valmiki boy plays keyboard in a local group. He explained how his self-image had improved:

I've gone a bit more closer to my religion, yes, because a couple of years back I just didn't like being an Indian because we used to get picked on, but

now I've gone closer to it because now Indian music is coming out.

Religious labels adopted by children

Of the ten Ravidasi interviewees five were quick to identify themselves as Sikh, when asked what their religion was. One called herself Hindu/Hindi and three did not use either the term Hindu or Sikh. One fourteen year old girl said:

I don't know what you call it. It's partly like the things Sikhs do we do as well – like weddings. I can't really explain it. I would say like it can be Hindu and Sikh.

Of the fourteen Valmiki interviewees, all of whom were related by blood or marriage, three brothers called themselves Sikh, four children did not apply either term to themselves, four called themselves Hindu, (one using the name 'Hindu Valmiki', two others 'Hindu Punjabi'). The other three identified themselves as primarily Hindu but also Sikh in some respects. In one twelve year old girl's words:

I know what culture I am, Hindu, but it's not as if we're restricted to Hindu because we believe in Sikhism as well.

Its just one thing really. Everyone just parted it.

A fourteen year old girl said:

I say to myself I'm a Sikh but really I'm a Hindu. I'm a Hindu Punjabi. I do many things that Sikhs do. We go to a mandir but I call it a gurdwara.

A Valmiki boy described himself as

Punjabi ... Sikh, because my granddad he's got a turban and I asked my cousin, 'Am I a Sikh or what?' and he goes, 'Yes, because you take after your granddad.'

In her diary an eight year old Ravidasi girl gave this definition of being a Sikh, spelling Ravidas in the way that many Ravidasis do:

I am a Sikh. I pray to Sri Guru

Ravidasji and all other Sikh gods. I go to Guru Ravidass Sikh temple.

This girl also made value judgements in describing others in relation to herself and her family. On seeing a picture of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale²⁷ and other turbaned Sikhs she observed:

They're real Sikh - they look after the gurdwaras.

She distinguished the language that she used at home from that used by her friend who attends the Ramgarhia gurdwara classes.²⁸ She gave an example of this girl's 'pure' Punjabi. Similarly the thirteen year old Ravidasi girl, who described herself as Hindu, spoke of learning 'pure Punjabi' at school as opposed to the mixed vocabulary she used at home. In describing a video of Hindus which she had seen in an R.E. lesson she commented that it showed 'true Hindus', adding, 'We are more free than they are.'

The children's use of 'strict', 'true', 'real', 'proper' and 'pure' conveyed much the same meaning. They were aware of difference but this should not be interpreted as a perception of caste inferiority. In conversation about the requirements of Sikhism the eight year old quoted above said that when he was older her father would grow his hair and wear a turban. Another described the 5 Ks in detail (see note 4 below) but said that her family did not keep them. She had learned about them in her Punjabi class. According to her the sort of people who keep the 5 Ks are

*people who work at the temple, because they have their little knife down there. They have the **kachha** underneath and they keep their hair long and they make the karah and they sort of pray to it every day in the morning.*

(Kachh(a) is a pair of white cotton breeches with a drawstring. It is one of the five Ks).

Unlike their older siblings and parents the children did not see the difference between their own community and others in caste terms and were not aware of what caste meant. However the eldest referred to being called low caste at

school. Older relatives frequently introduced the factor of caste when describing the relationship of their religious practice to others. For instance a woman who had just been married said:

We're not exactly Sikhs, we're a bit lower, but the wedding was like a Sikh.

One thirteen year old Valmiki boy (who had described himself as Hindu Punjabi) explained that his aunt was 'a Jat, a proper Sikh [though] not really a different community'.²⁹

Children alluded to their own lack of interest in religion in comparison with parents or grandparents. A fourteen year old Ravidasi girl thought that religion was more important to her father because 'people from India knew more because they're from India'. The thirteen year old Ravidasi girl said that:

My grandma is the only person that believes in God a lot ... don't know. It's just different.

The fact that both adults and children perceive the younger generation as falling away from their religion must be balanced against the Hindu understanding of the stages of life. According to this view it is after fulfilling one's family responsibilities that one may, in later life, devote more and more time to spiritual matters. This suggests that any conclusions that young people are abandoning their religion are premature. This theme is taken up in Chapter 11.

The place of Maharishi Valmik and Guru Ravidas in relation to gods and Gurus

Valmiki and Ravidasi children mentioned Valmik and Ravidas in terms which related them to the Sikh Gurus and Hindu gods. When shown a picture of Guru Nanak surrounded by the nine later Gurus children tended to include either Valmik or Ravidas. Thirteen children identified Guru Nanak correctly but a Valmiki boy said that the picture showed 'all the Valmiks, and I think that's the greatest Valmik in the middle'. Another said that the picture showed the Gurus and that 'Valmik was the first'. Another asked me 'was he one of the first

gods?' and two Ravidasi children said that the picture showed Guru Nanak, Guru Ravidas and Guru Gobind Singh.

The eight year old Ravidasi girl said that:

We really pray to Guru Ravidas because it's our really good God. I think Guru Ravidas was Guru Gobind or Guru Nanak's dad or something. I think he was. Guru Nanak was leader of the gods but he [Ravidas] was another leader of the gods.

An older Ravidasi girl did not name the picture of Ravidas correctly but knew that:

He's one of the popular gods that we have in the temple. He's the most important. I don't know what he said or did.

Children did not make any connection in caste terms between Maharishi Valmik, Guru Ravidas and their own communities. This suggests that parents may avoid talking to children about their caste background. It is also likely that in many households little time is spent in talking about religious tradition.

The Influence of Christianity

Whereas in many ways children conform to western norms, e.g. of dress, the content of religious worship has not been influenced by dominant Christian convention. Children are growing up in a Christian or post-Christian secular environment which they encounter particularly through television and school. It is mediated in a language (colloquial English) in which they are often more confident that they are in Punjabi and more at ease than members of their grandparents' and parents' generation are. Girls wear western clothes much of the time except in the gurdwara or for special occasions. Some English foods - fish fingers, chips, baked beans, burgers, sausages - have become popular without usurping the place of Punjabi food at least once a day. It is true that in Britain Sunday morning has become the preferred time for congregational worship. This is a practical response to the structure of the British working week. However, in no way does domestic or temple worship show Christian influence.³⁰

Sometimes children would make comparisons between non-Christian and Christian practice. For example a Ravidasi girl likened the distribution of prashad to the Holy Communion bread and wine which she had seen in a film. A twelve year old Valmiki boy, who attended a voluntary aided Christian comprehensive, suggested a similarity between applying a **tilak** (mark) to someone's forehead and Christian baptism or confirmation.

Christmas

Christmas has become the favourite festival but in a truly secular way. None of the children attended a Christian church on Christmas day. Nor had Jesus's birth become a cause for ritual celebration.³¹ Yet Ravidasi children showed themselves much better

informed about the story of Jesus than about the story of Ravidas.

Children felt no restriction in celebrating Christmas. The nine year old Valmiki girl commented:

My friend Sharon is not allowed to celebrate Christmas because she is not allowed by her religion. I can't wait until it really is Christmas.

Here she was contrasting her relative freedom with the restrictions on Sharon, a Jehovah's witness. By contrast she herself had an Advent calendar with chocolates in it and she was to sing in her school's Christmas programme.

All the children who were interviewed spoke enthusiastically about Christmas which, together with Divali, topped their list of favourite festivals. Food (English style roast chicken or turkey, more often than not), gifts and family reunion characterised children's experiences as did the build-up in school of Christmas quizzes, plays and making cards. They enjoyed parties and seeing the films on television. For a festal month or so their living rooms were festooned with colourful decorations, with a Christmas tree in pride of place. Everyone rushed around shopping and from Christmas to New Year children enjoyed the school holiday and, in some cases, lots of family parties, including bhangra dancing, food and drink, some of it alcoholic. In at least one home the domestic shrine was decorated for Christmas. No-one mentioned celebrating the festival in a religious manner, by going to a church or having special prayers, although one Ravidasi girl spoke of praying in the gurdwara - perhaps because in 1988 Christmas fell on a Sunday, the day of the week when more families are free to go to the gurdwara. All the children had a general idea of the bible stories of Jesus's birth.

Jesus

Of the twenty-five religious pictures on which children's comments were invited during their second interview, one showed Jesus and this was the only picture which every child named correctly. Although incorrect in the details most children related part of the nativity story and knew that Jesus had been crucified. As sources for this knowledge they frequently mentioned school (a play at Christmas, for instance) and a television film. One boy said he had heard about God at a local church youth club. The nine year old Valmiki girl described going to evenings organised by OM (Operation Mobilisation). This is a movement committed to evangelism but when the girl said, 'He died for us' and that she read her Bible (provided by Jehovah's Witnesses) she did not adopt an exclusive Christian stance. 'We believe in both the religions', she said, and 'We think there's only one God and there's lots of forms of him.'

Children were not asked to express their understanding of the relative status or divinity of Jesus vis-à-vis the Gurus, gods and the spiritual teachers whose pictures they were shown, but some of their comments shed light on this. One ten year old Ravidasi boy reported:

One of my uncles said that Jesus and Ravidas exist but God doesn't exist and I said I didn't believe it. He's separate. God is the highest and then there's Jesus and Ravidas and then there's us I think.

A fourteen year old Valmiki girl said there is

one God but different names - Jesus, Guru Nanak, Mohammed (she corrected this to 'Allah'). I'd say Guru Nanak, Waheguru.³² I admire English people because they have only one God, Jesus. Some have Mother Mary. We've got so many gods.

Jesus is regarded as 'the English God'. A Ravidasi girl said, 'I believe in the English God as well ... Jesus Christ and that.' Another

said, 'I believe in Christ, I sort of pray to him, but don't go to church.'

Children appeared to find no conflict or bewilderment in relating Christianity to their family's belief and practice. One Ravidasi girl said, 'All religions are equal.'

God, Heaven and Hell

Along with belief in reincarnation concepts of heaven (**swarg**) and hell (**narak**) are part of the Hindu belief. It is likely, however, that the children's conceptions of God and of heaven and hell are profoundly influenced by Christianity although unconsciously so. Here is a Valmiki boy's description of God whom he said he would call 'Guru Nanak' if he was praying:

I always think God's going to be sitting down on a kind of chair and he's going to have a beard, white clothes on. Everything's going to be sort of cloudy and there's loads of people and he's going to be really kind.

He pictured God with 'a big smile' and one hand raised, with light shining from it. He described how God 'talks to me in the night' if he had done anything wrong. Even in the day time he might hear God speaking.

If there's a lot of people around I don't shout out, 'Who's talking to me?' I just stay a bit quiet. I don't say nothing. I just hear it until it goes away.

His account suggest influence from pictures in the house such as one of Valmik, hand lifted in blessing, and influence from a Christian Youth Club which he attended each week. 'Here', he said, 'they tell us everything about God.'

Another Valmiki boy had heard about heaven and hell at school. Heaven he said, was 'quite a peaceful place' with 'everyone in white'. Hell he characterised by 'fire' and 'wicked things'. Children's views of what awaits people after death appear to be a fusion of Hindu, Christian and other ideas, among them the teaching which they receive at school. A Valmiki boy said:

Heaven takes me up and he lies me

down on this cloud and starts making me go small and I become a little baby and I go from heaven to someone else's stomach and be their child.

Another went into more detail:

I believe that if you're bad you turn into an animal, slug or something like that, [and] go to hell. If you're good you get reborn again [as a human]. If you're bad [you are born again as an] evil animal [like a] snake. [If you are] good you go to heaven or become a flower or something nice. I'll go up to heaven - like you'll fall asleep and find yourself in a place. Hell's going to be like skeleton bones and it's people screaming. I think if you're in heaven you'll be reborn and if you're in hell you'll be reborn, but as something horrible, and if you've done something really bad then you won't be reborn at all.

In talking about the afterlife two children mentioned respectively a newspaper account of a girl who had talked about her previous life and a television Kitcat advertisement. One fourteen year old Ravidasi girl referred to one near death experience of a friend of her mother's who had 'gone to hell by mistake'.

Christian caste-fellows

As noted above, of the people in Punjab who became Christian many were from under-privileged communities. In Coventry the congregation of one church, St. Paul's, Foleshill includes Punjabi Christians from the same families as the Valmikis. Whereas the Valmikis speak respectfully of Jesus, their Christian caste-fellows distance themselves from the Valmiki temple and on occasion speak disapprovingly of the gods and 'babas' (holy men) revered by Hindus and Sikhs. The beliefs and practices of these Christian families should be an interesting subject for further research. According to Valmiki informants Christian relatives visit them at home and are prepared to enter the new

community hall adjacent to the prayer hall. They can go in without having to pass through the room where worship takes place.

Sants

Living spiritual teachers

Two scholars have recently emphasised the powerful part played by **sants** (spiritual masters) in the community life of Sikhs in Britain (Tatla 1989 and Kalsi 1989). The Valmiki and Ravidasi are relatively small communities and they appear to be influenced not so much by the Sikh sants (e.g. Baba Mihan Singh) and Hindu gurus (e.g. Swami Satyamitrananda Giri), who visit Sikh and Hindu congregations respectively, as by the leaders of spiritual movements such as Radhasoami, which attract both Sikh and Hindus, and by certain individuals with a reputation for healing (e.g. the founder of the Balaknath temple). Sceptical Indian onlookers describe the followers of alleged miracle workers as low caste, although my evidence suggests that people from many castes are attracted when they are in trouble.

In his study of Asians in America, Williams suggests that:

Allegiance to religious leaders seems easier for immigrant parents to transmit to their American children than language or ethnic identity.

(Williams 1988:283)

As far as Coventry's Valmiki and Ravidasi children are concerned it is uncertain whether this will be the case. Since the babas whom their parents revere do not communicate in English they remain for children impressive figures whose words, however, make little direct impact.

Radhasoami teachers

Children from both communities reported encounters with spiritual teachers either on visiting a particular place of worship or in their home. The thirteen year old Ravidasi

girl, whose grandmother is a follower of Radhasoami, described

religious leaders like Indian saints. 'Sant' we call them. Whenever they come my grandma makes us all go and visit them and get blessing from them. They try to visit everybody's house. Whenever they've come here they've always come to our house. They're like messengers from God, they're all pretty much the same. They all wear white turbans and they've all got like white beards [and] they're very old. You worship them, you touch their feet and then touch your forehead, saying, 'Thank you for coming', and you lay out clean sheets, white sheets, over the settee when they're going to sit and you give them anything they want, and before you eat they try the food first so that they've got the blessing of the food. We really have to have scarfs, the chunnian, on our heads, and some of the men they have like handkerchiefs which they put on their heads and tie knots. So we have to have our head covered in front of them.

An eleven year old Valmiki girl described the weekly Radhasoami satsang (religious gathering) which she sometimes attended in a local school hall. People would remove their shoes and sit down. There were no special clothes, no '**matha tek**' (i.e. obeisance) and no singing. People would listen to the men who spoke, but she could not understand them. This girl's mother was an ardent follower who listened to tape recordings of Radhasoami teaching and spoke eloquently herself, but her children, like the Ravidasi girl quoted previously, knew only that Radhasoami taught vegetarianism. They showed no awareness of the distinctive emphasis on **nam shabd yoga**, a system of meditation. So children's knowledge is of expected devotional behaviour, not of the

content of the teaching, just as accounts of worship indicate knowledge of appropriate devotional behaviour rather than of the books or contents of the scriptures.

Gian Nath

A few Valmiki children had an impression of Gian Nath. Until his death in 1987 at the age (reportedly) of over 130 he was revered as a sant and, by some, as an incarnation of Maharishi Valmik. He visited Valmiki homes in Coventry on his visit in 1983 (Brindle 1983). In Birmingham there is a temple dedicated to him. A boy who could not recall Gian Nath's name recognised his picture and said he had been to this temple in Birmingham:

The picture in Birmingham looks real, like he's sitting next to you. All I know is that he had long hair.

As the boy's aunt said his hair was 'matted like dreadlocks (coiled in a) big bun'.

Children may have an idea that such a person is 'good' or 'Valmik'. Their overwhelming impression is a visual one and they are well aware of the behaviour appropriate in the presence of such a revered visitor. A ten year old Valmiki girl recounted Gian Nath's visit to her house as follows:

He came to our house a long time ago. He had a really big car - black, shined and polished. We did this sort of a prayer thing and he came and sat on my bed.

The children could not articulate any message that he preached. But they had a vivid sense of significant encounter - of **darshan** (literally 'sight'), which is in itself of deep significance to adults, whether or not the revered personage speaks or is 'understood'. Thus these venerated sages do not channel religious instruction to children but they, like the gurdwara, are channels of divine blessing. They are living icons.

Babas in the Balaknath temples

In Coventry and Walsall there are temples where Balaknath is worshipped. In each a baba (holy man), reputed to have unusual powers, attracts people who seek healing. A Ravidasi girl had been to both. She described visiting the Walsall temple when her mother was seriously ill:

Some people can [foretell the future] like gods, like the babas, Baba Balaknath. They sometimes look at your hands as well. I've been sometimes but I think it's a bit scary. Once I went to Walsall. You have to sit down outside. Baba sits on this holy piece of mat. This lady at the back, I think she started screaming. She was coming up to him and she was just swinging round with her hair, and I thought, 'Oh no, what's going to happen?' I just went out. My mum used to not be well. When you go in that queue he tells you what's wrong with you. I think it's very scary.³³

Among South Asians generally, when they are afflicted with health and relationship problems, there is a tendency to have recourse to practitioners of traditional Hindu and Islamic medicine and to consult individuals with a reputation for diagnosis, healing and prediction through supernatural means. The scene described must be viewed in this wider context.

Darshan Das

Mention has already been made of Darshan Das who profoundly influenced the mother of two of the interviewees. He founded a movement called Sachkhand Nanak Dham closely related to mainstream Sikhism but with its own distinctive emphasis. His critics regarded him as an agent of the Indian government in New Delhi intent on dividing and weakening the Sikh community. Moreover he was accused of behaving as if he was a Guru, in opposition to Sikh belief in the succession of the scriptures to guruship after the death of Guru Gobind Singh.

For children the sants personify their distinctive experience as members of an Indian community. Changes in their elders' behaviour, such as beginning to observe vegetarian principles, can be explained by reference to a sant's teaching.

Gender

Gender based obligations

As noted above, the festival of Rakhi is a happy annual demonstration of the tie between brothers and sisters. At marriages, too, particular relationships are affirmed. For example the bride's mother's brother puts the red and white bangles on the bride's wrist on the eve of the marriage. As we have seen in Chapter 5 involvement in vrats differentiates the experience of girls and boys. The apparent Christian and secular influence on their religious knowledge and thinking have had no perceptible effect on these Punjabi children's acceptance of traditional family roles. Nor had the anti-sexist views voiced by the girls and by some of the boys who were interviewed. In talking of sports and future careers some acknowledged that girls could be good at football or boys could cook. One thirteen year old Ravidasi girl intended to be a lawyer. The nine year old Valmiki girl hoped to be a pilot, yet all clearly perceived their future family responsibilities in traditional Punjabi Hindu/Sikh terms. They knew that they must marry and that then the boys would care for their parents and the girls would look after their husband's parents. Two Valmiki girls said they did not want to get married because they wanted to care for their own parents. As the nine year old said regretfully:

I'm not looking forward to being married. I want to stay at home and look after my parents when they're old. If I married I would have to live in a different house and only visit sometimes. I suppose I'll have to. Everyone does.

A nine year old Valmiki boy said:

In ten years I will be responsible for my mum and dad because my sisters usually get married to someone else

and they go and live with the boy, but I'll be staying in the house and my mum and dad will be my responsibility.

An eight year old Ravidasi girl with no brothers said:

My mum said [God] made something go wrong. Like she wanted a boy, but he gave her twin girls and that was wrong. When we're all married my grandad and my mum and everyone will be left alone.

Two teenage girls showed awareness of stricter rules of dress as they got older, one referring to appropriate clothing for the gurdwara, the other, a thirteen year old Ravidasi, to wearing a chunni (the gauzy scarf integral to Punjabi suits) in front of visitors. She also said that bhangra dancing is rarely mixed:

Unless it's a wedding or something. In our religion it's a bit ashaming if you do it in front of men.

Some taboos

Taboos also reinforce the different roles of sons and daughters. When asked to name any days of the week which were especially lucky or unlucky for anything eight children (both Valmiki and Ravidasi) mentioned knowing of a taboo for girls on bathing and/or hair washing on Tuesday and/or Thursday, and several more mentioned Tuesday and/or Thursday as weekly days of worship. This taboo concerns the possible harm which a brother may suffer because of his sister's negligence and is widespread among Punjabis.

A thirteen year old Ravidasi girl said:

There are some customs that other people think are unlucky but my family just ignores - like you shouldn't bath on Tuesday or Thursday because on Tuesday it's bad luck for you and Thursday it's bad luck for your brother, or brothers, especially if you've only

got one brother.

A Valmiki Sikh father explained the connection between Thursdays and brothers by pointing out the 'vir' means brother and 'virvar' means Thursday. The Ravidasi girl said that she had heard of this taboo from Hindu friends but said she was not expected to observe this rule and she did not believe in it. Some of the other children also indicated either that they did not share this belief or that their parents also ignored it.

A Valmiki boy mentioned the three features of Tuesday which cropped up in others' comments. First no non-vegetarian food should be eaten on Tuesday, secondly it was the day of 'devian' (goddesses), and thirdly girls should not have a bath because by so doing they might harm their brothers.³⁴

A Valmiki girl added two more taboos associated with Tuesdays.

You shouldn't go on a journey or cut anything.

Ravidasi girl added that her mother had told her that Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays were not good days for bathing or going swimming. It should be stressed that these taboos are prevalent among Punjabis including Sikhs and Hindus of other castes as well.

Kanjakan

At certain times Hindu Punjabis honour the goddess with hymns (**bhent**) and a ceremony which involves **kanjakan**. This is the plural form of kanjak, the Punjabi word for a young girl. Pre-adolescent girls are essential to ritual celebration of the goddess (Hershman 1977). One Valmiki girl mentioned having been one of the **kanjakan** several times. There would be one boy and seven girls.³⁵ The girls' toes were washed and marked with a tilak (red mark of a type usually applied to the forehead). After her fast the hostess would give them money, gifts such as tumblers and a red chunni for the girls. This practice was mentioned in connection with Tuesdays (the day of Devi) and in connection with

chickenpox and measles. Hershman fills in the association between pock diseases and the goddess (1977: 63). A fourteen year old Valmiki girl said:

If someone's had measles all the girls sat together - one boy and six girls. The boy washes the girls' feet. The mother gives the girls dinner and a scarf and there's got to be one boy. The mother gives bracelets and money to the girls - like £1. It's Mata - German measles.

By calling German measles Mata (mother), the name used for the goddess this teenager follows traditional usage. This does not mean that she discounts modern explanations for and treatment of illness.

No one spoke of participating in a **jagratan** or **jagran** (vigil). These are sessions of hymn singing to the goddess which last overnight. On occasion the priest from the Ram Mandir, the temple frequented by higher caste Punjabis, is called upon to officiate at a **jagratan**, held by members of the Valmiki community.

Pre-adolescent girls are traditionally regarded as pure and as potential embodiments of the Goddess or **shakti** (energy). However none of the children who were interviewed made any reference to such beliefs. This was the case too with Gujarati and Punjabi children of other castes whom I had interviewed in the earlier study of Hindu Nurture in Coventry. The fact that many children play a big role in certain religious events does not mean that they will be expected to understand or articulate the underlying beliefs or assumptions.

Conclusion

These children's world view is considerably influenced by school and the media. Their domestic and public worship are patterned on their elders' practice often with little intellectual understanding of its content. From videos they learn some of the mythological and ritual detail of Hinduism which they might otherwise never encounter. They are growing up in a 'little tradition' which is ambiguously related to the 'great tradition' of Hinduism and the associated Punjabi tradition of Sikhism which are themselves ethnic minority cultures in Britain. Both Sikh and Hindu tradition are changing and heterogeneous.

Just at the same time as the caste-based Ravidasi and Valmiki communities are consolidating socially and gaining in confidence (witness the Ravidasis' plans to expand their premises and the Valmikis' new community centre and their videos of cultural events) children and young adults are aspiring to fuller involvement in mainstream British life in which caste is an anomaly. The individual children, who are in many families the first generation to be exclusively educated in Britain, are points of interaction for Punjabi Hindu and Sikh practices and values, and for Christian teaching and secular concerns such as equal opportunity for girls or concern about the endangered environment. In the fragmentation or integration of their faith and practice they have no unifying guide.

It is unlikely that children from these communities are unusual in this respect. Although different specific factors are at work in the lives of children from other backgrounds these findings from two Punjabi communities suggest the complexities inherent in the development of individual 'religion' and in applying categories to others in a meaningful or acceptable manner in a plural and ever changing society.

In Chapter 7 we noted that children appear less grounded in their religious faith than older relatives are. Yet this perception in no way marks a departure from the classic Hindu analysis of human life into **ashramas** (stages) of which the last two are most concerned with the spiritual practices and devotion to God. Only the passage of time will show whether the lives of these Punjabi children, who are growing up in Coventry, will reflect this traditional ideal. If they do it will be interesting to see to what extent the religious faith and observances of their later years are distinctively Valmiki, Ravidasi, Sikh or Hindu.

On the question of religious identity it is important for teachers to realise how misleading concepts such as 'black', 'Asian', 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' can be. By focusing on just two communities I hope that I have encouraged educationists and others to avoid simple stereotyping and assumptions about the individuals with whom they deal.

For teachers of Religious Education this is imperative. They may be turned to by colleagues as authorities on the religions to which pupils and parents are assumed to belong. They also have to decide how to present world faiths in the classroom in which there are likely to be children from traditions which are regarded as peripheral if understood at all. Religious Education should be as sensitive to the Mormon, Christadelphian, Valmiki and Ismaili as to the Anglican, Methodist, Brahmin Hindu or Sunni Muslim. The R.E. teacher needs also to be clear about the different factors involved in a religious allegiance which is largely determined by birth into a caste and, on the other hand, in a religious allegiance of a western sectarian or denominational type. Awareness of the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities may well educate teachers out of an over simple portrayal of Sikhism as a

reformist movement which succeeded in abolishing the caste system among its followers.

The insights gained into the local spectrum of belief and practice enhance the experience of the teacher, but must be used responsibly. For example sharing the knowledge that some families are high or low caste may be unhelpful. Such information, if used regardless of hearers' level of sympathy with or understanding of South Asian society,

could result in even more negative attitudes about Asian society. If the subject of caste is tackled in class the teacher should not in any way identify children as high or low caste. Pupils may not know their caste, may feel embarrassed if they do and may have parents who are keen to escape its connotations. Teachers should be made aware of the feelings associated with caste-membership.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for its generous support and to my colleague Robert Jackson, for his advice. The research could not have taken place without the help of many members of the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities in Coventry. I am especially grateful to Mr Rattan Chand, Mr Darshan Singh Mattu and Mr Davinder Prasad and all their families. They are in no way responsible for errors of fact or interpretation. Thanks are also due to the secretaries in the Department of Arts Education for their considerable patience. Thanks too to Roger Ballard for making possible this slightly revised edition for the CASAS website.

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Footnotes

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- ¹ Valmiki is the preferred title for a community often known as Balmiki. Both names derive from their deity, whom they call maharishi (great sage) Valmik. In Gurmukhi, the script of Punjabi, 'b' and 'v/w' are often interchangeable.
 - ² The Punjabi Hindu Nurture in Coventry Study was supported by the Leverhulme Trust whose generous funding is gratefully acknowledged. The Institute of Education subsumed the Department of Arts Education.
 - ³ 'Formal Hindu Nurture' (1984) and 'Hindu Nurture in Coventry' (1986-1987). For details of these studies see Jackson and Nesbitt (1986), Nesbitt and Jackson (1987), Nesbitt and Jackson (1988), Jackson and Nesbitt (1990) and Jackson and Nesbitt (1993).
 - ⁴ Khalsa ('pure', 'owing direct allegiance') is the term for Sikhs who have been initiated and observe the code of discipline. This includes the 5 Ks i.e. signs of commitment all of which commence with the equivalent of K e.g. kesh (uncut hair). Amrit (ambrosia) is a word for holy water and denotes the sweetened water with which the candidate is initiated into the Khalsa.
 - ⁵ Karva Chauth, a day when wives observe a fast for their husbands' welfare. Vrat (vow) is the word used for such fasts
 - ⁶ Puja is worship involving offerings of light, incense, food etc. to the deity.
 - ⁷ For example higher caste Sikhs in Coventry reported an instance when Valmikis or Ravidasis were not allowed to borrow utensils from the gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) or to distribute the karah prashad a sweet doughy mixture of ghi, sugar, wheat flour and water which is distributed at the conclusion of Sikh worship. Higher caste Hindus enquired, 'Who do the Balmikis get to read their scriptures?' implying either that they are less literate than other communities or that they are ritually impure.

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- ⁸ In this paper he is referred to as Valmik in conformity with widespread Valmiki practice and to avoid confusion. Among Hindus generally Valmiki is the name by which he is known.
- ⁹ The schedule for the first interview was devised by Kim Knott of the Community Religions Project, University of Leeds. To this schedule questions, based on my earlier research findings, were appended.
- ¹⁰ For the immortal celibate Baba Balaknath, portrayed as a naked, blue youth see Sharma 1970. Some Valmiks and Ravidasis in Coventry attend a Balaknath temple. The worship of Gugga Pir, a snake deity, has not apparently been continued by Punjabis in Britain. For details of this cult see Ibbetson, 1970 vol. 1, p.171 ff. The Radhasoami movement is described by Juergensmeyer 1982 and 1989. The teaching of Radhasoami, which influences many Sikhs and North Indian Hindus, emphasises meditation. There are several divisions within Radhasoami. Charan Singh is the present guru of the large group which is based in Beas, Punjab.
- ¹¹ He is referring to karah prashad (see above). Karah means karah parshad. Prashad, the Hindi variant, and parshad are used interchangeably by Punjabis. The word means 'grace' and the shared sweets symbolise divine grace.
- ¹² The 'kind of kitchen' is the langar, the hall where a free corporate meal (also known as langar) is eaten.
- ¹³ Hindu children of other communities have similarly testified to the sense of peace, security and confidence which are experienced as a result of repeating traditional prayers. See Jackson and Nesbitt (forthcoming).
- ¹⁴ Maian is the Punjabi word for the occasion prior to the marriage when a yellow paste is applied to the bride and groom. Songs are sung by the women.
- ¹⁵ Mehndi is henna and refers to the decoration of the couple's hands and, in the bride's case, feet. The bridegroom's finger nails may be marked with henna. The bride's hands are more delicately patterned. The powder made from dried henna leaves is bought in packets and mixed with water, oil and sometimes lemon juice. A ready-made paste is now available in tubes. Although greenish-black when applied the paste leaves a reddish stain which lasts for several days. According to a Punjabi Muslim informant although higher caste bridegrooms are subjected to a mehndi ceremony their hands are not actually decorated, whereas in lower castes they are.
- ¹⁶ No other child mentioned Shraddh but a Ravidasi woman observed that the fortnight of Shraddh was a period to be avoided when fixing the date of a marriage. She was referring to the practice of a bride returning to her parental home, after only a day or two at her inlaws, before settling in to her household. Her daughter had just stayed with her inlaws for more days than is usual after the wedding day because they were not supposed to send her off to her new home during these days.
- ¹⁷ It was televised in Encounter, Central Television, 12 March 1989
- ¹⁸ Gambling is popular on Divali night as players hope that the goddess Lakshmi will bless them with prosperity. (When, as a teacher in Uttar Pradesh, I asked pupils to write about Divali a recurrent theme was their condemnation of gambling as a malpractice particularly evident at Divali.)
- ¹⁹ Jackson and Killingley (1988) provides a useful account of Hindu attitudes to food. See also Jackson and Nesbitt (1993).
- ²⁰ A local Gujarati Hindu woman described a similar practice when she lived in East Africa, saying that in Britain all she could do was throw away a small piece of dough as she had an electric stove and not a naked flame.

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- ²¹ For details of Santoshi Mata, the ‘goddess who brings contentment’ and her vrat see Brand 1979.
- ²² See Swain 1974 for further discussion of the role played by religious pictures in Punjabi life.
- ²³ For a summary account of recent trends in Indian movies see Haggard 1988 which has a useful bibliography.
- ²⁴ For this story in Punjabi see Lal, Mohan pp.52-53. Darshan Singh summarises by saying: The legend is about Ravidasa’s offering of a damdi a coin which the Ganga receives raising her hands from the waters, and in return gives a golden bangle as a gift from her for Ravidasa. (1981: 14)
- ²⁵ In the Sanskrit text of the Valmiki Ramayana (Uttarkand: Sarg 66 sloka 1-6 printed on p.1609 of the edition published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur) both twins were born naturally. Valmik uses a bunch of grass to protect the babies from evil. (Kush is the name of a type of grass often used in ritual and lav means ‘stalk’). It is possible that video dramatisations follow a popular version which demonstrates Valmik’s supernatural power. According to this he made a doll out of grass, and gave it life, so creating Kush.
- ²⁶ Nagas are Genii superior to man ... They are supposed to carry a precious jewel in their heads.’ (Zimmer 1946: 63)
- ²⁷ Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale died in 1984 during fighting between his followers and the Indian army in the Golden Temple, Amritsar. His charismatic leadership attracted many Sikhs who felt alienated from the Government of India.
- ²⁸ Ramgarhia is the title used by Sikhs from the artisan castes i.e. those whose ancestral occupations were carpentry, bricklaying and iron-working.
- ²⁹ This was a ‘love marriage’ as no marriages are arranged between Valmikis and members of the Jat community. Punjabi Jats are unambiguously Sikh in identity and their zat far outnumbers all others in the Sikh panth.
- ³⁰ Vertovec (1987) shows the much greater influence of Christian practice in Trinidad where Hindus teach their children a creed in Sunday school, sit on chairs in the temple, and the priest uses English in his exposition.
- ³¹ This is the case with Hindus and Sikhs generally, although Gujarati devotees of Sathya Sai Baba have mentioned having a swinging cradle for Jesus in front of their shrine and singing appropriate bhajans (hymns).
- ³² Waheguru, literally ‘praise to the Guru’, has come to be one of the names which Sikhs use most frequently in referring to and addressing God.
- ³³ About Baba Balaknath's disciples Hershman wrote that they are often possessed by the spirit of Baba Balaknath and flagellate themselves in ecstatic trance, when their matted hair falls free and swings wildly with the whirling movements of the head. (1974: 288) According to *Avazi Qaum* the Baba whose devotees flock to the Balaknath temple in Coventry was shown up as a harmful fraud in Punjab (1989).
- ³⁴ Hershman (1974) provides a detailed account of the treatment of hair by Hindu and Sikh Punjabis. He cites ‘**gille val**’ (wet hair) as one of three common, but sinister usages of the rarely mentioned word ‘val’. A sorceress might wash her hair and throw the water from it over an infant so as to wet it and capture her spirit for her womb. Traditionally a woman would only unknot her hair once a week on Mondays (a day of good fortune) so that she might wash, comb and oil her hair: No Punjabi woman will wash her hair or clothes on Tuesday (the most ill-starred day of the week) unless she wants to commit sorcery with the water dripping from her hair which is especially empowered on that day. (op.cit: 281)

³⁵ According to some authorities (e.g. Seva Kalsi in a written communication 23 February 1990) 'boys do not participate in the rituals'. However all girls, both Valmiki and higher caste, who have described the role of kanjakan have mentioned the presence of one boy (lankra).

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