by Shalini Sharma

What do we really know of the historical experience of different communities of Asians living in Britain? Apart from a few works that have focussed on particular community groups dwelling in particular locales in Britain and a series of migration statistics and encyclopaedic entries, the answer would be, not much. In such a context, the importance of oral history is increasingly acknowledged. The lives and pursuits of ordinary people and the valuable information about customs, culture and priorities that can be gleaned from them are recognised as a valuable source to gain a wider understanding of our past. One such unrecorded history is that of Hindus in Britain. However, a beginning has been made by the launch of the British Hinduism Oral History project by the Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies, which has been substantially aided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Three hundred interviews of first generation migrants are to be conducted across Britain. The questionnaires follow a common format but each interview is unstructured to allow for the interviewee to freely focus on what he or she considers significant memory. The questions probe on reasons for migration, memories of the life left behind, first experiences of Britain, the building of social and community groups, and the practice of faith in such a context. This forum can be used as both a space where the elderly inform your young descendants of their stories, hopes and fears, and as the first record of the daily experiences of Hindus in a ‘multi-cultural’ Britain.

Three distinct types of people have been targeted. Firstly, those who have perhaps made a difference in the lives of Hindus in Britain and are seen to have enhanced the prestige and self-respect of the community in the wider context of Britain. Secondly, the individuals whom “everybody knows” in particular locales, i.e. whom are known in the local communities as outstanding and exemplary figures of their faith. They are seen as the prominent innovators who have raised money for charitable causes, taught community languages, or built temples in their local communities. Finally, this project attempts to search out the voices of those individuals normally silent in historical accounts. These include the perpetuators of faith within the family home, mothers and wives who migrated with their men-folk and established the social customs and culture of a “Hindu” home. Also in this category are the voices of individuals whose experiences lie outside the dominant and officially recognised Hindu communities. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism.

These stories can be compared in terms of class, caste and regional community to ascertain how united or coherent Hinduism is. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism. These are either people belonging to “lower” caste groups or those who are practising Jains or Buddhists but perceived by the state as falling under the aegis of Hinduism.

The first set of issues to be raised by the interviews carried out thus far turn on to what extent a body of individuals exists that denotes itself as Hindu. What does being a Hindu mean? What if anything do individuals in Britain date back to this period. However, what such overt manifestations of faith fail to convey is the extent to which smaller communities of Hindus such as Bengalis and Tamils practice their faith in different ways. Bengali informants spoke of the home as the principally important space for worship and the annual Durga Puja celebrations as the only real public celebration of their religion. Similarly, a Sri Lankan had built a temple in his garden, which is now visited by individuals from all tenets of British society including many Christians and Sikhs. Even within a group of individuals who originated from one region of India, there are many differences as to how to practice Hinduism. For example, the Punjabis are divided into Arya Samajis, Sanatan Dharmis, and various Sampradayas such as the growing faith in Sai Baba apparent amongst Hindus in Britain.

Home and Hindu culture

Since the rise of Hinduism within the Indian polity much research has been conducted on Hindu communalism within India. Studies of the long-term cultural strategies of groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, have alerted social scientists of the political importance of social activity termed as cultural. For these very groups have attempted to cast the myriad diversities of Hinduism under one hegemonising net of Hinduism. A common assumption surrounding Non-Resident Indians (NRI) is that they actively contribute to RSS/VIHP funds and support the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. The project can explore this postulation. Relations between the ethnic minorities within Britain are discussed and opinions on the possible barriers between communities are sought. Exploding the myth that NRIs are only interested in what is happening in India, each individual to be interviewed stands firmly in the belief that he or she is British. For many Indians as a spiritual home, a place for pilgrimage, and a place where family and friends still reside. Home, however, is Britain and it is here that political loyalties dwell.

There was an Indian community. They used to get together. It did not have any temple as such. They would get together every weekend to sing the songs of prayer to the Lord and...