

Headline

Shrines in India and Pakistan demonstrate shared practices of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims

Summary

Modern scholars and politicians tend to assume that the 'world religions' are separate and bounded entities with their own unique institutions and texts.

State policies reinforce this 'reality' by relying upon tools of enumeration and labeling to perpetuate religious difference. The partition of colonial India in 1947 and the mass expulsion of Muslims from East Punjab and a similar movement of Hindus and Sikhs from West Punjab, was an extreme example of the accentuation of religious difference. What this research in the region of Punjab (Pakistan and India) shows, however, is that despite all this, many holy places, shrines and tombs of saints (pirs) are regularly used by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

This research project was conducted between 2008 and 2010 by Dr Navtej Purewal, Dr Virinder Kalra and their interdisciplinary team, funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#). Fieldwork took place at a mixture of mainstream and marginal shrine sites in Punjab, and used a combination of surveys, participant observation, ethnography and interviews, as well as study of oratory and music such as *qawalli*, *kirtan* and *dhadi*. The team found that various forms of social exclusion and everyday necessity are addressed through spiritual idioms. In 'DIY' shrines and practices the mixing of symbols is common, and self-run rituals and spiritual services exhibit a considerable freedom of interpretation and practice which empowers dalit/low caste groups and women. These sites are used not only for worship and spiritual practice, but serve a wide variety of personal, social and community functions.

State authorities and religious leaders are not always happy about this situation. When they intervene, practices become more disciplined, and surveillance of performance, sermon and ritual comes into operation. Yet the popularity of these sites makes them hard to police effectively, and these forms of 'everyday' or 'lived' religion continue to thrive on both sides of the border which today separates India and Pakistan. To some extent, the effect is to undermine the reality of separate, 'communal' religious communities, but nationalism, physical separation of religiously defined communities across the border, and enforcement of 'big' religion through politicised religious ideologies act as a countervailing force.



Gugga Pir (Mairhi) near Patiala, India, where tombs and folk and spiritual music attract hundreds of worshippers each week

Find out more...

- Read more about the project and the shared cultural heritage of the Punjab on the website Sannjh Punjab: http://www.sannjhpunjab.org/main_research.php?id=2&nav=Research.
- Access Nonika Singh's interview with the project's leader Tej Purewal entitled 'The daughter's case' published in *The Sunday Tribune*, 17th May 2009:
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090517/spectrum/book2.htm>
- Listen to tracks 1 and 4 from the CD: "*Mittar Pyaare Noon: Contemporary Sounds of the Rababi Tradition of Kirtan from Lahore*" Shabad Kirtan performed by Bhai Ghulam Muhammad Chand and produced in association with the project:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/mittar_pyaare_noon_contemporary_sounds_of_the_rababi_tradition_of_kirtan_from_lahore_shabad_kirt_1.
- Read about a seminar a seminar on religion, social identity in Punjab Chandigarh, February 18th 2010 organised by the project which was covered by the **Tribune News Service**:
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100219/cth1.htm> and **indianexpress.com**:
<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/worldexperiencingrevivalofreligioninp/581777/>
- Look at the project's listing on the University of Manchester's website here:
<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/sociology/research/projects/gcpr/>
- Purewal and Kalra (2010) article 'Women's Popular Religious Practices in Indian and Pakistani Punjab.' in a special Issue of the journal *Women's Studies International Forum*. Edited by Santi Rozario and Geoffrey Samuel.
- Purewal (2009) book chapter 'Gender, *Seva* and Social Institutions: A Case Study of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara and Charitable Trust, Birmingham, U.K.' in Verne Dusenbery and Darshan Tatla (eds.), *Sikh Diaspora Philanthropy in Punjab: Global Giving for Local Good*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi. ISBN 9780198061021.

You might also be interested in...

- John Mack 's Religion and Society project on conversion from 'little' religion to 'world religions' in East Africa:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_one/small_research_projects/page:2
- Gordon Lynch and Abby Day's network which considers the construction of 'belief' and 'beliefs' as differentiated categories (cultural performance):
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_two/networks_and_workshops
- Roger Jeffery's project 'Learning at the Swami's Feet' investigating Hindu education in South India:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/roger_jeffery
- Roger Ballard's work on lived religion in the Punjab and Prakash Shah's work on the category of religion
<http://www.casas.org.uk/papers/religion.html>.

Project Details

Award Title

Gender, Caste and the Practices of Religious Identities

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Award Type

Phase 1 Large Grant

Key terms

India, Pakistan, shrines, Punjab, caste, gender, ritual, women, symbols, syncretism, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh