Online Authorities?
Young British Sikhs, Religious Transmission and the Internet

Image at: http://www.sikhchic.com/cartoon.php?id=40&pid=15

"Sacred Practices of Everyday Life", 9th - 11th May 2012

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Collaborating partner

BECAS's role is:

- To provide a point of contact with the local Sikh community and contacts with relevant agencies;
- To contribute expertise and experience on role of voluntary Sikh organisations in the provision of education and the transmission of Sikhism;
- To articulate and oversee non-academic Sikh interests in issues of relevance to the project, and to ensure that the research remains grounded and relevant;
- To provide opportunities for the researcher to speak and run workshops at *gurdwaras* and other organisations in Bradford, Leeds and beyond with the support and endorsement of BECAS;
- To provide a fieldwork base in the local area.

BECAS

The Bradford Educational and Cultural Association of Sikhs

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Collaboration, transmission and impact

➢ As part of the collaboration with BECAS some dissemination events have taken place in the West Yorkshire area (in Gurdwaras and at cultural events) to increase awareness of the research and its findings.

➢ Impact funding to take this further:

- Three presentations to young Sikhs in advertised dissemination events (London, Midlands, North)

- Findings to be made available online (website and Facebook)

- A research report (printed and online)

- Teacher resources (online)
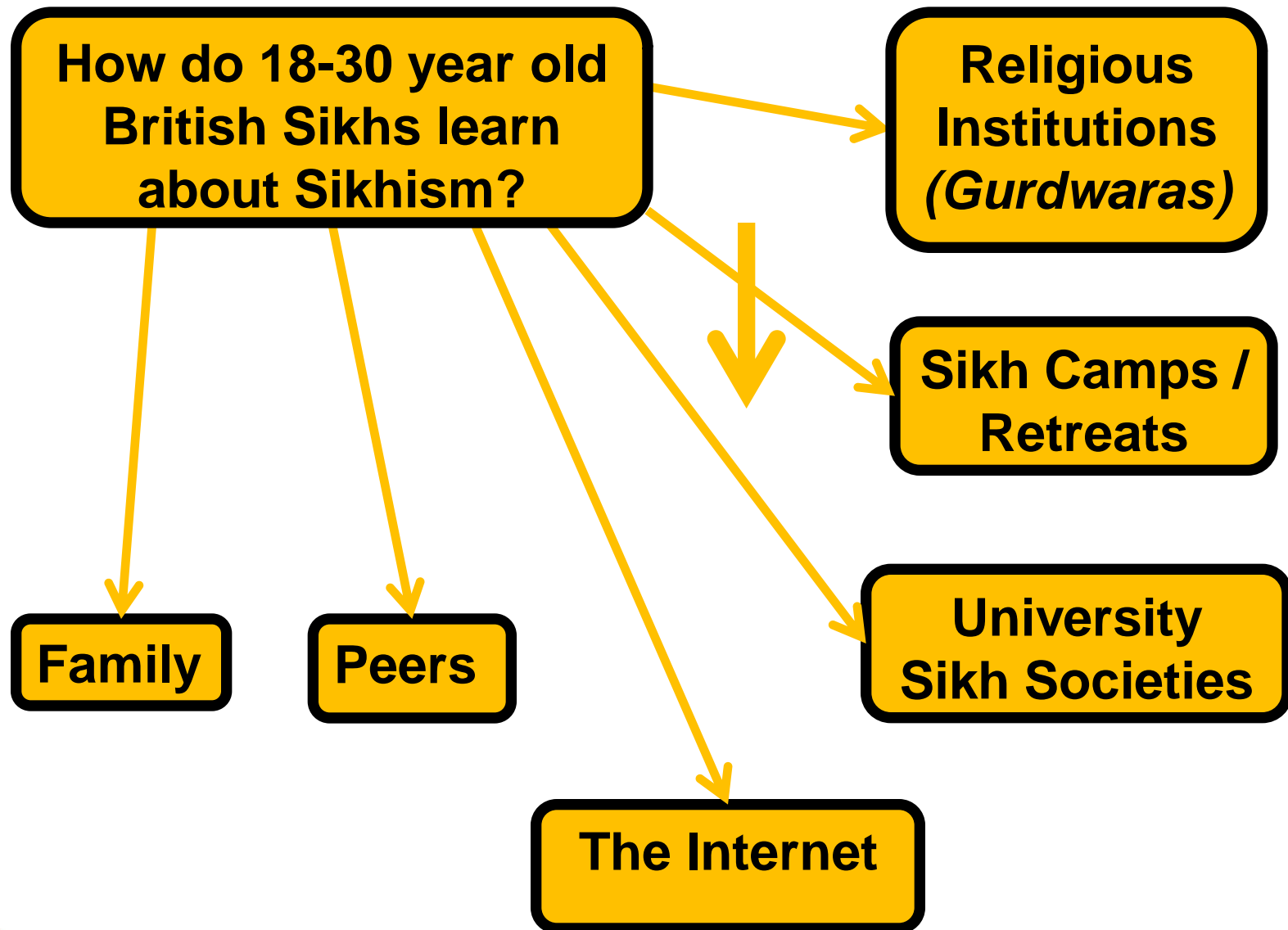
Collaboration, transmission and impact

"I am excited to hear the outcomes! Please publish updates on the facebook page on which you advertised!"

"I would like to know what the outcome of the research will be, some kind of feedback or even to read the thesis report?"

"I would like to request a copy of the completed report... I am thrilled that someone is taking steps to actually ask Sikhs what their thoughts are on Sikhi and to compile this information, as I believe it would be interesting and useful in knowing how to improve prospects for the future."

This raises interesting question about the relationship between peer transmission and impact

Research Arenas

How do 18-30 year old British Sikhs learn about Sikhism?

Religious Institutions (*Gurdwaras*)

Sikh Camps / Retreats

University Sikh Societies

Family

Peers

The Internet

Young British Sikhs Online

1. The evolution of Sikhism online

2. How young Sikhs engage with Sikhism online

3. The impact of the online environment on Sikh religious authority

Sikhism Online 1.0

http://www.sgpc.net/
July 2000

http://www.dsgmc.in
July 2009

www.sikhspirit.com
Dec 1999

http://www.sikhifm.com
Nov 2002

www.sikhs.org
Dec 1994

http://www.sikhs.org.uk
Jan 1999 http://allaboutsikhs.com

http://www.gurdwarananaksar.com/
Mar 2004

Oct 2000

http://www.sikhicamp.org
June 2000

http://panthic.org/
Jan 2005

http://www.dtfbooks.com/
Mar 2002

Mid 1990s to the early 2000s sees Sikhism online in the form of websites and discussion forums.

www.sikhnet.com
March 1996

http://www.khalsacamp.com/
Aug 2001

http://www.sikhstudent.org/
July 2002

soc.culture.indian
March 1990

http://www.akj.org
June 1998

http://www.info-sikh.com/
June 2001

1990	1995	2000	2005	2010

http://www.srigranth.org/
Sept 2001

soc.culture.sikhism
July 1995

http://www.waheguroo.com
Jan 2001

http://www.sikhnn.com/
May 2003

http://www.gurunanakgurdwara.org/
Dec 2006

http://www.khalistan.net/
May 1996

http://www.centralgurdwara.org.uk/
Apr 2002

BOSS
(http://www.waheguru.demon.co.uk)
June 1998

http://www.sikhsangat.com/
Feb 2003

http://www.nsouk.co.uk/
Feb 2003

Most of the scholarly analysis of the interaction between the internet and religion has focused on these particular technologies.

http://www.sikh-history.co.uk/
May 2000

http://www.ikirtan.com
Sept 2002

http://www.singhbrothers.com/
Jan 2002

http://www.smethwickgurdwara.co.uk/
July 2008

http://www.gsghks.org.uk/
June 2003

http://www.sikhitothemax.com
July 2000

Sikhism Online 2.0

- **Wikipedia launches in 2001**
- **Sikhiwiki arrives online in 2005 currently with 5821 articles**

- **Youtube appears online in 2005**
- **The relative ease of the process of uploading videos online has led to a variety of Sikhism related videos now being available**

- **Blogging arrives in the late 1990s (Campbell 2010: 24) allowing individuals to write about their own personal religious journeys.**
- **Popular Sikh blogs include** http://manvirsingh.blogspot.com, http://thelangarhall.com/

WIKIPEDIA
The Free Encyclopedia

You Tube
Broadcast Yourself

1990   1995   2000   2005   2010

YAHOO! Groups

facebook

Google Groups

- **Website based discussion forums precede the appearance of website free discussion groups such as Yahoo groups (1998) and Google groups (2001).**
- **Groups include those with an International focus (e.g. 'Gurmat Learning Zone'), organisations (e.g. BOSS) and those with a local focus (e.g. leeds-bradfordsikhs)**

- **Sept 2006 - Facebook opens to those aged 13+ with a valid email address**
- **January 2011 - Facebook passes Google to become the most popular website in the world**
- **April 2012 – Facebook tops 900m users**
- **Many Gurdwaras / Sikh orgs now have Facebook accounts**

Young British Sikhs Online

- **Q. Do you ever use the Internet to learn about Sikhism? Yes / No**

  a) Which websites / forums do you visit most to explore and learn about Sikhism?

  b) Of these, which ONE website do you visit the most?

  c) How has the Internet helped you (or not) learn about Sikhism?

  d) What kinds of questions about Sikhism have you asked online?

  e) Are you a member of any online Sikh communities?

Young British Sikhs Online

- Why Sikhnet?

- Offers a wide number of online tools

- Is constantly providing innovative applications via its dedicated online team.

- As Bunt (2009:196) explains, "fast-loading, high-quality, easy-to-navigate sites with attractive graphics and easy-to-read content ... will possibly have the ascendency on more difficult-to-read, technical and/or poorly designed material."

Young British Sikhs Online

Survey responses reveal that young Sikhs go online to:

1. **Discuss taboo subjects**
2. **Answer their questions about the Sikh tradition**
3. **Explore differing practices within the Sikh tradition**
4. **Access repositories of religious materials**
5. **Examine English Translations of Sikh scriptures**
6. **Obtain daily guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib**
7. **Find out about Sikh events**
8. **Access event archives and recordings**
9. **Purchase Sikh resources**
10. **Understand the legal position of Sikh articles of faith**

Singh Jasjit, "Global Sikh-ers: Transnational Learning Practices of Young British Sikhs" in Jacobsen Knut A. and Myrvold Kristina (eds.), *Sikhs Across Borders*, Continuum, 2012

Online Authorities

- A number of scholars have suggested that the Internet has the potential to threaten traditional religious authority structures.

- For Barker, the Internet challenges traditional authority structures by offering users new additions to knowledge through "opinions, values, and, perhaps most importantly of all, questions" (2005:74)

- Focusing on Sikhs Jakobsh argues that:

  – "members of virtual communities, instead of turning to … gurdwara administrations for validation, are exploring the multitude of truths readily available to them online ... given the power that comes with technical knowledge, they have in essence become the 'new authorities' within the digital domain." (2006:32)

Online Authorities

- Campbell notes that the concept of authority is rarely contextualized and argues that "there is a need for a more refined investigation and explanation of what is meant when the term "authority" is used in reference to online contexts" (2007:1043).

- She recommends researchers identify which specific form or type of religious authority is being impacted:

  1. Religious Hierarchy
  2. Religious Structure
  3. Religious Ideology
  4. Religious Text

Religious Hierarchy

- It is clear that many young Sikhs are aware of the risk of relying too much on information found online:
  - "forums are dangerous as they are full of opinionated ppl who are bias and only protyra [sic] one side. only websites with objective articles are useful"

- For some, a strategy employed to make sense of the often conflicting opinions available, is to ensure that online information is ratified by an 'elder':
  - "You have to remember that not everything you see or read on the net is true ... So it is always good practice to confirm actions, either with an elder Gursikh or someone at the Gurdwara etc"

Religious Hierarchy

- However, it appears that only the 'right' types of elder are suitable to ratify Internet findings:
  - "For basic facts and information the internet is brilliant. But when you're looking at a deeper level … you need to talk to those that have actually experienced whatever it is that you need answers for. And you can only get from people – you can't get that from facts and figures – you have to take that from experiences."

- In this regard, those affiliating with particular groups in which authority is bestowed based on religious experience (as opposed to factual knowledge) will continue to look to respected elders as religious authorities despite what is available online.

- "choices related to internet use and innovation are … often guided by previously established views about religious authority, community, and even older mediums such as printed text." Campbell (2010:21)

Religious Hierarchy

- The idea that previously insignificant "techies" have become online religious authorities is not supported by some interview and survey respondents who demonstrate little loyalty to particular discussion forums:

  - "If there is a certain subject I want to look into I just use google"

- Most ideological subjects have already been discussed !

- In the early 2000s few discussion boards existed meaning that anyone wishing to engage with Sikhism online would have to join one of these boards.

- In the early 2010s there are a number of ways to engage with Sikhism online meaning that young Sikhs are able to only join those discussions which are 'least challenging', or which support a particular point of view.

Religious Structures

- The Internet has challenged traditional structures in its capacity to mobilise like-minded individuals behind a particular cause.

- Examples include the mobilisation of young British Sikhs behind the Behzti affair, and the recent "Respect for the Guru Granth Sahib" (R4G) campaign

- These mobilisations usually by pass "official" structures and organisations often becoming "virtual organisations" in their own right

Religious Ideology

- Many survey responses highlighted an increased awareness of diverse opinions about what constitutes 'correct' Sikh ideology due to online engagement.

- E.g. the status of Sikhnet as the most popular Sikh website may have contributed to the steady rise in the number of Kundalini yoga classes being held in Gurdwaras all over the UK.

- Increasing numbers of British born Punjabi Sikhs, some of whom have attended courses in Espanola, are now teaching yoga in Gurdwaras in the UK.

Religious Texts

- It can be argued that the online environment has assisted in re-establishing the Guru Granth Sahib as the main religious authority for many young Sikhs.

- Young Sikhs are now able to engage with their Guru in a language they understand and without having to perform any of the necessary Gurdwara rituals

- Translation websites (e.g. Sikhitothemax) allow young Sikhs to easily quote from the Guru Granth Sahib

- Daily Orders (Hukams) mean that for many, the Guru Granth Sahib has become a more easily accessible source of religious guidance and authority.

Conclusions

- The online environment is challenging authority relating to religious hierarchy, structure, ideology and text

- Rather than assuming that the online environment has affected religious authority, attention needs to be paid to exactly how authority has been affected

- Although early websites and discussion forums might have been the place for religious discussion the impact of new technologies including Facebook appears to have diminished their importance.

- The sheer amount of discussion forums now available means that young Sikhs are free to join and leave forums as they wish.

Conclusions

- The online experience very much depends on the user's background and religious affiliation

- For those young Sikhs who are unaffiliated, the Internet affords them a relatively 'safe' space in which they can start to explore their tradition on their own terms

- For those who already affiliate to a particular ideology or group, the Internet can supply well rehearsed arguments for and against these views causing some young Sikhs to continue referring to offline elders or authorities to 'check' information they find online.

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