

The Legitimization of a Regional Folk Cult : the Transmigration of Baba Balaknath from Rural Punjab to Urban Europe

Ron Geaves and Catherine Geaves

Abstract

The article explores the regional folk cult of Baba Balaknath as it moves from its major centre of worship in the Himalayan foothills of Himachal Pradesh down to the plains of the Punjab and then to on to several cities of the West Midlands in Britain. At each location the cult picks up practices and beliefs which are dominant in the religion of the new locality.

On its arrival in Britain, the priests of the cult have adopted a variety of strategies which legitimise the folk tradition and aid it in adapting to the new environment. These strategies fall into the category of universalisation. Study of the transmigration of the worship of Baba Balaknath from the Punjab to Britain provides a unique insight into the transformation of a regional Hindu folk cult as it attempts to legitimise itself through moving closer to the 'Great Tradition' in Hinduism or adopting an eclectic universalism.

Many studies of Hinduism in Britain have focused on major sects which demonstrate the transferral and adaptation of either orthodox forms of Hinduism or movements formed around the leadership of charismatic gurus. Utilising Weightman's (1981) classification of Hinduism these kinds of religious movements emphasise either the dharmic or transcendental.¹ Very often these studies overlook the fact that many of the migrants of Hindu or Sikh background originated from East Africa and are already several generations removed from Indian village life and its concerns. Their religious life has already adapted itself to the new situation brought about by migration long before their arrival in Britain. This is particularly true of the numerically dominant Gujarati communities.

¹ Weightman's classification as an analytical tool for the study of Hinduism has been further refined by Roger Ballard's (1996) 'Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum: Continuity and Change in Four Dimensions of Punjabi Religion', *Globalisation and the Region: Explorations of Punjabi Identity*, eds Singh, Pritam & Shinder, Thandi, Coventry: Coventry University Press. 'Panthic' would provide comparison with 'transcendental' whereas 'Kismet' refers to 'pragmatic'. Roger Ballard's classification provides a more accurate tool of analysis in this context as Baba Balaknath is a Punjabi phenomenon.

Our experience of India indicated that for the vast majority of the village population, religious life was far less institutionalised, more informal, less orthodox and very eclectic. The major motivation was likely to be pragmatic or kismatic rather than dharmic, qaumic, or transcendental. Consequently, we were interested to discover whether the folk traditions of the Indian village could be successfully transplanted to Britain and what kind of adaptations would need to take place. In order to achieve this we observed the Punjabi migrant community in the West Midlands and in the villages of origin. The Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts are the two main areas of migration of Punjabis into Britain. The majority of Britain's Sikh and the smaller Punjabi Hindu community originate from the Jalandhar Doab. The area is essentially rural, consisting of a multitude of small villages and some towns.

The religious life of these communities demonstrates considerable eclecticism particularly in folk traditions where the borders between Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism are considerably blurred. This especially manifests around tombs or shrines to holy men or women. Villagers, especially women, will queue to seek solutions to the everyday problems of village life. The priests or representatives of the dead saint advise but also carry out rituals designed to ensure successful resolution of the problems brought before them. Consequently, the popular representatives of religion are more likely to be concerned with healing or miraculous solutions for life crises than teaching doctrines which reinforce dharmic codes or means of salvation. Oberoi (1994) has referred to these religious traditions of Punjabi village life as an 'enchanted universe' and he has demonstrated how they compete with more orthodox forms of religion in the region.ⁱⁱ

These folk traditions from the Punjab have also made their way into Britain and Europe. One of the largest and most well-known amongst the migrants is the cult of Baba Balaknath.ⁱⁱⁱ The aim of this article is to explore the ways in which the cult

ⁱⁱ Oberoi, H. (1994) *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.140-203

ⁱⁱⁱ I utilise the term 'cult' throughout the article even though the word has been severely damaged by its pejorative use in the media. Therefore it is necessary to define how I am using the term. I have decided to continue with the use of 'cult' to describe the phenomenon of Baba Balaknath as it was formerly used in the same context by Ursula Sharma (1970) in her study 'The Immortal Cowherd and

has changed in the move from its homeland to Britain, and to indicate how the changes in Britain are in turn affecting the cult back in the Punjab. One of the major ways in which the cult has manifested change is in its adoption of a universalist stance,^{iv} that is, the ways in which the temples in Britain are moving away from a folk cult model to embrace other models of religious organisation described in the article. This phenomenon is evident both in Britain and in the Punjab, but is most notable in Britain.

In order to describe the changes in the form of the tradition as it moves from Shahtalai in Himachal Pradesh, down to the plains of the Punjab and then out into the Sikh/Hindu diaspora I have utilised the metaphor of a river moving from its source and receiving tributaries. The device is useful but has a distinct limitation in that a river's flow is in one direction. However, it is crucial to recognise that in reality movement is in both directions and the contents of the article affirm that human contact flows both 'upstream' and 'downstream'.

The cult in Britain is concentrated in the West Midlands area but also has followers in West London. The four temples to Baba Balaknath are situated in Walsall, Wolverhampton, Coventry and Southall.^v In attempting to address the question of how the cult has changed we looked at the main centre of the cult which is situated at the *Gufa* (cave) ^{vi} outside the town of Shahtalai, north of Hoshiarpur in

the Saintly Carrier]: An Essay in the Study of Cults'. Sharma defines 'cult' as a 'complex of religious activity directed towards a common object of reverence (be it deity, saint, animal, spirit, or indeed a living human being). That is, the members of the cult are united by the fact that they all worship the same object, rather than the fact that they all hold the same views or dogmas. You 'belong' to a cult only as long as you care to practise it, and membership is seldom exclusive; it is generally possible to participate in more than one cult at a time' (Sharma 1970, p.137).

^{iv} I have utilised 'universalist' as an umbrella term to describe the process of legitimisation adopted by the Baba Balaknath temples in the UK in which they are attempting to move from being a regional cult with beliefs and practices developed in a particular geographical locale to forms of religion that are not bound by either geographical limitations or exclusivism. In this respect, the bhagats are able to draw upon powerful influential forces in the recent history of Hinduism such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa or, more locally, the Radhasoamis. However, it should be pointed out that I discovered no explicit reference of meaning to either movement and certainly there was no evidence of the transcendental or pantheistic dimensions normally present in Hindu universalism.

^v This localisation is due to the fact that the migrants from specific regions will tend to settle in a relatively small area. As Vertovec notes: "... distinctions of provenance are by no means limited to general regions (Punjab, Gujarat, 'East Africa'), but extend to particular provinces and districts, even towns and villages therein." (Vertovec, 1992, p. 10).

^{vi} There is a problem here with transliterating some Punjabi terms. '*Gufa*' could be more accurately rendered as '*gufa*'. However, the official plaque that was installed in the Walsall *mandir* to

Himachal Pradesh, then followed it down into the plains of the Punjab to the Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar districts which is where the majority of Punjabi migrants to Britain originated. This is the stronghold of the worship of Baba Balaknath and many of the villages in the Jalandhar district contain a Baba Balaknath temple. It is not surprising therefore that the migrants from this area brought the cult to Britain from its regional homeland. Finally, we looked at the temples in Walsall and Wolverhampton. Both of these British temples have attempted in different ways to universalise the cult of Baba Balaknath, and at the same time have sought to legitimise it.

Whilst we are aware that we cannot do justice to such a rich and complex tradition in an article of this length, nevertheless, we hope to indicate by our observations some of the ways in which the *bhagats* (devotees) have adapted their tradition in order to meet the changing needs of their new environment.^{vii} This article, whilst covering the issue of eclecticism within the tradition, will attempt to draw out the way in which the two British temples examined in this chapter are universalising and legitimising the cult and how developments in Britain are in turn affecting the *Gufa* in Shahtalai.

Brockington, in writing about the widespread practice of reinterpretation within the Hindu tradition, notes:

Tradition is not always just what it seems, but has constantly been undergoing reinterpretation to accommodate new understandings and changed circumstances. Innovation is not the enemy of tradition but that by which it maintains its relevance. Hinduism does not reject the old in favour of the new

commemorate its opening by the *mahant* of Shahtalai uses '*Gufa*'. This is also the rendition utilised by both *bhagats* of the Walsall and Wolverhampton *mandirs* in any written material. Therefore I have decided to follow their lead in the interests of recognition by devotees. The inconsistencies in transliterating Indic terms also arises in some proper names. The son of Shiva usually known as 'Karttikeya' is referred to as 'Kartak' in Punjabi.

^{vii} We have also left to one side the question of caste, but it would be interesting to discover whether the Baba Balaknath cult is caste related. Vertovec notes that, "While most British Punjabis are from the adjacent areas of Jalandhar and Ludhiana ... their composition includes various caste groups ... However, the overall salience of caste distinctions among Punjabis in Britain, and in India itself, is arguably less marked than those associated with other regional social structures (Vertovec, 1992, p. 11). In an interview with the Walsall temple priest Geaves (1997) records the priest as saying that caste is rejected and that the status of Brahmin should be by merit rather than by birth.

but blends the two, expressing new dilemmas in traditional language and accommodating fresh insights to established viewpoints. The ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances has been a mark of Hinduism throughout its history, and the unifying factor bringing together its many diverse threads lies in their common history within this unique weaving together of tradition and innovation.^{viii}

This process is evident in the Baba Balaknath cult both in the Punjab and in Britain. Whilst it is essentially a folk tradition which focuses on Baba Balaknath's healing powers, it manifests strong characteristics of the Shaivite tradition. His name, in incorporating the title "*Nath*", indicates that the cult could be an offshoot of the *nath* tradition.^{ix} Its connection to Shaivite traditions is further reinforced by the belief that Baba Balaknath is a form of Skanda, one of the sons of Shiva. I have also heard claims by devotees that Baba Balaknath was incarnated in the Punjab during the nineteenth century. In this regard, the language used to describe him is more influenced by Sant panthic traditions but also borrows from the Shakti Sarwar phenomenon described by Oberoi.^x It is clear that such reinterpretation as Brockington writes of has occurred in this cult. As we hope to show, since entering Britain the cult has been subject to further changes.

Because the cult is essentially a folk tradition emphasis is very much on the pragmatic or kismet. This kismet focus is stressed by Oberoi (1994) in his analysis of what he defined as the 'enchanted universe':

the focus of religiosity was not on analysis but on pragmatic results. Whereas scriptural religion is concerned with explaining reality, popular religion

^{viii} Brockington, J (1981) *The Sacred Thread*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.209.

^{ix} The *nath* tradition relates the legend of nine great yogis, of whom Shiva is believed to have been the first. *Nath* yogis attained perfection by particular yogic techniques which gave them power over death. Such a belief ties in well with the Baba Balaknath tradition, since he is believed to be immortal, and to live in the *Gufa* in the form of a child. Moreover, certain pictures portray him with Gorakhnath, the most famous of the *naths*.

seeks to manipulate reality to the advantage of its constituents, be it through the intercession of spirits, magic or other rituals ^{xi}.

Healing and the removal of spirit possession are fundamental aspects of the cult.^{xii} Women make pilgrimage in the hope of producing sons, cures for various illnesses are sought, as well as freedom from the influence of evil spirits.^{xiii} Each suppliant is given sacred ash taken from a *havan* (the sacrificial ceremony in which ghee and grains are offered into fire usually performed by a Brahmin) which burns continually, and *amrit* ^{xiv} which s/he takes home or is used by the *bhagats* in rituals to remove spirit possession. This practice remains a central part of the cult in Britain. Both in Walsall and in Wolverhampton the *havan* ceremony is conducted not by *brahmins* but by the temple *bhagats* who both define themselves as Sikhs from the *Jat* caste, a fact which does not seem to concern the devotees.^{xv} This lax attitude towards *brahmins* is highlighted by Taylor who notes: "Brahmanism has always been weaker in the Punjab than perhaps in any other part of India."^{xvi} It is also true that the use of *bhibuti* (sacred ash) is more directly influenced by Shaivite temple use of ash than the Brahminic fire sacrifice used in Hindu rites of passage. Historically Shaivite traditions are more easily accessed by tribal and outcaste groups than Vaishnavite

^x Oberoi, op.cit. p.148

^{xi} Oberoi, op.cit., p.142

^{xii} I have described the rituals of exorcism used to remove possession by traditional village evil spirits that take place in the temples regularly in an earlier article 'The Authentication of a Punjabi Regional Folk Cult in the English West Midlands' in the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 20 (1), p.41.

^{xiii} Oberoi highlights the lack of distinction which in the past was made between mental and physical ailments: "Popular sentiment attributed illness to the malignant influence of a deity, or of possession of a spirit, in which case the spirit had to be conjured or exorcised." (Oberoi, 1994, p. 172). However, Oberoi seems to suggest that such beliefs within Sikhism died with the advent of the 20th century, but we found them to be still very much in evidence today. (Geaves, 1997).

^{xiv} Links with the Sikh tradition are evident here, since *amrit*, meaning "nectar", is given to Sikhs when they take on Khalsa identity in accepting the five "K's".

^{xv} The issue of caste seems to reflect local concerns. Jat identity would help the *bhagats* maintain prestige with Sikh devotees, however, the claim to Sikh identity may alienate surrounding orthodox Khalsa communities where Jat Sikhs dominate gurdwara attendance. The Walsall *bhagat* has moved away from any claim to Sikh identity and in conformity to his attempt to identify Baba Balaknath firmly with the Kartak/ Skanda has now denied his Sikh ancestry and affirmed Hindu ksatriya identity.

^{xvi} Taylor J. (1976) *The Half Way Generation*, London: NFER, p.99

traditions and the Shaivite influence may help explain the laxity of caste requirements for priesthood. Observations at the *gufa* also suggest a strong lower-caste presence and if this is duplicated in the West Midlands may help to explain the strong presence of Sikhs at both the Punjabi and British temples.^{xvii}

The source: the *Gufa* in Shahtalai

The *Gufa*, high above the village of Shahtalai, deep in the Himalayan foothills of Himachal Pradesh, is the central place of pilgrimage for Baba Balaknath devotees. I have described the hagiographical biography of Baba Balaknath in more detail in previous articles but briefly the temple complex consists of several locales of sacred space associated with various events in Baba Balaknath's legendary exploits. The temple complex is situated on top of a mountain known as Lodhsidh but the village of Shahtalai contains a number of important shrines visited by pilgrims in sequential order before ascending the mountain. After visiting a Shiva temple on an adjacent mountain, the pilgrims descend to Shahtalai where they bathe in the small stream that runs through the town. The river is believed to be the place where Baba Balaknath brought his goats whilst working for a local female landowner. Bathing in the river removes the devotees' sins and provides the purification necessary before moving on to the *gufa* itself. Two temples in the village are also visited, both associated with sacred trees: one is the site of the tree where Baba Balaknath sat and meditated whilst guarding his flocks of goats and the other marks the tree where he hid the rotis and yoghurt given to him as payment by his employer. According to the legends it is the discovery that her goatherd did not partake of the nourishment offered him as payment for his duties that made the woman realise that he was a *siddha* and become his first devotee.^{xviii} Babaji finally left her employment and retired to a cave at the top

^{xvii} In spite of claiming a caste-free community Sikhism has been bedevilled by the continuance of caste identities contrary to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Low caste Sikhs are more likely to be involved religious activity that crosses the Sikh/Hindu borders and to be involved in shifting religious identity (Nesbitt, E., 1991, *My Dad's a Hindu, my Mum's side are Sikhs: Issues in Religious Identity*, Arts Culture Education Research and Curriculum Papers, p.9).

^{xviii} This story may reinforce the claims of the bhagats that Baba Balaknath is a form of Skanda. In Maharashtra, local forms of Skanda are also associated with similar stories of manifestation as a

of the mountain. This is now the central shrine and main temple. The climb up the mountain is likely to be in the company of numerous bands of dancing pilgrims accompanied by drummers and led by their local Baba Balaknath *bhagats*. These charismatic healing figures, believed to have direct access to the god, owe more to the shramanistic tradition embodied in the village *ohja* than they do to the ritual priesthood of the *brahmin*. The drummers and the *bhagats* exhort the pilgrims to heights of impassioned and frenetic devotion which increases as the summit approaches. Some of these groups will halt at the base of the mountain along the river bank and gather in circles to perform rituals to exorcise individuals believed to be possessed by spirits. The temple complex on the mountain contains bazaars and *dharamsalas* (guesthouses) and three complexes of worship. The temple at the very summit marks the spot where Baba Balaknath is believed to have descended to the mountain from the sky and contains his footprints embedded into rock. This is first shrine attended by the pilgrims before they move on to another temple complex built in honour of a king who renounced the world to live as an ascetic yogi as Baba Balaknath's disciple and companion. The complex also contains temples dedicated to prominent *mahants* of the pilgrimage site and a *langar* (communal free kitchen). Most devout pilgrims do not eat here until they have visited the third and most sacred shrine, the *gufa* itself. This elevated shrine contains the black metal *murti* of Baba Balaknath sitting cross-legged and naked in the entrance to the small cave where it is believed that he disappeared into the bowels of the earth and remains in the form of a child and is sometimes claimed to be seen by the devout. This is the most sacred site and the only place where women are not allowed in honour of Babaji's status as a *brahmacharya* (a celibate). Men and women are separated at the entrance to the temple steps but a bridge allows the *murti* (image or statue of a deity or saint) to be seen from afar by women.^{xix}

shepherd/yogi who is employed by a woman with no knowledge of the deity's true identity. She also feeds him rotis and curd whilst he neglects his duties as a shepherd.

^{xix} The reason given for women being denied access to Baba Balaknath is that as a yogi he renounced the company of women. It is believed that in an earlier incarnation Baba Balaknath was Shiva and Parvati's son. He and his brother, Ganesh, are told by Shiva that the first of them to go around the

The legend recounts that the cave where Baba Balaknath retired in order to meditate was already inhabited by a demon named Lodh. The villagers would bring the demon goats in order to escape from his evil powers. When Babaji evicted Lodh from the cave, he complained that the goats would no longer be presented to him and that his livelihood was ruined. Babaji then agreed that his devotees would always come to the mountain to bring rotis for himself and goats for the demon.

This part of the legend is still reflected in the worship of Baba Balaknath. All the pilgrims bring rotis with them or buy them at the temple itself but some still arrive with goats. If the goats shake when they are in Babaji's presence they are deemed to be accepted by him. These goats are then auctioned to the pilgrims. Since the priests, as part of the offering ritual, pour water on the goats' backs, they always shake and are consequently accepted by the deity.

Below the *Gufa* shrine is another shrine to Baba Balaknath where the *babhuti* (the ashes from a fire offering) is made by continuously burning wood in a *havan*. The pilgrims receive the ash which they take home with *amrit*. These are used to cure a variety of ailments. Traditionally, the most common ailment is barrenness or inability to bear sons. There is also another temple in the complex to a king who renounced the world and came and lived with Babaji as his constant companion. The devotees believe that he disappeared into the mountain through the cave and some claim to experience seeing him in various forms.

The temple has about it an extremely primitive atmosphere. *Arti* (a ceremony in which lighted ghee lamps and incense are waved on a tray in offering to the deity) is not sung in the usual North Indian manner but a host of large bells hanging from the ceiling are rung randomly whilst priests blow conches. The resulting cacophony bears little resemblance to the structured melodic sounds usually associated with the

world will be given a bride. Baba Balaknath sets off immediately and travels over land and sea. When he returns he finds that Ganesh is already married. On enquiring how Ganesh completed the task so quickly he is told that Ganesh merely walked around his parents declaring, "My parents are the world to me." Baba Balaknath is so enraged that he swears never to have anything to do with women and becomes a renunciate. It should be noted that this legend is usually attributed to Skanda and demonstrates the linking of Baba Balaknath to mainstream *Shaivism*. On the other hand, if Baba Balaknath was a *nath* ascetic, the story may reflect the strong view of women as temptresses of yogis as expressed in the Gorakhnath and Mahendranath legend.

ritual and which we observed at the Wolverhampton temple. Instead of lamplight the images of Baba Balaknath are lit up by fires. The priests were all *Brahmins*, the head priest being chosen as a young child and appointed for life. He is expected to remain celibate in keeping with the renunciate tradition and is viewed as the *sampradaya's* hereditary successor to Baba Balaknath.

On the six hour journey to the temple from Jalandhar we observed thousands of pilgrims, a large number of them Sikhs, travelling to and from the *Gufa*.^{xx} It is alleged that two and a half million pilgrims visited the *Gufa* from the period of March to June 1996 alone and it is expected that there will be a 25 per cent increase on those figures which suggests that the cult is growing. The vast majority of these are from the plains of the Punjab but migration from the Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts of the Punjab to Britain and North America has significantly influenced the financial status of the temple. The financial support of diaspora Sikhs and Hindus is visually demonstrated by the number of marble plaques laid in response to the munificence of their offering. The efforts of the British temples is not easy to assess, but as we hope to show, the cult in Britain is well-organised and popular, and support for the *Gufa* is shown by the British pilgrims both in person when they go on pilgrimage and in the substantial material offerings made. The Walsall *mandir* has very close links with the *Gufa* and has contributed large sums of money to it. A new sewage system was also organised by the Walsall bhagat and paid for by donations of Walsall devotees. The multitude of steps which lead up the mountain to the *Gufa* bear names of pilgrims from West Midlands towns and West London who have donated for their construction, and several are inscribed with "Caldmore, Walsall, England". Many of the steps also bear the names of Sikhs and Hindus from the USA and Canada. The steps are a relatively recent addition, only being laid in 1988 and are an example of the impact of the transmission of the cult from the Punjab to Britain and elsewhere.

^{xx} The cult of Baba Balaknath makes Sikh identity problematic. Sikhs within the cult perceive their Sikh identity as ethnic rather than religious (Geaves, 1997)

The sudden influx of wealth has had a significant effect on the *Gufa*, since the government has recently taken control of the complex administration because of the large amounts of money being donated, and there are plans to install a cable car, coach station, car park, secondary school, Sanskrit college, hospital and pilgrim hostel. Such an extensive building programme indicates the healthy state of the Baba Balaknath tradition and is an example of the way in which the cult in the Punjab is moving towards becoming more institutionalised as the donations and endowments increase. It is interesting to note that such an institutionalising process is not yet evident in the British temples which, in contrast to many Hindu temples in Britain, do not have committees, language classes or other such organised activities. Instead it is the charisma of the individual priest and his healing powers which are the focus for the activities which take place. Whether the British temples will draw inspiration from the developments at the *Gufa* remains to be seen. There are already signs of a conflict between traditional formalised Hindu worship as practised in Britain and the ritual practice of exorcism. The priest in Walsall is keen to play down his role as an exorcist and the temple in Wolverhampton has recently attracted negative publicity in a local newspaper which associated the traditional rural Punjabi rituals to remove spirit possession with satanic rituals. However, the economic growth of the migrant community in Britain, North America, and Canada, especially among the Sikhs, is having a direct effect on the *Gufa* in the Punjab which is demonstrated by the plans to make the site more accessible to pilgrims.

This region of Himachal Pradesh is a strong centre of *Shaivite* (the worship of Shiva and his family) and *Shakti* (energy or power of the divine associated with goddess worship) traditions. The north-eastern hill regions of the Punjab above Hoshiarpur extending into Himachal Pradesh contain thousands of Shiva temples and important shrines to the Goddess who is usually invoked as Shiva's consort. These are frequently visited by the pilgrims to Baba Balaknath. At the *Gufa* the cult is firmly rooted in the *Shaivite* tradition, and there was a Shiva temple both on the mountain and inside the main temple. *Shaivite sadhus* (renunciate holy men) meditate in

clusters below the top temple. Although the Baba Balaknath cult in the Punjab is rooted in the Hindu *Shaivite* tradition, there are elements of the eclecticism and universalism which enter the cult in Britain to be observed here. A large majority of the pilgrims are Sikh as well as Hindu, and the pilgrim route includes a visit to Mandir Shri Pir Nigaha, a tomb of a Sufi saint in the lineage of Shakti Sarwar at Una. The tomb complex is extremely eclectic and also houses shrines to Shiva and Hanuman. Flags which are usually covered in orange when presented to Baba Baba Balaknath are also offered here by the pilgrims but the material is green to reflect that the tomb contains a Muslim.^{xxi} This eclecticism is further demonstrated at the *Gufa* itself as it houses a communal kitchen to ensure commensality run on the lines of the Sikh *langar* (free communal kitchen). However, there is little else to indicate the eclecticism of Baba Balaknath's devotees at the temple itself except for the mixture of Sikh and Hindu pilgrims, however, a common feature of most of the worshippers may be their low-caste status within Hindu hierarchical structures.

The tributaries: The cult in the Punjab

Even before leaving the mountains, two other rivers of Hindu tradition have joined to embellish the legend. The first is a story of a meeting between Gorakhnath, the founder of the *Nath Yogis* and Baba Balaknath. The depictions of the deity show him as the archetypal *nath* ascetic or *sidh* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as displayed on *Shaivite* temples throughout India. He is shown either standing or seated nearly naked with long straight hair. He usually wears ear-rings, has the yoga band around his ankles and always carries or leans upon *the yoga danda* (a T-shaped staff traditionally carried by Shaivite sadhus in imitation of depictions of Shiva). The story of him living as goatherd links him with the tradition of ascetic shepherds also common in the legends of mediaeval *Shaivite* ascetics. These attributes of Baba Balaknath may point to the historical roots of the phenomenon.

^{xxi} It may be that the Sikhs adopted an already existing practice of using flags in worship, since they are so much in evidence in the Himachal Pradesh area where there is a strong tradition of Sakti worship. In other parts of India it is traditional to offer flags to the Goddess.

The second river is far more influential and is not disassociated from the above. As mentioned previously, Himachal Pradesh has always been a strong area of Shiva worship. Singh (1995) notes that even Guru Gobind Singh invoked the one God worshipped by Sikhs as Shiva and his consort^{xxii}. In all aspects, the temple demonstrates its allegiance to an old tradition of *Shaivite* Hinduism. It is believed that Baba Balaknath was blessed by Shiva to remain in an eternal child form and many of the devotees identify Baba Balaknath as a later incarnation of Skanda, one of the two offspring of Lord Shiva. Baba Balaknath bears striking similarities with depictions of Skanda throughout India, particularly Murugan in Tamil Nadu.^{xxiii} However, it is not uncommon for Shaivite ascetics to become deified by associating them either with Shiva himself or his family.

When the cult of Baba Balaknath manifests outside of the mountains of Himachal Pradesh in the plains of the Punjab, it changed in character as several new streams of indigenous Punjabi religious traditions merged with the original legend. The *Shaivite* cult of Baba Balaknath mixes with the *Sant /bhakti* traditions prominent in the Punjab but does not incorporate a *panthic* form of organisation often associated with Sant traditions such as the Radhasoamis. On the contrary it maintains its loose structure and focuses primarily on the kismet dimension where devotees gather around a local ‘expert’ in spirit possession. Many of the villages around Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar contain a Baba Balaknath temple frequented by as many Sikhs as Hindus. The Sikhs do not always identify with the official cult and very often believe Baba Balaknath to have been a fourteenth century predecessor of Guru Nanak noted for his healing powers. Oberoi (1994) mentions Sikhs who worshipped a miracle saint by the name of Sakhi Sarvar who was renowned for

^{xxii} Singh, Gopal (1995), *A History of the Sikh People*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, p.10.

^{xxiii} The similarities to Murugan are remarkable, especially the form of Murugan depicted in Palini. The image of Baba Balaknath as a child yogi seated upon a peacock and wearing a pearl necklace is almost identical to Murugan. The main difference is the loss of the *vali* (spear) and its replacement by a *yoga danda*. Murugan devotees when asked to identify the image of Baba Balaknath universally recognised their own ishwara. Both Murugan and Baba Balaknath are acknowledged to be the elder son of Shiva and share the legends of the Skanda Purana. However, Murugan has two consorts. North Indian forms of Skanda usually maintain the myth of strict celibacy associated with the legend of Kartikkeya.

healing. His followers were known by a variety of names in different localities and the phenomenon was widespread amongst Sikhs at least until the late 19th century.^{xxiv} It is not known whether the saint was historical or mythological but further research needs to be done on the oral tradition surrounding him to see whether the healing stories parallel those associated with the 'historical' Baba Balaknath.^{xxv}

Most of the Baba Balaknath temples in the Punjab were established by a devotee who believed that he had been given the ability to channel this healing power or represent the deity. Often the temples are owned by the descendents of the original priest who inherit the power. Although they acknowledge the *Gufa* as the main centre of pilgrimage, they are completely independent of the official cult. These charismatic healers are as likely to be Sikh as Hindu. The prevalence of the worship of Baba Balaknath in the Punjab demonstrates the strength of popular religion in the region. In the village of Danda we observed the activities of the Baba Balaknath priest every evening after *arti*. Villagers, mostly women, would queue to seek solutions to the everyday problems of village life. The priest advised but also carried out magic rituals designed to ensure successful resolution of the problems brought to him. One evening we watched the healing of a child which was carried out by sweeping the earth around Baba Balaknath's shrine and then sweeping the air above the child's head. The stories told by pilgrims to the *Gufa* indicate the prevalence of Oberoi's 'enchanted universe' amongst the villagers. Although there is now a road from Hoshiarpur to the *Gufa*, traditionally devotees began their pilgrimage through the jungle-covered hills by releasing a consecrated goat. They claimed that the goat always led the groups of pilgrims directly through the jungle-covered hills to the *Gufa*. Many claim to have actually seen Baba Balaknath himself whilst at the *Gufa*.

^{xxiv} Oberoi, op.cit. p.148

^{xxv} The link with Sakhi Sarvar is maintained by the custom of including a visit to the shrine of the Muslim pir at Una on route to the *gufa*. Many of the pilgrims to Baba Balaknath carry green flags in addition to orange which they offer to the saint's tomb. Reasons for visiting the shrine only elicited the information that before the road was built to the *gufa*, there was only one path through the mountains. This path went right through the middle of the pir's shrine at Una. Whatever the reasons for the connection between the two pilgrimage sites, it has also influenced the Muslim shrine which contains Hindu murtis and religious iconography mostly connected with Shiva.

The cult is thus transformed by the strong religious eclecticism of the Punjab. Its mythological roots derived from popular and classical Hinduism are joined to the phenomenon of the *Sant/bhakti* tradition which is so strong in the Punjab. But the major influence is the 'enchanted universe' of popular folk religion associated with miracles, magical healing, exorcism and the aid of supernatural powers to resolve misfortune which is practised by many Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in the region.

Arrival in Britain

In the West Midlands three temples dedicated to Baba Balaknath can be found in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Coventry. There are also strong house groups in West Bromwich and other towns incorporated into the urban sprawl located between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. Other groups exist in Southall, West London but have not opened temples as they are cautious of criticism from the devout Khalsa Sikh gurdwaras in the area. Each of the temples or groups is centred around the charismatic authority of individual devotees that claim to be a channel for the healing power of Baba Balaknath. The *sangat* (assembly or congregation usually gathered for worship) is usually a mixture of Punjabis from the surrounding area and individuals who have strong loyalties to a particular priest or temple because they have experienced healing. In order to assess the transformation of the cult since it arrived in Britain, this section will focus on two case studies carried out in the Walsall and Wolverhampton temples. Each temple displays remarkably different ways of legitimising the cult in its new environment.

Mandir Baba Balaknath, Caldmore Road, Walsall

Located in a converted church, the Walsall *mandir* (temple) was opened in 1983 and is the first Baba Balaknath temple in Britain. Although all the groups of devotees maintain contact with the *Gufa* through pilgrimage, the Walsall *mandir* is unique in that it claims to be the only centre of Baba Balaknath worship in Britain which is linked directly to the official cult at Shahtalai. They are proud of this and

denounce the other groups as unofficial. The link to the *Gufa* is demonstrated by a plaque indicating that the temple was opened by the *Mahant* (monk or priest in charge of an ashram or temple) at Shahtalai when he visited Britain in 1983.

Unlike the *Gufa*, where only the *murtis* of Baba Balaknath are in evidence in the main temple, the interior of the Walsall *mandir* houses all the main Hindu deities commonly found in British Hindu temples: Ganesh, Hanuman, Durga, Krishna and Radha, Ram and Sita. This is in keeping with most British Hindu temples where the principal deities are usually to be found in order to cater to everyone's needs whether *Vaishnavite* (worshippers of the various forms of Vishnu) or *Shaivite*. Around the walls pictures of the Sikh gurus have also been hung. No such pictures were to be found at the *Gufa* and may therefore be an indication of the wider universalism evident in the cult in Britain or a reflection of Sikh participation in the *mandir*. We estimated that around 60 per cent of the devotees were Sikh. High above the Hindu pantheon, in pride of place, is the *murti* of Baba Balaknath who is the focus of the devotees' attention. As in the *Gufa*, he is placed in this exalted position because there exists a belief that women must keep a certain distance from him lest they die.^{xxvi} A Shiva *lingam* (inverted U-shaped upright stone phallus used to worship Shiva) stands in its separate shrine on the right hand side.

The *mandir* celebrates the festivals of *Diwali*, *Shivratri*, *Durga ashtami* and the *Chet chala mela* dedicated to Baba Balaknath^{xxvii}. The last is by far the most important occasion in the temple's year. Throughout the month of *Chet* (March/April) we were told that around six thousand pilgrims attended the temple.

^{xxvi} At the *Gufa* we heard a story that a man who had wanted a child prayed to Baba Balaknath and his wife finally produced a daughter. He was so thankful that, against everyone's advice, he took the baby girl up the steps to Baba Balaknath. On the way down he tripped and dropped the baby who died. This incident was interpreted as evidence of Baba Balaknath's displeasure.

^{xxvii} These festivals are associated with Shiva and Devi worship with the exception of *Diwali* which is a major event for most British Hindus. *Diwali* is the Festival of Lights which comes at the end of the year around October. Lamps are ceremoniously lit and presents exchanged. There are often large firework displays. This festival is probably acknowledged by the temple in recognition of the norms observed by the Hindu community in Britain. *Shivratri* is a festival celebrated in honour of Shiva held every February/March whilst *Durga ashtami* is the major festival associated with Durga, a principal manifestation of the goddess usually depicted as riding on a tiger. She is one of the forms of the goddess associated with the consort of Shiva or Parvati. *Chet chala* is the festival in March/April during which time Baba Balaknath devotees go on pilgrimage.

Some of them come from Europe and even as far away as Canada and the USA. At the festival we met pilgrims who had come from Bedford and London and were informed that there were also people from Europe and Canada present. Considering the large number of Punjabis who have migrated to Canada this seems likely, and may indicate the growing importance of the status of the Walsall *mandir*. Whereas in the Punjab the individual charismatic healing priest of the village will take pilgrims to the *Gufa*, it seems that in the West devotees who cannot go to India are beginning to use the Walsall and Wolverhampton *mandirs* as minor or subsidiary pilgrimage centres. This is a further example of the changes which migration from the Punjab is bringing about and evidence that Hindu communities outside of India are creating new centres of sacredness away from the ritual purity of India.

The inspiration behind the Walsall *mandir* is the *bhagat*, Jaspal Bhatti. Unlike the *Brahmin* priests at the *Gufa* whose role is purely a ritual one, the *bhagats* in Britain seem to have an important counselling and healing function akin to the village priests in the Punjab temples. Jaspal Bhatti prefers the title of *bhagat* (a devotee; someone who practices *bhakti*) to priest and part of the respect shown to him comes from the fact that he is believed to be a medium for the healing powers of Baba Balaknath through his devotion. Prior to the temple opening, the *bhagat* of the *mandir* had maintained the worship of Baba Balaknath in his home in Walsall since 1964 and his father had been a priest of Baba Balaknath in the Punjab. When the *Mahant* from the *Gufa* opened the *mandir* he asked Bhatti, who owned a shop at the time, to become the priest.

In spite of the large number of Sikh devotees, the worship is Hindu and consists of *arti* and *puja*(traditional Hindu worship performed in the temple or home) performed twice daily. Tuesday evening is special to Baba Balaknath and the *bhagat* uses it to counsel and heal. Healing is ascribed to the deity and is achieved by drinking *amrit* (nectar; used to describe water which has been offered to a deity or guru) and placing *babhuti* on the forehead. The problems brought by the petitioners echo those traditionally treated in the villages of the Punjab. Most often the priest will

either suggest that the person is the victim of 'black magic' or a curse. He also believes that many of the sick have broken a vow made to a deity in a previous life. Baba Balaknath has the power to reveal the broken vow and effect a cure by suggesting that the person fulfils the vow. Other than Tuesday, the *Sangat* gathers together on Sunday afternoon and evening. As at the *Gufa*, one of the unique forms of worshipping Baba Balaknath is the offering of *chandni* (flags) to the deity. During the *Chet mela* up to one hundred flag ceremonies may take place. The flag is wrapped in cloth and is taken to the back of the *mandir*. It is then brought in procession to the deity. The *bhagat* situates himself in the midst of the procession and exhorts them towards greater fervour and devotion whilst also chanting traditional mantras and passages from the *Skanda Purana*. Twice a year the flag which stands ceremonially outside the temple is changed in a manner similar to the custom in Sikh *gurdwaras*.^{xxviii}

The temple maintains a purity of worship which is mainstream Hindu *Shaivism* in character. It is denied emphatically that Baba Balaknath incarnated in any form other than those recorded in the *Skanda Purana*. The *Purana* operates as the authoritative text and the forms of worship are based upon it along with the traditional forms of worship at the *Gufa*. The *bhagat* is attempting to dissociate the cult from folk tradition and to fit the tradition into classical Hindu cosmology. He produces much literature to this end and is in the process of writing a book on the lives of Baba Balaknath which demonstrates that he previously incarnated as Skanda and Sukhdeva in the *Dwapara* and *treta yugas* (two of the four ages or extended period of time. There are four such ages which are differentiated by the degree of spirituality in each one). In this way the folk deity of so many Punjabi villagers is authenticated by being placed within traditions that exist throughout India. This conscious attempt to legitimise Baba Balaknath is illustrative of a point made by Knott:

^{xxviii} The flagpole is covered in fabric selected by devotees. It is also ceremonially washed but the ceremony of changing the *nishan sahib* in *gurdwaras* usually only takes place annually.

When one religion comes into contact with another, and its beliefs, practices, and values become open to question in the new social context, the adherents of that religion become increasingly aware of its content. This is not without consequence for the persistence of a religion in an alien milieu.^{xxix}

The title of the temple illustrates this retention of its Hindu roots, as does the use of Hindu symbols in its publications. In bringing Baba Balaknath into this cosmic scheme the cult is being both universalised and legitimised, and in transposing the tradition to Britain a legitimising process is taking place whereby a Punjabi folk tradition is being linked more closely to classical *Shaivism*. However, both popular sant/bhakti forms and Shaivite traditions co-exist amongst Baba Balaknath devotees in the Punjab. The *bhagat's* attempt to endorse the Shaivite tradition whilst denying the Sant tradition must remain problematic when there is such a large Sikh contingency in his congregation.

This transformation could be perceived as a shift from the Little Tradition to the Great Tradition.^{xxx} Srinivas' model (1952) classifies Hinduism in terms of geographical spread, where a scale from "local" to "All-India" helps to distinguish between the forms of Hinduism practised.^{xxxi} This can be observed in the identification of Baba Balaknath with Skanda who is worshipped throughout India. The *bhagat* of the Walsall *mandir* is keen to point out that Baba Balaknath is merely the local Punjabi name for a deity known by various names all over India. In particular, he cites Muragan and Skanda, both of whom are central to mainstream *Shaivism*. However, none of the above models avoid the implication that the All-India or Great Tradition is superior to the negatively termed Little Traditions. Nye

^{xxix} Knott, Kim in Burghart R.(1987) *Hinduism in Great Britain*, London: Tavistock Publishers, pp.160-161

^{xxx} The concept of Little Tradition and Great Tradition as a means of exploring the complexity of Hinduism is found in Redfield, R (1955) 'The Social Organisation of Traditions' *Far Easterly Quarterly*, 15:13-23 and Singer, M (1972) *When a Great Tradition Modernises: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilisation*, New York: Praegar.

^{xxxi} Srinivas, M. (1952) *Religion and Society amongst the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(1992) points to the problems associated with this kind of classification, since it cannot do justice to the rich variety of Hinduism. xxxii

We prefer to utilise Weightman's model or the more precise classification developed by Ballard which is specific to the Punjab. This kind of model proposes a functional approach. By looking at Hinduism in terms of "quest", Ballard posits four areas of concern to the devotee: kismatic; for survival and betterment in this life, dharmic; for the acquisition of merit and a good rebirth, panthic; for liberation and salvation and Qaumic; the development of communal/political forms of distinct religious identity. The evidence seems to suggest that the Baba Balaknath cult is still firmly rooted in the kismatic dimension which is so strong in the villages of the Punjab. This is most marked in its healing/exorcist function. However, the efforts of the Walsall *bhagat* to link the cult with the Great Tradition by providing it with a grand narrative is likely to shift the motivation towards the dharmic quest or even the transcendental. In particular, the dharmic dimension is likely to be promoted by the Bhagat's emphasis on absolutely correct forms of ritual practice based on the brahmin observances at Shahtalai.

Ek Niwas, Dudley Road, Wolverhampton

The temple in Wolverhampton known as *Ek Niwas* was opened in 1995 and, like the Walsall *mandir*, it is the inspiration of the individual priest. It is not connected officially with the *Gufa* in Shahtalai and represents a more eclectic strand of Punjabi culture in which the borders between religious traditions are often very fluid. The Wolverhampton *bhagat* has had no formal training unlike his counterpart at Walsall. He claims that his authority comes directly from the God in a vision. The vision is a unique one in the context of the Baba Balaknath phenomenon. Unlike the temple at Walsall, *Ek Niwas* does not identify itself with a particular religious tradition. On the contrary, the ideal is of a centre where all the world's major faiths are represented.

xxxiii Nye, Malory (1992) 'Hindu Religious Traditions in a Diaspora Context', BASR paper

The decor of this temple is completely different from any other Hindu temple that we have seen, either in Britain or in India. The interior is designed to reproduce the mountain upon which the *Gufa* is situated, and the *murtis* are set against a Himalayan backdrop. Each *murti* is set upon a complex structure of fibreglass mountains and dense foliage. An artificial waterfall is negotiated by a bridge across which the devotees can walk. Stuffed animals hide in bushes amidst waterfalls and caves and some scenes depict famous events in Baba Balaknath's life. The various caves form shrines to deities or contain scriptures of the world's major traditions. All this is presided over by a large picture of the God which hangs above the other *murtis* with the legend in English: "God's Voice is heard in many Ways". Flanking the *murtis* are two pictures; one of Guru Nanak and the other of Guru Gobind Singh. On the left hand side are newly installed *murtis* of Krishna and Radha and on the right hand side at the entrance is a Shiva *lingam* shrine. This apparent attempt at universalism has been further developed by the installment of a statue of Jesus Christ.

The influence of the Sikh tradition is very much in evidence at the Wolverhampton temple. Not only does the temple house a *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh sacred text) and a *Sach Khand* (a room where the *Guru Granth Sahib* is kept at night) but on a Sunday *shabads* or *kirtans* (devotional songs) from the *Gurbani* (the word of the Gurus as contained in the *Guru Granth Sahib*) are sung. The worship strongly reflects the *satsang* tradition of Sikhism but Nye does point to the fact that *bhajan* singing and communal worship among British Hindus is common and it could be that the Wolverhampton temple is merely reflecting this change^{xxxiii}. However, the shoe attendant, on taking our shoes from us, kissed them in the Sikh manner. On leaving we were presented with *parshad* by a Sikh which was an interesting mixture of *rotis* and the Sikh *karah parshad* (traditional *parshad* given out in Sikh places of worship made of flour, sugar and water). The temple also houses a *langar*. In common with most *gurdwaras* and Hindu temples in Britain, the *mandir* opens on Sundays for

^{xxxiii} Nye, Malory (1993) 'Temple Congregations and Communities: Hindu Constructions in Edinburgh', *New Community*, Vol 19:2, p.209.

communal worship. However, it is also used on that day for the traditional healing associated with Baba Balaknath. Both communal worship and healing occur on Tuesdays, the traditional day sacred to the deity.

None of the above mixing of traditions is unusual within the parameters of Punjabi religious eclecticism, as demonstrated by the visit to Mandir Shri Pir Nigaha mentioned earlier. It is possible to argue that they are an extension of the cult's normal activities within the Punjabi rural setting. However, it is the Wolverhampton *mandir's* unique adaptation of the rural eclecticism which is of interest. The Wolverhampton temple does not confine itself to Hindu expression as is the case at Walsall, but attempts to embrace all the major world faiths.^{xxxiv} An example of this is the adoption of four symbols which surround the literature and posters - the Christian cross, the Muslim crescent, the Hindu "Om" and the Sikh "Ek Onkar". We also observed that among the posters for sale of the main Hindu deities, Sikh gurus and the Buddha, was one of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. This combining of the sacred symbols of several faiths has invoked a degree of criticism from the various individual faith communities in Wolverhampton. Recently, the Wolverhampton Interfaith movement has been asked to involve itself in disputes with local Gurdwaras whose leadership is outraged at the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib in the temple. The bhagat himself has been offered police protection after threats from unknown members of the Sikh community.

The title of the temple, itself, is revealing. By calling it "*Ek Niwas*" (One Home) the priest is pointing very specifically to the universalism he preaches. The priest, who, like the Walsall priest, is a *Jat* Sikh, is assisted by a Durga priestess who also bears a Sikh name. Such universalism is not unique in Hinduism, however, since other examples of this type of stance include Satya Sai Baba, who employs symbols and values from a variety of world traditions. In spite of this emphasis on

^{xxxiv} This type of eclecticism is not unique to the Ek Niwas mandir. The Jalaram Bapa mandir in Leicester has a ceiling painting depicting Jesus, Guru Nanak and Buddha. The Skanda Vale community in Mid-Wales also presents itself as worshipping a universal deity that incorporates the beliefs and practices of all major faiths.

universalism, however, the worship is essentially Hindu and suited to the predominantly Punjabi congregation. In both the British temples that we visited, worshippers follow the usual practices of ringing a bell to announce their presence, performing *pranam* (prostration) to the deities, and offering fruit and other foods which are distributed as *parshad*. It is questionable how far the priest's attempts at universalising the cult have succeeded, since in our visits to the temple we never saw worshippers from outside the South Asian migrant community. In fact, the priest acknowledged that the *murtis* of Radha and Krishna had been installed in the hope that the temple may become more popular with the local Gujarati community.

Conclusion

There are several features of the Baba Balaknath cult which appear not to have changed in its translation to Britain. As in Shahtalai the *murti* of Baba Balaknath is always placed high up so that women may not come too close to the god. Both the temples attempt to reconstruct the mountain and *Gufa* at Shahtalai, although the *mandir* in Walsall is not so spectacular as *Ek Niwas*. Although the *bhagat* at Walsall claims that the *mandir* is the only official temple linked to the *Gufa*, both priests perform a role remarkably unchanged from the charismatic healers of the villages around Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur. Healing and miracle cures to life problems are still the main attraction of the cult and each *mandir* performs the *havan* to supply the ash used in the healing ritual. As in the Punjab, flags are used extensively in worship as traditional offerings to the deity and both the temples incorporate a *langar*. Tuesdays are dedicated to the worship of Baba Balaknath, and the festival in the month of *Chet* is the most important annual occasion.

Some of the ways which the cult has adapted echo changes which taken have place within most Hindu temples in Britain. Sunday is used as the principal day of congregational worship as well as Tuesday. Both temples display deities not only from the *Shaivite* but also from the *Vaishnavite* tradition. This is a departure from both the temple at Shahtalai which is purely *Shaivite* and the village shrines and temples which display only the *murti* of Baba Balaknath. On the whole, British

Hindu temples are *Vaishnavite* and the prominent deities are the two most popular human *avatars* (lit. a descent; an incarnation) of Vishnu, Krishna and Rama. However, they nearly all contain places of worship for the family of Shiva and the Goddess.

The evidence of religious symbols, style of worship and visual images from the Sikh tradition is a new departure. Although it is more prominent in the overtly universalist stance of *Ek Niwas*, it is evident in both temples. The two bhagats are both Sikh by birth and their congregations indicate the number of Sikhs who worship Baba Balaknath. This is not a departure from the situation in the Punjab but neither Shahtalai or the village temples display outer signs of Sikhism. The requirement of the temple in Shahtalai that the priests be *brahmins* has lapsed and both temples follow the model of the Punjabi village shrines.

Both the Walsall and Wolverhampton temples have sought in different ways to legitimise the cult through a process of universalisation, but Wolverhampton goes a step further by incorporating Muslim and Christian symbols and identifying Baba Balaknath with "*Ek Niwas*", the home of the One God. This is beginning to add a transcendental dimension to the doctrine. Essentially, what appears to be taking place is an attempt to legitimise and give authority to a rural folk tradition in order for it to adapt to a new urban environment. Thus what began as essentially a localised folk religion is, due to its translation onto British soil, coupled with the generous financial support of the *Gufa* by wealthy devotees, being transformed. In the case of the Walsall *mandir*, this transformation is manifested by adherence to mainstream Hinduism, whereas in the case of the Wolverhampton *mandir*, an entirely new tradition which embraces major world faiths could be developing.

It could be argued that certain elements of universalism have always been present. Baba Balaknath has been incorporated both into the *Shaivite* tradition and also into the *Sant/bhakti* tradition so popular in the Punjab. However, both British temples are transforming the cult by developing strategies which move it from the 'Little Tradition' to the 'Great Tradition' or from local Hinduism to all-India

Hinduism. To demonstrate the transformation of the cult as it travels from Shahtalai to Europe, Ballard's categories of the kismatic, dharmic and panthic show that the motivations of the two temples are undergoing adaptation.

Ballard's categories can demonstrate the actual processes by which the traditions move from local to all-India or from Little Tradition to Great Tradition. However, the movement is not a simple progression; the cult indicates that there can be movement back and forth between the various categories. One would expect a cult that associates itself with *Sant* and *nath* traditions at some time to have possessed a strong panthic element which would be manifested in a grand narrative. However, the focus on the kismatic has negated the need for a grand narrative, and instead the cult has emphasised the lesser narratives which underlie grand narrative. The efforts of the priest in Walsall to rewrite the Baba Balaknath legend, placing it within the mythology of classical Hinduism, supplies a new grand narrative which denies both *Sant* and *nath* origins.

Both Walsall and Wolverhampton maintain the essential elements of the cult as practised by its adherents in the Punjab but they both try to universalise the cult, albeit in very different ways. Ironically, the strategy of the Walsall temple to draw upon the *Shaivite* tradition as perceived in the practice and belief of the Shahtalai temple can potentially make the tradition more exclusive. The priest adamantly denies Baba Balaknath's 'human' or 'historical' birth. He is far more interested in demonstrating that Baba Balaknath is a central aspect of mainstream Hindu *Shaivism*. He claims that Baba Balaknath's story is told in the *Skanda Purana* where he is described as *Bhuva putra* (One who is born on earth with the blessings of Shiva) and *shuri* (title for the son of Shiva). The *Skanda Purana* tells of two sons of Lord Shiva, Ganesh and Kartak who are born in the *Dwapara yuga*. Kartak becomes a renunciate and is reborn in the *Kali Yuga* as Baba Balaknath. The devotees of Baba Balaknath also believe that he incarnated as the son of Vyasa and as the sage Sukhdeva. Sukhdeva incarnated to teach the mysteries of the Bhagavad Gita which he revealed to King Bhagirat after the king was bitten by a snake. This serves the purpose of

linking Baba Balaknath to the *Vaishnavite* tradition through Krishna. The Hindu deity born as a son to Lord Shiva is known in other parts of India, particularly Gujarat, Kerala, and Madras where he is known respectively as Apwaswami and Murgan. In effect, the Walsall temple has legitimised the rural folk tradition by highlighting its *Shaivite* roots and returning it back to the fold of Hindu *Sanatan dharma* (Lit. The eternal way; the term usually used to describe Hinduism by Hindus themselves).

On the other hand, Wolverhampton has concentrated on the eclectic nature of Punjabi village traditions and the popularity of the *Sant/bhakti* tradition. If rural Punjabis are happy to gather at the shrine of a holy man regardless of what religious tradition he originated from, then it is possible for a Baba Balaknath temple to become the home of all the world's major faiths. After all, many tributaries join together to form the Baba Balaknath religious identity in the Punjab. The Wolverhampton mandir places them all under the umbrella of '*Ek Niwas*'.

Our overall impression of the Baba Balaknath tradition is that it is strong and thriving. Economically it is definitely benefiting from the growing prosperity of the Asian community in Britain. The temples are well attended by all sectors of the community, both young and old. Although it is difficult to assess how successfully the cult is being transmitted to the younger generation, there is a core of young committed people who have been healed and who serve the priests in various ways. The cult's increasing popularity and fame as a healing tradition is also drawing followers from further afield and the fact that the priests are not ritual *Brahmins* but charismatic healers ensures a dynamism not normally found in British Hinduism. As Knott points out in describing the Gujarati community in Britain:

It is frequently noted that British Gujaratis maintain more conservative and less dynamic traditions than their Indian counterparts, a criticism also directed at other South Asian religious groups in Britain^{xxxv}

^{xxxv} Knott, Kim (1997), 'The Religions of South Asian Communities in Britain', A New Handbook of Living Religions, ed. Hinnells, J. Oxford:Blackwells, p.769

More research needs to be done to ascertain whether the cult of Baba Balaknath will change in India as a result of its re-introduction in its new British form. It may be that the cult will move out of its localised roots as transport and communication improves, and as its migrant devotees disperse to other areas of Britain. It is also interesting to note that the Wolverhampton priest and priestess plan to open a large centre in the Punjab near Chandigarh with the same universalist principles as in the British temple. If this plan succeeds it will have enormous implications for the cult in the Punjab. Whether the universalism promoted by the Wolverhampton priests will find ready acceptance remains to be seen but there are already strong precedents for universalism in the Punjab particularly amongst *Sant* organisations like Radhasoami and Sant Nirankari. Neither of these has emerged out of folk healing traditions but they do demonstrate the eclecticism found in the Punjab with regard to the Hindu, Sikh and Sufi traditions and show that such an acceptance of universalism is possible. However, the religious motivation of these panthic organisations maintains a strong transcendental aspect rather than the pragmatic or kismet.

The strength of the claim to universalise Baba Balaknath in this revolutionary manner lies in the healing. In the Punjab and up in Shahtalai, Baba Balaknath has always been a healing deity who resolves the problems which are not amenable to normal remedies. In Britain his healing powers take on a new poignancy. Even today, many of the original village migrants, particularly the women, can find the impersonality and technology of British hospitals and doctors alien to their original cultural norms. Older women, especially those who are limited in their ability to communicate in English can find some aspects of life in Britain alienating and depressing. Our interviews with those who claimed to be healed by Baba Balaknath shows that the deity does not lack patients suffering from psychosomatic or depressive illnesses even among young British-born Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus. However, another reason for the popularity and growth of the movement may lie in the new-found confidence of the Hindu and Sikh community to reintroduce

traditional rural folk-religion now that they are more firmly established in certain parts of Britain such as the West Midlands and West London.

Although his fame is still essentially confined to the Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur area, pilgrims seeking healing now come from as far away as Europe and North America. It may be a question of time before Babaji's healing powers extend beyond his Punjabi devotees and then the universalisation process will be extended further. However, despite the efforts of both temples to universalise the Baba Balaknath cult in Britain the vast majority of followers, whether Sikh or Hindu, are linked by their Hoshiarpur/Jalandhar origins. It remains to be seen whether the cult will begin to attract members from outside this ethnic group as the fame of Baba Balaknath's healing powers spread to the wider Asian community. With regard to distinctive forms of Hinduism in Britain, Knott poses the question:

If such forms do emerge ... will they retain significant regional elements within them or will these be surrendered in a drive for unity? (Knott, 1991, p. 104)

If the Wolverhampton and Walsall priests are successful in promoting Baba Balaknath as a universal figure, the cult may well shed its regional elements and become part of mainstream Hinduism in the same way that the figure of Krishna was taken from his forest roots to become a universally recognised and much loved deity accepted both by Asian Hindus and Western converts. It is more probable that the Baba Balaknath groups demonstrate Babb's view:

the Hindu religious imagination as a capacity or propensity, is not expressed as any particular interpretation of the world, but in the Hindu tradition's ability to generate multiple and various interpretations within a common frame of reference. It is not static but endlessly protean and full of creative possibilities.^{xxxvi}

^{xxxvi} Babb, Lawrence (1987), *Redemptive Encounters*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.1.

