Guest Editor: Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, Emory University

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For a site visit to be successful, it will have specific pedagogical goals, the students will prepare for what they will see, hear, and otherwise experience, and the experience will be integrated into class discussions rather than tacked on as an “extra” (touristic) activity. But fieldwork, of which the site visit is one genre, is serendipitous and often cannot be “contained” within the pedagogical parameters that we as professors might set. It is important for us to try to account for and address what students may learn that we may *not* have intended — some of these unexpected learnings are positive and others may have more subtly negative consequences. For example, in visiting sites that are new to them, students often reflect on and may question aspects of their own traditions. When the site visit presents and/or requires unfamiliar body language and position, students may learn about cultured, bodily ways of being in the world. They may learn as much about different modes of hospitality or child-raising as particular rituals or sacred texts. These are positive lessons, albeit unintended.

However, students may also consciously or unconsciously draw other conclusions from the site visit that we do not want them to or that may be unwarranted. They may make false generalizations about a religious tradition, or “religion” more generally, based on a single experience or series of experiences at one site. Or students may make unconscious conclusions about what kinds of sites and experiences are worthy of study at all. For example, for pragmatic reasons, site visits are usually made to public, institutional spaces of religious traditions, not domestic or private spaces of worship. As Karen McCarthy Brown has so

passionately argued (2003), when students visit institutional spaces of religion, they may identify and limit the study of religion generally, or particular religious traditions more specifically, with those kinds of institutional spaces. Domestic practices of a tradition and/or entire religious traditions that take place outside of institutional spaces may be left out altogether from “what counts.” The site visit may also mask multiple religious affiliations of those worshippers whom students meet at a particular site.

Every site visit will generate different kinds of unexpected learning opportunities for different kinds of students. Here I will describe just a few (initially) unintended consequences of site visits to Hindu temples that my students and I have experienced over the last decade. First, however, let me describe very briefly what some of my pedagogical goals are in sending students to Hindu temples, how some of these goals have changed over the years because of the unexpected learnings I have witnessed in students, and the kinds of preparation I give my students before visiting the temple.

My primary pedagogical goal in the temple site visit has been to enable students to witness or experience the ritual of worshiping the deity through making offerings to his/her image/*murti*, i.e.,
puja
. I also want students to experience the seeming informality and individuality of worship in Hindu temples. I encourage Hindu students to visit a temple that they do not regularly attend or whose traditions represent those of a different region than that from which the student’s parents come. Here the pedagogical purpose is to expose Indian-American Hindu students to the diversity of traditions within Hinduism. I prepare students for the temple site visit by discussing at length the

puja
ritual, introducing key terminology of the ritual, showing slides of
puja
in a wide spectrum of contexts (home, temple, roadside shrine), and showing the Smithsonian video titled
Puja
(1996), which both shows
pujas
in India and the U.S. and gives commentary on the meanings of
puja
by both first- and second-generation Indians in the U.S. So, theoretically, students have been exposed to a wide range of
puja
practices and know that it is both a domestic and temple ritual.

[redacted]

Endnotes

[1] One of the oldest “international” mosques in Atlanta, Al-Farooq Masjid, has requested that we send our students to the mosque at particular open houses held for non-Muslims, as students were often taking up space on Fridays that kept Muslims from prayer.

References

Brown, Karen McCarthy. “Roundtable: Site Visits in the Study of Religion: Practice, Problems, Prospects.” American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, 2003.

Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion. VHS. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.: 1996.