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The Slash Between Going Home as an Insider/ Outsider

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The Slash Between Going Home as an Insider/ Outsider

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Introduction

My MA thesis examines the revival of Buddhism in India in the context of modernism and globalization. Specifically, I am interested in the role that India's government plays in branding, supporting and promoting Buddhist tourist and pilgrimage sites for economic development. Since there are various significant places connected to the Buddha's life, I chose two sites that stood out to me the most: Bodhgaya and Sarnath. When I realized I will have the opportunity to do some field work in India, I chose to go to Sarnath. Personally, I was intrigued by the lack of information and updates on the developmental projects at the site, and I saw some transformational potential in Sarnath, which I believe Bodhgaya had already experienced. As part of my field work, I was interested in talking to different kinds of groups (tourists and pilgrims) to get a sense of the motivations behind their decision to travel to Sarnath. I also wanted to pay close attention to the locals and residents of Sarnath, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, to have a better understanding of their roles in the marketization of Buddhism.

Fieldwork in Sarnath

As part of my preparation for this long-awaited trip. I looked at maps, brochures, and other academic sources that could give me an idea of what places I should explore. I took a course on ethnographic methods, and read articles that may be helpful as I do my first bit of fieldwork. I felt that my ethnic background and my familiarity with the predominantly Hindu group would be advantageous when I interact with the residents of Sarnath. I was also confident that it would be easier for me to communicate with the European or North American tourists and the Buddhist pilgrims because of my fluency in English. I was hoping that these skills and my familiarity with the South Asian culture and religion would be a great asset for the success of my fieldwork. However, all these assumptions of mine fell apart as I realized that I was neither an insider nor an outsider, but I was somewhere in between. Although I had come upon the insider/outsider dichotomy during my journey as a student of religious studies, my own position as a non-resident Indian/Canadian affected my experiences in ways that I had not prepared for.

My “Aha!” Moment

It was about eight in the morning. I put on my *kurta* and a pair of leggings, then headed downstairs for some breakfast at the hotel. Sanju,¹ one of the servers, smiled at me and directed me to an empty table. As I was getting breakfast, Sanju brought a cup of freshly brewed *banarasi* chai (a specialty chai that was popular among the locals in Banaras), and

¹ Sanju is a pseudonym that I will be using for this paper.

placed it on my table. I grabbed some hot parathas and a tomato cucumber sandwich, and began eating my breakfast. The fellow sitting at the table next to mine questioned Sanju about the tea, and Sanju casually answered that he just assumed the rest would be happy with some orange juice. Then he went to the kitchen to ask the cooks to make some more chai for the others.

As I witnessed this brief interaction, I looked around and noticed that I was the only person who was served some chai; at the time, I didn't really think much of it. While eating my breakfast, I booked a taxi to take me to the Wat Thai temple in Sarnath. When the taxi driver came in to get me, I thanked Sanju for the delicious chai and left the hotel. As I was sitting in the cab, the driver asked me why I wanted to go to a Buddhist temple if I am Hindu. He also asked me why I would not spend more time at the Ganges since I will not be back for at least another three or five years. I asked what made him think I would not be back for such a long time, and he responded with a joke that just wearing a *kurta* does not make me a local.

When we reached the destination, I thanked the driver for his time and started walking up to the Wat Thai temple. Right before I got to the temple, however, a sign reading "The Garden of Spiritual Wisdom" caught my attention. A large crowd of tour-guides was aggressively trying to follow me into the garden, but the security guard told them that the garden was closed off to guides. There were few other groups who wanted to go in, but the security guard only let some of us in. The rest were told that the garden was "closed for renovations." Only tourists (excluding those who had come from other states of India) and Buddhist monks were allowed to enter the premises.

A camera in our hands, we were different. I surveyed the garden, and found that a few Buddhist monks were meditating near a tree. The garden, unlike its surroundings, was extremely peaceful and quiet. As I

was jotting down some notes, I discovered that the only locals in the garden were the workers. What struck me most was that the signs were written only in English, instead of both Hindi and English. As I was writing down my observations, the manager greeted me and thanked me for visiting the garden. He asked me to write a comment in his book, so that he can publish it on his website. Once I finished with my comments, I asked him why only certain people were allowed into the garden. He sincerely told me that it was a tourist garden only, and that locals were not allowed into the garden. I wondered why those who come from various other states of India were not categorized as tourists, but I thanked him for his response and headed to my next destination.

The Wat Thai temple is beautiful, and contrary to the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom, extremely busy and loud. As I walked my way through many different groups of visitors, I recognized one of the tourist groups that I had seen the day before. As I was approaching the group, I was immediately dismissed with a firm “no.” I was taken aback by this, but I decided to talk to a different group of tourists that were sitting on the steps of the temple. One of the women smiled at me, so I struck up a conversation and started talking to her about her decision to visit the temple. While I was talking to Lauren, I was interrupted by a woman who told me to step aside. I wondered if I was in her way; suddenly, she stood beside Lauren, placed her child in Lauren’s lap and asked her husband to take a picture. Once they took a few pictures, the woman grabbed her kid and walked away like nothing had happened. Lauren looked at me and laughed, then she said, “Don’t worry. It’s because I am a foreigner.” It was in this moment that it dawned on me that I was not just different because I was a scholar amongst tourists and pilgrims, but I was also somewhere between Indian and a foreigner. The taxi driver was right, wearing a traditionally Indian attire and my skin tone alone did not automatically make me identifiable as an Indian. Although I was not focus-

ing on the insider/outsider debate for my thesis, I realized that this was an important revelation that I had to consider.

The Insider/ Outsider Problem

While I was focusing on information I deemed important to my thesis, I did not really consider some of the brief interactions (mentioned above) as significant. As I talk through these various occurrences, I would like to discuss some of the different ways of thinking about the insider/outsider problem that J.Z. Smith presented in his lecture, “The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion,” which are then explored by James B. Apple (2012).

In his chapter, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual on the outskirts of Sujata village,” Apple analyzes his role as a North American scholar participating in a Tibetan Buddhist ritual. He argues that “insider/outsider” is a relative term, and that these terms should be viewed as an “anthropological distinction,” rather than an intrinsic status.² One of the ways of thinking about the insider/outsider phrase is to consider social or cultural identity, which includes groups that share cultural components like language or social customs.³ When Sanju decided to serve only me the Banarasi chai, he felt that he and I had something in common, which was our ethnic and religious backgrounds. Due to this commonality, he had made an instinctual decision to serve the chai to the only visibly Indian person in the dining room. However, Sanju had also handed me the same Bisleri mineral water as

² James B. Apple, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual on the outskirts of Sujata village,” in *Studying Buddhism in Practice*, ed. John S. Harding (New York: Routledge, 2012), 158.

³ Apple, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual,” 159.

the rest of the tourists. In this case, I can either identify as South Asian or North American, and it seems I was identified as both simultaneously. Sanju had involuntarily decided that I would want some chai with my breakfast, while he did not consider this option for the others. At the same time, he was worried that I would not be able to drink tap water because he also recognized that I was from a foreign country. This seems like an appropriate reaction since I was his customer, but I noticed the same distinction when I visited the restaurants. The visibly non-Indian tourists and I were the only ones that did not have a jug of water on our tables. We were handed a complimentary bottle of mineral water instead.

The hesitation displayed by the European tourists when I tried to approach them, and my exclusion from a slightly aggressive photoshoot raised some concerns for me. In the first case, the group did not perceive me as a tourist or a foreigner to the country. In the latter, the local woman insisted she only wanted pictures with the foreigners. Throughout my trip, I was also quite surprised that all the rickshaw and taxi drivers immediately recognized me as a non-resident Indian. Even as I sat down on the benches to jot down some notes, I was approached by kids who asked me if I had come from America. To the kids, the vendors, the tour guides, the security guards and the drivers, I was American. To the European or North American tourists, I was Indian. For the most part, I was somewhere in between . . . an ambiguity.

My religious identity⁴ as a Hindu was immediately ascribed to me when I told people my name. My interest in Buddhist sites set me apart when tour guides and rickshaw drivers approached me. Much like the driver I mentioned earlier, they would ask me questions like “Why Sarnath? Why don’t you go see the Ghats of Banaras?” Although they could

⁴ Apple, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual,” 159.

recognize that I was a non-resident Indian, they instinctively accepted me as a Hindu and felt comfortable with asking me such questions. The language and demeanor of the taxi or rickshaw drivers suggested that they did not view me as totally exotic or other,⁵ which is another aspect of the dichotomy that Apple considers.

Conclusion

It might seem that the ambiguous nature of my status or position would be detrimental to my fieldwork research, however, this revelation was a blessing in disguise. As Apple states, while referencing J.Z. Smith, “the slash [in the phrase insider/outsider] connects what look like two oppositional sorts of categories and indicates interaction and interrelation, as well as implying shifting temporality and relative modes of relationship”⁶ That very slash comes into play when I identify as non-resident Indian/Canadian. As I continue interpreting the rest of my research from the fieldwork I conducted in Sarnath, this dichotomy and my positionality become useful analytical tools and methodological considerations. As the personification of the slash that connects these two supposedly polarizing terms, I was able to understand both sides of the coin. As Serawit Bekele Debele asserts: “insider-ness is an ambiguous position that is in an active process of becoming and unbecoming.”⁷ Consequently, it allows one to cross certain boundaries while limiting others simultaneously. The same goes for outsider-ness. There are many factors and levels that can shape and re-shape these concepts, such as race, religion, eth-

⁵ Apple, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual,” 160.

⁶ Apple, “The insides and outsides of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual,” 162.

⁷ Serawit Bekele Debele, “Ambiguities of ‘Insider-ness’ in the Study of Religions: Reflecting on Experiences from Ethiopia,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 11, no. 2 (2016): 158.

nicity, language. What I have illustrated, through the discussion of my experiences in Sarnath, is that the insider/outsider debate is much more complex and problematic when it is viewed as a phrase that represents disjuncture. Instead, I would argue that this concept is much more fluid and dynamic; it is dependent on various socio-cultural conditions field-research is being conducted. So, was I more of an insider or an outsider during the course of my fieldwork? I do not think that I can definitively answer that question. If I had to, I would suggest that I, as a researcher, was both an insider *and* an outsider, and *neither* at the same time. As I moved between the two positionalities, I became more aware of the process that seemed to maintain some sort of distance between the familiar and the other. As I reflect on the fieldwork I conducted in Sarnath, I am more mindful about the ways in which I connected with different types of people, and the factors that shaped these interactions. I do not see it as a problem, but a minute disruption that encouraged me to view others with a different lens and perspective, including myself and my own identity.

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