

**“Better Left Unsaid:”
Ethnographic Representation and Discernment in “A Virtual Village”**

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Introduction

Teaching about religion in South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—has tended to depend on images of discreet “religions”—Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity—some of which appear to have a mutual, communal hostility for one another. Paradoxically, many efforts to undermine such portrayals nevertheless reassert notions of distinction because they still describe people, places, and practices as “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” etc. Such adjectives suggest a sense of singular belonging when, in fact, many individuals identify with more than one community, myriad sites attract inter-communal crowds, and innumerable practices appear more “Indic” than identifiable with only one religious tradition. Meanwhile, expectations among many students that religion occupies a place apart from most people’s everyday activities narrows their understanding of how deeply religion permeates many Indians’ (and, indeed, many Americans’) lives.

As students use the online education website “A Virtual Village,” they discover for themselves how one rural, north Indian community manifests these complexities. Assigned by their instructor to explore the village and note the religious phenomena they encounter, students “enter” temples, mosques, and tombs to observe the practices pictured there. In some places, they interview practitioners virtually, hearing and reading their responses. But users also find religious images in some shops, while some homes sport images of Hindu gods or Islamic calligraphy. They find Hindus and

Muslims sitting with one another at work, watching a cricket match together, or seeking exorcisms at a Muslim saint's tomb. If required to describe who and what they encountered, students must reckon with the limits of using "Hindu" and "Muslim" as descriptors.

In order to attract students to this experience, the web design provides navigation tools that feel familiar to users, welcoming them to explore an environment unfamiliar to most. The self-directed quality of the educational exercises suggested on the site also offers a greater sense of ownership over the lessons learned, as the student determines which path to take, which hyperlink to follow, which glossary entry to read, and which resident to "interview." Each student's journey differs from the next because each determines her or his own itinerary through the village's roads, alleys, and buildings. In sum, "A Virtual Village" attempts to offer the advantages of ethnographic experience in an admittedly limited, virtual environment.

Goals

Attempting to alter existing paradigms fundamental to the pedagogy of a particular topic is akin to changing the programming of a computer while trying to use it. One faces the dilemma of either pointing out problematic dimensions of the pedagogy yet reinforcing them by adopting the very terms one wants to displace *or* taking a new tack that will make the teaching innovative yet perhaps also make it ill-fitted for the existing curriculum. We faced a similar dilemma when trying to tackle two issues that we considered endemic to the study of South Asian religions: the inherency of communalism and the reification of religion.

In the first instance, any effort to undermine the popular assumption that Hindus and Muslims practice divergent, if not antagonistic, religious traditions usually relies on identifying particular individuals and communities as "Hindu" or "Muslim," while demonstrating their occasional integration. Hence, in order to *deemphasize* the Hindu-Muslim binary, one tends to begin by *emphasizing* the primacy of each identity. So, for instance, an attempt to demonstrate the inter-communal nature of the worship at a Muslim saint's tomb might begin by describing a Hindu family's monthly devotions there. Paradoxically, this effort to weaken communal expectations relies upon the communal identification of both the saint and the devotees.

The second instance of attempting to reformulate an accepted aspect of pedagogy involves attempting to teach about religion in a manner that does not portray it as a discreet segment of life partitioned in everyday practice from economics, politics, entertainment, shopping, and socializing. Obviously in order to teach about religion, one must talk about "religion." But for most U.S. students, "religion"—in its purest sense—means spirituality, sacred texts, holy places, and sacrosanct leaders that exist (indeed, are defined as) set apart from the everyday. Many textbooks and documentaries have recognized how Hinduism and Islam apparently defy these parameters (as opposed, apparently, to Christianity) and often begin with the intonation that "Hinduism (or Islam) is more than a religion; it's a way of life." Based on our experiences of Christian cultures in

the United States and India, we consider it facile to suggest that somehow Christianity was “just” a religion while Hinduism and Islam were more—especially in light of popular sentiment that the surplus of interest in the everyday was what was “wrong” with Islam.

We decided that our effort to teach about Hindu and Muslim interactions, as well as the everyday manifestations of Hinduism and Islam, required an alternative pedagogy that moved away from the old paradigms. The Internet appeared to be a promising domain in which to realize a new approach. Given that our attitudes toward these topics were forged through our experiences in Indian cities and villages, we thought it best to provide students as comparable an experience as possible—at least as could be best managed from another hemisphere. We crafted a “virtual village” in which users could roam as phantoms through digital streets and experience social interactions and religious expressions virtually without having to keep within the supposed boundaries of religious communities or the implicit categories of “Hinduism” and “Islam.” Experience—the heart of ethnography—would make possible what so many attempts to describe life in rural north India had failed to achieve.

Ethnography

Most efforts to teach about religious cultures from a non-normative perspective inherently involve comparison. Even efforts to teach students about a religious culture with which they are familiar usually involve acts of comparison, since, almost inevitably, the students encounter practices, beliefs, and sentiments quite disparate from their own. Theorist of religion Jonathan Z. Smith has outlined five frameworks that we can use to compare religions: ethnographic, encyclopedic, morphological, evolutionary, and statistical.¹ Each has its own rules of organization, norms of presentation, and, of course, advantages and drawbacks.

We considered the ethnographic approach as the most likely to help students achieve the goals we sought for our project. As Smith explains, ethnographic representations commonly compare through the traveler’s eye, portraying differences and similarities with the traveler’s culture via anecdote and illustrative encounter. Whether in the form of a travel journal comprised of daily entries or in the form of a list of conclusions regarding various peoples encountered, a travelogue records one’s experiences grappling with life in a foreign place, often framing one’s encounters with its unfamiliar residents through reference to “home.” Since many ethnographic encounters that evoke comparison occur (or appear to occur) haphazardly, randomly arising due to the accidents of travel, the comparisons may not seem methodical—the information derived from such comparisons appears organized only by the traveler’s itinerary.

Cultural anthropology has recast the travelogue as thick description by deliberately structuring the collection and representation of data and using less subjective language to describe it. While cultural anthropology promotes the creation of ethnographies that replace the traveler’s wandering encounter with the scholar’s methodical investigation, the anthropologist still remains restricted,

at least to some degree, by the randomness of interpersonal experiences.

A Virtual Village

[A Virtual Village](#) strives to offer students an experience that strikes a balance between the traveler's happenstance and the anthropologist's research. On the one hand, [A Virtual Village](#) seeks to provide an opportunity to virtually roam the streets and *galis* (alleyways), the homes and shops, the temples and mosques of a north Indian village, including occasions to "meet" residents and select questions to "ask" them. On the other hand, the website offers information about select images, objects, and places found along the way. Through hypertext links, students can learn about other places in the village with similar items or connect to broader descriptions of cultural phenomena that an item might manifest.

The "[Roam](#)" feature stands out most prominently on the website because it offers the fastest avenue into the ethnographic experience. By using a navigation system to pass through a series of interconnected images, the user gets the impression of moving through the village: turning to view scenes, looking more closely at items, and engaging residents in pre-established dialogue. It approximates a traveler's encounter with the village-scape by providing the user choices of where to go, what to examine, and whom to approach. Of course, we the designers have a heavy hand in that encounter given that we have chosen which paths the user can traverse, which items she can view, and whom she can virtually interview.

Primarily, we have sought to mimic online what we ourselves have experienced in Arampur: separate and interrelated manifestations of Hindu and Muslim identities and practices occurring within the larger fabric of Arampur society and culture. The user's wandering brings him to a shop in which a small shrine to the Hindu god Ganesh stands next to bolts of fabric. Farther down the street he passes a sweet shop brimming with sugary morsels, a shoe repairman fixing a sandal while squatting on the roadside, a barber with an Islamic calendar hanging by his customers' chair, a pair of elderly men—one Hindu and the other Muslim—engaged in their daily conversation in a drug store, and a tea shop filled with men waiting for their steaming brew. In a home, the user can view the courtyard as a 360° panorama before entering the kitchen and asking questions of two women there. Lakshmi Devi responds to questions about married life, the village where she was born, and the benefits of fasting. In a mosque, [he can hear the call to prayer](#) or a [poem about Muhammad](#). In each case, the user can complement his "accidental" encounters with detailed material elsewhere on the website about particular cultural and religious phenomena.

Lastly, one of the advantages the ethnographic framework offers is the creative suggestion that the user does not approach the study of religion with her view entirely narrowed by the interests of the scholar, or with her conclusions already determined by a theory, or with the rich cultural context simplified into statistics and charts. Although [A Virtual Village](#) includes warnings about the limitations of what it depicts, it operates under the semi-fiction that the user controls her ex-

ploration by seeing and hearing what she decides to pay attention. Although the [glossary](#), [history](#), [topics](#), and "[about Arampur](#)" sections of the website provide complementary information she can utilize at her discretion, the virtual empirical experience encourages the student to come to her own conclusions. This, itself, is a valuable lesson. As Mathew N. Schmalz has explained elsewhere, ethnography has no message if not that Hindu traditions—and, by extension, Muslim ones too—cannot be reduced to a singular description.²

In sum, [A Virtual Village](#) endeavors to instill the unspoken notion that what is actually the result of our ethnographic research can become in some manner the user's ethnographic experience. Although critics might declaim proffering to students such ersatz encounters as an "Avatar"-like simulacrum of actual interpersonal and cultural engagement that masks privilege and difference, we would argue that thick descriptive anthropology and, indeed, eloquently expressive travelogues have at their best prompted detailed images of the unfamiliar in the minds of their audiences. These images inherently trigger a comparative response that recognizes both differences and similarities between the foreign and familiar. [A Virtual Village](#) attempts to prompt among U.S. students a parallel response to a north Indian village while avoiding the common conclusions about Hindu-Muslim antipathy and discreet religious worlds.

Representation

The overarching frame for the Virtual Village was scholarly. In his monograph on Arampur, Peter Gottschalk challenged conventional understandings of Hindus and Muslims as separate communities.³ Of course, making an effective scholarly argument depends, in part, on developing it in a relatively linear fashion and in response to a fairly discrete set of questions of concern within academic discourse. In the wake of postmodern challenges to scholarly claims of authority and objectivity, there have been consistent calls for ethnographers to experiment with different forms of representation that destabilize the influence of the ethnographer's interpretative voice and editorial control. The representational possibilities offered by the monograph are limited. Theoretically, one could use collage, journaling, or a range of interpretative voices beyond the ethnographer's to subvert and expand the range of written ethnographic representations. But a volume constructed like that would be unwieldy and could be marketed only if a conventional ethnographic representation had set the context for more nuanced and layered interpretation.

The advantage of the webpage is that it allows a more dynamic representational idiom, avoiding some of the pitfalls of presenting a single or monolithic perspective. Hypertext, for example, links particular voices, images, and glosses to other voices, images, and glosses in a manner that conveys a fuller sense of ethnographic context. Most importantly, perhaps, the inclusion of transcripts of the interviews, along with digitized recordings in the original Hindi, allow an appreciation that ethnographic exchanges are hardly seamless. For example, in an interview with "[Sharda Chaurasiya](#)," the owner of a sweetshop, it is clear that the interviewer's questions are being par-

ried with a great deal of effectiveness. Indeed, the first part of the interview begins with Sharda Chaurasiya saying that she doesn't understand anything that the interviewer is saying in his accented Hindi. If ethnography sometimes elides such difficulties in communication, [A Virtual Village](#) seeks to make them explicit in a way that reflects the often limited and partial nature of any ethnographic representation.

Revealing the fissures and discontinuities in ethnographic research is particularly important in a pedagogical context. Allowing students to read, and sometimes hear, ethnographic exchanges focuses attention on the challenges of fieldwork and can promote a more critical perspective on ethnographic interpretations and the "data" upon which they are based. Beyond pedagogical concerns, there are also ethical considerations associated with any form of ethnographic representation. Ethnographers, especially in monographs, control the representational context. Although there have been cases of putative informants publicly challenging how they have been portrayed in ethnographic accounts, the opportunity for such challenges is quite limited when great distance and lack of financial resources come into play. For this reason, revealing transcripts that show disagreement, confusion, and lack of communication gives witness to the often asymmetrical give and take of ethnographic exchanges. When such transcripts show disagreement, they offer an opportunity, albeit brief and still constrained, for informants to claim their own voices.

Discretion

If there are imperatives that demand disclosure, other imperatives require discretion. Some of these imperatives are simply pragmatic. For example, during an interview with [Dr. Premnath Dubey](#), a group of men relentlessly joke and poke fun at the doctor for several minutes. In order for the interview to take place, the interviewer had to ask them to be quiet. Of course, representing that would have reflected much about much of everyday social life in the village, but the constraints of the recording made it difficult.

The ridiculing of Dr. Dubey, however, was not just innocent fun. Some of the most cutting comments came when Premnath Dubey referred to himself as a "doctor." A quick perusal of his description of his [qualifications](#) reveals that he has a B.S. from a university with virtually no name recognition. In one sense, this simply reflects the rather free use of titles in many Indian villages. In another sense, Premnath Dubey's description of himself as a doctor could be construed as an illegal form of misrepresentation. In villages in North India, those who practice quackery are often characterized as *jhola chhaap* doctors because their only claim to status is a medical logo (*chhaap*) on their carry-bag (*jhola*). But since Premnath Dubey is quite open about his qualifications, it provides an interesting pedagogical opportunity for students to closely examine the diverse medical forms of medical therapies in Arampur.

While representing Premnath Dubey's work may or may not have prompted legal issues on the ground in Arampur, other representations most certainly would have if made available on a

U.S.-based website. One feature of A Virtual Village is the [“My Life”](#) section in which residents posted their own photographs, along with captions, depicting their families, friends, and aspects of Arampur. One eager teenage photographer convinced his young friends to pull down their shorts before taking their picture. Although we hesitated to edit or censure any of the images made by our photographers, clearly this was one we had to decline to publish online. Other pictures, taken by the same photographer, had various nonsensical Hindi glosses that left both of us scratching our heads until we realized that we had been “had.”

Of course, such examples of comic or ridiculing agency are not unknown in ethnographic literature. For example, the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon found in his initial research with the Yanomamo tribe that his informants were providing him with highly obscene names for themselves and others—names that he only realized were fictitious when he had reached sufficient proficiency in the language.⁴ In one sense, providing a full account of “being played with” would have contributed to a richer understanding of ethnographic culture. Yet, in another sense, depicting images that would qualify as obscene, and even illegal, in a Western cultural context would have placed the project at risk and, more crucially, placed informants into a vulnerable position in cyberspace that they might not fully appreciate.

The advantage of the World Wide Web is that it has the potential to reach a far larger audience than would commonly be the case either for a monograph or for a classroom. But once information is put out on the web it can be deployed in a variety of ways, not all of which are in the designers’ control. Of particular concern in an Indian context are issues of communal conflict. A Virtual Village demonstrates how individual Arampur residents express many identities, not just religious ones, including some shared among Hindus and Muslims. Although this shows how Muslims and Hindus should not necessarily be construed as separate or opposing communities, it does not mean that no one religiously disparages or negatively caricatures others. For example, one Hindu woman spoke of her fear that Muslims were intentionally having large numbers of children to outnumber and dominate Hindus. Elsewhere, a Muslim man referred to a story of a Hindu Brahman who converted to Islam out of fear of hell-fire. During yet another conversation, a man came out of his home to announce to us, and the surrounding crowd, that he and his family of Christian converts were oppressed by village Hindus.

We did not include any of these “communalistic” comments, even though they represented real aspects of life in Arampur. One reason for this decision was simple self-protection: India has strict laws against fomenting inter-communal hatred and being accused of doing so can have legal implications. More substantively, although the website provides pseudonyms for all interviewees, those who offered offensive comments might have suffered from negative reactions, since they would have still been recognizable from their pictures. With the increasing availability of the Internet in the towns surrounding Arampur, such deprecating comments about religious communities could easily circulate and re-circulate in a manner that could cause real social harm. And so, while we included other social critiques—such as very cutting criticism regarding the lack of infrastructure

in Bihar—we decided that, with regard to issues of religious conflict, there were some things better left unsaid.

The discernment that led to the exclusion of a specific picture and certain comments brought us back to the original problematic facing the project: how to challenge conventional pedagogical categories without relying upon them and how to introduce something innovative while still making it comprehensible. The issue was not that communalistic comments would have provided counter-examples to the underlying goal of the project. The issue was instead the fact that the World Wide Web was bringing us all—both interviewers and informants—into a new context that provided both opportunity and risk that none of us could fully appreciate. The interplay of old paradigms with the new, of conventional forms of depiction with innovative representational possibilities, necessitates caution. This reflection, which hopefully adds to the ethnographic context of [A Virtual Village](#), exists then as a kind of hypertext attached to the original web pages: an annotation that extends the chain of representations and raises new questions of discernment.

Notes

1 Smith actually identifies two others: structuralist comparison and the systematic description and comparison. However, he admits these to be expressions of morphological and ethnographic comparison, respectively, and so we need not go into detail here regarding them. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), especially, 19-35.

2 Mathew N. Schmalz, "Ethnography" in *Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (London: Routledge, 2007), 112-124.

3 Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.)

4 Napoleon Chagnon, *The Yanomamo: The Fierce People*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1992.)