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Physical Religious Spaces in the
Lives of Rajasthani Village Women:
Religion as an analytical and
practical approach in development

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Abstract

In this article I argue that the study of religion holds potential for analysing, evaluating and harnessing development processes, the key argument being that focus on the feelings expressed by individuals within physical religious spaces can offer insight into the perspectives of others which in turn can feed more effective communication between development partners.

Generally, 'religion' is connected to the agency that shapes people's actions and perceptions of the world around them. By combining ethnographic micro techniques with a focus on religious spaces, it is possible to gain a more detailed insight into human behaviour. Such a focus can help us unravel some of the complexity of development processes and understand why change may or may not be desired in a particular area and by a specific group. Firstly, research into the work of faith-based organisations (FBOs) could look at how physical religious spaces are used by members to reflect on concepts of development and the progress of initiatives. Secondly, by locating dialogue between partners who express a faith within religious spaces, empathy is generated that cements a lasting connection. Lastly, I argue, through documenting the lives of three women from rural Rajasthan that private ritual spaces are used by some to express personal feelings. These women also responded creatively within this same ritual space to their experiences of domestic violence.

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Introduction

In this article I argue that the study of religion has potential as a means of analysing, evaluating and harnessing development processes. Religion can act as a methodological focus helping us understand how and why people act as they do. It also offers a way of appreciating the, often contradictory, beliefs and attitudes people display. By combining ethnographic micro-techniques with a focus on physical religious spaces it is possible to gain insight into human behaviour. Such a focus can help us unravel some of the complexity of development processes and understand why change may or may not be desired in a particular area and by a specific group. For example, it can help us understand why a woman stays in an abusive relationship, or consider why someone does not want to take bio-medical advice but turns instead to a traditional healer.

In this article religious spaces refer literally to the physical spaces where ritual processes take place. Individuals and groups create religious spaces in order to express and communicate with images of the sacred. The communication that occurs may follow the same pattern each day or may be spontaneous, created out of the believer's need to work through a problem or give thanks for a joyous experience. Religious spaces can be formal – a temple, church or mosque – or informal, occurring in private moments when the individual feels safe and secure. Private religious spaces may be occupied by an individual or a group. The private nature of these spaces means that the occupants share the same need to express a specific experience and/or work through a shared problem.

I argue that focus on these spaces can offer development practitioners one means to improve their communication with local communities. Failure to communicate effectively at a community level is a criticism directed at western development agencies (Crewe and Harrison 1998, Chambers 1996, Gardener and Lewis 1996). I am not concerned in this article to pass judgement on whether or not non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are good at development instead I argue that a focus on religious spaces can help to make the work of NGOs more effective. The argument also states that faith based organisations (FBOs) use religious spaces for quiet reflection on their work. In this article the term 'FBO' refers to organisations that operate as an NGO but whose membership openly professes to have a faith

which serves as a motivating force in the work they do. Secular and non-secular researchers examining the effectiveness of the work of FBOs could therefore find the incorporation of these spaces in their research useful in providing insight into processes of policy making and project planning used by these organisations. Furthermore the extent to which an FBO communicates effectively with local communities can be observed through a focus on their use of religious spaces. The relationship between an FBO and those it wishes to help is often expressed and talked about by the FBO membership through religious images, language and practices (for example, prayer). The language FBOs use to describe the development relationship into which they have entered can reveal how they position themselves in relation to others. Are they really equal partners working alongside people in the developing world? Or do they perceive of themselves as the givers of aid who select those most in need of their help? If so, they reinforce the much criticised giver/receiver aid power relationship in which the recipients are rendered silent and homogenous by the processes of development.

In short, when thought of in terms of a series of physical spaces, religion provides a valuable insight into the lives of others. This understanding can feed more effective communication that offers one way of countering the power imbalances identified by some as inherent in processes of development (Esteva 1993, Hobart 1993). This article will outline how religious spaces can act as a useful tool for development practitioners in three ways. Firstly, I will show how religious spaces could be used more effectively by FBOs as a reflexive tool for the critical evaluation of their work. Through the presentation of a partnership between a Rajasthani Gandhian FBO and their UK faith-based donor agency I highlight how the use of religious spaces for quiet contemplation can offer membership the opportunity to reflect on the benefits or not their actions have brought. Secondly, through focus on this same partnership I will suggest that by locating interfaith dialogue within religious spaces empathy may be generated that cements a lasting connection between people of different faiths. This partnership may be long lasting challenging critics who claim relations between donors and locally based organisations are often brief engagements determined by the funding life of a project (Stirrat and Henkel 1997).

Lastly, through ethnographic case studies focusing on how three Rajasthani women use a ritual space to express their experiences of domestic violence, I will argue that

focus on how others use religious spaces could help both secular and faith based development agencies appreciate how individuals work through creative solutions to the problems they face.

Religious spaces as an approach for the critical evaluation of relationships in development

Tyndale (2003, 2006) urges development donors to take note of the important work of FBOs. For her it is the long-term emotional commitment FBOs display towards local communities that makes many of them successful communicators and responsive to the changing needs of others. A focus on FBOs, and specifically consideration of how their values translate into action, is an important link between religion and development. Programmes such as the Religion and Development research consortium at the University of Birmingham, which the UK Department for International Development has funded, seek to understand the value of this work in the hope that lessons for the wider development community may be learnt (see website for Religions and Development Research programme).

Most of the research in this area consists of case studies of individual FBOs. For example, the case studies contained in Tyndale's (2006) edited volume offer a cross-cultural perspective on spiritually-inspired faith-based initiatives. In addition, a dedicated volume of *Development* 2003 46(4) offers insights into the operation of various FBOs, with the collective authorship highlighting how the development concerns of these initiatives are influenced by religious belief. Indeed, the concept of development pursued by each is shaped by the religious values of that tradition.

In my article Does compassion bring results? (Bradley 2005), I support Tyndale's argument that the potential of FBOs as committed, long-term development partners remains unfulfilled. When directed towards development objectives, faith can bring positive results. Faith can also, however, create a blindness that prevents the believer from connecting with and seeing those he or she wishes to help. In other words, faith can prevent or act as a barrier to dialogue between each party in the development relationship (see also Bradley forthcoming). In the absence of a mechanism for critical reflection, faith often results in strong feelings of self-righteousness. In Bradley (2005), I highlight how the failure of a UK donor FBO to attempt a 'real'¹ understanding of the

Hindu faith led to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of what the communities they 'targeted' desired. Projects designed and led by the UK FBO failed and money was wasted, those that continued in partnership with a Gandhian FBO were more successful. The power relationship in which this UK FBO operated was clearly visible in the language its members used to describe those whom they 'targeted' to help. Their negative, homogenous descriptions of life in rural Rajasthan were coupled with a mission statement promising to serve the poor in this area. The relationship was founded on a notion that the FBO had the strength and ability to help those whom they perceived as weak and needy. The strength to act was generated during prayer meetings and shared meals in which Christian imagery reinforced their mission. As my case study revealed, little attempt was made to connect with those designated as 'poor'. The FBO assumed that it already possessed insight into the lives of Rajasthani people. In this example, the development relationship is one of superiority and subservience between an active giver (UK donor FBO) and a passive recipient (local Rajasthani communities).

Had the members of this FBO taken a step back and considered how their faith impacted on and shaped the relationship between them and those they wanted to help, they may have gained some insight into the inequality and one-sidedness of the 'partnership'. Furthermore, this FBO conducted an annual tour of the regions its projects served. These visits often involved touring Hindu temples and the members of the FBO did show an interest in understanding more about Hinduism. Sometimes they would ask local people to join them in worship, which they saw as an exercise in sharing each other's faith and thereby fostering links between them as 'peoples of faith'. However, as I describe in my article (Bradley 2005), this dialogue was founded on Christian practices and centred on prayer rather than on the Hindu practice of puja. The opportunity to use religious spaces for critical self-reflection was missed by this FBO. However, as a researcher by focusing on the feelings expressed by the FBO membership within religious spaces I was able to gain insight into their collective perceptions of people in Rajasthan. In turn, these insights founded my critical evaluation of the development work of the FBO, offering explanations for some of the problems the organisation faced.

Religious spaces, empathy and successful interfaith dialogue

Religious spaces were used more effectively to foster communication and understanding between the members of the UK donor FBO and the members of the local Gandhian FBO they funded.² The local Gandhian FBO had been working in the same area for twenty years and had strong links to the national Gandhian movement. It had been successful in a number of drought proofing projects and education initiatives. Members of the organisation described themselves as having a strong faith, which is why I use the label FBO. At the end of each day both organisations would sit together in silence, reflecting on the day's events. The Christian FBO would recite a prayer, to which the Gandhian representatives usually responded with a Hindu prayer for peace *OM Shanti*. I observed these sessions and felt that a closeness developed between the collective groups as the trip went on. The warmth and empathy expressed in this space was cemented through respectful acknowledgement of each other's faith. This respect then translated into effective dialogue, which forged shared development goals and objectives. Members of the UK FBO seemed to listen more carefully to the experiences and local knowledge of those working for the Gandhian FBO. If religious spaces had been created in the same way between the UK FBO and local Hindu communities, I believe that the local communities would have regarded this FBO with less suspicion.³

I stayed on after the UK FBO returned home and observed how the Gandhian FBO interacted with the Hindu communities in which they worked. The early work of this FBO had been met with hostility. Local communities often resisted the ideas of change presented to them by the ngo representatives. This was largely because villagers could not 'see' how a change in their behaviour would bring about the positive results illustrated by the ngo. Furthermore, the way in which everyday life is organised and conducted reflects the character and identity of a community. Requests by outsiders to alter the pattern of life were interpreted as a challenge to the very fabric of local life and were met with suspicion. In order for the NGO to gain the respect and trust of these communities they had to try and become part of village life, highlighting that they too experienced and understood the hardship facing people. The Gandhian FBO used religious spaces as a means to foster better relations with local people. Members of the Gandhian FBO would spend time in local temples worshipping village deities (*puja*). The process of performing *puja* (honouring Hindu deities) sent a clear message to villagers that the ngo respected a central aspect of their lives. The ngo communicated to the village that they too turned to the same deities for guidance

and protection. The social space provided by the temple enabled the ngo representatives to integrate with local people talking to them before and after worship about the things that concerned them. It also gave the ngo a chance to identify local people to employ. As the ngo became established and employed more and more people from local communities the hostility and suspicion with which they had previous been held diminished.

Trust was also built through meetings between senior members of the Gandhian FBO and local religious leaders. The endorsement of the ngo's work by respected religious leaders helped to cement positive working relations. The religious leaders would, at times, persuade the wider community that supporting the ngo was in their best interests.

A broader understanding of religion can contribute to an analysis of development processes. Critical examination of development relationships must involve the perspectives of all involved. Mosse (2005) emphasises that development policy is not formed through a one-sided process and that it fails to bear fruit when communities are 'targeted' for pre-designed interventions rather than regarded as active partners in the policy-making process. Those who are targeted for involvement in a project possess the agency to decide if that policy will in fact bring positive results for their lives. If they decide it will not, as is often the case, the project will fail (Chambers 1992, 1996, Esteva 1993, Gardner and Lewis 1996, Hobart 1993, Pottier 1993, Pottier, Bicker and Stiloe 2003). Successful policy-making is a multi-faceted, negotiated process. Recognition of it as such is vital if development results are to improve. Mosse (2005) wants the critique of development to move beyond exposing the donor organisation's cultural imperialism. He advocates a more sophisticated engagement with the web of mediation and conflict that begins at the inception of a development partnership. Ethnographic research in which the anthropologist observes and documents the various relationships involved in a specific development project can provide useful critical insight into how and why tensions arise that inhibit the success of an initiative. Mosse hopes that such analysis may achieve greater clarity over what occurs in the construction and implementation of a project. This clearer picture could have practical benefit in pinpointing reasons for development failings in the pursuit of more effective practice.

I would also suggest that, while ethnographies exist of how others live, including studies of policy-makers (Beckerleg 1994, Crewe and Harrison 1998, Croll and Parkin 1992, Gardner and Lewis 1996, Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, Good 1987, Gould 1997, Jerman 1997, Kamat 2005, Mosely 1987, Oliver der Sardan 2005), this material has not automatically translated into development policy that successfully achieves its objectives. Poor communication remains one area that prevents policy from responding to the needs and concerns of those it is directed towards. For communication to improve between the various actors involved in development, insights into policy making processes must be accompanied by 'real' face-to-face interactions between development partners. In reality, this may involve a network of bodies or organisations. This connection must be empathetic. In situations where religion or faith motivates each party to act, it is a useful focus for communication. First, faith can be experienced emotionally and encompasses a drive to reach out to others. Second, by seeking to understand the faith of others, deeper insights into their lives may be gained. However, as my case study shows, faith alone is not enough; critical reflection must accompany any development intervention at all stages.

Religious spaces as an approach to better communication between actors in development

For religion to operate as a useful analytic approach, two bodies of anthropological literature need to be brought together. Work within the sub-discipline of the anthropology of development has gone some way towards improving understanding of local knowledge. It has also made problematic the process of identifying those who are in need and of critically analysing the strategies for responding to that need. Anthropology has been used as a means of evaluating projects so that lessons can be learnt and better practice built (Asad 1973, Chambers 1992, 1996, Esteva 1993, Gardner and Lewis 1996, Hobart 1993, Pottier 1993, Pottier, Bicker and Stilloe 2003, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Tinker 1999).

Religion has been studied at a local level in the sub-discipline of anthropology of religion.⁴ Anthropologists like Aigbe (1993), Akinnasi (1995), Angro (2004), Barber (1981), Bennet (1996), Gold (1989), Gottlieb (1992), Hirschkind (2001), James (1988, 1995), Knauft (1996), Lambek (1993), Rappaport (1999), Sanders (1999) and Swantz (1995) highlight religion as a source of beliefs and values that structure everyday life.

What is missing is an application of religion that allows it to translate into a clear methodology, enabling simultaneous analysis across various themes such as:

- a. Religion's role in shaping world-views, which affect how people perceive their role and place in society and in turn shape an individual's needs and desires for the future.
- b. Religious concepts and values motivate believers which in turn could have a bearing on how individuals interpret and respond to development ideas.
- c. Religion as one aspect of misunderstanding and interrupted dialogue across the development divide. The world-views of secular and non-secular partners may clash, resulting in conflict and misunderstanding.
- d. Religion as one aspect of a dialogue (inter-faith) geared towards gaining clearer insight into the lives of each other whilst also forging empathic connections between people.

For this holistic, micro-focused methodology to be achieved, the concept of religion needs to be redefined. If religion is viewed as a series of physical spaces, each one fulfilling an important function in the life of the believer, this holistic methodology becomes possible. Literature within the anthropology of religion shows that religion encompasses more than just faith in a god. Religion is also a space to which people turn to understand the world and their place in it. People turn to religious spaces over and over again in order to work through problems and seek answers.⁵ The argument I make in *Challenging the NGOs* (Bradley 2006) is that religious spaces offer development partners the opportunity to gain insight into the personal self-perceptions of different members of each other's communities. This insight could then lead to a more fruitful dialogue between all involved in development work.

When I conducted my fieldwork in rural Rajasthan, North India I wanted to understand what function private religious spaces played in the lives of Hindu women.⁶ My ethnographic research led me to realise the usefulness of the material for development practitioners. Religious spaces offer insight into the lives of others, which could provide a more accurate representation of people and their needs.

Background to the ethnographic research

Ritual provided a means of analysing social constructions of personhood and of understanding the self-perceptions and identities of Hindu women in rural Rajasthan.

The Rajasthani women I observed performing religious rituals live in villages 150 kilometres from Jaipur. The villages from which they come are populated mainly by upper-caste Rajput and lower-caste Kumhar (potters) families.

I initially visited this region of Rajasthan between June and August 1995. To conduct research, I spent five months living with Rajasthani village women both in their homes and in the centre from which the Gandhian FBO operated. This gave me the opportunity to observe their daily routines, and in particular to see the part rituals played in them. I gathered most of the data during the time I spent with three women – Poonam, Devi and Parvati. Poonam and Devi are Rajput, whereas Parvati is a Kumhar; all three live within an hour's drive from the town where they worked for the Gandhian FBO.

a. Case Study One: Poonam

Poonam (32 years old) is one of four daughters born into a poor Rajput family, which lost its money due to a bad investment and a father who squandered it recklessly. Poonam's father had no money to offer as a dowry for his daughters. When she was 18, Poonam's father handed her over to a man 30 years her senior. Poonam married and had a son, but her husband drank and beat her regularly. Gradually, desperation set in and Poonam ran away with her child. She had to leave during the night taking only the clothes she was wearing with her. Once she left she headed for the headquarters of the Gandhian FBO, which was about forty kilometres away. She had heard it was run by a caring man who would not turn her away. She arrived on the doorstep of Deepak's house in the early hours of the morning (she had managed to hitch a lift once she reached the road). The Gandhian organisation provided her with the means to live alone without her husband. Poonam now lives in a small town not far from the FBO base where she works as a nursery nurse. She has not remarried and cares for her son alone. Her natal family visits from time to time to help her with childcare (no financial help is given). Poonam experiences some hostility from her local community. She is the only single mother in her town (apart from women who have been widowed). On my first visit I stayed with her for around two months. I stayed with her again when I returned in February 2001.

b. Case Study Two: Parvati

Parvati is a 30-year-old Kumhar woman, a wife and the mother of two young children,

one boy (ten) and a girl (eight). She lives in a hamlet on the outskirts of town in a two-roomed mud house. Her husband is an alcoholic and regularly beats her after a drinking binge. She also lives with her widowed mother-in-law. Parvati worked as a cook and cleaner at the headquarters of the Gandhian FBO. While I stayed there, she cooked for and looked after the district nurse, who was resident in the headquarters. She also cooked for 30 women training to be village health workers when they stayed at the headquarters (July 1995). On my return in February 2001 she had a new job cooking for the children of a home based in the headquarters.

c. Case Study Three: Devi

Devi is a Rajput woman by birth although she married a South Indian man and has spent her married life in Tamil Nadu. She is 35 years old and has a 15 year-old son. Devi escaped a violent marriage. She struggled for years to remain with him because she did not want to bring shame on her family. After 17 years of abuse she could take no more and left with her son. She decided to return to her family in Rajasthan where she felt she would be safe. On arriving she was told that the Gandhian FBO was looking for a cook. She took the post and was provided with accommodation and food for both herself and her son. Her son enrolled at the local high school.

All three women performed *puja* twice daily at shrines in their homes or, in Devi's case, at the shrine she constructed for herself in her room in the headquarters of the Gandhian FBO. *Puja* refers to the process of Hindu worship performed in honour of specific gods and goddesses. *Puja* can take place at home, in a temple or at a community, public shrine. Hindus often choose to worship in their homes gods and goddesses that relate to their concerns. In addition, regional traditions determine the particular deities worshipped. The fact that women perform *puja* in the home reinforces their traditional roles as wife and mother (Bennett 1983, Fuller 1992). The traditional dictates of this role require them to make the focal point of the ritual the well-being of their family, which centres them within the domestic sphere. *Puja* therefore becomes an integral part of their daily activities, and they hope that through the performance of *puja* twice daily they will protect their family. Poonam and Devi still performed *puja* even though they no longer lived with their husbands. They did so (they claimed) because they were still mothers. Despite their circumstances, they still performed *puja* to emphasise the importance of their children's security and well-being.

The daily routine and pattern of *puja* follows a similar structure recorded by anthropologists such as Fuller (1992). However, I believe a ritual performed by Poonam, Devi and Parvati late each morning displayed personal reflections of their individual self-perceptions and as such was unique to them. Once the bulk of the day's chores were completed, at around 10.30 a.m., each woman took a break. Whereas *puja* is an accepted part of a woman's daily routine, known and encouraged by male family members, the Sita ritual was performed by the women privately; while Parvati's husband may have known it existed, he did not have knowledge of its content and its significance in allowing her to voice her feelings towards his abuse. The personal nature of the feelings expressed through the ritual highlights the women's freedom to construct and perform rituals. I argue that they had chosen to construct this ritual because it fulfilled a need to enforce or express a particular aspect of their identity.

What is the significance of Sita?

What is particularly interesting is that many feminists scorn Sita for projecting a repressive image of women (Agarwal 2000, Diesel 2002, Fruzzetti 1990). Sita appears in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, with her husband Rama. Rama is banished to live in a forest by his father, the king, acting on the instructions of Rama's stepmother who does not want Rama, but her son, to succeed as king. Sita is presented as the loyal and devoted wife who follows her husband into exile. One day Ravana, an evil demon, kidnaps Sita and takes her to his palace in Sri Lanka from where Hanuman, the monkey god, rescues her. Rama doubts her fidelity and makes her walk through fire to prove her innocence, which she does. The story goes on to see Rama become king and heralded as the ideal leader and man. Sita is also commended for her role as the perfect, loyal wife.

One can see from this particularly biased retelling of the story why feminists might see Sita as a less than suitable role model, yet she is very popular with women and men in India, and various debates have been waged as to why (Kishwar 1996). Many worshippers believe that Sita showed courage and defiance in the face of such harsh treatment (Sutherland 2000).

The woman (or women, this ritual was often performed collectively) would remove a

ring from their finger. They would then kiss the ring and touch their forehead with it. They would chant the story of Sita's kidnapping by Ravana and her rescue by Hanuman and his army of monkeys. Each time the name Sita was mentioned they would kiss the ring and touch their forehead and heart. The ritual would end with the glorification of Sita. The women would praise her for her courage in exile and in the hands of the evil demon, and ask that she may inspire them to be like her. That Rajasthani women were glorifying Sita in a ritual they constructed for themselves and performed privately, suggests that Sita was not a repressed figure to Poonam, Parvati or Devi. Instead, they saw something in her image that reflected their own interests, and ultimately found her a source of strength. The ritual reveals a process of internalisation, which occurred through its production and performance. It was an embodiment of the personal experiences of each woman. As such, the ritual represented a space in which each woman projected a positive self-image. It protected a space in which the women were in control. The fact that they had chosen to use their spare time to affirm a vital part of their social identity reveals their agency and creativity. The performance of this ritual opened up a spiritual space, which in turn unlocked their innermost concerns and anxieties. The particular representation of Sita that the worshippers endorsed injected their lives with motivation and a stoicism enabling them to cope with the repressive patriarchal control over their existence.

To Poonam, Parvati and Devi, Sita was and is a powerful symbol of courage and strength. They need to incorporate these important values and qualities into their lives to overcome the harsh realities of life as a Rajasthani woman. The symbols women attribute to Sita allow them to make sense of their past 'collective history of suffering' (Leslie 2003: 61).

It is not just the symbols attached to Sita that are important, but the physical enactment of the ritual is also significant. When they were together, Poonam, Devi and Parvati would sometimes choose to share the performance of this ritual. There were other women around in the centre, but it was they who felt a connection because of their shared experience of violence and so, through performing the ritual together, they offered support to one another; this was clear because Devi never performed the ritual before meeting Poonam and Parvati. The generation of such bonds is a vital part of protecting women's self-esteem in the face of indigenous injustice. The ritual represents a creative and embodied process that both enables women to cope with

abuse and as is clear from their actions, inspires responses to that abuse. I often wondered why Parvati stayed in her violent marriage when she did not have to, for Deepak repeatedly asked her to leave her husband and offered her a secure home at the centre. Parvati refused, saying, "Why should I be the one to leave? I haven't done anything wrong." She strongly felt that it should be her husband who should leave, as he was the one who had shamed their family. In fact, she was so defiant that she displayed her bruises each time her husband took a drunken rage out on her. Although the practice of veiling is observed by Hindu women in this part of Rajasthan (purdah), Parvati chose not to veil her face thus allowing those she passed to see her face and its bruises. Parvati's pain was evident, yet she refused to leave, not because she felt she must remain a loyal faithful wife (she does not want to live with her husband any more) or because she was a passive victim (her vocalisation of her pain was a clear indication of that), but because she clearly believed she had done no wrong and wanted her community to realise that. Running away would place the focus on her; her community was likely to accuse her of abandoning her husband and his brutal crimes would be covered. Displaying her pain publicly was a way of protesting against her injustice in the hope that the community would support rather than stigmatise her. Performing the ritual affirmed the values she needed to endure her struggle. In addition, the affirmation she got from Poonam and Devi enabled her to cope with violence.

Devi appeared to be torn between the two strategies adopted by Poonam (leaving a violent husband) and Parvati (staying in an attempt to shame her husband). Two months after I left, I learnt that Devi had returned to her husband in South India. Whatever her reasons, I know that they are not because she is a weak woman unable to stand on her own, so perhaps her actions represent a third strategy. She has shown her husband that she can leave and cope on her own, that she does not need him. She will be able to hold over him the constant threat of leaving him again and can remind him of her strength to stand up to him.

The ritual created a space within which the women could explore their experiences and consciously or unconsciously consider strategies to challenge the constraints they endured. Possessing different perspectives on their experiences did not hinder the solidarity the women expressed through performing this ritual as a group. What was important was the respect the women showed each other through the preservation of

a space within which each woman had the freedom to articulate her unique and personal responses to violence. In this sense ritual does not just function to build identity but is also about the construction and maintenance of boundaries within which individuals are safe to reveal their innermost feelings.⁷

The Gandhian organisation played a crucial role in this ritual process. It provided physical shelter and employment for each woman. Within the safety of the headquarters the women could meet, connect and share their deeply personal experiences of violence. The Gandhian organisation was embedded and respected in the local community. By employing the women the Gandhian FBO was able to send a message to the community that the women deserved to be supported rather than stigmatised. This highlights how development interventions need not directly challenge social inequality, but can, as in this example, involve the creation of secure physical spaces that can then be used by individuals and groups to respond to injustices in their own terms.

Conclusion: Assessing the benefits for development of a focus on religious spaces

The study of religion helps us gain more accurate and holistic insights into other people's lives. Religion helps to bridge gaps and create sustainable multi-faith dialogue. Religious spaces offer secular and non-secular development workers the chance to gain more insightful perceptions of people. In addition, through participating in religious practices, the opportunity emerges to form meaningful bonds with the communities they partner. A focus on the spaces FBOs create can provide critical insights into the positive and negative aspects of their practice.

Furthermore, by tracking changes in religious practices it is possible to understand shifts in people's life priorities and perceptions of their environment. Ethnographic material that spans a number of years highlights the importance of maintaining contact with a community because communities and the individuals within them change.

On my return five years later, Devi had moved back to South India. Poonam and Parvati still lived in the area. Neither of the women continued to perform the Sita ritual

privately. I spent time with Poonam in her home and noted that she had built regular visits to her local temple into her daily routine. She went at roughly the same time every day (11 a.m.) to perform puja at the main temple shrine dedicated to Rama and this was the point in the day when she used to perform the Sita ritual. Changes in their external environment were the reasons both women gave for reallocating their time from private ritual to more public displays of devotion. The drought was of major concern for both these women (though neither was directly affected) as for all members of their community. Space for the expression of their personal experiences seemed to be replaced by rituals through which they asserted their social identity as members of a troubled community.

Although it cannot be assumed that all members of a community experience life in the same way and have the same hopes for the future, the drought in Rajasthan brought home the importance of community membership to many groups, even those usually marginalised by the operation of power structures. Religious spaces exist in a number of private and public places and function to transmit feelings on various levels. Because the temple is the central religious space in any Hindu village, it is within its parameters that community identity can be sought and awarded through the performance of regular *puja*. At times of intense suffering, the community collects in a way that unites previously divided parties, all seeking comfort in the belief that their deities will look out for and protect them. Respect and interaction within this space can offer the outsider a unique opportunity to express empathy for the suffering of others and gain understanding into what needs to be done to enable them to achieve a more secure existence.

To conclude, the physical religious spaces used by FBOs and people generally in their everyday lives, offer the development practitioner and researcher regardless of their secular or non-secular positioning, a focus to enhance their communication with others. This focus could bring better insight into the lives of those working in development and those targeted for development. I hope that once better communication is achieved the power relationship underpinning development relationships between a donor who has money and decides how to spend it and a partner who is targeted to receive aid may be challenged.

Notes

1. By 'real' understanding I refer to an absence of any dialogue between the FBO and the communities in which they worked. The FBO did feel they had an understanding of the lives of the Hindu families 'selected' by them for their help. They also believed they had empathy for "their suffering" [the words of the FBO director]. I argue in my article that this empathy was founded on an image conjured by them to support their mission to serve the poor.
2. For a case study of a Gandhian organisation working in India see Kumar (2003).
3. On many occasions villagers would be wary of meeting the UK donor FBO, especially if they arrived unannounced. Meetings had to be prearranged by the Gandhian FBO and it was often the male elders who met with members of the UK FBO. Although the UK FBO would request that women were present at meetings, they were usually excluded from consultation processes. Husbands would arrive to reclaim their wives. A few times an outspoken older woman remained determined to have a platform. Whenever the UK FBO arrived in a village unannounced and attempted to talk to groups of women, these interactions would reach an abrupt end with men circling their womenfolk drawing them away. A further example of suspicion occurred in reaction to an irrigation project. Saplings were planted to help retain monsoon rain in the village pond. The project failed to bring immediate results, which provoked irritation among the villagers who suspected that the UK FBO representatives had lied to them. They did not trust the engineers who told them that the results would improve over time as the trees grew. The villagers allowed their goats to eat the fodder; this was the only practical use they could see in the saplings.
4. Edited volumes on anthropology of religion include Anglo (2004), Bennett, (1996), Bowen, (2002), Bowie (2000), Crapo (2003), Glaizier (2003), Hicks (2002), Lambek (2002), Scupin (1999), Whitehouse and Laiulaw (2004).
5. Anthropological studies on healing, witchcraft and spirit possession emphasise the use of private spaces for the expression of personal trauma and problem solving (Ashforth 2005, Brain 1982, Csordas 1987, 1994, Des Jarlais 1992, Erdtsieck 2003, Geschiere and Cyprium 1994, Gessler 1995, Janzen 1987, Kendall 1985, Kratz 1994, Kumar 1984, Manji 2003, Marwick 1982, Masquelier 1994, Pool 1994, Rekdal 1999, Turner 1992).

6. My research was influenced by Gold and Raheja (1994). Their research was located within the private moments created by Rajasthani women for the purpose of having fun and venting frustrations at the behaviour of their husbands. Gold and Raheja believed that these moments offered insight into the self-perceptions of Rajasthani women and showed them as active, powerful agents determining their present and future lives.

7. Other literature that makes links between women's rituals and the articulation/expression of personhood include Diesel 2002, 2000, Gold 1996, Lincoln 1981, Richards 1982, Udvardy 1990, Von Mitzlaff 1988).

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