HOW THAI-SIKH DIASPORA STUDENTS' IDENTITY AFFECTS THEIR PARTICIPATION IN EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY

(WORKING PAPER)

Dr. Anjana. Sukumary, Humanities and Language Division, Mahidol University International College, Salaya, Thailand

Abstract

This article draws from an ethnographic case study of a group of Thai-Sikh diaspora students in the International college of a Thai Public university. It examines the issues related to the identity of Sikh diaspora students in Thailand and how it affects their participation in extra curricular activities in the university. This study fulfills the deficit of abundant research in the area of Thai-Sikh diaspora studies. As a member of Indian diaspora, I was intrigued by the ‘clustering’ nature of Thai-Sikh diaspora students inside the university. Based on Social Identity theory, this qualitative study focuses on the empirical data collected over a period of nine months mainly through semi structured in-depth interviews as well as ethnographic observation. The major findings of this study are a) the diaspora students mostly feel comfortable in their own groups because of the cultural and religious differences from Thai students. b) the unwillingness on the part of the host society to see them as ‘Thai’ limit their participation in extra curricular activities. c) the fear of not being accepted and viewed differently impacts the lack of participation d) there is a lack of proper knowledge and understanding on the part of the Thai society about Sikh religion. This study emphasizes the need of a mutual understanding between the Thai-Sikh diaspora students as well as the Thai students to accept the differences and broaden their networks outside of their community.

Key Words: Thai-Sikh diaspora, Identity, Social Identity theory, participation, Extra curricular activities, university
INTRODUCTION

The origins of all Sikhs can be traced back to Punjab, a state in the Northern region of India. The mobilization of Sikhs within and outside of Punjab started with the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. The British recruited many Sikh men for their army and there followed a migration of the Sikh soldiers to several countries outside India including Singapore, Malaysia (the then Malaya), Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. Some of them migrated to Thailand from Malaya. (Nesbitt, 2005). During the partition of India in 1947 and with the severing of Punjab into East Punjab (part of India) and West Punjab (part of Pakistan), there occurred a mass migration of Sikhs to different parts of the world including Thailand. Thus it can be inferred that there were two main waves of Sikh migration, the first wave before and after the World War I (pre 1900 to 1918) and before the partition of India and the second wave post the partition of India in 1947. The first wave of immigrants mostly travelled by sea from India via Penang and Malaya and then rail en route Thailand. As Malaya borders with Southern Thailand, many immigrants settled down in the Southern provinces of Yala, Trang and Pattani even though a majority settled down in Bangkok. The second wave of migrants mostly followed those who migrated in the first wave to Thailand. The later arrivals saw Sikhs settling down in other provinces of Thailand especially the North Eastern region of Thailand mainly in the provinces of Korat, Khon Khaen and Ubon Rachathani. As most Sikhs were business people, they began to spread their business to the Northern provinces of Thailand including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Tak (Maesot) and Phae and also the city of Pattaya in the Chonburi province, which is closer to Bangkok. The Sikhs started trade with Thailand (then Siam) during the reign of King Rama V. During the Vietnam war, the Sikh merchants from Bangkok moved to the North East of
Thailand and opened up tailoring shops to serve the deployed American soldiers there. The end of the war saw a decline in the textile business many Sikh businessmen and their families moved back to Bangkok and to several other provinces in Thailand where as some families preferred to stay back. (Kamwang, 2014).

Sikhism was given an official religious status by the Department of Religious Affairs of Thailand in 2005 and is supported by the King of Thailand and the Thai government. (Mani, 1993). Sikhism follows the tenets taught by Guru Nanak Dev and the Sikhs display the devotion to their faith by wearing the five signs of being a Sikh that was taught by Guru Gobind Singh called the Five K’s. They are Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (comb), Kirpan (sword), Kachh (cotton breeches), Kada (steel/iron bangle). The male members of the Sikh community are required to wear a top knot or turban and an insult to the top knot or turban is considered as an insult to the Sikh community. There is an emphasis in Sikhism to give 10% of a person’s earnings to charity and also the system of ‘langkar’ (common kitchen) to provide food for the needy. The two major groups in Sikhism are the Nirankaris and the Namdharis. The Nirankaris (‘niranar’ means formless, one of Guru Nanak’s name for God) worship a formless God where as the Namdharis believe in repeating God’s name (nam), a pivotal element in Guru Nanak’s teaching. (Sidhu, 1993; Nesbitt, 2005). The Sikh community in Thailand consists of both Nirankaris and Namdharis. According to the International Religious Freedom report of 2006 by the U.S Department of State, the Sikh community in Thailand is estimated to have 70,000 members with 75% of the community settled in Bangkok and Pattaya. (Mani, 1993). The first Gurudwara (the major worship place of Sikhs) in Thailand was built in an area called Pahurat in Bangkok (a place where the majority of businesses are owned by Sikhs) in 1932 and was registered as an association called ‘Sri Guru Singh Sabha’ in 1946. The new Gurudwara in Pahurat was
completed in 1981. Currently there are 19 Gurudwaras in different regions of Thailand. The Sikhs who were settled in Thailand (hereafter called Thai-Sikhs) had to adapt to the customs and values of the Thai society and since some of their religious practices weren’t compatible with those of the Thai ways, several negotiations took place among both Thai-Sikhs and the Thai government. This has not only enabled the Thai-Sikhs to formally adjust to the ways of the Thai society but also helped the Thai society to accept and welcome the religion of Sikhism and their practices. (Kamwang, 2014).

At present, the Sikh community in Thailand is described as “the most integrated community in Thailand”. (Chilana, 2006). On a superficial level, the above statement seems true but it inevitably leads to the question as to how much of integration has happened on the part of the Thai-Sikh individuals. This essentially points in the direction of the need to analyze the issue of social integration of the Thai-Sikh diaspora individuals in Thai society. This paper analyzes the social interaction of Thai-Sikh diaspora individuals in a University setting. During participant observation, I realized that there is a lack of participation of Thai-Sikh students in the extra curricular activities of the University. The visible factors for the lack of participation, as most Thai-Sikh students identified were long distance commute to their homes as the University is situated in suburban Bangkok. They also expressed that since extra curricular activities are not credit courses, lack of participation in them will not affect them academically. They added that the most Thai students have the advantage of staying in University dorms and hence participation in extra curricular activities become easier for them as most activities take place late in the evening. However, on close observation and in depth interviews with students of Thai Sikh diaspora, it becomes evident that the distance from the university and schedule of activities are not the major causes of lack of participation. It has strong cultural implications where in the issue
of identity plays a crucial role.

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Identity is a very complex term and can be roughly defined as how individuals or groups perceive themselves in a society. Psychology defines identity as a cognitive construct of the self that answers the questions ‘who am I?’ (Forte, 2007). Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1982) identifies an individual as belonging to a group. It identifies an individual’s group membership and behavior based on their nationality, religion or political affiliation. (Brown, 2000). According to Jenkins (2004), Social identity is an ongoing process of interaction between the individuals of the ‘ingroup’ (those belonging to the same group) as well as those in the ‘outgroup’ (those outside the group). Hence it can be inferred that a share of an individual’s identity is derived from their affiliations and interactions with a group and its group members. (Hogg and Terry, 2000). The theory of self categorization is an elaboration on the elements of the social identity theory. (Turner, 1981). Both the theories expound on the theme of social identity and its elements and processes. In fact, Turner is of the opinion that it is through self categorization that an individual develops social identity. There is also the transition from the personal identity to that of group identity, rather ‘depersonalize’ the individual in order to be part of a group. (Korte, 2007).

The strength of a group depends on how stronger the similarities or differences between the group members and hence Social identity varies according to different situations. Onorato and Turner (2004) is of the opinion that an individual and a group is connected through a ‘cognitive schema’ where in embedded the core as well as the peripheral concepts of the self. The core concepts maintain the personality of the individual where as the peripheral concepts help him/her to adapt to the various circumstances. The transition of the personal identity to group identity is
one of the salient features of Social identity theory, where by an individual perceives himself/herself as a member of a group and identifies strongly with the group. This situation can result in enhancing their ‘self esteem’ as well as bias or favoritism for their group and discrimination of members of the other group. There are possibilities of stereotyping and prejudice as a result of social identity and self categorization. (Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al, 1987).

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of my research are

1) To study and analyze the socialization and interaction patterns of Thai- Sikh diaspora students with the native Thai students in the University
2) To understand the reasons behind the clustering nature of the Thai-Sikh diaspora students
3) To analyze ways to foster better relationships between Thai-Sikh diaspora students and the native Thai students in the university.

METHOD

This qualitative analytical study involves 22 Thai- Sikh students of an International College (age 18-21 years) as a single case. This research is based on the fundamental epistemological characteristic that the ‘social organizations are constructed on purposeful actions of individuals as they negotiate their social roles and define status within a group’. (McGee&Hardman, 2012). This study is an interpretative exploration into the identity of Thai-Sikh diaspora students and how this affects their participation in extra curricular activities at the university and is part of a bigger project on the identity construction among Thai-Sikh diaspora individuals. The experiences and opinions of the diaspora students proves helpful in understanding the social dynamics of diaspora students’ relationship with the host society.
Majority of the data collection for this study was done through semi structured in-depth interviews. The interview questions investigated a number of issues including cultural identity, activities of students inside and outside university and friendship and interaction patterns with Thai-Sikh as well as Thai students. Having similar cultural background helped me as an interviewer to develop the rapport as well as elicit information from the interviewees as rapport encourages informants to talk about their culture and eliciting information fosters the development of rapport. (Spradley, 1979). I have used a combination of encouraging and challenging probing tactics and this helped to put the interviewees at ease and to open up and in some situations challenge them to delve deep into some issues that they wouldn’t normally consider pondering over. Some of the interviews were conducted in a meeting room adjacent to the staffroom at the university and some of them at a quiet corner of coffee shop in the University premise. The informants were equally responsive in both the venues and were very cooperative. Prior to the interview I briefed them about my project and started the questions only after they were clear about my objectives. Conducting a pilot study prior to the main research helped me avoid over complicated questions (Black, 1999) and framing questions based on abstract concepts such as identity. In addition to the interviews, participant observation is intended to understand more about the interaction patterns of Thai-Sikh students in the university. This study is part of a bigger research project dealing with the issues of identity construction of Thai-Sikh individuals.

DATA ANALYSIS

The participants include 10 male students and 12 female students. There were 108 Thai-Sikh students studying at the university at the time of my interview. The number varies every
trimester. Even though there were more female students, I realized that the male students had more experiences to share since they have very visible signs of their religion as compared to the female students. The extra curricular activities in the University includes various arts and sports clubs as well as a major ice breaking event for freshmen students at the beginning of every trimester. All the students are part of the International college of a reputed public university in Thailand and belong to Thai-Sikh diaspora.

The analysis involved identification of themes and patterns arising in the data and the focus was on discovering patterns, themes and categories in data that were not pre-determined by experimental hypotheses prior to data collection (Mc Gee&Hardman, 2012). The major themes on preliminary analysis were that of Identity, religion, participation and social interaction of students, however on further analysis several consolidated themes emerged out of the initial ones including identity crisis, discrimination, relationship with the host society students, perception of host society regarding the Sikh religion etc.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyses the relation between the identity of the Thai-Sikh diaspora students and their lack of participation in the extra curricular activities of the University.

The major findings of this study are

a) the diaspora students mostly feel comfortable in their own groups because of the cultural and religious differences from Thai students.

b) the unwillingness on the part of the host society to see them as ‘Thai’ limit their participation in extra curricular activities.

c) the fear of not being accepted and viewed differently impacts the lack of participation.

d) there is a lack of proper knowledge and understanding on the part of the Thai society about
Sikh religion.

And hence, the issue of identity has an integral part in the lack of participation of Thai-Sikh diaspora students in the extra curricular activities in the University. In the case of the Thai-Sikh diaspora students, their group identity of being Thai-Sikh in a bigger group comprised of the native Thai students seem to strengthen their identity as Sikh. As a result, they prefer to stay in their own groups thus explaining their ‘clustering’ nature.

Reference


