

Hindu Traditions in Contemporary British Communities



Podcast with **Steve Jacobs** and **Theodora Wildcroft** (25 September 2017).

Interviewed by **Ella Bock**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/hindu-traditions-in-contemporary-british-communities/>

Ella Bock (EB): *Ok, so. Shall we get started? I guess I can introduce myself to you, first of all, in person. I'm Ella. I go to school at Lewis and Clark College, in Portland Oregon. But I'm currently at home for the summer in Washington DC.*

Steve Jacobs (SJ): Ok. Well, I'm [Steve Jacobs](#) or Stephen Jacobs if you're being very formal, but nobody calls me that. I'm senior lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton, here in the UK, mostly based in the Media department, but also based in Religious Studies as well.

Theodora Wildcroft (TW): I'm Theo Wildcroft. Nobody calls me Theodora unless they want to make me giggle, basically. I'm at the OU, the Open University, in Milton Keynes, but I'm actually at home in Wiltshire at the moment – in north Wiltshire, in the south of the country. And I am just coming up on my last year of PhD, in full thesis-writing-up-joy at the moment!

SJ: That's the most exiting bit! (Laughs).

TW: It is, actually. I had a really good supervision on Tuesday, so I'm fine right now. Good supervision, good response. So that's another two chapters sorted. So fingers crossed!

SJ: Brill.

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EB: *Congratulations on your PhD!*

TW: Thank you.

EB: *So, I guess we can jump right into it. My first question is to just get started with introducing what "yoga raves" and "kirtan" are. So if you could, like, explain a little bit what those are, and their presence in Britain, and if they interact at all, and how they would do that.*

TW: Well, I think for a while now there's been a sub-current of kirtan influence in the UK, but it's not particularly well-known. So we start, I think, with kirtan – because kirtan is an existing practice within South Asia and the Indic and Hindu contexts, basically – which is a practice of devotion or religious practice through sound – specifically through singing and music: sharing singing and music. And that has an interesting history which I think we'll go into in more detail, in terms of how that has met and interacted with the kinds of sub-culture elements within British culture in the last thirty to forty, maybe even fifty years – at least fifty years, probably. Yoga and the most recent kind of incarnations of that are doing some interesting things that aren't particularly well-known. But it's interesting what they're doing. Yoga raves, I think, is really a much more recent phenomenon and Steve can talk a lot more about that, really being quite specific.

SJ: Yes, I mean yoga raves is a term that's used by a duo who come from this group called the [Art of Living Foundation](#), who – well, to cut a very long story short – are a kind of Hindu-derived meditation movement. They're a very close cousin to [Transcendental Meditation](#). And they wanted to . . . and one of the things with Art of Living is they wanted to draw in a younger audience. So these two musicians who were members of the group, started what they called [yoga rave dance parties](#): kind-of alcohol, drug-free events that had the same sort of format as a kind-of rave would have, but using traditional kind-of Hindu mantras, to use a loaded term, or bhajans as a sound track – but giving it a Western kind of sound track, particularly an electronic dance music beat. (5:00) So it's a kind of interesting syncretic phenomena.

EB: *OK*

TW: So we've got the kind of yoga raves going on – I think, mostly in London?

SJ: Well, yoga rave isn't a term that's used by the UK group. They prefer the term yoga jam. So there's

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a whole range of different terminology: I've seen mantra punk; yoga rave; yoga jam. And one of the reasons . . . and it's based very much around a small group within Art of Living, here in the UK. And they said to me, "We do not like the term 'rave'", because in the UK rave is so much mixed with the culture of electronic dance music and part of that is taking lots of NDMA or Ecstasy as it's more commonly known. So jam – they preferred this terminology. The leader of the group said, "I like the term, it's cool!" he said. And it kind-of has this kind of connotation of the bricolage and also something that's fun and enjoyable.

TW: There is a wider movement as well, though, called [Conscious Clubbing](#), which I'm aware of. I have friends from the yoga community – particularly around London, I think, maybe Brighton, maybe places like that – that do conscious clubbing events which are specifically alcohol and drug free. And often early Sunday mornings seem to be a big time for a get-together. And, of course, the music they're using is very much rave music. But it has that similar sense of wanting to achieve a state of ecstatic kind of communion, a coming-together kind of a feeling and a celebration, but without the artificial stimulants. So there's kind-of a cross-over there. And then, of course, they're all often using contemporary kirtan music, contemporary kirtan tunes, which provides another link as well. Whereas kirtan is much more a practice that's done live. I think that's one of the big differences for me, is that – not that that's always a difference between them and the yoga jams, I think – but one of the things that's clear with kirtan is that it's always live musicians, live singers, live interactions with the audience, the music happening in real time, if that makes sense.

SJ: Yes. I think one of the things that Theo and I have talked about over the years that we've been interested in this, is the difference between participation and just being a part of the audience. And that whole thing has kind-of – it's a whole kind of array of different relationships of participation. So the traditional kirtan is, of course, a call and response and very much involves everybody. Whereas sometimes the yoga jams and the yoga raves seem to be less participatory, even though there is an element of participation.

TW: Yes. Definitely.

SJ: They're much more performances, in many ways.

EB: Well, I'm interested in how the two different movements and communities are trying to reconcile traditional cultures and practices with contemporary modern . . . like having yoga and therapeutic

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things in raves and EDM music. How do you see them reconciling those two? And if they are[seen as] authentic ways of practising and, like, what authenticity means here – because that's a loaded term.

SJ: OK. Authenticity is a really interesting phenomena. I've just been reading a book about authenticity by [Lindholm](#) and he says, really, when we're thinking about authenticity you see two different types of discourses around authenticity. **(10:00)** One he calls the historical and genealogical, and the other he calls the romantic and expressive. And what's really interesting for me is that when you look at discourses about yoga rave and yoga jam and in Art of Living – and indeed their wider practices – is they use both of those discourses. So it's authentic because it's Vedic. And of course, if you know anything about the Vedas, sound is very primordial, with the primordial mantra Ohm. In fact, the notion of sound within the Hindu tradition is badly understudied. It's not studied . . . it's not given the centrality by many people the way that it [should be]. So it's got that roots in a kind of invented or romanticised Vedic past, but it also is part of the therapeutic culture where it's the experience. But the experience without the roots becomes kind-of too ambiguous and free floating. So you experience a somatic experience, but that somatic experience is then rooted back into an imagined Vedic past.

TW: You see, I would add a third aspect. Because I think that's all really true, and rings very true with the things I'm looking at. But a third aspect is the notion of authenticity that comes from a personal way to practice, and a personal investment into the practice. That's what the kirtan wallahs – the musicians and the people who share kirtan – are bringing: it's a level of experience with that practice. They're often quite accomplished musicians, although that's not . . . they're not necessarily prized for their technical ability so much as a sheer devotion to the practice itself: that they spend large amounts of time doing what they do – which is singing and playing, not just for audiences, but for themselves. And that also, tangentially, has a communal aspect which . . . One of the things I find really interesting is, when you have big bhakti events, big kirtan events where you have a number of different kirtan musicians playing one after another, they will back each other up. So if someone arrives early, or someone's around , you know, one will say to another "Could you play shaker on this for me?" or you know, "I'd love to play tabla on yours." And so you get these individual musicians, or small groups of musicians, but actually when they play at these events they have all sorts of friends playing with them. And their friends are usually people who have either just played or are going to play again. So there's this idea that the most joyous thing that they could be doing is playing. Always.

So there's an authenticity there that comes from that weight of practice and that weight of personal
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history, rather than necessarily genealogy. And certainly, one of the historical aspects that I'm aware of with regards to kirtan here, out in the south-west in particular, is that we have a certain community of people who've spent a lot of time in Indian ashrams and loved the experience of kirtan there and began to practice kirtan there. And they're over here, they're home again and they miss that community coming together. And a lot of these events are about them coming together with other people, regardless of whether they were at the same ashram, regardless of whether they're the same lineage, regardless of even if they have the same devotional roots, even. You have people from different sects and lineages coming together, people with no lineage at all coming together. But what they value is that communal coming together and singing and sharing kirtan, which is really interesting. So there's that communal weight as well. So that, over time, the community has its own history. So it's really interesting, when you talk about authenticity with regards to Hindu roots and South Asian roots – which are obviously very real and very true – but what I would say is what I see. And what I see is a weight of practice in this country that's been going on for decades. And that's the roots, as much as anything else, that they're connected to.

SJ: I mean there is a romanticisation of Hindu traditions that Theo and I have talked about. (15:00) It goes right back to cultural roots here in the UK, of course: [George Harrison, 1969, the Mahamantra by the Krishna Consciousness](#) got to number 12 in Top of the Pops, sold 700,000. In America you've got the counter-cultural movements, particularly people like [Ginsberg](#) and the [Mantra Rock Dance](#) in San Francisco that had some of the foremost counter-cultural groups, people like [Moby Grape](#). And then also of course, there was [Swami Prabhupada](#) the founder of . . . [the International Society for Krishna Consciousness]. In fact, you'll see his image on the [poster](#) for the Mantra Rock dance in '69. So all of these kind of influences, counter kind-of influences between the West and the East, well they've actually been going long before the counter-culture of course. I think the counter-culture is a very important threshold.

TW: It is. It's a threshold. But I think it's a threshold of visibility. That's what's interesting about it. It's that we have these periodic visible manifestations of commercial culture engaging with Hindu devotional music in one way or another. I mean you shared the – was it the [Cher? Cher's version of the Gayatri Mantra](#)? And it's really interesting to see those commercial expressions and commercial engagements with Hindu devotional music. But what it's important to remember is those do not feed necessarily directly from ancient Indian practices, they feed from an existing subculture that is continually engaging with this music and continually engaging with this practice. You know, there's a
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transnational culture that certainly in the UK spends time, a lot of them will spend time, going back and forward from the UK. A number of the people involved will be South Asian heritage, a number of people won't. You know, it's a whole transnational current that's going on that's always there. It's just the bits that we tend to notice: the bits that get into the top 40 sphere, or the bits that end up on the credits of pop shows, which we were also talking about weren't we? We were talking about how the Gayatri Mantra was used on the [opening credits to Battlestar Galactica](#), you know – who knew that?! Because it's a really interesting mantra in terms of its visibility. The story goes that one of the actors basically went to the show runners and said, "We have to use this. We have to use this Mantra." And he wanted that sense of authenticity of this being something ancient, because the show itself speaks to really interesting themes around religion and rebirth and these different things. But without the counter-cultural and sub-cultural engagements with Hindu devotional music, he would never have had that to bring them. (Laughs).

SJ: Yes. No, Cher wouldn't have been doing that Gayatri mantra . . .

TW: No. Cher doesn't rock up at an Ashram in India and go "I think I'll take this mantra." She takes it from someone else, who takes it from someone else, who takes it from someone else. And the intermediaries are the kind of yoga jam people and the new [kirtan](#) people and the [bhakti](#) musicians that we're talking about. And there's a thriving – certainly in the UK and particularly, in my opinion, in the South West of the UK – it's a thriving and vibrant little culture. I'm hoping you'll be able to include some actual music and links.

EB: *Well, I hope that David does.*

TW: Yes.

EB: *Well, I was wondering if you've seen or come across any backlash against the use of mantras in Western pop culture? Or even within the kirtan and yoga rave/ yoga jam communities?*

TW: I can speak to one really interesting discussion of this by, I won't mention her by name, but she'll recognise herself, by an [integral yoga](#) teacher of japa, so a mantra teacher. So she was leading a session, that I was at, that wasn't even really kirtan, it was very much on mantra and the effect of sound and how we can . . . chant, so much more chanting than singing, if that makes sense. So, the effect of mantra on the energetic field, the effect of mantra on our connection to the universe. And she

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talked specifically about the Gayatri Mantra. And she said a number of things about it. (20:00) She said that the Gayatri is a very ancient mantra – so she connected it to this lineage – that it's been chanted continuously in India for thousands of years – however the story goes – and then she said, "But these days a lot of people come across the Gayatri Mantra through. . ." She didn't mention the Cher version but she mentioned various pop culture versions of it. And she said, in her view, that is absolutely fine because its a way in. People come across these pop culture versions of mantra and it is not the same, it does not have the same effect as a mantra that's been chanted in community for devotional intent. But the words still have power and the sound still has power and it is the connection – a seed that is planted that can lead people to something deeper and fuller. I'm aware that in the States, in particular, there is a very, very different debate that's going on, I think, around the issues of authenticity and appropriation. And I think it's important to be aware that the discussions of appropriation are very different here in Europe and particularly in the UK. Our yoga culture as a whole is less commercialised. It's still commercialised in many respects but we still . . . we have an enormous grassroots yoga community, still. And our yoga community is still much more integrated with South Asian groups and communities and influences. So, as a result, the conversations are more complicated. That's not to say that appropriation isn't an issue and it's not talked about, but it's much less polarising than debates have been recently in the States, if that makes sense. Would you agree?

SJ: The discussions about appropriation really only occur in the academic arena because when we're talking broadly about the Hindu traditions – and I'll use the plural here – there's not this idea that, you know . . . Ok, so you have a Murti and it's installed in a temple, but anybody can go and buy an image of the Ganesh, or anything. And they're not so precious about different uses of it. Of course you've got the tradition of calendar art in the more visual things. And also when you think about kirtan in India itself, you know, a lot of Hindus are chanting kirtan to Bollywood tunes. So you already have that tradition of, you know, taking a traditional kirtan that goes back to the medieval Bhakti period, but it's being chanted to the latest Bollywood tunes. And even in India you get CDs like [Cosmic Trance for Youth](#), which is within the Hindu community itself. Young people are taking the traditional mantras and bhajans and giving it their own electronic dance soundtrack, to try and draw young Hindus in India into it. You know, devotional music in India is one of the biggest selling kind of genres of music. You go anywhere like Rushikesh, which is a very important pilgrimage place, and you've literally got stall upon stall in the bazaar along the banks of the Ganges selling all of these kind of remixed mantras, if you like.

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TW: I also love that the supposedly traditional kirtan instruments that are now accepted to be the ones that everyone should have are tabla and harmonium. And that's fascinating when you think the only reason that harmoniums ever came to India, as far as I'm aware, is through Christian missionaries.

SJ: Yes, that's correct.

TW: Christian Missionaries arrived in India with harmoniums and played lots of choral music and got them singing Christian songs. And you know, essentially Indian people, the Indian culture, went: "That's great, we'll have that! We're just going to sing Vedic mantras instead." And now, if you want a good harmonium you go to an Indian manufacturer. You don't go anywhere else. One of the few places in the world that still has huge amounts of harmoniums being played is India. And now, if you have kirtan that doesn't have harmonium and tabla that's now seen as non-traditional. I mean, I was at an event the other week – it was a bhakti event – and I realised tucked away in the corners around the space were eight different harmoniums waiting for – because everybody has their own – waiting for their particular musicians to come. So I counted eight lying there, which is great. So at which point I'm less interested in I mean, I think cultural borrowing is really interesting, and all religious scholars hopefully are aware of how syncretic religion is, generally.(25:00) There are further discussions you can have about power and about colonialism, but I think those differences are much clearer when you're talking about multi-million dollar selling pop artists than if you're talking about kirtan musicians in Bristol, or wherever, who have a day job and sell a few CDS. The level of power that they have to appropriate somebody else's power is very different, I think, than Sony might have. (Laughs). What is more interesting to me is the syncretism involved in the music itself. And I don't know how much that's true of the yoga rave/ yoga jam side of things, but I know that in the kirtan movement in the south-west, singers are using not just Vedic and Hindu mantras, they're using Buddhist mantras, they're using Sikh mantras, they're using Sufi mantras, they're using all sorts of different things and bringing them together under the label of kirtan. And I think that's really interesting.

SJ: Certainly within [Art of Living Satsangs](#) you certainly do have occasionally – but it's very, very occasionally – do they use songs or poems from outside. I've heard [Imagine](#) done once in a kirtan (laughs). But they tend to stick to their kind-of favourite that come from the Sanskrit and Bhakti traditions. But they do have a kind of – well I wouldn't call it a song book, exactly – but they do have a list and you flick through and yes, there's poems by [Rumi](#) and [indistinct] chorus, but they very rarely

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use them ,interestingly enough.

TW: That is interesting. Well I see a lot more uses of that. One of the classic examples which I personally adore, is a chap called [Tim Challice](#) who's from down kind of Bath and Bristol way. And he has a chant which takes a [Hafez](#) poem I think, which is [This Place](#), so, "This place where you are, God circled on a map for you. Wherever your eyes and ears and heart can move against the earth and skies a beloved has bowed there waiting." Which is rather beautiful, but he takes that and sings that and then he takes it immediately into a Hare Krishna. So we see that as well. We see essentially taking two different traditions and bringing them together in those chants. And the sense, within this community in particular, is that it does not matter. The shape of your belief does not matter. The deity that you are calling to does not matter. These places often have these enormous long altars filled with any number of different Murtis, any number of different images of different Gurus, any deity or anything else that is considered to be sacred can go on there. The point is, is that you come together and you sing. And that's it. And there's the idea of devotion without prescribing the object of devotion. And that's a really interesting thing, I think.

SJ: Yes. I mean there are other artists, we talked about [Sheila Chandra](#) who's a British South Asian and coming from a [Hindu background and then bringing in English folk music](#). She'll start off with Om Namaha Shiva and then suddenly morphs into some sort of English folk song. I mean that's kind of cultural thing as well, only from a different side.

TW: Yes. I think there's really, really beautiful alliances and kind of borrowings that are going on and it's interesting, again, to go back to that idea of what makes them authentic. What makes them effective. And I think it is a depth of understanding of the music that they're working with and the practices that they're working with.

SJ: When you talk to the yoga jam crew they talk abut the Vedic origin and what [Guy Beck](#) calls the [Sonic Theology](#) that goes back right to the Atharvaveda, is the experience that is also validated through a quasi-scientific discourse around the physics of vibration, which you know, that if you chant the mantras you do not need to know – and of course [Staal](#) talks about how it's the sound not the semantics that's important; that this is all to do with the science of vibration. (30:00) So it's kind-of validated through, you know, tracing it back to romanticise a Vedic past, the somatic experience of chanting it, which is again validated through this kind of quasi-scientific discourse around vibrations,

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which is kind-of interesting.

TW: Yes, and it will eventually change the world. Just keep chanting the Gayatri Mantra, just keep chanting it and all will be well.

EB: *Ok so we're about out of time for the podcast length, but I've enjoyed listening to both of you talk and thank you so much for doing this and talking to me and the RSP about everything you know.*

SJ: Well thank you for facilitating this.

TW: Indeed.

EB: *Of course. It was my pleasure.*

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