Conclusion: Understanding Differences

My original intention in studying the religions of India was to analyze the interactions between Hindus and Muslims. Although I had read various references to Hindu and Muslim participation in each other's festivals, I found the analysis of these dynamics in contemporary India very limited. On the basis of those accounts, I had formed an assumption that the boundary separating Muslims and Hindus was clear, yet quite permeable. When I first encountered Sindhi Hindu elements at the Jhule Lal Mandir at Sindhi Ghat in Lucknow, what caught my eye was the inscription in Devanagiri (the primary script for Sanskrit and Hindi) and Nastaliq (the primary script for Arabic, Urdu, and Sindhi). Not being familiar with Jhule Lal or the Sindhi language at that time, I assumed that the inscription in two languages signified a site that attracted both Hindus and Muslims, a clear example of the harmonious interactions that I wanted to research.

When I began asking about the site, several acquaintances directed me toward the Hari Om Mandir. I entered the Sunday morning satsang looking for an example of Hindu-Muslim harmony and found a community that defied a variety of borders as they incorporated the Guru Granth Sahib, Sufi pirs, deities, and the Bhagavad Gita. When I met a few Sindhis, their idealization of the harmony of pre-Partition Sindh reinforced my impression of a community that represented religious harmony. Because of my assumptions, I anticipated that research on this community would enable me to investigate the dynamics of religious harmony and fluid practices in the midst of fixed borders in a contemporary example of lived religions.

The assumptions that I brought to the study of Sindhi Hindus related to the work of scholars who have highlighted the presence of porous borders in Indian religions, often contrasting that with the assumption of impermeable boundaries in much European and American thought. As I began interviewing Sindhis in Lucknow more formally, I realized that my assumptions, and these perspectives on which they were based, did not promote a clear understanding of the experiences of Sindhi Hindus, who...
Hindu, Sufi, or Sikh

often drew sharp lines between various religions. In fact, the concept of porous borders assumed that Sindhi Hindu practices involved the crossing of clear religious boundaries, which directly dismisses the assertions of many Sindhi Hindus themselves.

This community also did not consistently represent an ideal of religious tolerance or pluralism, as many Sindhis augmented their pride in their Hindu identification by contrasting themselves to non-Hindu communities. Several Sindhis highlighted Hindu tolerance to promote the superiority of Hindu traditions over other religions, while a few specifically expressed negative images of Muslims. My initial failure to understand the dynamics of this community stemmed from my acceptance of particular boundaries between religions and the related assumption that Sindhi Hindus recognized those same boundaries but understood them to operate fluidly in an environment of interreligious harmony. As the reality of this community did not match my expectations, the research became an opportunity to learn more than I ever expected and to rethink my understanding of the borders dividing religions and the formation of communities, cultural practices, and identifications.

The Complexity of Contested Borders

In rethinking the borders and social processes related to Sindhi Hindus and other communities that do not match the common definitions, recognizing both the power of the dominant understandings of religious boundaries and the power to contest those dominant understandings is vital. Numerous examples in the preceding chapters illustrate the various power dynamics of these contested borders. Most obviously, the concern among the leaders of the Harmandir about the legal redefinition of their sacred site demonstrates the power of the dominant definitions to create a shift in a community’s self-representations and practices, while the community’s refusal to simply accept the dominant understandings illustrates their power of resistance. Both forms of power were also evident in the various ways different guru movements created their Sindhi heritage in a diasporic context informed by the dominant definitions. As the different types of celebrations of Cheti Chand and Nanak Jayanti illustrated, Sindhis in North India often shifted between assertions of a pan-Hindu unity that increasingly conformed to the dominant understandings and a separate Sindhi identification.

The ability to shift between different understandings was important for Sindhi Hindus who wanted to maintain their regional heritage while also connecting to the dominant community. As largely a trading community,