

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Title:

An internal and global conflict within the Sikh community has local impact.

Location:

The town is one of the biggest and most crowded Catalan municipalities. It belongs to a large metropolitan area and many areas have great cultural diversity. Many of the immigrants are from other areas of Spain (having arrived in the 1960s and 1970s) and from other continents (arriving mainly around the 1990s). These areas are working class and have an increasingly high unemployment rate, sometimes reaching 30%, as well as important structural deficiencies (in relation to social and health services), which are worsened by the disengaged attitudes of the surrounding neighbours. This all generates tension that is manipulated by some political parties for their own political interests.

Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

24 May 2009 (the day of the assassination in Vienna, see information on the background and context of this conflict) and the following months.

Actors involved:

Actors directly involved:

- **The Sikh community** was established in the city a decade ago and has a temple with capacity for 300 people for Sikhs from all around the metropolitan region. The men mainly work in construction and many women work at home. The immense majority are of Indian origin. Generally, they speak little or no Spanish or Catalan. Despite their lack of resources, they have good organisational and entrepreneurial skills.
- **The Ravidassia community** is a recent community which has branched off from the Sikh community. This happened in this town and all around the world due to a violent episode that took place in Vienna (Austria). This community consists of people belonging to lower castes that felt discriminated and marginalised within the Sikh community. In the town, they have their own temple from when they called themselves “Sikhs” and where they practise the Sikh tradition with certain aspects, including emphasis on the equalitarian and caste-transcending teachings of a non canonical guru named Guru Ravidass, as well as a minor centrality of the traditional symbols (turban, beard, dagger, etc.). The public and definitive separation from the Sikhs has emphasised and solidified these different practices. The Ravidassia have created their own version of the Holy Scriptures (the Guru Grant Sahib) in order to include Ravidass’s figure and teachings. In the town, the community is made up of around a hundred people with very few resources, many of them do not have jobs or speak Catalan or Spanish.

Mediating actors:

- **The Religious Affairs General Office of the Catalan Government.**
- **The councillor at the City Council in charge for religious diversity management.**
- **The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia** has been developing a programme to facilitate relations between the different religious communities over the past four years, and between these communities and the non religious civil society and the City Council. The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia mediators maintain fluid communication with the leaders of the Sikh and the Ravidassia communities, mainly through their participation in different groups for interreligious dialogue.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

On 24 May 2009, in Vienna (Austria), a Ravidassia spiritual leader was murdered by two radical Sikhs. This had a global impact and provoked the definitive separation of these two groups into two different communities, in India and other countries with Ravidassia presence. The Ravidassia decided to stop being “Sikhs” and created a particular tradition. Since then, some episodes of tension and even violence have occurred in the town, mainly due to criticism from Sikhs of what they understood as the Ravidassia heterodox and non rigorous religious practice. As a consequence of the Vienna attack and the Ravidassias’ public demonstrations in India, the local administration and the police were concerned about potential violent confrontation between the two groups.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

- To pacify the Ravidassia people.
- To prevent violent attacks between the two groups.
- To avoid an unfair degradation of citizens’ view on these two communities and, as a consequence, on all religious and immigrant groups.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out:

The mediation process was developed in two phases:

(1) A first phase of joint visits to both communities (by the Catalan Government, City Council and the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia), in order to pacify their members. The visits were aimed at asking institutionally for the situation to be calmed down in general, and referring to the most essential principles of any religion: peace, love, non violence, etc., and at preventing negative consequences on citizens' views of certain public demonstrations. The Ravidassia were the most agitated and expressed their will to publicly protest against what happened in Vienna and against the discrimination they had been suffering in the town over the past years. On these days, the temple was more crowded than usual and there was a great deal of confusion and stress. It was decided to provide them with institutional and official recognition of their "new" religious identity. A private official reception was organised for them by the Catalan Vice President, along with a visit to the temple by the local councillor for coexistence and living together. Furthermore, the police placed intensive surveillance on the two temples. The Sikhs showed less agitation but also less transparency on the issue; they systematically denied the existence of conflict with possible violent consequences. Finally, a foreign scholar specialised in Sikhs and Ravidassia who happened to be studying the two local communities was contacted. She helped reach a better understanding of the local and international elements of the conflict, and also to reach a diversity of new leaders and spokesmen in the Ravidassia group (young people, women, etc.). All shared different and complementary views on the situation.

(2) Once the tension calmed down, a second phase was dedicated to monitoring the relationship between both communities. Specific efforts were made to strengthen communication with the new Ravidassia leaders identified, inviting them to present their "project" for a new religious community, and introducing them to other local, religious and non religious, grassroots leaders. More efforts were made to communicate to the Sikhs that the new situation would not modify their recognition and, particularly at the beginning, existing encounters between the two communities in public forums (such as interreligious groups of dialogue). This was also communicated to them, but only as a transitory solution. Both were encouraged to build their identities in a positive way, not just based on denying and criticising "the other".

Assessment of the level of success in reaching the initial objectives:

- In the end, the situation did not result in a violent episode. The tensions were progressively pacified.
- The external view of these groups and on religion or immigration has not been impacted by this.
- However, the conflict remains and, more than a year later, it has been impossible to reconcile the two groups' positions. For example, they still refuse to share public events involving all the local communities. At the same time, the Ravidassia insist on publicly presenting themselves as "those who are not Sikhs because Sikhs are intolerant". It has to be said that this is a historic process –the birth of a new community- which is at a very initial stage and will be hard to transcend: the affirmation of a new identity and the denial of an old one.

Mediator resources mobilized:

- The coordinated institutional recognition by the Catalan Government and local governments, along with a civil society representative with a local and international dimension (The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia) in terms of religious freedom and diversity. This was followed by recognition from other local religious and social organisations.
- Reference to the most essential religious principles of any religious tradition: peace and non violence.
- Academic and specialised knowledge available to tackle an urgent social issue.

Expenses related to the mediation intervention (working hours of the mediators, materials needed...):

Multilateral and bilateral meetings. Academic research on the issue and on specialists.