

**‘The Saints Belong to Everyone’:
LIMINALITY, BELIEF AND PRACTICES IN
RURAL NORTH INDIA**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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MUKESH KUMAR

Date: 15/04/2019

Dedication

To the Meo peasants, Jogi and Mirasi musicians
and Mewati women,
who are living through difficult times

*'Bas-ki dushvār hai har kaam kā āsāñ honā
aadmī ko bhī mayassar nahīñ insāñ honā.'*

(Mirza Ghalib)

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A note on terminology

In this thesis, most Hindi, Urdu, and Mewati terms are italicised and diacritics are used to emphasise their pronunciation for English readers. However, the names of places, persons, castes, sects, linages and saints are not italicised, and no diacritic marks are used, for instance, Laldas, Shah Chokha, Ram, Krishna, Meo, Jogi, Fakir etc. Similarly, conceptual themes such as Bhakti and Sufi as well as famous texts and objects such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Quran appear in plain font in their typical spelling in English texts. Non-English compound words used as nouns follow the same rule. I have followed these principles throughout, with the exception of popular sayings, songs and statements, when the terms are being used with a different meaning than previously encountered in the text or where they may be difficult to understand even for a native speaker. ■

Abstract

Mewat is a cultural region in north India with a predominantly Meo Muslim population. Historically, the interaction of Hindu, Muslim and other religious groups has given the sharing of the region's many shrines of Bhakti and Sufi saints a pluralistic character. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, these shared shrines and their saints reflected the world of middle-caste/class Meo Muslim peasants upon whom various service castes were dependent under the *jajmāni* (patron–client system). The Meos' devotion to these saints was in line with the Bhakti and Sufi ideas that advocated the transcendence of caste and religious identities in favour of peasant values and devotional requirements.

However, the rise of nationalist and reform politics at the national level in the 20th century and its extension to Mewat led people to identify themselves as more Hindu or Muslim. In this thesis I explore the malleable nature of these religious boundaries and identities by tracing the history of two shared shrines of the 16th century Bhakti and Sufi saints, Laldas and Shah Chokha. I used ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with Hindu and Muslim individuals, as well as Meo oral folktales and folksongs performed by the Jogi and Mirasi bards and archival methods to explore the pre and post-religious reform eras.

Based on this data I argue that the Hindu and Islamic reform movements, the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat respectively, came to define religious identity and practices in Mewat from the beginning of the 20th century. The Tablighi Jamaat movement led Meos to see themselves as a Sunni Muslim group, a change that unsettled traditionally shared religious sites and practices and created both visible and invisible threats for Muslim individuals and

groups who were still engaged in what most Meos considered as un-Islamic practices. In response, the more powerless social groups such as Meo and other Muslim women and the bards and minstrels of Jogi and Mirasi caste backgrounds responded with passive resistance.

In this study, I demonstrate that the contestation of previously shared religious sites is deeply rooted in the changing forms of the religious cultures among social-religious groups. The significance of this study is to show how, in the wake of religious reform, separatism and disputes, symbolic aspects of shared shrines undergo religious transformations, while marginalised groups employ strategies of passive resistance to maintain the expression of their shared faiths and beliefs. ■

Chapter 1

Introduction: understanding past and present religious engagements

1.1 The beginning

Although I was born and brought up in Bharatpur, a small town in eastern Rajasthan, until 2015, I had never visited any of the neighbouring areas in the Mewat region. At that time, I was examining possible fieldwork sites for this doctoral dissertation. Before this visit, I had moved to Delhi in 2006 for the purpose of higher education. With the help of a friend in India's capital city, I was able to find a local friend who agreed to show me places in Mewat. At first, I became a little depressed by the entrenched negative beliefs about the region held by many people in proximate areas and big cities like Delhi and Gurgaon. 'A place of Muslim terrorists', 'a mini-Pakistan', 'full of thieves and kidnapers' — these were the common accusations I heard about Mewat in general and about the Meo Muslims in particular. Many people suggested that unless I changed the field area of my research, I would not return alive.

On the day we met, my friend in Mewat queried my interest in the Meos, asking me, 'What is the purpose of studying Muslims? You could find a better topic for your research.' When I asked him to clarify his comment, he invoked the prevailing negative knowledge about Muslims rather than information based on concrete evidence. His description of the Muslims of the area included adjectives like 'dangerous', 'thieves', 'criminals', 'beef-eaters' and 'terrorists'. Not once did my Hindu friend, whose background was the middle-class

peasant caste Yadav community,¹ refer to them as the Meo Muslims. Instead, throughout the few days I stayed with him, the collective noun 'Muslims' and the adjective 'Muslim' kept popping up.

This popular understanding of the category 'Muslim' is pan-Indian. Although this category is not completely without meaning, the assumption that religious identities in India are fundamentally exclusive entities holds significant sway over political–bureaucratic understanding and underpins many academic discussions, especially those on the themes of secularism, religious tolerance and inter-religious relations. In these discussions religious groups are assumed to be monolithic, internally coherent, homogenous and externally non-interactive. Bernard Cohn (1987) referred to such an understanding as 'the objectification of culture', an experience both 'totalising and individualising' (pp. 224–54). With the beginning of the 'modernity' projects of the colonial state from the late 19th century, the main emphasis of colonial officers and administrators remained on the bounded definition of groups through the production of census operations, anthropological surveys, and administrative reports and gazetteers. In this endeavour, Cohn (1996) argued:

the position of the subjects was constituted by the colonial state by *classifying and naturalising* categories and identities such as educated or uneducated, rich or poor, male or female, young or old, Hindu or Muslim, Welsh or Scottish, and so on. (p. xi)

The categories of Hindu and Muslim existed before British rule—they were not entirely colonial constructions. However, my focus is not on the system of classification but rather on the ways in which the historical evolution of

¹ Yadav (Ahir) is a middle caste peasant community in north India.

religious and communal consciousness around the categories 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' achieved its current teleological outcome of being marked by mutual suspicion and dislike.²

Religions and religious views in India have diverse origins, producing a complex religious world that is an amalgam of multiple religious traditions. These multiple religious practices and traditions were also shared across religious communities. A sense of commonality engendered through common sharing of culture binds local communities, whose members belong to different religions, into a closely-knit thread of inter-communal dependence and alliance, that enhanced, enriched and made cohabitation a historically possible phenomenon. Although this type of local alliance is often susceptible to dangers and conflict, common cultural practices play a vital role in the sustenance of co-existence irrespective of religious divides. Such practices include language or dialect, or symbols such as the cow, sacred locations, pilgrimages, shared saints and shared myths and stories. Beside their religious loyalties, each community and caste group contribute its own set of values towards making a specific region culturally vibrant and liveable.

My overall aim has been to understand the processes through which members of these diverse religious groups have come to understand their identities and practices. To understand this, for reasons explained in detail in later chapters, I focused on those who identify themselves as Hindu or Muslim in the Mewat area of India and how these religious categories show malleability in popular cultural practices. My initial research questions were:

² Defining these terms religiously is a daunting task as they represent diverse meanings and traditions. I am following Flueckiger's suggestion that we should expand 'the boundaries of what counts as 'religion' to include 'ways of life' (Flueckiger 2015, p. 4).

- How do we understand and differentiate between the past and present forms of religious engagements of those who currently identify themselves as Hindu or Muslim?
- How have religious boundaries, identities and practices changed and evolved historically?
- Which major forces have reshaped the religious culture from a more plural and shared one into a more segregated form of religiosity?

Drawing on my fieldwork in Mewat, I show that social identification with religious categories such as Hindu and Muslim was secondary to identifications by caste, sect, clan and village up until at least the beginning of the 20th century. All of these identifications are still significant to the Meos and other Muslim groups, even if they have adopted Islam.³ However, these days religious identification has acquired a prominent status. In the past the religious categories of Hindu and Muslim as a source of social identification also relied on ethnic, linguistic as well as other categories. Crucially, I argue that in this process institutional religions did not surpass the importance of sects, and, caste—the prime measure of social identity in India. Although caste and religion are treated as coterminous, these days religion and religious identities have generated more ‘cacophony’, surpassing discussions of other social identities at least in public arenas and in the virtual world.

A review of the literature shows that political scientists, anthropologists, and historians of South Asia still continue to reify—consciously or unconsciously—religious, caste and community groups, describing them as possessing

³ I examine the aspects of caste and sect associations of Muslim groups in chapters two, three and four.

coherence and definite boundaries.⁴ Fundamental religious categories such as Hindu and Muslim, which are in fact internally diverse, have been homogenised, not only in political and reformist rhetoric but also in treatises supposedly written to counter such notions.⁵ ‘Scholars too heavily rely on Hindu and Muslim as descriptive adjectives and categories,’ as Gottschalk (2005, p. 3) rightly points out. ‘Such distinctions are, though, not without uses,’ he adds, ‘but privileging them implies that such communal divisions exist for all South Asians at all times’ (Gottschalk, p. 3).

The friend with whom I was travelling in 2015 appealed to the same bounded notion of religious groups. He was conscious of his own caste status in Hinduism, but he presumed that ‘the other’ (Muslim) was a homogenous group. Similarly, the initial questions many Muslims asked us, whom we met in the process of fieldwork, were also related to our religious identity. The Muslims we met differentiated themselves from other Muslims (by caste identity such as the Meo, the Mirasi, the Qureshi etc.)⁶ but treated ‘the other’ (Hindus in this case) as a coherent group, or so it seemed to me. Religion seemed to have surpassed other measures of social identifications in the public domain at least in categorising unfamiliar people. It appeared that strangers

⁴ There are, however, a few exceptions: (Assayag 2004; Bigelow 2010; Flueckiger 2006; Frøystad 2005; and, Gottschalk 2005; Mohammad 2013).

⁵ There are countless writings that treat the Hindu and Muslim sectarian and communal problem from a ‘difference’ perspective. For analyses of various aspects of secularism, communalism, nationalism, and electoral behaviour in India require focus on the bounded definition of religious groups. However, I understand the impulse and relevance of such works but at the same time, they work with a bounded and collective definition of religious groups which undercommunicate the internal diversity of a group.

⁶ The description of the self and the other Muslims by these Muslim groups in Mewat was mostly in terms of *jāti* (castes) than religious identity. Mayaram (1997a) notes this aspect with regard to Meos (pp. 47-9). However, for neighbouring Hindu castes, the first identification was a religious one.

were located first by religious categories so as to guide one's initial behaviour and conduct. However, beneath the bounded conception of religion and religious groups lay multiple layers of pluralism, which remained in the background until uncovered by deeper social and cultural research.

The region of this study, Mewat, has served historically as an experimental zone for Hindu and Islamic reform movements, the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat respectively.⁷ There are various reasons for this, including the contested identity of many Muslim groups, the attempts at religious conversion of Muslims by the Arya Samaj, and the challenges for the Islamic groups to keep the Muslim community intact. Apart from the conversion of Muslims known as *shuddhi* (purification), the Hindu reformers of the Arya Samaj were not in favour of idol worship, a common Hindu practice. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, urged the slogan, '*vedo ki ur lauto*' (return to the Vedas) to eradicate this practice among Hindus. At the start of his missionary activities, Dayanand criticised Hindu practices such as idol worship, instead advocating a true knowledge of Hinduism which, according to him was represented only in the ancient Hindu scriptures called the Vedas. The Arya Samaj's objectives targeted both Hindus and Muslims for the reasons outlined above.

On the other side, the fact that the Arya Samaj was successful in converting many Muslims to the Hindu fold frightened Islamic religious leaders. Many of them believed that the act of apostasy (*irtidād*) was gaining an importance among Muslims, prompting them to leave their religion because they lacked awareness of Islamic teachings. Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat emerged as a direct

⁷ Detailed information about the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat is provided in chapter six and seven respectively. The Tablighi Jamaat was founded in Mewat and has currently become a successful transnational movement among Muslims.

response to the *shuddhi* program of the Arya Samaj. 'Tabligh' means 'conveying or imparting' Islamic teachings.

In addition to the Arya Samaj's goal of winning new converts and the Tablighi Jamaat's mission to discipline Muslims' religious behaviour, both organisations wanted to create ideal prototypes of Hindus and Muslims based on the teachings of the Vedas and the Quran. In this respect, the Arya Samaj like its counterpart the Tablighi Jamaat, encouraged and even pressured people to follow what was laid down in the sacred books. The two organisations played a very important role in shaping Islamic identity in particular and the religious practices of Muslims in Mewat.

My field experience later raised additional important research questions:

- Do all shared or liminal/syncretic⁸ practices inevitably succumb to the quest of reform organisations for purification resulting into hardening of boundaries or do some shared practices show resilience?
- Why are some practices more resilient than others?

In order to answer these questions, I examined a wide range of issues such as identity formation, the malleable and eclectic nature of religious boundaries and the fluid orientation of inter-caste relations on the one hand, and inter-

⁸ The concept of syncretism, particularly the use of the term, is highly debated among scholars. Most scholars (Khan 2004a, 2004b; Mayaram 1997b, 1997c, 2004c) prefer the term 'liminality' to denote the cases of religious interactions. Syncretism is said to imply a bias by creating binaries by 'either-or' usage while liminality gives importance to the betwixt and between status. I discuss both terms in detail in a later section in this chapter.

communal divides, boundary making and resistance to puritanical reform on the other.

1.2 Mapping the Mewat area throughout its history

1.2.1 Mewat's location and history

The geographical area of this research, Mewat, is 65 kilometres south-west of the capital of India, Delhi. It derives its identity from the Meos, the majority inhabitants of the region. Mewat spreads across the border regions of three present-day north Indian states where the Meo population dominates: Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. As shown in figure 1.1 below, the bulk of the region falls in the northern parts of the two districts in eastern Rajasthan, Alwar and Bharatpur (two erstwhile princely kingdoms). However, the centre of the Mewat area is in the Mewat district (recently renamed as Nuh)⁹ of southern Haryana, which adjoins the northern parts of Bharatpur and Alwar. Apart from the Alwar, Bharatpur, and Nuh districts of Rajasthan and Haryana states respectively, some parts of Mathura in the state of Uttar Pradesh also intersect with the boundaries of Mewat. Overall, Mewat is located within a triangular zone bounded by three big cities, Delhi, Jaipur and Agra covering an area of almost 9000 km square but, without constituting a single administrative unit. Presently, Mewat exists as a cultural zone defined by the distribution of the Meo population.

⁹ Carving a separate district of predominantly Meo population from Gurgaon district in Haryana was a long-standing demand which was first fulfilled in 2004 when the then Chief Minister, Omprakash Chautala named it first as 'Satyamev Puram'. The name was later changed to Mewat by the Congress government in 2005 followed by one more change in 2016 as Nuh by the BJP government this time.



Figure 1.1: Map showing the location of the Mewat (Nuh) district in the state of Haryana, 2016

Historically, Nuh became the centre of a kingdom ruled by the famous Mewati King Hasan Khan,¹⁰ who ruled before the Mughal invasion of Babur. After the defeat of Hasan Khan at the hands of Babur, the area remained under the control of the Mughals. During late Mughal rule in the 17th century, Bharatpur and Alwar were carved into two regional kingdoms by rulers from Jat and Rajput caste backgrounds. From the beginning of indirect British colonial rule in the area after the battle of Laswari in 1803,¹¹ the two kingdoms were under

¹⁰ Hasan Khan Mewatti was a 16th century Meo ruler who fought against Babur, the first Mughal ruler in India, alongside the Rajput king, Rana Sanga, in the battle of Khanwa in 1526.

¹¹ The battle of Laswari was fought between the Marathas and the British. The then ruler of the Alwar state, Bakhtawar Singh, supported the latter. The British afterwards then recognized his rule and the state was put under indirect control. Bharatpur also

indirect rule as parts of Rajputana until Indian independence in 1947. The bordering district of Nuh, which historically constituted the southern tip of the British Punjab province, had been linked to the region of Gurgaon from colonial times until 2004, when it was separated into a new district which, in the past 15 years, has undergone three name changes, (Satyamev Puram, Mewat) before acquiring its present name of Nuh in 2016.

1.2.2 The Meo Community

As mentioned earlier, the Meo constitute the majority community in the area. The Meo are said to have converted to Islam or at least to have indicated their intention to accept Islamic values in their social lives several centuries ago. However, despite adhering to Islamic symbols, they did not fully discard previously held local practices for marriage rules and caste endogamy. Those rituals, some of which still survive, were similar to those of other Hindu peasant groups in neighbouring regions of Mewat. Practices included observing Hindu rituals as well as worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses. Writing as early as the 1850s, colonial ethnographer, Powlett (1878)¹² notes that:

Meos are all Musalman in names, but their village deities are the same as those of Hindu Zamindars (landlords). They keep, too, several Hindu festivals. Thus, the Holi (Hindu festival of colours) is with Meos a season of rough play and is considered as important a festival as the Muharram, Eid, and Shabibarat

entered into a similar treaty with the British after the battle (Erskin pp. 319–35, 424–441).

¹² William Percy Powlett was a British colonial settlement officer in Alwar (Ulwar) district in the 19th Century. He carried an extensive survey of the district which constitutes one part of the cultural region of Mewat. His work is an important historical source material for information about the state's physical nature, politics, and history. His main contribution is to document oral folk materials concerning religion, belief, and people's lifestyle.

(all Islamic festivals); and they likewise observe the Janam Asthmi, Dasehara, and, Diwali (another set of Hindu festivals). They often keep Brahmin priests to write pili chitthi, a note fixing the date of marriage. They call themselves by Hindu names, with the exceptions of 'Ram' and 'Singh' is a frequent affix, though not so common as 'Khan'. (p. 38)

Before the above description by Powlett in the 19th century, according to historical sources, the names Meo and Mewat had been in use for at least one thousand years. After the establishment of the first Delhi Sultanate kingdom in the 12th century, Balban, the powerful ruler of the slave dynasty, attacked and plundered Mewatis. Indo-Persian historians of the era and, later, Mughal sources as well as British colonial accounts construct the Mewatis negatively as rebels, plunderers, highway-robbers, criminal tribes and so on (Mayaram 2004a, pp. 74-96). The dearth of historical materials before the 10th century means that there is much speculation concerning the origins of the community. The word 'Meo' is assumed to be the basis of the name Mewat. Mayaram (1997a, 2004a) links the origin of the Meos to migration like that of the Jats. She charts a niche for the history of Meo migration from the western side of India in light of Persian and Arab chroniclers of Sindh. She argues that under the pressure of the Arab forces after the conquest of Sindh in 711–12 C.E., groups like the Meos and Jats occupying the Sindh and Punjab regions were forced into the interior parts of north-west India around the 10th and 11th centuries, (1997c, p. 26; 2004a, pp. 19-26). Similarly, Bharadwaj (2012) notes the tribal and sedentary nature of the community before they began turning into a group of peasants from the 15th century onwards (pp. 217-19).¹³

¹³ The writings of Shail Mayaram and Surjabhan Bhardwaj trace the history of Meos from the thirteenth to the middle of the 20th century.

From around the 15th century the peasant background of the Meos connected them to the symbolism of Hinduism despite their existing attachment to Sufi and local versions of Islam. Various other peasant groups live around Mewat and their locations are identified by caste names. For instance, the regions beyond the north and north-west parts of Mewat (western side of Alwar, and parts of Rewari and Gurgaon) are dominated by Ahir peasants, whose region is called the Ahirvati (Ahirs' abode). Similarly, in regions beyond the north-east and south of Mewat, Jat peasants exist in large numbers, their area is called the Jattiyaat (the region of the Jats). Likewise, there are two other distinct peasant caste cultural zones, Minavati, and Gujarvati (after the Mina and the Gujjar peasants respectively). There are remarkable similarities between these peasant castes who bestow on one another equal social status, including the Meos. But all these groups identify as Hindu, with the exception of the Meos, who are Muslims. The Meo peasant world and the social, cultural and religious developments that occurred within a common social setting marked by the shared semiotics of these various peasant groups is the subject of this study.

Between the 13th and 19th centuries, the Meo community underwent socio-economic and religious changes. These changes gave rise to important debates, first about the Meos' change from a sedentary to a peasant group, and second about the process through which the Meos became Muslims.¹⁴ Mayaram (1997a, 2004a) rightly notes in her work that groups like the Meos were simultaneously both Hindus and Muslims in their cultural and religious practices. But Mayaram fails to provide answers to why this was so, how and when this process happened and under what circumstances. I address these questions in chapter three.

¹⁴ The process is still going on.

The Meos consider themselves to be the descendants of Hindu warrior gods and figures such as Ram, Krishna and Arjuna. Around the 15th century most Meos claimed links to Hindu mythical kinship and were at the same time practising a popular or vernacular form of Sufi Islam. Their connection to the Hindu past still exists through these claims that the Meos are the descendants of the two Hindu warrior gods, Ram and Krishna. I argue, this is rooted in the connections between mythical kinship, land and peasant community rights – facts which Mayaram fails to analyse. The claimed Meo connection with Hindu god-kings such as Ram and Krishna, and with the warrior figure Arjuna became a powerful legitimization of their claims, similar to other peasants, to land when private property rights emerged during Mughal rule.¹⁵

The Meos' world was an agrarian one in which both religions co-existed in compliance with north Indian peasant devotional culture. In a more precise sense, the Meos' religious experiences and the transformation of their religious world from a Hindu–Muslim one to a more marked Muslim one even now is not in complete contradiction with a rustic form of peasant religiosity. Rather than looking at the peasant world and their religiosity from a Hindu–Muslim perspective, I find it more useful to look at the shared religious life which the Meo cherish even after undergoing radical religious transformation.

These transformations in peasant world views contain elements of piety, asceticism and renunciation which emerged during the Bhakti-Sufi period.¹⁶ For

¹⁵ This process was still underdeveloped. But there was certainly an idea of private property emerging although not in a clear sense. It intensified in the later centuries.

¹⁶ Bhakti and Sufism are broad conceptual frameworks which are commonly known as movements. They are highly diverse and complex cultural-religious phenomenon. I am using the two terms in a general sense without discarding the complex reality. The Bhakti period is considered between 700 to 1800 C.E. and Sufism from 1300 C.E. onwards in India. The peak of Bhakti and Sufi is considered to be between 1400 to 1800 C.E. Many influential Bhakti and Sufi saints were contemporaries like the saints in this

instance, many scholars consider that the Tablighi Jamaat reform movement, which played a crucial role in shaping the Meos' Muslim identity in the 20th and 21th centuries, is a purely Islamic movement (Mayaram 1997a, pp. 53-84; Mayaram 2004b; Sikand 2002a; 2004, 2006). However, as I show in subsequent chapters, on a closer analysis, the religious preaching of the Tablighi Jamaat movement maintains continuity with a form of peasant religiosity first articulated by Bhakti and Sufi saints. I argue that, the Tablighi Jamaat's closeness to ascetic religious values helped to make it a highly successful movement among the Meos, as it allowed Meo Muslim peasants to maintain continuity with their previous religious-philosophical world.

1.2.3 The Meos and the problematic categories of 'marginalised' and 'subaltern'

The writings of scholars like Mayaram, and Bhardwaj on the Mewat area are helpful in exploring the Meo community and its history, but their routine use of the term 'the Meo' is problematic for its homogenising of the behaviour of Meo people. Despite Mayaram's claim to be an ethnographer, the writings of Mayaram and Bhardwaj are in fact more historical than ethnographic. Both writers presuppose a politically and socially homogenous community, albeit with internal differentiation. While their writings deal effectively with the cultural and religious state of flux in Mewat and the Meo community, they also contradict each other on issues of community autonomy, resistance to the state and the internal organisation of the Meo group and a number of criticisms can be made of their work. Firstly, Mewat is a Meo majority region, not all the Muslims in the area are Meos and not all the population is Muslim. Secondly, their repeated use of the term 'the Meo,' like colonial ethnographers using

study. Classification of these saints from present religious-theological point of view is almost impossible. More description of these diverse traditions coupled under the two terms is given in chapter four.

'Hindu,' or 'Muslim,' assumes a homogenous peasant community whose history is assumed to be the history of the region.

Specifically, Mayaram's construction of the marginalisation of the Meos as subaltern is highly problematic, although she partially acknowledges the problematic category of subaltern with regard to them (see, 2004a, p. 2). Like other peasant communities in many parts of the world, the Meos as a group are marginal to the state. However, the Meos see themselves as a community of upper caste Kshatriyas (warrior class). The coherent use and the vague application of the term of 'subaltern' implies the Meos to be *nimnavargiya* (low class), but this does not correspond to the self-perception and social reality of the Meos. When I asked Meo interviewees the question, '*Kyā aap log apne aap ko nimnavarg mānte hai?*' (do you consider yourself as *nimnavarg*?), respondents not only laughed and refuted the term but also cited a long history of their bravery, including the formation of the Meo state in the 16th century by Hasan Khan Mewati. The Meos I spoke to considered themselves as a *bahādur kaum* (a warrior community) along with castes such the Rajputs, Jats, Gujjars, and the Ahirs. This is not a case of false consciousness, for the Meos are in fact more well off than other sections of society in Mewat. The term 'subaltern' is not consistent with the dominance of the Meos in Mewat.

In addition, while peasant and non-peasant low caste groups may be marginal to the state, they are not necessarily in an equal and homogenous relationship with one another. Social realities are hierarchically organised not only along the binary axis of peasant and state relations but also along the dimensions of different castes of peasant and non-peasant origins. There are multiple layers of marginal–dominant relationships to which scholars like Mayaram refer but do not explore. The concept of subaltern associated with

peasant groups particularly by the Subaltern school of history¹⁷ does not acknowledge the different layers of subalternity, specifically of those landless groups who exist below the 'subaltern' peasants. For instance, the landless Jogi and Mirasi, two middle and low caste groups of musicians discussed in detail later in this thesis, were, along with other low caste service groups, historically dependent upon the Meos for livelihood under the *jajmāni* system.¹⁸ Their dependent status also constituted their marginality.

1.2.4 The Jogi and Mirasi and the question of 'real' marginality

Although this research starts with the Meos, my ethnography deals with three other low caste-class Muslim groups: the Jogis, the Mirasis¹⁹ (the two bards and minstrel communities of the Meo community), and the Fakirs, a low caste community of beggars and numerous Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain individuals. But central to this part-historical, part-ethnographic study are the Muslim castes, the Meo, the Fakir, the Jogi, and the Mirasi, and the relationships these groups shared and continue to share with one another socially, culturally, and religiously. The reason for placing the Meos at the centre of this study is their dominance in Mewat. Once the Meos began to follow a puritanical version of Islam, their dominance placed pressure on low caste-class Muslim groups like the Jogi and Mirasi who to also become 'pure

¹⁷ The Subaltern is famous group of historians in India who focused on writing the history of marginalised groups such as peasants, tribes, Dalits and women in India, primarily in relation to colonial state. However, these influential writings have the major drawback of treating these groups as homogenous.

¹⁸ The system of *jajmāni* also known as patron-client relationship has been a peasant communities' centric system in India. It has social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions which have been analysed in a vast number of writings. Similarly, the Meo peasants were patrons for many castes in Mewat using the ritual and economic services of the service castes and giving them gifts or payments in return. This aspect has been examined in the next chapter in detail.

¹⁹ Although, I collected information from members of these two bardic communities, I have given more attention to the Muslim Jogis for comparative analyses.

Muslims'. Historical memories about the Meo community are preserved in the form of oral history, folk tales and songs by these two minstrel castes, the Jogi and Mirasi. In the *jajmāni* system, the Jogi and Mirasi communities' main roles were to tell panegyric tales at Meo gatherings. Their main duty was to entertain the family and the public on occasions such as marriages, festivals and other events organised by their Meo patrons.²⁰

While the Jogi and Mirasi are two different communities, they used more or less the same oral resources in their folk artistry. Socially different from the Mirasis (who were untouchables for the Meos 30 years ago), the Muslim Jogi caste enjoys a comparatively higher social status. The Jogi community exists across the religious divides unlike the Mirasis, who are only Muslim. Until recently, the experience of both the Jogi and the Mirasi communities has been of extreme poverty and marginality contrary to the experience of the Meo community. In a very real sense they are the actual subalterns in Mewat. The ascription of a marginal status to the Meos in academic writings has inappropriately obscured the experience of low caste-class groups who suffer not only at the hands of the state but also through the social dominance of the peasant groups like the Meos. The Meos cannot therefore be considered a subaltern group when it comes to the question of socio-economic dominance in the area.

However, by reading historical and ethnographic field materials, oral narratives and myths on the themes of religion, identity, and ritual crossings, my main objective is to place a variety of traditions, concepts, desires, and truths together in a way that don't necessarily compose a unified or coherent whole of Meo-ness, Jogi-ness, Muslim-ness, Hindu-ness or any other 'ness' for that

²⁰ For musicians, the patrons normally belonged to landowning peasant class such as the Jats, the Ahirs, and the Gujjars apart from the Meos.

matter. This is not to suggest that groups or boundaries do not exist. They always exist despite a flow of personnel across them (Barth 1998, p. 9). Rather than seeing these issues as already constituted objects, exploring such categorisations and their authenticity or lack of it became a major point of interest for me.

1.3 Writing the field

During the week I spent looking for an appropriate fieldwork site, my acquaintance and I travelled extensively in the Mewat region in search of shrines, Sufi tombs, temples and other places of worship. I wished to analyse ritual and religious engagements across different religious groups. My main concern was to locate religious spaces in Mewat shared by Hindus and Muslims who visit these places with shared desires and where the boundaries of rituals and beliefs intersected. There were many Islamic Sufi shrines frequented by Hindus, but I could not locate a Hindu temple or shrine visited by Muslims. However, I did discover a Mewati folk tale later that described a famous temple of the Hindu god Shiva in Firozpur Jhirka (known as *jhir kā Mahādev*) which had once been a place of veneration among the Meo Muslims.²¹ It appeared that in the past the Meo and other Muslims had had close relations with Hindu places of worship in Mewat.

Thus, my initial plan was to study a Hindu temple and an Islamic Sufi shrine which were liminal and syncretic in nature. In December 2015, I decided to conduct my fieldwork around two shrines: one hosting the cult of a Hindu-Muslim saint known as Laldas/Khan and the other the tomb of a Sufi saint

²¹ Shail Mayaram (2004a) also notes in the discussion of a bandit narrative, '*Gurchari-Mev Khan*', that two brothers used to pay tribute to *Mahādev* (Shiva) on occasions of concern. See, (Mayaram 2004a, p. 242).

popularly known as Shah Chokha.²² During the course of fieldwork, I focussed on understanding the historically shifting nature of the identities and religious practices around these shrines. My central object of concern was the past and present forms of social and religious engagements between different social groups in and around these shrines. I was also interested in forces such as socio-economic changes as well as reform organisations that emerged in the last century that had shaped and unshaped the broader processes such as social identities, religious boundaries, religious beliefs and practices in the area on the one hand and created moral and social pressures on traditional beliefs and identities on the other. This hardening of religious boundaries overlapped with social categories that had historically acknowledged the malleable nature of the religious world. Figure 1.2 shows the area and the two field sites in which I carried out fieldwork for this study.

²² In the absence of a Hindu temple where Muslims also visit for charismatic appeals, the only shrine I was able to locate is of Laldas.

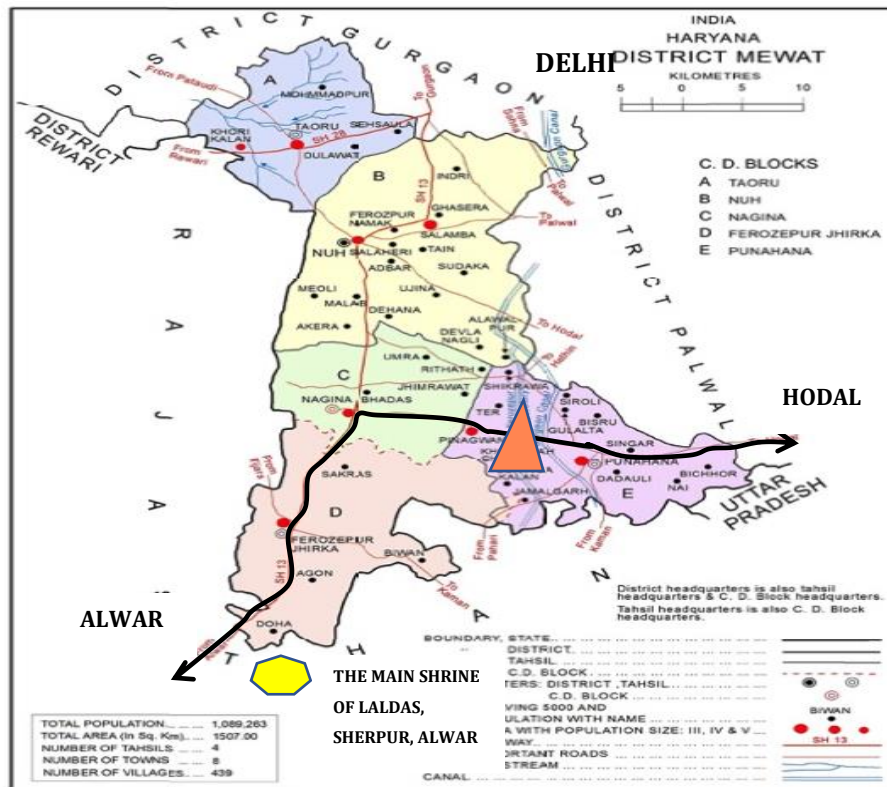





Figure 1.2: Map of the Haryana area of Mewat (Nuh), 2011

-  Horizontal L Shape Road
-  The tomb of Shah Chokha, Punahana, Nuh, Haryana
-  The main Shrine of Laldas, Sherpur, Alwar, Rajasthan

1.3.1 The cult/sect (panth/sampradāy) and shrines of Laldas

In my fieldwork, I followed the horizontal L-shape road indicated in black in figure 1.2 through the Haryana part of Mewat from Hodal to Ramgarh in Alwar (Rajasthan) which adjoins the main road from Gurgaon to Alwar via Ferozpur Jhirka at Nagina. Hodal and Ramgarh are located almost 80 kilometres from each other connected by a *pakkā* (metalled) road. This straight asphalt road also passes through numerous smaller towns and villages in the Nuh district, such as Punahana, Shah Chokha, Pinagwan, Badkali, Ferozpur Jhirka, until it reaches

Alwar city via the Ramgarh tehsil of Alwar. The road serves the transportation needs of the area through the numerous peripatetic three-wheelers and modified Indian jeeps that ply between neighbouring villages and towns. In addition, the road also serves as a market place for each town or village. Numerous fruit shops, vegetable carts, hired vehicles, mobile repair centres and garment stores located along the two sides of the road convert it into a narrow thoroughfare at some places.

The road leads to the main shrine of Laldas located at Sherpur village in the Ramgarh tehsil in Alwar via Firozpur Jhirka at the border of Rajasthan and Haryana states. This was my first fieldwork site. Born into a Muslim family in the 16th century (1540 C.E.) as Lal Khan Meo, the saint is presently called by the designation of Baba Laldas. He is said to have believed in formless devotion (*nirgun* Bhakti) to the Hindu god Ram and lived by the values of Islam in his personal life. He was thus a Kabirpanthi *nirgun* Muslim saint.²³

Among Muslim adherents, the saint is well known as Lal Khan *pīr* or *dādā* Lal Khan, while Hindus and Sikhs evoke him as *bābā* Laldas or *sānt* Laldas. Apart from the main shrine at Sherpur where he is buried with 16 family members (figure 1.3), there are two other main shrines and numerous temples of Laldas all over north India.²⁴

²³ The 'Kabirpanthi *nirgun*' term stands for a follower of the 14th century Bhakti saint Kabir who advocated the formless devotion of God. Laldas was the follower of Kabir. On the issue of devotion to Ram there were two main schools, Ramanandi which followed more orthodox and *saung* form of devotion while Kabirpanth was more progressive and followed *nirgun* Ram. Again, it is doubtful whether all the saints followed a lineage of these two saints or not. Sometimes, they had no connection to each other at all. The major figures of the north Indian form of Bhakti devotion were Kabir, Dadu, and Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion.

²⁴ There is a difference between a shrine and a temple of Laldas in my usage. A shrine does not indicate an obvious identity while a temple is associated with Hinduism. All the Laldas places which are contested by Hindus and Muslim are considered here as



Figure 1.3: The Sherpur Shrine of Laldas/Khan at Sherpur Village, Ramgarh, Alwar²⁵

Apart from Sherpur, the two other main shrines of Laldas are in the villages of Dholidoob (where his parents, Chandmal and Samda, are buried), and Bandholi (where one of his sons, Kutub or Dhruvji, and his two daughters Riddhi and Siddhi are buried). These three shrines are among the central places of traditional shared worship.

Outside Mewat, this sect²⁶ has taken on diverse and obscure religious forms. For instance, in the Saharanpur district of western Uttar-Pradesh, the same Laldas is considered to be a devotee of the river goddess Ganga. According to a

shrines in this research while a Laldas temple is referred to those building recently constructed by his Hindu followers in the Hindu temple style.

²⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all the photographs in this thesis are mine, taken during my fieldwork in the area in 2016.

²⁶ I am using the word 'sect' as a literal translation of the Hindi word '*Sampradāy*'. Each sect/*sampradāy* of Bhakti may represent what Juergensmeyer (1982) refers to as a path (*panth*) or tradition.

popular legend, the saint stayed there for some time and travelled ever day about 60 kilometres to Haridwar (a holy city on the bank of the river Ganga) to take a dip in the holy waters. Pleased with his devotion, the deity, Mother Ganga, appeared and gave him a boon. She caused a stream to flow in front of his hut so he could access water easily. The stream is presently called *Paon Dhoi* River (literally, 'feet rinsing river'). Known locally as 'Bhagirath²⁷ of Saharanpur', the saint Laldas holds important place in local folktales.²⁸

Similarly, at Dhyanpur in Punjab, Laldas is linked with a Vaishnava sect. Stories of his birth place and miracles differ from Dhyanpur to Mewat and Saharanpur.²⁹ The Dhyanpur ashram records the saint's visit to Saharanpur but the Saharanpur temple links him with Mewat, not with Dhyanpur (see, figure 1.4). Popular stories, historical accounts, and scholarly works provide conflicting descriptions of the figure variously called Baba Laldas, Baba Lali, and Baba Laldoyal. At Dhayanpur, among his devotees are Sikhs and Shams Guphis who remember him as Baba Lal Dayal. Despite the multifarious nature

²⁷ In Hindu mythology, Bhagirath was the person responsible for bringing the river Ganga from the heavenly mountain Kailash (Himalaya) to earth by channelling her through the knotted hair of the god Shiva.

²⁸ In Saharanpur, Laldas was a good friend of a Muslim saint called Haji Shah Kamaal. The extraordinary friendship between the two is still a unique symbol of communal harmony. Haji Shah Kamaal remained in the vicinity of Laldas and took spiritual advice from him. A *mazār* (tomb) of Shah Kamaal is located in the vicinity of Laldas' temple. Both saints are said to have followed the same life-style.

²⁹ Dhyanpur Temple considers Lahore to be Laldas's birth place while the Saharanpur temple clearly associates it with Mewat. Historical accounts and genealogies of local record-keepers (Jagga) in Mewat provides a complete list of Laldas's ancestry linked to Mewat. H.H. Wilson (1861) notes, he was born in Malwa during the reign of Mughal king Jahangir (c. 1605-1627) and later travelled with his guru Chetan Swami to Lahore (p. 347). While Dhyanpur Ashram claims that he was born during Firoz Shah Tuglak's reign and lived for 300 years (c. 1355-1655), in Mewat he is believed to have lived from 1540 to 1648 C.E. (1597 to 1705 V.E.).

of these stories, they have certain commonalities; in particular, the intersection of Sufi and Bhakti themes.



Figure 1.4: The Laldas temple in Saharanpur

As with all oral traditions, it cannot be determined with full certainty that all these stories correspond to a single figure called Laldas. The personage of Laldas is layered with multiple identities. However, there appears to be strong historical evidence that there was a Mewati Laldas who lived in the 16th century and from whom many Meo families still claim ancestry. Currently, Laldas is popularised as the great saint of Mewat and the symbol of communal harmony (*sāmpradāyik sadbhāvanā ke pratik*).³⁰

The great Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and his eldest son Dara Shukoh are also said to have been devotees of Laldas. This is mentioned in popular accounts, print materials and other historical sources across north Indian regions. The earliest sources refer to him as a Hindu gnostic. The Mughal prince, Dara Shukoh, who was interested in Hindu philosophy, had an

³⁰ Many cheap pamphlets about Laldas have the title ‘the great saint of Mewat and the symbol of communal harmony’.

extensive dialogue with the saint Laldas which is also available in various versions of the text *Su'āl va javāb-i Dārā Shukoh va Bābā Lāl Dās* (Questions and answers between Dara Shukoh and Baba Laldas) (Hasrat 1953; Hayat 2016; Wilson 1861) (figure 1.5). Amongst all the available variants, Hayat (2016) notes there are six manuscripts and two texts (p. 13).³¹



Figure 1.5: Laldas in interaction with the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh

Source: FACT (Foundation for Advancement of Cultural Ties),
<http://www.darashikoh.info.com>

In exploring the saint's identity, Hayat notes the distinctive nature of the saint, although he ultimately accepts the suggestion of Laldas's Punjab origin (Lahore, presently in Pakistan). Hayat's conviction about the timeframe of the

³¹ Hayat's list includes eight works and a partial mention to one other work. Kept in various archives and libraries in London and Berlin, the manuscripts and texts are available in Persian, English and Hindi languages. Hayat meticulously notes the minute differences in all these works.

several meetings between Laldas and Shukoh, i.e. before 1654, follows the works of Hasrat and Qanungo (1952) while Wilson assumes it to be in 1649. Hayat, however, agrees that the time period and the number of the meetings remain ambiguous. There is no mention of these cases in the historical manuscripts and sources. Indeed, sources refer to the impossibility of any interaction between the Mewati Laldas and Dara Shukoh as the former is believed to have died in 1648.

However, unlike other ambiguous claims about the identity of the figure Laldas, in Mewat, stories about his identity are underpinned with historical evidence such as a family genealogy recorded by the Jaggas. The Jaggas—a community of Brahmin genealogical record keepers in Mewat—provide a complete ancestry of the saint. The state considers the Jagga records reliable historical and legal evidence. Some of the Meo families I met trace their ancestral links with Lalkhan (*pīr*) through both maternal and paternal sides. It may also be a possibility that the name 'Laldas', which was already in use in north India, overlapped with other figures identified by the same name. Lalkhan Meo in Mewat may have undergone a similar identity adaptation and change into Laldas since 'das' was a common term for a saint of Bhakti background.

Laldas's hagiography, '*Laldas Nuktāvalī*', from Mewat—compiled by a follower called Dungarisi Sadh—denotes him as having *nirgun* Ram Bhakt status. His status as a Bhakti saint is thus not merely an invention by Hindu followers. Muslims followers also practice a strict form of vegetarianism under the influence of his teachings. Whether the saint in Mewat is the same Laldas or not, his teachings, belief, and practices are important to the people there. Almost all historical sources, including oral materials, contain certain referential signposts of liminality about the peculiar status of this saint: he is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. At present, however, his Hindu aspects are more emphasised.

Hindu followers of Laldas in Mewat—who agree that the saint was a Muslim—have begun constructing new temples. One such temple that I spotted for this project was recently built (2015) in Punahana (see figure 1.6). Visitors to the temple are all Hindus and mostly Baniyas (merchant class). It stands at the heart of the town. Such new Hindu temples of Laldas in north India³² stand in ritual and symbolic contrast to the main shrine. For instance, at the main shrine in Sherpur, the centres of ritual offerings are graves (*kabra/* mausoleum) unlike the new temples, in which a well adorned Laldas idol is installed, ironically endowing a *nirgun* (formless) saint with a *sagun* (god with attributes) anthropomorphic form. The Baniyas have now commenced constructing temples of Laldas purely in the *sagun* style of Vaishnava worship.³³ The distinction between *nirgun* and *sagun* devotion is ambiguous on a philosophical level. However, the *nirgun* concept is closer to the Islamic concept of Allah. This transformation of Laldas from a *nirgun* Bhakti follower to a *sagun* saint and deity is important and is discussed in chapters five and ten.

The symbolic and ontological transformations implied by installing idols of the saint in many temples in Mewat and the neighbouring regions is a complete subversion of Laldas teachings and his cult's beliefs. I argue that the changing nature of the shared shrines of Laldas and the displacement of the symbols of one group by the other are deeply rooted in the way in which religious cultures

³² There are currently 15 to 20 new temples built in Mewat alone which I visited. The number of total temples in north India may be in hundreds. I need to identify all of them in the next project.

³³ The *sagun* Bhakti, however, appeared to be an orthodox form of Brahminical devotion which did not want to compromise the authority of Brahmins since the *nirgun* Bhakti rejected idol worship, temple, ritual, pilgrimage, etc. (Vaudeville 1993).

respond to changes in their political economy³⁴ and in their relationships with other groups.



Figure 1.6: The temple of Laldas at Punahana

1.3.2 The dargāh (tomb) of Shah Chokha

My second fieldwork site is the tomb of a Chishti Sufi Saint, Shah Chokha, located in a village named after him. The tomb is shown in figure 1.7. The Shah Chokha village is on a distance of 3 kilometres west from Punahana on the same metalled road that comes from Hodal. When I visited in 2016, it was a large tomb in a comparatively deserted area on a small hillock in the Aravalli hills, facing north-east to south-west in continuation of the direction of the Aravalli hills towards Delhi. The saint's real name was Sayyed Akbar Ali Shah. He is said to have been born in the Khurasan region in Iran before moving to

³⁴ I am using the term political economy more in the sense of cultural materialism here to understand the link between the Meos, their peasant/landholding status, centrality in the *jajmāni* system, and the implications of Meo politics upon the subordinate caste groups. In later chapters I show that the disintegration of the *jajmāni* system has affected religious practices in Mewat positively and negatively.

India. During the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605 C.E.), the saint settled in Mewat.



Figure 1.7: The tomb of Shah Chokha at Shah Chokha Village, Punahana, Haryana

Historical references about Shah Chokha are as scanty and uncertain as those for Laldas. The Urdu hagiography, written and compiled sometime in the 20th century, records his life span as 70 years from Hijri 930 to the 4th Jamadil 1000 Hijri (i.e. 1522 to 17th February 1592 C.E.). Popular stories depict the Mughal emperor Akbar was a devotee who used to visit the saint for advice on spiritual matters. Popular accounts and the hagiography claim that Akbar visited Shah Chokha immediately after a visit to another Chishti saint, Sheikh Salim Chishti, to seek his blessings for a son. Shah Chokha is said to have replied to Akbar

that, 'brother Salim's prayer has been heard, you will be blessed with a son soon. Your son should be named after him'³⁵ (Hagiography 2011).

Ideologically, the *dargāh* (tomb) has become a meeting ground for two Islamic sects, the Sufis and the Tablighi reformists. The co-presence of these two symbolic and ideological structures is crucial to understanding the religious transformations in Mewat. The Tablighi Jamaat has had a key influence among Muslims in turning them away from shared spaces of worship such as the shrines of Laldas and the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha and in applying ideological pressures on those Muslims who still worship both saints.

Currently the Tablighi Jamaat runs an Islamic school (a *madrassā*) in the premises of the tomb of Shah Chokha. The *madrassā* provides in-house services for school children and teachers with the help of donations from local residents. In the inner circuit of walls of the *dargāh* there are two mosques. Between the mosques and behind the main grave is a large room, currently used by Tablighis for storing grain and food materials donated by visitors. The Tablighi Jamaat discourages villagers and other people from visiting the Sufi saint for blessings and encourages them to spend time in the mosques. The presence of the Tablighi form of Islam at this place brought about transformations in the meanings associated with worship of the saint.

The two saints are invoked as figures of power capable of turning human desires for wealth and prosperity into reality. In this search for material prosperity and family well-being, Muslims deploy the Islamic method of revering a Sufi *pīr* (a Muslim mystic saint), while Hindus and Sikhs, on the contrary, invoke the saints as *kuldevtā* (family gods) and divine incarnations.

³⁵ This prophecy was supposed to have been fulfilled with the birth of a son who later became Jahangir.

Devotees seek the saints' help in agricultural activities, illness in the family, issue of childlessness, to gain profit in business and have very high expectations of and regard for the two approximately 400 years old saintly cults. Contrary to the great religions' concerns about salvation or the otherworld, the shrines-goers care more about their earthly needs. Most often, a personal crisis attracts a new follower whose friends or relatives have suggested they follow a particular saint to alleviate their problems. This suggests that diversity in ritual modes is created out of desperation or compulsion at moments of crisis. When religion is invoked as a medium of resolving human sufferings at the personal level, the need for it is ongoing, as new problems keep arising in the lives of followers.

Overall, these two shared places in this study, the shrine of Laldas and the tomb of Shah Chokha, are currently experiencing inter and intra religious disputes. Whereas the Laldas shrine is a site of contention between Hindus and Muslims, the Shah Chokha tomb has become a matter of debate between Sufi and reformist Tablighi ideology about the place of saints in Islam. Although Laldas was born into a Meo Muslim family, Hindus claim he is an incarnation of the epic Mahabharata's character, Yudhishtira.³⁶ By contrast, Muslims believe he is a *pīr*. The duality of the '*sānt* versus *pīr*' identity of Laldas, the 'temple versus *dargāh*' divide of his shrines, and the '*samādhi* versus *kabra*' issue of graves has led to competitive sharing of the cult of Laldas. Similarly, the ascending reformist ideology of the transnational movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, consider the tomb of Shah Chokha to be a place of *shirk* (polytheism) and *bīdāt* (innovation).

³⁶ Yudhishtira was the eldest among the five Pandava brothers (heroes of the epic) known for his piety, honesty, and kind-hearted nature.

1.4. Lacuna in theoretical frameworks on religious and cultural interaction

There is significant debate among historians, anthropologists and scholars of religion about the most effective framework to adopt in the analysis of interaction between two or more religions where religious synthesis becomes a norm. In Sikhism, which largely grew out of a Hindu and Islamic confluence, symbols, songs, prayers, themes, devotion, and world views contain references to diverse Hindu and Islamic practices of the time. Similarly, like the blending of religious ideas, communities, groups, and cults, individuals also exhibit signs of mixing. Within the social sciences, much has been written about cultural contact between people from the perspectives of acculturation, assimilation, hybridity, multiculturalism and creolisation. Although these terms have the power to acknowledge differences based on colour, race, language and ethnicity, they nonetheless fail to examine religious blending adequately. The mixed practices of religious blending generally fall outside these conventional categories. As a result, we lack a single strong theoretical framework. Cultural mixing, including the mixing of religions, is notoriously under-theorised, resulting in the interchangeable use of the terms syncretism, hybridity, creolisation, and fusion as virtual synonyms (Robbins 2010; Stewart 2011).

From the late 20th century, the Western world increasingly started identifying their spaces as cosmopolitan, multicultural, and hybrid in the wake of the massive migration of populations and the development of better communication systems with other parts of the world (Eck 2002, 2006). These two processes, massive migration and increasing global contact, have changed the face of the world at various levels and in myriad ways. In the present era of global capitalism, processes of migration and urbanisation have multiplied and intensified. The question this raises is: Can theories developed to describe very different times and places be applied usefully to explain the South Asia context

and the diversity of shared shrines and religious practices found there?

Contrary to the Western world's more recent heterogeneity, South Asia witnessed what could be called 'religious cosmopolitanism' long ago. To answer this question of religious mixing in South Asia, most scholars use the concepts of syncretism and liminality.

1.4.1. Syncretism, and liminality

Syncretism refers to the synthesis of different religious forms. It is a 'contentious and contested term' (Stewart & Shaw 1994) that has undergone many transformations in meaning. The ancient meaning of syncretism was used by Plutarch to refer to unity among Cretans. The 16th century's theological use of the term was to denounce syncretism as the illegitimate mixing of pure religious units. Since then the term has been then subjected to differing meaning and values (Adogame, Echtler & Vierke 2008, p. 5). In Christian circles the term is most often used in a pejorative sense to refer to developments in non-Western churches that do not neatly align with Western Christianity. Some see syncretism as a disparaging, ethnocentric label applied to religious traditions (such as independent African churches) that are deemed 'impure' or 'inauthentic' because they are permeated by local ideas and practices (Stewart & Shaw 1994). However, from the 19th century onwards, the discipline of religious studies shows that syncretism was present in the earliest forms of Christianity (Droogers 2008, p. 9). Thus, the Christianity of the West is itself syncretistic, and never more so than when employing the distinctly Western construct of 'religion' (Richard 2014). Therefore, in most analyses of religious synthesis the concept of syncretism is interpreted as having both positive and negative attributes. For many scholars, any form of religious exchange is syncretism.

A large body of literature has been devoted to the study of syncretism, variously understood as acculturation (Melville 1941), hybrid or mixture

(Turner & Turner 1978), a means of transforming religious symbolic systems (Droogers 1989), politics of religious synthesis (Stewart & Shaw 1994), and a process intertwined with contextualisation (Adogame, Echtler & Vierke 2008). Despite its varying usages and the meaning attached to the phenomenon, syncretism has never lost its central significance. This is that it points out aspects of different religions, sects, identities, and other domains of life that are engaged in interaction. However, analyses of syncretism have failed to provide a sufficient explanation for the convergence of various factors into one entity such as identity. Much controversy has also erupted over the possible implications of the phenomenon, which has been accused of unconsciously giving more attention to supposedly 'high' forms of institutionalised religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. In some other contexts, religious synthesis has been described as having positive connotations as 'a form of resistance to cultural dominance, as a link with lost history' (Stewart & Shaw 1994, p.i).

Building on the Western understanding of syncretism many scholars have extended the use of syncretism in Indian contexts. Medieval Indian life is understood to have exercised immense cultural tolerance towards religious-cultural synthesis. As they spread into India, Islam and Christianity situated themselves in the pre-existing framework of beliefs and practices without discarding them (Bayly 1989, pp. 73-86). In studies of Bengali, Punjabi and other regional societies where Islam had a deep impact on the lives of the masses, syncretism is adopted to explain the complex processes (Burman 1996, 2002; Courtright 1999; Das 2006; Roy 1983). For instance, in his study on Bengal, Asim Roy (1983) pointed out that Bengali Muslims and Hindus continued to share textual forms, myths, rites and festivals until well into the 19th century. Many cults, saints, and Sufi *pīrs*, who attracted communities and individuals cutting across the religious divide, have been subjected to analysis under the term

syncretism in a move that portrays an image of positive interaction and peaceful coexistence that is contrary to the contemporary hostility between some religions. Thus, the phenomenon of syncretism came to imply promoting the objectives of harmony and tolerance. However, I argue that the term may have been applied without discrimination to refer to all kinds of religious movements that appeared to be complex, hybrid or ambiguous, even when positive outcomes are not apparent.

In fact, it is by no means clear that syncretism promotes harmony and tolerance. Scholars like Hayden (2002, 2016) and others have asked whether shared shrines always promote tolerance and positive values among groups. Evidence presented in chapters five and ten of this thesis suggests that shared shrines do not always promote values of tolerance and mutual respect.

The centre of Hindu-Muslim synthesis in India is mostly the shrines of the Sufi and Bhakti saints. Both Hindus and Muslims have their own patterns and reasons for visiting these shrines. Several questions arise: Can the nature of such shrines be identified as syncretistic solely on the basis of sharing? Or do Hindu participation and Hindu influence in the worship of Sufi saints amount to syncretic values? If a Hindu visits a Muslim shrine or vice versa, is syncretism the right framework within which to interpret such actions? Some have suggested that the answer is 'no' (Khan 2004b, pp. 213-14). Merely visiting a shrine is not syncretism until and unless the values and symbols of various kinds coexist together.

One of the major limitations with the concept of syncretism identified in the literature is that it is confined to a narrow focus on boundary making and does not clearly illuminate ambiguities (Mayaram 1997c, p. 39). Further, some have argued that syncretism seldom deals directly with its object, preferring institutional versions of religions over folk ones. The metaphors evoked to

describe religious mixing and synthesis often imply that religions are organic, (for example, terms like 'hybrid' or 'half breed'), alchemical ('mixing'), or constructed ('bricoleur') (Stewart 2000, p. 22).

As a way around the theoretical implications of syncretism, many scholars (Khan 2004a; Khan 2004b; Mayaram 1997c, 2004c) have turned to the phenomenon of liminality. Their use of the term liminality gives it a broader reach than syncretism. Liminality implies an anti-structural stance and emphasises the phase of transformations and its emphasis on ambiguous scenarios. Liminality was first used by Van Gennep (1957) and then popularised by Victor Turner (1969). It is linked with the ideas of threshold and transition, referring to a betwixt and between status, or something which is neither here nor there. The term was used by Turner to understand the life of a Ndembu youth in terms of phases. Youth or the period of initiation was referred to as a period of transformation or a liminal phase. The main features of a liminal phase are that it is characterised by a period of limbo, uncertainty and anti-structure. Based on this understanding, both Mayaram and Sila Khan (Khan 2004a, 2004b; Mayaram 1997b, 1997c, 2004c) prefer the concept of liminality over syncretism as it implies the existence of 'a line of thought that emphasizes "fuzzy" thinking as an alternative to binary logic of "either/or" (Khan 2004b, p. 212). However, Sila Khan uses 'threshold' instead of liminal in the study of understanding Hindu-Muslim religious identities in South Asia.

One problem in Mayaram and Khan's analyses of 'liminal' or 'threshold communities' is that all members of a liminal group are imagined to be ritually and religiously engaged in following a uniform set of practices although their identities are rightly pointed out to be liminal. The prefix often attached to such liminal groups in the form of 'the' (for example, the Meos or the Ismaili, or the Niyogi) leads one to believe that all liminal participants behave religiously,

ritually and politically in the same way as other liminal members.³⁷ It assumes that all liminal participants follow a set of liminal or threshold guidelines beyond which liminal participants do not go. In short, liminality has been considered a bounded category, without scholars problematising and reflecting on internal diversity. On the other hand, when such groups are taken as homogenous, internal contradictions are completely erased. In most accounts, liminal groups are referred to homogeneously as if their liminal identity is synonymous with the behaviour of every liminal individual. The assumption is that everyone else is behaviourally the same in the between and betwixt period.

However, both syncretism and liminality need to be used together as conceptual tools. Both terms always emphasize a particular situation. This particular situation in the religious context is often considered by religious clergy to be a result of the mixing of great 'religions' or 'pure religions' with 'unpure units' (such as folk religions). However, syncretic and liminal religious sects and practices hold equal importance in everyday life like the institutional entities such as Christianity, Hinduism or Islam. Religious syncretism and liminality should be viewed as independent religious developments. For instance, descriptions of syncretism and liminality in South Asia highlight cases of religious synthesis among the symbolism of Hinduism and Islam. Having said this, one might echo the views of Khan (2004b) that 'the non-sectarian sharing of a sacred space should not be viewed as liminal or syncretistic' (pp. 213-14). Syncretism and liminality thus refer to the particularistic mode in which two conditions are required to create a third one. The two conditions are always presumed to belong to institutional religions. Formulated in this way, liminal actions or syncretic behaviour present conspicuous circumstances of religious synthesis in which the symbols of different religious worlds often merge and

³⁷ I am thankful to Kathinka Frøystad for directing my attention to this issue.

can be called religions in themselves. In this thesis I interpret liminality to mean the unique situation of Laldas and further cases of religious mixing among the Meos and other Muslims groups.

1.4.2. The term 'Indic'

This research is set against the backdrop of the general theme of Indic cultural interaction. The term 'Indic' refers here to the fluid orientation of the religious communities in which religious identities are expressed, shared, omitted and shaped as much by broad cultural patterns—such as the diffusion of Islam or the widespread influence of institutional Hinduism—as by other local practices, norms, and social structures in India. This use of the term Indic was developed by the scholars Lawrence and Gilmartin who worked on South Asian religions, taking clues from Hodgson's use of the neologism 'Islamicate' (Gilmartin & Lawrence 2000, pp. 2-4). For Hodgson, the term Islamicate meant the strong influence of Muslim rulers over a vast territory expanding from Africa to East Asia but where there was diversity in Islamic practices as a religion from region to region. These practices were connected to but at the same time went beyond the standard definition of Islam. Thus, Islamicate referred to the multiplicity of Islamic practices from region to region in places that had been under the political influence of Muslim rulers for a long time.

Similarly, the term Indic refers to religious practices beyond the boundaries and doctrines of Hinduism. It is a way to understand the diverse and numerous practices marked by shared idioms that cannot be restricted to one religion or the other. Indic practices have certain common tropes specific to South Asia, such as the veneration of cows even by Muslims or the veneration of a Muslim or Christian saint in the form of a Hindu god by Hindus. It refers also to any other particular tradition followed and influenced by more than one religious group which cannot be characterised purely in terms of Hindu, Muslim, Christian or any other religious categories but are generally influenced by South

Asian narratives. For instance, the two cults in this study emerged in the 16th century at a time when the devotional aspects of the saints' teachings reflected the concerns of a rural world that were at odds with both institutional Islam and Hinduism. Since then the meanings of the shrines, saints, and teachings have undergone transformation over time. Those transformations are vital to understanding the process of social and religious changes. Along with the understandings of syncretism and liminality set out earlier, this research draws on the phenomenon of Indic practices. This is a context where relationships, practices and beliefs in South Asia are not static even in liminal and syncretic contexts.

1.4.3. The issues beyond mixing

Thus, some scholars use theoretical concepts such as liminality, Indicity, bricolage, threshold and syncretism to try to conceptualise human attempts at intermingling, religious and ethnic mixing and boundary crossing. In these analyses, the cases of mixing remain the main analytical focus. Sometimes, the boundaries of religions or of other kinds are fuzzy and may not exist in everyday behavior, but religious and social identifications are often well marked in terms of self/collective definition. An analogy is the physical boundaries of nation states. Although these boundaries are penetrable and infiltrated by groups, they have demarcated borders, which has both positive and negative ramifications: positive, for those inside, and negative, for those outside.

However, despite fluidity across boundaries, both physical and imagined boundaries do exist and are not always of an ephemeral nature. Although people participate in religious mixing, around shared shrines there are groups and agents who work against such mixing. If reformist groups or a faction among the participants sharing a place become dominant, the question of power

can become a serious concern. Dominant groups may well promote a belief system contrary to religious mixing.

Fluidity across religious boundaries between Hinduism and Islam is not a new idea; it has been analysed in a vast number of writings (Amin 2016; Assayag 2004; Bigelow 2010; Flueckiger 2006; Gilmartin & Lawrence 2000; Gottschalk 2005; Khan 2004a; Mayaram 1997a). Although, such writings successfully present the religious boundaries as malleable, they but do not extend their analyses to the question of what happens when, within the broad spectrum of religious interaction reform groups emerge and push the idea of a more uniform, pure and solid religious boundary and advocate for religious separation. The phenomenon of resistance to power when forces working against religious sharing become powerful is given little attention. The latter chapters of this thesis examine resistance to and the effect of anti-syncretic/anti-liminal processes. All these processes have to be understood in terms of dynamic interactions between different religious traditions, ideologies and social practices.

Most discussions conclude that shared shrines show either an increase or decrease in syncretic aspects. My research concludes that syncretism/anti-syncretism, liminality/anti-liminality are twin processes that reflect new trends in people's religiosity. Specifically, in the latter parts this study asks: What remains when anti-syncretic political and religious forces are hegemonic and have established their control among a large section of population in a particular region? The work of reformism creates moral as well as societal and political pressures on some people's faith. How they negotiate this pressure personally and politically is seldom given adequate attention. This study aims to fill this gap, in line with Stewart and Shaw's encouragement that explication of the semantics of syncretic and anti-syncretic dynamics in a society should show how the notion of religious purity came into existence (Stewart & Shaw

1994, pp. 50-60).³⁸ Extending Stewart and Shaw's suggestion, in the latter parts of this study I examine that what happened to religious synthesis when the notions of religious purity expressed by both the Islamic reform movement (Tablighi Jamaat) and the Hindu reform movement (Arya Samaj) took a solid hold in Mewat.

1.5 Research methods and fieldwork

My data collection involved both historical as well as ethnographic methods. I referred to and analysed pertinent historical materials from the Delhi, Rajasthan, and Alwar archives which were mostly accessible online. I also collected oral histories, hagiographies and other printed materials as well as ethnographic observations and interviews from the field. A good deal of oral historical materials was collected from the members of two low caste minstrel and bardic communities, the Jogi and Mirasi. My first encounter with these communities was at the Laldas shrine of Sherpur where they were performing at the time of the annual *melā* (festival) (figure 1.8). These folk-singers and oral story tellers traditionally sang popular narratives about the Meo community and the two saints.

Initially, I spent a few months applying the participant observation method in the field, before identifying key themes to be explored in depth. Once I had collected basic information about the field sites, their social composition and the two shrines, the next process involved meeting people in each village and at

³⁸ Although I prefer the term liminality over syncretism depending upon the nature of a religious interaction but here my usage of anti-process of these two processes refers to both anti-syncretism and anti-liminality terms. The term anti-syncretism was popularised by Stewart & Shaw (1994) in their very influential work. By using anti-syncretic and anti-liminal terms in this study, I refer to the ideologies which oppose the cases of religious synthesis, such as the reform organisations, the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat, and want people to follow a pure form of religion, in the same sense of Stewart and Shaw's usage of the term.

other locations. Early in the research, I became friends with people who were working in an NGO called the MDS (the Mewati Development Society) at Punahana. The head of the MDS at Punahana, Islamuddin, not only helped me in arranging logistical services but also became a very good friend and informant. He took me to numerous villages, welcomed me into his and his relatives' houses, and organised numerous meetings with religious clergy, politicians and women (who were part of the MDS and were living around the chosen field-sites).

This work was actually carried out at multiple field sites and among multiple groups. Multi-sited religious ethnography allows one to go beyond spatial limitations to include religious ideas, rituals and practices that exhibit similar or diverse forms beyond a specific locale and which are rooted in different local socio-historical contexts. The method helps to understand interconnectedness and transnational (trans-local) networks (Marcus 1995) as well as allowing the comparison of the same issue from different angles, highlighting variations in perspectives and experiences at both individual and community levels across shared shrines.

I also collected data from visitors at the shrines, other bards and singers (the Jogis and Mirasis), the priests and Mullahs who officiated there, and numerous village residents. I divided each week into two parts. I lived near the Shah Chokha village and worked there from Tuesday to Thursday. Most visitors visit the *dargāh* on Thursday as that is a usual practice among Sufi followers, so I spent the entire day there. I spent Tuesday and Wednesday with villagers, including teaching English to children in the *madrassā*. On Friday, I spent most of my time either at the Laldas temple at Punahana or visiting other temples of Laldas in nearby areas. For three days from Friday to Monday, I carried out fieldwork in and around the main shrine of Laldas at Sherpur. Here, I followed the same methods as at Shah Chokha. Sunday was an important day at the

Laldas shrine in Sherpur as the saint was born on this day. My fieldwork was organised reflect the importance of Thursdays and Sundays for visitors to the two sites.



Figure 1.8: A group of Jogi and Mirasi bards performing at the Laldas shrine, Sherpur

Occasionally, I went beyond my fieldwork sites to visit other places, people, and bards related to the shrines and the Meo and the Jogi and Mirasi communities. Sometimes interaction with important participants took place during marriage ceremonies, rituals, festivities or pilgrimages and at other cultural events. My research also addressed the issues of the contemporary position of the Jogis and Mirasis vis-a-vis the Meo community within the new patterns of dominance and resistance unfolding as a result of transformations in Mewati social relations.

After I finished the background research, I conducted interviews from March to October 2016. The initial interview participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate. I tried to interview people from different age groups and from the minstrel and bard communities as well as

shrine visitors who consented to see me later in their homes. I then employed the snowball method in which interviewees recommended the names of other potential interviewees. My access to women was very limited because of the male/female segregation in the community. It was possible to meet elderly women only. The interaction with women was easier at the shrines or when people invited me to talk to their mothers and grandmothers while interviewing them. On only two occasions was I able to meet a few younger women of my age when their husbands allowed it. This did not allow me to explore gender issues in depth.

However, by the end of the fieldwork in October 2016, the material collected included primary and secondary historical materials, the hagiographies and pamphlets related to the two saints, field notes of more than 150 pages based on participant observation, 40 interviews and numerous folksongs, oral tales and folk narratives from Jogi and Mirasi bards. Throughout my fieldwork my focus remained on the past and present forms of religious practices, beliefs and narratives in and around the spatial topography of the villages in which the two shrines are located as well as in some surrounding villages.

1.6 The structure of the study

This dissertation has eleven chapters, grouped into four thematically related parts. The sections follow a chronological order (past to present, history to current ethnographic data) and the chapters deal with the nature and significance of religious practices in before and after the pressure of religious reformist ideas. The remaining chapters of this first section focus on the background to the research.

Chapter two analyses the issue of caste in Islam, specifically how caste works in Islam in the Mewat region. This chapter also interrogates the past and present forms of the *jajmāni* (patron–client) connection between the peasant

Meos and the minstrel castes, the Jogi and Mirasi, who provided the bulk of oral materials for this research. Chapter three examines the genealogies of the Meos and the Jogis and their connections to Hindu gods and the mythic figures of the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Overall, this first section explores the connections between caste, Islam, Hindu myths, genealogy, memory and the formation of communities.

Section two (chapters four and five) investigates the past and present forms of religious interactions through the stories about the shrines and saints. Chapter four investigates the malleable nature of religious boundaries and the overlapping of caste, clan, village and religious identities. Chapter five explores the theme of hardening religious boundaries. These two chapters focus collectively on the stories of the saints, their miraculous deeds, and the nature of shared devotion among Hindus and Muslims in the past and present, tracing the changes in religious cultures from late colonial rule (the late 19th century) to the present. In particular, I explore the power struggle between the Hindu Laldasis and the Muslim Laldasis at Laldas shrines and between the Tablighi Jamaat and the Sufis at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha in chapter five.

Section three (chapters six and seven) deals with the ideologies of reformist groups. Using the rhetoric of being the only true religion, both the Hindu and Muslim reform organisations (Arya Samaj and Tablighi Jamaat) attempted to discipline people's religious behaviour. The overall purpose in this section is to understand the implications for shared religious culture and beliefs of these organisations, both of which are bastions of religious and male power. I explain that these reform ideologies articulated binary oppositions between 'pure and impure,' 'true or false,' and 'right or wrong,' in an organised manner and were historically very powerful in the Mewat region.

Chapter six examines the implications of the Arya Samaj's politics for Mewati Muslims in an area that still had strong connections with a non-Islamic past. In contrast to the Arya Samaj's strategies of conversion, the Tablighi Jamaat motivated Muslims to follow a pure version of Islam. After exploring the nature of that 'pure' version, I show that the majority of Meos have responded positively to the Tablighi Jamaat ideology and that this has created a sphere of the Muslim Meo male dominance in the organisation. Those Muslims, especially women, who still believe in Sufi saints feel pressured to give up their beliefs. Chapter seven enquires into the impact of Tablighi Jamaat activities on shared shrines and Muslims' belief in the Sufi and shared saints.

Section four, chapters eight to ten, examines the current situation of religious belief in the context of these reform organisations. In particular, it examines responses to reformist pressure by groups who still have faith in the traditional beliefs and customs. Chapter eight examines passive resistance and secret religious practices and beliefs. Using the works of scholars such as Simmel (1906), Taussig (1999), and Urban (1998), I analyse concealment in the context of religious discipline in a region where female literacy is low and the social structure highly patriarchal. Women as well as some men conceal their beliefs in these saints for fear of being subjected to ridicule and viciousness.

Chapter nine addresses the case of the bards and minstrels resisting the increasingly puritanical notions of their former Meo patrons. The minstrel castes, Jogi and Mirasi, were once dependent on the Meo patrons for everyday subsistence. While they cannot openly disagree with the views of the Tablighi Jamaat, they have opted to express their dissident ideas through the lyrics of new poetic songs. Using James Scott's (1990, 2008) ideas of 'passive resistance'

and ‘public and hidden transcripts’³⁹ chapter nine discusses the use of poetic art by the bards for passive resistance against religious reform ideologies.

Chapter ten interrogates why some religious rituals and symbolism disappear. The spatial transformation at the Laldas Shrines and the Shah Chokha *dargāh*, I argue, is an attempt for social construction of space and place. I show how space and place take on new meanings through spatial and symbolic transformations in line with the response of the ideologies of powerful groups at the shrines. In the first half of this chapter I examine the process by which the shrines of Laldas is being turned purely into a Hindu shrine through invented Hindu symbols and tradition. I then focus on the spatial changes at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha in line with debate and discourse among the Sufi and Tablighi groups. I show how both groups use religious arguments to discourse believers of other faiths from visiting their saints’ shrines. In the conclusions presented in chapter eleven, I argue that change and transformation at shared religious shrines and in religious practices reflect a changing form of religious culture that has been greatly affected by socio-economic and political transformations.

■

³⁹ These terms are defined and used in chapters two and nine.

Chapter 2

Caste and religion among Muslims in Mewat: patterns of social stratification

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of my research, underlining the fact that the scope of the research is not confined to the geography of the two shrines and the cults. The project goes beyond the spatial boundary of the shrines into the lives of villagers, shrine visitors and different social groups whose interactions in and around the shrines have meaningful impacts on religious practices, social relations, livelihoods and beliefs. This chapter analyses the ways in which the social, economic and political dominance of the Meo caste is countered in the narratives of other Muslim castes within the broad spectrum of social relations. The chapter also suggests that the values and ideas of male Meos hold more importance than others in Mewati Muslim society. The chapter also asks how caste functions in the everyday life of Mewati Muslims in compliance with Islam and explores the consequences of the *jajmāni* (patron–client) system applied by the Meos in their patronage of groups like the Jogis and Mirasis. In particular, the chapter explores the nature of and changes in social relations under the *jajmāni* system among Muslims in Mewat. Before I examine these issues related to caste, religion and the *jajmāni* system, I present a brief overview of population statistics and the socio-economic life in Mewat and the two villages.

2.1. Social and economic profiles

2.1.1. Population figures of the Meos

As pointed out in chapter one, the two field sites in this study are located in the Alwar and Nuh (Mewat) districts of Rajasthan and Haryana states respectively. The shrine of Laldas is situated on the border of Alwar and Nuh in the Sherpur village in Rajasthan while the tomb of the Sufi saint Shah Chokha is in the Shah Chokha village in the Nuh district of Haryana. In the Alwar and Nuh districts, the Muslim population in general and the Meo population in particular make up a significant proportion of the population, giving them the power to have an impact on social and political developments. In Alwar, Muslims are presently in a minority (14%) while in Nuh they are in a majority compared to the Hindu population (79.37%), even though the total number of Muslims in both districts have a very significant presence (547,453 in Alwar; 862,696 in Nuh).

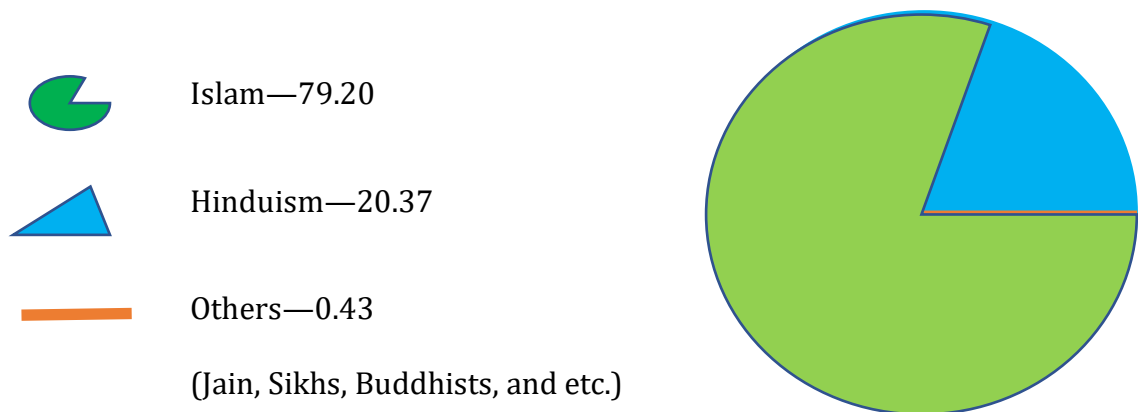


Figure 2.1: Population by religious distribution in Nuh (Mewat) District in Haryana, 2011

Source: 'Population by religion community – 2011', Census of India, 2011.

According to the 1901 census, the Meos in Rajputana (the present-day Rajasthan) made up 168,596 or nearly 2 per cent of the total population. In what was at that time the princely state of Alwar, the Meos numbered 113,142 or over 13 per cent of the total population; while in the kingdom of Bharatpur, they

numbered 51,546 or over 8 per cent (Hunter 1909, p. 313). Two decades later, in 1931, 25 per cent of the total population (746,000) in Alwar were Muslims, dispersed across ten *nizā mats* (districts). In the four districts located in the north of the state near the borders of Nuh (Mewat), including the village where the shrines of Laldas are located, the Meos alone accounted for almost 50 per cent of the total population. The Meos were listed as the most populous caste in the state.¹ Of the total Muslim population of the Alwar kingdom (186,500), almost 80 per cent (146,460) belonged to the Meo caste in 1931 (Cole 1932, p. 129; Copland 1999, p. 118).

District	Meo Pop.	Total Pop.	Percentage
Tapukrah	12,411	27,058	45.8
Ramgarh	15,089	33,036	45.7
Alwar	18,937	43,705	43.4
Govindgarh	11,877	28,176	42.2
Kishangarh	7,713	31,083	24.8
Khairtal	7,713	31,374	22.4
Malakhera	5,722	35,017	16.5
Lachmangarh	8,140	49,472	16.4
Mandawar	3,580	31,079	11.5
Tijara	13,243	39,620	33.4

Source: Census of India 1931, Vol. XXVII, Provincial Tables I and III

Table 2.1 Meo population of Alwar: selected *nizā mats* (1931)

Source: Ian Copland, *the Alwar revolt of 1932*

¹ Colonial census categories referred to Meos variously as a tribe, criminal groups, and sometimes a caste. The debate on caste among Muslims is discussed later in this chapter.

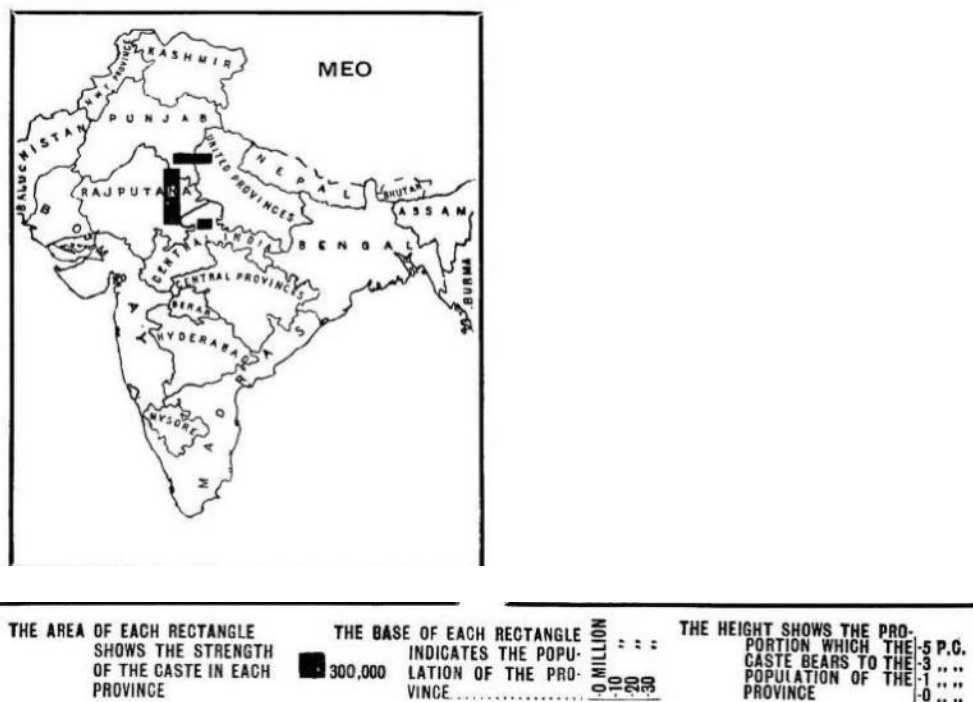


Figure 2.2: The spread of Meo population in the late 19th century

Source: Risley & Crooke 1891

In another princely kingdom, Bharatpur, in 1931 the bulk of the Muslim population was located in the three *nizā mats* of Kama, Nagar and Pahadi in the northern part of the kingdom. Similarly, in the then British district of Gurgaon (in Nuh, in the present-day Haryana part of the Mewat region), in 1931 the Meos constituted a sizeable group. Of Gurgaon's total population of 740,163, 242,357 were Muslims and almost half were Meos (124,821 in the Punjab province) (Khan 1933, pp. 79, 306). The Meos and other Muslims populations were concentrated in three *nizā mats* of Gurgaon district: Nuh, Ferozepur Jhirka, and Punahana *tehsils*² or administrative divisions. Presently these three *tehsils* form the main part of present-day Nuh in Haryana. According to the 2011 Haryana census, almost 80 per cent of the population in Nuh (Mewat) were Muslim and nearly 60 per cent, were Meos.

² A *tehsil* is an administrative division in north India.

2.1.2 Population figures of Shah Chokha and Sherpur

The total population of Shah Chokha village is 7339, divided among 1086 households made up as follows:

94 Hindus:

74 scheduled caste persons (previously called untouchables)

20 people from Baniya background

and

7245 Muslim Fakirs

(Census of India: District Census Handbook of Mewat 2011)

Here, the Meo population only exists in the adjacent Meo village of Phalaindi (figure 2.3), which many local people claim is an extension of the Shah Chokha village. The two villages of Shah Chokha and Phalaindi have clearly demarcated boundaries now along a passing canal. Most Fakir villagers in Shah Chokha work as labourers. Many of them migrate to cities like Mumbai to work in various small-scale industries, working as hawkers, or in scrap and plastic garbage collection.



Figure 2.3: The Meo village of Phalaindi, a view from the dargāh

Of the 7379 residents (3757 males and 3622 females) of the Shah Chokha village, 5440 were over the age of six. Compared to the Meos, the social and economic profile of that Fakirs of Shah Chokha is poor.³ For instance, according to the census of 2011, most adults were workers (1543) in the form of either industrial worker (764) or marginal/casual workers (455). Only 8 people were recorded as cultivators. Most of the non-workers (3492) were women or male children (*Census of India: District Census Handbook of Mewat 2011*). Most of these non-workers do not have a regular source of income.

³ The term Fakir derives from an Arabic term '*faqr*' meaning 'poverty'. The term also refers to practicing asceticism (*faqiri*) in Islam. Many Meos claimed that the Fakirs of Shah Chokha were previously Meos and then they drank the cup of asceticism (*fakiri kā pyālā pi liyā*). Similar to Fakir, the Jogis meaning 'yogi or meditator' practice asceticism in Hinduism. The formation of both categories into caste groups was interesting historical developments because they meant to be defying caste, class, and religious categories. Nowadays, the Fakir and the Jogi are endogamous caste groups in Mewat. The Jogis are further divided into the Hindu Jogis and the Muslim Jogis. Both Jogi and Fakir are the caste communities of dispossessed. For more information on the aspects of living a *fakiri* life, see (Mohammad 2013, pp. 104–129).

By contrast, Sherpur had a larger population of Meos than Shah Chokha. The population included refugee groups from Pakistan who arrived after the partition of India in 1947. Although Sherpur is a small village in terms of overall population, it is larger in area than Shah Chokha.⁴ With a total population of 1505 people (800 male and 705 females) in 267 families (*Census of India: District Census Handbook of Alwar* 2011), the economic condition of the residents of Sherpur is much better than those in Shah Chokha as most residents own land. Most Meos (135 households) in Sherpur identified themselves as ‘cultivators’ in the 2011 Alwar district census. In Sherpur, 374 people identified as low caste Hindu post-partition refugees who sometimes also worked on Meo lands as agricultural labourers. Apart from low caste Hindu groups, there were a few households of upper caste Brahmins in Sherpur and Baniyas in Shah Chokha.

Most residents of Shah Chokha (4712) and Sherpur (951) were illiterates. The number of illiterate females (2774) was higher than male illiterates (1938) in Shah Chokha. In Sherpur also, female illiterates (529) outnumbered male illiterates (422). The literacy rate in both villages is roughly the same: 48.72 per cent in Sherpur and 48.94 per cent in Shah Chokha. The female literacy rate is much lower in both villages, at about 32 per cent.

Overall, Mewat is amongst the most underdeveloped regions in India. In the 2018 report of the Planning Commission (*NITI Aayog*), Mewat topped the all India list of the most underdeveloped regions, with poor health resources and the lack of educational infrastructure cited as the reasons for its underdevelopment (Kumar 2018).

⁴ Sherpur’s area size (356 hectares) is bigger than Shah Chokha’s (259 hectares).

2.1.3 Land and productivity

Mewat is bounded by the Aravalli mountains, locally known as '*kālā pahād*' (the black mountains), which rise to 500 metres. The region is one of the less fertile zones on the outskirts of the alluvial Indo-Gangetic plains. In the absence of perennial rivers and other water sources, irrigation relies either on rainfall or water-pumps. The area receives a comparatively low rainfall, making it a hot, dry and semi-arid zone. The excessive use of the ground water for agricultural and domestic purposes has caused water salinity. A report produced by the National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) scheme noted the overexploited use of groundwater (*Agriculture Contingency Plan, Mewat, Haryana* 2016, p. 3). The major field crops are wheat (49.8%), millet (Bajra/pearl millet, 32.8%), and rapeseed mustards (22%) (*Agriculture Contingency Plan, Mewat, Haryana*, p. 4).

2.1.4 Language and culture

Mewati is the main dialect of the Meos and other residents of the region. Residents also speak Urdu and Hindi. Historically, the area has also been influenced by the Braj literary and music cultures. The Mewat and the Braj regions intersect in the Bharatpur and Mathura districts. Inspired by the myths of Krishna and Hindu themes of love and devotion, the Mewat area has also experienced an efflorescence of diverse cultural traditions. Although the region is now heavily influenced by Islamic culture and religion, it retains the zest of the vernacular Braj tradition and culture. *Brajbhāṣā*, the language of the Braj area of Mathura, Agra, Aligarh and Bharatpur, was primarily associated with vernacular literature and music about the god Krishna (Busch 2010a, 2010b). Mewat constituting a neighbouring region of the Braj was heavily influenced not only by the Braj language and culture but also by mainstream Hindu traditions. For instance, a vernacular form of the two Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other similar folktales and stories were

produced in colloquial Mewati. Thus, a distinguishing aspect of Mewati cultural traditions has been their connections with the Indic and Islamic worlds respectively. Such cultural resources were performed for the Meo patrons by the two bardic castes, the Jogi and the Mirasi, under the *jajmāni* system. Before analysing the nature of the *jajmāni* system in Mewat, I outline the notion of caste among Muslims.

2.2 The issue of caste among Muslims

My ethnographic research in the two villages (Shah Chokha and Sherpur) and in the town of Punahana shows that caste is an everyday principle that people live by in Mewat. It may be weaker among Muslims but it still subverts Quranic equality and any emerging notions of egalitarian social relations, and is crucial in questions of honour. Muslim groups still function around caste notions in everyday life, ranging from marriage relations and kinship ties to the organisation of social difference in the Muslim majority region of Mewat.

On the first day of my fieldwork, I ended up in Punahana, sitting in a furniture shop run by a man called Mahir Hussain—the first local person I met in the field.⁵ During our informal conversation Mahir told me that the entire area was known as Mewat after the caste name Meo, although not all the Muslims in the region belonged to the Meo caste. His emphasis on the Meos as a caste despite their being Muslim struck me. From then on I noticed the extent to which caste notions shaped personal behaviour and the interrelationships among groups. Mahir himself belonged to the Muslim Bhadai caste (a caste of carpenters) but believed that, for outsiders, all the Muslims were simply considered Meos because of their common appearance in the region, including

⁵ For the sake of maintaining anonymity, the name of persons mentioned in this study, until and unless they are very popular and famous and consented to include the real name, has been changed.

their behaviour and dress. I wondered what separated the various Muslim castes from each other, given their similar appearance and the fact that they did not hesitate to share food or sit together when praying in a mosque.

Many scholars have written about caste and social stratification among Muslims by primarily identifying them with the Hindu caste system of social classification based on hierarchy. Caste among Muslims has been explored through diverse analyses that have sought to explain caste in terms of, for example, the impact of the Hindu system on Muslim populations, the corruption of Islamic ideas or the view that Muslim castes are merely professional groups identified by occupations. In Dumont's highly criticised theory of caste,⁶ caste among Muslims was seen as caused by the negative influence of Hindus on Muslims (Dumont 1980, pp. 205-9). According to Dumont, caste was a cultural influence upon Muslims which they could not resist successfully for reasons of social co-existence with Hindus. However, disparities between textual Islam — which focuses on an egalitarian Muslim society — and behavioural Islam — marked by social hierarchies — is still apparent among various Muslim groups. Muslims in India live this contradiction, adhering to a caste-like system based on ranking, the notion of purity and pollution, mixed with some endogamous practices.

⁶ Based on the idea of purity and pollution distinction in Hinduism, Dumont (1980) constructed a textually informed image of Indian caste system solely on the basis of Sanskrit and Brahminical ideas. Division of labour in caste society, low and high status of Hindu castes, Dumont analyses, in terms of pure and impure nature of work of castes. The theory of Dumont presents a static concept of caste and stagnant nature of this society. His theory has been criticized for good reasons for overemphasis on religion (Singh 2014), denying society reality of secular domain (Beteille 2012; Gupta 2000; Raheja 1988b), and underestimating caste as matter of domination and sub domination (Berreman 1971).

Sociologists and social anthropologists have offered various definitions of this problem of caste among Muslims in South Asia. For instance, Barth (1962) notes, among Muslims of Pakistan, *jāti/Quom* (caste) is an integral aspect of social identity, while McKim Marriot (1960) notes that caste ranking and social hierarchies are visibly present among Muslims in India and Pakistan. However, scholars generally agree that although the Hindu ideological justification for caste does not exist in the case of Muslims (Ahmad 1978, p. 11), behavioural Islam in the local context stands in stark contrast to Islamic scriptural requirements.⁷ However, others have argued that inter-caste relations amongst Muslims cannot be simply reduced to the rank and purity of castes (see, Raheja 1989, p. 80) as Dumont did.

The lack of consensus among scholars about the caste system among Muslims has led researchers to conceptualise hierarchies among Muslim groups by equating them with other examples of unequal social classification. These systems which divide Muslims into two class categories — Ashraf (elite Muslims) and Ajlaf (poorer Muslims)—and four ethnic labels: Sayyed, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. Various Muslim castes classified by occupation live in Mewat, such as washer men, barbers, bards and cleaners. Outsiders assume that these groups are Meos. However, this is not necessarily the case. The Meos have a higher socio-hierarchical position than other Muslims in Mewat. The Meos are a landowning agricultural community. Therefore, the Muslims of Mewat are not a single homogenous social or Islamic religious group. They are in fact divided into various caste-like groups. The Meos are just one of these Muslim castes.

⁷ All the Muslim groups in Mewat demonstrated caste-like features such as endogamy, notions of low and upper social status, hereditary occupations and social segregation. These features are identical to the Hindu caste system, although they are changing as a result of the rise of Islam in the area.

A few days after my first encounter with Mahir, he recommended that I meet another person, Tushar Ahmad, whom he thought would be important for my research. Tushar, a Meo by caste, had a pharmacy business and received me warmly. Mahir's and Tushar's families had been friends for a very long time and visited each other's houses regularly and shared meals, but caste sentiments played an important role in their relationship. In private conversations, Tushar almost unconsciously focussed on the bravery of the Meos and the subordination of other castes who used to serve them. He said that Islam gave low caste people like his friends of the Badhai caste the ability to sit and enjoy their company. He added that, had it not been for Islam, other Muslims would never have achieved a status equal to the Meos.⁸ Around this time, Tushar was looking for a bridegroom for his daughter solely within the Meo caste. Meo endogamy also follows the lineage system (*pāl*, discussed in chapter three). This dictated that Tushar's daughter had to be married into a lineage different from his. Such notions incorporate the awareness of both caste and Islam and function around the consciousness of superior and inferior social status.

This chapter concerns itself more with the behavioural aspects of Muslims in Mewat. For example, the display of caste feelings among my Muslim interlocutors reflected their concerns about maintaining a respectable social status. For this purpose, they either supported or reworked the notions of egalitarian Islam. Thus, they were concerned with their position in the hierarchical caste society on the one hand and gaining Islamic legitimacy for being a proper Muslim on the other. Islamic and caste notions are coterminous, despite there being no ideological justification for the caste system in Islam. For instance, many Muslim castes have come up with new nomenclatures for their

⁸ Fieldnotes. It is important to note Mahir like Tahir used the word '*jāti*' (caste) to describe his and other Muslim communities.

respective castes. These names indicate the Muslim groups' quest to give their caste identities a higher Islamic status to efface the low caste origins of previous caste names. For example, the members of the Fakir caste now call themselves Sayyeds; and the Kasai (the butchers) caste uses the term Sheikh. Sayyed and Sheikh are both high-class Muslim denominations. In this entire process the significance of caste hierarchy acquires a new religious appearance without being radically altered.

At the time of my fieldwork, although caste among Muslims in Mewat was neither constrained by Islamic doctrines nor fully founded on the Hindu notions of caste, it remained the fundamental organising principle of both the collective and individual self-consciousness within local social relations. In other words, every Muslim individual of a particular caste was fully aware of his individual and caste status in relation to other Muslim castes in the area. This caste consciousness was not only limited to the attitude towards Muslim members of other castes but also to Hindus, especially in determining behaviour towards untouchable groups.

Hierarchical relation and social stratification appear in the everyday behaviour of Mewati Muslims and function around the notions of both Islam and caste. All the Muslim individuals' names of different Muslim caste groups are alike and have been Islamised despite the caste and hierarchical divisions between them. The relationships that the Meos and other Muslim castes share are more significant than their other social differences and similarities. Public interactions between Muslims in the two villages I studied did not display hierarchical or status differences and obscured their caste differences. A visitor to these two villages would find apparent harmony in the social behaviour of the inhabitants. Caste makes itself visible, however, on important social occasions and in everyday behavioural practice. For instance, the Fakirs, Jogis and Mirasis are usually not welcomed inside a Meo house because of their low

caste origins (see, Ali (1978, pp. 27,34, on Fakirs of Bihar). Moreover, caste and Islam coexisted in a way that reflected features of the two religions.

In everyday life, caste identities were often attached to a person's first name when speaking about him in his absence. The awareness of one's caste status not only determined the behaviour of others but also provided a sense of how to behave oneself. Aggarwal (1971) noticed this aspect of Muslims being aware of their caste identity in the Meo village of Chavandi Kalan. In other words, unless one's caste identity was fully known to everyone in one's social world, there could be awkward behavioural implications. For instance, I would be asked about my religion and then immediately about my caste so that I could be located in the caste order for proper behaviour. My middle-caste peasant identity was similar enough for many Meos to give me access to their food and the domestic space of their homes. However, my caste identity was problematic for the Hindu Baniyas when they knew about my intentions. The reason for this was that my peasant background made me look like the Meos, who are generally not considered serious about education. But my education was possibly raising my class status. Higher education in India is considered the key to a good life and status. Despite the success of an individual, caste sentiments are still alive in behaviour. For instance, whenever I approached people from upper caste Hindu backgrounds for interviews, most of them were uneasy with the idea of inviting me home. On two occasions in their homes, I was served snacks and water in plastic plates and cups, an indication of purity and pollution notions of the caste system.

In these behavioural aspects, caste emerged as a more useful measure of social status than religion. Although, all the Muslim groups I studied behaved on equal terms in public life, they practised strict endogamy, lower castes were rarely welcomed in Meo households and caste was often crucial in identifying a person's social origin. Despite the new importance attained by religion since

before the beginning of the 20th century, 'caste is, in most contexts, still a more useful measure of social status' (Lorenzen 2005, p. 4) than religion. The fragile nature of both caste and religion may be subjected to analysis, but caste exists across religions. On this note, Nandy (2002) makes the case for the pan-religious existence of caste in Indian society, arguing that 'castes often cut across religion; they have porous and fuzzy boundaries, complex relationship with each other, and spill over ethnic boundaries' (p. 123).

In any particular village in Mewat, the relationship between the residents, whether of different castes and religions, was marked by locating other people in kinship terms of uncle, aunty, grandfather and grandmother. All elderly people, whether of lower or upper caste and of both religions, were addressed by these kinship terms. People who lived closely to each other and shared village life spoke to each other using these kinship markers regardless of their caste status. For instance, a Hindu low caste member of the Shah Chokha *panchāyat* was treated as *kākā* (uncle), a mark of respect, by Muslims as well as Hindus. However, his caste identity was always used to address him behind his back (*chamār ke* or 'of the tanner caste'). In his presence, the caste term was replaced by the kinship terms. The kinship terms were not used for strangers like me. For instance, a Punjabi Khatri who immigrated from Pakistan to the Sherpur village during the partition of India and left the village after some time to live in Alwar, revealed to me that it was very difficult for him to live in the village as there was no kinship identification for his family. He felt vulnerable as the other villagers addressed each other using kinship markers except for newly arrived partition refugees like him and his family. Without these kinship relations, he believed, he could be open to disrespect or harm (interview with Pradeep Khatri 29 September 2016).

These relationships between villagers that Pradeep pointed out were also mediated by the system of *jajmāni*. In this system various caste groups in a

village were interdependent on each other primarily for socio-economic and ritual purposes. However, the system was not merely based on economic relations or the exchange of services. It had social and cultural implications which in earlier times had been vital for the functioning of the Indian caste society.

2.3 The *jajmāni* system

Castes in India were traditionally dependant on each other. The organisation of their relations came to be known as the *jajmāni prathā* (system), after William Wiser's (1936) use of the term. Since then, the *jajmāni* system has been variously defined by scholars primarily as the socio-economic structure of Hindu castes in peasant society. As in many other places in India, under the caste organisation in Mewat both lower and upper service castes were tied to the peasant castes for everyday food supply and subsistence. Service castes received grains and other agricultural products either on a daily basis or annually during the harvest season from the peasant patrons in return for services provided. This entire relationship was culturally mediated and hierarchically organised in the caste system according to the profession (or service) a particular caste group was entitled to perform.

Although the *jajmāni* is identified as the system of exchange of goods and services between various castes at the village level, it also had social, cultural and religious aspects and implications. Ranging from its economic to its ritual aspects, the *jajmāni* assigns a central place to the peasant castes and landlords who worked as *jajmāns* (patrons) to service providing groups of both low and high caste origins.⁹ Scholars like Dumont (1980), Hocart (2018) and Heesterman (1985) have mostly understood caste society with reference to the Brahmins (the

⁹ High castes such as the Brahmins were providing ritual services.

priests) and the Kshatriya (the rulers). However, the centrality of the peasant class in the *jajmāni*, gave power to most peasant castes vis-à-vis other castes. For the requirements of everyday social and religious activities of peasants despite holding varying ritual positions, social status and works, service castes including Brahmins were depended on the peasant class, a relation mediated by economic exchange.¹⁰ Jan Breman (1993) writes that members of a caste enhanced their ritual status as well as displayed their power and prosperity by both refraining from doing defiling works usually done by low caste groups on the one hand and by asking for the services of highly esteemed specialists such as Brahmins on the other. In her study among Gujjars, a Hindu peasant community similar to the Meos, Gloria Godwin Raheja (Raheja 1988a, 1988b, 1989) critiqued the notions of studying (Hindu) caste society in terms of rank and hierarchy, and the opposition of the pure and impure with Brahmins at the top as Dumont (1980) would have it. Central to Raheja's thesis was the idea of the prestation or gift made by a dominant peasant caste to service castes including the Brahmins, a ritual exercise of passing off the negativities (sins, afflictions, madness, faults, evil, inauspiciousness,) from donor to receiver. Raheja calls this 'the poison in the gift' (see Raheja 1988a; Raheja 1988b, 1989). However, prestation has no religious significance in Islam. Thus, in the Meos' *jajmāni* case, there is no prestation process. The *dān* (ritual gift) is missing since Islamic values have existed among the Meos for the last several centuries.

The *jajmāni* system among the Meos is therefore not the same as for Gujjar cultivators. The exchange of peasant goods with services is more about the

¹⁰ In north India, the Brahmins are treated as a service group who perform ritual services for their peasant *jajmāns*. Srinivas (2003) mentions that the rank order of a *jāti* in the local social hierarchy is an ambiguous matter, for instance, he notes, Brahmins of Banaras who perform final ritual rites of a deceased person are considered *achchuut* (untouchables).

Meos' rights and obligations to give, and the rights and obligations of *kamins* (service castes) to receive such gifts. Even if this exchange under *jajmāni* may or may not have had the same religious implications for the Meos in the past, their centrality to the system produced their domination locally. It also shows, as Commander (1983) argues, that '*jajmāni* is based on considerations of status and hierarchy, as opposed to the conditions of contractual engagement and labour' (p. 288). The Meos' donations to *kamins* should be seen as payments rather than as *dān* (prestations) as the ritual efficacy part of Hinduism does not exist for the Meos. Raheja (1989) notes that the *dān* prestations are separate from usual payments in the *jajmāni* and bring auspiciousness to the patron's family, which is itself an outcome of the rituals (pp. 85–7). The Meos' power 'to give' to service castes assigned a central place to them in the Mewati *jajmāni* system. Despite being nominal Muslims, the Meos did not seek material benefits by feeding Brahmins as is a common practice in Hinduism.¹¹

Many castes of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds live in the villages of Sherpur and Shah Chokha. Sherpur is dominated by people of the Meo caste, while Fakirs or Miyan are in majority in Shah Chokha. Other Muslim castes such as the Sakkas (water carriers), the Mirasis or Doms (untouchable bards), the Miyan or Fakirs (a community of beggars), the Quraishis (the Muslim caste of butchers) were also a part of the Meo agrarian world. Like Muslims, Hindu service castes such as Chamars, Bhangi, Brahmins and Saini also used to perform their respective traditional works for Meo peasant households. Some of the service groups such as the Dhobis (washermen), Nai (barbers), Jogis (bards and minstrels), Lohar (ironsmiths) and Badhai (carpenters) exist across the religious divides and have both Hindu and Muslim members but they do not

¹¹ The role of Brahmin priests in Meo rites was limited. They did not organise marriages or perform death rites for the Meos. Brahmin priests, however, were asked to name a Meo child or give astrological predictions.

intermarry across religions. All these groups constituted a dynamic nexus around the Meos. Within the caste nexus, the Meos stood at the top of the order simply by the virtue of being major or minor landholders.

All these service castes provided services, supplied goods and materials, and performed some marriage rituals for the Meos; their ranking in the caste system varied according to the occupation of a particular group. The Meos stood at the centre of the *jajmāni* system as a comparatively high caste with a powerful middle-class peasant status, while other Hindu and Muslim service castes (except Brahmins and Baniyas)¹² ranked below them in social status.

Despite the fact that the basis of the *jajmāni* system was land, the role of the castes was multifarious and not limited only to agricultural labour. Rather than being a formal labour relation, what made the *jajmāni* system unique was the role of various service castes (*kamin*) in the Meo rites of passage. For instance, a Brahmin (priest) used to be invited when a family's newborn was to be named. An example of this is available in a well-known folktale from the area, *Ghurchari Mev Khan ki bāt* (the story of *Ghurchari and Mev Khan*). In this tale, the younger son Ghurchari, the hero of the account, was named by a Brahmin of the village when his Muslim father Khuda Baksh invited him to name the child. Likewise, the Nais (barbers) had an important role in Meo marriages. The Nais cooked food and still carry invitations and other messages to relatives. Another group, the Mirasis, were not only oral performers but also worked as messengers like the Nais to break news of importance to a Meo family's relatives. The Meo circumcision rite is always performed by a Muslim Nai. The relations these castes shared and still continue to share are determined to an extent by the functionality and usefulness of a caste after the disintegration of traditional

¹² The ranking of Brahmins and Baniyas is generally higher as their work is considered pure.

relations. In agreeing with Raheja's position on the Gujjars, I consider that the Meos' central position as donors or givers like other Hindu middle peasant castes such as the Ahirs, Gujjars and the Jats constitutes their domination on the ground.

On the other side, in any analysis of the position of low caste Muslims in the Meo *jajmāni* system, the hierarchical notions and low and high status need to be kept in mind. Reliance on religious identity to understand the issue of Hindu–Muslim cultural interaction would not prove productive. A more useful and apt basis for categorising is needed in order to understand the complex Indic patterns of religious–cultural interaction and social realities at the local level. Caste has to be one of the main bases of such analyses since it is the organiser of primordial identity more than religion.¹³ Caste performs the role of the organiser of not only inter and intra-religious relationships among communities but is also a hierarchical determinant of power. Despite all belonging to the Islamic religion, the Meos, Fakirs, Jogis and Mirasis share hierarchical relationships around caste. For example, the caste of Mirasi is considered an untouchable group by both the Meos and the Jogis. Drinking water or partaking of food with the Mirasis was strictly forbidden for the Meos and other castes. However, under the rubric of equality before God in Islam, the antagonistic attitude between Muslim castes has decreased to an extent, although the notion of superior or inferior caste status still applies in social lives and ritual practices.

¹³ The reason for making caste the basis of analysis is that it resonates with the class structure. Often, the lower castes of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds constitute the bulk of the low class in India. The issue with using Hindu and Muslim as primary categories is that these religious categories serve as a political tool to try to subsume or misrepresent caste experiences.

The issue and position of 'real subalterns' also need to be re-examined in this context. The real subaltern status among these Muslim groups belongs to the landless service castes. Subalternity proves to be a multi-layered phenomenon. Landed peasant groups are economically and socially superior to the low caste service groups and their experience should not be under-represented, as it often has been in the past when landed peasant groups were grouped into the subaltern category with landless laborers and service groups.¹⁴ In the next sections, I turn my attention to the domination of the Meos in the area and its implications for other low caste Muslim groups.

2.4 Understanding the Meo peasant status and the question of domination

Srinivas (2003) offers a definition of a dominant caste:

when a *jāti* (caste) owned the bulk of land in a village, and enjoyed numerical strength, it exercised dominance in village affairs, everyone obeyed its decrees, even castes marked ritually higher. (p. 455)

In an earlier work, Srinivas (1987) suggested that such dominant castes were widespread across India. He noted that one of the characteristics of a dominant caste is population; one caste can be a dominant caste merely on the basis of massive numbers (pp. 4–8, 97–100). Most often the castes Srinivas identified as dominant were middle caste-class peasant groups who were considered ritually inferior to Brahmins but who socially wielded considerable power and influence. On these criteria the peasant castes such as the Jats, Gujjars, the Ahirs are the dominant castes in north India. Their political influence is quite visible in present day Indian politics.

¹⁴ This was the major drawback of the Subaltern school.

Similarly, the Meo caste's dominance can be seen in all spheres of Mewati Muslim life. The numerical domination of the Meos is replicated in politics. For example, none of the elected politicians in Mewat's three Muslim majority legislative units (Nuh, Punahana and Ferozpur Jhirka in Haryana) have ever been from a non-Meo Muslim background.¹⁵ Similarly, almost 70 per cent of the total landholdings in the area are in the control of Meos. In his late 19th century settlement report, F.C. Channing (1882) notes that most lands in the southern part of the Gurgaon district (which covers the present day Meo dominated areas of Nuh, Ferozpur, and Punahana *tehsils*) were in the hands of Meo peasants. Ownership was under the *bhaichārā* (brotherhood) settlements, in which all holders were related to each other by ties of blood (p. 18). Similarly, most positions of social, political and economic importance in Mewat were and still are generally controlled by the Meos.

The use of the term 'domination' here does not mirror the concept of power in the Foucauldian sense of power as a medium of coercion and oppression. Rather, I am using the term in the Hegelian perspective of social relations, in which domination operates in cultural terms in subtle ways. Hegel makes it quite obvious that 'the social relation in which domination operates is always based upon some cultural form as a practice, and this form is inherently contradictory' (Miller, Rowlands & Tilley 1995, p. 64). In analysing the master-slave relation, Hegel (1910) shows that power is dialectic in nature (pp. 182–88). In the Meo *jajmāni* system, it was the land-ownership of the Meos that was the single greatest determinant of the power relation between the patrons and clients. This domination was not necessarily confined to labour input and

¹⁵ See a list of all the winning MLAs so far from three legislative assemblies here: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/assemblypolls/haryana/ferozpur-jhirka.html>, <https://www.mapsofindia.com/assemblypolls/haryana/nuh.html>, <https://www.mapsofindia.com/assemblypolls/haryana/punhana.html>.

returns in payment. The service castes or clients also performed various rituals in the social life of the Meos and their social status varied. However, in the Hegelian treatment of power, the mutuality of the relationship between the dominant and the dominated was a very dynamic one. Hegel (1910) shows that from this relationship or encounter two distinct, self-conscious beings emerged (pp. 163-219). The self-consciousness of the subordinates (Hegel's 'bondsmen') is realised through their work and labour. Caste and labour relations under the *jajmāni* and current tensions in their respective narratives reflect these two distinct Hegelian self-conscious beings.

The presence of two self-conscious beings was evident in my frequent encounters with individuals of different caste groups in the two villages indicating disjunctions between public and private narratives. Often, the public behaviour of the village residents was entirely different from what people told me during personal interviews. Publicly, everyone talked of equality, brotherhood and harmony but in one-to-one conversation, the central stage in my interviewees' narratives was occupied by difference.

The contradiction between public and private behaviour of individuals from Meo and other Muslim castes may, however, be best understood by studying what James C. Scott (1990) calls 'the public transcript' and 'the hidden transcript' — the open and off-stage interactions between subordinates and those who dominate' (pp. 4–9). According to Scott, the public transcript refers to the open (public) interaction between subordinate and dominant groups. On the other side, every social group produces its own hidden transcripts in which the private discussions among the members of the group contain offensive remarks about the other in contradiction to what they normally say publicly. While sharing the public transcript, both subordinate and dominate groups embody etiquette and politeness. Scott is right when he says about the public transcript that:

much of what passes as normal social intercourse requires that we routinely exchange pleasantries and smile at others about whom we may harbor an estimate not in keeping with our public performance. (p. 1)

Thus, the public transcript requires certain degree of civility, a willingness to smile at others and a little acting. Contrary to the public transcript, the hidden one exposes the reality of the social relationship between the dominant and the subordinated. When the mask of the hidden transcript is removed, both the powerful and the subordinated are found to use opprobrious expressions about one another, off-stage and within their group. In the case of the landless caste of the Miyan (Fakirs) from Shah Chokha village, the bitterness of their thoughts was hidden from the socially and economically superior Meo caste but was expressed in front of fellow caste members. In their respective 'public and hidden transcripts', in Scott's terminology, the public transcripts upheld the idea of Muslim equality and homogeneity while the hidden transcripts revealed awareness of socio-economic difference.

The expressions used by low caste Muslim groups echo Scott's analysis of what the practice of dominance generates: 'the insults and slight to human dignity that in turn foster a (hidden) transcript of indignation' (Scott, p. 7). The low-class castes of the Fakirs, Jogis and Mirasis are denied dignity by the Meos on the basis of their caste and socio-economic conditions. In everyday life, the dominant Meos invoke their superior caste and the low caste of others both consciously and unconsciously. For instance, my close associates from the Meo caste often made disrespectful remarks in the presence of low caste people. Such behaviour had two implications: firstly, it displayed Meo dominance; secondly, it denied lower caste members their human dignity.

In the past the Fakir community of Shah Chokha were considered beggars and treated like untouchables. They now use the term 'Sayyed' to define themselves. Sayyed is a high-class Muslim honorific for the direct descendants of the prophet. Their claim to Sayyed identity is based on the belief that they migrated to India with the Sufi Pir Shah Chokha. The Fakir community's aspiration to high caste status or Sayyed identity follows Islamic principles of status, thus Islamicising the route to upward mobility. At the same time, the members of the Fakir community of Shah Chokha refuse to consider the Meos as true Muslims. They have disdain for the Meo lifestyle, which they see as unnecessarily extravagant and not in line with Islam. Their resentment is expressed in disparaging remarks. An elderly Fakir of Shah Chokha village cited the statement of a prominent Meo political leader, Choudhary Tayyab Hussain, who claimed that the Meos would shave their moustaches and beards (the signs of Muslim identity) on occasion of grave concern for the Meo community to become Hindus again.¹⁶ This statement indicates the blended nature of Meo religious identity, the awareness of their mixed community history and the proximity of the Meos to diverse local customs and beliefs. The claim was also deployed by the elderly Fakir as a proof of un-Islamic behaviour. For him and other Fakirs, the Meos were corrupting Islam. Safaat Khan cited the mixed religious practices and history of the Jat peasant community,¹⁷ which is similar to the Meos remarking, '*Jāt kyā Hindu, aur Meo kyā Musalman* (what is Hindu in the Jats and Muslim in the Meos)' (Khan 24th April 2016). The two

¹⁶ Interview with Safaat Khan 24th April 2016.

¹⁷ According to Nonica Datta (1999) the history of Jats shows a diverse set of religious and cultural practices; therefore, they were remotely related to Hinduism. Datta (1997) shows the Arya Samaj played a very important role in constructing the Jats' Hindu identity by applying a uniform code conduct upon their behaviour. Similarly, the Meos' Muslim identity has been formed by the Tablighi Jamaat in the late 20th century by applying a set of uniform Islamic practices.

peasant communities, the Jat and the Meo, have undergone similar experiences of Hindu and Muslim identity construction respectively.

Since the Meos are dominant in all sectors, the Fakirs' negation of true Muslim identity to the Meos shows a resistance to their own social conditions. Although the Meos were not their direct oppressors, the Fakirs' hidden transcript¹⁸ (i.e. their narratives about the Meos' social and religious position) counters the Meo caste's dominance. Sometimes, out of anger at their own inferior socio-economic conditions, the Fakirs hold the Meos responsible for appropriating land. The discourse about landlessness and deprivation was quite obvious. I frequently noticed anti-Meo remarks among Fakir youth. During the fieldwork, my own youth provided me with an easy entry into the group of Fakir youths. Once they began trusting me, they always joked about the Meos. When they were playing volleyball, watching Indian Premier League (cricket) matches, or simply sitting at a roadside shop, anyone's loose behaviour was always compared with the Meos. For instance, when they knew I was staying with a Meo family, they joked about it saying, '*Meo ki yāri, Gadhe ki sawāri*', meaning 'friendship with Meos is like riding a donkey'.¹⁹ Many similar caste proverbs were centred on targeting Meos' loose Islamic beliefs, friendship with Meos and issues of trust and honesty.

2.5 The position of the bard castes of the Jogis and Mirasis in the Meo *jajmāni* system

As far as the Jogis and Mirasis are concerned, aside from performing for the Meos, the bards (particularly the Jogis) had other roles in an agriculturally centric society. In particular, the Muslim and Hindu Jogi caste communities rendered agricultural services to the peasant castes other than the Meos in

¹⁸ This transcript is hidden from the Meos.

¹⁹ An observation from my fieldnotes.

Mewat and the surrounding areas. Both the Muslim Jogis and the Hindu Jogis worked as pest/locust controllers on the cultivated lands of peasants by chanting mantras. These roles as pest controllers and folk singers were complementary as the work required singing, chanting and reciting hymns and couplets. While doing fieldwork in Alwar, I encountered a particular set of hymns that the Muslim Jogis used to expel the locusts. Before the widespread use of pesticides in agriculture, the Jogis were hired to control crop-damaging insects by performing the hymns mentioned below. I was told that merely reciting the verses would not produce any effect until and unless the recitation was performed by a specialised Jogi.²⁰ The lyrics of the verses make references to various religious figures, which shows the ambiguous nature of the Muslim Jogi tradition:

*kāngru des me kumkā devi jane duniyā sārī, jahān base Ismail jogi
Ismail Jogi wāi vādi, vādi mein nipje laung-supāri
ek hi laung raati-maati, duji laung batāwè saathi
tiji laung jhile ajrāti, chauthi laung aap ki sej chod hamāri sej aawè
randi fāt fut mar jawe, kātjo tut jamin gir jāwe
is kām ko kon sudhāre, vir hanuman aap sudhāre
suti ko jagāwe, baithi ki baanh pakad lāwè.*

The whole world knows that Kumka (Kamakhya) Devi lives in Kangru (the Kangra region of the Himalaya)²¹, where Ismail Jogi also settled

²⁰ Interview with Ramnath Jogi, Abdul, Yusuf and other Jogis. They all revealed this information to me when I asked about their traditional profession.

²¹ Kamkhya is a Hindu *tāntric* goddess whose cult first evolved in the Himalayas. There is famous temple of her in Guwahati, Assam. The region Kangra is in Indian state of Himachal Pradesh famous for the temples of Bajreshwari Mata and Chamunda Devi. Both places are related to Hindu *tāntric* traditions of goddesses linked to the main goddess Durga.

Ismail Jogi lived in the same neighbourhood, clove and nuts
grow in that locality.

The one clove has dual appearance, the other says we are
together

The third one humming tonight, the forth clove leaves your
side and comes to our side

The whore dies crashing and annihilating, the knot breaks and
falls on the earth

Who fixes this work, the great Hanuman you resolve this issue

You wake up the slept one, pick up the sitting one by hand.²²

By performing these pest-controlling hymns, the Muslim Jogis did not kill locusts. Rather, they merely passed them to the borders of another village where similar arrangements would have been made with another Jogi to send them even further afield (Gold 1999, p. 75; Gold & Gold 1984, pp. 117–18).²³ Thus, this claim helped Naths and Jogis gain employment. Sometimes land grants were given to situate a permanent Jogi family, either by a local ruler or commonly by a village, which resulted in ‘a thinly dispersed landed Jogi community’ (Gold 1999, p. 75). The segmentation of the householder Jogi may have been rooted in their utility in the agriculturally centric caste society, which in turn contributed to the formation of their own caste. In Alwar, the village of Nangla Jogi (literally ‘a hamlet of Jogis’) consists completely of a Jogi population (comparatively small in numbers) and villagers claim to have received the village land as a donation.²⁴ The surrounding villages are

²² Interview with Ramnath Jogi, Abdul, Yusuf and other Jogis. The verse makes anonymous reference to locusts and are difficult to intrepet in a meaningful way.

²³ Gold notes the same story in other parts of Rajasthan.

²⁴ Interview with Jogis from the village Nangla Jogi. Although they did not remember the name of the particular person who gave them land, an old land grant plate shown

populated by Jat and Rajput peasants, which justifies the location of the Nangla Jogi village nearer to the peasant communities. Its current population of 600 people and its area of just two square kilometres makes it among the smallest of villages (but the largest village of Jogis). This further explains the dispersed nature of the Jogi community. Apart from this village, other peasant villages have a maximum of ten Jogi households. However, unlike the Hindu Jogis, the Muslim Jogi bards were more closely connected to the Meos.

As their main vocation was to sing and perform folktales, successive generations of the Jogi and Mirasi bards were trained to become oral performers and storytellers. Their tales were passed on from generation to generation, by either fathers or grandfathers through memory and recital practices. The oral recitations of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, singing memories of Meo bravery and grief, and narrating other local folktales made up the bard castes' main performances. Apart from narrating and performing the Meo community's history, the Jogi and Mirasi castes would also sing accolades about a living person to increase their earnings during a particular event. Mewat's history and important Meo political events have been recorded orally for the past several centuries by these groups in the form of what I call the 'human archive'.²⁵ The effectiveness of this human archive was entirely

to me by an elderly Jogi proved this fact. The plate mentioned the grant's date as *Vikrami* era 1711 (1640 C.E.)

²⁵ The reason I call the Jogis and Mirasis memories a 'human archive' is simply because of their ability to remember tales of historical and mythological importance. Their tales and songs do not differ from an official state archive. If the memory of the folk-singers could be contested, so could the facts kept in archives. I interviewed many bards and singers who not only helped me to understand Meo and Mewat history but also their tradition of telling folktales and folklore. In subsequent pages of this thesis I relate many ethnographic descriptions I recorded from them. I contacted both artistic and non-artistic bards for the information, and it is their voices that run throughout this study.

dependent upon the capability of the bards to recollect folktales and stories that amounted to several hundred hours of narration.

Most of these folktales belong to a genre called *Mewāti bāt*²⁶ (see, Mayaram 2003, pp. 318-19,) and are sung in the form of couplets designed and performed in the manner of a dialogue with an audience. The Mewati *bāt* is closer to the prevalent western Indian oral genre of the *vāt* (tale), widespread across Rajasthan. In Mayaram's words, 'the Rajasthani *vāt* means "tale/epic" or "prose narrative" [and] is rooted in Sanskrit *vārtā* (accounts) traditions' (Mayaram 2003, pp. 315-19). A closely related term *varat* stands for 'fasting'. A *varat* (meaning vow/fasting) also has religious significance when females in South Asia take a vow of fasting in the name of a particular deity, either for well-being of the entire family or most commonly for the long life of their husband. In Sanskrit *varat kāthās* (fasting tales), a story is often recited by a Vyas²⁷ (pundit) to an audience mostly made up of religiously fasting women (Wadley 2005, pp. 36–52). These fasting ceremonies usually end in the evening, with the audience listening to a tale attributed to the particular god in whose name the fasting was observed. The practice of telling *varat* stories involves a reciter (Vyas) and a group of listeners (mainly a group of fasting women). During the narration of the folktale, a *varat kāthā* requires the audience to intervene actively from time to time. This was done simply by nodding or hailing the god's name—a gesture signifying the audience's attentiveness. Likewise, the Mewati and other bards

²⁶ *Mewāti bāt* is a style of folktale rendition. The term *bāt* means the lines in quotidian dialogue or conversation.

²⁷ Vyas is a Brahmin scholar specialised in reading religious stories and tales. He is invited to narrate *varat kāthās* (fasting tales) such as *Satyā Nārāyan ki kāthā*, a story widespread across north India and attributed to Hindu god Vishnu.

employed similar methods²⁸ in most of their folktale performances in a style of performance known as *dohā-dhāni shāli* (*dohā dhāni* style).²⁹

In classical Hindustani music, the rendition of various *rāgs* conveys the feeling (*ras*) or desire of spiritual and worldly love. In the folk music of Rajasthan, as Shalini Ayyagari (2012) shows in the case of the Manganiyars (literally beggars),³⁰ the feeling is expressed through the *dohās* or ‘the poetic couplets’ (p. 13). In the *dohā dhāni* style of folk music, the Mewati bards fuse a classical music genre ‘*rāg dhāni*’ with ‘*dohā*’ (couplets). Thus, it shares features of both classical and folk music and thus attains what Peter Manuel (2015) terms ‘an intermediate sphere’ (p. 82)—a betwixt and between zone neither fully classical nor fully folk music. All the traditional folktales of Mewat such as the telling of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata correspond to the *dohā dhāni* style of folktale renditions. Generally, the couplets (*dohā*) are sung by a lead singer, followed by an in-depth description (*dhāni*) of each couplet. The second part (*dhāni*), which is both sung and narrated description, is always accompanied with instrumental music, melodies and rhythms.

Both kinds of Jogi bards, the Hindu Jogi and the Muslim Jogi, derive their identity from the Nath cult of the Shaivite tradition (see Briggs 1998).³¹ As shown in the next chapter, the tunes of the Bhapang, the musical instrument

²⁸ To continue with this style of oral reciting, the Jogi and Mirasi engaged in dialogues on the stage, with the lead singer posing a question and somebody in the group offering an answer.

²⁹ The term *dohā-dhāni* is made up of two words: the term *dohā* means ‘couplets,’ and the *dhāni* stands for ‘a form of classical *rāg* music’.

³⁰ The Manganiyars is a community of bards in west Rajasthan like the Jogis who depended on Rajput patrons.

³¹ For more information on the Nath cult, the classic work of G.W. Briggs is important. Although much has been written primarily about the Hindu Jogis, Briggs’s work provides a detailed account of different kinds of Jogis found all over India and Nepal. Briggs’ work also helps in understanding various nuances of the Jogi (Nath) cult.

used by the Muslim Jogis, evoke Shiva's marriage. The name of the instrument involves a curious blend of the Vaishnava, Shaivite and Nath *panth* (cults). The first Hindi word '*bha*' stands for Bhole (another name for Shiva), '*pa*' for pundit means the god Vishnu and, '*ga*' for guru Gorakhnath—whom all the Jogis consider their patron saint. Like the Muslim Jogis, the Mirasis commemorate the patron Hindu goddess Bhavani (Durga) before the beginning of any performance. The Mirasis used to offer homage to Bhavani at her shrine at Dhaulagarh near Lachmangarh in Alwar district of the Mewat region (Mayaram 1997b, p. 7). Thus, their art derives sacred inspiration from the (Indic) symbolism of Hinduism, involving strands from diverse religious traditions: Nath; Shaiva; Vaishnava and Islam.

Colonial ethnography put the Meos in the category of 'lax Muslims'. Their blended culture gave them a complex religious identity. Like the Meos, the Jogi and Mirasi bardic castes have a blended religious history and a liminal identity. For instance, as already mentioned, the Muslim Jogi community, like the Hindu Jogis, worships both Shiva and the founder of the Nath cult, Gorakhnath. All Jogis consider Shiva and Gorakh as their patron god and lord (Nath) respectively. Similarly, the Meos still consider themselves to be descendants of the Hindu gods and mythological figures.³² Therefore, a significant aspect in the histories of the Meo, Jogi and Mirasi communities is the issue of the religious synthesis of Hinduism and Islam in their life, marked by shared narratives of the Indic world. Both minstrel castes used to sing and recite the two great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata (locally known as '*Pandun kā Kadā*'),

³² As mentioned in the next chapter, the entire Meo community is divided into 13 *pāls* (clans) and 52 *gotrās* (lineages). Out of these 13 *pāls*, 5 Meo *pāls* trace their identity as Jaduvansi (descendants of Hindu god Krishna), three from another god Ram (Raghuvansi—descendants of Ram), and some of them from Hindu epic Mahabharata's figure, Arjun, see, (Mayaram 2004a, pp. 52-9).

the couplets of the Pandavas) and the Ramayana, called '*Lankā ki Chadhāi*' (the raid on Lanka) for their Meo patrons. Both the performers (Jogi and Mirasi) and the audience (Meo) were Muslims who enjoyed the cultural performances of the two Hindu epics. Likewise, there are multiple oral recitations of the Meos' experiences with colonial and pre-colonial states, folk tales of feuds between the local Meo heroes and other symbols of power, and the relationship with other castes and groups in the area. The bardic castes sang mythic instances of Meo bravery in relation to pre-colonial, colonial and princely states (Mayaram 1997a, 2003, 2004a). The Meos were centrally placed in these performances by virtue of being the *jajmāns* (patrons) of bards.

From the late 20th century, some caste relations in the *jajmāni* system disintegrated completely; some still survive; and some have undergone changes depending on the usefulness and resilience of a particular group's occupation. Although the Meos currently strive for a purist Sunni Muslim identity and practice, it was very difficult for the bards to leave their profession behind in favour of Islam as advocated by the Meos and Tablighi clergy. For these bards, it was a matter of livelihood. On the other hand, since the Meos were an affluent peasant group, they could choose to follow a purist Islamic movement without any dangers to their livelihood. In such contexts, the ethnic construction of a new identity is intricately linked with everyday livelihood concerns. Since the bards cannot leave their art as it is still a source of livelihood, an idea of passive resistance and the positive articulation of religious synthesis based on the messages of universal righteousness is taking root in their new songs. This aspect is discussed in chapter nine.

In the next chapter, I analyse two kinds of genealogies of these Muslim groups of Meos, Jogis and Fakirs to show their local situatedness. I show that the Meos and the Muslim Jogis linked their genealogical to Hindu gods and religious figures, an interesting historical development reflecting their collective

socio-economic self. Thus, syncretism and liminal identities appear to be construed as practical and fulfilling meaning-making needs. ■

Chapter 3

Genealogies of belonging: the cultural production of community, village and family

We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? (Nietzsche 1968, p. 51)

This chapter examines two different types of genealogies among three Muslims groups (the Meo, Jogi and Fakir) in Mewat, drawing parallels between the social and cultural life of the communities and their historical links to their socio-economic status. I discuss Meo genealogies in relation to the those of the bards, the Muslim Jogis, and the landless beggar community of the Fakirs. I focus on the genealogies of these three groups for three reasons. Firstly, the Meos are a dominant peasant caste on whom the Jogis and the Fakirs relied at one time for survival through the *jajmāni* system. Secondly, the Meos' history and cultural practices, including the genealogies, have been recorded and recollected by the Jogis and Mirasis. The bards' own genealogies are different from the genealogies of the Meos and provide an interesting point of comparison. Thirdly, as I demonstrate in this chapter, the Fakirs, who are predominant in Shah Chokha village, now use genealogies for a different purpose. Within the discourse of reformist Islam, they have used their ancestry to elevate their status from that of a community of beggars to that of high-class Muslims. In doing so, they reflect the fact that, with the disintegration of the *jajmāni* system, new patterns in social relations have emerged and the

competing claims to high-class Muslim social status have diverged from traditional caste status.

This chapter also shows that shared, syncretic and Indic practices and symbols are unique historical products. Particularly among Muslims, the conscious imbibement of Indic symbols such as a connection to numerous Hindu gods, proximity to shared beliefs and shared traditions is an example of their deep-rooted local connections. The Muslim groups, thus, have created a meaningful cultural world to show their local origins and connections by culturally participating in widely prevalent shared Indic religious narratives. In this process, the religious symbols, beliefs and practices of one religion or the other have acquired multiple local forms even after these symbols have currently been identified with the category of one religion such as Hinduism. For instance, the epic Ramayana which is now considered a Hindu religious text exists in 300 versions among Hindus, Muslims and other groups.¹

3.1 The relevance of genealogies

Genealogies offer a crucial means of understanding the patterns of social interrelations and socio-economic status, deeply rooted in the respective cultural imagination of a collective self. Several theorists have explored the question of whether the study of genealogy can pin-point the historical memories of socio-economic status while reflecting the present. Myth, memory, and history in genealogical perceptions merge as does the present into the past (Goody & Watt 1963; Mayaram 2004a; Thapar 1991, pp. 52-73). Alon Confino (1997) suggests that memory 'can be useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience' (p. 1388). In this chapter, I argue that studying the production

¹ The three hundred versions of the Ramayana are found all across South Asia and beyond, despite the fact that the work is considered a Hindu epic (Ramanujan 1991).

of genealogy through memory helps to illuminate unequal economic, social and political relations and the hierarchical social realities of groups. Even when genealogy has been categorised as fabrication, invention or Sanskritisation, historians, sociologists and anthropologists of South Asia have not denied its significance. However, there is little scholarly attention to the connections between the socio-economic status of groups and their construction of particular forms of genealogies. By virtue of their claim to some idea of historical truth, genealogies afford a valuable perspective on the present and past of a society. They are unique cases of collective memory which memorises, records, distorts and philosophises the ancestry and the past of certain groups and their specific social and common collective experiences.

Genealogies are found in many societies all over the world, where they serve a range of human purposes. At the fundamental level, one can think of genealogies as a way of connecting oneself to the past and to other humans, dead or alive, or with a supernatural entity such as God. As an important source of information on social origins, genealogies are useful in analysing kinship lines, fixing succession disputes and land-right issues, determining property ownership and interpersonal–intercommunal relationships (Thapar 1976). Apart from other objectives, one of the main concerns of genealogies is with ‘submerged problems’ (Knauff 2017, p. 1; Koopman 2013, p. 1), which are deep rooted issues in the collective consciousness of groups as well as in individuals’ lives. These genealogies are shaped historically by long-term socio-economic processes within people’s subconscious behaviour ‘that condition [them] without [their] fully understanding why or how’ (Koopman 2013, p. 1). The submerged problems ‘managed’ by genealogies may be problems of poverty, landlessness, unequal status or any other form of discrimination. Genealogies thus not only reflect these submerged problems indirectly but also provide cultural meanings for social realities and status. Nonetheless, the meanings in

genealogies are ambiguous—only partially indicative of the past and present socio-economic conditions of a group—and interpretation is required to reveal how genealogies function as meaningful cultural symbols in the mix of history and myth. As Koopman (2013) showed, genealogy is a philosophical tradition and an important method for understanding the complex histories of our present social and cultural conditions.

3.2 Genealogies of Muslim social groups in Mewat

The process of genealogical identification in Mewat operates at multiple levels: religion, community, caste, village and personal. However, the main divide between the Meo genealogies on the one hand and the Jogi (and Fakir) genealogies on the other is their respective roots in warrior and ascetic traditions. In this chapter, I focus on two kinds of Muslim caste groups who claim different genealogies for their social origins, both drawing on Hindu mythical traditions (Meos and Jogis), and Islamic Sufism (Fakirs) to achieve meaningful explanations of social status and economic conditions. These genealogies highlight the conflicting forms of normative traditions by producing culturally significant forms of knowledge and philosophical traditions.² In this chapter, I compare not only different types of genealogies but also their use at multiple levels such as community, village and family.

Muslim groups such as the Meos and the Muslim Jogis link their memories, myths and pasts to the present largely in the tradition of *itihās-purān*. The term *itihās* means ‘history’ and *purān* refers to ‘the legends of Hindu gods,’ mainly those of Vishnu’s incarnations. *Itihās-purān* is a widely prevalent mode of the

² By ‘normative tradition’ I mean that these Muslim groups philosophically value things differently in their moral imaginations. The term also reflects a moral self which is integral to their lives but which varies depending on socio-economic conditions. I am trying to connect this moral self with the socio-economic status of the groups.

traditional historical consciousness across India (Mayaram 2004a, p. 52). Romila Thapar (1991) differentiates between the political genealogies of *itihās-purān* and the stories of creation found in the Brahminical Vedas because the *itihās-purān* genealogies, for the first time, reflected genealogical traditions of castes, mainly of the political rulers, other than Brahmins. This non-Brahmin caste genealogy in the *itihās-purān* tradition was recorded and performed by the bardic castes rather than by the Brahmins (Thapar 1991, pp. 6-12). However, aside from the genealogies of the Brahmins and political rulers, peasant and other genealogies did not emerge until after the 15th century. The Meos' (figure 3.1) and the Jogis' genealogies are, thus, developments of the post-15th century period.



Figure 3.1: Two elderly Meo peasants sitting next to their fields

All Meos claim for themselves Rajput Kshatriya (warrior) status, tracing and linking their genealogies to the Hindu warrior gods Ram, Krishna and Arjuna—the Mahabharata's figure, among others. In contrast, the Jogis and Fakirs relate their community origins and genealogical stories to Nath Shaivism

and Sufism respectively, two forms of ascetic traditions.³ These two kinds of genealogical patterns provide an historical context for the present sociological realities of upper and lower caste-class groups and give these differences meaningful cultural explanations.

If 'genealogies can be memories of social relations' (Thapar 1991, p. 1), then the question arises as to the nature of these social relations in Mewat. The two kind of groups—the peasant patron Meos, on the one hand, and the service groups of the Jogis and Fakirs, on the other—share a relationship characterised by contrasting features: landholders and landless; upper and lower castes; powerful and powerless. The powerful seek to hold power in the world through physical strength and warrior qualities while the landless often seek to negotiate with the material world by retreating from material attachments into ascetic spiritualism.⁴ It would be wrong to say that ascetic values are always promoted only by the materially disadvantaged groups, although, it is equally true that the Nath (Jogi) ascetic form of the tradition in India have historically emerged among the comparatively poor and low caste-class groups (Gold 1992, 1999; Gold & Gold 1984; Schomer & McLeod 1987).⁵ Socially, most saints and their

³ Nath is a popular sect which historically drew inspiration from the Hindu god Shiva. Sufism refers to a mystical movement in Islam identified after lineages of saints. Both are broad cultural currents with complex histories.

⁴ This may be considered one—but not the only—form of resistance among many by the landless groups such as the Jogis. The history of ascetic sects is very complex. Many ascetic groups were warriors and traders, and engaged themselves in mercantile and finance activities. Thus, it was not entirely made up of landless sections although the main ascetic trope in the teachings and philosophy of the Nath/Jogi gurus was to maintain distance from the material world.

⁵ It may be claimed that there have been Brahmin ascetics too. However, one needs to look at the institution of renunciation in Hinduism differently. What Dumont (1960) saw was orthodox Brahminical perspective on asceticism which does not deny materialism altogether, while the exemplary Jogi, Guru Gorakhnath, the founder of the Nath sect, was in favour of leaving household and material attachment completely. Contrary to a Brahminical form of orthodox Vaishnav asceticism, the great majority of the leading Nath, and *nirgun* Bhakti figures were from lower castes. In spirit, Nath and

followers, especially those of the Nath and *nirgun* Bhakti backgrounds, belonged to the lower strata of Hindu and Muslim society. They were often very poor and illiterate and the saints used vernacular mediums in their teachings (Vaudeville 1987, 1996). However, their emphasis was always non-sectarian and most practised asceticism, devotion to one God and an austere life marked by meditational practices.

Peter Van der Veer (1987) points to one distinction between the traditions when he argues that:

in asceticism the indigenous term *tapas* (heat) seems to be the defining concept, while in devotionalism the term *ras* (religious sentiment) is central. (p. 682)

A further distinction can also be made, in that devotionalism was primarily related to the god Vishnu and his two incarnations, Ram and Krishna, while asceticism predominantly drew inspiration from Shiva.⁶ Contrary to the *ras* of devotionalism, Shaivite (especially Nath/Naga) asceticism is defined by *tyāg* (abandoning) mainly of the comfort of clothing, food, housing, and sexual desires to attain the final goal (Van der Veer 1987).

In 'On the Genealogy of Morals', Nietzsche (2010) points out that genealogies which work to promote moralistic truth should be considered as an objective sequence of events that reflects and encodes the structures of power and

Bhakti including Jain and Buddhist religious figures, were closer to each other than they were to the orthodox mainstream of Brahminical Vaishnava devotion (Schomer & McLeod 1987).

⁶ I am not concerned with Buddhism here, which also promotes asceticism. Despite all the complexities, I am trying to understand the role of socio-economic background in following a particular type of religious tradition in Hinduism. The orthodox Brahminical Vaishnava Devotionalism too may contain certain ascetic tropes which are often practised within the household life.

domination (pp. 92–5).⁷ Since the Meos are historically a powerful group of peasants controlling almost 70 per cent of land in Mewat, their genealogies emphasise their superior social status through a claim on warrior qualities. One of the main concerns of genealogies is to promote those values that reflect the realities of a social group. For instance, in the case of the Meo community, their genealogies laud heroic values as well as their influential social status as a landholding peasant group in Mewat. However, the contradictions in the Meo's genealogies raise the questions: Why do the Meos claim the status of the Hindu warrior class (Kshatriya) despite being a Muslim peasant group? At what point did they begin to make such a claim?

In answering these questions and examining the meanings of genealogies for these communities, the nature of the relationship between the two types of groups becomes important. The groups were not socially and economically equal although they were interdependent. The Meos dominated in terms of caste and class power. The genealogies of these groups function as a value system, illustrating the connection between historically determined material and social conditions and each group's collective consciousness.

3.2 Communities and genealogies

3.2.1 *The Meos and warrior genealogies*

The genealogies of the Meos are of two kinds: the first relates to the entire Meo community; the second is oriented to family. The community genealogy, '*pālo ki bansābali* (the descent lines of *pāls*)', describes the origin of different territorial clans, or *pāls*, of the Meos. These are usually linked to a warrior god or famous

⁷ I am aware that Nietzsche's examination of genealogy is different from the approach to genealogy in this chapter. Nietzsche treats genealogy as a sequence of events. Here I refer to his statement to point out a hidden meaning in genealogy. I also rely on his understanding of asceticism in the latter part of the chapter to reflect on the collective imagination of the Jogis in their genealogies that reflect a low caste-class status.

characters from the two great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Most of the Meo population is organised into twelve *pāls*, each headed by a 'Choudhary' (headmen), but many Meos are also outside the *pāl* system or *nepāliya* (i.e. without a *pāl* identity) (Mayaram 2004a, pp. 49–73).

Apart from the twelve largest clans which are the *pāls*, the Meo community is also divided into 52 smaller clans (*gotra*). The *pāl* is basically a clan's territorial unit. *Pāls* play an important social-political role in Meo society. For instance, *pāls* determine the endogamous and exogamous marriage system. The Meo Muslim community practices endogamy but the Meo *pāls* follow exogamy. For instance, females of a particular *pāl* are customarily married into one or more specific *pāls*. So, if a particular *pāl* is taking bride from another *pāl* or *pāls*, the relationship between *pāls* is customarily marked by taking or giving daughters in marriage (*beti lenā aur beti denā*). Although there are exceptions to this rule, the bridal exchange system is determined by traditional customs and sometimes follows complex rules. This feature is analogous to the Hindu lineage (*gotra*) system. The son of a family from the Hindu peasant castes of Jats, Ahirs, Gujjars and Meena is not usually permitted to marry into the *gotra* of his mother and grandmother. This practice among the north Indian Hindu peasants is restricted to the lineages only. By contrast, in the Meo *pāl* system it is applied to an entire *pāl*.⁸ A *pāl* is thus imagined to be a large extended family and functions powerfully around the idea of brotherhood. In Meo marriages, cousins from the maternal side of a family can be married into the paternal side of the same family as long as this does not contradict the bride's receipt custom from a particular *pāl*. The

⁸ There are a few exceptions also in which some villages belonging to the same *pāl* follow the *pāl* marriage system differently such as they may take daughters from a *pāl* into which other *pāl* members marry their daughters. Then this custom is usually identified as the custom of that village only.

entire *pāl* system maintains relevance in politics, matrimonial alliances, the resolution of disputes and in any other matter of socio-political importance.

This Meo *pāl* identity is linked to the Hindu gods and mythological figures. Meo links to Kshatriya (warrior) status are rooted in the Rajput tradition. Of the twelve main Meo *pāls*, five are Jaduvansi (the descendants of Yadu/Jadu, the clan of the Hindu god Krishna); five others are linked to the Tomar clan of Rajputs (the descendants of Arjuna); two *pāls* consider themselves Raghuvansi Meos (the descendants from the god Ram); one small unit called *pallākarā* is said to have descended from Nirban Chauhans⁹ (Mayaram 2004a, p. 52). Thus, the Meos considered themselves both Kshatriya (warriors) and Muslims at the same time. The following paragraphs examine the question of why they believe this.

Among north Indian peasant communities such as the Ahirs, Kurmis and Jats, the claim of an ancient past full of *kshatriya* (martial) glory was strengthened in the first part of the 20th century with the formation of many caste *mahāsabhās* (or major associations) (Pinch 1996). The claim of martial peasant origins was reinforced by and deeply rooted in the Vaishnava traditions. Pinch argues that the peasant groups or ex-shudras¹⁰ proclaimed Kshatriya status on the basis of genealogical ties to Ram and Krishna, the two avatars of Vishnu (p. 82). It is likely that the cultural construction of *kshatriya*-hood may have been similar among Meo peasants.

However, the martial ethos among these peasant groups first emerged during Mughal rule in the context of what Kolff (2002) calls ‘the military labour market’. The Mughal imperial state’s demand for soldiers made the emphasis

⁹ A clan of Chauhan Rajput rulers in Rajasthan.

¹⁰ Shudra refers to the lowest category of the Hindu fourfold divisions into the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (kings), the Vaishya (traders), and the Shudra (peasants and labourers).

on martial traditions an important aspect of village life. This created and redefined the martial sensibilities of rural peasants. Valour and bravery were already central to peasant–state relations, with the importance of self-defence in incidents such as non-payment of taxes as well as for survival in their villages (Hauser 2004, p. 404). In case of the most peasant communities such as the Meos, Jats, Meenas and the Gujjars, their marauding activities earned them a negative reputation. Until the 13th century, these groups did not have the settled mode of life of agricultural cultivation. Barani (1285–1357 C.E), the famous Persian historian of the Delhi Sultanate era (1206–1526), described the Meos negatively as ‘lawless plunderers, raiders, robbers and assaulters’ who had ‘virtually besieged Delhi’ (Mayaram 2004a, p. 74).

Irfan Habib (1995) suggests that a group similar to the Meos, the Jats — a pastoral community in Sindh around the 12th century — underwent a transformation from the middle of the 14th century onwards to become a settled agricultural community (pp. 170–80). Bhardwaj (2012) notes that the Meos underwent a similar transformation from a sedentary to a peasantry group, although their Islamisation was already underway. Later, there is evidence to suggest of the expansion of agricultural activities from the late 14th century onwards, which occurred on a large scale during the period of Mughal rule (Chandra 1996, p. 190; Habib et al. 2011). In this period, the idea of private property began to emerge, even if loosely defined. This process intensified under late Mughal rule in the 16th and 17th centuries. For instance, the Ahir (Yadav) community and Kurmi peasants engaged in *khud-kasht* (personal cultivation), which gave peasants certain private rights over the land (Chandra 2003, pp. 168–92; Chandra 2009; Habib 1999, p. 137). What we see in the cultural imagination of the Meos is the reflection of changes going on at that time. While Mayaram asserts that the Meos were unconscious of their simultaneous Hindu and Muslim identity, I argue that the Meo connection to Hinduism was a

conscious cultural choice. Meo kinship conceptions in the form of genealogical links with Hindu gods emerged later than their initial conversion to Islam and were connected to the evolution of the idea of peasant ownership of land.

Aside from these important developments taking place around claims on land, the emergence of warrior sensibilities in the Mughal state shaped the Meo community's connections, especially with Hinduism. The areas the Meos inhabit now are the same areas mentioned in the Mahabharata and are close to Krishna's Braj kingdom. Islam on its own was not able to advance the traditional cultural claims of land ownership of the Meo peasants over the land of Krishna, especially when the Meos had already formed a relationship with Islam. To fulfil this purpose, the pre-existing cultural connection to Hinduism came to be further emphasised. Thus, a Mewati version of the Mahabharata known as *Pandun kā Kadā*, was written by a Meo poet Saddullah Khan around the 17th or 18th centuries (Mayaram 1997b, p. 7). Cultural developments like this signify the need for cultural resources to legitimise claims to land through kinship ties. The Meo's imagined kinship with Krishna, Ram and other figures—kings, warriors and the sole owners of the land—were rooted in the process of legitimising peasant rights and claims on the land.

Kolff's views on martial sensibilities among peasants in the Mughal period remains relevant today (Hauser, p. 404). This martial sense of identity is still present among Meos, who often insisted to me that they were a martial and trustworthy community (*hum ek bahādur aur wafādār kaum hai*).¹¹ The Meos were proud of their patriotic loyalties to the land and to their martial status, citing the examples of Hasan Khan Mewati who fought alongside Rana Sanga, a local

¹¹ Fieldnotes.

Rajput, against the first Mughal Muslim emperor Babar, and the numerous sacrifices made by the Meos in the 1857 rebellion against the British.¹²

Moreover, the Meos were not always anti-state as Mayaram claims. Bharadwaj (2012) has shown that Meos were hired for the Mughal imperial postal services and as personal bodyguards to the emperor; they were known as *dāk-Meorās* (Meo postmen) and *khidmattiyās* (service men) (p. 248). Nonetheless, it also appears that Mayaram's representation of the community as marginalised does not resonate with the Meo's self-perception, emotions and sensibilities or their current landed status.

It can therefore be concluded that a common theme across these peasant and landholding groups was the idea of themselves as a community of warriors. The Meo's genealogies reflect the same concerns as other land-owning peasant castes' genealogies. The peasant martiality reflected in genealogies needs to be understood in the context of these groups' desire to own land, their memory of the martial ethos relating to their recruitment into imperial and state armies and their desire to achieve superior status.

These genealogical perceptions were expressed in material and symbolic practices. The Jogi and Mirasi bards sing the origin story of a cluster of Meo *pāls*, about the same warrior ancestors, as well as panegyrics of each village, block, family and the principal figures of a *pāl*. The Meo community genealogies are sung and performed in the oral folk tradition by the low caste bards and performers, the Jogis and Mirasis, but the pedigrees of the Meos are recorded by a caste of Brahmin record-keepers called the Jaggas or genealogists. I recorded a

¹² The number of sacrifices made by the Meos during the 1857 rebellion exceeds any other district of the Haryana state. K.C. Yadav (1977) notes the total number of people who died from the Haryana part of Mewat was around 1100 far more than the total numbers of 200 of the second placed district in the list, see, (Yadav 1977).

set of *dohā* (couplets) from a group of Mirasis which beautifully summarises the story of five Jaduvansi *pāls*, which all link their origin to the Hindu god Krishna:

jadūvañs bahāl, pānch pālañ meñ me pāyo
jabro dal mevāt, ek sāu ek samāyo
jadū vansi ke bīc huyē hai krīsnā murārī
brīj mandal ke bīc basā dī mathurā pyārī
jā sū ab tak kahē jahān teen lokan sū nyārī
chhīraklot, duhlot ko jabro mero damrot ko dal
*punglot vā nai ki sar nyuñ pāncho pāl sabal.*¹³

The Jadu clan flourishes, divided among five *pāls*
A powerful faction in Mewat, a hundred and one
Among the Jadu clan, Krishna (also called Murari) was born
In the middle of the Braj region, he founded beautiful Mathura
town
People say it (Mathura) is unique in all the three worlds
Chhiraklot, Duhlot and my powerful Damrots
Punglot and Nai as well, thus, the five *pāls* stand strong.¹⁴

The above passage begins by invoking the Jadu (yadu) clan of Mathura, the centre of the Braj region and the abode of the cowherd god Krishna. Geographically, the Braj region intersects with the Mewat territories and has a close cultural resemblance to it in language, culture and music. The appropriation of Krishna as a deity who was also a cowherd by five Jaduvansi Meo *pāls* is similar to that of another peasant caste, the Ahirs/Yadavs, but the

¹³ I recorded these couplets among a group of Mirasis from Natoli village in Mewat namely, Sannu Khan, Sahab Khan, and Jumma. I am truly indebted to all these participants for the pains they took to perform for a small gathering of three or four people, including myself and my informant friend.

¹⁴ The English translation is mine.

Meos emphasise Krishna's Rajput status. Michelutti (2002) argues that the central aspects of the formation of the Yadav/Ahir community has been the discourse of religious descent centred on Krishna. Similarly, the five Jaduvansi clans—the Chhiraklot, Duhlot, Damrots, Punglot and Nai—consider Kanhaiya (Krishna) as *dādā* (literally, 'grandfather', a Mewati term for ancestors) and *autāri* ('incarnated one'). His bravery and central role in the Mahabharata war is crucial for the Meos.

This warrior tradition among the Meos has connections with the Rajput martial tradition in Rajasthan. The Meos' claims intersect with the claim of Rajput groups but is rooted in a peasant conception of the martial community, a widespread phenomenon among north Indian peasant groups. Two other Meo *pāls* identify themselves as Raghuvansis or the Kacchwaha Meos and link their origins to another Hindu warrior god, Ram, the hero of the epic Ramayana:

kachwāhā rājput ramchandar kā potā
jānai rāvan kūñ bas kiyā diyā durjan ke gotā
raghuvansī insūñ kahain saccā karūñ bayan
hain ye dahngal yāi vansa main bañkañ bargujar balvan

The Kacchwaha Rajputs are the grandsons of Ram
 Who vanquished Ravana and destroyed evil men
 Raghuvansis they are called, my testimony is true
 The Dhaingal are in this line, the brave Bargujars too
 (Mayaram 2004a, pp. 54–5).

Sometimes more than two *pāls* associate their origins with the same figure. The Meo *pāls* play a more important role in the social structure of Meo society rather than just lineages. In Meo traditional social and political organisations such as caste *panchāyats*, the Choudhary or the headmen of a *pāl* is attributed significant social influence. He still presides over disputes and receives immense respect

from the members of that *pāl*. Usually, such headman status is controlled by a person from the most populous village of a particular *pāl*. For instance, in the next set of couplets, importance is given to the Bisru village of the Damrot *pāl*, the largest village of this *pāl*, among the five Jaduvansi *pāls*:

damrot pukhret, khauf sun dushman dahle
aur ghāte mein linon ahmal, mār ghātā sun pahle
dādā rao delki, rall layin rājan sun jahrpat
jaswat ke sut mein medhā rao huwā pāran se pargat
atmal khan umraon, bājein tamak bihuwān mein
bānteyo ho nilam aur pukhraj, khusi khān khallukā mein
tyāreh baje jit kā dhol, jāo jahān kun chadkar
bahuteran devān rupiyā jiv, thāp durjan ka jhādā
āāyein utwal su jit, diya ginni ka bādā
rai khan sarsattān me huyo, jag me duniyā nauti
aali me kaura ko rai, vā ne diyān sundar ka moti
paonsar huwan sanwala meo, ghāt kuti dushman ki
bisru me raj karein ho mero randhir, joth batin utan kin,
bisru chaudhar ko makān, bhup ne kirat leni
batin utān ki ghanthjor, saāth mein bichān deni
kal mein dinā rupiyā gyārah sah pacchis muhar singh
sawreliya dino satrah sah ko dān
aali dhing khanaiya meo, liyā su jas kā nākā
rayan kid hara diyān hai tol, diyā dorā sun nākā
damrot badband rit kartab ki jānyein
sabsu pahlo samadhi dino tol
bisru me chote khane choudhary sahabu aur sahjad
asal karke dikhla di unnn ne diyo kontal tol sadā su ghar buniyadi
yah jas gatwein jumma rai, katha datar bahutera
barah palan sub hi adab, jivan seeja teran

*damrot de sabatin, tumne diya amita mal
ye jas gawein ghar ke rainji, laga deyon boda ke dhal
nu kartab me bhadkar rahi, meri damrot ki pal (Recorded from Mirasi
musicians).*

the enemies shiver from the fear of Damrots' bravery
in the battle Ahmal destroys the enemies beforehand
Dada Rao of Delaki, challenged the kings instantly
among the sons of Jasmat, Medha Rao was the blessed
incarnation
Atmal Khan Umraon, there sings songs for you in his Bihuya
village
Distributed the blue and yellow sapphires, Khushi khan in
Kahlluka village
To you trumpets of victory are beaten, wherever you go
mounted
gave us plenty money and livestock, after destroying the
wicked men
when returned victorious from Utwal, gave us courtyard-full
money
Rai khan was born in Sar sattan, feasted people in the entire
world
The Rai of Kaura in Aali village, he gave us beautiful pearls
In Paonsar was born Sanwla Meo, who destroyed the enemies
fiercely
Bisru was ruled by my Randhir, he distributed the pairs of
camels
Bisru village has the headmen ship, Bhup received fame
Distributed the pairs of camel, and gave us jewelleryes too

In Kal, a sum of eleven hundred and twenty-five rupees was given

Muhar Singh Sawrelia gave donation of seventeen hundred rupees

In Ali was the brave Kanhaiya Meo, he achieved the highest fame

To bards has he given in plenty, donated with free hands

Damrots are supreme, know their traditional duties

First among others, they measured our share

There are small segments in Bisru

Headmen Sahabu and Sehjad remained true to words

They always gave in quintals

Nuriya Saras was born in Rahila, who doubled the quintals

this eulogy sings Jumma Rai, although, there are many storytellers

Related with all the twelve *pāls*, a biography of you should be written

Damrots give to all but they gave you very precious gifts

This eulogy sings the singers of house, Damrots always give them plenty

Thus, in duty, my Damrots are supreme.

In this case the poet and singer was attached to the Damrot *pāl*. His tale therefore attributed a superior standing to the Damrots over other Jadu *pāls*. A few of the villages mentioned—including Bisru, the largest village of Damrots—are situated within a few kilometres of Shah Chokha village and Punahana town. The panegyrics (*jas*) sung by the Jogi and Mirasi for the Jaduvansi Damrot *pāl*, thus, includes important personalities, figures and the headmen of this *pāl*. More significant is the fact that such Meo panegyrics always uphold virtues such as bravery and benevolence similar to the

characteristics of royal kings and rulers, thereby implying a Kshatriya status. These panegyrics symbolically reinforce the community's claim to martial origins and traditions.

This relationship of the bards with the Meo community proved to be an important source of livelihood for the musicians. In turn, the Meos' folk-peasant world was recorded and celebrated. A parallel reading of these verses also suggests a hierarchical relation between the bards and the Meos. The following section explores the link between economic marginality and a distinctive kind of collective religious and philosophical orientation.

3.2.2 The Muslim Jogis' ascetic ideals and genealogy

The Meo tradition is an example of a genealogy based on a noble morality and desire for power. Nietzsche (1968) argues that in parallel with this, another type of morality often develops, a *ressentiment* morality (a morality of resentment). In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes:

He introduced, the psychology of the antithetical concepts of a *noble* morality and a *ressentiment* morality, the latter deriving from a denial of the former. (p. 146)¹⁵

Nietzsche explains further that this morality of *ressentiment* shows:

To be able to reject all that represents the *ascending* movement of life, well-constitutedness, power, beauty, self-affirmation on earth, the instinct of *ressentiment* here becomes genius had to

¹⁵ In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche makes a distinction between 'master morality' and 'slave morality' by which he meant a set of ideas related to the issues of class division. He basically puts the resentment morality of slaves against the morality of their masters. The Muslim Jogis' self-representation in genealogies is close to but not the same as slave morality. However, philosophically and religiously, it may be a form of resentment about one's own status.

invent another world from which that life affirmation would appear evil, reprehensible as such. (pp. 146–7)

The Muslim Jogis genealogy can be usefully compared with the Meo genealogy. Both are rooted in Shaiva and ascetic, and Vaishnava and the warrior traditions respectively. Social inequalities or possession of wealth and land affect the cultural imaginations of groups as they remember and construct their genealogies. The Muslim Jogis lacked Bourdieu's 'liquid capital', i.e. the wealth and social status related to landed property (Bourdieu 1990, p. 149). At the same time, Nietzsche (1968) understands lacking the will for power in terms of decadence arguing:

I consider life itself instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces, for power; where the will to power is lacking there is decline. (p. 129)

The Jogis' genealogies pose several questions: Were the ascetic ideals of material detachment of the Jogis 'born in the instinct of a decadent life which [...] struggles for its own existence', in Nietzsche's words (as cited in Foucault 1978b, p. 84)? Under what conditions did they emerge? What values do these collective ascetic tropes of a community in their genealogies represent?

The claim that the emergence of ascetic values among the Jogis may be explained by the desire to express a resistance against their material conditions does not negate the philosophical and meditational aspects of the Jogi (Nath) sect for all sections of society. Not having an affluent life may evoke the values through which one could imagine a spiritually-driven life as a compensation for what one lacks socially and economically. During this process, the imagination may identify religiously and culturally ordained messages through which one can make sense of the conditions of present life and set goals for the future. Here the beliefs of the poor Muslim Jogis and bards in a genealogy linked to

Shaivite asceticism can be seen as an attempt to emphasize asceticism as the denial of both material attachment to the world and the Meos' values of attaining power.¹⁶ For the Jogis, the Shaivite ideals represent the ultimate goal and purpose in life.

The Muslim Jogis also played an important role in the oral and performative traditions, including performing folktales for their Meo patrons. Folk art and music prospered under the patron–client (*jajmāni*) system and was associated with these communities as well as with the Mirasi, Manganiyar, Nut, Bhand and many other groups in Rajasthan and elsewhere. In day-to-day life, it was expected that Jogis would eke out their livelihoods by seeking alms. All mendicants, whether Jogis, Fakirs, *sādhus* or *bābās* (religious figures), used solo musical instruments in their devotional singing, as can still be seen today. For instance, the Baul singers in Bengal, a low caste group, worked with 'Ektara' — an instrument made with just one string.

The musical instrument played in Mewat by Muslim Jogis is the 'Bhapang', used especially when performing the *Shiva Kathā* (tale of Shiva). This is performed throughout the night in the temples of Shiva on the occasion of Shiva's wedding (*Mahāshivarātri*, the great night of Shiva) (Napier 2014). The Hindi word '*bha*' stands for *bhole* (another name of Shiva), '*pa*' for pundit meaning the god Vishnu and, '*ga*' for the guru Gorkahnath — whom the Jogis (figure 3.2) consider their patron saint. Brahma, the god from the Hindu trinity, is not acknowledged; rather, he is replaced by the Nath guru Gorakhnath. This is important because it represents a syncretic *mélange*, a curious blend of

¹⁶ By no means I am trying to simplify the complex institution of Hindu renunciation. People became ascetic for all kinds of reasons. I am more concerned with the collective memory of the Muslim Jogi community rooted in Nath Shaivite ascetic tradition. A link between collective consciousness, socio-economic status, and genealogies are crucial in my analysis.

Vaishnava, Shaivism and Nath beliefs in the symbolic world of the Muslim Jogis.



Figure 3.2: A renowned group of Jogi and Mirasi musicians and singers

Source: Yusuf Khan

Also distinctive is the fact that in the first couple of verses of the *Shiva Kathā*, the Jogi singers chant the name of Allah and the prophet to show reverence. They then invoke their *ustād* (master or teacher) who has taught them their artistic skills. These Islamic invocations are then followed by the main attractions of the night: singing, dancing and reciting Shiva's wedding story:

*avaal soch allāh, pahal mābūd manāū
mitā zikr kā fikrā, gīt hazrat kā gāū
mèro dilè umangè daryāo, hūkam mūrshad sū cāhū*

Allah is the supreme idea, first and foremost (I) worship him
the concern for mentioning him is fulfilled, now I sing the song
of Hazrat (Mohammed)

My heart is full of passion like the ocean, it seeks the permission
from my teacher.¹⁷



Figure 3.3: A bhapang

Source: public domain

The only instrument these balladeers use is the Bhapang (see figure 3.3), which looks like Shiva's Damru (a small hand drum) but produces different melodies. The stories about the origin of the Bhapang provide further insights into the origins of the Muslim Jogis and the various synthesising processes of Hinduism and Islam. For instance, Allah is responsible for creating the Hindu god Shiva in the process of creating life on earth:

*yā duniyā me dekho bhapang kahā su aayo,
dharan nahi, ambar nahi, nāthè surajbhān
sèshani pè kutbi tāro, huyè ujādo bhān
shankar ko allah-tālā ne pahlo but banvāyo
yā duniyā me dekho bhapang kaha su aayo*

¹⁷ This and the following are excerpts cited from my interview with Bhapang artists of the Muslim Jogi community. I am immensely indebted to Yusuf Khan, and his father—the late shri Umar Farook Mewati—an internationally renowned Bhapang artist, for providing me with detailed information about the Muslim Jogis, their history, and performance. The collection of *dohās* or more particularly the *Mewāti bāt*, was translated by me with the assistance of a Mewati friend, Aadil. Fieldnotes, August 2016.

See brother! How Bhapang originated in this world,
there was neither the earth and the sky nor the sun and the
moon
only the polar star gleamed above
first of all, Allah made the body of Shankar (god Siva)
See brother! How Bhapang originated in this world.

In the Jogis' performative traditions elements of both Hinduism and Islam figure prominently. For instance, the verse above brings together Hinduism and Islam, dealing with the demands of monotheism through the creation of Shiva by Allah. Shiva is popularly known as *bābā Ādam* (literally, grandfather Ādam, the first man sent to the earth by Allah in Islamic theology), and thus has a high status in the narratives of Jogis. This reverence for Shiva translates into musical renditions of lineage narratives that connect the Jogis indirectly to the Nath and Shaivite traditions:

*bhapang-2 sab kare, bhapang hai apne hāth
bha se bhole, pa se pandit, ga se gorakhnath
gorakh ke augarh huye, augarh ke ismail nath
waki hum aulād hai, suno hamari bāt*

Everyone iterates Bhapang-2, Bhapang is in our hand,
'Bha' for Bhole, 'pa' for Pandit, 'ga' for Gorakhnath,
Augarh became disciple of Gorakh, of whose disciple was
Ismail Nath,
We are the sons of him, listen to our words.

This Muslim Jogi tradition also suggests that Ismail Nath (note the Muslim first name) is responsible for founding the Muslim Jogi sect within the Nath belief system. Ismail is also the founder of the Nizari Ismaili tradition—a schism that emerged in Shia Islam after the caliphate controversy among the Fatimid's

caliphs around the 11th century (Daftary 2007, pp. 116-26; Daftary 2010) and which spread in Asia and North Africa. The Ismaili population, in various groups such as the Sathpanthi (also called Khoja) and Imamsahi, has spread throughout western India in the regions of Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujrat, Sindh and Maharashtra. As Asani (2010) points out, 'ambiguity of identity has been a prominent characteristic of Nizari Ismaili communities' (p. 97), especially during the last two centuries when they have had to practice *taqqiyā* (concealment of their true identity) for fear of persecution (Khan 2003a, pp. 40-5; Virani 2011). This suggests that the Jogis' reference to Ismail Nath may have some connections to the lost branches of the Nizari Ismaili tradition in India. Dominique-Sila-Khan (2003a) explores the history of this lost Islamic tradition which is represented by an overt faith practice among Shia groups. *Taqqiyā* was consciously done to save themselves from the fear of persecution in a Sunni dominated region. However, different groups disguised themselves behind different Hindu traditions in South Asia. With time, many Nizari groups lost the connection to their original faith. When I asked Muslim Jogis about Ismail Nath, no-one was able to provide any information. Lengthy disguise may have led to the memory being forgotten, but the history is still present in oral traditions.

If it is the case that the Muslim Jogis' association with the Nath sect was a strategy for *taqqiyā* (concealment of their true faith), then why did Muslim Jogis disguise themselves behind the Nath tradition, rather than behind another Hindu tradition? Why did wealthy Ismaili groups such as the Khojas not link themselves with the Shaivite ascetic tradition? This connection between the Muslim Jogis and the Nath sect was both consistent with the Nath values among the community about the futility of the material world and also a reflection of the low collective socio-economic self. In other words, wealth and social status are indirectly related to the community's collective orientation

towards a religious philosophy. For instance, the Khoja Muslims¹⁸ from the western parts of India, who were known as the Satpanthi Ismaili group, disguised themselves behind various Vaishnavite traditions (Asani 1992; 2010, Mallison 1989) since their wealth as well as their lived reality was inimical to transcendental Shaivite philosophy. The Khoja Muslims' trade status, unlike that of the Muslim Jogis, was not coherent with ascetic ideals or philosophy. Thus, this syncretic imagination carries the marks of the socio-economic experience of the groups.

Through their performances, the Muslim Jogis connect with both Shiva and Allah at the same time. But I argue that their choice of ascetic ideals to articulate their collective self is rooted in their marginalised socio-economic experience. In contrast to the Meos' claim to Kshatriya status, the Muslim Jogis believed that their community descended from the Hindu ascetic god Shiva and his disciple Gorakhnath. Gorakh, a revered *guru* of the Nath sect, advocated the renouncing of household life and material attachments in order to be a true *yogi*. Such ideas are essential to the Nath tradition. In Nath folklore, there are also stories of kings (Bharthari and Gopichand) renouncing their kingdoms to join the sect, and Gorakh saving his Guru Machhendranath from sexual and worldly desire, signifying the futility of the material world. Individuals were inspired to leave household and material attachments behind to attain the true meaning of life. Although these ascetic ideals of the Nath sect were transformed by the insertion of a household category among the Naths (Gold 1999; Gold & Gold 1984), the inspirational values still run high among the lower socio-economic groups

¹⁸ A small mercantile community located along the costs of Gujarat.

including peasants. Thus, historically, the Nath sect was principally composed of lower social groups.¹⁹

It is also apparent that the name of Ismail Nath was never included in the mainstream Nath guru's list or in the list of 84 *siddh* (meaning 'perfect meditators' in Nath vocabulary). However, in the folktales of the Jogis, the guru Ismail Nath was initiated by and became a disciple of Aughar, a disciple of Goraknath. Ismail Nath was chiefly responsible for the dissemination of the Jogi version of Islam in India. Similarly, in the same area of eastern Rajasthan, the Nath Yogi and Nizari Ismaili traditions (see, Khan 2003a, 2003b) flourished for a lengthy period. One of the Dadupanthi²⁰ saints, Sunderdas, for instance, enjoyed the patronage of both the local Marwari community and the Rajput Qaimkhani chiefs who had converted to Islam. The verses composed by Sunderdas integrate Sufi concepts within the *nirgun* form of Hindu reverence²¹ in this particular tradition, while also absorbing selective aspects of Vaishnava Bhakti and yogic practice (Horstmann 2014). Without claiming for themselves a separate Hindu or Muslim identity, many saints remained both Hindu and Muslim in devotional practice. One could follow more than one religion at a time without owing loyalties to a particular religion (kumar 2017). However, most often, following a particular religious tradition also reflected one's social positioning, as it does in case of the devotional requirements of the Meos, Jogis and the Khoja Muslims.

¹⁹ Similar to the Nath sect, the Kabirpanth was also entirely made up of tribal and comparatively middle and low caste groups (Lorenzen 1987).

²⁰ Dadu was a 16th century Saint who, like Gorakh and Kabir, advocated belief in '*nipakh*' that stresses neither this side nor that.

²¹ Rajasthan was among the important centres of north Indian Bhakti devotion. The *nirgun* Bhakti was the popular form in north India compared to the south.

In addition to the dual religious connections of many saints, the differences between religious traditions were often articulated along the lines of sect and cult, rather than in terms of the two identities of Hindu and Muslim. Oral traditions claim that Ismail Nath settled in the Bengal region where there was an inevitable confrontation between him and the goddess Kamakhya of tantrism or the Shakti cult:

*kangru dèś me kumkā devi jāne duniyā sārī,
jahan base Ismail jogi
sahja jogan ko hai ismail, wāki charchā bhārī
kumkā devi ku bas me karkè, jogi muslim dharam chalāyo.*

Kumka devi lives in Kangru *dèś* (region), the whole world knows,

In the same region settled Ismail Nath Jogi,

Ismail is the son of Sahja Jogan, people talk a lot about him,

After controlling Kumka Devi, he spread the Jogi Islam.

Thus, a Nath *yogi* was responsible for the dissemination of the Muslim Jogi form of Islam. Kamakhya Devi is worshipped mostly in Assam in eastern India, which was historically part of Colonial Bengal and was famous for black magic and *tāntric* practices (Fell 2000; Urban 2001). For the Muslim Jogis, it was imperative to control the goddess's power in order to convert the region to their Islam.

This opposition to a Shakti cult appears to be a narrative strategy to differentiate the practices between them and the Naths, even though the Jogi traditions valued both religions equally. In this case, however, there is an opposition between the two cults; thus, these oral traditions show the differences were sect based instead of religious communities. For example, despite the opposition towards religious traditions of equal standing such as the

Shakti cult which is now known to be a Hindu religious tradition, the symbols of Hinduism and Islam are jumbled together in the religious culture of the Muslim Jogis. The Shakti cult was viewed negatively as posing a challenge to Nathism, a predominantly male ascetic world. Apart from this, the differences between Hindus and Muslims seems not to have been organised in terms of religious identities. Rather, as indicated by the verses cited earlier, the general animosity owes much to cult antagonism rather than to that between different religions (this aspect is explored further in the next chapter). For instance, the emergence of Islam among the Muslim Jogis took place in Bengal under the patronage of Shiva, when Ismail Nath controlled the negative forces of the goddess Kamakhya, an idea which is rooted in the Indic nature of the creation of sacred things.

3.3 The Sufi saint, Shah Chokha, and the village genealogy

The foundation story of Shah Chokha village is closely related to the story of the saint. This story indicates the Chishti Sufi lineage of the saint, the extent of the saint's influence and the centrality of his tomb (see figure 3.4):

*chisthi gharāne auliyā, kāyam durust imān,
aatho thāambe roshni, shah chokha bade makān. (Hagiography 2011)*

The saint belongs to Chisthi family, firmly stands our faith in
him

All eight blocks are lit, by the greatness of Shah Chokha.

The belief is that the saint (*shah*) came to the village and referred it as *Chokhā Jagah* (a good spot) and settled down to build a *qankāh* (hospice). The reason for choosing this place is that there is a hillock facing Mecca (later the place of his tomb), a perfect spot for offering *namāz*. As the number of Shah Chokha's followers grew, the place developed into a village. Currently, the Shah Chokha

village is divided into eight blocks named after the eight *murids/khalifā* (disciples) of the saint who survived him.



Figure 3.4: An inner view of Saint Shah Chokha's grave

In the couplet above, the *thāmbā* refers to a village block. In Mewat, these blocks are usually named after ancestor or important people who might have founded villages, clans, *pāls*, blocks or families. These ancestors are called *dādā* or grandfather and people connect to these different social units through a common ancestor. In Shah Chokha, therefore, all Fakir families residing in a particular *thāmbā*/block which is named after a common ancestor (a disciple of Shah Chokha) are linked to the saint. People's narratives, their identification with a particular *murid* and a hagiography dedicated to the saint confirm this fact. Eight of the eleven *murids/pīrjādgāns* (disciples) of the saint were married. The three unmarried disciples (Sayyed Lutafullah alias Gang Pir, Sayyed Hussain aka Harun, and Sayyed Gulam Ali aka Dendar) who are buried in and around the main premise of the *dargāh* are also venerated along with the saint. The eight married disciples were cremated after death in the courtyard of the saint's tomb. On the left-hand side, outside of the main sanctum of the

mausoleum, there are seven smaller tombs of the married disciples. One is buried at the back of the shrine outside the main fence.



Figure 3.5: The graves of the seven disciples of Shah Chokha, protected by iron grids

Thus, the ancestors of the village are the eight married murids: Garibullah, Karimullah alias Kalu, Yusuf, Amirullah alias Aadam, Ali Muhammed, Hafijullah alias Chand, Yajid, and Yarhamhamullah. The eight blocks in the village are linked with these disciplines. Each is also known by short names such as Garib Patti²², Kalu Patti, Yusuf Patti, Aadam Patti, Ali Patti, Chand Patti, Yajid Patti, Yarham Patti.

The *dargāh* of Shah Chokha does not have a permanent caretaker from a particular family, unlike other *dargāhs* where descendants of a family work as custodians. Representatives of all the blocks of the village clean and maintain

²² A *pattī* (Patti) literally a strip refers to a block. The formation of different blocks followed a strip downwards from the hillock.

the *dargāh*. This appears to be for economic reasons. Each block is allotted to for two months of guardianship and the job is often taken by elderly people without other sources of income. Women often undertake this job as cleaning belongs to the domestic sphere of activity and male members usually have other occupations. Since Fakirs do not have control over sizeable landholdings like the Meos, the tomb supports some families indirectly through payments to the caretaker of the grave.

I met one custodian, Hazra at the beginning of my fieldwork. She belonged to the Aadam Patti. Her custodianship of the tomb included opening and cleaning the *dargāh* in the morning, helping visitors in rituals and closing the mausoleum in the evening. This work enabled her to earn money through donations from visitors and tips for her services. She needed this money so she decided to put herself forward for the job at a meeting held by the village *sarpanch* (headman). No-one else from her block came forward so she got the job. The job remains in the hands of each person for one month, before passing to someone from a different *pattī*. Although the reason for taking this job is purely economic, women caretakers do it more respectfully than the males.²³

²³ This aspect became clear when I observed the behaviour of two male and seven female caretakers over the course of fieldwork. The two male caretakers had no faith in the saint while the female ones fondly shared stories of the saint's charisma with me. Hazra also mentioned that 'the current *Maulavi* does not know anything about the shrine, I will tell you everything,' then she told me a story of her passionate belief in the saint (see chapter eight for Hazra's story).



Figure 3.6: A view of Shah Chokha Village from the dargāh

In the late 19th century, for revenue purposes the Shah Chokha village (see figure 3.6) was listed under the Ferozepur Jhirka *tehsil* of the then British district of Gurgaon (Channing 1882). The village is entirely dominated by a low caste Muslim group of Fakirs (discussed in the previous chapter) who begged for their livelihood. The Fakirs used to guard new graves for the Meos and other Muslims, watching it until the new graves attained a solid form. Although, the Fakirs have a low social status, they were also respected or feared for their *tāntric*-like behaviours such as sleeping next to a dead person. The origin narrative of the village is ambiguous as remnants of old houses are only found near the saint's tomb on the hillock. The spread of the village from the tomb to the main street dates only from the last 30 years. One account is that this was formerly a Meo village before the saint arrived and the Meos became Miyan (Fakir) under the saint's influence. Since saints were wandering alms seekers, it followed that their devotees, like the alms seeking Jogi community, followed the same lifestyle and later were organised into the Fakir community as result of *fakirī* (ascetic) practice.

The Fakir villagers, however, stress their identity as Sayyeds, a high-class Muslim denomination, on the basis that the saint himself was a Sayyed. Other Meos contest this claim. In a caste *panchāyat* which took place in 2010 to discuss the use of the title 'Sayyed' by the Fakirs, an elderly Meo stated that they could not be Sayyeds as they were related to the offspring of the disciples who were not the sons of the Sufi saint (interview with Abdul Meo, 19 May 2016).²⁴ In their defence, the Fakirs of Shah Chokha claimed that their *dādās* (the eight ancestors and disciples of the saint) were born in Iran and migrated with the saint to Mewat. This claim was not part of an organised campaign. However, it attracted the attention of socially superior Muslim Meos since it appeared that the Fakirs were claiming a higher social status than theirs through links to Sufi figures like Shah Chokha, a saint also venerated by the Meos.

This signalled a new kind of competitive feeling that has arisen among Muslims, with some claiming to be high-class Muslims. Such feelings strengthened gradually, especially after the successful reformist teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat who argued for a true Muslim status (this issue is dealt with in chapter seven). Genealogy thus also helps to elevate one's social and community status. It is used differently by the different Muslim communities. Unlike the Meos and the Jogis, the Fakirs use genealogy to identify with the Sufi saint but to strengthen 'true' Muslim status. In turn, this is also associated with the Islamic form of ascetic life.²⁵ This claim by the Fakirs to a higher Muslim status is relatively recent. It has provided them with an opportunity for upward social mobility, unlike their previous identification as low caste beggars.

²⁴ Abdul Meo was the person who raised this issue.

²⁵ Asceticism (*zuhd*) in early Islam was a popular practice. Sufi saints led a transition from asceticism to mysticism (Green 2012, pp. 20-3). The Fakirs are not counted as mystics but Muslim ascetics in India.

While the Fakirs are pushing their claim for a higher Muslim status within Islam through the saint, at the same time most Fakirs, influenced by Tablighi notions, do not regard saint worship as proper Islamic conduct. Thus the entire debate about their connection to the saint is adopted in a manner that fits with the Tablighi Jammāt's understanding of Islam, which denounce Sufi veneration as anti-Islam. For the purposes of worship, under the impact of the Tablighi Jamaat, the saint carries little influence, especially among most of the male members in the village and the area.

As already mentioned, each of the eight blocks in the village is identified by the *murids'* name. The divided blocks play an important role in village politics and other spheres where a show of solidarity is needed. How this particular form of identification matters can be seen in everyday life. For instance, during the election of a local body at the village level, or in case of conflicts, emotions, sentiments and solidarity were expressed along the lines of identification with a particular *thāmbā*.

The Fakirs' attempts to claim a high-class 'true' Muslim status were also facilitated by a change in the nature of the community's relationship with society in general and the Meos in particular. The Fakirs' traditional role in the *jajmāni* system is no longer relevant to their current livelihood. As soon as the Fakir's dependence on the Meos disintegrated and their former role ended, they moved to other arenas in search of a livelihood. Most of them work in factories, run small-scale scrap businesses or have emigrated to Mumbai and Delhi to work as hawkers. Their lifestyle, community history, culture, traditional roles and cultural requirements now align with Islam, unlike the Meos and the Muslim Jogis. The Muslim Jogis still earn their subsistence from musical artistry, a non-Islam sanctioned practice. Thus, the Fakir's adoption of Islamic values did not have livelihood constraints, unlike the situation of the Muslim Jogis, who still cherish the idea of religious synthesis through their artistry. Similarly, the

recent Islamisation of the Meos did not have implications for their livelihood as they were affluent. Livelihood compulsions have thus often hindered and intensified the process of shaping Muslim identity indirectly, depending on the nature of the source of income.

For the Fakirs, the claim to a superior Muslim status through descent lines to the saint became a useful resource they were able to use to climb the social ladder of the various Muslim groups in Mewat. Their claim has created a feeling of competition with the Meos for being better Muslims. The Fakirs have drawn on narratives of true Islamic practice to criticise the Meos for the poor economic condition of their community. These moves provide a sense of superiority to the Fakirs over the Meos.

3.4 Saint Laldas and family genealogy and pedigree

The genealogies discussed so far have been those which do not show any pedigrees. In the case of Laldas, a complete recorded pedigree is available. As described earlier, the Meo pedigrees are recorded by the Brahmins called the Jaggas (record-keepers). The records of the Jaggas are considered valuable and trustworthy historical material. A particular Jagga family usually maintains the records of its particular peasant patrons across several generations. The Jaggas visit the families once a year and note down all the important events, mainly related to the births, deaths and marriages, etc. Locally known as *sajrā*, the pedigree provides a person's complete ancestral line. In case of Laldas, the pedigree records the entire family tree since the time his birth in the 16th century (see figure 3.7).

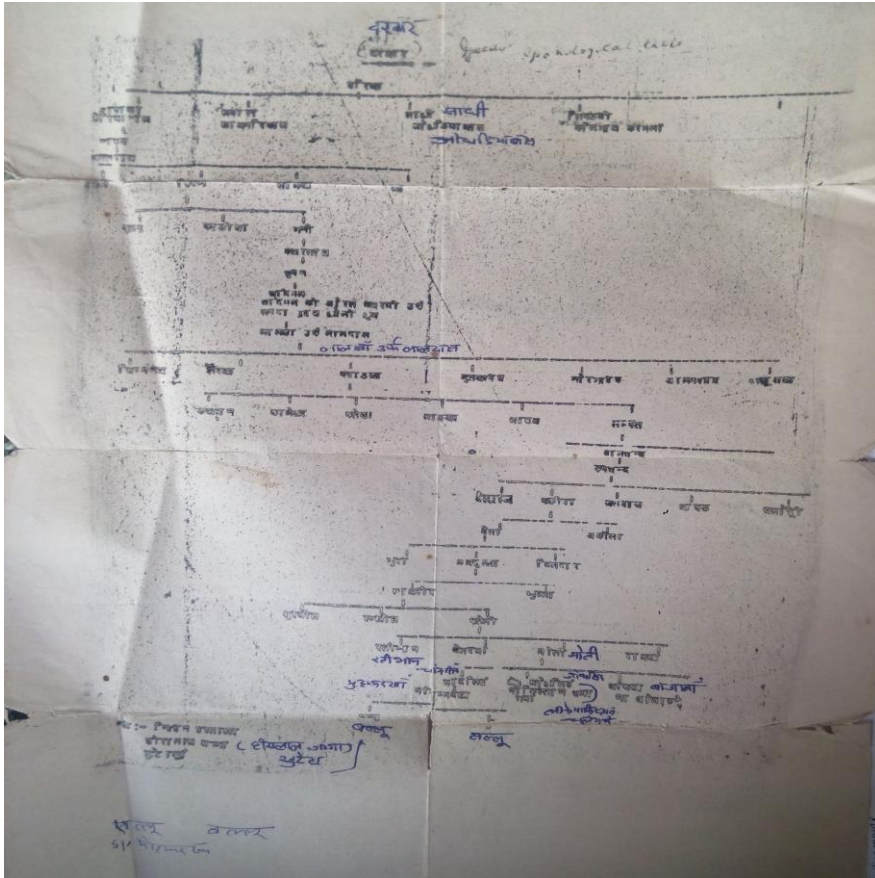


Figure 3.7: The sajra (family pedigree) of Laldas

Source: Hiralal Jagga

The use of pedigrees is somewhat different from genealogies. A pedigree generally concerns itself with a family rather than a whole community. It helps to establish a descendant's claim on an ancestor's heritage, although sometimes it can generate negative impacts. The genealogy of Laldas is contested by Hindus while his pedigree is generally accepted. The reason for Laldas's contested genealogy is the nature of shared belief in the cult. He is considered by the Hindu devotees to have incarnated in all four Hindu epochs as four different Hindu characters (this aspect is discussed in detail in chapter ten). According to local Hindu belief, he was born as Raja Harishchandra in the Hindu epoch *Satyug*, as Prahalad in Asura kul (the clan of demons) in the epoch *Traitā*. This was then followed by the incarnation of Yudhishtira among the Yadavs in the *Dwāpar* age, and the current form of Laldas in *Kalyug* among the Meos. This

genealogical link is not denied by the Meos as they also link themselves to characters from the Mahabharata and to other Hindu figures. However, the genealogical story of the Laldas incarnation as Hindu figures facilitates current attempts by Hindu Laldasis (Hindu followers) to appropriate the cult into a Hindu form. This ancestry has also generated a conflict between Hindu and Muslims Laldasis of the area over claiming the cult and the shrines of Laldas for one religion or the other.

Laldas's pedigree line supplies rich historical information which specifies his ancestral identity and gives information about current descendants. The present custodians of the Laldas shrine at Sherpur are his descendants by the Duhlot Pal of the Meos. The saint himself propagated the *nirgun* Bhakti (formless devotion to the god Ram), but the Duhlot links its origins to the Hindu god Krishna, an incarnation of Ram with four other *pāls*. As the *sajrā* (pedigree) tells us, the saint Laldas lived simultaneously as a householder and as an ascetic. He had six wives, seven sons and seven daughters. The shrine at Sherpur contain 16 graves of his family members. According to his pedigree, provided to me by Hiralal Jagga, his father's name was Chandmal and his mother's Samda. He was born in Dholidoob near the present day Alwar district in his maternal grandfather's house. A shrine is located there and it is also his parents' burial place. The current Meo priests who sit at Sherpur and Bandholi (a shrine of his son Kutub) are descendants of the saint from the current 11th generation. Among all the sons, only his second son Pahada was married. He is said to have been the progenitor of the current line of the *sādhs*, who are also fulfilling the duties of custodian. His first son, Kutub, meaning 'polar star', lived for only 18 days. The reason for his short life was that the polar star cannot be held in captivity and as soon as Laldas saw the face of his son, the son died.



Figure 3.8: The graves of Laldas (top left) and those of his sons, parents and wives (clockwise)

For generations, Laldas's descendants have been living in the vicinity of the shrines. All the descendants are called 'Meo *sādh*', and their beliefs and practices are different from other Meo Muslims. They do not observe a complete Islamic life despite being Muslims. When Hindus first attempted to expropriate the cult, the Meo *sādh*'s relationship to the shrines was also questioned. The Meo *sādhs* used the saint's pedigree to support their traditional custodianship claim. Currently, the court has accepted their claims. However, the Hindu Baniyas are making strong efforts to remove the Muslim *sādhs* from this priesthood in the traditional Laldas shrines, seeking to replace them with Hindu Brahmin priests. In an interview, a Hindu Laldasi of Baniya caste background stated that the replacement of the Muslim priests is the Hindus' current goal. In this debate, the record and production of ancestry lines and genealogical pedigrees have a concrete significance. Genealogical information is thus functions not only to satisfy the basic need of knowing how one is

associated with other humans but also to create a cultural document that has the power to fix things and provide 'evidence' to support a case when the need arises.

Although Laldas's devotion was rooted in the *nirgun* Bhakti tradition, he introduced one major change: the promotion of household ascetic values in line with Vaishnav devotion. Here, a distinction needs to be made between two kinds of asceticism born out of the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions. While Vaishnava Bhakti teaches devotees to remain the part of the household and domestic system, the Shaiva traditions—specifically the Nath teachings—encourage withdrawal from the household and material life. I describe in the next chapter that Saint Laldas's Kabirpanthi belief in *nirgun* Ram was also closer to the Islamic conception of Allah about the idea of one formless God; so it did not put him in conflict with his background as a Meo Muslim. Laldas's ascetic ideals were for a settled Meo household in contrast with the Muslim Jogis' belief in the need to renounce the material world. In the next part of the thesis, I show why places like Laldas and Shah Chokha, which historically represented the plural and fuzzy nature of religious boundaries (chapter four), turned into and still continue to be the places of inter and intra-religious disputes, particularly from the 20th century onwards (chapter five). ■

Chapter 4

Religious synthesis in the past: the Laldas and Shah Chokha cults

In this chapter, I examine Hindu–Islamic cultural interaction as well as the nature of ‘Muslim’ identity in the context of the Laldas and Shah Chokha cults. I draw on folk materials such as oral stories, folk tales and the hagiographies of the saints in order to understand the many strands of meaning implicated in religious identity in the Mewat area. My research on oral narratives and hagiographical writings shows that religious interaction dealing with these saints was multi-layered, complex and dynamic, in contrast to the present day’s narrower religious classifications. I argue that the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ have changed their meanings significantly since the saints’ times. The stories I cite in this chapter illustrate the complexity of these interactions in the evolution of institutionalised forms of religious identities.¹

This chapter explains that the nature of Hindu and Muslim identities before and after the 20th century was different. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the categories of Hinduism and Islam functioned around a different religious consciousness that was fuzzy and ambiguous in nature. However, the 20th century witnessed the rise of a uniform conception of Hindu and Muslim

¹ Institutional forms of Hindu and Muslim identities and practices were mainly associated with Brahmins and Mullahs respectively and were closely tied to political power. It solidified more in the 20th century.

identities.² Dalmia & Faruqui (2014), for example, suggest that, before the 20th century, 'religious antagonism [was] more often expressed in terms of one *samprādāy* or *panth*³ (sect or cult) against another and far less in terms of Hindu versus Musalman' (p. xxi).⁴ In the 20th century, identification with either the Hindu or Muslim category became a more common trend. The chapter argues that the history of the Laldas and Shah Chokha cults exemplified the acculturated form of the popular or folk religious world, in which sect and ethnic differences were more important than identification with Hindu and Muslim identities and differences. My main argument in this chapter is that the categorisation of Hindu and Muslim was insignificant in the folk peasant world and the world of the Meo saints from the time these saints lived until the 20th century. Diverse religious identities and practices, beliefs and symbols that are now considered parts of Hinduism and Islam were fused and merged in the folk religious cults that transcended and contradicted our contemporary understanding of Hinduism and Islam. More particularly, religious identification was expressed along the lines of sect and ethnic labels. Folk religions such as the cults of Laldas and Shah Chokha contradicted the institutional forms of religions associated with political power and represented by the 'professional' clergy of the Brahmins and Mullahs.

The Meo and other Mewati Muslims' devotion to the Bhakti and Sufi saints before the 20th century suggests that Indian Muslims were not particularly concerned with the religious boundaries and institutional practices of Islam. This was not in contrast to various Hindu caste groups at the same time, who

² This aspect is dealt with in chapters five, six and seven.

³ *Panth* meaning 'path' refers to a Hindu sect, its origin is usually linked to the teachings of a particular saint.

⁴ Oberoi (1994) reaches the same conclusion that religious differences and categories of Hindu and Muslim were insignificant in the folk world of Punjab.

also followed a diverse set of Hindu practices. Various caste groups of Indian Muslims, like Hindu castes other than the Brahmins, invented their own versions of the Indic religious world in which symbols of both religions co-existed in a peculiar manner. For instance, a key aspect of messages of the two cults and their saints, Laldas and Shah Chokha, is the insignificant nature of the Hindu/Muslim division. Laldas emphasised a kind of non-difference between the two religions and Shah Chokha enriched the Meos' version of Islam. Their spiritual messages and symbolic acts attracted a large number of followers from both faiths.⁵ In other words, similar to many saints and cults, they advocated common religious ideals for both Hindus and Muslims without denying the authority of God or the gods of either religion. The members of both religions were asked to follow a righteous path in the context of the similarities and differences (institutional and dogmatic) in pursuit of a common universal spiritual message. These Bhakti and Sufi saints gave priority to the local over the non-local or imperial/political, to esoteric mysticism over dogmatic practices, and to monotheism over polytheism.⁶

⁵ Such messages are common among the saints of Nath, Bhakti, and Sufi backgrounds. The idea was to emphasise a form of religiosity meant for all humans, one beyond religious differences. Often, their teachings promoted peace, love, harmony and equality by using religious vocabulary. In the Bhakti tradition, spiritual leadership was most often in the hands of low and middle caste-class saints. The authority of the Brahmins and the Sanskrit traditions were replaced by devotional songs in vernacular languages to emphasise universal righteousness (Schomer & McLeod 1987).

⁶ The common idea between most *nirgun* Bhakti and Sufi saints was that they identified God as one and as a formless entity. Many Bhakti and Sufi saints were poets or at least their sayings have been collected and transcribed in the form of poetry. Their philosophical positions ranged from monotheism and dualism to absolute monism. However, most saints were mainly regional, expressing variations in teachings, devotional practices and ritual observance.

4.1 Bhakti, Sufism and religious interaction

Bhakti and Sufism are movements of theistic devotion in Hinduism and Islam.⁷ While Bhakti spread from south to north India from the 10th century onwards (Hawley 2015), the currents of Sufism arrived in India around the 13th century from the Persian and the Arab world (Ernst & Lawrence 2016). Central to the practices of both traditions are mysticism, and god centred meditation. Both Bhakti and Sufi ideas were also circulated through collections of the teachings and sayings of numerous saints, disseminated through songs and oral presentations, which were centred on devotion to one God (in Sufi Islam and *nirgun* Bhakti) or multiple gods and goddesses such as Ram, Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, and Kali in other Bhakti traditions (Hawley 2011; Prentiss 1999; Schomer & McLeod 1987; Vaudeville 1993). Saints of both traditions inspired poetry, musical cultures such as classical *rāgs* and *qawwālī*, advocated socio-religious reforms and through their teachings challenged and sometimes reinforced religious orthodoxy and orthodox practices.

The world of Sufism and Bhakti cannot be understood as uniform sects or movements; diversity, complexity, ambiguity, complex interactions within and between the two are their major features. Avoiding essentialist categorisation of both must involve what Carl Ernst (2005) calls 'the polythetic approach to religion' (p. 20) in which 'numerous examples of hybrid and multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines can be at work in any particular religious *milieu*' (p. 21). Bhakti and Sufism in north India reached their zenith between the 14th to 17th

⁷ I am not using the terms Hinduism and Islam in their modern usage, instead they refer to amalgams of multiple forms of religious practices. I do not use the term Hinduism to refer to the modern understanding of political Hinduism, called Hindutva. Nor does my use of the term Islam refer to a single orthodox form of reformist Islam.

centuries. Many saints became identified as the founders of religions, cults and sects.⁸

Previous studies have questioned the idea of one coherent monolithic Bhakti movement (Hawley 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015; Pauwels 2010). John Stratton Hawley (2012) claims that ideas about the coherence of Bhakti emerged centuries after the saints in these traditions lived in order to serve different religious and political aims. For example, some saints were later considered as representative of the Hindu religion even though the saints had vigorously criticised Brahminical Hindu practices and Hindu identity in their time. The regional developments of Bhakti (referred to as 'nodes' by Hawley, 2015) differ from region to region. Similarly, the existence of a coherent Sufism is problematic (see, Eaton 2015; Green 2012) since Sufism represents a complex world with complex relationships to Islam and Hinduism in South Asia and has vast regional differentiations and saintly traditions. Consequently, each saint of Bhakti and Sufi backgrounds and his respective location need to be analysed separately to understand the complex nature of his belonging. The cultural encounter of the two is another complex issue.

The high tide of this two major socio-religious movements of Bhakti and Sufism was preceded by Shaivite philosophy (such as the Nath and *tāntric* traditions) which had already swept through north India (Ernst 2005). The coming of the Turko-Persian and Sufi versions of Islam⁹ to north India added one more dimension to the diversity of traditions on the subcontinent. The period from the 7th to the 12th centuries was marked by the dominance of Shaivite traditions in which the god Shiva and many *tāntric* goddesses acquired

⁸ For instance, the Sikh religion was founded by a famous Bhakti saint Guru Nanak.

⁹ Apart from many Sufis from Persia (Iran), Turko-Persian Islam was also represented by Muslim political rulers and soldiers.

supreme standing in the court culture of the ruling classes. Closely related to Shaivite philosophy were the Naths and yogis, whose anti-institutional ideas opposed the Brahminical hierarchies of society. Later, the Naths and extreme Shaivite yogis had a particular interaction with both the Brahmanical and Bhakti and Sufi movements. Nath (Jogi/Yogi) Shaivism, Bhakti and Sufism were, thus, reflexive currents challenging orthodoxy and societal norms, and advocating alternative realities. According to Ernst (2005), by the time Sufism arrived in India at the beginning of the 13th century, the Nath yogis, strong proponents of an anti-Brahminical society, were already organised into a group similar to Sufis. The encounter between the two led to an exchange of practices, such as Hatha yoga¹⁰ being adopted by the Sufis (Boullillier, 2015). Many scholars also believe that Sufis later influenced the poetry of the *nirgun* Bhakti saints (Horstmann 2014) as well as their (inner) vision of God (Vaudeville 1987).

The emergence of the Laldas and Shah Chokha cults in the 16th century needs to be explored in this context of diverse trends in Bhakti and Sufism. The stories of both saints tell us about post-Islamic establishments and their relevance for local identities, social practices, worshipping patterns and the changing religious order in north India after the 13th century. While Saint Laldas espoused a Bhakti view of gods and religions in his teachings, Saint Shah Chokha preached the Islamic concept of piety through themes of love and devotion. The two saints are still remembered for their powers to grant boons and perform miracles, and both focused their teachings on and promoted forms of locally rooted identities, in contrast with the imperial, political, institutional religious entities of the time. This aspect of a local or vernacular form of Islam

¹⁰ A form of yoga associated with the Nath yogis. Hatha yoga refers to a complicated set of physical and mental practices such as a focus on *kundalini* (the coiled one within), retention of semen etc.

and Hinduism as opposed to institutional forms of religions may be understood more clearly by studying the two cults together.

When Islam arrived in India around the 12th century, it intermingled with and influenced local ideas to add further layers of diversity to the subcontinental religious world. Dalmia & Faruqui (2014) note that almost 40 major Sufi saints of different backgrounds belonging to different *silsilās* (Sufi saintly lineages), such as the Chishtiyya, Qaddiriya, Suhrawardy, Madarriya and Nakhsbandi, traversed the territory over a span of a few centuries. The coming of Islam and its associated *silsilās* added more cultural streams and the local communities responded by wholeheartedly adapting them into their previously held beliefs.

Borrowing from Cynthia Talbot's work (2009), I argue that Indian Muslims were deeply embedded in their local societies and cultures while participating in the cosmopolitan world of Islam. As Talbot puts it, 'local connections of people and communities were never weakened by their allegiance to Islam' (p. 213). Both Mohammed Mujib (1985) and Richard Eaton (2004) claim that Punjabi and Bengali Muslims were spiritually dependent on miracles and magic to a degree incompatible with a genuine belief in any omnipotent god. In the 1901 Census of India, Bengali Muslims were reported to be joining in the Durga Puja, worshiping the Sitala and Rakshya goddesses during epidemics, and using Hindu astrologers and almanacs in their everyday lives (Eaton 2004, p. 121). Furthermore, Eaton writes that:

when Islam was taking root in Bengal, a land where the cult of mother goddesses had great popularity, the 16th century Bengali poet Sayyad Murtaza addressed Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed) as *Jagat Janani* (the mother of the world).
(p. 114)

On the other side, Hinduism was always defined by diversity in religious beliefs, practices and cultural life. In fact, the term Hinduism was not used in its contemporary political sense at least until the late British colonial period.¹¹ According to Thapar (1989), 'Hinduism is a mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas' (p. 216), that arose out of interaction, acculturation, incorporation and constant engagement in the vibrant social life of many caste communities. In this context, it may be argued that when Islam came to India (through Sufis, soldiers, traders or rulers), Hinduism was already so diverse that Islam, particularly the Sufi version, would not have been alien to its diversity. In other words, the coming of new religious traditions inevitably added to the range of this already diverse religious world.

As the frontiers of Islam moved eastwards around the 12th century, they had a striking influence on the lives of non-Muslims in Mewat and elsewhere. New converts did not abandon local practices. This is still evident in practices such as the marriage and caste norms still prevalent among local Mewati Muslim groups. The present cultural practices of the Meos, Jats, Ahirs, and Gujjars, along with other peasant castes in the area, are the result of the synthesis and sharing of common cultural traits. Taking into account the general consensus among scholars on the terms 'Islamicate' and 'Indic' (see chapter one), the Mewat region represents a typical Indic world.

¹¹ There is a debate among scholars about whether Hinduism was or was not a colonial construct. While strong arguments suggest it was not (see Lorenzen 1999; Pennington 2005), its evolution as a religious category was mediated by colonial *milieu* and thoughts of Indian urban nationalist elites and their use of religious symbols. I am of the opinion that the category Hinduism acquired new meanings during colonial rule, but that a sense of the Hindu religion was already there. It was to this incipient Hinduism that Kabir, Gorakh, Laldas and other religious figures were referring to. However, this Hinduism was an orthodox Brahminical construct according to the sayings of many saints.

Overall, although Islam and Hinduism influenced people's lives equally in Mewat, the Nath, Bhakti, and Sufi beliefs caught people's attention and attracted wider followings than the two mainstream religions. For instance, the cult of Laldas separated itself from both Hinduism and Islam while retaining certain tenets of both religions. Similarly, Shah Chokha articulated a distinct Meo Muslim identity in relation to the Mughals' Muslim identity. Neither of the two saints venerated by the Meo peasants completely disavowed Meo versions of folk religion. Their stories were located in shared pluralistic contexts. The Laldas cult is better documented than the Shah Chokha cult, through written as well as oral material. My discussion in this chapter illustrates these limitations.

4.2. The Laldas cult and the interplay of diverse Indic traditions

Folk stories narrate how, in the 16th century, Sahab Khan, the Mughal Governor of Tijara, near the present-day Alwar district in eastern Rajasthan in north India, summoned Laldas (1540–1648 C.E.) to account for his not following Islamic practices, despite being born a Muslim. Sahab Khan offered him meat, saying it was Muslim food that a Muslim should willingly eat. This gesture was meant to signify the saint's Muslim status and return him to the Islamic fold from which he had drifted. That encounter with Sahab Khan is recorded in a hagiography—compiled and written in rhyming verses by a Laldas follower named Dungarisi Sadh:¹²

*tabai mughal ne swāgat kari, baitho pīr dayā tum kari,
roti-khānā karo kabāb, bhukhā khāya badā sabāb,
dān yār to badā aziz, upar musalmān ki cheej*

¹² Although Dunagrasi is said to have compiled the verses of Laldas, other portions of the text seem to have been added later. Since it is work of many authors and the verses are not identifiable, I am treating it as anonymous but will refer to the cited couplets under the name of Dungarisi Sadh. The verses are of unknown dates.

musalmān hoye khāye khulāye, to wah rāh khudā ki pāwè.

(Dungarisi, n.d., p. 26)

Then the Mughal welcomed him, saying sit, *pīr*, bestow your blessings on me

Eat a meal of bread and kebab, it is really tasty when you are hungry

Serving you is a matter of immense joy, this is also a Muslim practice

If a Muslim eats himself and feeds others, then he attains the path of God.¹³

Although the Mughal's request that Laldas eat kebab seems a gesture of respect, it conceals a strategy designed to uncover the true religious status of the saint. The fact that in these hagiographical narratives the saint's religious behaviour is shown to transgress Islamic boundaries is meant to show his status as a Hindu saint. The verses state that Sahab Khan had heard reports that Laldas did not pray as a Muslim: he neither performed ablutions, nor called on the prophet's name, despite belonging to the Meo caste and the Islam religion. In another set of stanzas Dungarisi Sadh goes on to tell us that the saint taught the same doctrine to both Hindus and Muslims and that this landed him in trouble:

shilvant santan sukhdāi, satjug ki si rāh chalāi

dauri khabar tijārè gayi, sahib khan sū jā kahī

jāt meo arū musalmān, hindu rāh chalāi aan

rozā bang niwaj nā pathè, eid-bakrid ku man nahi dharè

rozā rakhe nā kalamā kahè, hindu turak su nyārā rahè

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the verses throughout the thesis is mine. I take responsibility for any errors.

nabi-rasool kahe nā kahāwè, rām-rām mukh seti gāwè

ketā hindu musalmān, ek hi rāh chalāi aan.

(Dungarisi, pp. 23-8; Powlett 1878, p. 55)

He was benevolent, gratifying the saints, his conduct was like
that of *Satyug*

This news sped to Tijara, Sahab Khan was notified

He is Meo by caste and a Muslim, but he preaches the ways of
Hindus

He does not keep *rozā* nor recites the *kalmā*, he remains aloof
from Hindu and Turk

He does not utter or encourage others to speak the name of the
prophet (*nabi-rasool*), his mouth only chants Ram-Ram

He says, whether a Hindu or a Muslim, the path is the same.

Sahab Khan tested the saint because of the complaints about his unorthodox conduct. The saint followed the path of *nirgun* Bhakti (formless devotion) to the Hindu god Ram in conjunction with practising strict vegetarianism; as a result, a miracle happened when he accepted the meat that Sahab Khan offered. As soon as the saint touched the flesh, it became rice (Dungarisi, n.d., pp. 23–8). The encounter did not end there. A vicious *jinni* tormented the Mughal Governor's beloved daughter. Kazis and Mullahs failed to expel him but when Sahab Khan's wife approached Laldas, the matter was resolved.

In another story, the saint was questioned by another Mughal *faujdār* (garrison commander or police officer) of Bhadarpur in Alwar. This time, Laldas was accused of killing a Mughal official who had laid hands on another man's wife. As the saint arrived, riding an unruly horse, the *faujdār* was surprised to see how well he controlled the horse and that there were both Hindus and Muslims among his followers. After asking a few questions about the saint's caste and religion, the official expressed amazement:

*faujdār jab puchī bāt, fakar kon tumāri jāt,
dīn tumhārā kinhoon nā jānā, jinhe sunā acraj aana.*
(Dungarisi, p. 13)

When the faujdar asked the saint, what is your caste
Nobody knows your religion, whoever hears this is a surprise.

The saint replied:

*hindu-turak ek sā bhujhè, sāhib sab ghāt ek hi suhjè
bolan hār kine batāyā, jāmā ek meo ghar pāyā,
vastra vivek morchal hāth, murakh ho so puche jāt.*
(Dungarisi, pp. 13, 4)

Hindus and Turks are same, God considers them as one,
Tell me, who taught you this? (I) received (my) clothes in a Meo
family,
Clothes, wisdom, and my free hands, only a foolish man
enquires about caste.

The saint's reply to the official's query stresses ideas of the oneness of God and the idiocy of enquiring about caste identity. Laldas uses the metaphor of his birth into a Meo household (receiving his flesh and garments) to insist that this is not who he is. The official, perturbed by Laldas's behaviour, asks for money before setting him free. Laldas refuses this offer, saying that he does not possess wealth. The *faujdār* makes the saint drink water from a poisoned well. Another miracle ensues: the poisoned well turns into a source of sweet water. The *faujdār* stands there before the saint and prays to him, asking who he really is.

In his reply, the saint directs his followers, expressing his belief and real religious intentions in the following couplet which refers to his advocacy of God in *nirgun* form:

mai hu lāl, tu merō dās, nirgun bhakti karo prakās
nirankar ko sumran kijō, yahī sikh sādhan ko dijo.
(Dungarisi, p. 4)

I am Lal, you are my follower (Das), spread the doctrines of
nirgun Bhakti
Recall the formless, give this lesson to the sages.

These well-known stories appear in the hagiography, along with other tales of Laldas's miracles. These also appear in the accounts of the colonial ethnographer and British colonial settlement officer P.W. Powlett. Powlett, undertook an extensive survey of Alwar state in the 1850s and wrote the '*Gazetteer of Ulwar*' in 1878. Powlett cites many verses of the hagiography under the subheading '*panthis* or sects' (pp. 53–60) in the chapter on religion. This provides some idea of the earliest date of the circulation of this hagiography: probably sometime between the late 17th and mid-18th century.¹⁴

Many similar miracles, told in couplets in the hagiography and supplemented by the details in the Powlett's gazetteer account, are central to the formation of the cult known as *Lāldāsi Samprādāy* (the cult of Laldas). As mentioned earlier, Laldas was born into the Duhlot Pal of the Meo Muslim community in approximately 1540 C.E. and identified himself as 'both Hindu and Muslim and beyond all at the same time'.¹⁵ Unlike Kabir, who taught a sharp critique of both religions, Laldas, though closer to the Kabirpanth or the path of Kabir, advocated an innovative religious synthesis for his followers. He combined practices of Hinduism and Islam within the Bhakti *milieu* of the time,

¹⁴ Powlett and other sources indicate the verses were already in circulation before his survey work. Powlette describes Laldas as the most famous saint of the area.

¹⁵ This phrase is inspired by Lorenzen's phrase from his work about religious identity of Kabir and Gorakh as it expresses the Laldas's situation perfectly, see, (Lorenzen 2011, p. 20).

diverging from his guru Kabir's preaching. For example, Kabir rejected the boundaries of caste and religion but Laldas appeared to partially accept religious boundaries through the deployment of religious unity. These differences were based in their class and caste background as I explain in chapter five.

These days, the hagiographical accounts are more popular among Hindu devotees trying to establish the persona of Laldas as a miraculous Bhakti saint markedly different and superior from their Islamic counterparts. These accounts, however, do not conceal Laldas's peculiar betwixt-and-between status. In this he is like Satya Pir of Bengal and other saints 'who [blurred] the line between Hindu and Muslim as religious categories' (Stewart 2000, p. 22).

4.2.1 Reading complexity in the Laldas cult

As mentioned earlier, Dungarisi Sadh was a Hindu devotee of Laldas who compiled popular life stories, accounts of worship methods and the various hymns related to the saint in a handwritten manuscript.¹⁶ The first part of the text, the *Nuktāvali*¹⁷ (a collection of *nuktās*), describes the whole of the saint's life in verse form, including tales of incarnations, miracles and other major events. The text is in five sections, including *Srimad Laldas Gita*, *Samvād Sār* (a dialogue between the saint and a disciple) and *Sākhis* and *Rāgs* (tales and songs sung in Hindustani classical music style). The text narrates in couplets popular oral

¹⁶ I am very grateful particularly to Anand Sadh, Ramnaresh Sadh, and Sonu Aggrawal among others for providing me with a copy of the text, *Laldas Nuktāvali*. Though the date of compilation of the text is not known, I assume it to be from the 1940s and 50s on the basis of the written style of Hindi.

¹⁷ The term '*Nuktāvali*' is made of, *nuktā+avali* words whereby the '*nuktā*' stands for 'couplet' and '*avali*' for 'collection' meaning 'the collection of couplets'. The *Nuktāvali* is the first part of the six hundred pages long hand-written text. Although the first part is compiled by Dunagarisi Sadh as the text mentions it, the task is equally difficult to date the text and the circulation of hymns.

stories and sayings, adopting a poetic style similar to that of the great epics in Sanskrit and Hindi. For instance, the opening stanza of the text says:

*sadhu-sant ki āgya pāū, sri lāl bhakt ki kathā sūnāū
pur-pattan sherpur vās sthān, jahān dungrisi sādḥ ne kiya bakhān.
san pandrah sau sattānave mein lāl liyo avatār
hindu-turak beech baithkar kinhā bhakti prachār.*

(Dungarisi, pp. 1–5).

If the saints and sages permit, I will tell the story of Sri Laldas.

I was born in Pur-Pattan and reside at Sherpur; Dungrisi Sadh's
(my) narration begins there.

In the year of 1597, Lal was incarnated

He spread the messages of Bhakti sitting among Hindus and
Turks.¹⁸

Not only does the text include Urdu words to convey specific meanings within a Hindi verse but it also occasionally uses the local Mewati dialect. For example, one story of a childhood miracle—that of the saint of controlling an insane elephant—is presented in the text through ‘linguistic duopoly’¹⁹ (Bakshi 2012) involving the Hindi and Urdu languages. The Mewati dialect and the vernacular languages are influential in the text but have a secondary status to Hindi and Urdu:

¹⁸ The English translation of the couplet completely loses its rhyming characteristics. Readers of the Hindi language would be able to grasp this nuance in the verse.

¹⁹ Linguistic duopoly refers to the dual connection of the Mewati dialect, a spoken Indo-Aryan dialect, with the Hindi and Urdu languages. In the text, *Nuktāvali*, words of Mewati are used with Hindi, Sanskrit, and Urdu words. The style in the text is similar to rhyming scriptures. Bakshi (2012) argues that ‘Mewati is possibly undergoing a shift towards Hindi-Urdu with Urdu playing a key part due to its associations with Islamic identity’ (p. 234). The large presence of the Tablighi Jamaat run *madrassās* also pushing this shift towards Urdu.

ek din mārag lāge jāyi, bhay mantā gaj nād nachāi
main mantā gaj bahut alām, karī sūnd sū teen salām
 (Dungarisi, p. 6).

A fearless elephant trumpeted loudly, walking on a street one day,
 That elephant was very angry (*alām*) and bowed (*salām*) three times with its trunk.



Figure 4.1: A typeset version of the text, Nuktāvali

In the couplet above, the Urdu word *alām* refers to the disturbed status of an insane elephant. As soon as the saint confronts the elephant, the animal bows to him. The Islamic greeting *salām* is used here to refer to the elephant's submissiveness to the saint. The narrative style of the text loaded with vernacular terms blends terms from the Mewati dialect, infrequent Urdu usages and numerous references to the mode of oral use of Hindu epics and religious texts. The verses thus depict a 'linguistic duopoly' in which the Mewati dialect, the Urdu and Hindi languages and the epic prose style converge to serve the narrator's purpose of describing a saint who transcended conventional

boundaries. The text also displays the intimate connection between the familiar and the known 'religious other' in a world conscious of religious differences but connected in multiple ways through shared ideals of public life. Similar examples throughout the text indicate not only linguistic duopoly but also the complex nature of a closely knit interlingual world often reflected in the literary 'web of intertextuality' (Ramanujan 1989, p. 190). Such examples point to the intimately related literary and oral traditions of Hinduism and Islam and institutional and vernacular/folk cultures.

Ramanujan's (1989) 'intertextuality' incorporates different forms of 'reflexivity', a key for understanding the relations between various Indian literary traditions of myths and folktales. For instance, motifs, words, symbols and narrative frameworks produced in Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu were extensively used in Mewati in a reflexive manner in producing the Mewati folk versions of the Hindu epis, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other tales. Similarly, another stanza of the text uses the Arabic/Urdu word *mustaqim*, meaning 'a straight path' or 'the right path' in Islam. The text uses the term to talk about the path of *nirgun* Bhakti taken by Laldas. For instance, after realising that he has mistreated the saint, the *faujdār* calls his soldiers to approach Laldas again. This time, a couplet addresses the saint as a true *pīr*:

sunte hi chākar daude aaye, pīr-murid dhyān me pāye
unkā aesā sānchā dīn, sāi nām su hai mustaqim
lāldās tum sachhè pīr, ab baksho merī taqsir (Dungarisi, p. 14).

The soldiers came running as they heard the order, *pīr-murid*
 were in meditation

Their religion is so true, their path is linked to the name of *sāi*
 (God)

Laldas you are a true *pīr*, now please forgive my crime.

Oral narratives, handwritten verses and cheap pamphlets in multiple locations in the Alwar and Bharatpur districts recount the life of Laldas. Born in Dholidoob in Alwar, Laldas spent his childhood with his maternal grandparents. Later, he moved to his parental home in Bamniya Bas village. His parents were very poor and he collected and sold firewood every day for subsistence. He also took his family's cows to graze on a nearby hillock in the Aravalli mountain range. There, he is said to have engaged in *tapasyā* (meditation) of *nirgun* (formless) Ram while surrounded by the grazing cows. A very old ruined building marks the spot of his meditation (figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2: The meditation place of Laldas on the Aravalli hills

A mosque is also attached to the ruined building (figure 4.3), where Laldas is supposed to have prayed to Ram. Another mosque from the same period exists at a small distance. These architectural remains are evidence of his faith in both religions and are expressed in numerous couplets attributed to him which make direct or indirect references to his proximity to both religions.



Figure 4.3: A mosque attached to the place of Laldas's meditation

Laldas met one of his future wives, Bhogari, at this place. Bhogari's father was a shepherd who spent time with Laldas. In India, animal grazing overseen by *charwāhā/gwāl* (shepherds) is a communal practice and a popular trope in local religions; for example, the god Krishna spent his adulthood in the company of *gwāls*.

One day, in the absence of her father, Bhogari took their cows to the grazing fields in the mountains and there met Laldas for the first time. She told Laldas that her father had been arrested by Mughal state revenue officials. My informants and bards referred to the crime of Bhogari's father as non-payment of *jamā* (rent), which indicates the Meo peasants' experience in relation to the Mughal state.

By this time Laldas was famous for his miracles, especially in the service of poor and needy people. He produced a gold coin and gave it to Bhogari so that she could pay her father's debt and free him from prison but he swore her to secrecy. Bhogari was flattered by the saint's action and decided to marry him. She told her father of her decision when he returned home and Bhogari and

Laldas got married. Thus, Laldas took on the second stage of the Hindu life cycle, that of a householder.

Laldas's marriage is important as it provided Meo peasants with an example of householder asceticism, unlike the Nath yogis who advocated a complete detachment from the material world. The saint's model of married householder asceticism was more in tune with the peasant ideals of the Meos. Moreover, Laldas's beliefs in the *nirgun* Bhakti of Ram complemented the Islamic conception of Allah, a formless entity. For instance, the Sufi concept of *wahdat-al-wujud* (unity of being) finds a closer structural parallel with the interpretations of non-dualism provided by Indian philosophers like Shankara, Chaitanya and Nimbarkar. *Wahdat-al-wujud* finds its ultimate expression in the doctrines of *nirgun* saints such as Kabir (Alam 2004, pp. 91–8). Alam writes that this idea of the oneness of God:

was expressed in the *nirgun* Bhakti assertion of the fundamental unity of Hindus and Turks. Kabir, for instance, saw no difference between Ram and Rahman. Notable in his poetry is the coalescence of Hari and Hazrat, Krishna and Karama, Muhammed and Mahadev, Ram and Rahim.
(pp. 91-2)

A conversation with a Sufi saint, Chishti Gadan of Tijara, who is supposed to have inspired Laldas to work for the cause of *dīn* (religion) expresses the same concern of *wahdat-ul-wujud*:

gadan kahe tum dar mat māno, dīn durast kar durmat bhāno
durmat kutiyā dur udāo, hindu-turak kū rāh gawāho
hindu-turak ka aisā hait, jaisè dharā bijurā khèt
pahel vidu kā yah jashlè, sāi kahèn soi kah dè.
(Dungarisi, p. 7).

Gadan says don't be afraid, strengthen your religion and
eradicate evil thought
Banish the evil of bad thought, show the path to Hindus and
Turks
Such is the manner of Hindu-Turks, like a man of straw in a
field
First take this vow, whatever *sāi* (God) says is so.

The conversation between Laldas and Gadan shows both Hindus and (Turks) Muslims the right path. The ethnic label 'Turk' is synonymous with Muslims and shows the multifarious nature of religious identity, in which the institutional versions of religions were associated with the political representatives of the state, such as Turks and Mughals, or religious elites like the Brahmins and Mullahs. Here, the concern for the institutional form of Islam (like Sahab Khan's concerns) is associated with Mughal power. Often in the text ethnic label 'Turk' is used to depict the Islam of the political rulers. In the folk world, religious categories were often replaced by such ethnic labels (Turks, Mughals) or sect names (Bhakti, Sufi, and Naga traditions), prioritising the latter over the former.

In many other verses of the *Nuktāvālī*, the Bhakti and Sufi modes of piety are seen as true paths that are different from the ways of both institutionalised religions.²⁰ The conversation between the Chishti saint and Laldas resonate on two levels. Firstly, the *nirgun* Bhakti and the Islamic conception of Allah do not differ much in their imagination of the Almighty. Secondly, their critiques of hegemonic religions are predicated on common Hindu and Muslim practice as distinguished by ignorance and the absence of a true love of God. The

²⁰ I am not able to cite all the verses here. They repeatedly appeal to Hindus and Muslims to follow *nirgun* Bhakti.

unanimity of the two figures in the narratives thus illuminates the critique of both Islamic ways of life and Hindu modes of worship. These two traditions enhanced and complemented each other.

Laldas thus presented a unique form of religious liminality and a betwixt-and-between zone which unsettled fixed notions of religion. The linguistic complexities in the text above display this liminal status and challenge the edifices of both Hinduism and Islam. Here I borrow from Victor Turner's (1969) theory of liminality and its development by scholars such as Shail Mayaram and Dominique Sila Khan (Khan 2004a, pp. 1–10; Khan 2004b; Mayaram 1997c, 2004a). Liminal entities straddle thresholds; they are betwixt and between, representing margins and ambiguity. For instance, according to Turner, 'deaths, being in the womb, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, an eclipse of the sun or moon depict liminal situations' (pp. 94–130) and are stages of separation from fixed points in society. This concept of liminality breaks from social structures, challenges established norms and creates ambiguous situations. It can be permanent or move into new phases (post-liminality) accompanied by transformed identities.

Saint Laldas's liminal status is visible in his non-observance of the Islamic practices of *rozā* and *namāz*, despite being born a Muslim. But the text shows that Laldas also opposes Hindu religious customs. For example, he does not condone idol worship, although it is one of the central aspects of Hinduism, but instead encourages the *nirgun* Bhakti of Ram. This works against Brahminical Hinduism and the *sagun* mode of devotion that was widely prevalent at the time. Laldas thus separates himself from both the Muslim identity of his birth and from orthodox Hindu forms of religious practice. He stood for *nirgun* Bhakti ideas that were compatible with his Islamic faith.

The hagiography's goal of detaching Laldas from Islamic aspects, although successful, could not hide the saint's distinctiveness. The text stressed that Laldas was a Bhakti saint and adherent of Ram, but this was not the only story. There are occasional references in the text that give some indication of Laldas's equal proximity to the Islamic religion. Laldas foreswore some Islamic and Hindu rituals and borrowed concepts from both religions to create an alternative set of practices in a liminal space where the participants' preceding identities, groups or solidarities could be transformed into new behaviours and rituals. This inter-structural liminal period was also a period of creativity.

It is from this perspective of liminality that the ambiguity about Laldas's identity as a Hindu *sant* and/or a Muslim *pīr* should be seen. Laldas is said to have gone on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca three times during his life. On each of his journeys, he brought back a brick and used it in building mosques. Two mosques, the Mecca and Medina, still exist in the vicinity of his shrines at Rasgan village where he spent his married life. As an incipient Indic cultural tradition, this kind of religious interaction is necessarily an indication of the co-subsistence of opposite religious values alongside the desired ones. In this process, religious synthesis and the negation of values take place simultaneously. For instance, when a person follows mixed religious practices, he or she can simultaneously be both Hindu and Muslim, representing a break from already established categorical societal norms. For instance, when state forces came to take Laldas to Sahab Khan, Laldas was sitting at the Mecca Mosque he had built, despite the fact that he was an adherent of Ram:

us fakar ko dekho jāye, es ghorā pe lāo chadāi
dehādè jab nagalè aayè, makkā mahjad baithe pāyè
(Dungarisi, p. 12).

Go and see that *fakir* (mendicant), bring him on this horse
When they reached Nagla, they saw sitting him at the Mecca
Mosque.

Laldas was reciting *saī* (God) Ram's name at the Mecca mosque (figure 4.4). For the saint, religion and its symbols were to be used to invoke the one formless entity. Other similar verses in the text also make it clear that, although the text is oriented towards Hinduism, it clearly signposts the saint's proximity to as well as distance from both Islamic and Hindu religious symbols and practices.²¹



Figure 4.4: The abandoned Mecca Mosque

Later, as he consolidated himself in his religious beliefs, despite being a Muslim Laldas advocated not only *nirgun* Bhakti (formless devotion) but also preached the values of cow herding and vegetarianism. Vegetarianism was central to the formation of his cult. He taught five rules: abstaining from the killing of animals and eating meat (especially beef); abstaining from alcohol consumption; not partaking of any food in a daughter's house; not growing

²¹ While there is little explicit representation of Islamic aspects in the text, a careful reading of the couplets indirectly points to this aspect.

tobacco and sugar cane; not stealing; and the chanting of Ram's name. His teachings continue to be followed by people of both religions.

Muslims in this area believe that, as long as these five tenets are followed, the people there will continue to receive the saint's blessings and protection. His love for cows was so well known that, until recent times, Meo Muslims would donate a young yellow heifer to his tomb in times of distress. For example, Meo Muslim still believe that, if the rain fails, a yellow cow should be offered to the saint and there will be a downpour before the supplicants arrive home.²² This yellow heifer will turn into a cow living in the vicinity and protection of the saint.

Cow-veneration is usually seen as a Hindu tradition. The majority of Hindus consider Muslims to be the natural enemy of cows since they eat beef. In the cultural practices of Meo Muslims of Laldasi, the cow functions as an Indic religious symbol within the context of a peasant-hood like other Hindu peasant communities. The cow has now been completely appropriated by right-wing militant Hindutva proponents to gain political mileage. For Meo Muslims who are Laldas followers, however, the veneration of cows is imbricated with their peasant identity and rustic religiosity across religions.

Many folk cults evoke the centrality of peasant life through their teachings, including those of Tejaji among Jat peasants in Rajasthan, the cowherd god Krishna among Yadav/Ahir peasants, Gazi Miyan among Ahir and Kurmi peasants in Uttar Pradesh, and Baba Laldas among the Meos. Grazing, saving the life of cows, and taking care of them were everyday characteristics of peasant rusticity. Both Tejaji and Gazi Miyan in the respective folklores of Rajasthan and the Gangetic belt died to save cows from Hindu attackers (Amin

²² Fieldnotes.

2016; Bharucha & Kothari 2003). The protection and nourishment of the cow constitutes the central strand in the life stories of these folk religious figures from both Hindu and Muslim peasant backgrounds. Although their cults attract people from all caste backgrounds, including upper caste Brahmins and Baniyas of orthodox religious standing, the centrality of peasant life lived by these saints evokes the religiosity of folk worlds in which Indic themes found their most profound expression. However, it is important to remember here that the love of cows as an Indic phenomenon closely follows the Krishnaite tradition among cow herders. Religious communities and caste groups of peasant origins commonly share similar stories with identical plots. Similarly, the Meo Muslim saint Laldas and his Muslim followers in Mewat respect and venerate cows as much as other Hindus do simply because of the peasant religiosity that provided the origin for the practice. More particularly, cow veneration practice symbolises a distinction between the peasant and non-peasant worlds, between non-Brahminical and Brahminical religiosities and between low and high cultures. While the cows had different symbolic values among peasant castes, they most often represented anti-Brahminical Hinduism.²³

Laldas's followers, who mainly come from the Duhlot Pal (clan) of Muslim Meos, are generally known as Laldasis and do not consume meat. Vegetarianism is not followed in Islam although pork is prohibited. In Hinduism, vegetarianism has both religious and personal traditions. Here in the context of Laldasi Muslim Meos, vegetarianism represents values of complex religiosity in which Hindu and Muslim theological doctrines seem irrelevant.

²³ There are many references to cows in the Rig-Veda, supposedly authored by Brahmins and associated with a hunter-gather society. However, with the evolution of agricultural activity and the caste-oriented system, cows became the symbols of peasant groups. My argument here about the cow as a symbol of religiosity refers to a highly differentiated society.

For instance, how did Gazi Miyan, an 11th century Muslim iconoclast known for smashing Hindu idols and historically hostile to Hinduism, transform into a figure of veneration among Hindus and Muslims? In Indo-Gangetic folklores Gazi Miyan kept company with *gwāls* (shepherds) and also vowed to protect cows—a quintessentially Krishnaite theme—from Hindu perpetrators (see Amin 2016). As soon as one enters the main shrine of Laldas at Sherpur village in Alwar—a few kilometres far from his paternal village—one sees that the walls are covered with paintings depicting the saint’s life. In almost all the images, he is surrounded by cows (figure 4.5).

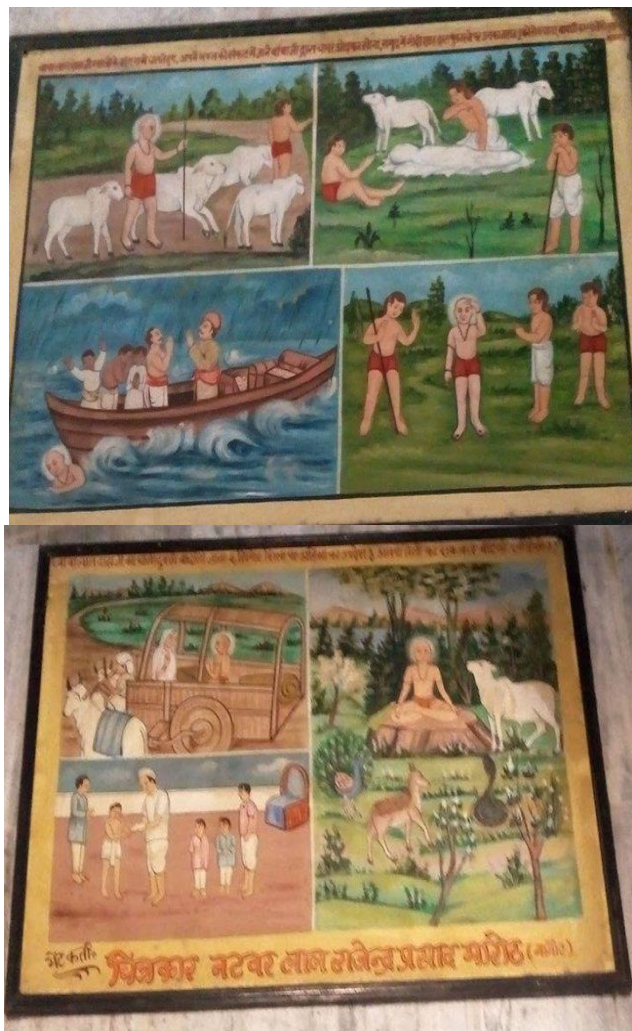


Figure 4.5: Wall-paintings at the Sherpur shrine, showing Laldas surrounded by cows

During fieldwork I noticed that Laldas's Hindu, Muslim and Sikh followers, who visited the shrine in the morning and evening, followed the same practice. They offered grain to feed animals and birds. Other offerings included oil, incense sticks, rice, corn and sweets. The complex nature of these religious beliefs is displayed by the fact that the priest at the shrine is a Muslim of Meo caste who does not keep *rozā* (fasting during the holy month of the Ramzan) nor recite the *kalmā* (the lines of the Quran); a man who is neither a Muslim nor a Hindu but a Laldasi.

4.2.2 Laldas and the life of a *sādh*: living in a liminal situation

The practices of Laldas's Muslim followers provide examples of the saint's equidistance from both religions and the unique religious synthesis that he preached. As mentioned above, the priests at almost all Laldasi shrines are Meo Muslims known as *laldas kā sādhs*. The term *sādh* originates from *siddh* meaning 'perfect' in meditation. Etymologically, *sādh*, *siddh*, and *sādhu* are related, describing those among the Hindus who lead religiously oriented lives. A devotee of Laldas may be called a *sādh* in Mewat but the term more commonly refers to the Meo Muslim priests who sit at Laldas's shrines, although in recent times some of the priests have also been Hindus. The Hindu *sādhs* belong to diverse communities (Brahmans, Gujars and Badhai) and are currently performing priestly rites at two different Laldasi shrines. It is not clear when they began this role. Muslim *sādhs* traditionally performed this duty, which has brought upon them the disapproval of non-Laldasi Muslims. In one famous popular saying, the *sādhs'* lifestyle is the object of sarcasm and disapproval:

*dhāri-moonch katā kè raho rishāy
dono dīn sū jāyego lāldās ko sādhs.*

They are pleased to shave off their moustaches and beards
They will fail both religions, these *sādhs* of Laldas.

Any tradition that potentially surpasses the tenets of Hinduism and Islam encounters criticism because it destabilises the very edifice supporting these beliefs. My interviews with many *sādhs* of Hindu and Muslim backgrounds revealed that in many aspects of their personal lives their behaviours frequently crossed over religious boundaries (figure 4.6). Muslim *sādhs*, especially the old generation, do not grow moustaches or beards, nor do they pray in mosques or fast during the holy month of Ramzan.



Figure 4.6: Muslim and Hindu *sādhs* of Laldas

*Clockwise from left, images 2 and 6 are of the Hindu *sādhs**

Nasimuddin—a *sādh* of Laldas—has never physically touched meat in his life. He believes that if any *sādh* did so, the saint would penalize that person so no-one in his family breaches this regulation. He recollects that his nephew once breached this code and ate meat and had severe stomach pain.²⁴ He was then

²⁴ Without telling anyone in the family, the nephew tested meat in the company of friends.

bathed and taken to the shrine to ask for forgiveness. Generations of Nasimuddin's family have been custodians of the Sherpur Shrine and have followed the Laldasi path.²⁵

Meo Muslim *sādhs* face numerous social issues in their communities as a result of their beliefs and practices. The marriage of their children can be complicated as prospective in-laws expect adherence to purist Islamic conduct, especially after the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in the area. On the day of the Nasimuddin's daughter's marriage, Muslim relatives of the groom who were of Tablighi background insisted on serving meat at the wedding occasion which led to a confrontation and eventually the cancellation of the marriage.²⁶

Newly arrived brides in Laldasi families go to the shrine first in order to develop a connection with the cult and leave behind the practices of their families of origin. Ruksana (figure 4.7), the wife of Nisamuddin, recalls that for her it was a smooth transition from her previous family values. She believes that the saint fortified her at every step as at that time no-one questioned the Laldasi religious practices. According to her, now life is harder as other Muslims want the Laldasi to espouse pure Islamic ideals. Her husband has compromised by attending the village mosque and celebrating the major festivals of Eid and Bakr-e-Eid. This pressure to conform to Islamic rules has not made the Laldasi Meo Muslims deviate from the core values of the cult; rather, it has led to the invention of new traditions, such as making adjustments for reformist teachings within the Laldas traditional belief system. For instance, since Bakr-e-Eid is an Islamic festival of a sacrifice, Laldasi Muslims buy goats and give them to somebody else to sacrifice on their behalf so that they do not

²⁵ Interview with Nasimuddin 5th August 2016.

²⁶ Nasimuddin suggested they eat meat outside the wall of the Laldas shrine but not in the premises where they live.

contradict Laldas's teachings.²⁷ Every Muslim *sādh* thus tries to balance the two faiths.



Figure 4.7: Ruksana, a female Laldas sādh

Hindus, too, in some cases, have started using the term *sādh* as a second denomination of their names. However, the rule for Hindu devotees of Laldas is that they cannot worship any goddesses, as Hindu goddesses accept meat in ritual offerings. I found out that many young Hindus from Punahana who used to worship Kali had to stop praying to her when they embraced Laldas. The saint has appeared to people in dreams, exhorting them to have faith in Sufi saints instead of worshipping a goddess, thus showing the connection of the Laldasi cult with Sufism.

4.2.3 The case of mixed rituals at the Laldas shrines

Every day it is the duty of the *sādh* to bathe and open the shrine and perform *ārti* in front of Laldas's grave (figure 4.8). A group of Hindu devotees, including

²⁷ Interview with Ruksana 7th September 2016.

the members of the Sherpur temple committee, join the *sādh* for evening prayers. The Muslim priest's austere lifestyle, and his performance of Hindu rituals at the saint's shrine which resembles an Islamic *dargāh*, signifies the border crossings in Indic lives. The rituals include Hindu style *ārti* and *bhajans* (Hindu religious songs) with Hindu devotees.



Figure 4.8: The current Muslim sādhi performing ārti at the Sherpur shrine

Most Hindus do not see any conflict in these practices since they worship a diverse range of gods. Another example of mixed practice is the offering of cloth to the saint and the protectors of his grave. These protectors are called *fakirs* or *sayyeds*. There are four of them located at each corner of the Sherpur shrine. The grave of these *sayyeds* symbolically indicated the protection of the shrine and the saint. These four *sayyeds* (*fakirs*) receive a *chaddar/galeb*, a piece of cloth designed to cover graves and an Islamic symbol offered to other Sufi saints. While offering the cloth to Laldas and the four *sayyeds*, Hindus as well as Muslims adopt the Islamic manner of obeisance, but the cloth for Laldas is not green as at Sufi *dargāhs*, but white.

Sallu, an elderly *sādh* who claims to be a hundred years old, claimed that the practice of offering white *chaddars* was 'a perpetual tradition at least in my life span and probably in my father's too', not a recent change.²⁸ The symbolism of offering white cloth to Laldas, a customary apparel for Hindu ascetics, along with the green cloth to *sayyeds* (traditional for the Islamic dead) synthesizes differing religious symbolism and practices in the cult. Both Hindu or Muslim devotees buy both white and green *chaddars* to offer to the saint and the *sayyeds* respectively (figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9: White sheets offered to Laldas (top left), a visitor carrying sheets (top right), and a Sayyed's tomb with the green sheet (lower left and right)

Unlike many other Sufi saints who are typically worshipped on Thursdays, Laldas is customarily worshipped on Sundays, his birth day, although visitors pray at the shrine every day, most prostrating themselves in front of the grave. They then circumnavigate the grave, walking on the path between the main

²⁸ Interview with Salamuddin 10th August 2016.

sanctum and the outer walls, Muslim reciting verses from the Quran and Hindus singing the *bhajans* of Laldas.

It appears, then, that, like other Bhakti figures such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Dadu, through his teachings Laldas rejected the prevalent social-religious hierarchy.²⁹ Many saints from lower socio-economic backgrounds questioned the idea of caste and religious identity. Laldas's teachings reflected the peculiar Meo caste relations towards both religions and the peasant background of his family and community. His major concern was the transcendence of both Hindu and Muslim institutional religiosity (i.e. Hindu Sanskritic culture and Islamic political form) by imbricating Meo relationships with vernacular Hinduism and Islam, thus rendering fluid the boundaries between the sect and both religions. Sects like Laldas both defined one's religious status and also made the religious categories of Hindu and Muslim less crucial. In the next section, I discuss the image and popular stories of Shah Chokha to describe the nature of popular Islam in Mewat.

4.3. The Sufi Saint Shah Chokha and popular Islam

The Sufi Saint Shah Chokha (1524–1592 C.E.) was probably a contemporary of the medieval Muslim ruler Akbar (r. 1556–1605). While there are no contemporary historical sources, popular tales record that, after meeting the Sufi saint, Sheikh Salim Chishti of Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar supposedly visited Shah Chokha seeking blessings for a son. As noticed in chapter one, Shah Chokha is said to have replied, 'As our beloved elder brother Sheikh Salim has wished for you, so do I, you will soon be blessed with a son'. After receiving the

²⁹ See, Callewaert & Friedlander (1992) and Friedlander (1996, pp. 106–123) especially for Saint Ravidas's concerns for salvation in the social context of the struggle between Bhakti saints and the orthodox Brahmnical tradition.

saint's blessings, Akbar promised to build his *makbarā* (tomb) and a *qankāh* (a Sufi hospice), a promise that he kept.

The experience of a miracle by visitors (Hindu, Muslim and others) or their fulfilment of their wishes being as a result of their faith in Sufi saints forms an important strand in popular Islam in India. If the wishes of a visitor to such tombs are fulfilled, that person will show gratitude to the saint in various ways, including offering a *chaddar* or installing memorabilia.³⁰ It may be that Shah Chokha's tomb was constructed on Akbar's orders after his wish for a son was fulfilled but an alternative narrative holds that *djinnns* (creatures of fire in Islamic mythology) were responsible for erecting the tomb in a single night. In any case, Shah Chokha's tomb has been a centre of popular Islam in the area ever since.

Apart from appeals for miracles and boons, the *dargāh* had many useful purposes in social life in Mewat. Often, it was the location for *panchāyat* meetings where disputes were resolved, since it was believed that witnesses would not lie in the *dargāh*. Popular belief held that the saint himself would watch over the proceedings. If a person's truthfulness had to be tested, the community would take him to the *dargāh*, with some rice grains in his hand, and ask the *maulavi* (Islamic scholars) to read a few Quranic verses. If the rice turned red, it meant that the person was guilty. On one occasion when I was present, there was a land dispute between two families. The dispute had remained unsolved for a long time. Both factions agreed to a final hearing in the *dargāh*. Some elderly folks were chosen to supervise the proceedings, and snacks and drinks were served. No-one questioned the final verdict and it went as smoothly

³⁰ People donated all kinds of things such as watches, money, images, calendars etc. to be kept in the Shah Chokha *dargāh* once their wishes had been fulfilled.

as a discussion in someone's dining room. This attests to the importance of Shah Chokha within popular Islam in this area.

Sufi or popular Islam is deeply rooted in its local context in varying forms. Afsar Mohammad (2013) and Joyce Flueckiger (2006) respectively suggest the useful terms 'local Islam' and 'vernacular Islam' to denote local religious expressions of Islam rooted in specific historical and social locales in South Asia. According to Mohammad, 'local Islam' represents a lived form of Islam, a repertoire of diverse religious practices in a specific locale. The local symbolism associated with Shah Chokha represented both the diversity in Islam and, as I show in the section below, also worked against a uniform and bounded conception of the Muslim community (*ummāh*). Shah Chokha's life moved between local and imperial/institutional (universal) Islam, seeming to prioritise the former over the latter as evidenced by local folk stories.

4.3.1 The local vs imperial divide and the fragile nature of religious identities

The stories of the local embodiment of Shah Chokha in Mewat construct his image quintessentially a local figure despite being born in Iran. Shah Chokha is not only an Islamic *pīr* but a *dādā* (a grandfather/ancestor) in these Meo narratives. He always stood for local causes.

The Mewat region was an important part of the Mughal province of Agra and served to connect Delhi to both the Agra and Ajmer regions. Imperial rulers were keen to control Mewat because of its strategic location on these two important trade and pilgrimage routes. The text *Ain-i-Akbari* describes many of Akbar's imperial sojourns as he passed through this region when he travelled westwards, either to subjugate rebel chiefs or to visit the famous Chishti saint Moinuddin at Ajmer (Mubarak, Blochmann & Jarrett 1894). The history of tension and contestations between local (Mewat) and imperial (Delhi) powers provides an interesting starting point from which to understand the

multifarious nature of Islamic identity. The fragile nature of the relations between these two orders of Muslims is displayed by Shah Chokha's role in local affairs and his relationship with local heroes.

In one folktale about Shah Chokha and a Meo figure, Dada Bahar, the saint advocated for local Muslims, against the imperial power of the Mughal court; he was not working to unify Islamic religious identity but was supporting the local versions of Islam. This legendary tale about Shah Chokha and the local Meo hero Dada Bahar tells of Rajni, a famous local beauty whose father was a local official for Akbar in Bisru village. Rajni was taken to the imperial court because Akbar, overwhelmed by the stories of her beauty, wanted to marry her. Rajni's father, Randhir Singh Meo, was the head of the village and the local tax collector (see the Mirasi couplet on pages 99–100 in chapter 3). However, his high status did not permit him to transgress the endogamous practices of his Meo community, who had decided that Rajni's marriage to Akbar would bring them great dishonour. To deal with the situation, a caste *panchāyat* (council) was called under the auspices of Shah Chokha. This council gave the saint's best friend and local hero Dada Bahar, from a Meo clan called the Chiraklot Pal of the neighbouring village Kot, the task of bringing the girl back. The saint advised the Meos to do this to save their honour. He did not favour the marriage or the practice of strengthening the Muslim *ummāh* (religious community) by persuading Meo Muslims to enter into matrimonial alliances with Muslims of non-Meo origins (folktale Dada Bahar).³¹ Akbar's supposed desire to bring a Meo girl into the royal Mughal *harem* and Meos' opposition to it differentiates the Meo Muslims' religious consciousness from the Muslim identity and religious consciousness of their imperial rulers.

³¹ The folktale Dada Bahar was recited by a Mirasi, Gulshan Rai. I am thankful to him for his invaluable information.

Marriage practices usually determine the rules by which caste groups delineate their status, and these examples show how the local symbolism of caste honour surpassed religious identity. Although cross-caste marriages among Muslims in Mewat are now encouraged by *maulavis* (theologians), it is still not a common practice. A few decades ago, some cross-caste marriages led to violent confrontations (Chauhan 2003). The folktale of Dada Bahar shows the important role played by Shah Chokha in protecting the Meos' caste honour. Many Hindu rulers from Rajasthan gave their daughters in marriage to Muslim imperial families to strengthen their position and build alliances. Meo Muslims, on the other hand, are proud of the fact that their daughters were always given in endogamous marriage according to caste and clan lines. In this way their daughters' honour was not compromised, unlike the Hindu Rajput rulers who allowed their daughters to become part of the Mughal *harem*.

The Meos' Islam was a locally mediated popular Islam. Despite practising certain Islamic practices, most Meos were not conscious of their Islamic self. Instead, they fought to retain their local social customs and practices. For example, in the case of the Meos of Singhal Pal, a popular folktale sung and narrated by Mirasi and Jogi bards also shows the Meos' resistance to Islamisation. The tale celebrates Isardas, who not only refused to marry his daughter to a Muslim king but refused to convert to Islam (Aggarwal 1971, p. 39).

In addition to the issue of the honour of the Meo caste, the members of Mewati Muslim society still take pride in their past stance against both the Mughal and British imperial rulers (also see, Mayaram 2004a) and in being loyal to the land of Mewat and hence their mother country. Nowadays, they see their traditional loyalty to the land as a case of unwavering patriotism that has never been compromised, even by their religious loyalty to Islam. As true patriots and loyal to this land (now India), they opposed Muslim rulers who came from the

Arab and Persian world and were in power for a very long time. This history is celebrated in Meo Muslims' popular narratives. During my fieldwork, Mewattis recalled numerous instances where the Meos supported local causes against foreign invaders, even when the invaders were Muslims. Contemporary Meos frequently cited the example of the Mewati Muslim king Hasan Khan Mewati, who supported the local Hindu *Rājā* (ruler), Rana Sanga, in c. 1526 C.E. in his battle against the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Babur. This example is often cited to show that Mewati Muslims supported a local Hindu ruler against an alien Muslim, choosing local brotherhood over Islamic fraternity. Similarly, Dada Chokha, a Muslim saint on good terms with Akbar (Babur's grandson), always favoured local interests.

Another event from the same folktale of Dada Bahar reinforces these local/imperial dichotomies and the fraught nature of religious distinctions among peasant groups like the Meos and the Jats. Kot, the village of Shah Chokha's friend Bahar, constitutes the present-day border between two communities, the Hindu Jats of the Rawat clan on the east and the Muslim Meos of Chiraklot clan on the west. Shah Chokha was passing this Meo village when he saw the wife of Bahar, Rajni, (popularly called Dadi Bistrani or 'grandmother from Bistru village'), whom Bahar had rescued from Akbar and later married. The saint asked Dadi Bistrani to make *kheer* (rice pudding) for him. She replied that milk was not available as the young heifers of her house were not yet ready for milking. The saint asked her to bring a pot for milk. He caressed a young heifer and the animal started giving milk, one of the saint's miracles. As Dadi Bistrani was preparing the *kheer*, the saint sat next to her and started throwing the rice in different directions. As he was about to throw a handful of rice to the east after three successful attempts in other directions, Dadi grabbed his hand, saying, 'If you throw away all the rice how will I make *kheer* for you?' The saint

smiled and answered, 'Had you not stopped me, your children would have spread in the eastward direction too'.³²

Kot is the last Meo dominated village in this region. The village still believes that the reason for the Meos' absence beyond this border was because Dadi Bisarani interrupted the saint and prevented him from throwing rice towards the east. However, the folktale seems to point to the saint's real intention being to disperse the Meo population in all directions. The Meo Chiraklot clan of Kot village have always had an antagonistic relationship with the adjacent village Hathin of the Rawat clan of the Hindu Jats. One can find stories of imagined conflicts and wars between the two peasant communities in the area. In stories that I heard from village elders, the major issues of conflict were village boundaries, headmanship and the control of resources. Religion and religious identities were not the basis for conflicts. The folktale of Dada Bahar and other stories indicate that the differences between the two peasant groups, the Jats and the Meos, had not been colloquialised in terms of religious sentiments and identities, despite the two groups contemporary identities as Hindu and Islam. The Meos' earlier connection to Islam was, thus, the result of their belief in and connection to Sufi saints like Shah Chokha.

Stories of past about intercommunity alliances and conflicts are still alive in actual practice. Cross-caste religious village affinities significantly shaped the relationships between present-day Hindu and Muslim castes such as the Meo, Jat, Ahir, Mina and the Gujjar. The same folktale reveals that Bahar of Kot had killed many Rawat Jats in conflict. Seeing the reign of terror expanding, the Rawat Jats formed a brotherhood alliance with the Meos of the Damrot Pal of Bisru village. A similar alliance was also formed by the Chiraklot Meos with the

³² This story is an abridged version of the folktale Dada Bahar.

Jats of the Sorot clan of a nearby village. As a result, in any crisis, the Muslim Meos of the Damrots clan of Bisru will always help the Hindu Rawat Jats of Hathin against the Muslim Meos of the Chiraklot clans. Similarly, the village of the Jats of Sorot clan will follow the same rules.

To this day the relationship remains a *bhai-chārā* (brotherhood alliance) between the respective friendly clans of the two communities, surpassing caste and religious divides. This relationship of brotherhood and antagonism was and still is clearly not articulated along religious lines. Peasant clans and village antagonisms are the main markers of community solidarity and differences here and they are rooted in local dynamics such as geographical locations, concerns about village expansion and boundaries and clan populations etc. This relationship of cross-caste religious clan brotherhood between Meo and Jat villages and clans developed several centuries ago but is still lived in everyday life.

This cross-village and cross-clan alliance bridging castes and religions is not restricted only to the political domain but has been extended to other arenas of social life, such as inviting one another to marriages, funerals and other feasting ceremonies. One particular ceremony is that of anointing the chosen clan headmen or *chaudhuris*, the traditional power authorities who are still relevant although without official state recognition. The anointment is always done by a group of representatives from the brotherhood alliance. For example, if the Rawat Jat clan headman has to be chosen, the anointing will be done by the headman and representatives of the Damrot Meos.

These stories illustrate the point that a significant aspect of Indian Islam is the importance of locally rooted social and religious practices that mediate Islamic identity and interactions. Before the 20th century, local social practices were given far more value than the institutional Islamic practices of the imperial

political class. Local Islam could conveniently challenge political Islam or any other version of Islam. It was not simply that the local forms of Islam stood against the imperial counterpart but that these local forms and meanings also contained diverse Islamic practices. For example, as discussed in the next section, Tazia and Muharram, a period of mourning in Shia Islam, was an occasion of festive celebration in Shah Chokha and other parts of Mewat.

4.3.2 The local Muharram, the Tazia procession, and the urs in Shah Chokha

On the basis of stories I collected from villagers, it is clear that the period of Muharram used to be a grand celebration in Shah Chokha village and other parts of Mewat. A Muharram procession or Tazia was held annually to honour and mourn two Islamic martyrs, Hasan and Hussain. However, Tazia and Muharram, a widespread practice up until 30 years ago in Mewat and Shah Chokha, was very different in meaning from Tazia and Muharram as practised by Shia Muslims.

Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, a leading Deobandi *ulemā* (Islamic scholar) of the 20th century, was travelling through the Mewat region in 1922 (Masud 2000, p. liv). In Ismailpur in Alwar, a Meo Muslim village, he found that most people had little awareness of Islam. They did not follow Islamic prayers, nor could they recite the verses of the Quran (see, Masud 2000; Hasan, A. 1985). Maulana Thanawi asked them what they were doing for Muharram. The villagers replied:

We have a platform, which is called *Imām Husain Kā Chabutrā* (the platform of Imam Sahib). Here, a Tazia pandal is kept during Muharram. If a person who can read arrives, the *Shahādatnāmā* (martyrdom commemoration) is read out here. (When a leading, 2016, Masud, pp. liv-v; Hasan, A., pp.238–239, Sherwani, n.d.)

Maulana Thanawi ensured that the rituals were performed with more zeal. He urged them to call on *ālims* (Islamic scholars) from elsewhere during Muharram for *taqreers* (discourses). As soon as he left the village, his followers asked him why he encouraged the local Muslims to continue with a practice of *azādāri* (a non-Islamic or Tazia related practice) rituals when he had always opposed these rituals. Maulana Thanawi is said to have replied:

These people have no link with Islam, except Imam Husain's name. If I discourage them at this point, there is little chance that their association with the religion would remain and they may turn towards *irtidād* (apostasy). However, if they continue the practices and call clerics from outside, the link would remain, and they may learn the basics of Islam too viz. prayers, fasting et al. Hence, it was important, to tell them to continue the practices of celebrating Tazia (Masud, p. iv Hasan, A., p. 233)³³.

This account of the celebration of Muharram and Tazia were corroborated by numerous historical sources from the Alwar archive that I examined.

In Shah Chokha, I found that on the occasion of Muharram, people dressed in new clothing, visited relatives and participated in wrestling competitions. The Tazia procession used to begin from the tomb. People carried a colourful bamboo canopy on their shoulders. Sweet dishes including sweet rice were prepared and people wore new clothes. A band followed the procession with people singing Tazia songs. The Tazia songs were sung in the style of Mewati *bāt* and memorised and narrated the events of Karbala in local versions. People

³³ This story was also told to me by a Tablighi *Maulavi*. Maulana Thanawi was the teacher of Maulana Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jamaat, at the *madrassā* of Deoband.

moved down from the hillock, singing, dancing, beating their chests and spinning in circles. The Tazia *pandāl* (canopy) was then immersed in the water of the village canal. Shamsuddin, a resident of the village, remarked, '*tajiā hum logo ke liye gangā mein durgā dashānè jaisā thā'* (Tazia to us is like the immersion of the Durga idol in the holy Ganges water).³⁴ During the day-long celebration, the procession was followed by sporting events such as *pattebāji* and *tamaks*. *Pattebāji* is a re-enactment of the battle of Karbala, in which two people fight one another with *lāthis* (bamboo sticks) or *talwār* (swords). *Pattebāji* calls for skill and bravery and the blood of wounded participants signifies the blood of Hasan and Hussain who died in the battle. In fact, I was told that *pattebāji* had multiple significances in invoking the memory of Islamic martyrs.

Similarly, until thirty years ago the annual *urs* festival of the *pīr*, like the celebration of Tazia, remained an undisputed communal event that attracted people from across the region. It was organised in the manner of a traditional fair. Writing in the 1880s, colonial settlement officer Channing noted:

In the Ferozepur tehsil, there is a large gathering of Meos at the village of Khori Shah Chokha, on the 1st to the 7th *Jamad-ul-awwal*; the object of their pilgrimage is the tomb of the Saint Shah Chokha. The estimate attendance is from 8000 to 10000. Formerly, this fair used to be a great place for elopements, it being held a sufficient answer from a man, who left the fair with another Meo's wife to say that Shah Chokha had given her to him. (Channing, p. 38)

Not only had the tomb formerly been a place for elopement, but many cultural events and festivals made it a vibrant place among locals. Preparation for the

³⁴ Interview with Shamsuddin 3rd July 2016.

urs would begin 15 days in advance. In front of the main gate, bangle and cloth hawkers, sweets sellers, entertainers or a circus would establish themselves for half a month. People would visit with their children during the week-long celebration. Many Hindu families would get their children's heads shaved to fulfil vows taken in the name of the saint. The *biryāni* feast on the main day of *urs* would attract largest gathering. A mound of cooked rice with meat in it would be piled up in one corner of the *dargāh* to be distributed among visitors. Every evening the festive occasion buzzed with musical events. The Sufi musical *qawwāli* was the main attraction for devotees of the saint.³⁵

At the time of my visit these events at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha constituting local Islam were either no longer active or were not celebrated in the original form. Most of these local religious practices had either ceased or were observed on a smaller scale. Majority Meos and other Muslims in this area presently identify themselves as Sunni Muslims. Therefore, Muharram and its associated practice of Tazia—a quintessentially Shia occasion of mourning the memory of Hasan and Hussain's death at the battle of Karbala—have been discouraged by activists of reformist Islam. Eventually, the practice died. However, as recently as only 30 years ago Tazia and *urs* celebrations held an important place in every Meo household.³⁶

Afsar (2013) suggests that a form of universal Islam—in opposition to vernacular/local Islam—is trying to localise itself in South Asia and beyond. It is 'a normative version of Islam' (Mohammad, p. 7). 'Universal Islam' becomes localised by a complex and multivocal process that may not be reducible to the terms 'vernacular' or 'local' (p. 4). This universal or global Islam is exclusionary

³⁵ Fieldnotes, cited from stories told by people.

³⁶ Many informants remembered this custom of Tazia celebration as being prevalent among Mewati Muslims till the late 1990s.

in nature and is represented by reformists who try to localise global/universal Islam as true Islam (pp. 3–15). A similar form of global or universal Islam presented by the Tablighi Jamaat is replacing these practices in Mewat.

As discussed in the next chapter, the data about Shah Chokha indicates a tension in Mewat between a locally produced form of global Islam as promoted by the Tablighi Jamaat and popular Islam. The Tablighi Jamaat kind of Islam among Mewati Muslims struggles with Sufi Islam, the latter is struggling to survive in Mewat.³⁷ However, a localised form of global Islam and popular Islam may also engage in particular interactions of tension and alliance.

Thus, over time, religious beliefs such as Sufism from outside the subcontinent, along with locally evolved practices, have shaped the diverse religious cultures in India through religious and cultural encounters. The two largest modern-day religions in India, Hinduism and Islam, evolved historically side by side since this interaction began and have over time acquired layers of new meanings.

On the other side, these days, the proponents of both, uniform Hinduism and 'pure' Islam, identify diverse respective movements of their religions such as Bhakti, Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Tantric (Hindu), Sufism (Islamic), ideas as sub-religious strands of the two institutionalised religions of Hinduism and Islam. These sub-strands were both aligned with and differentiated themselves from the ideas of these two mainstream religions, and also contradicted and supported each other, for example in the ways they imagined God and opposed the orthodox practices of their respective religious associations. Although the doctrines of Islam and Hinduism were often overwritten with newer ideas

³⁷ Although Tablighi Islam is the globally prevalent Islam. It drew inspiration locally from Deoband, and its working style contained some local practices that I mention in chapter seven.

about gods and religious identity, these sub-religious strands retained tenuous and complex bonds with the institutional doctrines. The multiple religious doctrines and their various forms exceeded a fixed and institutional notion of religions, sometimes presenting a unique blend and at other times competing with each other. Within these various sects, animosity co-existed with complex patterns of interaction. Both antagonistic competitions and mutual coexistence were unique features of these religious interactions.³⁸

All the diverse religious practices along the lines of the two saints and their cults have recently been challenged and disputed. There are different types of conflicts, contestations are displayed not only among Muslims but also among Hindus, who are now engaged in arguing with Muslims over the meanings of shared shrines, shared practices and the identities of Laldas. In the next chapter, I describe, the reasons behind the present contested nature of the shared shrines. While the shrines of Laldas is disputed between Hindus and Muslims, the tomb of Shah Chokha is disputed between Sufi and Tablighi Muslims. The emerging uniformity in cultural practices, religious beliefs and the inter and intra religious contestations at these two sites from the 20th century onwards is directly related to the influence of Hindu and Muslim reforms and political activities (discussed

³⁸ Right from the first emergence of Buddhism around the 5th century B.C., most of these religious traditions have tussled with the Brahminical religious notions based on hierarchy. Apart from the main philosophical quest for the purpose of human life, the gurus of the Nath sect, as well as the Bhakti and Sufi saints, laid an extreme emphasis on human equality, unlike the Brahminical notions about low and high-class divisions of humans sanctioned by the Vedas ordained religious ideas. What was later institutionalised as a Hindu religion was mainly made up of the bulk of the Brahminical religious worldview. Closely aligned with political elites, both groups of religious clergy, the Mullahs and the Brahmins, and their institutional religions stood in contrast to the teachings of the countless Bhakti and Sufi saints. Thus, contrary to the political and religious elites, the Bhakti and Sufi doctrines were the reflections of a comparatively low caste-class world, with the saints of these sects aspiring to make a dignified egalitarian world based on love and harmony (Ernst 2016; Vaudeville 1993).

in chapters six and seven). However, it is the changing forms of religious cultures and consciousness of socio-religious groups that currently define the nature of the religious sharing, boundaries, sense of community and identity of these shrines. ■

Chapter 5

Religious interaction and competitive sharing around shared shrines

Many sacred places in India have become centres of dispute, marked by intense antagonism. The famous example is that of the Babri mosque,¹ which became a disputed site around the time of India's independence. In this chapter I asked what caused these antagonistic attitudes and occasional violence between Hindus and Muslims in particular religious spaces. Spaces that are not shared, like mosques and temples, may be less vulnerable to contestations than historically shared spaces such as Sufi tombs, where frequent interactions between different religious groups take place. In the 20th century, many such spaces were the subject of contestation over identity, ritual and control of space. For instance, in Karnataka alone, Sikand (2002b) notes five shared shrines that are disputed by Hindu and Muslim groups.

In this chapter, I attempt to locate the emergence of a different religious consciousness around shared sacred shrines in the 20th century. Drawing on

¹ The Babri Mosque was a mosque located in the Faizabad district in Ayodhya, the mythical birth place of the Hindu God Ram. It was one of the largest mosques in the state of Uttar Pradesh. According to the mosque's inscriptions, Mir Baqi, on orders of the Mughal emperor Babur (after whom it was named), built it in 1528–29 C.E. (935 AH). In 1992, the mosque was demolished by activists from Hindu right wing groups.

Robert Hayden's (2002; 2016) analysis of sharing religious spaces, I delineate the ways in which inter and intra religious and theological debates have contributed to the emergence of a new kind of intolerance in relation to shared shrines. In cosmopolitan scholarship, the basic idea of tolerance is about respecting 'others' who are different in creed, colour, gender, religious belief, ethnicity, and so on (Appiah 2017). In the previous chapter I argued that until the late 19th or early 20th century, religious differences were constructed along measures of identification such as, caste, sect, clan, village and ethnic difference rather than on religious differentiation such as Hindu or Muslim; only later, with the changing context, did the two identities, Hindu and Muslim, solidify and prioritise themselves over other identities like caste and sect. Religion was and still is not the only primary source of social identification; it is one form of identification among many, although its importance has increased with time.

As I have suggested in earlier chapters of this thesis, from the beginning of the 20th century disparate forms of Hindu and Muslim religious consciousness began to solidify. I show in this chapter, the notions of two kinds of uniform religions traditionally advocated by orthodox section of society such as Brahmins and Mullahs slowly became powerful as a result of reform and political work in the 20th century. As a result of it, diverse set of religious practices around Bhakti and Sufi saints who opposed identification with and categorisation in terms of Hindu and Muslim were also subsumed under these categories. This uniform form of power advocated by reformist and political elites first emerged in the 20th century and worked against diversity of religious practices and identities (see chapters six, and seven). However, before the 20th century, this religious encounter, despite disputes and violence, was marked by embracing consciously and unconsciously mixed cultural-religious symbols and less by the notions of bounded segregation in public culture so that it contained a dynamic form.

This should not be taken to imply religious boundaries are not fluid today. Rather, both Hinduism and Islam still display multiple forms of plural religious practices functioning around a fluid religious consciousness and a malleable religious boundary. But I show, institutional forms of religious consciousness around Hindu and Muslim identities (uniform, orthodox, political, inclusionary and exclusionary² and the narrow one as often traditionally defined by political and religious elites) gradually acquired more importance, and a powerful existence. Nowadays, a visible and binary form of religious identities (Hindu and Muslim) do exist among Indians alongside the plural religious practices.

The hardening of religious boundaries was shaped by both local and national politics and reform organisations and by changes caused in religious cultures by transformations in their devotional apparatus and religious world-views. After the gradual disintegration of traditional forms of caste relations caused by the slow collapse of the *jajmāni* system (a collapse that is still ongoing), the shared devotional spaces and the interdependence of Hindu and Muslim caste groups in Mewat were negatively affected. The religious culture and devotion of caste-class collectives is usually tied to their socio-economic status³ and their meaning-making is usually mediated through religion. Changes in religious world-views of a group thus most often reflect changed socio-economic experiences.

² Inclusionary of diverse sects under the respective labels of Hinduism and Islam and exclusionary of each other's closely related sects and practices such as Nath, Sufism, and Bhakti. Nath and Bhakti are subsumed under Hinduism, and Sufism under Islam.

³ The leading theorist of cultural materialism Marvin Harris claims that social life is often a response of practical necessity on the earth. In somewhat similar sense, I show social life and practical necessities are displayed in cultural behaviour of people including the religious practices. A change in any aspect brings changes to other aspects of human life as well.

Many saints, like the two I discussed in the previous chapter, preached the transcending of religious boundaries, including the sharing of their shrines. However, at the time of writing, the shared shrines of Laldas/Khan, and Shah Chokha are both being contested. Followers of pure Islam and orthodox Hindus are endeavouring to reshape these saints according to their world views. Both groups have as their objective either to prove the irrelevance of a saint to a particular religion (by followers of pure Islam) or to incorporate them within the standard definition of the religion (by most followers of orthodox Hinduism).

The cult of Laldas/Khan, with its preaching of a unique religious synthesis, has been transformed from a liminal set of beliefs into a zone of intense religious competition. Laldas's shrines and symbols, and the Muslim custodians traditionally associated with the saint's sites, have been destabilised and transformed in the process of the redefinition of the cult's identity. Similarly, when reformist Islam became powerful, Muslims were encouraged to neglect the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha. At present, Tablighi activists (mostly Meos), with the support of the majority Fakirs⁴ from Shah Chokha, have been successful in stopping what they see as anti-Islamic practices. For instance, there is no *qawwālī* music at the *dargāh*, the annual *urs* celebration is organised in an environment of conflict, and Muslims are discouraged from visiting the *dargāh*. There is thus a tense relationship between the majority Meos and other Muslims such as the Fakirs (who support the Tablighi Jamaat) on the one hand and the minority of Sufi Meos on the other.

Similarly, a large number of shared sacred spaces in India are currently at risk of losing their identities as liminal/hybrid ritual spaces and becoming identified as Hindu shrines (see, Sikand 2002b). Although, historically, inter and

⁴ As discussed in chapters two and three the Fakirs support the Tablighi Jamaat enforcing their claims as high-class Muslims.

intra religious-theological debates have always occurred, this active display of antagonistic attitudes at shared shrines is a comparatively recent trend that originated in the 20th century due to the rise of communalism in India.⁵ There is substantial literature on the rise and growth of communalism and about the increased Hindu-Muslim religious consciousness encouraged by British colonial policies (Chandra 2008; Pandey 2006; Van der Veer 1994), revivalist movements (Hardy 1972; Hasan, M. 1985; Jones 1968) and the politics of local power and practices (Bayly 1985; Freitag 1989; Robinson 2007). As Bayly (1985) argues, whether 'a unilinear growth of a more homogenous Hindu or Muslim religious consciousness can be postulated is doubtful' (p. 180). However, there is general agreement among scholars that communal (religious) consciousness generally increased in the 20th century. This chapter asks: How did this changing religious consciousness manifest at shared sacred shrines or tombs? The shrines of Laldas/Khan, for example, are the site of inter-religious disputes between Hindus and Muslims, while the tomb of Shah Chokha is contested between Sufis and the reformist ideologies of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, historical records show no signs of contestation at the three major shared shrines of Laldas⁶ and the tomb of Shah Chokha. Yet these sites underwent a change in the 20th century and have since become disputed religious spaces. Divisive colonial and post-colonial religious politics reached its peak in India in the 20th century and affected all spheres of social and religious life. The political sphere encompassed the domain of religion. Disputes about the shared shrines reflected changing forms of religious

⁵ Communalism in India is often referred to for pointing out sectarian differences between religious groups such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc.

⁶ As shown before, these three major sites belong to the tombs of the saint, his parents, and his sons and daughters at different places in Alwar. There are other numerous places known as Laldas temples now in the region where he is said to have spent sometimes during his life.

cultures. Contrary to the view that disputes about sacred sites are ‘the product of religious forces beyond the influence of political actors’ (Hassner 2003, p. 4), I argue that in the Mewat context the contestations were reflections of local and national politics as well as the evidence of the evolution of new dimensions in local religious cultures, influenced by the changing dynamics and relationships between social groups. The political and religious spheres were closely intertwined. Their differences were principally in the evolution of a new kind of devotion or maintaining their traditional religious belief among particular socio-religious groups.

The formation of separate and bounded Hindu and Muslim political communities is, thus, a 20th century phenomenon. Although these categories existed in the pre-colonial period (Lorenzen 2011; Lorenzen 1999), they were organised around a fuzzy and fluid religious consciousness (see, Brass 2000).⁷ In the 20th century, Hindu and Muslim religious and political communities were in the process of hardening their boundaries and purifying their religious behaviour. These notions of segregation were first manifested in the political arena and later in shared sacred zones. Social groups engaged in shared devotion were also undergoing economic and social transformations as well as religious ones. These processes frayed the shared religious fabric, and the transformation of society and politics affected shared worship spaces. These differences became starker as the interrelations and interdependency between social groups gradually disintegrated.

5.1 Examining processes at shared shrines

Shared shrines have attracted research aimed at examining, on the one hand, their role in promoting tolerance, peace and interreligious engagements (Albera

⁷ Paul R Brass talks about the nonexistence of a single Muslim political community before the 20th century.

& Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012) and, on the other, the nature of competition between religious communities, the forms of communal and ethnic strife and levels of intolerance (Barkan & Barkey 2014; Hayden 2002; Hayden et al. 2016). However, in the case of India, some shrines appear to promote religious conviviality and active social engagements between different religious groups (Bigelow 2009, 2010) while others display more contestation, albeit short lived, and passive tolerance (Hayden 2002; Sikand 2002b).

There appears to be an 'antagonistic tolerance' or 'competitive sharing' within the dynamics of those involved with these two religious shrines in this study. The ideas of 'competitive sharing' and 'antagonistic tolerance' were originally developed by Hayden (2002), who investigated the nature of tolerance among an assortment of faiths at shared sites in the Balkans, the Mediterranean regions and India. In this chapter I discuss the emergence of competitive sharing, the passive meaning of tolerance, and the example of the low-intensity violence around the shrines. In Hayden's (2002) words, this kind of sharing is 'compatible with the passive meaning of tolerance as non-interference but incompatible with the active meaning of tolerance as the embrace of the other' (p. 205).

Most importantly, contestation at the Laldas shrines in Mewat is evidence of the emergence of new patterns in religious cultures. These include the power of the Baniyas (shop-keeping and merchant class) who adhere to *sagun* Vaishnava Bhakti contrary to Laldas's *nirgun* teachings, alongside the emergence of the robust notions of Islamic purity among Meo Muslims. Religion becomes infused with political understandings of categories and boundaries. However, Hayden's compelling narrative about the negatives of sharing a shrine does not indicate the differences based in the changing forms of

religious cultures.⁸ Instead, he embeds his discussion in the pragmatic philosophy of tolerance in democracy, showing disjunctions between the notion of Lockean democracy and Mill's liberty in situations of religious nationalism (Hayden, pp. 216–18). For example, the emergence of notions of Islamic purity played an important role in the rise of Muslim intra-religious contestations at the Shah Chokha tomb, but it has crucial links with Meos becoming Sunni Muslims, a sign of transformations in locally rooted religious culture, an aspect ignored in Hayden's analysis.

These debates about whether shared shrines promote tolerance and peace or not have been multifarious and context specific. Political dynamics play a significant role, with shared sacred spaces becoming contested or fluid depending on the local social and religious narratives. While some shrines promote peace and others interethnic and religious conflicts, this depends on what is happening in and around a particular shrine. For instance, in the Punjab region of north India, which experienced the most devastating impact of partition violence in 1947, the tomb of a Sufi saint at Malerkotla became a central object in sustaining peace. Bigelow (2009) shows that the shrine at Malerkotla facilitated interpersonal engagement across social and religious lines, which helped the communities reject communalism.

The anthropologist Andre Gingrich (2002) makes an important point when he states that that anthropology is necessarily comparative in nature: it is never an isolated study of networks and relations in a particular society (Gingrich & Fox, pp. 1–24). Jenkins (2008) warns that 'the open-endedness of everyday life

⁸According to Hayden (2002), the introduction of electoral politics led to the demise of sharing (p. 217). Although, it was one of the reasons, this does not explain why disputes emerged in princely arenas and long before independence. Secondly, Hayden does not take the changing form of religious and social dynamics into account.

should recognise, the routine imminence of change and transformation' (p. 121). Any attempt to separate these saints, shrines, groups and individuals on the basis of a single and bounded category would be unrewarding. The shrines, saints and their histories, when examined from 'the *longe durée* perspective' (Albera & Couroucli 2012, pp. 5-9) highlight the changing nature of religious sharing over time.

5.2 The Laldas shrines and Hindu–Muslim contestation

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I visited the Laldas shrine at Sherpur with the idea that I was going to a temple. From a distance, the rather unusual dome appeared similar to a tomb rather than a temple. Unlike the north Indian temple architecture in which temple towers look like canopies, the shrine of Laldas resembles an Indo-Islamic building. Various saffron-coloured flags wave from the top of the domes. The pink and white building is surrounded by an outer wall which also constitutes the back wall of many rooms. These rooms function as a temple office, the shrine lodges, kitchens, shops, etc (figure 5.1).

At the main gate in the outer wall stands a huge billboard with the slogan '*pujaniya sant sri 108 bābā sri lāldās mahārāj ji* (Holy Saint Maharaj Sri 108 Baba Laldas)', a common epithet for a Hindu saint, with the Hindu *swāstik* marks on both sides. From outside, the symbols and iconography (except for the dome and the *sayyeds'* grave at the four corners, mentioned in the previous chapter) give the shrine building its striking appearance of a temple.



Figure 5.1: Two back views of the Sherpur Shrine

Within the shrine wall, there is a shrine complex consisting of some *kacchā* (mud) houses and three smaller shrines. Two *kucchā* houses belong to the families of former Meo *sādhs* (the priests of Laldas) who have been living here since before the outer wall fencing was constructed. The shrine complex also has two non-operational mosques, one on the top of the *sanctum-sanctorum*, and the second one in the open courtyard in front of the main *sanctum* (figure 5.2). These two mosques have been forcibly de-commissioned by Hindu Laldasis. Disputes about the shrine and these mosques have been going on since the middle of the 20th century.



Figure 5.2: Decommissioned mosque at the Laldas shrine (left), with the kucchā houses of the Muslim sādhs (right)

In 1945, a court case was filed in the princely court of the Maharaja of Alwar. The matter was a dispute between Meo Muslims and Hindu Baniyas (Mahajan/merchant class)—these two castes are main followers of the saint. The Baniya Laldasis accused the Meos of offering Islamic prayer (*namāz*) at the Dholidoob shrine of Laldas (figure 5.3), where the saint’s parents are buried thus converting it into a mosque (‘A brief history of the case as derived in the Munsiff Court’ 1946). As mentioned earlier, in various parts of Alwar there are three such shrines where the saint Laldas is worshipped, irrespective of who is buried there. Historical records of Alwar in this period throw light on the nuances of this matter. The dispute at the Laldas shrines appear to be nearly a century old. An officer investigating the matter reported communal tensions at the shrine of Sherpur in 1939, including the arrest of several Meos for offering *namāz* on two occasions in 1914 and 1932 (*Dholidoob Shrine* 1946). The officer did not find any concrete evidence to support his claim but his account of the

dispute in 1939 is corroborated by various legal documents kept in the Alwar archive. The matter of conducting *namāz* at Laldas shrines emerges sporadically but nothing of grave concern occurred until 1945 (*Dholidoob Shrine* 1946).



Figure 5.3: The Dholidoob Shrine of Laldas

The civil suit filed by Hindu Laldasis on November 21, 1945 contained six Meo names. The court was asked to forbid the defendants from calling *azān* and offering *namāz*. A month later the accused Meos lodged an objection to this appeal and the Munsiff Court ordered a temporary injunction against the Muslim Laldasis on January 17, 1946 (*Dholidoob Shrine* 1946). The appellate court later ruled that:

the Hindu Laldasis were entitled to full possession over the front part of the shrine and the Meo Laldasis were entitled to perform *namāz* in the back portion. (*Dholidoob Shrine* 1946)

When the matter became serious, the Prime Minister of Alwar princely state took on an active role. He consulted both parties to ensure an acceptable settlement. It was agreed that the status quo be maintained, along with the

rights of both parties to worship at the shrine. Islamic *namāz* and Hindu prayers began to be offered in the back and the front portions of the Dholidoob shrine respectively.

Occasional complaints of disturbances were reported by both groups during their respective prayer gatherings. The situation remained stable until, in September 1946, the Hindu Laldasis insisted on celebrating a *srāddh*, a Hindu ritual to mark the deaths of parents and ancestors. This renewed the dispute. The Prime Minister ordered that police be deployed at the site and advised the district magistrate to order separate times for *namāz* and the Hindu *ārṭi*. Again, worshippers of both religions continued to attend the Dholidoob shrine of Laldas.

The *srāddh* ceremony of the saint on 24th September 1946, in the evening after the *namāz*, sparked a conflict in which several Hindu Laldasis—including four policemen—were reportedly injured (District Magistrate 1946). This incident resulted in the arrest of many Meos who were holding a *panchāyat* (a caste-council meeting) related to the matter the same day. This issue also caught the attention of the media, religious organisations and political parties. For instance, the *Dawn* newspaper—founded by Mohammed Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League—reported on 6 October 1946: ‘Durgah Desecrated in Alwar: Many Hurt Seriously in Hindu-Muslim Clash’ (figure 5.4) (The *Dawn* Correspondent 6 October 1946).

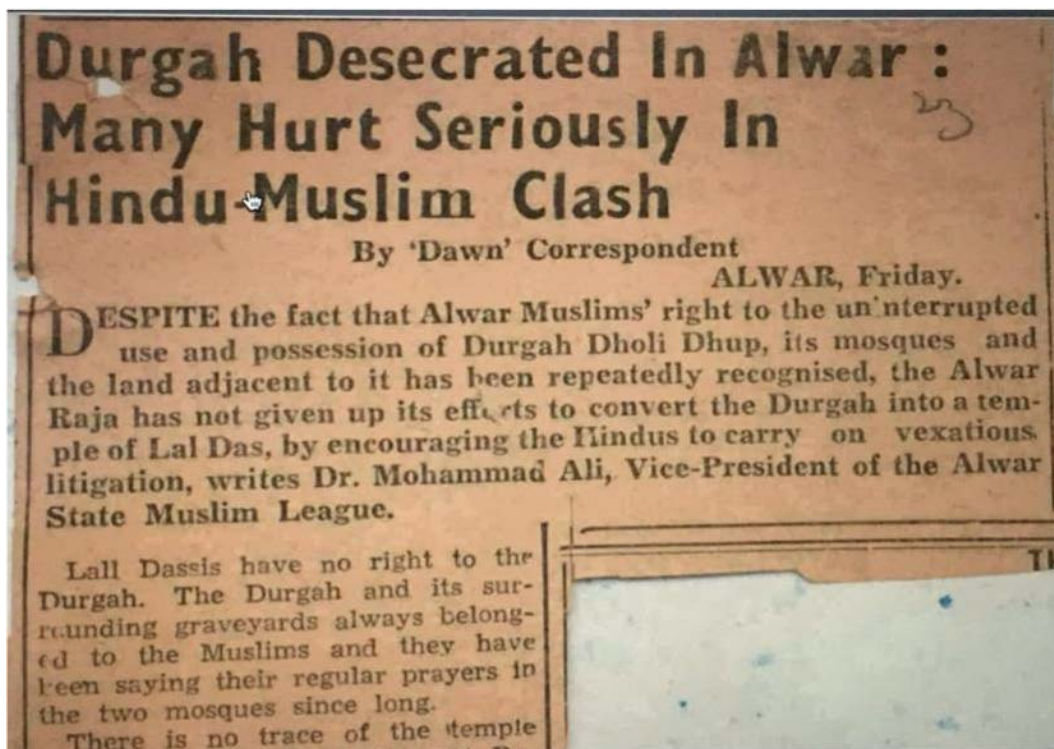


Figure 5.4: A news report about the dispute, 1946, by the Dawn newspaper

Source: District archive, Alwar

The debate and discussions surrounding the clash reflected the ongoing debate at that time about nation and nationality, which revolved around the role of Muslims in an independent India. The Hindu Sabha of Alwar, a regional branch of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, immediately condemned the attack on Hindus and demanded severe action against the perpetrators. In a similar response, the Alwar branch of the Muslim League wrote an extensive letter to the Prime Minister in defence of Muslims. The concerns of both parties remained limited to their respective religious groups, thus demonstrating the bounded notion of community that had taken root in the region in the 20th century. In the same edition, the *Dawn* reinforced the demand for the separate nation of Pakistan by citing this story as an example of Hindu oppression of Muslims:

it is high time that the Indian Musalmans tell their leaders that they are prepared to make all sacrifices which the *Qaed-e-Azam*

(Mohammed Ali Jinnah) in his political prudence may demand, and now they are in a position to stand on their legs in order to march to the gates of triumph. (The *Dawn* correspondent 6 October 1946)

Both Hindu and Muslim politico-religious organisations actively framed the debate to suit their contemporary interests. Muslims accused Hindu Laldasis of desecrating the mosque in the *dargāh*, and Hindus accused Muslim Laldasis of converting the temple of Laldas into a mosque. Simultaneously, this religious contestation was politically influenced by the ongoing political debate about nation and nationalities.

Although the entire dispute remained shrouded and attracted less attention than the partition violence in state in 1947, these contestations took on new form in the 1990s. By this time, the shrines of Laldas were controlled by Hindu Baniya devotees who had formed a trust⁹ to look after the temple properties, organise fairs and festivals and maintain the shrines as Hindu temples. The status of the traditional Muslim priests, the Meo *sādhs*, who lived close to the shrines, was now under question. The Hindu Laldasis admitted, in various court cases, that the cult belonged to both Hindus and Muslims but a process of slow Hinduisation had begun and continues to this day (see chapter ten). As Hayden (2002) argues:

processes of competition between groups that distinguish themselves from each other may be manifested as syncretism yet still result, ultimately, in the omission of the symbols of one group or another from a shrine. (p. 228)

⁹ The present name of the trust is the *Laldas mandir avam vikas samiti* (the Laldas temple and development committee).

This describes perfectly the present situation at the Laldas shrines. The omission of the symbols of one religion and simultaneous introduction of new symbols is a carefully thought-out strategy for locating a shrine within a particular religion. The mosques in the shrines are completely abandoned although not demolished. On several recent occasions of refurbishment, the minarets have been re-shaped as temple domes. Saffron flags and Hindu symbols such as Om give the shrines the overwhelming appearance of Hindu places of worship. However, the Muslim *sādhs*, the graves in the shrines and the mosques in the premises indicate the complexities of the cult.

Throughout the dispute, both Hindu and Muslim factions of Laldas, the Baniyas and the Meos, remained critical of different symbolic religious aspects present in the shrine. Muslim advocates referred to the Hinduising of the site and the desecration of Islamic symbols. For instance, the president of the Alwar Muslim league reported a conversation with the Imam of the mosque of Laldas's Dholidoob shrine, saying that the minarets in the west of the premise had been dismantled and the holy Quran thrown away. Muslims also complained about the hanging of *jhālar* (furbelows) and garlands of flowers as in a temple. Similarly, Hindus protested that Muslims were converting the shrines into mosques by destroying Hindu symbols such as idols and images of the saint, furbelows and garlands. Whatever the veracity of the complains, it becomes clear that these accusations of desecration are also attempts to elide traces of a shared past.

While Hayden's comments on competitive sharing may not be universally true on shared shrines, disputes at shared religious spaces are manifestations of competition between religious groups. This competition in Mewat first began in the political domain, although the issues varied according to the economic and social context. State policy and the goals of religious reform organisations all contributed towards a rise in the general animosity between Hindus and

Muslims. This was aggravated by the need to mobilise people for local councils and political bodies. Under the rubric of responsible government—a demand of local movements such as Prajamandal in the 1920s throughout Rajputana—princely rulers were forced to appoint members of civil society as ministers in the council, a process similar to the Indian nationalists’ demand for increasing Indianisation of services and posts. This resulted in intense competition to mobilise groups on the basis of caste and religious allegiances. These alliances remained dynamic in post-colonial democratic politics. The disputes at shared shrines thus followed political, economic and social developments.

My research indicated that identities are typically contested at sites of border crossings and transgressions. In my fieldnotes, however, I noted that differences are put aside during the fairs and festivals when the shrines become particularly vibrant religious spaces. Religious boundaries still exist but cooperation between people (the Muslim priest, Hindu, Muslim, Jain, and Sikh devotees, the lower caste attendants, and the temple trustees) seems enhanced and differences become ephemeral. It is possible that ‘negative tolerance’ or ‘competitive sharing’ are among a number of strategies deployed by claimants to the shrines.¹⁰

The most recent dispute at the Sherpur shrine of Laldas occurred in 2012 (Parashar 2012), when the Hindu Laldasis who currently control the shrine tried to install an idol of the god Shiva. For the first time in the history of this region, Meo villagers had to flee when organised bands of right-wing Hindu organisations such as the Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal demonstrated with weapons.¹¹ The Muslims did not respond on the same scale for two reasons: the

¹⁰ By the time I realize this aspect, I was approaching the end of my fieldwork. The main reason for not exploring this aspect further was, thus, the time constraint.

¹¹ I learned of this incident through interviews with Sherpur residents in 2016.

obvious dominance of the Hindu majority and the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in discouraging practices of saint veneration among Muslims. Furthermore, Muslim political groups were more concerned with maintaining peace and order rather than opposing the Hindus. The changing nature of social relations in Alwar also contributed to the disputes at the shared shrines of Laldas to which I now direct my attention.

5.2.1 The nature of Hindu–Muslim relations in Alwar in the first half of the 20th century

Twentieth-century Alwar was an exception among other princely states in Rajputana because of the presence of a significant Muslim population. As mentioned earlier, Meos were listed as the single largest caste in Alwar (Cole 1932, p. 129; Copland 1999, p. 118). Thus, Muslim homogeneity at least on caste norms was an important fact in Alwar.

Jai Singh (r. 1892–1937) and his nephew and heir Tej Singh (r. 1937 onwards), who ruled the state until 1948, adopted some pro-Hindu policies. For instance, Hindi replaced Urdu as the official language of the state in 1911 and became the sole medium of instruction in state schools. The opening of private Urdu-medium *maktabs* (school) was prohibited by a new law in 1925 and the building of new mosques was proscribed (Copland, p. 117). In 1930, the state stopped its customary practice of supporting the Tazia festival and gave a large grant to Hindu festivals (Mayaram 1997a, p. 60). These policies in a state where one-quarter of the population were Muslim inevitably shaped sentiments along religious lines.

During this time, the conduct of both rulers became overtly Hindu. Jai Singh reportedly adopted the demeanour of a pious Hindu saint (taking on the *rājṛṣi* title), wore plain saffron cloths, presided over religious rituals and organised *Hindu dharm sabhās* (Hindu religious organisations) for religious preaching. There was increasing Hinduisation of the state machinery, public spaces and

educational curriculum. This was a change from Jai Singh's persona at the beginning of the 20th century, when he presented himself as an exoticized symbol of native kingship, an Indian king who spoke fluent English and drove a Rolls Royce. In his subsequent transformation into a nationalist symbol, he repeatedly demonstrated marked religious behaviour such as eschewing the use of leather goods and Western dress in favour of *swadeshi* (homemade) objects and clothing, wearing gloves while shaking hands with the British, and revising the spatial organisation of the kingdom after the *Rāmrajya* (kingdom of Ram) of ancient Ayodhya, such as adopting names from the Ramayana for the streets. He considered himself as a descendant of the Hindu god Ram (see, Mayaram 1997a, pp. 53–84). He was on the Board of Governors of Banaras Hindu University and president of the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, two leading Hindu institutions of the time. Overall, the state resisted colonisation and westernisation through indigenous Hindu symbols. These were not just anti-British but also anti-Muslim in nature.

Alwar thus underwent a shift in state policies marked by the appropriation of Hindu symbols. Hindus also dominated the top bureaucratic positions. In the 1930s, almost 95 per cent of senior posts were held by Hindus (Copland 1999, p. 117). The people's demand for democratic reforms in the state, such as the introduction of a responsible government under the aegis of the Maharajas based on representation of the people, further endorsed competitive feelings among the socio-religious groups manoeuvring for power. The entire state of Rajputana, including Alwar, witnessed a rise in political activities in both rural and urban areas (see, Hooja 2006, pp. 969–1096; Sisson 1971; Stern 1988, pp. 288–318). Electoral processes for local political bodies enhanced the potential to mobilise the population to seize power along caste and religious lines.

Two reform organisations, the Hindu Arya Samaj and the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat, aggravated communal feeling in the state through their programs (see,

Copland 1998; Copland 1999, pp. 116–19; Mayaram 1997a, pp. 53–84; Mayaram 2004b; Sikand 2002a; 2004, 2006; 1997). The Arya Samaj aimed to convert Muslims to Hinduism, initially focussing on those Muslim communities who still had connections with Indic practices. Alwar, as a part of Mewat, attracted the Arya Samaj's attention because the majority of Meos and other Muslims such as the Jogis still traced their genealogies from Hindu gods and goddesses. The Arya Samaj mounted a successful *shuddhi* (purification/conversion) campaign in and around areas where there was a large Muslim presence. This was a direct attack on Muslim sentiments.

The Tablighi Jamaat, founded in the 1920s by a Deoband trained Islamic *ulemā*, Maulana Ilyas, also focussed on Mewati Muslims, with the objective of turning them into better Muslims. It promoted the slogan, 'O Muslims, become Muslims' (Ilyas 1989; Troll 2008). Ilyas's fundamental concern was to change the behaviour of 'nominal' Muslims like the Meos so that they performed Islamic conduct such as offering *namāz* five times a day. Another organisation, the Anjuman-I-Khadim-ul-Islam (the servants of Islam), was set up in 1923. It worked to increase solidarity among Muslims on political and religious grounds. The excessive attention of reform organisations on Muslims not only fostered communal and religious difference, but also made the Mewati Muslims feel a responsibility to choose increasing Islamisation; indeed, sometimes they were forced into it.

The partition of India hammered a final nail into the coffin of Hindu–Muslim relations in the state; there were massive communal riots in Alwar. Copland writes that:

whole villages were razed; scores of mosques desecrated;
thousands killed or forced on pain of death to convert to

Hinduism, and many more thousands were forced to flee for their lives. (1998, p. 215)

These events were made possible because communalism had already taken root in the state. In 1932, a communal riot occurred in Alwar city over the issue of religious processions on the Muslim festival days of Holi and Muharram (Mayaram 1997a, pp. 71–5). In the same year, there were conflicts between Meo peasants, the state and the Chamars and Baniyas. Scholars disagree on the nature of these events. Mayaram claims that very few Meos participated in the riots in Alwar city. Copland disagrees with Mayaram on the presence of Meos in the Alwar riot of 1932, calling it an instance of communal and religious conflict.

I have demonstrated that the religious consciousness of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ as two opposing ways of being had differed in the past, especially before the 20th century. In particular, in the late 19th century the politics of caste and religion adopted new narratives. For instance, when the British army began to recruit Indians on the basis of whether they were members of a martial caste, many castes from all over India filed petitions, each claiming a higher status than other castes (Constable 2001). Although caste has always been important in India, such moves by the colonial state were part of a new impetus to define its status. Cohn (1987) writes:

through the asking of questions and the compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilise for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves, and Indians utilised the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on caste in terms of social precedence. (p. 230)

In response to the British imperial focus on classification and difference, Indian nationalists used symbols of religion in their political mobilization, thereby making society more religiously conscious. Gandhi, for example, adopted Hindu symbols in his nationalist politics of mass mobilisation (Minault 1982; Robb 1986).

Although caste and religion attained a new importance and attention during colonial rule, the need to construct collective definitions often rendered internally diverse groups homogenous. These collective identifications also conceptualised differences along the bounded notions of caste and religious groups. Thus, religion became both a way of differentiating groups as well as unifying them into a nationalist force. Already divided Hindu caste groups continued to identify themselves as a bounded Hindu group and in the first half of the 20th century its politics essentially became anti-Muslim.¹²

The Hindu and Muslim followers of Laldas were not concerned with locating the saint in a fixed religious space until the 20th century. Before this time, religious identities were fluid and accepting of religious interaction at shared places. The present contested nature of shared spaces has its genesis in the increasing belief in the (need for) uniformity in religious communities, a belief that transformed liminal and syncretic practices at the local level. The idea of a single Hindu or Muslim community was constructed gradually in Alwar by many forces including the changing form of religious cultures among social groups.

In the next section, I show that the Laldas shrines and cult underwent a radical transformation based on devotional differences that emerged in Baniya

¹² New dimension to this anti-Muslim politics appeared with the rise of Mandal politics and after the Babri mosque demolition in 1992.

and Meo religious cultures in the 20th and 21st centuries. These differences became seminal in the late 20th century, when the *jajmāni* relations between Baniyas and Meos disintegrated completely.

5.2.2 Devotional differences and the rise of disputes at the Laldas shrines

In his preachings, Laldas took inspiration from a Chishti saint of the area known as Gazan Tijara. Gold (1992) notes:

Hindi *sant* piety presents closer structural parallels to strands in Indian Sufism than to any other form of Indian mysticism contemporary with it. (p. 25)

In the previous chapter I described the ways in which the anterior verses in the hagiographic text named the Bhakti and Sufi modes of piety as the true path, rather than the institutionalised forms of Islam and Hinduism. In that narrative Laldas and the Chishti saint were unanimous, implying that the Sufi path and the *nirgun* Bhakti worship complement one another.

For Meo Muslim peasants, Laldas provided a further step; a devotional framework in which the ideals of asceticism (influenced by Nath teachings in the preceding centuries of Bhakti and Sufism)¹³ and those of a settled household could co-exist. Meo peasants no longer had to renounce family life as advocated among lower-socio economic groups by the powerful Nath guru Gorakhnath. Laldas's encounter with the Naths is mentioned in another story from the hagiography. His teaching attains superior status over the Naths after a spiritual contest with a Nath guru, Naga Sadhu. The Naga Sadhu once asked Laldas to feed 1400 disciples. Laldas successfully met this challenge by providing huge amounts of food from his *kamandal* (urn). This contest also shows

¹³ Alwar is an important monastic centre of the Nath sect. The Bharthari Dham (temple) of a great Nath yogi Bharthari is located in Alwar.

metaphorically two philosophically and religiously different world views based on sectarian differences.

The Meos, as a comparatively powerful class of peasants, were keen to retain their worldly advantages and superior status.¹⁴ For them, ascetism such as that practised by the Nath sect, which stressed detachment from material concerns, did not represent a supreme value system. Unlike Nath doctrine, Laldas's teachings did not forbid worldly attachments or power. Overall, his teachings were reflections of the Meo agricultural world, part Islamic and part Hindu in nature, connected to both belief systems by multiple socio-economic and cultural strands. Laldas himself was married (he had six wives), looked after cows, and performed miracles. At the same time, the *nirgun* Bhakti that he preached provided a meaningful cultural symbol, one that resonated with the Sufi Islam that Meo peasants followed while maintaining the links to Hinduism inscribed in their *pāl* genealogies.

Philosophically speaking, the distinction between *nirgun* (God as formless and without attributes) and *sagun* (God as visible and with characteristics) may seem vague (Vaudeville 1987).¹⁵ Although seeds of both visions already existed in Vedic and Puranic Hinduism and Sanskrit *kāvya* (literature) (Doniger 2014, pp. 151–56), the *sagun* form was an expression of orthodox Brahminical image worship, in temples or elsewhere, in Hinduism.¹⁶ *Nirgun* Bhakti was an attack on both the Brahminical Hinduism of temple worship and on caste society. These distinctions were applied and adapted by different caste and class groups

¹⁴ As noticed earlier, in their genealogical claims, the Meos connect themselves with the Hindu warrior gods and figures.

¹⁵ This division has been challenged by many scholars. In fact, imagining a *nirgun* deity is very difficult.

¹⁶ Doniger (2014) shows a *nirgun-sagun* tension in the Brahmin authored Puranas such as Bhagwat Gita. She writes, 'Epic and Puranic Hinduism abound in examples of resistance to the *nirgun* ideal' (p. 152).

according to their own priorities (Gold 1992, p. 26). For instance, the gurus from the lowest level of caste society, such as the Kabir, Raidas and Dadu,¹⁷ rejected both Hindu Brahminical religion and caste hierarchy outright but later preachers like Laldas, who came from a middle caste-class background, were ambiguous in their criticisms of these institutions. The saints who did not belong to lower castes apparently partially accepted some religious boundaries as a way of crossing borders. Laldas, for example, advocated a unique religious synthesis rather than a complete negation of religious boundaries. This was deeply rooted in the Meos' liminal and peasant social and religious experience.

The other important group among Laldas followers, the middle-class Hindu Baniyas (shop-keepers and merchants), were connected to the Meos by the *jajmāni* system.¹⁸ Baniyas are a highly dispersed assortment of traders, merchants, shop owners, and wealthy businessmen whose economic status can vary enormously.¹⁹ Although the Baniyas, as a class, maintained an upper hand

¹⁷ Kabir and Dadu are considered low caste Muslims while the saint Raidas was an untouchable. Historically, the existences of these groups are still a matter of debate.

¹⁸ In rural areas, the term Baniya and its origin related to business was previously used for the village grain dealers. These village level Baniyas were not as powerful as the great merchants of the city, called Mahajan (literally 'great men') or Sahu (Bayly 1992). Also, there was not one unified class of Baniyas: the socio-economic status of various Baniyas groups, primarily identified as Hindus or Jains, varied. I am using the term Baniya to refer to 'petty business class' of the Baniyas who were engaged in money lending, trading, and grain dealing with the Meos. Their traditional status was of Vaishya and Shudras (two low caste-class Hindu groups). The Baniyas are divided into a number of endogamous subcastes such as Aggarwal, Gupta, and Jaiswal etc.

¹⁹ The relationship between the Baniyas and the Meos and the issue of domination was far more complicated. Hardiman's work (1996) considers the Baniyas as a dominant group in Western India on the basis of usury practices. In this system, the Baniyas, particularly the Mahajan and Shahukar, were backed by the state. However, in Mewat, usury practices have not been studied. Going by the current and historical situations, I find Meos to be more dominant numerically, politically and socially in Mewat. Although the Baniyas are economically well-off, a large section of the Meos are equally economically powerful. The Meos' dominance is greatly affected by the rise of Hindu-Muslim politics. Baniyas use Hindu-Muslim politics as well as social-religious ties

over peasants in India (Hardiman 1996), their source of income also depended on peasants who used their money-lending and usury practices. In Mewat, through their various roles such as village grain dealers and small money lenders, the Baniyas were closely tied to the Meo agricultural world until its complete disintegration in the last three decades.²⁰ In the past, powerful Hindu, Jain, and the Marwari merchants²¹ had worked closely with the state and had financed pilgrims and patronised temples and shrines. By the end of the 19th century, there was a new middle class of Baniyas (Bayly 1992, pp. 369–75), whose position strengthened further in the late colonial period (Hardiman 1996, pp. 62–92).²² Conventionally, the Baniyas were a caste dealing with trade, goods, imports-exports, business and shop-keeping. Money and wealth are central to their everyday priorities. *Nirgun* Bhakti or devotion to a formless god did not appeal them. They expected to see their deity and expected him to be physically present at all times for assistance with hardship in business or for the fulfilment of boons.²³ For instance, this requirement of the Baniyas is reflected in recent

with other Hindus castes and the Baniyas of outside Mewat to fight against the Meo domination.

²⁰ The reasons for the disintegration of the *Jajmāni* system with the Baniyas are multiple and interlinked. They include liberalization, free movement of labor, invention of new technology, the increasing growth of banking system, and the provision of loans by government.

²¹ Marwari means a person from the Marwar region of Rajasthan. The Baniya of this region are called the Marwari Baniya. They are spread all over India and are a wealthier class than other Baniyas. Jain Baniyas were few in Mewat and they all are idol worshippers.

²² Most Baniyas in Mewat are still small shop owners. The rise of their influential economic status as a class is recent in origin. For instance, in Punahana, most of my Baniya informants claimed success in their businesses, a result of the last 30 years.

²³ Hardiman (1996) notes that many Jain Baniyas of Rajasthan justified their worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, arguing 'Lord Mahavira (the founder of the Jain religion) was a renouncer who would not provide blessings for material gain, forcing them to turn to Lakshmi' (p. 84). Carrithers (2000) refers to the spiritual cosmopolitanism of the Jains as 'polytropy'.

bhajans (religious songs) circulated in new pamphlets in which Laldas assists a merchant when his ship was sinking at sea:

*sahar āgro modi shah, tāke grah dravya ki chāh
jāki ki jahāj samundra me atki, puchat phire bāt ghat-ghat ki
jab bābā tumko yād kiyā, pahuche jahāj ubāri tumne bedā par kiyā.*

In Agra lived Modi Shah, he desired wealth and prosperity
His ship was stuck in the sea, (he) wandered in need of help
When he remembered you, Baba (Laldas), you appeared and
resolved his issue.

The devotion advocated by Laldas combined household asceticism with the performance of one's social duties. This was more appealing to the Baniyas but in a *sagun* mode of worship. They needed the assistance of a deity in physical form.

The *nirgun* Ram of Laldas and his Meo followers was similar to the Islamic deity. By contrast, the Baniyas prefer the *sagun* form of Ram — an ideal husband, obedient son, a promoter of law, order and caste hierarchy. Devotion to Ram was believed to assist in the responsibilities towards one's family and society and in earning a livelihood through mercantile activities. Historically, the Baniyas were connected to the *sagun* form of Vaishnava Bhakti. Their commitment to what Bayly (1992) calls 'a highly orthodox and Brahminical style of life'²⁴ (p. 381) prompted the transformation of the imagery of Laldas. In order to attain the *sagun* Ram through his *nirgun* follower, Laldas, Baniyas started

²⁴ The closest similarity between Laldas teachings and Baniyas conventional belief was vegetarianism. Both Jain and Hindu Vaishnavite Baniyas in Rajasthan were strict vegetarians (Hardiman 1996, pp. 65-7).

appropriating the saint into a *sagun* and a more orthodox and Hinduised form of Vaishnava worship. Schomer & McLeod (1987) argue that:

while the orthodox Vaishnava tradition has affirmed at the level of doctrine that salvation is open to all regardless of social status, ritual barriers between high and low castes have not been really challenged at the level of practice, and leadership has remained almost exclusively in the hands of Brahmins.

(Schomer & McLeod 1987, p. 8)

Thus, the Baniya transformation of the cult is in line with Brahminical Hinduism. For example, in many new temples of Laldas, Brahmins, not Meo *sādhs*, perform the roles of a priest.

In the last decade, Baniyas have begun constructing temples of Laldas in the Vaishnava style of *sagun* worship (discussed in chapter ten). Many temples in Mewat and the neighbouring regions now have an idol of the saint inside and new ones are being built in the Hindu style with Laldas images installed. This transformation from the *nirgun* to a *sagun* form of the saint also implies changes in meaning-making; his teachings are interpreted in the context of the ways of life of Hindu merchants and their connection to Brahminical forms of orthodox Vaishnava worship. This change in religious world view has been facilitated by the money and power of rich Baniyas who dispute Meo claims that Laldas was a *pīr*, asserting instead that he was a Hindu guru rather than a liminal saint. New temples like the one in Punahana (figure 1.6 in chapter one), constructed within the last two decades, are in the style of Hindu temples. I have argued that shared devotion began to collapse with the rise of affluence among the Baniyas and the dissolution of their traditional relationship with the Meos. In addition, before the 20th century, Hindu–Muslim politics was not so polarised and the Meo population was greater in number than the Baniyas. In the last 30 years, the

Baniyas have gained the support of other Hindu caste groups and extremist organisations such as the RSS,²⁵ the BJP, the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council). These disputes have now acquired the character of a dispute between the Hindu and Muslim religious communities, rather than between Hindu and Muslim Laldasis or between Baniyas and Meos. The Meos as a Muslim group are now far more vulnerable.

This transformation of Laldas is simultaneously facilitated by the transformation of the Meo community from a Hindu–Muslim group to a markedly Muslim group who discourage Meo devotion to Laldas as antithetical to Islam, just as they oppose the veneration of Shah Chokha. They now identify Sunni Islam as the true religion. The sole reason for the Muslims disputing the claims of Hindus over Laldas relates to the control of space. If they can control the Laldas shrines, these shrines may provide for the Tablighi Muslims a space within which to encourage the true path of Islam, just as they do at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha. With the rise and success of the transnational Islamic faith renewal movement the Tablighi Jamaat, the Meos have come to imagine themselves more as Muslims (see chapter seven). The situation at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha reveals the tension between the two kinds of Muslims on the issue of Muslim veneration of religious figures like Laldas and Shah Chokha. In the following sections, I discuss the intra-religious nature of disputes among Muslims at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha.

²⁵ Founded in the year 1925, the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*, National Self-Help Group) has advocated since then for the transformation of India into a Hindu nation. Their idea is based on political mobilisation of Hindu sentiments against Muslims and other religious minorities. For more information on the RSS, see C. Jaffrelot, *Hindu nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, 2009); and, J. Sharma, *Terrifying Vision: MS Golwalkar, the RSS, and India* (New Delhi, 2007).

5.3 Muslim intra-religious disputes around the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha

The tomb of Shah Chokha once had unique significance in the Meo peasant worldview. In moments of distress, there was a common saying among people in this region, whether Muslims, Hindus or Jains:²⁶ '*yā dādā Chokha madad kariyo* (O! Dada Chokha, please help me!)'. For example, when peasant carts and vehicles occasionally got stuck in the mud of the unmetalled main road (*kacchī sadak*) near Shah Chokha village, people would invoke the *pīr* with this invocation. The name of the saint, specifically for Muslims, was synonymous with that of Allah and it also held significance for Hindus and Jains. People would ask for Shah Chokha's help in mundane problems such as locating lost keys or misplaced household objects and in more serious situations such as cures for illness. This everyday reliance on the saint's authority is questioned by a large faction of the Meo Muslims and Fakirs, whose forefathers once held the saint's name in the highest regard. The Tablighi Jamaat strongly discourages visits by Muslims to Sufi or other shrines and is increasingly influencing their veneration of the saint.

When I visited the *dargāh*, there was an old mosque, probably constructed at the same time as the tomb itself, behind the main sepulchre. On the western side of the *sanctum*, there is a bigger and comparatively newer mosque, while on the east, a huge dark hall is used as a *madrassā*. A few refurbished rooms above the old, giant wooden main entrance gate serve as the residence for the school children and their teachers. In one corner of the *sanctum*, there are usually incense sticks, a few bottles of oil and a small mound of sugar balls. The grill around the grave was covered with ritual threads tied by visitors asking for the granting of boons (see figure 5.5).

²⁶ In Shah Chokha, there were two families of Jain Baniyas.



Figure 5.5: Ritual activities in the main sanctum

There were also some manuscripts of the Quran and a footprint believed to be that of the saint inside the *sanctum sanctorum*. Between the outer and inner walls, there were many smaller tombs, apart from the two mosques, *hujrās* and *dalāns* (drawing rooms and verandas) also known as *bārā*. Larger prayer gatherings on Friday used the other mosque on the Eastern side. The two mosques and the *madrassā* are the centres of Tablighi activity in Shah Chokha village and contribute to the tensions between Muslims of different religious-ideological leanings.

During my field visits, I was struck by the shabby-looking children in the *dargāh*, mostly clad in dirty kurta-pyjamas and skull caps (figure 5.6). They were either reciting verses from the Quran in high-pitched rhythmic voices or playing rough and rustic-style games, including spinning whirlygigs, kicking cloth soccer balls or simply chasing each other.



Figure 5.6: Children at the madrassā in Shah Chokha dargāh

I spent a lot of time with the head *maulavi*, sitting around in the courtyard of the *dargāh* waiting for visitors (figure 5.7). One day the *maulavi* made a request. He said, ‘Doctor Sahib, you know, our children are lagging behind in modern education. We cannot afford to hire an English teacher; would you kindly teach our *madrassā* children some lessons while you are here?’ Although I agreed, this happened less often than I expected because of constant unforeseen situations, meetings, and events. Even so, some convivial interactions during the few English lessons I was able to teach proved immensely helpful for me in making connections with these children.



Figure 5.7: The head maulavi (lying) with two villagers

Initially, the children were suspicious of my presence. At the beginning of my fieldwork, any attempt to photograph them met with an unpleasant collective stare. This hostility soon disappeared, and after a few classes we bonded cheerfully. Later, whenever I entered the *dargāh*, somebody would always welcome me with a bottle of water. At other times, such as during the Thursday rush of visitors, many children would encircle me asking the purpose of my visit and my progress with the book they presumed I was writing about *dādā* (Shah Chokha). Even though the *madrassā* children were playing near the saint's grave, it gradually became clear to me that they had strong opinions about it. They barely went inside the *sanctum*. These interactions with the children first directed my attention towards the ideological tension brewing on the issue of saint veneration among Muslims.

Every Thursday, when the children of the village gathered to receive offerings such as sugar balls from visitors to the *dargāh*, the children of the *madrassā* were forbidden to take such edibles. Their self-control was often breached when delicious sweets (*ladoo* or *rasgulla*) or rice pudding (*kheer*) were on offer and sometimes caused chaos. The children and teachers of the *madrassā*

missed no chance to enjoy such occasions. Their ideological objections to the offerings seemed fragile in the face of temptation.

An older student of the *madrassā*, Saiket, asked me during an informal conversation, ‘What is the point of worshipping a dead person?’ This seemed to be a disrespectful remark that could offend many visitors. I asked in reply, ‘Why do you think so?’ Saiket answered, ‘Islam has no place for worshipping a dead person ... He is not different from us. He is one of us. If I die one day would you start worshipping me?’ The issue became clearer one Thursday when I was in conversation with a devotee of the saint, Maqbul Khan. Saiket stopped to join our conversation and subsequently he and Maqbul engaged in a heated discussion (figure 5.8) on the importance of saints in Islam.



Figure 5.8: Saiket (left) and Maqbul Khan (right) at the Shah Chokha dargāh

Saiket accused Maqbul Khan of being a Hindu in his religious practice since he visited the *dargāhs* of Sufi saints. I reproduce below an excerpt from their conversation, which reveals some important issues of dissension between the Tablighi Jamaat and the Sufi followers about saint veneration in Islam:

Saiket: Hindus worship dead people, stones, trees, rivers, animals and anything that they find interesting. There is no difference between you and a Hindu?

Maqbul Khan: Yes, I respect him, not worship him. He is our *bujurg* (ancestor/elderly man) and closer to Allah. Why should we forget him?

Saiket: I have seen Muslims bending in front of him. The head of a Muslim should only bend for Allah. No one other than Allah deserves this conduct. You have equalled the status of Allah and a dead human being by worshipping him.

Maqbul Khan: We do not bend in front of the saint. We lower down our head to show respect as one does in front of his/her parents. You seem not to respect your elders. Do you disrespect your father because he is a human being and living on earth?

Saiket: It's not about respecting a person. We also go to the tombs but only to pray for the deceased so that Allah may grant them a place in *zannat* (heaven) not to pray for ourselves. We recite *Darrod-ul-Sharif* (the verses of the Quran for a dead person). All of you (mentioning names of the nearby Sufi leaning villages, Papra, Mamlika, and Sikri) come here and ask for favours from the saint as if Allah is nothing in front of him. If you need anything, then why don't you directly ask from Allah sitting inside your home or praying at a mosque? The mosque is the right place to go and pray about things that you desire for.

Maqbul Khan: We do not contradict the power and authority of Allah. '*Dene wālā to Allah hi hai*', (Allah is the giver). The Sufi

saint is just a medium to reach to Allah. Suppose, if you want to meet the principal of a school, for that matter, you would have to meet his/her secretary first. Then, he would allow you to see the principal. Also, if you want to go on the roof of a building, you need a ladder to reach there. Similarly, the Sufi saint is that secretary or the ladder for us. There are people who are closer to Allah and they are not simple human beings. They are pious human beings like our dervish. We petition Allah through them. Allah never ignores the requests of such pious human beings. This is the way to get things done by Allah with the help of the saint. The Quran allows it completely.

Saiket: It's a lie that the Quran allows such things.

Maqbul Khan: Then, you need to come to our *jalsā* (a festive assembly) to listen to our Maulvi's *taqreers* (theological discussions).

Saiket: All you are doing is committing *shirk* (crime against Allah), hence you are a *bidati* (heretic).

On various occasions, I came across saint worship being conflated with *shirk*. In the case of Shah Chokha, disputes about the saint's charismatic authority rest on the Tablighis' narratives about Sufi Muslims that construct the Sufis as 'other Muslims'. These 'other Muslims' among the Mewati Muslims are Sufi Muslims who do not take the Tablighi line and Muslims who believe in the charisma of Sufi saints.²⁷ Within a thirty-kilometre radius from the tomb, some villages and houses are identified as either *bidati* or Tablighi. The term

²⁷ Their number has drastically gone down after the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in the area.

bidāh/bidat refers to heresy or innovation in the theological Islam and believers in the saint are called *bidati* (innovators). The phenomenon of *bidat* emphasises the nature, character and importance of Islam developed after the prophet Muhammed's life. It stresses the fact that Muslims should not follow or introduce any new changes in their life other than lived and told by the prophet contained in the Hadith. Sufi practices are, thus, considered a later addition in Islam and are hence discouraged as *bidat* because they are not derived from the Islam told and lived by the prophet. For example, celebrating *urs* (the yearly festival) of the Sufi saints, sacrificing animals in the saints' name, praying to or supplicating the dead or the saints or anyone else besides Allah (this includes slogans like *yā dādā Chokha*) fall into the category of *bidāh* and *shirk*. This is the basis of the main dispute between two different factions of Meo and other Muslims.

The crime of *shirk* is a crime against God. The word *shirk* in Arabic means 'regarding someone as the partner' or 'ascribing a partner or rival to Allah'. This term is used by the Tablighi Jamaat to discredit the beliefs and actions of Sufi Muslims, especially association with saints which they translate as polytheism. The veneration of Shah Chokha or Laldas is conceived as a challenge to the monotheism of Islam and the sole authority of Allah, who alone is responsible for bestowing mercy and blessings and forgiving sins. The main disagreement between the Tablighi Jamaat's view of Islam and Sufism is in regard to Sufi saints. The main aim of all Islamic reformist organisations since their emergence in the 18th century in India²⁸ has been the promotion of *tawhid* (the unity of God) and the criticism of *shirk* (actions that compromise the idea of one God) (see, Robinson 2008). As a consequence of this, all Sufi beliefs and customs have

²⁸ The first such attempt was carried out by a *maulavi* Shah Wali Allah (1703–62), who believed the root cause behind the Indian Muslims' decline or loss of power was their ignorance of the Islamic sacred scripture.

come under intense criticisms. In Robinson's words, 'at their most extreme, these attacks aimed to wipe out Sufism altogether' (p. 262).

This debate in Islam is an old one. The famous rivalry between the two schools, Barelavi and Deobandi, has contributed to the emergence of such debates about Islam in India.²⁹ In Mewat, the Tablighi-Jamaat, a loosely connected missionary offshoot of the Deoband School, assumes the role of Deobandi *ulemās* in this context. At the local level, the tensions between two groups also reflect their respective loyalties to Alwar and Delhi³⁰. A famous *mazār* (tomb) of the Sufi saint Ruknuddin Shah, made of dazzling white marble, is located in Alwar. Sufi believers are commonly designated with the term *Alwariya*, meaning 'a person who goes to Alwar to pay respect to the saint'. The term now carries a pejorative connotation of shame, evidence that Tablighi discourse has been successful in Mewat as well as in Shah Chokha.

Sufi Meos also counter Tablighi Meos by mocking them as the new Mullahs of Islam:

*sānp ne chhori kānchli, hit ne chhoro leo,
barkhā mandi par gai, jab se hue maulvi Meo,
hue maulvi Meo, pīron ki kare gain gillā,
bhar bhar kundā khain lewen na kisi ki sallā,
nakti unki khusni, mathe unke syāh,
jaise chhuhrān kā fatihā, aise unke byāh.*

²⁹ The two divisions, Sufi and Reformist (orthodox school), in Muslims among many differ to each other on the issues such as, ways of worshipping Allah, the place of the Sufi Saints in Islam, *harāms*–prohibitions (music, painting, eating meats cut in one stoke). One of the contestations between the two ideologies in India finds expression in the traditional rivalries of Barelavi and Deobandi schools of thought, see, (Metcalf 1982; Metcalf 2002)

³⁰ Delhi is the centre of the Tablighi activities organised from the Banglewali Masjid.

The snake has shed its skin, the wall is stripped of plaster,
The rain has failed since Meos became Islamic scholars (*maulvi*),
These Meo scholars criticise the *pīrs*,
They eat food full of vessel and don't take advice from others,
Their trousers are short, their heads are black,
Like the death rites of (low caste) sweepers are their
weddings.³¹

Most residents of Shah Chokha have been profoundly affected by Tablighi preachings and appear to be committed to the Tablighi's version of Islam. As mentioned above, the saint's *urs* is not celebrated at the tomb, nor do annual fairs or *qawwālis* take place there. These were once usual practice and common sights.

There was barely any celebration in the year 2016 when I visited. Many elderly devotees claimed that the *urs* gathering at the *dargāh* was much smaller than it used to be. A small number of people said a communal prayer and distributed *biryāni*.³² There was no music. There appeared to be heightened tension between the villagers of Tablighi ideology and the traditional devotees of the Sufi saint from neighbouring villages. There had been a violent feud in 2011 around the celebration of the saint's *urs*. Most villagers of Shah Chokha opposed the organising of any cultural program, especially the singing of *qawwāli* and the use of loudspeakers. The Sufi group insisted on celebrating the event in their accustomed manner and the Tablighi villagers resisted furiously.

³¹ This couplet is also cited by Aijaz Ahmad in his paper, see, (Ahmad 2015, p. 76)

³² The reference to the size of the gathering was pointed out by many old attendants, who claimed it used be much larger in the past. In 1882, Channing noted that the gathering was of almost 10000 people. In 2016 it was only around 500 people.

The simmering tension turned into a violent clash with both sides pelting the other with stones. Although no one was hurt badly, this was the second clash.

In the late 1980s, a similar dispute took place within the premises of the *dargāh*. A famous Meo *maulavi* in the area, Hasan Khan Gangehi, had taken charge of the *madrassā*. An ardent follower of Tablighi ideology, he discouraged villagers from visiting the saint's tomb. This led to a fight between the two camps of Shah Chokha villagers who were, at that time, equal in number.³³ Many Sufis considered Gangehi's actions disrespectful of the saint. A large caste *panchāyat* was organised and later removed Gangehi.

During fieldwork, I noticed various verbal disputes leading to a minor scuffle. I observed another dispute one day when I conversed with Fakruddin, who visited the tomb regularly with his grandson. Some young villagers whom I knew also joined the conversation, which soon turned into a verbal spat between them and Fakruddin and his grandson, finally leading to a minor fight. Fakruddin's grandson grabbed the collar of a person who had made a disrespectful remark about the saint saying, '*yā mare huyè budhè tum choro kyo nā'*, ('why don't you leave this dead old man alone'). I had to intervene to stop the fight. I often noticed similar robust disagreement during my field visits. Most villagers are now Tablighi supporters and the *dargāh* is under the control of a Tablighi *maulavi* so there are frequent encounters between Sufi and Tablighi believers. Meos and Muslims adhering to each group are easily identifiable from the names of their villages and the Tablighi-influenced villages currently outnumber the Sufi ones. The Tablighis are also constantly trying to persuade the Sufis to follow their path.

³³ There are now only two families in Shah Chokha who openly claimed to be Sufi supporters.

This concern to discipline Muslims' religious behaviour is deeply rooted in Muslim responses to the activities of the Hindu reform organisation, the Arya Samaj. In the next two chapters, I describe the reform activities of the two religious organisations and their implications for shared practices. In chapter six I examine the Arya Samaj's conversion politics, as this provided an important context with which Islamic reform organisations such as the Tablighi Jamaat arose. ■

Chapter 6

The socio-political implications of the Arya Samaj in Mewat

6.1 Historical background

In this chapter, I focus on the missionary activities of the Arya Samaj—the Hindu reform organisation—and their implications for Mewati Muslims, Hindu devotees and shared shrines. Since its foundation in 1875, the Arya Samaj has engaged in proselytising. Initially, the Samaj exclusively targeted Hindus, denouncing practices such as idol worship and calling for a return to the teachings of the Vedas. For Arya Samajis, true Hinduism consists of only those practices and customs mentioned in the Vedas (Jones 1976; Jones 1995). All other forms of religious behaviour are erroneous additions to Hinduism. Influenced by the colonial knowledge of orientalist scholars, Arya Samajis came to believe that Hinduism in the late 19th century had become degraded and needed revival.¹ The Samaj expanded its influence through various social endeavours, such as promoting women’s education, agitating for the eradication of untouchability and advocating reform measures for equality among Hindus.

¹ Colonial oriental scholars produced knowledge that claimed India was in a degraded situation and blamed Muslim rulers for it. For instance, James Mill (1817) divided the history of India into three parts: Ancient Hindu India, Medieval Muslim India, and Modern British India. He considered that late 18th century India was going through a ‘dark age’ as a result of Muslim rule. The Arya Samaj was a product of this *milieu* and followed this line of thought.

I argued in the previous chapter that there was intense Hindu-Muslim antagonism in various parts of Mewat in the first half of the 20th century. It was easier to consolidate people's sentiments along religious and communal lines against the backdrop of worsening communal relations. In Punjab province alone, numerous religious organisations like the Arya Samaj were established. After a few decades, alongside its other objectives the Samaj attempted to reconvert Muslims back to Hinduism. Through its controversial *shuddhi* campaign, the Arya Samaj directed its initial reconversion efforts at the Muslim castes who had liminal identities—such as the Meos and the Muslim Jogis²—or who had retained some connection to Indic symbols and practices. *Shuddhi*, which literally means 'purification', was an integral ritual part of traditional Hindu practices. Adherents would perform a set of rites, such as bathing in the river Ganga, going on pilgrimage or feeding Brahmins, in order to rectify their defiled status. Defilement could be caused by a number of factors, such as crossing the sea, killing a Brahmin and so on (Jones 1976, p. 129). According to Jones (1976), rituals of *shuddhi* in orthodox Hinduism, such as feeding cows and Brahmins, were derived from the *Manusmirit*, a book of ancient Hindu laws (pp. 90–100). From 1910 onwards, the Arya Samaj reinvented this concept of *shuddhi* by adding new traditions such as incantation of the *Gāyatri mantr*, performing *yagna* (fire rituals) and offering pork as a means to convert Muslims back to Hinduism.

For Arya Samaj reformers, the Muslims of Mewat and adjoining regions were ideal *shuddhi* candidates as their practices and beliefs drew on both religions. The organisation made Agra, a town one hundred kilometres from Mewat, a centre of *shuddhi* activities. Initially, the Rajput groups, known as Malkans, who had converted to Islam underwent this process of reconversion.

² Jogis are also call Naths. These two terms are interchangeably used hereafter.

The Rajput Shuddhi Sabha—an offshoot of the Arya Samaj established in 1909 for the reconversion of the Muslim Rajputs—claimed to have converted more than one hundred thousand Malkan Rajputs of western Uttar Pradesh by 1910 (Hardiman 2007, pp. 24–6). Further attempts at conversion among the Malkan Rajputs in the 1920s sparked uproar among Muslims, who suspected a systematic plan to convert Indian Muslims to Hinduism. Tensions became so politically and socially charged that Gandhi was impelled to write a letter in *Young India* in 1924 criticising the Arya Samaj *shuddhi* campaign (Adcock 2014). The Samaj converted individuals but also had a larger agenda to convert entire Muslim castes like the Meos to Hinduism. The first mass conversion was reported as having taken place in March 1908 at Deeg, bordering Nuh in the princely state of Bharatpur. Sikand (1997) writes:

the Arya Samaj reportedly went about poisoning the minds of the ignorant and simple village Muslims, telling them that their ancestors had been forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslim Kings. (p. 69)

During Partition there was unprecedented violence in Mewat. Partition was known locally as *bhagā-bhagi* ('push and run'). During this time, the *shuddhi* campaign not only cultivated an anti-Muslim political ideology but also used force and violence. It was supported by two princely kingdoms, Alwar and Bharatpur. Narayan Bhaskar Khare, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu right-wing organisation, was appointed prime minister of Alwar on April 18, 1947. He was a person with RSS leanings who supported the pogrom of the Mewati Muslims.³ Police reports indicate that there was intense

³ Members of the right-wing Hindu organisations such as the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS had close associations with the Congress party. Many political figures changed their loyalties frequently.

communal tension in the Naugaon and Sherpur area in Ramgarh following the Hindu–Muslim riots in Tijara (*Meo Disturbance in Meo Area* 1947). During Partition, Meo villages were raided by armies of the princely states and by Hindu groups with the objective of *safāyā* ('clearing up') (Mayaram 1997a, pp. 178–83). Copland (1998) noted the unprecedented numbers of killings, describing them as 'ethnic cleansing' (p. 202). Mayaram (1997a) notes the crucial role played by the Alwar and Bharatpur state in organising *shuddhi*:

teams of Arya Samajists accompanied by a Brahmin would visit villages to convert heads of villages/households of Malkans and Meos, described respectively as '250 years old' and '500 years old' Muslims. (pp. 65–6)

In official and Arya Samaji narratives, Meos were considered 'half Hindus' and needed to choose between becoming 'fully Hindu' or being exterminated. Mayaram (1997a) provides an account of these forced conversions by a captain in the Alwar state army:

The women, if they were of marriageable age, were all taken. They were *shuddh* (purified) after drinking *ganga jal* (sacred water of the Ganga river) and could be taken. No, the Meos were not Muslims, they were half Hindu. In their marriages they had both *pherās* and *nikāh* (Hindu and Muslim rites). They were not with the Muslim League. They did not want to go to Pakistan. But we had orders to clear them. Not a single Muslim was left in Alwar. Alwar was the first state to clear all the Muslims. Bharatpur followed. Yes, Bharatpur also supported the RSS. (p. 181)

The Meos were given the option to either convert or be killed. If they agreed to convert, the Shuddhi squad would shave the men's beards and ask them to eat

a piece of pork (Mayaram 1997a, p. 181). Some of those who converted received land grants from Alwar state (*Grants of Jagir to converted Meos* 1947).

At the present time, the influence of the Arya Samaj in the area has weakened. Its vision of ideal Hinduism has not been demonstrated by the behaviour of Hindus, many of whom do not follow its doctrines. However, their agenda of converting Muslims has been appropriated by other groups such as the Hindu faction of the Nath/Jogi sect in the area. In the following section, I analyse the reasons behind the failure of the Arya Samaj to turn Hindus from idolatry and the new politics of religious conversion in the area.

6.2 The question of Hindu religious crossover for the Arya Samaj

On his usual visits to the Shah Chokha tomb every Thursday, Ram Singh, a school teacher of Baniya caste from the town of Punahana, never forgets to donate money to Muslim religious volunteers of the Tablighi Jamaat. He considers that visiting a Sufi *dargāh* and donating money for Islamic education and renovation of mosques are a service to God. In Hinduism, the giving of money, regardless of the religious beliefs of the receiver, is considered to contribute to one's *punyā* (reward). Similarly, itinerant Muslim ascetics would, in the past, receive alms in the form of grain from Hindu households. Many of these Muslim ascetics belong to Muslim ascetic orders such as wandering Fakirs (beggars) or Jogis. Even in the present, the distinction between Hindu and Islamic symbolism and beliefs does not affect the giving and receiving of alms. Religious distinctions do exist, but they are not the only factor affecting the interaction between religions in the public sphere.



Figure 6.1 Laldas temple in the premise of the Arya Samaj in Punahana

Ram Singh lives near the temple of Laldas in Punahana (figure 6.1). Every day, he or one of his family members visits the temple, either in the morning or the evening. Ram Singh clearly regards Laldas as a Muslim, saying: *'hamāre bābā musulmān the par hamen unki pahchān se koi lenā denā nahi'* ('our saint was Muslim but we don't have any problem with his identity'). In 2015, a new temple to Laldas was built on the premises of an Arya Samaj school. This building also functions as a local centre for the Arya Samaj. There is an open courtyard in front of the temple. Visitors come daily and sit in the courtyard until the head priest, a Brahmin, makes the necessary arrangements for Laldas's morning and evening prayers. Most of the devotees are shopkeepers in the nearby central market in Punahana and come to the temple for quick prayers to the saint. This market is dominated by Hindus, particularly the Baniyas who run the shops. On the outer circle of this market, which separates Punahana from Nakanpur (a very old Meo village currently incorporated under Punahana town and the municipality currently), there are shops run by Meos. Hindu lower caste communities such as the Valmikis, Chamars, Sainis (Malis), Nais and immigrant Punjabis from Pakistan also have significant populations in this area.

The everyday dynamics of social life in this town are significantly affected by numerous factors. The population of Hindus and Muslims is almost equal, but the region has a Muslim majority within a Hindu majority nation. Hindus and Muslims interact with one another but there is a sense of insecurity among the Hindus, especially the Baniyas. Hindu caste groups have reacted to being in the minority by building solidarity networks with Hindu right-wing organisations such as the RSS, the Bajrang Dal and the Arya Samaj, anticipating potential conflicts in the future. The more militant of these organisations, for instance the Bajrang Dal and the RSS, have recently consolidated their political influence. The Arya Samaj participates in political matters but directs more attention to social issues and practices such as marriages ceremonies, establishing temples and schools and criticising non-Vedic practices. It actively involves itself in the social sphere rather than in politics.

The Laldas temple is located in a complex with many other adjoining temples. On the right of the narrow entrance is a temple of Jaharpir, popularly known as Gogapir or Goga Medi, which also houses a small temple of god Shiva. A temple dedicated to the goddess Durga is also located parallel to the Laldas shrine and on the right of the Jaharpir temple, separated by a thick wall from the Arya Samaj school building. An Arya Samaj temple stands about 50 metres away and there is a Vishnu temple behind the complex. The Laldas temple—built in red sandstone marble—is striking in comparison to the other edifices. The whitewash of the walls of the Jaharpir shrine is faded and it is gloomy inside. Almost all visitors to the Laldas temple bow to Jaharpir and Durga Mata but seldom enter their temples (figure 6.2 and 6.3).

Unlike the Laldas temple, the other shrines receive little money, leaving them in a poorer economic situation. The goddess Durga's shrine is newly constructed but the brown plastered cement of its walls was unpainted and it was dark at the time of my visit. Within the temple complex, most former

members of the Arya Samaj have begun following the saint. Those Arya Samajis present on the premises when I visited could not express their resentment openly.



Figure 6.2 *The goddess Durga's temple*



Figure 6.3 *The temple of Jaharpir*

The Arya Samaj strongly discourages idol worship. In Punahana, the fact that Laldas and Jaharpir are Muslim saints venerated by Hindus constitutes an even greater offence in the eyes of the Samaj and the priest of the Durga temple. The elder brother of Ram Singh, who is an uncompromising Arya Samaji, said, 'All who live in India are Hindus; therefore, we should not think much about Hindu and Muslim except praying methods.' He continued, 'Muslims pray rightly to one God though their books and praying methods are wrong'. Astonishingly, he also lamented, 'the Arya Samaj has not succeeded in bringing our Muslim

brothers onto the right path but at least Muslims do not worship idols like Hindus'.⁴ Unhappy with his own family members and their new god Laldas, he still maintains a distance between his own religion and that of his family.

Shyam Singh's uneasiness was evident when his family decided to host a *Laldas kirtan* (devotional musical singing) in their house. Every Sunday, as a part of disseminating the teachings of Laldas, a group of his devotees performed devotional songs in private houses under the banner of 'Laldas kirtan Mandali' (the Laldas Music Society). Shyam Singh was anguished by what he saw as his family's false values. He himself lived according to the Arya *dharm* (doctrines)—using earthen vessels for cooking, chanting Vedic mantras (couplets) and using Ayurvedic products. He does not make a substantial distinction between Hindus and Muslims and considers that both groups are following faulty religious paths. In fact, he admires textual Islam for its emphasis on monotheism and for forbidding idol veneration.

I discuss the Tablighi Jamaat in more detail in the next chapter but would like to emphasize here that there are striking parallels between their teachings and those of the Arya Samaj. Both organisations want to create ideal prototypes of Muslims and Hindus. The Arya Samaj and its *dharm* resembles Abrahamic religions in that it prefers its followers to know the sacred scripture (the Vedas) and use them to govern their lives, similar to the Tablighi's focus on the Quran. Members of the Arya Samaj also hold similar opinions about the role of saints and shrines, eschew idol worship and preach monotheism. The Jamaat hopes that the whole world will become Muslim in the future while the Samaj wants

⁴ Interview with Shyam Singh 7th August 2016. Shyam Singh is Ram Singh's elder brother and an Arya Samaji. Shyam Singh spent most of his time in the Arya Samaj temple. Whenever I visited the Arya Samaj temple, the attendance was very low compared to other temples. I did not see more than two or three people each time.

Muslims to become Hindus. Both organisations are mirror opposites of each other. They expect Hindus and Muslims to not only know the truth but to embody it in behaviour.

The Tablighi-Jamaat has been successful among Muslims but the Arya Samaj has not achieved its goal. Why have these two organisations, with similar goals, achieved different results? There are, undoubtedly, some fundamental differences between Hindu and Muslim social structures and religious practices that have influenced the success or failure of these reform movements. The Arya Samaj has a long history and some initial political success; its failure to become a powerful movement seems to lie in the Hindu mode of devotion. Since Hinduism is a mosaic of different traditions, Hindus may move from the worship of one God to another depending on their context or stage of life; they may also worship multiple gods simultaneously. Michael Carrithers (2000) notices such behaviours among the Jains and terms it polytrophy (poly=many, trophy=direction), while Diana Eck (1998) terms it a 'polytheistic imagination', (p. 22).

The Baniyas and other Hindus in Punahana tend to practice different beliefs and worship numerous gods according to their context and life stages. Many of Laldas's new devotees had to repudiate their earlier devotion to a goddess. They accepted this new condition in order to receive the saint's miracles. Many people moved to Laldas from the fold of other gods and religious figures if their expectations had not been fulfilled by the latter. The Arya Samaj's insistence on stringent adherence to ritual texts is in stark contrast to the ambulatory (mobile) nature of Hindu devotion.

The priest who officiates at the goddess Durga's shrine complained that Hindus were deserting their own religion in favour of Muslim saints. He was bitter about the decrease in the number of patrons coming to his shrine: '*log apnā*

dharam bhool rahè hai ('people are forgetting their religion') was his recurrent concern. This priest was aware that the charisma of the Laldas and Jaharpir cults was a major reason for their wide following. He tried to compete with the rising popularity of the Muslim saints by telling stories about the power and charisma of the goddess Durga. The traditions of these Muslim saints have historically developed on the basis of their miraculous powers. The priest of the Durga temple invoked the same logic to tell stories to match the miracles of Laldas and Jaharpir.

One such miracle story of the priest draws on events in 2011, when a small idol of the monkey god Hanuman in the courtyard of the Laldas temple was damaged in a Hindu–Muslim skirmish, following violence in the nearby town of Gopalgarrh, in which about 10 people lost their lives. The Hindus and the priest believed that Muslims were the perpetrators of the damage. Around the time of this incident, the priest of the Durga temple claimed that some men attempted to damage the Durga idol but were repelled by the power of the goddess, who blinded them: *'ye durgā mā bahut chamatkāri hai* ('this mother Durga is very miraculous'). The priest's claims that the goddess was miraculous parallels the narratives of miracles performed by the Muslim saints. The powerful cult of Laldas has had a negative impact on traditional Hindu religious beliefs and centres of worship in Punahana in contemporary times.

The local Arya Samaj had serious reservations about this cluster of temples but were unable to build an anti-idol and anti-Muslim consensus because of the fragmented and polytropic nature of Hindu religiosity. In Punahana, the Arya Samaj avoided direct confrontation with the followers of Laldas, whom they saw as idol worshippers. I observed this from conversations with the headmaster of the Arya Samaj school, who used to engage in respectful discussion with the followers of Laldas and did not try to persuade people to join the Samaj. Very neatly and tactfully, he tended to expend his

compartmentalised logic of 'we' (Arya Samaji, non-idol worshipper) and 'other' (Hindu who worship idols) in his statements. The headmaster's tone implied that the Arya Samaj was superior. I also observed the headmaster argue with people that an individual may make achievements in life by performing good actions, not by worshipping an idol in which he/she believes. He was unable, however, to debunk stories of the saint's miracles or provide advice to people who required help from them. The headmaster was asked many times, 'Does Dayanand Saraswati help people in need by performing miracles?' These worshippers also needed to see the saint or *pīr*, to do *darsan* (seeing an image). In Hinduism, as Diana Eck (1998) says, the emphasis is on the visual, on seeing the divine image. The Arya Samaj, with its emphasis on the text only, does not provide this.

The Baniya community overwhelmingly supports the Laldas cult. This acts to exclude lower castes from worship. However, lower caste people have made efforts to counter this by organising the programme of 'Laldas Kirtan Mandali'. Invitations to such events are always accepted promptly, although some people feel uneasy about participating because they might have to accept water and food served by lower caste people. Usually upper caste visitors of this group politely refuse food and water.

Muslims are even more of a concern to the Arya Samajis than low caste Hindus since one of their major aims has historically been to convert Muslims. Their predicament is demonstrated by their stance on a recent inter-religious marriage. In this incident, a lower caste Hindu woman and a Meo Muslim man decided to elope and the issue soon took on the traditional cast of a Hindu-Muslim dispute. The local Arya Samaj insisted that the man must convert to Hinduism if the couple were to have a future together. In a meeting, local Hindu organisations agreed that unless the man converted, the Hindu community would not allow the woman to live with him. Meo Muslims

responded with examples of law and regulations.⁵ There was also the question of what the Arya Samaj understands by conversion. For them, it was not a matter of 'honour', since the woman belonged to a lower caste and her body, they presumed, was already 'defiled'. Hindus transformed the issue of caste honour into religious honour by subsuming caste into a grand discourse about Hinduism, shifting the entire matter into the religious domain. Muslim and Hindu groups debated the issue from the perspective of their own religious interests. The Arya Samaj's insistence on conversion recalled their historical *shuddhi* campaigns.⁶

6.3 The *Shuddhi* movement of the Arya Samaj

Historically, the *shuddhi* campaign by the Arya Samaj was not entirely unsuccessful. They did convert many Muslims who engaged in liminal practices, some forcibly, such as the Meos and Jogis at the time of Partition. There are also examples of more subtle conversions and I cite one from the post-independence era when this politics of forceful conversion was already declining. This incident illustrates the complex ways in which conversion works and the changes it engenders (or fails to engender) in the status of the converted person.

As mentioned before, the Arya Samaj considered that the bardic community of Muslim Jogis were open to becoming Hindus. Many Muslim Jogis did convert, aspiring to a Hindu Jogi status. However, they have never been accepted by Hindu Jogis as members of that community which in turn resulted

⁵ It was quite confronting to notice this oppression of women by men of both religions. Both religious sides practise gender and class discrimination, asserting the right to make decisions about the lives of others. Unfortunately, my research project and time constraints did not allow me to go into details of this issue.

⁶ The matter of the couple remained unsolved for some time. Later, I was informed that the girl and the boy were separated.

into the creation of a new Jogi community called the Shuddhi Jogis (purified Jogis). Presently, there are an estimated twenty to thirty thousand converted Jogis known as the Shuddhi Jogis (figure 6.4) in north India, the largest proportion of which is in Mewat.⁷ There is no inter-marriage or inter-dining, and the Hindu Jogis despise the Shuddhi Jogis.



Figure 6.4: A meeting of the Shuddhi Jogis

Conversion leads to a semiotic change in the religious world. But, no matter how hard the Shuddhi Jogis tried to become Hindus, their status remained unchanged. During fieldwork I had a long discussion with Roshanlal Nath (figure 6.5), a Shuddhi Jogi, retired railway employee and the former president of the Rajasthan Shaiv Jogi Nath Vikas Sangh (the Rajasthan Shaiv Jogi Nath

⁷ I collected this information during a meeting of the Shuddhi Jogis. This is not exhaustive but the meeting's long list of names suggests a certain degree of research by the organization about their community.

development Organisation),⁸ who lives in Alwar. Roshanlal's comments demonstrated the Jogis' anxieties and the conundrum of their conversion.

Roshanlal has a cheerful round face, a moderate paunch and a strong upper body. He appeared extremely receptive when I first approached him in his room where he was sitting on a *charpāi* (charpoy). It was a shock when he disclosed that, following his retirement, his legs had become paralysed. He narrated his life story and his family history, detailing his struggles to convert other Muslim Jogis to the Shuddhi community and build solidarity by increasing numbers.



Figure 6.5: Roshanlal Nath Ji, sitting on his charpoy

Roshanlal Nathji had himself converted many Muslim Jogis in his lifetime. One of his stories provides some insight into the complex dimensions of the process of conversion. Almost 50 years ago, in the 1970s, he was in contact with an Arya

⁸ An organization created by all the converted Jogis by this name in order to promote their interests on various fronts. It is a fully functioning body, with different office bearers from the community. It holds a public meeting at least once every two months.

Samaji *pūndit* (priest), Sundar Lal Sastri, with whom he held regular meetings about spiritual and philosophical questions. He had had a deep faith in Arya Samaj teachings since his family was converted by that organisation. At the same time, he befriended a Muslim Jogi, Abdul, whom he used to meet often. When Abdul came to know about Roshanlal Nathji's interactions with Pundit Sundarlal Sastri, he asked to go along on the next visit. Over the course of a few years, under the influence of Sastri's teachings of Arya *dharm* and philosophy, Abdul decided to convert to Hinduism. His family found his decision hard and his two sons and wife decided to remain Muslims. On the day of his conversion, Abdul had to shave his beard, bathe and go to the Arya Samaj temple for the final rituals. After the *yagna* (sacrificial ritual around a fire altar) and the chanting of Vedic hymns, the priest Sastriji sprinkled Abdul with water from the holy river Ganga and gave him a few drops to sip.⁹ He became 'absolutely pure' and was also given a Hindu name.

Despite the fact that the head of the family was now of a different religion, the family practiced both religions without difficulty under the same roof. Roshanlal Nathji, who visited Abdul's house following his conversion, described the cordial relations between family members and said that the different faiths of the father and sons did not appear to be a major concern in the family. Roshanlal's explanations for Abdul's conversion, apart from spiritual curiosity, and shedding Muslim identity behind — an attempt for dealing with oppression in India — were that his sons would have difficulty marrying into Muslim families since they were being better educated than other people in

⁹It is a belief in Hindu tradition that a person after bathing in the holy water of the Ganga river gets rid of all their sins and becomes purified. The Ganga's water is used traditionally in ritual and religious activities.

their community, so finding a girl for them could be a problem.¹⁰ He hoped that they too would convert for a better life and improved opportunities for employment. Since Muslim Jogis consider Shiva as their patron god, they do not regard conversion as a culturally alien experience. This emerged as a focal point in my conversation with Roshanlal Nathji, who said, *'hamāre aur musalmān jogiyo ke beech koi badā antar nahi hai, hum dono shivaji ko mānte hai'* ('there is no major difference between us and the Muslim Jogis, we both revere the god Shiva').

A crucial point in this story is that Abdul was converted by an Arya Samaji priest (Pundit Sundarlal Sastri), who opposed idol worship in Hinduism. However, Abdul was probably more comfortable converting to Hinduism because of the common worship of Shiva in the Hindu, Muslim and Shuddhi Jogi communities. The Arya Samaj appeared to be more concerned with Abdul's actual conversion, rather than his everyday religious behaviour after conversion. Roshanlal Nath, on the other hand, encouraged Abdul's conversion to increase the numbers of the Shuddhi Jogis and thereby help them become a politically significant group. The Arya Samaj and the Shuddhi Jogis, thus, began working in solidarity to achieve the conversion of Muslim Jogis but for different purposes.

Two decades later, when Abdul died, there was a major dispute over the funeral rites for his body. By that time, the Tablighi-Jamaat had become a powerful movement in the region. Some of Abdul's distant family associates who were of Tablighi background wanted to bury him according to Islamic rituals. On the other hand, his friends such as Roshanlal wanted him to be buried according to Hindu Jogi customs. Both Muslims and Hindu Jogis bury their dead, but a Muslim is buried in a horizontal position, while Hindu and

¹⁰ As mentioned in chapter two, female literacy is very low in the area. Abdul's sons were aspiring to become doctors at that time.

Shuddhi Jogis are buried in the yogic lotus position (figure 6.6). Both Jogi traditions believe that a person does not die but enters *samādhi* (leaves the body).



Figure 6.6: An idol sitting in lotus position and symbolising a Jogi *samādhi*

After a *panchāyat* (meeting of elders), the decision was left to Abdul's sons. Abdul's elder son, Rahim, after consulting with other close family members, admitted that his father had become a Hindu Jogi, so it would be unfair to not follow his wishes after death. If he lived as a Hindu Jogi, Rahim said, he should enter *samādhi* according to that custom.

As soon as the decision was made, Roshanlalji and other friends made a *palanquin*, put a *pandāl* (canopy) on the top and decorated it with flowers and other colourful material like the wedding *palanquin* of a bride. The death of a Hindu (Shuddhi) Jogi is a celebratory event since it marks a transition from one world to another, not the end of a life. Abdul was seated in the lotus position in the *palanquin* which was borne by his Muslim sons and Hindu friend Roshanlal

to the burial place. A band of musicians and other people accompanied them. So in the end Abdul was buried according to Hindu Jogi rituals.¹¹

Conversion often generates conflicts between religious groups but, in this case, the legacies of the Nath/Jogi cult and its composite heritage among Hindu and Muslim Jogis through a shared worship of the god Shiva made compromises over life, death, religion, ritual and identity, possible. In the next section, I argue that Hindu Jogis like the Suddhi Jogis have recently taken on the role of the Arya Samaj in converting Muslim Jogis in a process which is a subversion of the ideals of the founder of the Nath/Jogi sect, Gorakhnath.

6.4 Hindu Jogis, the Arya Samaj and conversion

As mentioned earlier, unlike Abdul's conversion, Arya Samaj conversions before Indian independence were forceful and brutal. These days the conversion campaigns target the weaker sections of Muslim society such as the Muslim Jogis and are driven by the Hindu faction of the Nath/Jogi sect led by the head of the Gorakhnath Math (shrine) at Gorakhpur. Approximately, 471 Muslim Jogi families converted in 2008 under the patronage of the then president of Akhil Bharatiya Avadhooti Jogi Mahasabha (All India Jogi Cloister Association) and Gorakhapeethadhishwar (the head of the Gorakhnath Shrine), Mahant A vaidyanath.¹² The ceremony began with the anointing of the invitees

¹¹ I am very thankful to Roshanlal Nathji for sharing all the information and the stories about his life and that of his friend, Abdul. He helped me throughout this research by putting me in touch with the office bearers of the Rajasthan Shaiv Jogi Nath Development Organization.

¹² It was Mahant A vaidyanath who, as a head priest, transformed the Nath/Jogi cult of Gorakhpur purely into a Hindu cult by leading the Ramjanm Bhumi Movement at Ayodhya for the supposed liberation of the Hindu sacred space. He himself was involved in politics and represented Gorkahpur in the Parliament and the state assembly. After his death, he was replaced by another yogi and his disciple named Aditya Nath, who is a member of the right-wing party, the BJP (the Bhartiya Janta Party) and is currently serving as a chief-minister of Uttar Pradesh.

from the surrounding areas of Alwar and Gurgaon. Since it would have been unwise and uneconomic for the entire family of a would-be convert to travel, the heads of the families from about 50 neighbouring villages were invited to undertake the Shuddhi rituals. Many altars were set up to perform *yagna* activities under a big marquee and there was chanting of Vedic slokas (hymns).¹³ As soon as the chanting was over, all the *parivār pramukhs* (family heads) were given holy Ganges water to sip. At the end of the ceremony, each person received a rosary of *rudrāksh* (a symbol of Nath yogis and Shiva), a saffron *dupattā* (shawl) and a can of Ganges water. These three objects were also presented to the heads of each family of the converts according to the number of members in a family. Mahant Avaidyanath made a fiery speech, exhorting Hindus to be united. All the new converts took an oath to save Hindu culture and heritage whenever required at moments of crisis.

There are now new trends in conversion politics, including the role played by the Hindu members of the Nath sect. The Arya Samaj have been displaced from the new Shuddhi movement¹⁴ and the Nath sect has been transformed from its status as a liminal sect¹⁵ into a staunch Hindutva outfit. Hindu Nathpanthis did not traditionally observe Brahminical practices and Vedic rituals such as *yagna* but these are now used to legitimise the Hindu Nath status of a newly converted Muslim Jogi. Hindu Jogis adhere to the structure and

¹³ The information is based on field-notes from my fieldwork in Nagar and interviews with a local Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) leader, also see, Dainik Bhaskar, Bharatpur edition, dated 30 January 2008.

¹⁴ For instance, the political group Hindu Yuva Vahini, formed by Aditya Nath, converted 500 lower caste Muslim Nathas to Hinduism in 2014. Visit: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/40-muslim-families-converted-by-yogi-s-outfit-4-months-ago-still-live-in-margins/story-UIDwPOnXVISyBOMm8CWR5H.html>, <http://mattersindia.com/2017/04/vanishing-tribe-of-muslim-jogis-of-east-up/>.

¹⁵ The character of the Nath cult as a liminal sect has been described earlier and in the next section.

manner of the conversion process set up by the Arya Samaj. Thus, Nathpanthis currently identify themselves as Hindus, which is a major change in their philosophy and religious views. There appears to be a gradual but totalizing move by the current followers of the Nath and other sects such as Laldas and other Kabirpanthis to identify as traditional Hindus, who in the past had been opposed to Hindu identity and practices.

What was the nature of the relationship of Nath yogis to Brahminical Hinduism in the past? The Nath sect led by Gorakhnath, and the two kinds of yogis, *aughars* (uninitiated yogis) and *kanphattās*¹⁶ (split ears, a mark of initiation) distanced themselves from both Hinduism and Islam to claim a distinct status. The *Gorakhbāni* (sayings of Gorakh) speaks of a distinct notion of selfhood, neither Hindu nor Muslim but Jogi.¹⁷ However, like the changes in the Laldas cult, over the last few decades the Nath sect has transformed the teachings of Gorakh by adopting a quintessentially Hindu character. Gorakh's numerous sayings (*sabadis*) emphasised that he was neither Hindu nor Muslim:

hindū dhāyavē dehurā musalmān masīta

jogī dhāyavē parampada jahām dehurā na masīta

hindū aakhe rām ko musalmān khūdai

jogī aakhe alakh ko, tahān rām aakhe na khudāi. (sabadi 68–69)

The Hindu prays in the temple, the Muslim in the mosque

The Yogi meditates on the supreme, where there is neither

¹⁶ A *Kanphattā* yogi wears a thick ring, usually made of wood, precious metal or gold, depending upon what he can afford or whether it was a gift given to him. It is a symbol of an initiated and fully perfect Nath Yogi. Since the Kanphata term carries certain negative connotations, the term *darsandhari* is preferred.

¹⁷ Cited from Christine Marrewa-Karwoski, 9 April 2017, 'Far from Hindutva: Yogi Aditya Nath's Sect Comes from a Tradition that was neither Hindu nor Muslim,' <https://scroll.in/article/833710/far-from-hindutva-yogi-adityanath-comes-from-a-tradition-that-was-neither-hindu-nor-muslim>. Scroll.in Online.

temple nor mosque

The Hindu praises Ram, and the Muslim Khuda (Allah)

The Jogi praises the invisible, who is beyond Ram and Khuda.

(Barthwal 1960, p.25)

Gorakh added:

sabdaī māri, sabdaī jilāī aesā mohammed pīr

tākaī bharmī meīn nā bhulo kāji so bal nahi sarīr. (sabadi:10)

utapati hindū jarnām jogī akalī pari musalamānī

te rāh cīnom ho kājī mulām brahma bisn mahadev mānī. (sabadi:14)

He was killed by words, he was made alive by words, this is

Mohammed Pir

Don't forget in your illusion O Kazis! You do not have such
power.

By birth (I am) a Hindu, by practice a Jogi, and by knowledge a
Muslim *pīr*.

Recognize the path, O Kazis and Mullahs! taken by Brahma,
Vishnu, and Mahadev (Shiva).

(Barthwal 1960, pp. 4, 6)

According to Gorakh, the yogi (vernacular: Jogi) did not require social institutions such as religion and caste to help him attain life's supreme goal; this was achievable through meditation alone. He rejected both caste and religion, preaching instead a message of universal righteous conduct. The Nathas developed and maintained a distinctive sectarian message which rejected both caste and religion.

Historically, many Nath yogis were involved in politics and revered by kings for their alchemical powers (White 1996). At the same time, Nathpanthi,

specifically Nath *tāntrics*, were attacked and sometimes killed by Hindu rulers for not being in line with *dharm* (religion). The famous poet Jayasi in his work *Padmavat* warns the ruler Ratan Sen of these dubious religious practices, citing examples of Raja Bhoj being deceived by a *tāntric aghori* (an uninitiated Nath without spilt ears) (Chandra 1996, p. 120). The relationship between the Nath cult and society and politics was always complex. The Nath sect interrogated many societal values, particularly, caste and the Brahminical and Islamic Mullahs' notions of religion and normal household lives. These located the cult in a distinct space from institutionalised Islam and Hinduism.

Although the verses cited above are addressed to Jogis, the transcendence of duality is a common theme across many similar cultic traditions. One possible reason for this could be the influence of Gorakh's teachings on subsequent Bhakti preachers. It is likely that Kabir, a prominent Bhakti figure of the 14th century, was influenced by Gorakh, who advocated a similar path but through *nirgun* Bhakti (formless devotion) to the god Ram.¹⁸ The poetry of the saint Kabir expresses the same concern about two religious identities as Gorakh had done before him:

*hindu kahe mohi ram pyārā, turk kahe rahmānā,
aapas me dau lad lad muyè, maram nā koi jānā
hindu muā ram kahi, musalmān khudāi,
kahae kabir so jivtā jo duhu ke nikati nā jai.*

The Hindu says Ram is beloved, the Turk says Rahim
Then they die fighting each other, neither of them learn the
truth

¹⁸ Whether these gurus Gorakh or Kabir existed or not and who preceded whom are still matters of debate among scholars.

The Hindu died saying Ram, the Muslim, Khuda
Kabir says that the one who stays away from both, is the one
who lives. (Hess & Singh 1986, pp. 42, 68)

It is, however, noteworthy that the issue of religions and their relationships with the cults was not always antagonistic; rather it tolerated more complex and dynamic religious interactions rather than adopting a binary perspective of either conflict or positive syncretism. The Nathpanthi and the Kabirpanthi cults helped to explain the interplay among different traditions that makes Indic religious practices multi-layered, complex and inimical to religious portrayals in binary (either-or) terms.

Many Sufi and Bhakti saints moved beyond the orthodox positions of Islam and Hinduism, preaching innovative philosophical ideas about god and religious identities but retaining tenuous bonds with the old religions. In contrast to this, in current times the theological differences between cults and their relation to institutionalised Islam or Hinduism have hardened into binary religious identities. Despite the Nath gurus' critique of Hinduism, the Nath cult has currently emerged as the locus of aggressive Hindutva politics. The present goal of many mainstream Hindu Nath yogis, such as Yogi Aditya Nath, is not just to convert Muslim Jogis to Hinduism but also to highlight the Hindu aspects of the Nath cult through its identification with Shiva. In reaction, the Muslims of the area turned to proselyting activities through the Tablighi Jamaat to counter this aggressive form of conversion practised first by the Arya Samaj and then by the Hindu Jogis. As a result, the Muslim Jogis and other groups are scrutinised by religious 'police' and are now living under both overt and covert pressure from the Tablighi Jamaat to become 'proper Muslims'. In the following chapter, I discuss the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat and its implications for shared faith and practices among Muslims. ■

Chapter 7

The Tablighi Jamaat, prophetic mimesis and shared shrines

7.1 Historical background

Islamic organisations such as the Anjmun Hidayatul Islam, the Intkhab-e-tahrir and the Muslim League responded to the Arya Samaj' *shuddhi* attempt in the context of rising communalism, political consciousness and competition among religious groups in the early 20th century. These Islamic organisations appealed to Muslims to remain strong in their faith. The *shuddhi* attempt frightened Indian Muslims because it threatened to cause the disintegration of the Muslim community in north India.

According to Minault (1982), '*Shuddhi* and *tabligh* were the two sides of the same coin' (p. 193), but the idea of *shuddhi* was based in a fervent religious fanaticism. The Arya Samaj wanted to convert all Muslims to Hinduism. According to Metcalf (1982), by the end of the 19th century, debates had already emerged between religious authorities of the Arya Samaj, writers and *ulemās* (teachers) of the Islamic Deobandi school, and Christian preachers on the issue of the supremacy of their respective religions (pp. 198–234).¹ The Islamic scholar and one of the founders of the Deoband school, Maulana Muhammad Qasim,

¹ The Arya Samaj and the Deoband, Metcalf (1982) shows, used Christian techniques of proselytising such as print publications. Both Hindu and Muslim revival movements used newspapers, pamphlets and cheap books to engage in what was then called 'pamphlet warfare' (p. 211).

wrote a number of polemics directed against the Arya Samajis, showing that 'the theme of Muslim defence against newly aggressive Hinduism was to become increasingly important' (Metcalf, p. 214).

The *shuddhi* movement had already converted more than 150,000 Malkan Muslims by 1925 (Sikand & Katju 1994, p. 2216), and other Muslim groups like the Meos were being targeted. In this context, Muslim religious leaders believed that only the active teaching of Islam (*tabligh*) could save their religion from the brink of extinction in India (Sikand 1997). Both orthodox and non-orthodox *ulemās* united to resist *shuddhi*.

In the 1920s, almost 50 years after the foundation of the Arya Samaj, the Tablighi Jamaat became active in Mewat. Its founder, Maulana Ilyas, sought to refine and discipline the *dīnī* (religious) life of Muslims. Ilyas was born and brought up in Nizamuddin, Delhi, near the *dargāh* of the Chishti Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya.² He later moved to Deoband in Uttar Pradesh to receive an Islamic education at the *madrassā* there (Nadwi & Kidwai 1979; Numani 1991; Robinson 1988, pp. 20–3).

The Tablighi Jamaat's main focus remained on disciplining the lives of Muslims according to the teachings of the Quran and the life of the prophet Mohammed. The faith renewal movement, as Metcalf (2000) calls it, had little success in the beginning, but the violence accompanying the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 changed Hindu–Muslim relationships in the region. As detailed in chapters five and six, many Mewati Muslims experienced major violence in the Bharatpur and Alwar princely states, which had by this time

² Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325 C.E.) was, probably, the second most important saint in the Chishti order after Saint Moinuddin Chishti. His tomb at Delhi has been a place of popular veneration. The Tablighi Jamaat's main centre is located in the vicinity of Nizamuddin Auliya's *dargāh*.

acquired Hindu communalistic tones. The sudden success and popularity of the Tablighi mission should be located in the context of the fear, intimidation and communal divisions of the period, as well as theological interpretations and identity transformations underway.

The rise and success of the Tablighi reform movement in Mewat has created visible and invisible pressures which have important social, political and cultural implications, explored in this chapter. One of the major effects of Tablighi preaching, especially for Muslims, is the creation of a situation of political aloofness in which only pure Islam in the form of the Tablighi mission can rescue them from their degraded life. Given the ordinary Muslims' conditions in India, the Tablighi Jamaat may also be considered 'a resistance and withdrawal movement from worldly affairs against a dominant consumerist culture and politics' (Metcalf 1999, p. 1283). But the Tablighi Jamaat has also produced an inflexible hierarchical situation between the powerful and the powerless; such as between the Meos and other low caste Muslims (the Jogis and Mirasis), between men and women, and has widened the rift between the Sufi and anti-Sufi theology.

The influence of the Tablighi Jamaat is evident in all spheres of Mewati life today. Men of all ages, neatly dressed in white kurtas and pyjamas with Muslim skullcaps, frequent the horizontal L-shaped metalled road (figure 1. 2 in chapter one), asking for money from passers-by for the building of a new mosque, the repairing of an old one, or to meet the expenses of *madrassā* children. One can often see bundles of notes in the hands of such people which indicates that, although this is a poverty-stricken area where incomes are low, there is generous enthusiasm for such religious causes. The soliciting of donations for religious purposes seems to appeal to passers-by as representing symbols of religious piety.

Such incidents point to the growth of religious consciousness among the Meo and other Muslims in Mewat. Religion has an overwhelming presence here. For instance, roadside bookstalls sell Urdu books that tell stories of Muslim kings, discuss ethics in Islam and outline the duties of a Muslim wife to her husband. There is an unprecedented growth in the number of new mosques. A Google Maps search shows the preponderance of mosques — many newly constructed — in the area around Punahana in Nuh. The Tablighi Jamaat controls almost all the key *madrassās* and mosques in the area, including those in Alwar and Bharatpur.

The Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat and elsewhere works through a network of mosques. The concept involves the voluntary participation of fellow Muslims contributing their money and time. The life that the Tablighi Jamaat workers and other Tablighi Muslims live in mosques while on *tabligh* (proselyting) depicts the continuation of religious behaviour common in the practice of Bhakti and Sufism. Thus, even though the Tablighi Jamaat is an Islamic revival movement, there is a close structural parallel between the organisation's approach and the Meos' devotion to Laldas and Shah Chokha, both of whom advocated asceticism and frugal living practices in *tablighi* missions. In fact, Ilyas was initially promoted as a charismatic Chishtiyya Sufi master.

In fact, the Tablighi movement inherited certain Sufi practices which they then modified for their purposes (Gaborieau 2006; Troll 1985). Similarly, the Deoband school is concerned with reformism but the mode of life and the preaching of major Deobandi advocates have revolved around the Chishti form of Sufi Islam (Metcalf 1982). Troll (1994) suggests that it is possible to find an ascetic theme and belief in a true mystical experience in all the sayings and correspondence of the first *āmīr* (meaning 'head' or 'commander') of the movement, Maulana Ilyas. Although, the Tablighi Jamaat rejects institutional Sufism completely, many of its practices represents a religious tradition that

derives from Indian spiritual and philosophical values of austerity and asceticism advocated by the saints of Bhakti, Sufi and Nath backgrounds; in particular, the mode of piety, worship and retreat on a spiritual *tabligh*, the time spent in the mosques and the forms of preaching by its adherents. In fact, the Tablighis often adopt Sufi forms of preaching, vocabularies and modes of communication.

The success of the Tablighi Jamaat has attracted many scholars to study its organisational structure and mode of functioning (Gaborieau 2006; Masud 2000; Mayaram 2004b; Metcalf 2000; Siddiqi 2018; Siddiqi 2014; Sikand 2006). Scholars differ on the nature of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. One group denies the influence of Sufism on the Tablighi Jamaat (for instance, Ernst & Lawrence 2016; Masud 2000), while the other finds a connection between Sufism and the Tablighi Jamaat (Gaborieau 2006; Reetz 2006; Sikand 2007; Troll 1994). I argue that there are structural, and sometimes unrelated parallels between the Tablighi Jamaat, Sufism and Bhakti ideals. The success of the organisation among the Meo peasants is, I argue, to a large extent a product of this combination of practices.

Despite acknowledging the connection between Sufism and the Tabligh, scholars in the second group do not admit that the Tablighi movement is essentially rooted in an Indian form of spiritual mysticism and the close similarities between Islamic Sufism and the Bhakti and Nath doctrines. Specifically, for the Meos, as discussed in chapter four in the case of Laldas, the Bhakti religion was as important as the Sufism of Shah Chokha. My main contention here is that the Tablighi Jamaat would not have been successful among Meo peasants without the organisation's conscious or unconscious inclusion in their preachings of some vestigial versions of both *nirgun* Bhakti beliefs and Sufism.

A discussion of Tablighi Jamaat's transnational success among Muslims outside of India is beyond the scope of this thesis. I do think, however, that this success can be practically attributed to the meditation and spiritual retreat like programs such as *dhikr* for Muslims that the Tablighi Jamaat runs in the mosques. For instance, Tablighi practices include Islamic-tinged asceticism, such as retreats of 40 days or longer in a mosque, obligations to perform prayer, the remembrance of Allah (*dhikr/dhyān*) and keeping one's heart pure. All of these practices are reminiscent of the traditional spiritual-religious ways advocated by saints.

In particular, the success of the Tablighi Jamaat among the Meo peasants is understandable in the context of an Indian spiritual world marked by the ascetic practices of both Bhakti and Sufi saints. Tablighi Jamaat philosophy may also provide an ideology of resistance to the worldly life of ordinary Muslims in India by exhorting them to turn away from material concerns. Given the low socio-economic condition of Muslims on the one hand, and the political dominance of Hindus on the other, the Tablighi teachings about the importance of the afterlife become significant.

How, then, is the Tablighi Jamaat different from the older traditions? For one, most of the differences are in symbolic arenas. The Tablighi Jamaat emphasises the idea of 'Muslimness' in a uniform sense, rather than the idealism of the saintly traditions (*sant paramparā*). Basically, without altering the religious-philosophical world provided by Sufism and Bhakti beliefs for Meos and other Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat's main concern is to create a neo-Muslim whose identity and being are rooted purely in Islamic traditions. The Tablighi Jamaat has produced a Muslim society in Mewat—particularly in the areas around Punahana and Nuh, where it is most powerful—most of whose members no longer actively participate in or encourage the traditional practices of shared devotion. At some places, Sufi graves are neglected or reported as

destroyed so that Muslims can no longer worship there. The Tablighi Jamaat is focussed on discouraging Muslims from any form of worship other than that of Allah so that believers are not led into *fitnā* (chaos) or *irtidād* (apostasy).

7.2 The Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat

Most Muslims in Mewat, especially men, follow the Tablighi Jamaat and believe in its teachings. A minority still visit the Sufi *dargāh* and other shrines like those of Laldas. At the Shah Chokha shrine, the Tablighi workers control the *madrassā* and the mosques and use them to impart the true meaning of Islam while, simultaneously, discouraging Muslims from visiting the tomb.

The Tablighi Jamaat has a powerful presence in the villages of Sherpur and Shah Chokha. In this chapter I discuss the organisation's activities in Shah Chokha village, where I carried out major fieldwork. Tablighi workers from both villages hold similar views but they are actively present in the *dargāh* in Shah Chokha, where encounters between Tablighi Muslims and Sufi Muslims are frequent, unlike at the Laldas shrine.

In order to learn about the life of a Tablighi follower, I asked my informant Islamuddin to put me in touch with the main centre or *markaz* of Tablighi activities in the area, which is located near Punahana. The duty of this *markaz* is to organise local Tablighi travellers for proselytising, receive *Jamaats* (groups of adherents) from outside Mewat and send reports to the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters in Delhi at the Bangalewali Masjid. A local *markaz* also organises a communal weekly meeting, where a large gathering of Muslims prays together. This meeting is followed by a process of recruitment for Tablighi work in the area. Muslims are encouraged to devote time to living a religious life full of piety, honesty and care for human beings.

Four main spheres of Tablighi life are governed by the ideals of the Quran and the Hadith told and reminded by the Tablighi Jamaat: household, mosque,

markaz and proselytizing. I wanted to participate in Tablighi life in Shah Chokha, so I asked Islamuddin, who promised to ask permission from the head *maulavi* of the *markaz* after the Eid *namāz*. My journey with a Tablighi group began with this Eid *namāz* in the *markaz* of Punahana in July 2016. On that day, there were at least ten thousand people at the Eid prayer at seven o'clock in the morning. The faces of the *namāzis* looked elated since the tedious, stomach-turning and thirst-driven summer days of Ramzan were over. After the prayers, Islamuddin conveyed my intentions to the *maulavi* when we were exchanging greetings. The *maulavi* smiled and granted permission for us to visit the village mosques on Saturdays only but not to sleep there.

During my day visits to the mosques in Shah Chokha where the Tablighi proselytisers usually stayed, I found that the main emphasis of the Tablighi mission was to make Muslims aware of the 'true' religious practices of Islam. The notion of *tawhid*, meaning the 'oneness of God', is the fundamental tenet of the Tablighi activities based on *dāwāh* work (based on inviting people). The most important among the six principles or *chhe bātein* of Tabligh is the *kalimā shahādā* (the Islamic declaration of faith, 'There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah') (Sikand 2006, p. 180).³ In its theological approach, the Tablighi Jamaat aims to persuade Muslims of the importance and centrality of the tenet one God and the supremacy of Allah. Consequently, Tablighi preachings encourage Muslims to neglect Sufi and other shared shrines in Mewat.

³ The six *kalimās* in South Asian Islam refer to the six parts of a Muslim's belief derived from the Hadith (words, actions, and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad). They are: *tayyibāh* (word of purity), *shahādā* (declaration of faith in oneness of God), *tamjeed* (Allah is the greatest) *tawhid* (oneness of God), *astagfār* (forgiveness for sins), and *radd-e-kufar* (seeking in Allah refuge from disbelief).

In the wake of the separatism and communal violence of 20th century India, religious identities came to be defined clearly. Demands from neighbouring Hindu communities and states to define Muslim religious identity vis-à-vis Hinduism translated into overwhelming support for the Tablighi Jamaat organisation by the Meos. Although the Meos had been practising a local version of Islam for centuries, the realisation of their Muslim self in relation to Hinduism was generated from their collective experience of alterity, the mutual and exclusive definition of 'the other' in terms of religious categories. Partition violence prompted the hardening of boundaries around Muslim identities. The Tablighi Jamaat defined the collective Muslim self of the Meos in the 20th century by engendering the belief in the Meos that adherence to proper Islam was the only way to deal with their present condition. My Mewati Muslim interlocutors repeated these views in their narratives.

Tablighi itinerant groups frequent the villages of Shah Chokha and Sherpur and spend several days in mosques there on spiritual retreats (figure 7.1). The mode of functioning of the organisation is based on the support of religious volunteers who are willing to share their money and time for the cause of Islam. Several groups locate themselves in villages for proselytising work. As soon as a new group of *jamaatis* arrives in the village, they take a tour and invite the Muslim residents to accompany them to *dāwāh* (invitations for theological discussion) at a mosque.



Figure 7.1: A Tablighi group on tour standing in front of the dargāh of Shah Chokha.

The Tablighi volunteers are not interested in making new converts from other religions. Rather, they wish to make Muslims adhere to a proper Islamic life. Male villagers and itinerant Tablighis usually pray together every evening, and then discuss aspects of Islam. Sometimes the discussions deal with the nature of particular practices. The veneration of saints like Shah Chokha and Laldas, among others, is a common topic.

For these itinerant Tablighis, mosques are temporary residences. They cook their own food and take care of their daily necessities so as to give little trouble to their villager hosts. I saw them bringing their own food items, cooking utensils, quilts and bed sheets and other necessary equipment for their stay. They are detached from their normal household lives and encouraged to live simple and ascetic lives, eschewing luxuries, living on a meagre diet and choosing to communicate very little (Noor 2012).

There are always members of the village who enthusiastically invite the Tablighi groups to feast with them. The feast (*dāwat*) is closely related to the idea of invitation for theological discussions and debates in Islam (*dāwāh*).

Traditionally, there are many references in Quranic verses to Islamic *dāwāh* or invitations to both Muslim and non-Muslims to engage in philosophical dialogues and discussions about Islam. In Shah Chokha and elsewhere in India, the invitation is limited to Muslims only. The Tablighis invited the Muslim men of a village and then a villager, depending on his status and capacity, asked the travelling preachers to dine with them. My informant Islamuddin, being an active Tablighi worker, always invited the *jamaatis* in his village for dinner to discuss religious matters. The impact of such continuous activities across the region is to create and reinforce a powerful religious discourse of purity. This working method of the Tablighi Jamaat has transformed the organisation into a powerful transnational movement. However, its success in Mewat has created a rift between two groups of Muslims, the Tablighis and the Sufis. My fieldwork gave me some ideas of the practices that the Tablighi Jamaat considered particularly non-Islamic.

7.3 Local non-Islamic practices of *shirk* and *bidāh/bidat* in Mewat:

My ethnographic fieldwork, observations of popular practices and everyday conversations and materials collected from *ulemās* and the village residents showed that *shirk* was a recurring theme. Many Muslim villagers, usually men, gave me the impression that the Tablighi Jamaat considered saint veneration a terrible religious blasphemy. Many academic interpretations privilege the syncretic veneration of saints, usually as a reaction to the anti-syncretism preached by purist reform movements. Nonetheless, *tawhid* is the foundational principle in Islam that the Jamaat wishes to restore. All of the movements in Islam, whether Wahhabism, Sufism or the Tabligh, insist on the oneness of God. The debate is about the authenticity of subsidiary Islamic symbols such as saints. Different strands within Islam have contested these for centuries, and they continue to do so. For the sake of ethnographic situatedness and because of the complexity of this issue in Muslims' lives, it was imperative that I look

for locally rooted debates of *shirk* and *bidāh/bidat* 'without privileging the idea of 'many Islams' (Osella 2015, p. 5).

During my fieldwork, I learned that the Tablighis are taught to control their bodies, desires and worldly lusts and encouraged to focus more on self-discipline, piety and honesty. While travelling from one mosque to another, Tablighis strive for 'the act of Prophetic mimesis' (Noor, p. 149), i.e. to emulate the ideal Prophetic type. Followers try to adopt the teachings of the Hadith—the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad—in their daily life. Since it is impossible to replicate the life of the Prophet, the Tablighi followers pay more attention to their intentions (*niyat*) (Noor, p. 149). There are certain mimetic prototypes which the Tablighi Jamaat recommends to Mewati Muslims, such as Islamic sartorial practices. The common Tablighi apparel of white kurta-pyjama and skull cap is not unique in the area and the discourses around this form of clothing is significant. For instance, my landlord Irman, who is of Tabligh background, rebuked his younger son for his fashionable appearance. He had invited me to have dinner with his family. As we were enjoying the food and discussing the future marriage of his elder son, he yelled at his wife and then his younger son: 'I see, no discipline in this house. One wears what he wants as if this is Bollywood and I am making films here.' He was complaining about the young man's bracelet, shiny shirt and long hair. This was not just a father's concern about his child's future. Irman explained afterwards that his issue with his son was that of proper religious behaviour: 'What is the difference between you and a Hindu? You behave like them by committing acts of *bidāh*.'

Imran was obsessed with the place of religion and purist Islamic discourse in his family's personal lives. Since the Tablighi Jamaat regards both Hinduism and modernity as threats to the Islamic faith, Irman was convinced that his son's clothing choices were one indication of the intensification of identity- and faith-related threats.

Another story clarifies the Tablighis' fear of threats to 'proper' Islam. I also met a 20-year-old man who was an alleged thief with a history of drug addiction. He had grown up a motherless child and, when his father remarried, he was left to struggle on his own. He visited the shop in front of my landlord's house frequently (figure 7.2). Every evening, the space in front of the shop was lively with people cracking jokes and bursting into laughter. His appearance always increased the merriment of the gathering. Mocking questions were directed at him or somebody would taunt him for committing un-Islamic acts like stealing. This contempt often brought him to tears. He would usually try to defend himself in religious terms, citing the model of conduct for an ideal Muslim in Mewati society. Typically, he would say, 'I will become a better person, attend the Tabligh Jamaat's *cillā* (a 40-day retreat in a mosque), and eventually go on the Hajj, if Allah wishes.' He also considered, like many other Muslims, that the Tablighi way was synonymous with Islam and the only one through which he could purge his sins.



Figure 7.2: The usual gathering at the shop in front of my landlord's house

In everyday life, Muslims in Mewat are aware of theologians' (*ulemās*) views and enjoy debating, discussing and repeating them. Opinions are formed within spheres of civil society, such as the spaces where day-to-day interactions take place, where people gossip and exchange news, at chai stalls, shops, mosques and other sites of everyday life. This expectation that common Muslims in Mewat should behave according to Tablighi teachings puts unseen pressure on local people of Sufi inclination. However, the public sphere dealing with state and government authority lies outside the purview of Tablighi theologians.

Munis, a poor scrap worker from Shah Chokha, felt guilty for not reading *namāz* regularly when he was approached by Tablighi Jamaat workers. His excuse was that, although he wanted to pray regularly, his work kept him busy. Despite not being a regular *namāzi*, he understood *shirk* doctrines. He became angry when he noticed that his wife had put an amulet around their child's neck and tied a thread in his hand as emblems of the *barkat* (blessing) of Shah Chokha. He warned her not to do so again as the Tablighis would consider it the act of unscrupulous and unauthorised charlatans. When his wife asked, 'How do you know it does not work?', he replied, 'The power of the saint I do not contest, but the Tablighis do not like it so don't do it for their sake.'

As noted in chapter five, according to the doctrine of *shirk* preached by the Tablighi Jamaat, no living or dead person, animal, plant, idol or any material object should be held in religious veneration. Traditional Sufi Muslims give an unusual response, insisting that they are 'praying with' and not 'praying to' a saint (Osella 2015, p. 8). For example, they now add the term '*yā* Allah' before the traditional slogan of '*yā dādā Chokha madad kariyo*' (O *dādā* Chokha! please help!). Now, Sufi Muslims exclaim, 'O Allah, O Dada Choka! Please help!' This invoking of Allah first before the saint is a direct result of Tablighi influence.

In Muslim reformist theology, *shirk* (polytheism) and *bidāh* (innovation) are considered Hindu influences. They have long been linked to Muslim politics in India, since they deal directly with the boundaries between the two communities (Van der Veer 1994, p. 202). Debates with and between reformers occur within the boundaries of the Quran and Islamic theology. Syncretism is never mentioned as important to religious values common to both Hindus and Muslims. Both Islamic theology and academic discourses considered syncretism in India a Hindu phenomenon that was influential in encouraging Sufi saint worship (Van der Veer 1994, p. 202). Although current belief systems in Mewat are multivocal and many-faceted, currently the discourses of purity and religious separation are privileged over those of religious diversity.

Despite the complexity of the issues at stake in this sectarian debate, the most important concern is the ultimate agency of the one supreme God, Allah. Even if God bestows power to innumerable saints and objects, the important question for Muslims is their intentionality (*niyat*) when they tie a thread, go to a shrine or call upon a saint, (Osella 2015). In my interactions with these Muslims, I found that a range of issues seemed to affect their thinking: social class, caste, religion, needs, desires, education and modernity. However, the fundamental questions remained: How are we different from Hindus? And what should we do to become ideal Muslims?

However, it is also important to mention here that, under the impact of reformist activities, Islam has assumed an important and positive place in many aspects of the life of Indian Muslims. For example, in Mewat, Islam has been successful in eradicating certain caste discriminations related to access to a worship space, the sharing of food with a lower caste person (except some of the lowest groups like Bhangis/sweepers) and annihilating other caste taboos around food and drinks. This was not the case 20 years ago. Until then, untouchability was a prevalent customary practice followed by the Meos,

especially with regard to the Mirasi bards (Dom). Nowadays, as one Meo put it to me, '*Islam me hukkā pāni sab jāyaj hai* (Islam allows sharing of food and water-pipes)'.⁴ Despite considering all kinds of Muslims equal, Mewati Muslims, especially Tablighis, are now debating what counts as 'true Islam.'

Another important feature of these debates is that although the point of contention about Sufism in Islam is theological, both Sufi and Tablighi groups draw on the same scriptures, the Quran and the Hadith, to support their respective claims. Within Islam, pluralism is a well-established and commonly accepted fact: the same *surā* (hymn) is used by supporters of Sufism and by reformists who rally against it. Both the Tablighi Jamaat and the Sufi Alwariyas organise religious congregations or *jalsās* for this purpose. Maqbul Khan invited me to a Sufi *jalsā* in his village and Islamuddin accompanied me to a Tablighi *jalsā* on the Haryana-Rajasthan border.

On that late summer morning when Islamuddin and I headed out, faces wrapped in pieces of cotton cloth, the sun was already fiercely hot. After an hour's drive, we arrived at an enclosure of some 15 square acres that looked like a large marriage *pandāl*. A high platform stood at one end, facing the vast open space of the enclosure. Loudspeakers blared Islamic sermons. Their messages focussed on submission to higher commands, austerity in life and being respectful and polite to fellow Muslims. The place was soon full to capacity. The local newspapers reported the next morning that more than 100,000 people had attended. The Tablighi Jamaat regularly organises such gatherings.

Despite the attendance of so many people during the *jalsās*, it was not chaotic or unpleasant because of the unprecedented discipline of the crowd.

⁴ Quoted to me by an elderly Meo and brother of one of my informants. I used to spend evenings at the *addā* (gathering place) in front of his home, joined by other villagers. Our regular leisurely conversations were very informative.

This basic principles of the Tablighi Jamaat's teaching was clearly visible in the way the crowd behaved at this religious congregation. People greeted strangers smilingly and also helped them to navigate the cramped conditions. Such self-discipline is expected from every Tablighi and contributes to the power and efficiency of the organisation, which has been able to function with little controversy.

The Tablighi Jamaat is now a successful transnational movement, present in over 150 countries. Its annual three-day mass congregation, known as *ijtemā*, is an essential part of its mission. Most of its volunteers try to participate in the *ijtemā* at some point in their life somewhere in the world (mostly in South Asia). The *ijtemā* plays a significant role in the lives of Tablighi Muslims and is the largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj. The popularity of the *ijtemā* is demonstrated by the fact that the *ijtemā* near Dhaka in Bangladesh in 2009 attracted more than five million people (Siddiqi 2010) and did so again in 2018.⁵

Many *maulavis* at the Tablighi *jalsā* that I attended spoke about the importance of following the path of the Prophet. Quranic verses were cited to show the importance of living a moral life. As Metcalf (1993) puts it, 'In terms of the practice of the Tablighi Jamaat, its very program is understood to make the past live' (p. 590). I heard repeatedly the famous dictum '*agar andar imān hogā to bāhar māhaul banegā*', meaning 'if there is faith inside then the outside environment will be better'. The fundamental difference among Muslims was articulated along the lines of 'our Islam (Tablighi) versus their Islam (Sufis)'. The crowd listened to these discourses intently.

⁵Visit, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/millions-attend-world-largest-muslim-gathering-180123064824287.html>.

By contrast, at the Sufi *jalsā* in Maqbul Khan's village, verses from the Quran were cited to counter the notions of the Tablighi Jamaat. The discourse of the main *maulavis* from Bareilly—a centre of Sufism in India—focused on the extremist politics of the Tablighi Jamaat. The issues of religious harmony and a shared religious culture were first invoked and then consolidated by re-tellings of the life stories of the famous Chishti saints, Moinuddin Chishti⁶ and Nizamuddin Auliya. The *maulavis* pointed out that many people in South Asia became Muslims through the teachings of these saints and emphasised their service to Islam.⁷

In their quest to discipline Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat preaches that any association with saints may make believers stray from the straight path. The idea of 'proper' religious conduct has always been an important theological issue. Modernity and politics have impacted on the way in which religious consciousness functions within the uniform notions of religions and religiosity. Such reformist efforts from both the Hindu and Muslim sides work against diverse religious practices to replace it with uniformity.

The followers of Tablighi Jamaat attempt to distinguish themselves from non-Muslims and from Muslims on the wrong path. The organisation's negative characterisations of religious behaviour and its overemphasis on one single truth are attempts to homogenise contemporary Muslim issues and identities. The Tablighi Jamaat believes that a larger transnational *ummāh* (Islamic community) can only come about through creating oneness and uniformity. The Tablighi Jamaat appeals to members of the *ummāh* all over the world to forego

⁶ Moinuddin Chishti (1141-1236), a 12th Islamic Sufi saint was the founder of the Chishti order whose dargah at Ajmer in Rajasthan in India is a famous place of pilgrims among Hindu and Muslims.

⁷Eaton (2004) considers the role of Sufis in conversion. Also, see, (Eaton 1993).

unacceptable Islamic behaviour such as the veneration of Sufi saints with the slogans like 'O Muslims! Become Muslims!'

The reason behind the religious transformations of the Meos and other Muslims of the area is connected with the influence of the Tablighi's work. Although there was no major philosophical disjunction between what the Tablighi Jamaat offered and what people were devotionally attached to, the major change taking place was in the arena of defining one's Muslimness. In the Tablighi Jamaat narratives, Muslim identity is linked to religious practices.⁸ As discussed in an earlier chapter with regard to Laldas, the change in religious culture affected shared sacred spaces. Its manifestations were clearly visible at Shah Chokha tomb. Since Tablighi teachings are primarily related to disciplining Muslims' behaviour and one's Muslimness, the medium could vary from religious narratives, theological debates, to the violent confrontations.⁹

Despite such debates and contestations, the histories of the two saints in this study are deeply rooted in village narratives and connected to the lives of people. The villagers in Shah Chokha and Sherpur still identify themselves as descendants of the saints in a variety of ways, thus attesting to the survival and resilience of certain social structures in spite of concerted opposition. But pressure is mounting on the shared beliefs and practices of Muslims in the area, more particularly on those who believe in Sufi and Bhakti saints. However, many Meo and non-Meo Muslims, mostly women, still venerate these saints, although they conceal their devotion to evade the wrath of Meos and other Tablighis. In the next chapter, I discuss this aspect, drawing on ethnographic

⁸ As a result of the influence of the Tablighi Jamaat narratives Muslims' self and group identity has acquired a new significance.

⁹ The example of another type of violent confrontation can be seen in Pakistan where the Sufi groups of Barelavis have killed many non-Muslims over blasphemy charges and sue Muslims to discipline their behaviours.

narratives of both men and women who conceal their faith in Sufi saints. I suggest that their devotion to Shah Chokha or other religious figures such as God Krishna is a form of passive resistance. The example of concealment in chapter eight is followed in chapter nine by an analysis of the lives of the impoverished and powerless bards. Accused by the Tablighis of non-Islamic practices, the bards articulate their concerns through positive messages in new poetic songs, which I argue constitutes a further example of passive resistance against the Islamic reformists and the former patrons, the Meos. ■

Chapter 8

Concealment and secrecy: hidden in plain sight

He who hid well, lived well. (René Descartes)¹

Wherever there is power, there is secrecy. (Taussig 1999)

What happens when social and moral pressures apply to a religious faith in a Sufi saint by a dominant reform organization? Do all the beliefs judged impure by the reformist ideology succumb to the uniformitarian power? Or are there ways by which the power can be negotiated? This chapter considers practices of the concealment of religious faith in saints, principally among Muslims of Mewat. These practices arose against the backdrop of the puritanical notions of the Tablighi Jamaat, which discourages saint veneration as *bidat* (innovation) and *shirk* (polytheism) and hence views it as antithetical to Islam. The chapter shows how the faith in a saint under scrutiny in such situations comes to operate through practices of concealment and secrecy,² which become powerful weapons through which individuals can negotiate the social and religious pressures encircling them. In so doing, it shows that the practices of concealment and secrecy draw on age-old ideas and together constitute a very powerful form of social knowledge that helps sustain social institutions and

¹ This is the epitaph inscribed on Descartes's tombstone; he may have chosen it himself.

² Concealment and secrecy are closely related ideas although there are some minor differences. I am aware of those differences, but I am using these terms interchangeably in their shared general sense.

human relationships (Simmel 1906). This chapter draws mainly on the collection of ethnographic stories from the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha in order to reveal how secrecy functions. Although there were many similar examples of secrecy and concealment practices by Muslim followers of both saints, Laldas and Shah Chokha, most stories mentioned here are taken from the Shah Chokha *dargāh* in order to provide a deep contextual description. There were identical patterns in concealing faith at both places, but Muslims felt a bit more comfortable when visiting the Laldas shrines as the Tablighi activists did not control the space. Although Sherpur, like Shah Chokha, is a Tablighi village, Muslim residents of Sherpur who have faith in Laldas felt less pressured during their visits by the absence of Tablighi workers inside the shrines, unlike the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider some of the ways in which secrecy works as a form of passive resistance in the face of unwanted attempts to discipline people's religious practices and beliefs. Moreover, it shows how religious secrecy helps to negotiate an intimate form of power to enable the smooth functioning of family relationships and societal values, and to evade the wrath of patriarchal control. Through a series of ethnographic stories of concealment, the chapter aims to locate the role of concealment practices as forms of passive resistance that negotiate the pressure believers feel under due to their Sufi faith. Following Hugh Urban's (1998) suggestion, the focus of the chapter is 'away from the content of secrecy and instead toward the forms and strategies through which secret information is concealed, revealed, and exchanged' (p. 218).

8.1 Secrecy and concealment

In defining secrecy, scholars Warren and Laslett (1977) refer to those behaviours that the mainstream public considers immoral or illegal and which therefore have to be hidden. Within Islamic theology, the place of saints or more

particularly Sufi saints has always been the subject of much debate. For many Islamic faith renewal movements, the veneration of saints falls into the immoral or illegal domain not sanctioned by the Quran or the Hadith. Specifically, the veneration of Sufi and other saints, especially by Muslims in India, is seen as a corrupt form of Islam derived from Hinduism and idolatry, a perversion at best and apostasy at worst. However, contrary to this theological and ecclesiastical claim, a vast number of Muslims in South Asia and elsewhere revere the Sufi saints or the saints of other religions (see, Albera & Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012; Dalrymple 2004). Over the past few decades, the rise and success of religious reformist ideology such as that of the Tablighi Jamaat has created both a visible and invisible pressure on Indian Muslims who still visit Sufi *dargāhs* and other shrines for numerous purposes.

Devotees of Shah Chokha or other deities hide their veneration from close social groups such as the male members of families, village superiors, and Mullahs.³ The following stories of concealment reveal intricate processes of contestation and accommodation between the Sufi and Tablighi Jamaat ideologies, the divergent male and female beliefs in a family, and the different dynamics of the relationships between the powerful and the powerless. In the context of these stories, the Tablighi Jamaat acts as a locus of power, the shrines goers or more specifically saint Shah Chokha's followers perform the role of actors who conceal (concealers), and society and family (keeping gender

³ All the participants for interviews were either regular visitors or occasional saint worshippers. Apart from normal conversation for a brief period at the tomb whenever I met a new person, interesting and pertinent stories were followed by an extensive interview with the person. To respect anonymity, all the names in this chapter have been changed. I chose the stories only of those people who fully agreed and had no problems with me mentioning what they told me. I anonymised every character by changing names and places. All photos produced in this chapter are used to provide legitimacy for all these stories, but I have obscured most faces to respect their privacy.

relations in mind)⁴ fill the roles of both an audience and the (Tablighi) agents who work for power.

Secrecy has been linked with various crucial functions or roles in human society, such as helping to 'shape human relations' (Simmel 1906). Secrecy also contains 'cultural knowledge important for rituals in initiation and medical practices' (Beidelman 1993, 1997), and helps the 'secularization of religious identity' (Malesic 2009). With regard to secrecy of faith and public life, Malesic argues that Christians should conceal their identities in American public life to better protect it from the public sphere. Citing Christian traditions, he further argues that this approach would allow Christians to live their religious life without threatening the multicultural fabric and faith of neighbouring religious others. Taussig (1999) argues that when the mask of secrecy is exposed or 'defaced', this act has the power to 'destabilize social and political institutions' (p. 7).

Most often, at the core of secrecy lies power. A secret is secret because it cannot be articulated in the face of power. However, almost simultaneously, secrecy—or more particularly public secrecy—entails a crucial paradox. As Beidelman (1993) puts it:

for every secret to be realized someone must not only conceal something but someone else must know or suspect this concealment (Beidelman, p. 1).

⁴ Most stories of concealment I recorded from women. Most of them were not even willing to talk or in hurry to leave the place as soon as possible. On some occasions, elderly women were more vocal; one woman made this remark that 'we are not afraid of anyone.' However, this woman was from a far-off village. My gender identity also remained a barrier in exploring women's emotions regarding their faith.

Thus, in order to function, (public) secrecy as a form of social knowledge needs three things: actors, who conceal; an audience, from whom the secret is concealed; and power, which enables the social existence of a secret.

The powerful support of the Meos for the Tablighi Jamaat mission has been successful in applying a uniform code of religious behaviour upon the majority of Muslims in the area. However, there are still Muslims who have not completely discarded their previous beliefs, customs, and practices. In doing so, the analytical descriptions in this chapter suggest that Sufi followers find concealment and secrecy very useful in negotiating the pressures applied upon them by the people around them. It is often female family members who conceal their faith in order to avoid conflict with male family members. Concealing also helps female believers to sustain family relations, thus protecting social institutions and their relationships with men. Taussig (1999) speaks of the dangers of defacement, the flow of negative energy, tensions, and self-destructions of social relationships. But secrecy and defacement also entail a crucial relationship where, in Taussig's words, 'the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a revelation that does justice to it' (pp. 8, 221–30).⁵

In this chapter, power is not viewed as a static phenomenon, nor is it concentrated in one hand. Instead, power is considered a relative and distributive phenomenon which, in Foucault's understanding, persists everywhere and at every level in different ideological and other forms (Foucault 1978a, 1982).⁶ My analysis considers the Tablighi Jamaat a bastion of the power

⁵ Taussig takes this phrase from Walter Benjamin's work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

⁶ Although I am aware of Foucault's work, I have no intention of engaging with it in this dissertation. My fieldwork observations reflected Foucault's concerns about the relationship between knowledge and power. I cite him to acknowledge his body of work.

of male Meo Muslims in the area simply because of its immense appeal ideologically and otherwise. Tablighi Jamaat is largely a male-centric organization; women have a very limited exposure to the Tablighi Jamaat's public activities.⁷ Particularly around the area of the tomb of the Sufi saint, the majority of Muslims believe in the Tablighis' doctrines. The Tablighi Jamaat has thus established a framework of power with constraining/disciplining objectives, operating through the mind-set of adherents. This chapter looks at the internal dimensions of the Muslim society in Mewat. However, at the same time, I am also aware of the fact that both Muslims and the Tablighi Jamaat could be positioned as powerless groups vis-à-vis the Hindu majority in India.

8.2. Ethnographic stories of secrecy and concealment

8.2.1 Ahmad's⁸ secrecy

The first ethnographic story is that of Ahmad, a Meo Muslim taxi driver. Ahmad was born in the village of Bisru, currently a Tablighi village, at a distance of almost five kilometres from Shah Chokha village. The story begins when one early morning, Ahmad drove a group of Hindu devotees (who were his clients) on a ritual pilgrimage to the holy place of Vrindavan in the city of Mathura in north India. The city is known for being the birthplace of the cowherd god Krishna (who himself is an incarnation of the god Vishnu) and the site of Krishna's playful childhood stories. As Ahmad had been a taxi-driver for many years, he had visited various places connected with religions other than Islam, but he had never been attracted towards other religions until the day he experienced a miracle.

⁷ Although Barbara Metcalf (2000) talks about the participation of women in Tablighi activities in her work, this is not a common practice in Mewat or elsewhere. Such examples are exceptional in nature.

⁸ I met Ahmad in the Shah Chokha *dargāh*.

On this particular day, when Ahmad found that the temple of Lord Krishna was closed in the afternoon, he and his religious tourists decided to wait in the temple complex. It was midday when he realised that the time for *zuhr* (midday Islamic prayer) was fast approaching. So he decided to prostrate himself in the temple premises to offer *namāz*. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw a vision, an image well-clad and beautifully decorated with garlands of marigolds appeared in his mind. Ignoring the image, Ahmad closed his eyes again to concentrate on his prayer. Immediately, to his surprise the same image appeared. Ahmad was completely perplexed by the whole situation and ignored it initially as a daydream. He discontinued his prayer and decided to wash his face in the tank water that was kept in the premises before he tried to pray again. The same image kept following him and appeared as a shadow in the tank water as he was about to sprinkle the water on his face to refresh himself.

The incident frightened him. Without disclosing to his customers what had just happened to him, he decided to visit the inside of the temple that evening. Following the custom of his Hindu clients, Ahmad bought some flowers, sweets and a coconut to offer it to the Lord Krishna. Much to his surprise, the deity sitting in the *sanctum* was the same image of Lord Krishna that had appeared in his vision a few hours before.



Figure 8.1: Ahmad in the premises of Shah Chokha tomb

In searching to understand the possible meaning of this incident, Ahmad began collecting information about the god. Ahmad belongs to the Damrot clan of the Meo community. It is important to remember here that the Meo Muslims claim a unique fictive kinship relation with the god Krishna through the *pāls* (lineages). As mentioned in an earlier chapter, of these 13 *pāls*, five Meo *pāls* trace their identity as Jaduvansi (the descendants of Krishna). Ahmad's clan, the Damrot of Bisru village, 'links its identity to Jaduvans and Meo villagers consider themselves as the descendants of the god Krishna' (Jamous 2003, pp. 1–25).

The episode, and the awareness of his *pāl* and community's history, brought about a significant religious change in Ahmad's life. He formed an immense respect for Krishna. While remembering Allah or Saint Shah Chokha, he now never forgets to acknowledge the authority of the Hindu god as well. However, although he prays to Allah, Shah Chokha and Krishna at the same time without making any distinction between them, he never displays his association

explicitly with the latter two. Krishna and Shah Chokha occupy a place of religious importance in his life but are the objects of secret worship.

The story of Ahmad, while unusual, is not unique in its representation of meaning. In India, many people have faith in the spiritual beings of other religions. As I mentioned in chapter six when discussing similar devotional practices among the Digamber Jains, Michael Carrithers (2000) labelled such actions 'polytropic' (poly=many + tropos=direction) religious behaviour. According to Carrithers, the definition of religious boundaries completely melts away when it comes to the religious practices of the two kinds of Digamber Jains of the Jain and the Hindu religious backgrounds. It is not only that the Jain and Hindu religious identities show signs of religious malleability and fluidity across the religious boundaries. However, in present times, most cases of religious boundary-crossing involve Indian Hindu, Christians, Jains or Buddhists believing in numerous Sufi shrines and ritual practices. Examples of Muslims crossing religious boundaries do not occur as frequently or on a similar scale now.⁹ Historically, there are innumerable examples of Hindu–Muslim cultural interaction resulting in mixed practices among both groups. What could be referred as 'Indic eclecticism' or 'religious pluralism' was replete with examples of Hindu–Muslim eclecticism.

What is important about Muslim eclecticism is the current choreography of religious faiths in an era marked by narratives of religious separation, which have brought about changes in religious consciousness. This separation can

⁹ Although this seems like a sweeping generalisation, at least in Mewat the process of religious uniformity has been on rise. Most Muslims mentioned to me that they visit Laldas and Shah Chokha whom they consider their *pīrs* but they denied praying at religious spaces of other religions unlike their past.

largely be explained by the political mobilization of different groups but is partly explained by individuals' lived realities. Political mobilization is often achieved through religious means; religious notions and symbols can be used in mass mobilizations, and political pressure created in the name of reform and purity creates spaces for the concealment of aberrant faith practices. This kind of (political) pressure created under the guise of reform and purity has opened a new window through which the sociology of hiding one's faith becomes relevant.

Ahmad's story offers a reference point from which to consider the issue of religious synthesis as well as the performance of public secrecy and concealment. At first glance, religion seems to be a matter of experience and personal choice rather than an issue of identity association with a particular religious group. First of all, Ahmad chooses to hide his faith by keeping it secret. What makes Ahmad hide his faith in Krishna, a god whom the Meos themselves once admired and to whom they still link their origins? Why is it that the shift to a uniform and pure form of Islam succeeded in a community whose history and rich folk narratives reveal the equal level of importance of both religions in social life?

The new form of Islam among the Meos has been successful in building an environment in which the traditional practices are discouraged. The sense of being shamed publicly or through the public gaze has become attached to the idea of following un-Islamic practices. This public shame has become a widespread practice. Even Muslims one does not know personally can question the validity of a practice in Islam such as visiting the tombs of Sufi saints. The Tablighi Jamaat workers at Shah Chokha, including villagers, constantly used to

argue with Muslim strangers from outside the village about the place of a saint like Shah Chokha in Islam and the purpose of his visit. In Ahmad's case, such questions may also come from family members. His family members are strictly against Sufi veneration and discourage any such practice. Some of Ahmad's cousins are active clergy in the Tablighi Jamaat. Given this situation, Ahmad was unable to express his experience because he knew his convictions would be rejected outright. This kind of questioning from Muslims, whether familiar or unfamiliar, creates societal pressure but the believer's faith in Sufi saints or Hindu gods and goddesses does not necessarily disappear. Rather, the strategy becomes to conceal such beliefs.

Ahmad chose not to reveal his story to anyone, sensing that he might be mocked for his experience. He chose to hide his faith and engaged himself in the secret practice of his faith. On this note, Georg Simmel (1906) argues that purposeful concealment or secrecy is 'one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity' (p. 462). Secrecy, thus, secures a second world (the desired one) alongside the real one, and implies that one wishes to live the former. Every human relationship is, therefore, to a certain extent based on various aspects of veracity and mendacity about social life. As Simmel puts it, in these relationships:

every lie, whatever its content, is a promotion of error with reference to the mendacious subject; for the lie consists in the fact that the liar conceals from the person to whom the idea is conveyed the true conception he possesses. (Simmel, p. 445)

In Ahmad's case, the true conception of his experience is open to the multiple meanings and interpretation of religiosity other than to the issue of valid and invalid religious practices in Islam. The multiple meanings of religion are layered within oneself, where every layer contains ideas, symbolism, values

and notions of the religious others. To a lesser or greater extent, every individual in daily life performs actions, religious or non-religious, by taking symbolism, religious rituals, beliefs, and practices from adjacent cultural-religious groups (including the hostile ones) consciously or unconsciously into account. Adding to Ahmad's experience, the remaining stories in this chapter reveal different aspects of concealment and its dynamics in different situations of societal and family pressures, more particularly in the context of Shah Chokha.

8.2.2 The dilemma of the two sisters: Rabiya and Fatima's concealment

The sisters Rabiya and Fatima were born into a Meo household where their parents were strict practitioners of the doctrines of the Tablighi Jamaat. Their devout parents, especially their father, performed the religious duties of a Tablighi Muslim on a daily basis. Every Saturday, their father used to go to the Tablighi Jamaat *markaz* in Punahana to learn the basics of the Islamic religion and its true path, as dictated by the religious clergy. The evening communal prayer at the *markaz* is generally followed by the long hours of sermons by the clergies. At first, the speeches by the Tablighi Jamaat's *maulavis* (Islamic preachers) revolve around the significance of adopting a pure Islamic way of life, giving examples of the Islamic religious figures and narrating their biographies. Based on these stories, every member of the Tablighi Jamaat is expected to perform what Noor called 'the act of prophetic mimesis' (2012, p. 149). On regular intervals, all the attendees are reminded about what a Muslim should or not do to be in complete compliance with the Islamic scriptures. In this view, several practices are considered completely against the Tablighi or global version of Islam that people have followed for centuries.

As mentioned in the last chapter, under the Tablighi Jamaat's influence, there are far more Meo villages than Sufi-dominated villages. Both groups barely accommodate the other's views. The animosity from the groups within

the Meo caste over the issue of revering the Sufi Saints has reached a level where even marriages between villages of different clans and kinships are now discouraged, although they were once frequent. These days, one of the principal identifications of a Muslim is whether a person is a Sufi Muslim or a Tablighi Muslim. This animosity is generally displayed in day-to-day-conversations. All the Sufi inclined people refer to the Tablighis as 'terrorists' because they are seen to promote a radical uniformity in Islam, while the Tablighis call the Sufis *bidatis* (innovators).

The sisters Rabiya and Fatima, whose story was shared with me during my fieldwork, were accidentally both married into a family of Sufi adherents, a fact their Tablighi father only realised much later. The rhythms of their lives connected the two families, which thus oscillated between the traditions of Sufism on the one hand, and the anti-Sufi theology of the Tablighi Jamaat on the other. Until they were married, the girls had never visited any tombs as their father considered it an act of *bidat* (innovation). Born and brought up in a Tablighi environment, Rabiya and Fatima's lives revolved around monotheism or the supremacy of one God.

Fatima and Rabiya's father was initially not aware of the ideology of the families of his sons-in-law. As soon as he became aware of it, he sent an immediate warning to his daughters to stop visiting Sufi tombs in case they had begun following their husbands' family tradition. Their father said to them that if they did not do so as he told them, his doors would be shut to them forever. Caught in this dilemma, they promised their father that they would never do so.



Figure 8.2: From right to left: Fatima, Fatima's husband, and Rabiya and her children¹⁰

However, after their marriages, in fact as soon as the new brides arrived in their new homes, they were taken to the tomb of the Sufi Saint Shah Chokha along with their husbands to seek the blessings of the saint before the two couples began their conjugal lives. It was a tradition in the village of the bridegrooms' family to acknowledge the authority of the saints on any occasions of importance in their lives. Whether the birth of a new child, a marriage, or employment, people who lived in the Sufi villages would pay homage to the Saint first. Rabiya and Fatima had no option but to follow the custom of their new families.

A few years later, the elder sister Rabiya was expecting a baby. Unfortunately, the child died. The problem did not end there and doctors could not save her next three babies over the following years. Rabiya's experience

¹⁰ When I took this photo, both sisters insisted that their photo must be in my book. I also had to give a print copy to them.

undermined her personal faith and deeply shattered her religious belief. During this time, she had accompanied her husband to the tomb of Shah Chokha as an obedient wife, following in the footsteps of her husband. She confessed to me that, 'We two sisters had no faith in Shah Chokha. His shrine did not appeal to us.' But, after the hardships and tragedies of losing her babies, she decided to commit to a complete faith in the saint. Rabiya remembered, 'I made a wish of offering a *chadder* (piece of cloth offered to the grave of Sufi saints) in case our next child survived'.¹¹ This time a miracle happened, and the fourth child survived. I asked Rabiya what impact this had on her previously held beliefs? Rabiya replied, 'I was simply told not to believe in the charisma of Sufi saints as they are nothing more than a dead personality. Now, no-one knows the saint Shah Chokha's power better than me.'¹² She has started going to the tomb at least once a month and performs all the rituals required. This transformation from a non-Sufi adherent to a Sufi adherent resulted from Rabiya's self-revelation.

However, this case has created a tense situation for the two sisters, especially Rabiya. A contradiction exists between what was she told by her Tablighi father and what she experienced for herself religiously. Despite all this, the sisters' faith in the Sufi saint has increased, despite the emotional blackmail of their father, demanding that they should not visit the tomb of the Sufi saint. On many occasions, he openly declared that he would disconnect all future communications and relationship if the sisters were found to practice the faith of their in-laws by worshipping the Sufi saint. To sustain kinship and family relations, both sisters keep secret from their father the experiences they have had and their beliefs about Saint Shah Chokha. On the other hand, they also

¹¹ Interview with Rabiya and Fatima, dated March 2016.

¹² Ibid.

have a feeling that their father knows about their worship of the Sufi saint. Here, Rabiya feels that her father might have sensed that his daughters have gone against his wish. Therefore, he also participates in maintaining the secret of their faith by not openly acknowledging it. On this point, known secrets prove to be an important factor in maintaining secrecy on the part of both participants. For instance, in the process where women hide their faith from men, the men must equally participate in the entire process by acknowledging and respecting the women's acts. The trick to keeping this type of secret is 'don't ask and don't tell'. As Taussig (1999) writes:

We are troubled by our own complicity, but we do not speak because we know that without such shared secrets any and all social institutions – workplace, marketplace, state and family would founder (p. 7).

Taussig's comments on secrecy suggest that both the person who hides facts and the person who pretends to not know mutually respect each other's stance by indirectly allowing the former to keep a 'known secret'. Rabiya's father pretends to get angry but in reality he respects his daughters' decision under the disguise of not knowing anything.¹³ Rabiya, by contrast, shares everything with her mother, knowing fully well that her father will eventually know about it.

Secrecy as a social phenomenon, thus, is an important aspect of everyday human relationships. This is a powerful form of social knowledge that relies on conscious denials of social reality. Such shared secrets are not meaningless and devoid of significance. They contain very useful information which sustains not only human relationships but also social and political institutions. For instance,

¹³ Rabiya told me that her father has a sense about their belief in Shah Chokha.

secret deals between governments in diplomatic relations, the lies told by parents to their children, secrecy in socially illicit sexual relations: these are after all disguised as secrets in order to belie the social construction of a reality. In most cases, a widely shared belief by a large number of people makes hiding a compulsive norm, creating a public secret which cannot be openly acknowledged. As Daniel (2006) states:

Public secrets are those secrets that the public chooses to keep it safe for itself which in turn help them to slip into denial. (p. 2)

It is important to differentiate a 'public secret' from other types of secrets. In Rabiya and Fatima's case, the audience for the secrecy is slowly growing. Over the years not only close family members but also their distant relatives have a sense of their closeness to the Sufi saint, but nobody asks about it. The next example reveals a process of concealment among people who live outside Mewat and who have invoked the name of Shah Chokha at some point.

8.2.3 Abbas's longing to belong to the Saint

Large numbers of Meos and other Muslims from the Mewat region have migrated to distant places, mainly the Gulf countries as well as the regions of Mumbai and Gujarat to find work. These migrants often visit the Shah Chokha *dargāh*. They were easily recognisable as 'outsiders' because they did not frequently visit the *dargāh*—I noticed them, even though I was a first-time visitor. In moments of distress and disappointment, most of them look for help or solace from their local religious deities and figures like Saint Shah Chokha. The story of one visiting migrant, Abbas, is pertinent to this discussion.

Abbas, aged 45, lived and worked in Saudi Arabia. He looked frightened when I first approached him in the premises of Shah Chokha's *dargāh*. The reason for his uneasiness was his fear of being caught in an unwanted situation that he secretly admires but publicly hides. The members of his extended family

are supporters of the Tablighi Jamaat and his family discourages veneration of the saint. For Abbas, the social burden of carrying the symbolism of religious purity in a society which has changed rapidly in religious terms of *Wahabi*¹⁴ ideology is too much. The reformist politics have persuaded a major chunk of the population in the area of the importance of puritanical Islam in a way that the reformist view now forms mainstream public opinion. In this situation, concealment or secrecy gives Abbas a chance to accommodate, negotiate and exercise his personal belief vis-à-vis these dominant purist religious values.

While living in Saudi Arabia, Abbas has faced many hardships including— as he revealed to me—the loss of his valuables, including his passport and work permit. After a futile search for two days with numerous prayers and worship, he finally decided to invoke the name of Shah Chokha. Even though he was in the most pious place in the world for the Islamic religion, he felt he had no option except to look for help from the saint. He disclosed to me that within two hours of invoking the name of the saint, he received a phone call about his lost valuables. The immediate vow he took was to offer a *chadder* upon his return to India. He further said, ‘our gods are ours, we should never forget them. They always look after us no matter wherever we are and whatever we do’.¹⁵ Abbas’s use of the term ‘our god’ reclaims a local form of popular Islam in India, as Mohammad (2013) shows, in which the Sufi saints are considered gods not only by Hindus but also by Muslims.

Abbas did not differentiate between the Hindu and Islamic conceptions of gods. Rather the two strands of Islam, Sufi and Tablighi, had a peculiar interpretation in his views. He identified his religious belief locally with the Sufi

¹⁴ Abbas used this term. Wahabi refers to an 18th century Islamic reform movement that originated in Saudi Arabia. There are number of works available on Wahhabism.

¹⁵ Informal conversation with Abbas.

saint rather with a place meant to be the centre of Islam in the world. Without denigrating the status of any religious figures, Abbas maintained, 'all religions and gods are equal, one should have freedom to invoke what one believes in.'¹⁶ According to Abbas, neglecting the saint constitutes a huge mistake by the Meos, including his family members. Abbas does not begin his daily routine or any work without reciting the name of the saint. For him, the saint connects him to the almighty (i.e. Allah) since the saint is very close to Allah. However, under the changed circumstances produced by the success of the Tablighi Jamaat doctrines, Abbas is no longer able to express devotion to the saint publicly.

What is important here is that during our entire conversation Abbas was very conscious of my presence. My encounter with him happened on the occasion when he was visiting to fulfil his vow. When he entered the *dargāh*, he had covered his face completely with a small cotton towel. He was afraid of being seen publicly. This and other actions indicated his uneasiness about visiting the Sufi saint. For instance, his son parked his car nearly a kilometre away from the tomb, even though vehicles normally drive right into the premises. He very politely declined my request to take a photo of him, and his face was covered when he came in and went out. Yet, his action of visiting the *dargāh* necessarily invoke the principles of concealment. His story shows that, when it comes to religious belief, personal experience is a strong motivator and a person will practice secrecy to avoid rifts with society and family.

8.2.4 Haruni's trick to negotiate pressure

Thus, it is clear that as a result of pressure from reformist groups, previously held beliefs do not necessarily disappear or succumb but instead adherents find their own ways to cope. In another narrative, a woman named Haruni, aged 60,

¹⁶ Conversation with Abbas.

successfully maintains her faith in the Sufi saint although overtly denying that she worships him. On my regular visits, I used to sit at her small grocery shop for conversation about day-to-day life. Her life struggles were beyond imagination. Her husband was completely disabled after a paralysis attack; so, the burden of running household and taking care of four children fell upon Haruni. With the help of a government-run welfare program of the Mewat Development Agency,¹⁷ she managed to obtain some funds to start the shop. Throughout all this period of struggle, she retained complete faith in the charismatic authority of the saint. Despite many formal conversations, for a very long time she was hesitant to disclose any information about her faith in the saint. She used to ignore all my efforts to direct her attention to the issue of the cult of the Sufi saint in the village. The main reason for her for not being willing to speak about her faith in the saint was the opposition from male members of her family to the idea of worshipping the saint. Her father-in-law used to fight with her over this issue. Her unpleasant experience forced her to hide her faith from overt display. However, she did not relinquish her personal beliefs easily under the family and social pressure.

One particular issue to notice is that within the framework of male and female relationships – whether daughters and father (in the case of Rabiya and Fatima), or male in-laws and wives (in Haruni’s case), the issue of belief in the Sufi saint is primarily mediated by exposure to the teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat. Mewat is one of the least developed areas in India, with a very low rate of general literacy. The female literacy rate is dramatically lower than the male rate.¹⁸ Hence, females are less exposed to the Islamic scriptures. Aside from the literacy rate, traditional notions of patriarchy in the sense of accessing a male

¹⁷ I am grateful to Islamuddin for putting me in touch with Haruni.

¹⁸ Mewat District: Census Data, 201, Decennial Census Operations.

space are very powerful and woman are not allowed to sit with men in Tablighi Jamaat programs. The Tablighi Jamaat also works in a manner which gives priority to the males. In such contexts, it is interpreted as the role of males to discipline their wives, daughters and any females in the family by imparting the Tablighi Jamaat's doctrines and by preventing them from performing un-Islamic acts.¹⁹

Haruni is an uneducated woman who is told all the time by her father in law what is Islamic and what is not. The practices of the Tablighi Jamaat have become a male sphere, where everything is a matter of male honour. What females believe and worship has the potential to bring dishonour to male family members and might even make a man hang his head in shame in front of his social groups and other villagers.

Outside Haruni's house, the *maulavi*, who sits at the tomb premises, urges the Muslims of the village to abstain from paying a visit to the tomb. In such situations, it becomes very difficult for Haruni to maintain her religious leanings. She has to maintain a balance between the different agents of power within and outside her household, all of whom want to discipline her desire to practice the Sufi faith. Later, when Haruni began to trust me, she disclosed her tactics of managing the pressure and secretly maintaining her faith in the saint. She disclosed that at least once a month she visits the *dargāh*. To implement her plans effectively, she sends a child first to enquire about the *maulavi*'s presence on the premises. She keeps sending a child to inquire until she hears of a suitable opportunity. As soon as the *maulavi* is absent from the premises, she goes there and pays a quick tribute to the holy saint.

¹⁹ There are also separate Tablighi groups for women. These proselytise among Muslim women, but they are very few in number.

8.2.5 Everyday reliance on the Saint: Hazra's story

Hazra (70 years old) and her elderly husband performed the duties of custodians in the *dargāh*. At first, when I entered into the grounds of *dargāh*, I first came across the *maulavi*, who met people who were visiting him to seek guidance on spiritual or worldly problems. At 2 o'clock, the *maulavi* went to say *namāz* with other Muslims. I then sat next to Hazra and started talking to her. Hazra told me that her sons have abandoned her, and she is very displeased with the situation. She then started contradicting what the *maulavi* had been saying to me. She said, 'I believe in Dada Shah Chokha wholeheartedly but I could not say that in front of him.' She recalled that her many wishes had been fulfilled thanks to the grace of the miraculous saint. Like Fatima, Hazra had lost various children at birth and became hopeless and depressed. Then one day she decided to visit the shrine before the birth of her next child. Miraculously her next child survived, and the list of surviving children quickly rose to eight, including four daughters.

She also happily recalled that not long ago somebody had stolen her bag which contained 20000 rupees. After an unsuccessful search she called for the blessings of Dada Chokha. In her final statement to the saint, she said 'I will stop believing in you if I don't get my money back'. She soon caught a man carrying the same bag in the market. In these cases, secret worship of the Sufi saint is often linked to the fulfilment of a desire. Fulfilment of worldly and material requirements suggests the complexity involved in the religious behaviour of people who are supposed to become pure in religious behaviour. The all-encompassing reform organisations and their attempts to build religious boundaries have become an everyday concern for many people. Cases of concealment as a result of pressure from the reformists do not occur only among Muslims. There were many instances of Hindu visitors who regularly hide their faith in an obvious Islamic figure due to political compulsions and pressure.

8.2.6 Shiva Shankar's anxieties

Shiv Shankar Singla, 65 years old, lives in the Ballabhgarh region of Faridabad which borders Mewat. He is a shopkeeper by profession and a Baniya (trader) by caste. He has a long-term association with the Hindu reformist group, the Arya Samaj, and with a right-wing political group, the RSS. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, the Arya Samaj discourages any form of human or idol worship and expects followers to live their life according to the Hindu sacred scriptures, the Vedas. Returning Hindus to the Vedic ideology is its main motto. The RSS, on the other hand, does not intervene in ways of worship. The RSS's focus remains on politics. The political opinion of the RSS is that India should be a Hindu country rather than a secular nation as it is at present.



Figure 8.3: Shiv Shankar Singla at his shop

Shiv Shankar always blames Muslims for denigrating the ancient India, based on the myth of golden period. Despite his hatred for Muslims, he explains his visit to the tomb of the Islamic saint by saying *pīr baba to sabke hai* ('Sufi *pīr* belongs to everyone'). Behind his religious love for the Islamic figure but hatred for Muslims as a community lie the concept of the miraculous or charismatic

personality of the saint. Writing about charisma, Weber (1968) suggests an allegiance is shown to the person who carries the unique attributes and abilities by virtues of charisma. Such charismatic appeal creates the authority of the person.

In Weber's eyes, charisma is usually a revolutionary force that involves a radical break with the pre-existing order, regardless of whether that order is based on traditional or legal authority. The concept of power associated with a charismatic personality such as that of the Sufi saints is seen as legitimate power that does not have to be enforced. The Shankar's belief in the charismatic Sufi is the part of a universally accepted legitimate power, as the power of a supernatural being cannot be questioned. In Shankar's case, the Sufi saint represents an ultimate source of power rather than being a representative of a religion. However, his sense of the Islamic religion and opinions about the Muslim community are based on the everyday behaviour of common Muslims instead of on his personal association with Islamic saints.

Every Thursday, Shiv Shankar either goes to the tomb or offers a small piece of green cloth in the name of the Sufi saint at his personal religious space at home. Why Shankar left his strictly principled belief in the Arya Samaj ideology of a non-idol, non-human worshiper is an interesting story. His eldest daughter became seriously ill with breast cancer. The doctors discounted any hope for saving her life. Shankar not only travelled across regions and met healers, doctors and medical authorities but also tried every form of medicinal practice. Somebody suggested that he visit the tomb of the Sufi saint Shah Chokha. As this was contrary to his life-long beliefs, it was a difficult suggestion for him to follow.

However, seeing his daughter's condition not improving, he thought he should give it a try. Shankar, along with his sick daughter, went to the *dargāh* on

a Thursday and performed rituals there. Miraculously, as Shankar recalls it, his daughter started showing signs of improvement in her health within a short time of their visit to the *dargāh*. Mesmerized by this experience, he felt bad about his long-held ignorance, as he pointed out to me. Deeply shaken internally, he never revealed his experience to anyone, partly for the sake of his daughter's reputation but mainly out of fear of being mocked himself. In this case, he has had to conceal his belief, although he still follows it in daily life. Concealment is thus an important aspect of social life that allows humans to navigate socially built non-navigable domains. On this point Michael Taussig (1999) suggests that knowing what not to know is the most powerful form of social knowledge (p. 8). In other words, pretending to be unaware of or not revealing known things helps human beings to maintain already existing belief systems and institutions.

8.3 The stories of syncretic beliefs and the secular imaginations of the saints²⁰

This section deals with peoples' lack of concern with religious boundaries. People may consider some religious practices such as saint veneration as simply natural practices and beyond religious definition. There is no doubt that figures like Laldas and Shah Chokha are often seen today as belonging to either Islam or Hinduism, but this is not a case of historical continuity. Their cults historically evolved around an idea that there were no dogmatic beliefs about differences between Hindus and Muslims. Commonly held Hindu and Muslim religious feelings were determined not by the political behaviours of the ruling class but by the adherents being ardent followers of a particular cult or *panth*. The overall framework of debate was determined by the general animosity between inter- and intra-religious cults or the synthesis between them and was

²⁰ By 'secular' I mean people believing in other religions and respecting all religions, equally which is a common Indian definition of secularism.

not confined only to institutional ideas of religions but to sects and cults. These different cults and sects, which are now identified with one religion or the other, often advocated transcending religious divides. The category of religion (Hindu and Islam) played a secondary role in the competitiveness or syncretisations of the various cults. For instance, many charismatic stories about both saints are believed by Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Sikhs who do not make the saints' Islamic identities a concern. For example, when referring to Laldas (Lalkhan), Hindu devotees often reluctantly clarify during the interviews and conversations, '*hum jānte hai hamāre bābā musalmān hai*' (we know our saint is a Muslim). About Shah Chokha the same claim was made. He was given the status of *kul-devtā* (family god).

Charisma can be interpreted as an impartial imagining of the sacred. Impartially imagining these saints as representative of sacredness is an example of religious neutrality. Like sacred images, the saints were often considered to be beyond the religious divides. How these secular imaginings form common narratives around charismatic figures in which people of different religions enthusiastically believe is something that can help us understand why shared cults hold great sway over their followers. There are many instances of Hindus' and Muslims' narrative indifference about the origins, myths, and powers of the saints.

The expression '*pīr bābā to sabkè hai*' ('the saints belongs to everyone') was a common reply from both Hindu and Muslim visitors to the Laldas and Shah Chokha shrines when asked why they visit these places. The question implied a contradiction between the behaviour of an ideal Hindu or Muslim person, as imagined by the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat. Although the question may have unsettled the visitors' sense of religious identity, the reply denotes a belief in the saints that goes beyond religious divides. Hindu and Muslim identity did not apply to them as they are sacred manifestations.

On this point, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1976) distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' is apt. According to Durkheim the sacred is ideally desired extra-ordinary, potentially dangerous, awe-inspiring, fear inducing entities or objects created by humans. It transcends everyday mundane life and existence. A sacred entity could be anything such as– a god, a rock, the moon, the earth, a tree, an animal or birds, etc. if they are endowed with sacred properties and meanings. Objects become sacred only because humans have traditionally identified them as sacred. Once established as sacred entity or the symbols of religious beliefs and practices, anything can be sacred. The profane is the opposite, mundane and ordinary, often without power or control. For most visitors to such Sufi and Bhakti shrines, the sacred world is completely different from the profane world. In the day-to-day profane world, Muslims and Hindus are two distinct groups whose relationship is often one of intolerance and perhaps even hatred towards each other. But this division does not apply to the sacred objects and places of worship.

The story of Dinesh, a Hindu resident of Punahana, is useful to illustrate this point. Dinesh runs a garment shop in the town. When I first approached Dinesh at his shop to buy a cotton *gamchā* (towel) to use during the sweaty summer, he looked suspiciously at me, asking if I was from the area. The conversation soon turned towards my objectives for visiting an underdeveloped Muslim location like Mewat. The next questions were about whether I was a Hindu and my caste identity. When he realised he was talking to a Hindu with a middle peasant caste status, a Yadav person, his very first remark targeted Muslims for ruining this country. This othering in the form of 'us' (Hindus) and 'them' (Muslims) kept appearing in his narratives throughout our conversation as he blamed Muslims for theft, violence and other crimes in the area. A few days later when I had built a rapport with him, I began asking him personal questions about faiths and religious practices.

Surprisingly, Dinesh had immense respect for the Islamic Sufi Saint Shah Chokha. He claimed that he and his family members are among the traditional followers of the Sufi saint. Every Thursday, either he or one of his family members pays their respects to the saint by visiting his shrine, burning incense sticks and distributing sugar balls at the *dargāh*. Not a single new family initiative is taken without paying a tribute to the saint for his blessings. Whether it is a job, marriage, birth, death or any other occasion, the saint's name is definitely invoked with due respect. In response to the question, 'why do you worship a Muslim saint?' Dinesh replied:

'He is our *kul devtā* (family god, a god inherited by family traditions) ...[and] since he is given to us by ancestors and forefathers there is no question of not revering him.'²¹

He added, 'a *kul-devtā* looks after the family's well-being and supports us through bad times, this is what everyone needs, and we are receiving all these things from the saint'.



²¹ Interview with Dinesh 19th July 2016.

Figure 8.4: Dinesh's family at the dargāh for their child's head shaving ceremony

For Dinesh, more than the identity of the saint, it is the belief in him that matters. The sacred is thus a symbol built by a long process of meaning-making and eventually results in what Mircea Eliade (1959) called 'hierophany' or 'the manifestation of the sacred' (Eliade 1959, p. 5). For Dinesh and thousands of other believers, the manifestation of charisma or the sacred at the saints' tombs reveals itself through multiple examples of charisma accomplished in their daily lives by the saints' boons.

Among Hindu believers, the Sufi Saint Shah Chokha is so important that they make a worship space for him inside their homes like Shiv Shankar, as they do for other Hindu gods. Thursday is considered an appropriate day for the traditional ritual of visiting the *dargāh*. Many people who cannot visit him every Thursday normally offer a small piece of green cloth in their personal worship spaces in their homes to symbolise the offering of a *galeb* (grave cloth) at the tomb. I saw a piece of green cloth signifying their faith in the Islamic saint resting among the images and idols of the Hindu gods and goddesses inside the houses of many Hindus. Such examples are not exceptional ritualistic behaviours. There are numerous other instances of complete appropriation of Saint Shah Chokha by Hindus without contesting his Islamic identity.

In another instance, Rajesh, 35, a regular visitor to the Sufi saint's *dargāh*, revealed some fascinating details of his family's syncretic tradition. Born to a *lohar* (ironsmith) caste Hindu family, they too run a grocery store in a small town a few kilometres from the saint's tomb. Before moving to this town, his family stayed in the nearby ancestral village. He invited me to visit both his shop and the ancestral home to see their syncretic beliefs and practices. When I reached the shop on the agreed date, Rajesh's grandfather was sitting there, with a vermilion mark on his forehead, next to a loosely hanging portrait of the

god Shiva. He told me that that even though he observes all Hindu rituals and beliefs, and worships Hindu deities, his family had also been going to the *dargāh* since time immemorial. Rajesh's old grandfather built a grave in front of his ancestral village house to symbolise the body and grave of Saint Shah Chokha. Every day after taking their baths, Rajesh's family members would walk around the grave and then burn incense sticks, a practice which is usually followed at the Sufi sacred site.²² Constructing a tomb in front of a house is, however, an unusual act. Here, as in other Hindu traditions, performing circumambulatory rituals, or like taking rounds around a tomb in Islam, the act itself presents certain common rituals which are hard to categorise. The ritual practice of circumambulation is not unique to a particular religion. Therefore, the meanings inherent in following a practice like circumambulation are considered sacred merely on the basis of the sacred nature of the practice.

This also shows the malleability of religious boundaries and how different religions frequently look to one another for divine inspiration. The phenomenon of the ritual intersection of the divine authority (Frøystad 2012) remains, despite the emergence of the new religious intolerance or antagonism. More importantly, what makes such practices valid in popular behaviour is the sacred nature of sacred objects and figures. Both Islamic and Hindu figures are among recognised sacred entities and represent what Weber, Durkheim, and Eliade would describe as the sacred domain. In the profane world the two religious communities may argue over sacred symbols but not at the cost of denying the authority of the sacred objects. In Weber's view such appeals create charismatic personas to which people of all religions are attracted.

²² Interview with Rajesh and his grandfather 4th September 2016.

Thus, this chapter has dealt with the question of religious faith in saints and the ways of negotiating pressure with the ideologies of power that try to discipline that faith. The tomb of the famous Sufi saint Shah Chokha and the Hindu Saint Laldas have historically been the centres of devotion among Hindus and Muslims in the Mewat region. The evolution of the reform movements, stronger among the Muslims in the region, has led the majority male Meo Muslims to adopt uniformitarian Islamic religious practices. However, historical circumstances have contributed to the emergence and success of the transnational movement, the Tablighi Jamaat. Currently, however, the movement has been successful in applying a uniform code of conduct to the religious behaviour of the majority Muslims. One of the primary goals of the Tablighi Jamaat is to disband all associations of Indian Muslims who had liminal identities and links with non-Islamic traditions. The veneration of a Sufi saint is the most severely criticized practice by the Tablighi Jamaat. In this context, people who still want to maintain their faith in the Sufi saints for whatever reasons face difficulties.

Despite the changed circumstances, Muslims still have faith in the saints but cannot openly display that faith due to the social and moral pressure. Their open display of association with the saint might generate conflict, as happened many times during my stay. Thus, the phenomenon of secrecy or concealment is adopted by believers, particularly by women (the most powerless group) in order to manage the pressure and resist the power being imposed on them. Unlike male Muslims, women Muslims' lives are subjected to the dual pressures of the reform organization and family members. To not put family relationships at risk, the female visitors to shrines have to hide their faith in the saint. To protect their male honour within their communities, men regulate female visits to the Sufi tomb.

Through its ethnographic analysis of stories, this chapter has argued that not all syncretic or what are negatively described as ‘impure beliefs’ in Islam or in Hinduism (in case of the Arya Samaj) succumb to the power of reformist uniformity. Instead, human beings are socially and culturally equipped with the skills that help them to navigate social barriers and pressures. Concealment or secrecy is one of the most accomplished forms of skill and shows how human social knowledge helps sustain not only human desires to worship but also social institutions such as family, marriage and kinship ties.

The desire to passively resist an unwanted situation culminates in the poetic songs of the bards. The next chapter explores how, in the wake of religious separatism, the Jogi and Mirasi bards articulate positive messages about religious harmony, unity and synthesis through their new poetic songs. ■

Chapter 9

The art of resistance: the bards' and minstrels' response to anti-syncretic and anti-liminal ideologies

Where there is power, there is resistance.

(Foucault 1978a, pp. 95–6)

This chapter explores what happened after the patterns of social relations in Mewat changed. Traditionally, the Meos were a socially dominant peasant group on whom depended other Muslim groups (especially the Jogi, and the Mirasis). However, once the Meo patrons of the Jogi and Mirasi musician castes embraced the Tablighi Jamaat's version of Islam, these traditional economic and social relations weakened. Tablighi teachings frown on music. As a result, the Jogis and Mirasis have felt under pressure to give up performing, even though this has been their livelihood and they value their artistry for its own sake.

As marginal groups, the Jogis and Mirasis have therefore needed to find ways to negotiate the views and position of their former patrons whose passive opposition to their performance has become a vital issue in their everyday survival. This chapter argues that, in response, the Jogis and Mirasis are using the lyrics of their new poetic songs as a form of passive resistance to the Meo

patrons' version of religious purity, instead emphasizing a version of righteousness that is universal and thus needs no organised religion.

The previous chapter showed that under pressure people adopt measures like secrecy and concealment to negotiate with or passively resist the idea of Tablighi discipline. Although the examples in chapter eight were not related to livelihood concerns but to the exercise of religious beliefs, the attempted imposition of religious authority clearly had negative implications for an individual. This chapter explores the same theme in the context of the Muslim bards and their act of passive resistance against their former patrons, the Meos, who now ask them to join the Tablighi Jamaat and adopt its purist values. This chapter, which is based on the Indic theme of cultural interaction, tries to understand the Jogis' and Mirasis' art of resistance. With the gradual disintegration of the patronage system, the landless and small land-owning bards were most affected. Additionally, the rise and success of Tablighi Jamaat led the Meos to discourage such performances as antithetical to Islam.

In these changed circumstances, the bards opted to resist and express their anxieties through their artistic medium and folk musical compositions. After the loss of their traditional audience, current performances raise issues not only of identity and cultural heritage but also of livelihood. Significant in these changes is the way that the mediaeval Indian themes of the Nath, Sufi and Bhakti religious streams—which conventionally stressed upon the conception of transcending Hindu–Muslim religious divides—are moving towards expression of a discourse of religious synthesis. Despite their now compulsory identification with Islam, the bards currently advocate for a Hindu–Muslim composite heritage. By expressing messages of universal righteousness in their songs, the Mewati bards indirectly question the ascendant Islamic purist ideologies and groups on the one hand, and the divisive Hindu versus Muslim politics on the other. From such oppositions, the Muslim bards draw on an Indic

theme and the symbolism of Hinduism to represent a 'Muslim self' against the rhetoric and symbolism of the unfamiliar version of Islam (the Tablighi one) that represents the 'Muslim other'.¹

9.1 Resistance to domination

Resistance to pressure and domination is a highly complex phenomenon which employs both passive and active means in its operation. Writings of the Subaltern school in India, with its claim to recover the lost voices of subalterns in the writing of history, adopted a narrow idea of resistance. They focused only on visible forms of resistance, such as insurgency, peasant rebellion and tribal revolt (see Bhadra 1985; Guha 1997; Guha 1999).² Less obvious forms of resistance were overlooked in the writing of these Subaltern scholars. In contrast to the Subalterns, the famous works of James Scott (1990, 2008)³ on themes such as 'weapons of the weak', 'domination and resistance' have led to considerable writing and debate about the passive resistance of the marginalised. But in this context too, there is little scholarly engagement with

¹ The bulk of the fieldwork for this chapter was carried out among those Muslim Jogi and Mirasi singers who still practice their art in Alwar. Much of their lifestyle oscillate between symbolism of art that draws on Hinduism (e.g. praying to the goddess of knowledge Saraswati) and their personal religious faith (Islam). Not only do these groups see themselves as rooted in a caste society but also consider their local practices such as venerating Hindu gods and goddess as a completely natural phenomenon. Thus, their indigeneity creates a different Muslim self, one that is rooted in local practices. An idea of the 'Muslim other' appears in their narratives, indicating a version of Islam alien to India.

² For critiques of this lacuna of passive resistance in the Subalterns works, see Hugh B. Urban (2003, pp. 493–519) and (Bayly 1988, pp. 310–20).

³ James Scott is the pioneer thinker on the issue of everyday resistance to power through passive means. His numerous published works analyse the hidden meanings in the actions of powerless groups. Borrowing from his understanding from the book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale, 1990), the purpose in this chapter is to look for messages of resistance in the new songs of the minstrel castes in the wake of pressures like religious discipline and intolerance.

the issue of passive resistance to religious reform ideologies conveyed through the artistic means of folk songs.⁴

To identify the passive resistance practised by the bards of the Jogi and Mirasi caste, this chapter relies on James Scott's description of 'hidden transcripts'. I consider that the lyrics of the new songs by these bards constitute a type of hidden transcript. Scott refers to 'hidden transcripts' in the context of discussion about the public roles played by powerful and powerless groups, and the mocking, vengeful tone both groups display off stage. Both groups create public and hidden transcripts in their own ways. A hidden transcript is, thus, an off-stage product that subordinate groups use behind the backs of the powerful. The songs of the Mewati bards respectfully present the issue of the religious divide without radically denigrating or mocking the stand of the Meos and their ideological and social power. Their art—and their need to earn a living—requires that they remain civil in expressing anxieties. However, their songs are not hidden nor entirely offstage. However, these days they are performed for a different audience behind the backs of the Meo patrons. In my approach, I consider that the very acts of making, producing and performing a song provide a domain through which the performers can convey messages they cannot express directly by disguising them in an artistic form.

The lyrics of orally performed new songs, thus, act as a strategic tool. Through their songs, the bards can express meanings behind the back of the powerful that they cannot speak in the everyday domain of conversation and

⁴ Writing of Hugh Urban describes the passive resistance in the context of religious sphere but his focus too is on secrecy as a weapon of marginalised. See, 'The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions', *History of Religions* (1998) pp. 209-248; *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (California, 2003); 'Secrecy and New Religious Movements: Religious Secrecy and Privacy in a New Age of Information', *Religion Compass*, (2008) pp. 66-83.

directly in front of the powerful. Their performances thus help them express issues of religious identity and everyday livelihood through poetic artistry. Scott comments throughout his writings on the passive resistance of subordinate groups (or subalterns) through means such as folk songs, gossip, jokes and mimics. Such domains create a hidden transcript which can be displayed openly (Scott 1990, pp. 77–90) but which often works indirectly behind the back of power.

The fundamental concern of resistance is power. Power in a Foucauldian sense is not static; it is a historically evolved and culturally perpetuated phenomenon dispersed through various means. Power relationships are hierarchically organised around groups and individuals in any social-economic set-up (Foucault 1982, pp. 777–95). To contextualise the power relations in Mewat, it is important to understand that the two minstrel castes have traditionally been dependent on the Meos. As explained in chapter two, under the *jajmāni* system the bards were dependent on the Meos, who belonged to a comparatively higher caste status. The *jajmāni* system created circumstances for a power play in this context. More particularly in South Asia, power relations are hierarchically organised around the caste structure, which is closely linked to social class (in an economic sense). The livelihoods of many landless communities in India were traditionally premised upon services rendered to their peasant patrons.

In the last few decades, patronage has shrunk considerably. In Mewat, the main reasons for this change are the impact of the Tablighi Jamaat and the rise of a new market economy, especially after the economic liberalisation of India in

the 1990s.⁵ Without patronage, landless (or small landowning) cultural groups like the Jogi and Mirasi fell under the yoke of free labour market forces.

These new circumstances have meant a weakening of the tie between patrons and musicians. The subsistence of the landless castes now depends on them selling their physical labour. Thus, the artistic skills of the bards, which had once flourished under the patronage of the Meos, were no longer required in the changed mode of economic production and social relations. This disintegration of the patron–client system did not happen suddenly but over a long period. Some caste relations are still alive in rural areas, such as the barbers’ role in a peasant society. With the already decaying patron–client system, the situation of cultural groups worsened when the notion of music as an ‘anti-Islamic’ practice emerged among the Meo Muslims. As most Meos believe in the reformist ideals of the Tablighi Jamaat, and the reform organisation discourages the culture of art and music, traditional musicians have been left without patronage.

9.2 Impact on the bard castes of the changing trajectory of the *jajmāni* system

The changing patterns of *jajmāni* relationships between the dominant (Meo) and their subordinates (Jogi and Mirasi), were then and are still now an important element in the ethnography of the communities. Until the partial disintegration of the *jajmāni* system, the service castes were closely tied to the Meo peasant community because they fulfilled the Meos’ agricultural, ritual and domestic needs. In return for their services, the *kamin* or service castes were remunerated,

⁵ The policies of economic liberalisation expanded the market and made it more service-oriented and created conditions for the movement of labour. Both foreign and domestic investment increased after the liberalisation process. However, the impacts of this policy on the poor and its role in increasing income inequality in India are still debated.

mostly in the form of one share from the peasant communities' grain stores. As explained earlier, under the *jajmāni* system the Jogi and Mirasi were traditional oral performers for the Meos. Their relationship also shared the important aspect of 'a sense of duty' towards each other, despite this being premised on hierarchical notions. The relationship was not necessarily always based on the idea of exploitation. For instance, as Gyan Prakash (2003) shows for the *kāmiyā* (labourer) and *mālik* (master) relationship in rural colonial Bihar, at moments of distress, drought or severe famine, the master supplied food for their *kāmiyās*. With the disintegration of this traditional rural relationship, landless castes like the Jogis and Mirasis have been severely affected by irregular subsistence income. For example, many of my interviewees from these two communities seasonally migrate to places like Mumbai and Gujarat in the hope of generating extra income until the next cultivation period, when they return to work in the area. Their need to earn a livelihood has transformed the majority of these bardic caste members from a community of folk artists into labourers. Although there are still enough artists left who survive by relying on their artistic skills, few of the performers are from the younger cohorts of the communities.

Many elderly Jogis and Mirasis still remember and recite folktales and folk stories, although the extent of this practice has reduced considerably. There are several reasons for this. Traditionally, the Meos were both the patrons and the main audience in the Mewat region for the folk singers and storytellers. But the majority of the Meos have now transferred their loyalties to the Islamic reform organisation, the Tablighi Jamaat. The Tablighi Jamaat considers music to be an anti-Islamic tradition, one which has no place in contemporary Islam. Thus, the bards have lost their traditional audience.

The loss of the audience and the simultaneous emergence of other entertainment media such as the growing use of television in the 1990s have had a negative impact on the bards. Now the bardic profession is seen as of very

little value, so performers are forced to seek better opportunities or struggle hard to maintain their daily survival. The majority of the younger generation do not want to take up the profession as a livelihood.

This is illustrated by the experience of one of my interviewees, Harun.⁶ Harun is a young folk artist from the Muslim Jogi caste who has developed his traditional art of story-telling and singing into a professional career by performing in schools, for state-sponsored programs and at the various national and international forums for the promotion of traditional arts. According to Harun, he was forced to take his art beyond the traditional confines of Meo culture. He used to accompany his father and grandfather to perform at Meo marriage festivities in the late 1990s. During the traditional Meo marriage ceremonies, the relatives from the bridegroom's side used to stay for four to five days in the village of the bride's family. The bards were employed as the main public entertainers on these occasions. This provided ample opportunities for the bards. This period has now been reduced from four or five days to one night or so, which has also negatively impacted on the bards' profession (Mayaram 2003, p. 318). Harun mentioned that under the influence of the Tablighi Jamaat's ideology, the new trend was to stop them from performing in the traditional marriage ceremonies of their patrons, the Meos. Harun recalled that it was an acutely distressing experience to see that, just as they were about to perform, they would be stopped in marriage after marriage by the Meos saying, 'Don't sing, we will give you your share of money'.

Under the traditional *jajmāni* system, the Jogi and Mirasi were entitled to receive money or grain for their work. Although the Meos felt obliged to pay their traditional clients, they were no longer interested in their services because

⁶ Interview with Harun 15th July 2016.

of their un-Islamic nature. 'More than a matter of money, it was a complete disrespect for our profession,' Harun explained. Not being dependent anymore on the Meos or on begging alms for subsistence, Harun believes in using his art to earn income as a respected professional. However, it is in this context of the emergence of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat and under the changed circumstances of the political economy and modes of resource use that the bards and other low caste-class groups' lives need to be examined. The emergence of the puritanical notions of the Tablighi Jamaat changed broader socio-economic processes that have affected the lives of bardic caste members.

However, while the traditional style of oral telling used the *bāt* form (explained in chapter two), the new songs in which passive resistance ideas surfaced belong to another popular folk music genre called *rasiyā*. More particularly, the songs belong to Mewati style *rasiyā*—a subgenre. Geographically, the Mewat intersects the Braj region of Mathura and Vrindavan, which are the abodes of the cowherd god Krishna. The Braj region has also been a leading centre in the development of numerous folk poetry and folk musical styles. Inspired by the themes of Krishnaite Bhakti (devotion) and romantic tropes about the love of Radha and other peasant girls, this folk art intersected the divine and the profane world.⁷ In the *milieu* of the love affairs of a god, the folk genre *rasiyā* (literally 'epicure') spread into adjoining local areas, for instance Bharatpur, Mewat, Hathras, Awadh and Aligarh, in diverse local

⁷ For instance, the *rīti* poetry and the folk music genre *rasiyā* originated and prospered in the Braj region. More details about *rīti* poetry can be found in Allison Busch's works: 'Hidden in Plain View: Brajhasha Poets at the Mughal Court.' *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (2010), pp. 267–309; 'Questioning the Tropes about 'Bhakti' and 'Rīti' in Hindi Literary Historiography', in *Bhakti in Current Research*, ed. Monika Horstmann (2006), pp. 33–47; 'Listening for the Context: Tuning into the Reception of *Rīti* Poetry', In *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance Cultures in North India*, edited by Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (2015), pp. 249–82.

forms. In modern times, a new form of *rasiyā* has been adopted into saucy and spicy songs depicting mundane feelings about sex, love, teasing and erotic desires (Manuel 1994, 2015). Sung *rasiyā* has the power to evoke love, romance and erotic emotions. However, the Mewati bards did not model their current songs on this spicy style but instead modelled their prosody in the traditional manner of *rasiyā*. Performed in this way, *rasiyā* can generate powerful feelings in one's heart. Using the traditional style *rasiyā* prosody in Mewati *bāt* form, all the new songs the bards perform express messages about religious unity and the undermining of religious differences.

9.3 Experiences of the Jogi and Mirasi castes with Islamic reformism

In chapters two and three, I showed that the Jogis and Mirasis' cultural resources for oral performance are drawn from 'Indic' historical traditions that emphasise universalism, expressing ideas beyond the narrow confinement of religious categories. Groups like the Jogis and Mirasis were traditionally both Hindu and Muslim at the same time, while being closely interwoven into the power structure of the caste society. This type of universalism among such groups has a long and important history on the subcontinent. The Bauls⁸ of Bengal, for instance, convey in their songs the idea that ultimate reality does not lie in dogmatic creeds and doctrines but within oneself. Central to the Bauls' religious imaginary is divine love that is common to both Hindus and Muslims (see for instance, Capwell 1988; Datta 1978; Urban 2003).⁹ Similarly, the themes

⁸ The Baul is a syncretic group like the Muslim Jogis. They are considered low caste and are despised for their anti-institutional behaviour. They play an instrument known as the Ektara. Engaged in esoteric practices, the Baul songs emphasise religious universalism.

⁹ These works cite Baul songs that necessarily express a different viewpoint to institutionalised religious orientations. For example, one Baul song reads, 'The Lord is fixed at the door of devotion; whether Hindu or Muslim, in his vicinity there is no discrimination'. A similar Baul song of Lalan Fakir, the head figure of the sect, points out a Kabir-like critique of sectarian motifs, 'If you circumcise the boy, he becomes a

of universalism and divine love find their way into the Mewati bards' performance. In one of their poetic songs, they sing a metaphoric Krishnaite song of divine love, human feelings and universal values:

*krisn is rūp me jab aapkā darsan howè
aur aap dulhā banè aur jānki dulhan howē
prem ki bāt jamānè mein nirāli dekhī
aur prem se prem ki faltè huyè dāli dekhī
ki prem darasal hai, ādarsh hai jīvan kè liyè
aur prem mein shānti milti hai sadā man kè liyè
ki prem hi vair ki dīwār hatā detā hai
aur prem hi dushmani varso ki mitā detā hai
prem insān ko insān banā detā hai
aur prem pathhar ko bhi bhagwān banā detā hai*

Krishna when I see you in this form
And you are groom and Janaki is your bride
The idea of love is very amazing in this world
And (I) see the branch of love blossoming from love
That, love is real, ideal, for life
And in love the heart pacifies
That love separates the wall of enmity
And it is also the love that mitigates the years-long enmity
The love makes a human, human
And the love also turns a stone into god.¹⁰

Muslim — what's the rule for women, then? I can recognise the Brahman man from his sacred thread; but then how am I to know the Brahman woman? Tell me, just what does caste look like? I've never seen with these eyes of mine, brother' (Capwell, p. 129).
¹⁰ I am thankful to Mirasi Sadab khan for providing this song. The song was a part of *Krisn-leelā* stories that he performed for.

This song is sung at urban venues. It adopts lyrical tones in imparting a message about universality and the essence of human life.

As the Meos sided with puritanical Islam, patronage of the bards suffered. However, the quotations from interviewees and the textual examples I have included in this thesis support my argument that this results from a change in both the regional political economy as well as in the dynamics between religion and politics. As Meo patrons no longer entertain or take pride in their syncretic-liminal past, it is challenging for those bards who are still dependent upon the arts to survive by performing works which once glorified the Meos' dual connections.

The orthodox Muslim and Islamic reform groups felt negatively about the Bauls. The Muslim reformist group issued *fatwās* (legal decisions) against them. Urban (1999) writes:

the Bauls were among the most immediate object of this reformist attack. The apparent licentiousness, immorality and religious syncretism, not to mention the unorthodox, seemingly antisocial and antinomian lifestyle of the Bauls represented, for the reformers, the worst corruption of Islamic culture by Hindu polytheism and idolatry. (p. 29)

The interviews I conducted with numerous bards of Jogi and Mirasi origins open up a window into the personal experiences of the Muslim bards in the face of pressure from the reform organisation and the larger fear of Hindutva politics at the moment of renewed Hindu–Muslim political interest. The stories of one of the Mirasi musicians, Ustad Rammal Khan (aged 55 years), from the Alwar district in Mewat, who has turned his house into a *sangeetendra* (music

centre) reveal various responses to these pressures.¹¹ Ustad Khan teaches harmonium, veena (an India chordophone) and other instruments to both Hindu and Muslim children. Hindu musical learners who come to his training centre refer to him as *guruji*, while Muslim children call him *ustād*.¹² However, Hindus (especially girls) outnumber Muslim learners at his centre. His well-organised and very clean house is located in an urban *bastī* (slum) in the Alwar city. As soon as you enter the house, you are welcomed by images of musical instrument on the walls. On the day of my meeting with him, Ustad Khan's Muslim appearance was signified by a skullcap, which immediately gave me a sense of his religious beliefs. After offering refreshments—a cup of syrupy tea and snacks—he took me directly to a room filled with various musical instruments. On one wall of the room hung a portrait of a collective *namāz* offering at Mecca in Saudi Arabia. To my surprise, on the other side of the room, there was a large portrait of the Hindu goddess Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge); below the portrait burned a bunch of incense sticks, releasing a pleasant fragrance.

¹¹ Interview with Rammal Khan on two occasions, February 2016 and August 2017.

¹² The Hindu/Sanskrit word *guruji* and the Urdu word *ustād* have the same meaning, i.e. 'teacher' or 'master'.



Figure 9.1: Ustad Rammal Khan in his house

Like his ancestors of Mirasi background, Ustad Rammal Khan believes in both religions. During our informal discussion he said, ‘this is our heritage and livelihood’.¹³ Every morning, either he or one of his daughters cleans the room and prays in front of the image of the goddess. At the same time, his family also offers Islamic prayers. It is likely that such connections historically existed between faiths and religions across religious divides. An implication of this is the possibility that groups and castes were traditionally minimally concerned with Hindu–Muslim identities, unlike the present situation.

When I asked about the theologians or the Mullahs’ reactions to his profession, I was surprised to learn that that Rammal Khan’s art has been put under pressure by questioning from within the Muslim community and more particularly by Tablighi workers who have tried to persuade him from time to time to leave his work in favour of Islam. Rammal Kahn said this had not been a problem in the past. ‘This was not the case at least in Mewat. The religious

¹³ Conversation with Rammal Khan.

disciplining was a remote concern for the Muslims and the Meos in particular,' he said. The teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat, which he sees as 'good in making one aware of Islamic religious values', in his opinion have created rifts, not only between Muslims about Sufi ideology but also between Muslims and Hindus.

On this point, Rammal Khan recited a couplet of an Urdu *shāyār* (poet), Shafiq Jaunpuri (1903-63) regarding the implications of the Tablighi Jamaat's work:

*Wo andherā hi bhalā thā ki qdam rāh pè the
Roshni lāi hai manzil se bahut door hamèn*

That darkness was still better so that our steps were on the path
The light has brought us very far from the goal.¹⁴

This couplet expresses Rammal's views on the reformist teachings, that the knowledge that generates no love in the heart is not knowledge. His anxieties were directed against the unwanted imposition of discipline by the reform organisation. He could not openly express his views against many Meo Mullahs and the members of *ummāh* (the notion of a community based on the idea of brotherhood in Islam). Rammal Khan told me that whenever a group of Tablighi workers approached him, he would take them into the room filled with the instruments. The reformist thinking on music found immediate expression by designating the instrument room 'a place of *harām*' (a place of prohibited practices in Islam)¹⁵ where *namāz* cannot be offered. Nonetheless,

¹⁴ The English translation is mine. For more information about the poet, visit, Rekhta.Org. 'Gazals', poet Shafiq Jaunpuri.

¹⁵ The Islamic prohibition or '*harām*' categorises permissible and prohibited actions. Polytheism is a strictly prohibited act in Islam. It is assumed that keeping idols and images generates faith and causes one to deviate from the path of Allah. Rammal explains that he was undergoing moral policing at the hands of regular Tablighi Jamaat visitors.

Rammal Khan used his music as a starting point for dialogue. He always raised the question of his livelihood to counter the reformist ideologies. He would often say to the reformists, 'This is my work. If I leave it, my family and I will die.' He used to say to the workers of the Tablighi Jamaat, 'Give me a regular income, and I will leave the work, and join you.' The rationale behind his arguments was thus not a theological one but was entangled with his everyday life. The Tablighis could not respond.

9.4 Lost and found: new patronage arrangements

To fill the void when patronage stopped, the bards looked to other avenues for employment. For instance, in western Rajasthan, when the community of Manganiyars lost Rajput patronage, their developing relation with NGOs and their appeal to the global music industry helped to maintain the culture (Ayyagari 2009). Many Mewati bards survived by performing at local Hindu cultural-religious events. Festivities and ceremonies like *jāgrans* ('all night-awake'), Hindu marriages and the birth of a child provided new performance opportunities. More renowned artists, though few in number, had opportunities to perform at local, national and even international levels. The second-grade artists formed music bands to perform when opportunities arose. Unlike the traditional patronage arrangement in which the bards were tied to the Meo families regardless of their talent, a new pattern emerged. Bards were hired for social-religious and political events. The performances included singing *bhajans* (prayer songs) at temples, performing in a palace for foreign tourists and dignitaries, and singing and recording songs for the thriving local music industries. These activities helped sustain the culture and the artists to an extent. These new arenas, however, could only support a tiny number of musicians of the bardic castes. Opportunities to perform were limited, and the new opportunities also demanded new technical skills.

The songs for local consumption were circulated in audio-visual forms through recordings on mobile chips, pen drives and CDs. These songs did not express the resistance theme, as this risked attracting the wrath of the Meo patrons. The local music industry also did not record songs containing messages of passive resistance or promoting religious unity by celebrating mixed religious practices. Such songs were considered unlikely to find consumers.

For the bards, remaining in the Meos' favour was still necessary for political and social reasons.¹⁶ The Meos are the Jogis and Mirasis' former patrons and social and political elites in Mewat, so it is important for these musician castes to remain in the Meos' favour, even if it means not performing anymore. Only the more famous bards could afford to voice passive resistance in the songs. They performed most often for non-Meo gatherings in large cities and urban areas. Employed to display the distinctiveness of their culture, the singers would start by emphasising the unique religious blending. For example, they would often say, 'We are Muslims and the followers of the Hindu god Shiva'. While this appears to have been a well-thought-out strategy to please a Hindu audience, it also served as a stage from which the bards could voice a contrary opinion to that of the powerful.

Thus, neither the bards' former patrons, the Meos, nor the Tablighi Jamaat were confronted directly. Hindu gatherings would cheer when they heard Muslims invoking the name of Shivaji. The bards' critique of their Meo patrons' version of religious purity is thus performed not to the Meos themselves but to a different audience. In practice, the critique did not reach the ears of the Meos. Irrespective of the change in the patrons' behaviour, the bards still respect the social-religious relationships. However, contrary to the Meos' stand, they

¹⁶ The bards are seen as Muslims. The Meos are social and political elites among Muslims in the area. So, it is imperative to remain in the Meos' favour for several reasons.

emphasise religious righteousness that is universal and thus needs no organised religion.

Unless otherwise shared by a documentary film-maker or given to a researcher like myself, the lyrics of the songs are restricted for personal use only. They are sung on specific occasions, to express special feelings about the vitality of the bards' art and livelihood, the value of religious unity and above all culture. Anonymous and obscure references in the couplets are open to multiple interpretations by different audiences. For a gathering in cities, the references could refer to Hindu–Muslim politics at the national level. To someone familiar with the area, the lyrics could express uneasiness about Tablighi Islamic theology. For the bards themselves, as many of them recalled in interviews, the lyrics are both a reference to their own plight and a message to both Hindus and Muslims.¹⁷ While different groups interpret the lyrics differently, what is obvious to all listeners is the uneasiness the lyrics evoke about the ideologies of religious extremism, puritanism and divisive politics.

In previous times, the bards did not face the same danger of making their patrons unhappy. Their messages about transcending religious boundaries drawn from Nath teachings could, in those times, find easy expression in highly personalised and self-referential couplets. Under the current pressures, this earlier idea of religious transcendence has been replaced by those of religious unity and synthesis.

9.5 New songs of Hindu–Muslim composite heritage

In this section I discuss how the songs of the bards have evoked the notion of religious synthesis against a background of Hindu–Muslim antagonism. In 2010, an interview with the highly renowned Bhapang artist, Umar Farookh

¹⁷ Interviews with Jumme Khan, Umar, Yusuf, Rammal, and others.

Mewati¹⁸ was published in a local edition of a newspaper (see figure 9.2).¹⁹ The headline reads, '*dil me Allah, kanth me Shiva* (Allah in heart, Shiva in voice)'. Umar belongs to the Muslim Jogi caste. He and his many associates of both Hindu and Muslim Jogi caste backgrounds voice the idea of religious indifference. They advocate Hindu-Muslim unity through lyrical artistic expression. The lyrics of the poetic songs sung by Umar Farookh Mewati and his associates can be seen as positive resistance and a desire to be attached to a Hindu-Muslim dual cultural heritage.



Figure 9.2: The newspaper cutting of Farookh's interview

¹⁸ Umar Farookh wrote a good number of new songs. He formed a group with many Mirasi and Jogi friends to promote the art. The group has performed at numerous national and international events. After his sudden demise in 2017 his son Yusuf is determined to take the art to a new level. I conducted a few meetings and interviews with Umar Farookhji and his son Yusuf. I am immensely indebted to both for not only providing materials for this chapter but for also their assistance in making me understand the material and for their careful translation of certain words.

¹⁹ 'Rajasthan Patrika', Alwar edition Feb 10, 2010, Bharatpur Hindi Pustakalaya, Bharatpur.

Scholars have argued that power does not always culminate in a negative process of generating mere physical resistance. It can also work positively, 'by producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourse' (Abu-Lughod 1990, p. 42). In the same manner, the bardic castes produce songs in order to create a discourse based on positive messages. The new songs concern the question of power. But they also take a high moral position by creating a tone and language that express resistance through harmonious messages.

They do not openly criticise Muslim reformism, Hindu extremism or political behaviour. They take an anti-hegemonic stand and express a firm belief in a shared religious culture. For instance, the song cited below eloquently raises the issue of artistic concern about religious differences. It respectfully adds a different perspective to the divisive nature of current socio-political processes:

idhar ko masjid, udhar ko shivālā
ek pe tasvi, ek ko mālā
wahi ālif, wahi kakkè mein
wahi kāshi, wahi makkè mein
ranj ko samjhe nahi
yā rab kya andher hai
bāt to kuch bhi nahi bus samajh ka pher hai.

this side mosque, that side temple (of Shiva)
 one is bowed (as in during *namāz*), the other is offered garland
 (*mālā*)
 the same sound in both *ālif* and *kakkē* (Urdu and Hindi
 alphabets respectively)
 he is in Kashi (Banaras), he too in Mecca
 no one understood this difference

O, my lord! what is this darkness

Nothing is this issue except a matter of understanding.²⁰

The lines cited above suggest a spiritual-philosophical interpretation of the oneness of God. Despite symbols of differences, the couplet assumes there is a fundamental commonness across religious divides. The lines of the couplet have themes similar to the mediaeval Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which targeted institutionalised religions in favour of presenting the true human essence beyond narrow religious classifications.

Sometimes, the tone of a language in an artistic work shows the intensity of the resistance, with a more direct verbal demonstration of anger. In the above case, however, the philosophical orientation of the lines does not compromise the civility of the art. Despite the existential danger to their folk art, the bards maintain a civil discourse. In response to the ideologies of the religious separatists, the Jogis and Mirasis perform passive resistance and acts of dissent through a positive articulation of their worldviews.

The bards' desire to regain a lost audience is not as present in the songs as is their foregrounding of the question of shared culture and identity. The loss of the Meo audience has without doubt impacted negatively on the bards' lives. Nonetheless, their main concern within the subsistence economy remains to articulate positive messages of their Indic historical tradition.

²⁰ Interview with Umar Farookh Mewati. The song was given to me in both handwritten and video forms. Translation of songs was done with Yusuf's help. Any error in the translation is entirely mine.



Figure 9.3: Yusuf (standing) with his father Umar Farookh (right)

The previous statement raises the question of Indic symbolism in the folk artists' songs and life. What are these characteristics of Indic life? And how do they help the bards navigate the pressure of reformism or the politics of Hindutva? One of the songs written by Umar Farookh, but also widely performed by other minstrels, is helpful in unpacking these Indic meanings. Before reciting a few lines on the tune of Bhapang, Umar Farookh used to make a disclaimer: 'I am from a Muslim Jogi family but I am a follower of Shiva too. I keep a special feeling in my heart.' Somebody from the group would then ask him, 'What is that special feeling?' and the musicians would begin the song. The first couplet starts like this:

*ki hum hātho me gitā rakhēngē
 aur sinē mein qurān
 hum kābā bhi rakhenge aur kāshi bhi
 aur mel badhāye aāpas mein
 wo dharm aur imān rakhengē
 hinduyo ka mandir, muslmāno ki masjid
 sikho ka gurudwārā, ishaiyo ka girjā*

yahā girjā, wahā girjā
idhar girjā, udhar girjā
aur yè chāro usi ke dar hai
chāhe jidhar girjā.

that we will keep the 'Gita' in our hands
and the 'Quran' in our hearts
we will keep Kaaba (Mecca) as well as Kashi (Banaras)
and that which promotes harmony
is the religion and faith we will keep
temple of Hindus, mosques of Muslims
the gurdwara of Sikhs, the church (girjā literally 'bow down'
in Hindi) of Christians
you can bow down here or there
bow this side or that side
all four are his abodes
bow down wherever you want.²¹

Among the possible explanations for the lyrics of the couplets above is the Muslim bards' contemporary concern for religious unity and brotherhood. It is entirely ahistorical to assume a historical past without violence or skirmishes happening. Violence, feuds and struggles have been present in all historical epochs. At a very fundamental level, the bards of Mewat reflect the reality of 'new age religious intolerance' (Nussbaum 2012).²² This new age of religious

²¹ This song was collected from Yusuf. The song is also available in a documentary film, see Sudhir Gupta, 'Three Generations of Jogi Umer Farookh'. The documentary was filmed in 2010, by the Public Sector Broadcasting Trust & Prasar Bharati, <http://www.cultureplugged.com>. The English translation is taken from Sudhir's documentary.

²² I am using the term 'the rise of new religious intolerance' to refer to the emergence of a different kind of religious consciousness. This consciousness was shaped as much by

intolerance is more exposed in the wake of growing consciousness of the two fundamental cognate categories of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. Interest in this intolerance was renewed after the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. Like all other social identifications, religious identification seeks solidarity in what could be called the burden of fundamental commitment created under the impression of false consciousness. I associate 'false consciousness' with the broader processes of contemporary Hindu–Muslim politics. Fear, for example, is predicated on actual violence such as the partition violence of 1947. The fear of such violence is used by social, religious and political groups like the Tablighi Jamaat, the Arya Samaj, the Congress and the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). However, in such situations, this false consciousness created by political and religious elites makes it seem that there is danger and fear all the time in everyday life. The Mewati bards respond to this fear manufactured by political-religious elites. The bards refer to the mixed origin of cultures to present a rich and complex heritage. Their cultural references demonstrate a long tradition of resisting institutions and institutional ideas. The couplet cited above is not merely a reflection about the past but also draws material from the cultural context of mediaeval India, Nath, Bhakti and Sufi themes to resist the ideological and political power domination in the present.

Another song written and compiled by the Jogi bards (recited and provided to me by Yusuf, the son of Umar Farookh) is worth citing here. It evokes a sense of an ideal human (*insān*). Many mediaeval saints including Kabir, Nanak, Gorakh, Raidas and Tukaram evoked in their teachings the notion of a 'human' who represented neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. Similarly, in their lyrics, the bards evoke the idea of a true human being who could be anyone based on

the British colonial forces as post-colonial politics. There are many reasons for its emergence, which require attention in depth.

good actions. The lines of the song imply a lesson about Hindu–Muslim unity relevant to current circumstances. Yusuf revealed the song lyrics as follows:

(i) *sher-i-hindu kā kahnā hai ki musalman burā hai*

muslim bhi yah kahtā ki hindu hi burā hai

nā hindu burā hai, nā musalman burā

aa jāyē burāi pe to wo insān burā hai

ye hi hindu-muslim me rad-o-badal hai

udhar ābe-zamzam, idhar gangā jal hai

(ii) *idhar bhi to sita pe tohmat lagi thi*

udhar bhi to maryam pe ungali uthi thi

udhar abu zayd paidā huyā thā

idhar kans, ravan bhi paidā huya thā

udhar bhi khudā pe sitam dhāne wālè

idhar bhi prabhu ko burā kahne wālè

duniyā me dekho kitna-kapat chhal hai

(iii) *mandir bikate, masjid biktè*

shaikho, brahaman, mullah biktè

masjid ke wo chande biktè

gitā bikati, qurān biktè

yahā tak ki wo imā (n) biktè

madina ka wo pāni biktā

gangā kā wo jal bhī biktā

dono ko milakar dekho, dono ek jal hai.

(i)The Hindu patriot claims Muslims are bad

Muslims also iterate that Hindus are bad

neither Hindu nor Muslim are bad

the one who commits bad actions is a bad human

this has been falsified/altered (*rad-o-badal*) among Hindus and

Muslims

that side is the well of Zamzam, this side the water of Ganga
(ii) this side too was Sita blamed
that side too was finger pointed out at Maryam
that side Abu Zayd was born
this side too Kans and Ravana were born
there are people on that side who enrage *khudā* (god)
there are people on this side too who ridicule *prabhu* (god)
See, how much cheating and fraud prevail in this world
(iii) temples sell, mosques sell
Sheikhs, Brahmins, and Mullahs sell
the donations of that mosque sell
the Gita sells, and the Quran sells
Even that integrity sells
The water of Madina sells
that Ganga's water too sells
put two together and see, both are the same water.²³

What is significant in the song is the distinction between 'we' and 'they' in the form of 'this side and that side'. The division is not articulated along the lines of religious self-identification of the bards with Islam. Despite being Muslims themselves, the Muslim Jogi and Mirasi bards and writers position themselves as representing Hindu religious symbols and culture in comparison to the Islamic self. The symbols of the Arab or Islamic world in the song – Abe-Zamzam, Maryam, Abu Zayd, Khuda, mosques, the Quran – are put into the category of 'that side'. The parallel is the symbols of religion and culture of 'this side': Ganga's water, Sita, Kans and Ravana, temples, the Gita and so on. The two categories of 'this side and that side' are not simply geographical

²³ This song was provided by Yusuf. Again, the translation is mine completed with Yusuf's help.

differences between the Indian and the Arab world but express the Muslim bards' embeddedness in local religious symbols. The lyrics express a culturally deep-rooted Hindu, or more particularly an Indic, derivation of notions of 'good and bad, sacred and defiled, justice and injustice, and honesty'.

The bards' self-identification with 'this side' is represented through familiar mythic-historical characters like Kans, Ravana and Sita. Traditionally, the bards sang or narrated stories about the virtues of these figures in the cultural performances of Mewati folk tales and folk songs. While proud of their Muslim identity, through songs like the one above the bards suggest that what is more meaningful to them is to maintain the tradition of Hindu–Muslim synthesis.

Another notable point in the song is the issue of female sexuality. Maryam and Sita are paralleled with one another to compare shameful instances where women's chastity has been questioned in both religions. 'Maryam' is the name Muslims use for the woman Christians call 'Mary'. The tradition of associating Christians figures with Islam is an old one. But the Tablighi Jamaat used this device to link such figures to an Islamic claim for Mohammed's (570–632 C.E.) preceding era thereby incorporating the figures of other religions under Islam. According to this logic, many of the gods, pious beings, messengers, and charismatic authorities of other religions are among the thousands of prophets sent by Allah before the final one who brought Islam. In Islamic belief, therefore, Maryam (Mary) is not a Christian figure but the mother of one of their prophets. The Muslim bards' conscious choice of Maryam to represent an instance where a woman's chastity was questioned, as happened with Sita in the Ramayana, is also an attempt to juxtapose parallel symbols of different religions and their cruel attitude to women.²⁴ The parallel of the two women figures is

²⁴ In the epic Ramayana, Sita was condemned by the god Ram as an unchaste woman when she returned from the captivity of the demon king Ravan. She had to undergo a

also mediated by the discursive rationale of Islamic theology, as both women are related to Muslim prophets: Maryam is the mother of Jesus, and Sita the wife of Ram. In Mewat, the Tablighi Jamaat tries to deny the claims of the Meos and Jogis to be descendants of the Hindu gods, Ram, Krishna and Shiva, by placing these gods in the long list of prophets within Islam.²⁵ I noted an immense respect among the Meos for the two Hindu gods Krishna and Ram. The Meos like to invoke the names of Krishna and Ram as *autāris* (incarnated ones) and as their prophets. During sermons in religious gatherings the Mullahs of the Tablighi Jamaat advise the Meos to abstain from using the language and signs of disrespect for these two and other Hindu gods.²⁶

Similarly, among Mewati Muslims the Hindu god Shiva is remembered as Baba *Ādam* (the Christians' Adam). Hindu as well as Mewati Muslim mythology claims that Shiva was the first creation to be sent to the earth by Allah. In Mewat these gods, and the Muslims' stories related to them, are thus a symbol of the Indic world.

The pertinent question here is what messages the bards are trying to convey through their songs. They express the assumption that religions are human constructs and that the ultimate truth does not lie in our religious identities but in our actions. In responding to the reformists and other seen and unseen pressures at social-political levels, the bards invoke the idea of being a good human first. For the bards, Hindu and Muslim identities are like water from two

fire test to prove her innocence. Similarly, Maryam's chastity was questioned when Jesus was considered to be conceived before she married Joseph.

²⁵ The Tablighi Jamaat claim that before the arrival of the prophet Mohammed, Krishna and Ram were among the millions of messengers sent by Allah.

²⁶ This is not to suggest that such practices among the Meos have disappeared entirely but that the majority people now accept the Tablighi Jamaat's version of Islam. As this thesis has shown, many syncretic practices are still alive, but have fallen to a low level compared to the past.

different sources. As soon as the waters are mixed, nobody can tell where its true origins were. Similarly, the lyrics conclude that Hindus and Muslims are like the waters from different sources but are same in substance. As long as contained into separate bottles (as society does by categorising people), the waters can be identified with the stream of the Ganga or the water from the well of Zamzam. But the moment they are mixed nobody can separate the two different sources.

In the next chapter, I consider the issue of change and transformation at shared religious sites since the rise of religious reform organisations and politics. I show that it is the symbolism of the shared shrines that first undergo transformations, rather than the disappearance of the (impure) faith in saints, who are either incorporated into the new beliefs or are neglected. ■

Chapter 10

Post-liminal-post-pressure situations

10.1 Overview

As I have shown in the last two chapters, in response to pressure believers in shared faiths, beliefs, and practices can adopt various measures to negotiate with hegemonic doctrines. The question then arises: What actually changes in the face of pressure from reform movements and religious politics? I suggest that often the symbolic aspects of a shared cult or shrine first undergo transformations in order to be identified primarily with one religion or the other. Hayden (2002) notes a new worldwide phenomenon with regard to shared shrines: the manifestation of the dominance of one religious group over the other. He writes that ‘the shared shrines are either seized or destroyed by one of the groups involved in sharing a religious space’ (Hayden (2002), p. 205). In the case of the Laldas shrines, Hindu symbols currently overpower Islamic symbols and aspects in the shrines. Similarly, the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha—which is also a shared but not syncretic or liminal space—has undergone symbolic and spatial transformations at the hands of the purist ideological power, the Tablighi Jamaat, in line with their teachings and values.

The spatial changes at both places signify the present attempts to transform the meanings of a traditional sacred space. It is important to look into what Setha Low (1996, 2009) refers to as ‘the social construction of space’ to observe what she describes as:

the actual transformations of space—through people’s social exchange, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning.
(1996, p. 862)

Low contrasts ‘the social construction of space’ with ‘the social production of space’. ‘The social production of space’ emphasises how in the past spaces were socially, politically and economically produced and alienated from their natural settings. By contrast, ‘the social construction of space’ gives an account of the symbolic and phenomenological experience of space as governed by contemporary social processes such as conflict, control, exchange and technological developments. Thus, spaces are historically engendered (socially produced) into physical–material settings by various factors but forces constantly try to construct new meanings around the use of space. Low further shows that ‘both processes are social in the sense that both the production and the construction of space are contested for ideological or economic reasons’ (Low (1996), p. 862). Likewise, the traditional shrines of Laldas and the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha are socially produced sacred spaces, but forces are currently working towards redefining their meanings, which in Low’s terms is an effort to achieve the social construction of space. In fact, space contested for ideological or economic reasons reflects efforts to create new meanings for a space in a changed context, leading to spatial transformations (Low, 1996).

This chapter shows the current spatial as well other transformations in the traditional meanings of the Laldas shrines and the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha. Overall, this chapter describes the relationship between power, ideology and the use of space which is leading the spatial transformations at these shrines. Hindu Laldasis, or more particularly the Baniyas and the Tablighi Jamaat, are the respective agents of the transformations at the Laldas and Shah Chokha religious spaces.

In this process, both saints are being assigned new roles and denied their traditional religious importance. Currently, the shrines of Laldas and the tomb of Shah Chokha are examples of what Lefebvre (1991) would describe as the combined processes of 'dominated space' and 'appropriated space' (pp. 164-168).¹ In analysing, the control of space at the two religious sites, I focus on structure, control, and agency around these religious spaces on the one hand, and new discourse and practices on the other. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) write:

spaces are contested precisely because they concretise the fundamental and recurring, but otherwise unexamined, ideological and social frameworks that structure practice.
(p. 18)

The transformation in the Laldas cult is the subversion of the saint's religious teachings and ideals, with the liminal aspects of his beliefs now subsumed under Hinduism in the face of the pressure from the Baniyas to choose Hindu symbolism. Laldas's liminal identity has thus been transformed into a Hindu identity. In his analysis of a three-phased ritual process, Turner (1969) noted that liminality is the transition phase of an individual from one state to another (pp. 94-96, 101-108). Participants are first detached from their previous social life and identity and spend most of the time in an inter-structural zone, which is neither here or nor there. Previously, Laldas's liminal condition was a kind of inter-structural zone in which he advocated a unique religious synthesis, being

¹ Lefebvre (1991) shows that the concept of domination of space is inseparable from the concept of appropriation of space. Both processes go hand in hand. In Lefebvre's words: 'Dominated space and appropriated space may in principle be combined — and, ideally at least, they ought to be combined. But history — which is to say the history of accumulation — is also the history of their separation and mutual antagonism. The winner in this contest, moreover, has been domination' (p. 166).

neither a Muslim nor a Hindu. In the post-liminal phase, however, the imagery of Laldas is of a Hindu saint.

Similarly, the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha is being transformed, with Sufism overpowered by the practices of the Tablighi Jamaat. Both places are undergoing transformations of their space and its meanings, with adverse impacts especially for Sufi Muslims. These two spaces are being transformed into places of new meanings by the spatial changes under the dominance of the reform movements. The changes I observed appeared to be both constructive and damaging. While the shrines of Laldas have been made to look aesthetically more beautiful by the Hindu Laldasis, the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha and the graves have been abandoned by the Tablighi Jamaat with the clear intention of preventing Muslims from being attracted to the site. The latter part of the chapter examines the spatial transformations at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha.

As far as the cult of Laldas is concerned, each of the changes currently happening can be explained as 'Hinduising' endeavours by the Hindu Laldasis. The contemporary concern of the Hindu devotees of Laldas is to remove all the symbols of Islam from the cult, including replacing the Muslim priests (*sādhs*) with Brahmins on the priestly seats as well as omitting all traces of shared heritage and Islamic architectural remains such as the domes and mosques.

10.2 The invention of traditions: strategies of Laldas/Khan appropriation as a Hindu figure

The process of transformation of Laldas into a new form cannot be completed without simultaneously introducing new symbols, to which Hobsbawm and Ranger would perhaps refer as 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). In this section, I examine the current processes of invention applied to the Laldas cult, where I will argue that what is happening around the Laldas shrines demonstrates Hobsbawm and Ranger's point that 'many

traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented' (Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012), p. 1).

10.2.1 Temples

In Mewat and surrounding regions, the number of Laldas temples has mushroomed in the last few years. These temples are in the style of north Indian Hindu temple architecture. Generally built on a platform, the central objects of worship in these temples are the well-adored idols of the saint (figure 10.1). Rather than worshipping at the graves at traditional shrines, anthropomorphic stone idols are now the central objects of veneration among the Hindu Laldasis and the Baniyas.



Figure 10.1: The Temple of Punahana

As noticed in chapter five, the rich Baniyas currently worship the saint in the *sagun* form (god with attributes) of the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition, contrary to the saint's own beliefs. In this transformation of the cult's meaning, the Baniyas' wealth is instrumental in the articulation of a new social and religious ideology which has turned upside-down the peasant household ascetic ideals of Laldas (ideals meant for the Meo peasants in the past), transforming the cult into an

orthodox Vaishnavite form of Brahminical Hinduism. This new imagery of Laldas has been achieved by first transforming the traditional shrines spatially and at the same time constructing new temples in which to practice anthropomorphic image worship.

Tarabout (2010) argues that, historically, image worship was essentially a more popular practice among Brahmins and high caste-circles than among lower caste Hindu groups (pp. 56-84). He further suggests that the low caste groups worshipped a wide variety of objects, while Brahmin temples were most likely to house anthropomorphic images of deities. Together with objects, sounds and rituals, the image was one piece of Hindu representation of the sacred. Despite this, anthropomorphism was only one mark of Hinduism and showed a particular form of religious orientation which best reflected the mode of praying of upper caste Brahminical Hindus in the orthodox Vaishnavite form (Lipner, 2017). Although a number of scholars agree that the relationship between Brahmins and image is far more complex, Brahminical devotional practices certainly shaped image worship. Image worship was not a major object of concern from the 5th to 11th centuries C.E. among classical Indian philosophers but Vaishnav temple worshippers—in other words orthodox Brahmins—popularised this practice (see, Colas, 2010). Over time, this practice of image worship found its most profound expression among the Baniya merchants and trading class as it fulfilled their devotional requirements as per their wishes for assistance in running a successful business. The current transformation of Laldas by the Baniyas is an attempt to bring him within their traditional devotional framework. This objective has been achieved through many initiatives, such as the new temples built by the Hindu Baniyas.

All the idols placed in temples in different regions are distinctively different from one another. For instance, in Punahana the Laldas idol wears no turban,

while in a nearby Jat village in the same area, the saint's idol is adorned with a permanent turban and garlands (figure 10.2).



Figure 10.2: Various temple idols of Laldas with turbans

There is also a degree of differentiation and contestation within the cult's inventions. For example, some temples have simultaneously built a grave to signify Laldas's *samādhi* status while others objected to it. One finds in all these processes a set of contradictions. The idol installation and vivification processes also followed separate patterns. In the temple of Punahana,² this process was done by a Brahmin priest. On the other hand, the temple in the nearby town of Hathin invited the traditional Meo Muslim priest (*sādh*) from the main shrine to perform the vivification rituals. Although a Meo Muslim still inherits the seat of

² Idol vivification at Punahana temple happened on 26th January 2016. The date is mentioned on an invitation card which contained details about the saint, prayers, *bhajans* and *chālisā* (usually a prayer made up of forty hymns) attributed to him. I am grateful to the Brahmin priest of the temple for providing me with this information and source materials.

priesthood at the main shrine generation after generation, in most of the newly constructed temples a Hindu Brahmin is appointed to look after ritual activities.

10.2.2 *New genealogy*

Saint Laldas, according to the popular belief of Hindu devotees, is considered to be a current incarnation of a figure from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata: Yudhishtira—the eldest among Pandava brothers. Over the past decade this story has been widely circulated in many pamphlets and booklets written in a hagiographical style and locally produced by various temple committees (figure 10.3).³

The central aim in these narratives is to present Laldas as a figure who lived in all four Hindu epochs (the fourfold Hindu cyclical concept of time). For instance, in new pamphlets his incarnation is described as follows:

*Satyug me harishchandra huyè, tretā me prahlād,
Dwāpar me pāndav huyè, kalyug me bābā lāldās.*

In *Satyug*, (you were) Harishchandra, Prahlad in *tretā*,
A Pandav in *dwāpar*, and Baba Laldas in *kalyug*.

The Laldas incarnation story asserts that he was born as Raja Harishchandra in an upper caste in *Satyug*, in the Hindu epoch *Tretā* into *asura* (demon) category as Bhakt Prahalad, followed by two more incarnations in *Dwāpar* and *Kalyug* epochs as Yudhishtira among the Yadavs and Laldas among the Meos respectively.

³ Each Laldas temple has a temple committee. All these temple committees are linked to the main temple committees of Sherpur at the main shrine.

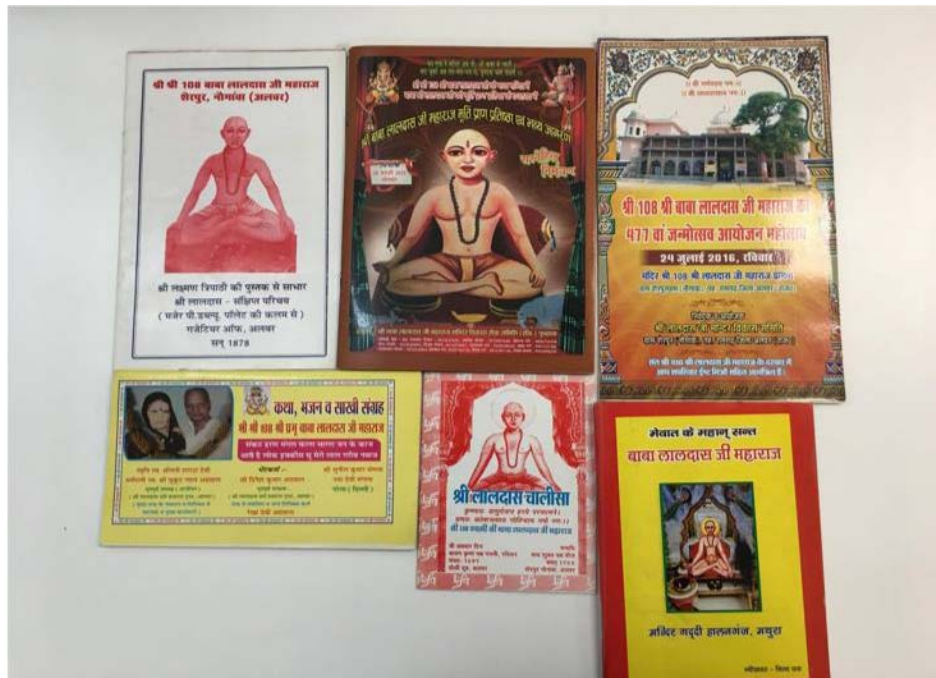


Figure 10.3: Newly published booklets and pamphlets about Laldas

The primary objective of the incarnation story is to show that Hindu gods and saintly figures have not only incarnated into two high caste Brahman and Kshatriya categories but also into Yadavs (a middle caste status peasant group like the Meos) and even among *asurs* (demons) as Bhakta Prahalad did. The message in these print materials is that Hindu figures and deities have perpetually been transcending the borders of caste, community and religious class (god and demon). This is not the first time a Hindu figure has been born outside a high caste of the Hindu religion; the publications imply that this has been a tradition. To provide an ideological legitimacy to the saint's Hindu identity, a shifting range of incarnated identities are taken as evidence. To establish a fictive kinship relation between Lal Khan (who belonged to a Muslim community with a comparatively low caste peasant status) and the Hindu figures, a genealogical lineage has been invented. Stories cite the examples of Hindu gods and saintly figures taking incarnations into socially and ritually similar communities such as the Meos and the Yadavs. Laldas, a supposedly Hindu figure of the past, is currently born into a Meo Muslim

community, the comparatively middle caste (Krishna and Yudhishtira among Yadavs) and outcaste identities (Pralhad as *asur*) are paralleled with Muslim religious identity. Given the distinctive differences between the Meos and other Muslim communities, Laldas needed to be legitimised by these stories of Hindu gods and figures who transcended boundaries and at the same time provided with an invented genealogy that could incorporate Laldas as a Hindu figure.

10.2.3 Pilgrimage

Annual fairs and festivals have long been reported at the saint's main shrine. Powlett (1878) wrote:

fairs are held at Laldas places three times a year. At Sherpur, on *asoj* 11 (October), on *asārh punam* (full moon) about July, and on *māgh punam* about November. (p. 59)

Although he also reported the total gathering of at least ten thousand pilgrims from neighbouring areas, this has recently acquired a different meaning. Whereas in the past this pilgrim gathering was made up of Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Sikhs from distant places, currently it has acquired a typically Hindu character. These days, such *yātrās* (pilgrimage) commence from a particular temple and end at the tomb. During a sixty-kilometre pilgrimage from the Punahana temple to the Sherpur shrine, I noticed, the immensely Hinduised nature of the cult.⁴ Hindu Baniyas carried saffron flags, a ribbon was tied around their heads, and they were constantly chanting the Laldas *chālīsā* (mantra) and prayers, followed by a slogan, '*laldas bābā ki jai ho*' (hail to Baba Laldas). Pilgrimages like this one are routinely organised by different temple

⁴ I attended this pilgrimage during the course of my fieldwork at the beginning of 2016.

committees.⁵ Apart from regular pilgrimages from one temple or another to the tomb, each temple organises regular *shobhā yātrās* (pagents) in its locality (figure 10.4). I happened to attend one of these pagents during which, a small idol of the saint dressed in white saintly attires sat in the middle of a beautifully decorated palanquin carried by four men. The Hindu devotees—mainly Baniyas—followed the procession, which passed through Hindu-dominated local streets and *mohallā* (parts of the town) in a Muslim majority area.



Figure 10.4: Laldas *shobhā yātrā*—a pagent for Saint Laldas

10.2.4 Prayers and *bhajans* (religious songs): transformation of a *nirgun* preacher into a *sagun* deity

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the ancient religious text the *Nuktāvali* was divided into various parts which included both life stories and *bhajans* in different genres ranging from classical Indian *rāgs* to dialogues and discussions with the saint. These days, newly composed religious songs have been added to

⁵ Field notes dated June 2016. Also see, 'Baba Laldas *kā melā* 20 ko', *Dainik Bhaskar* (16 June 2016), [<https://www.bhaskar.com/news/RAJ-ALW-MAT-latest-alwar-news-021003-374748-NOR.html>], accessed 10 Sept. 2017], for more details.

these traditional materials. These new additions are found in published materials such as the cheap pamphlets and booklets. The main motif is to articulate a Vaishnava style *sagun* Bhakti. In other words, the new prayer songs have similar themes and styles to those composed to worship a *sagun* Hindu god such as Vishnu, who is present all the time in front of the eyes of a devotee in the form of an idol. For instance, the *ārti* song of Laldas cited below, which Hindu devotees sing every morning and evening in the temple of Punahana, renders this style of *sagun*-like Vaishnav worship more explicit:

Om jai bābā laldas, om jai bābā laldas
Sab dukh hāri sankat tāri, aaya tere paas (om jai....)
Balyā awasthā me van jākar tumnè tapkinā
Devan kari parikshā, wahā pe bajāke mradu veenā (om jai....)
Lakdi bechan alwar jākar, karat pet uddhār
Chale bharotā unchā sarsè, deo karat jai jaikār (om jai....)⁶

Hail to Baba Laldas, hail to Baba Laldas
O destroyer of all the sorrows and problems, I came under your patronage (hail to Baba Laldas.....)
You meditated in the jungle in the childhood
Gods tested you, while playing the soft music of veena⁷ (hail to Baba Laldas.....)
By selling woods in Alwar, satiated the hunger
The bales (you carried) remained untouched and high above the head, gods hailing victories (hail to Baba Laldas.....)⁸

⁶ I am unable to cite the full song here. This excerpt gives an idea the way new songs are styled after typical Hindu *ārti* songs.

⁷ An Indian classical music instrument.

⁸ Cited from, '*sri Bab Laldas ji mahāraj murti prān pratisthā and bhavya jāgran*', public invitation booklet (2015), printed by Goyal printers, Punahana, Mewat, Haryana. The

The hymn above, which is sung during the morning and evening *ārati* prayers, is very unlikely to have appeared anywhere in the historical accounts of the colonial ethnographer Powlett, or in the texts of Dungrisi Sadh.⁹ Thus, it is clearly a recently invented tradition to fit the needs of the *ārati* of an idol. At the main shrine, the same *ārati* is sung in front of the saint's grave.

10.2.5 Methods of advertising: attempts to make Laldas a figure in every household

The management of the cult operates at two levels: the temple committee at the main shrine, and various local temple committees in the areas wherever new temples are built. Committees are named in the style of *Sri Baba Laldas ji Maharaj Mandir Vikas va Seva Samiti* (the Sri Baba Laldas ji Maharaj temple development and service committee—a recently adopted name). This is usually followed by a place name which generally refers to government-registered bodies of different temple committees under the same name. However, the conscious use of a phrase 'temple development' in the nomenclature points to the fact that the integration process is still underway. These various committees take Hindu-style measures to promote the cult. For instance, to popularise the cult and give it a Hindu identification they organise *kirtans* and *bhandārā* (music and feasts), celebrating the saint's birthday, and circulate news of any event through local newspapers.

All members of the local bodies except the main committee at the main shrine are Hindus, mostly members from the Baniya community. Since the main shrine is a place for shared worship, the Muslim priest had to be included when

English translation of the worship song does not rhyme like the Hindi version. It is provided to help non-Hindi readers understand the meanings in the song.

⁹ Powlett cites a large number of hymns, prayer songs, and oral stories that include similar hymns mentioned in the hand-written text of Dungrisi. This also shows the historicity of the oral songs and stories related to the saint.

the committee was first formed in the 1960s. Recently built temples are run entirely by Hindu members, mostly by Baniyas. Apart from the disputes between Hindus and Muslims about the identity of the shrine, a legal case about the formation of committees is pending in the court. This case provides more information about the history of the temple committees.¹⁰ On 14 June 2010, the case was registered on behalf of 'Sri Laldas Dharm Pracharak Sangh' (Sri Laldas Religious Missionary Union), which became a registered body on 17 November 1966 under the *Rajasthan Public Trust Act* of 1961.¹¹ Without going into too much detail about the case here, the legal battle shows the role of various kinds of temple trusts, many of which are recently formed.

Members of the temple committee at Punahana may be invited to visit a believer's home for *kirtan*. The idea of *kirtan* was first advised by a very devout follower named the late Sri Ramdas Aggarwal who is said to have been blessed by the saint. Ramdas is said to have gone through many struggles until he was introduced to the saint in early 2000 by a friend.¹² His family was in significant debt as his business was not profitable. In these circumstances, he thought he would try appealing to the miraculous Saint Laldas. A miracle happened in his life and he became a very rich person after visiting the shrine of Sherpur. After

¹⁰ A copy of the court case was provided to me by a lawyer friend who practised in the District and Session Court of Alwar, which is where the hearing of the dispute was taking place. There were no such committees in the past until disputes began occurring at the traditional shrines. To legitimise their claims over the Laldas shrines, all of a sudden, Hindu followers formed a committee in 1963. One of the Meo *sādhs* told me that this was also a strategy to control all the resources of the shrines. The names of these temple committees have been changed a few times.

¹¹ According to the filed petition, 'Sri Laldas Dharm Pracharak Sangh banam Sallu purta Mohammed Khan vagera', 14 June 2010, District and Session Court, Alwar, Case/Acc No. 006452. The case is filed for stopping Muslims from allegedly performing an Islamic prayer in a supposed Hindu temple.

¹² Interview with Ramdasji's son dated 11th June 2016.

that, he devoted himself completely to the service of the saint.¹³ The story of Ramdas made the cult more famous among merchants, traders and other Hindus in Punahana. In collecting miraculous stories of the saint, I was advised repeatedly during fieldwork to go and visit Ramdas's family as they were the ones most blessed by the saint.

Later another set of practices developed, including at the main shrine. This was the common practice in north India called *bhandārā* (ritual feast). Although the act of performing *bhandārās* has multiple meanings and significance for a person, from wish-fulfilment to celebrating major life events such as births, deaths and marriages, over time this practice was adopted by Sikh and Hindu devotees of Laldas. It not only helped popularise the cult but also gave Hindus the opportunity to perform selfless service to the saint.

The new advertising endeavours undertaken by devotees and various Laldas temple committees extend to both print and electronic media, as well as broadcast and social media in order to widely circulate the stories of the saint's miracles. Cheap pamphlets, audio and video cassettes of songs, CDs, and *bhajans* on YouTube are popular hits. Devotees of Laldas also connect with one another using social media platforms such as Facebook. As his cult increased in fame, more and more people began to come from Delhi to visit the Laldas shrines. They used social media to connect with other devotees, informing each other about events such as *bhandārā*, *sevā*, or the celebration of festivals. For any material needs at the main shrine, the social media groups and individuals also circulated information on these online platforms. Various devotees responded very quickly, taking responsibility for providing the required materials in the form of *dān* (gifts), a return gift offered to the saint. Social media was thus used

¹³ Interview with Ramdasji's son dated 11th June 2016.

not only to circulate information but also for mobilizational purposes such as requesting a collective *shram dān* (gifts of labour). As a result, numerous webpages were created that were devoted to Laldas to actively respond to the queries from new urban devotees. As a result of the active mediated engagement and other forms of communication, the cult has achieved a new height in the form of both material resources and new devotees. The material efflorescence has occurred over the last twenty years.

10.2.6 The role of money

Money has played a significant role in the rapid transformation and spread of the cult. As the cult has a strong hold among the affluent community of Baniyas, it has attracted a huge flow of money and resources in the last couple of decades. For instance, all the temples are being built on a grand scale, using expensive marble stones. Although it is impossible to locate the reasons for this sudden increase in the flow of money, the period of this transition certainly has roots in the rise and circulation of stories about the saint's miracles. '*Bābā naye bhakto ko jald pakadatè hai,*' (the saint fulfils the wishes of new devotees very quickly),¹⁴ was a statement that attracted many people. In Punahana, among approximately 500 Baniyas households, the followers of the saint have risen from 20 households in the early 2000s to about 400 hundred currently.¹⁵

These days, any event related to the saint is celebrated with an extravagant expenditure of resources. All the expenses are borne by the respective temple committees, received in the form of donations. In previous times the donations

¹⁴ Field notes. The research participants usually mentioned many names during interviews whose wishes were granted by boon of the saint, Ramdas's name was cited again and again.

¹⁵ These statistics was mentioned to me during an interview with the then secretary of 'Sri Laldas Temple Development, Punahana'. The figures were mentioned in his private notebook. Though it is not a significant evidence but in light of other events certainly shows a growth in the number of followers of the cult.

would have been oil, corn, millet and sugar. Nowadays, the shrines and new temples benefit from cash donations. All this money comes largely from Hindus who consider the saint to be the provider of everything in their lives.

This excessive flow of money and resources in the form of *chadhāwā* (offerings) has also contributed to a new type of succession dispute over the seat of the priesthood between the two Meo priest (*sādh*) families at the main shrine. A court case to determine the true successors of the Muslim priests has been going on in the High Court of Rajasthan.¹⁶ This dramatic event has distant roots in the larger dispute between Hindus and Muslims in 1998. During the outbreak of conflict at that time, the then priest Sallu fled, fearing for his life at the hands of the workers of the Hindu extremist organisations the Shiva Sena and Bajrang Dal. The then district collector of Alwar ordered the shrine to be opened and that the keys be given to another Meo Muslim, Pappu, who was present at the time. This later gave rise to a succession issue.¹⁷ The current nature of the succession dispute over the priesthood owes much to the offerings of money and other materials that the serving priest has the right to keep.

It is impossible for the Meos to halt the transformation of Laldas's shrines as the wealthy class of Hindu Baniyas are among his main followers. However, the Tablighi Jamaat's opposition to the Hinduisation process is reserved only for the mosques present inside the saint's shrines, which are restricted from functioning at the hands of Hindu devotees. One simple reason for this transformation is also the comparatively lower attendance by Muslims now as a result of the

¹⁶ 'Sallu versus Igris alias Pappu', 2005, 7 July 2006, Civil Judge and Judicial Magistrate Court, Alwar, Diwani Case No: 1/2005. A judgement in this case on two occasions is given in favour of the previous priest Sallu which is disputed again by appealing in the high court of Rajasthan, 'Sallu versus Igris alias Pappu', 1 Feb. 2010, Upper District Magistrate Court, Alwar, Diwani Case No: 08/09.

¹⁷ Pappu is distantly related to the traditional custodians of the Sherpur shrine. He does not belong to the main descendants of Laldas.

success of the Tablighi Jamaat among them. All these processes have contributed to shaping a distinct contemporary identity for the cult and the saint that is altogether different from the past.

10.3 The transformations at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha

As pointed out earlier, the space at the *dargāh* is under the control of Tablighi workers. They manage the *dargāh* premises in a particular manner and looked after the entire premises except for the main *dargāh* and its *sanctum*. The neglect of the main *sanctum* or the tomb displeased many Sufi visitors. As a result of the neglect of the *dargāh*, the building appeared completely abandoned at the time of my visit.

At the time of my visit, the tomb of Shah Chokha was enclosed by walls on all four sides with two gates, one at the front entrance (southern side) and the other at the back (northern side). The southern gate (figure 10.5) provides access for the shrine's visitors who come via a road connected to the main bitumen road. The northern gate connects the premises with houses and the interior parts of the village. The outer walls are 10 metres high and the inner walls surrounding the main building have been recently refurbished. In the middle of the open space within the inner walls stands the large stone tomb, painted in green. Within the inner walls, the *sanctum sanctorum* building has two doors; the one on the east opens towards the seven smaller graves of his *murids* (disciples), a veranda, and the large open hall used by the workers of the Islamic reform movement the Tablighi Jamaat; the southern one is used by visitors to enter into the *sanctum*.



Figure 10.5 *The dargāh of Shah Chokha's main entrance gate (on the south side) in the outer wall.*

Currently, like the shrines of Laldas, at the *dargāh* too, the agents in control (Tablighi workers in this case) have changed and used the space according to their religious beliefs and devotional practices. In this process, they consciously ignore the symbols of Sufi Islam. I now explore the key constituents of the symbolic transformations at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha.

10.3.1 *Spatial transformations at the dargāh and changes in symbolic meanings*

The *dargāh* is undergoing spatial changes. At the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha the main challenge for the Islamic reformists is to disrupt Muslims' faith in the saint. In doing so, the current spatial transformation at the *dargāh* is aimed at prioritising other places that have Islamic meanings, such as the mosques (figure 10.6) and the *madrassā*, giving them greater significance than the grave of the saint within the premises.



Figure 10.6 One of the mosques in the dargāh between the tomb and grain stores

When I visited the site, I noticed that the spatial transformations were in line with the use of space for the Tablighi workers and *madrassā* children, rather than for Sufi visitors. For example, a new iron gate outside the main sanctum courtyard had been installed and remained locked all the time, disrupting what had once been direct and unrestricted access to the grave (figure 10.7). The direction of access was changed all of a sudden one day, which puzzled many visitors. This control was not merely symbolic but an active attempt to restrict the free movement of people. Many Muslim Sufi followers complained about it, but the Tablighi followers simply responded by saying, ‘the gate is installed to stop animals coming inside’.¹⁸

¹⁸ This explanation was given by the head *maulavi* to a person who asked about the purpose of the gate.



Figure 10.7: A newly installed iron gate at the dargāh of Shah Chokha

Whenever renovation or new construction takes place, it is mainly for the benefit of the Tablighi workers who live there. This conscious neglect of the *dargāh* is visible as soon as one enters the *dargāh*. The Tablighi Jamaat controlled spaces such as the *madrassā*, mosques, residential and school rooms are refurbished from time to time, while the main *sanctum* and the other adjoining tombs are neglected. Often, in this process of redefining the meaning of the space, many Sufi-leaning people claimed that there used to be many graves in the *dargāh* courtyard but they have been consciously destroyed by Tablighi workers in the name of renovation. Whether it is renovation of classrooms, mosques, or the open space, it is done for the use of the Tablighi activists. For instance, *maulavi* expressed unhappiness when the cleared open space was used by the Sufis to celebrate the saint's *urs* (figure 10.8).



Figure 10.8: A clean-up of the courtyard by Tablighi workers and the students from the madrassā

10.3.2 Discourse

For Tablighis, the *dargāh* is an heretical space which exists in contradiction with ‘true Islam’. Therefore, the space around the *dargāh* needs to be put to good use. The *maulavi* at the *dargāh* often used to say, ‘The entire surrounding is very important for imparting the true teachings of Islam, which does not allow veneration of a dead human being’.¹⁹ The *maulavi*’s reasoning expressed the belief that the control of the space is very important for propagating Islam and its practices. ‘It is the work of the saint we are carrying forward as he was an Islamic preacher too,’ he was always pointing out.

Low (1996, 2009) shows that language and discourse play an important role in the spatial transformation of a space and its meanings. The Tablighi workers have certainly changed the discourse in the transformation of the sacred space

¹⁹ Interview with the head *maulavi*, 23rd May 2016.

into a place of meaning. The dominant discourse now is that mosques are the right place to worship, rather than the saint's grave. Anyone who goes inside the main *sanctum* should pray for the saint (by reciting *durood-ul-sharif*) so that Allah can assign him a place in *zannat* (heaven) and not to pray to the saint for themselves. The Tablighi reasoning takes as its example the saint's use of the older mosque inside: Shah Chokha prayed there during his life. In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat use the example of the saint and the mosque to point out what is un-Islamic in popular devotion. The discourse of the Tablighi Jamaat embodies the space as a sacred Islamic place by associating it with mosques, rather than with the saint's tomb. This reworked discourse also strives to transform the traditional meaning of the space through the lived experiences of Muslims, whose belief and faith-related activities should be centred around the mosques.

10.3.3 Everyday behaviour

Among Sufi visitors of Muslim background there is a set code of conduct that governs their behaviour in the *dargāh*. For instance, before entering the main *sanctum*, they wash their hands, feet and faces and go inside in bare feet. Their minds are occupied with *dhikra/zikr* (the remembrance of God). One visitor said to me that 'he tries to keep his heart pure and his mind oriented to the saint'. He used the word *fanā* (annihilation) to describe his feelings of love and respect regarding the saint. The Muslim visitors enter facing the saint's body and exit in the same posture, without turning their backs. It is considered inappropriate and a sign of disrespect if someone does not leave in the proper manner. However, Hindu visitors often do not realise this and do not follow this code of conduct. Hindu visitors' behaviour follows the style of a visit to a temple. Sufi Muslims, however, do not mind the conduct of Hindus; many Sufi Muslims appreciate them for their concern for and faith in the saint.

By contrast, the Tablighi workers, teachers of the *madrassā* and children barely take respectful behaviour into account. None of them go into the *dargāh*, receive the share of offerings or entertain visitors. Children in the *dargāh* wore slippers all the time, even when passing in front of the *sanctum-sanctorum*. Although the Tablighi followers did not openly criticise the saint, their non-verbal behaviour depicted a negative tolerance towards his presence. Without contradicting his service to Islam, the Tablighi followers deny the saint any miraculous authority. They see him as only a dead person who is worthy of respect like any elderly person (*bujurg*) but should not be an object of veneration.

Most villagers in Shah Chokha come to the premises to offer *namāz*. On Fridays the congregation is usually larger. *Namāzis* on Fridays do not engage with the *dargāh* or the saint in any manner. After prayers they sit in the courtyard with the *maulavi* or teachers. This complete neglect of the presence of the saint shows how a new social construction of the *dargāh* space is taking place slowly, transforming the traditional meaning of the sacred space according to Tablighi Islam for most male villagers. The neglect of the main tomb building and the saintly sacred zone is encouraged and legitimised by Tablighi narratives, which regard the *dargāh* as an illegitimate place of worship in Islam. They are spatially shifting the symbolism and the meanings of what was once a sacrosanct space from Shah Chokha's grave to the mosques in the premise under the influence of their 'purist' Islamic discourse. The construction of space with new meanings thus produces new religious symbols, spaces and places of significance.

10.3.4 Changes in the ritual sphere

As a result of the ongoing debate between the Sufis and the Tablighis about saint veneration, some popular customary practices have also changed. For instance, Sufi Muslims in particular have stopped kneeling down or touching

their heads to the foot of the grave. This is clearly the result of the Tablighi narratives about praying to the saint. While standing near the grave, Muslims I knew from surrounding Sufi-leaning villages used to lower their covered heads with cupped hands but they rarely knelt down. By contrast, a Muslim visitor from outside Mewat performed all the rituals, including kneeling to the saint—a practice the Tablighi Jamaat strongly objects to. On a couple of occasions, the Tablighi followers noticed Muslims doing practices of *shirk* and *bidāh*; they tried to persuade that person away from such practices by engaging in discussion and conversation. However, their activism sometimes backfired. One tall and strong-minded Sufi Meo would start abusing the *maulavi* and teachers of the Tablighi Jamaat as soon as he entered the *dargāh*, and in this situation, no-one dared to reply.

However, the concerns of the Tablighi Jamaat are limited only to Muslims. Hindus are never approached to be disciplined for worshipping the saint. Hindu visitors at Shah Chokha, most of whom are from Punahana, come and perform their visits including rituals such as offering a *chaddar* and distributing sugar balls and leave the place quietly, without much interaction with the Tablighi workers. On the other hand, the Sufi inclined Meos and other Muslims can be heard complaining and murmuring about the presence of Tablighis at the site. Their reservations are particularly directed at the neglect of the saint and his *dargāh* by the Tablighi workers. Many regular Muslim visitors with whom I had developed an acquaintance reproached the head *maulavi* for his attitude towards the saint.

Since Saint Shah Chokha has a well-documented genealogy within the Chishti Sufi tradition, it is much more difficult for him to be appropriated as a Hindu saint, unlike the case Saint Laldas. Village and population dynamics would also not allow it. Among Muslims, many Sufi-inclined Muslims still regard Shah Chokha as a charismatic personality, despite the powerful

influence in the area of the Tablighi Jamaat. However, the *dargāh* has been subjected to intra-religious debates and disputes between Sufis and Islamic reformist groups, unlike the situation at the Laldas (Lalkhan) shrine, where the debate over the identity of the saint and his shrines has an inter-religious nature.

The examination of both religious spaces thus shows a degree of contestations and competition between groups and a hardening of religious boundaries. Through their attempts at these religious spaces, both the Hindu Laldasis and the Tablighi Muslims are in the process of consolidating uniform notions of Hindu and Muslim identities. This trend is a general indication of the rise of a new religious consciousness in many places around the world. The narrow classification of religious symbols is directly related to modern constructions of religious identity, self and practices. In this redefining process, shared shrines are obliged to succumb to the symbolism of one religion or the other. ■

Chapter 11

Conclusions: lines in the water

This thesis has addressed a set of issues relating to understanding the historically shifting nature of identities, shared shrines and religious practices. I have argued that the complex religious world of South Asia cannot be understood at all without locating historically existing connections and contestations between the multiple forms of religiosity that are locally produced and that extend beyond the narrow classification into either Hindu or Muslim. I have argued in this study that pre-existing religious cultures may take different and separate routes, can mould and be moulded by social and political forces but that, despite these changes, in the (re-)structuring of a new religious world-view certain shared devotional aspects remain in vestigial forms.

Primordial social attachments such as kinship relations and descent lines through which many villagers link themselves to the saints previously gave an account of the formation of caste, clan, village and communal identities. However, caste and religion are identities often articulated along the lines of differences. In many theorists' treatises on social identities, 'difference' has occupied central stage, with the routine use of collective notions of 'culture' and 'society' (Jenkins 2008, p. 24). The attention to difference to emphasize caste and religious collectivities is still prevalent in most academic writing in India. In this study I have countered this issue of describing collectivities as one uniform group, exploring how people have responded to the attempts of reform groups to impose uniformity. I have argued that it is crucial to study the ways in which people accepted or resisted this attempt to homogenise their religiosity because

religiosity is often indicative of and sensitive to socio-economic and political changes.

What constitute similar and dissimilar religious worldviews is often analysed in terms of monolithic and bounded definitions of religious categories such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc. However, beneath the uniform description of these religious categories lie multiple forms of religious sects, alliances and contestations between beliefs, faiths and practices. These plural and diverse orientations exceed any attempts at a binary division of complex issues of religion, faith and identity. This thesis has not only countered the binary mode of thinking but has also explored passive resistance as a response to attempts to impose a binary mode of thinking about religious identities.

Boundary making is a long-term historical process. The origins of claims about the legitimacy of religious and group boundaries are often significant, as are the implications of those boundaries. At times when religious boundaries were more fluid, the freedom to practice one's faith was rooted in an unconscious religious self and the cultural imaginations of a social group. This unconscious identity was, in turn, the result of socio-economic processes which generated genealogies rooted in socio-economic experiences. Of course, change and continuity also reflect the changing dynamics of internal group structures. Groups, categories, boundaries, religious practices, beliefs and identities are in constant interaction. History shows that religion, culture, belief and identity commonly mould one another. But the previous practice of classification in terms of collectivities often ignored the fact that 'a collectivity is a plurality of individuals' (Jenkins, p. 103). How does this plurality of individuals relate to a collectivity of religion, community, caste, village, and so on? Rather than focusing on the religious behaviours of different kinds of collectivities, this study instead looked at the interaction and co-activities among individuals sharing a shrine. My research not only focussed on 'individuals in co-activity' in

the sense of revering a shared saint or site, engaging in the same religious practices within the cultural zone of the Braj, Mewat, and Rajasthani, but also at ways of negotiating co-activities in conflict.

When the cults of the Meo Muslim saints Laldas and Shah Chokha were founded in the 16th century, they developed around the common medieval Indian themes of Bhakti and Sufi doctrines that advocated the transcendence of two institutional religious identities, Hindu and Muslim. Following the teachings of Saint Kabir, Laldas advocated for a unique religious synthesis and Shah Chokha prioritised a local form of Islam. Laldas followed a *nirgun* Bhakti (formless devotion) of the Hindu god Ram which, I argued, was not different from the devotional practices of the Sufi saint Shah Chokha and the Sufi concept of the *wahdat-ul-wajud* (the unity of God). Thus, both the *nirgun* Bhakti of Laldas and the *wahdat-ul-wajud* of the Sufis like Shah Chokha complemented one another in their imaginings of God. These religious sensibilities also reflected the socio-economic connection of the Meos with both Hinduism and Islam.

Contrary to earlier works, my research has shown that despite being a Muslim group as a result of mostly Sufi influence, the Meo's peasant status prompted them to root their sense of self in Hinduism and the Indic symbolism of peasants. For instance, it was the peasant status of the Meos which required a connection to Hindu gods such as Ram and Krishna, two warrior-king figures, to legitimise a cultural claim over their land in the context of emerging ideas about private property. Thus, practical necessities often led to semiotic changes in the cultural-religious order.

With the formation of a new community of followers popularly known as 'Laldasi', the Laldas cult promoted the idea of being neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a *sādh* (a household yogi/meditator). This conception of a new

community was far from the traditional religious orientations. Shah Chokha gave his blessings for the prosperity of the Meo community on all fronts.

This common cultural-religious sharing of saintly figures and cults by Hindus, Muslims and other religious groups has in recent times generated what Robert Hayden calls 'competitive sharing'. This has led to a 'negative definition of tolerance which is not based on the idea of an active embrace of the other'. In current thinking, both Hindus (with Sikhs and Jains) on one side and Muslims on the other are trying hard to locate these two saints in either one religion or other, by identifying the shrines as either a temple or a Sufi *dargāh*. At the same time, one Muslim reformist group, the Tablighi Jamaat, wants to completely discard the role of saints from Islam. Thus, competitive battles have begun, not only between Hindus and Muslims but also among the two Muslim groups, the Sufi and Tablighi. At the Laldas shrines this battle has indirectly been won by Hindus, while at the tomb of Shah Chokha Tablighi Muslims have been successful against the Sufis.

These divergent processes of and contestations about defining identity, and the religious practices around these shrines have left enough space for the slow Hinduisation of the Laldas cult and the neglect of the graves of Sufi saints by the Tablighis. This process of change in religious identity and practices has involved inventing a new tradition in order to legitimise the Hindu status of Laldas, rather than the traditional view of him as a liminal figure. On the other side, changes are taking place at the *dargāh* of Shah Chokha to transform the traditional meaning of local Islam and replace it with the Tablighi form of Islam. Respective agents of power such as the Baniyas (the Hindu merchant class) at the Laldas shrines (the saint's main followers apart from the Meos) and Tablighi Muslims at Shah Chokha are harbingers of current religious transformations. While none of the features of Laldas' Hindu status can be completely denied since he preached formless devotion to the Hindu god Ram, he and Saint Shah

Chokha attract little attention among Muslims nowadays due to the impact of the Islamic reformist Tablighi Jamaat and their purist ideas about not worshipping such saints. At the same time, thanks to their money and power, the Baniyas are inventing new Hindu traditions to incorporate Laldas as a Hindu saint.

I described these examples of contestations at the Laldas and Shah Chokha shrines and tomb as an indication of the changes in religious culture and religious consciousness, in which syncretic, liminal and shared practices have had to be legitimised for the current and in a new context. This separation of complex Indic phenomena such as the figures of Laldas and Shah Chokha into neat and tidy religious boxes was a gradual process that is certainly related to the discourse of colonial and post-colonial modernity and politics that needed clear definitions of religious boundaries.

The thesis also explored the operation of conversion processes in Hinduism, with Laldas gradually converted into a Hindu saint. I argued that numerous connections between symbols of Hinduism and other sects and religions made the conversion and appropriation of Laldas an easy event. Since Hinduism is not clearly defined religion but represents a mosaic of different traditions, orthodox Brahminical Hinduism was able to appropriate any tradition with a link to the diverse set of Hindu practices. For instance, the cult of Laldas is easily being co-opted into the Hindu religion on the basis of the simple connection that Laldas chanted the Hindu god Ram's name. The agents of this transformation, the Baniyas, were historically followers of an orthodox Brahminical form of *sagun* image/idol worship in Hindu temples. In order to attain their traditional form of Bhakti and worship, the *nirgun* follower of Ram, Meo Laldas is being given an anthropomorphic form in new Baniyas temples, with a Brahmin appointed as priest, in contrast to the Meo *sādhs* at the traditional shrines of Laldas.

In this study I have also argued that the rise of the Tablighi Jamaat among the Meos can be seen as the continuation of a religious tradition and philosophy among the Meos as advocated by Saints Laldas and Shah Chokha. Both emphasised an extreme form of religious piety, living a simple austere life, endorsing prayers, retreats and meditation. These religious-philosophical traditions of the Bhakti and Sufi saints mean that the Meos can act in continuity with their tradition when they adhere to the Tablighi version of Islam. The life Tablighi Muslims live in *dhikra* (remembrance of God) in the mosque is similar to the teachings of both saints. This, I have argued, demonstrates that among the Meos shared religious values exist in vestigial forms.

The significance of this study is to show some of the ways in which the religious world is a complex web of social-cultural connections that are constantly transforming. A change in any aspect of believers' social, religious, and economic lives brings changes to related aspects of their lives. Sometimes these changes are hegemonic—led and imposed by the economically and politically dominant groups in society. As the lives of Meo and other Muslim villagers show, responses to this hegemony can vary, ranging from devotional transformations to the dominance of particular religious symbols over others in one's life, the hardening of religious boundaries or the passive resistance to unwanted changes. ■

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Glossary

Alām: disturbed, insane, angry

Ālim: Islamic scholar

Āmir: head or commander of army (organisation)

Anjuman-I-Khadim-ul-Islam: literally, 'the servants of Islam' a Muslim political outfit formed in the 1930s

Ārati: Hindu manner of worshipping or praying to gods and goddesses

Arya Samaj: a Hindu reform organisation

Asur: demon

Aughar/aghori: Initiated yogi of the Nath sect

Auliyā: Muslim saint

Azādāri: mourning and lamentation related to Tazia and Muharram, a non-Sunni practice

Azān: call for namāz

Bābā: literally grandfather, older man, religious and spiritual personalities

Bajrang Dal: a Hindu right-wing militant organisation

Baniya: a Hindu caste of merchants

Bārā: courtyard, fence

Barkat: blessing

Bāt: conversation, dialogues, a poetic style in Mewat

Bhajans: religious songs

Bhapang: a music instrument of the Muslim Jogis in Mewat

Bhandārā: religious feast

BJP: Bhārtiya Jantā Pārty, a right-wing Hindu political organisation

Bhagā-Bhagī: partition event in Mewat

Bhakti: devotion

Bidat/Bidāh: innovation/addition in Islamic teaching of the Quran and the Hadith

Brajbhāsā: a dialect spoken in the parts of Mathura, Bharatpur, Hathras, and Aligarh and Bulandsahar popularly known as the Braj area

Bujurg: elder

Biryani: rice cooked with meat or vegetables

Brahmin: a Hindu caste of priests

Caste Panchāyat: a council of caste not recognised by the government

Chaddar/galeb: a piece of cloth designated for graves

Chadhāwā: offerings

Chālisā: mantras consisting of forty hymns

Charpāi: charpoy

Chhe bātein: the six principles of the Hadith and the Quran

Chishti: a well-known lineage of Sufi saints

Cillā: a forty-day Tablighi retreat in a mosque

Dādā: grandfather

Dādi: grandmother

Dāk-Meorās: the Meo postmen during the Mughal Period

Dalān: veranda/open hall

Damrot: a Meo pāl/lineage

Dān: gift, prestation

Dargāh: a tomb of a Sufi saint

Darsan: seeing a holy person or the image of a deity in Hinduism.

Dāwāh: invitation for discussion and debates in Islam

Dāwat: feast

Dharma: religion/religious doctrines or moral duty

Dhikra/zikra/dhyān: remembrance of Allah

Dīn: religion

Dīnī: religious life

Dohā: couplets

Dohā-Dhāni: a form of classical music (see: rāg).

Damru: a small hand drum and a symbol of the god Shiva

Duhlot: a Meo pāl

Durood-ul-sharif: verses of the Quran recited at a grave

Eid: an Islamic festival

Ektārā: an instrument made of one string

Fanā: annihilation

Fakir: Muslim vagabond ascetics; a Muslim caste of beggars

Fatwās: legal rulings sanctioned by Islamic scholars (muftis)

Faujdār: a Mughal garrison officer or police officer

Fitnā: chaos

Gamchā: towel

Gwāls: stockmen/shepherds

Gorakhbāni : sayings of Gorakh

Gotra: lineage

Guru: teacher

Hadīth: the collection of the teachings and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

Harām: prohibitions in Islam

Harem: domestic spaces meant for women only

Hujrā: drawing rooms

Ijtemā: Islamic congregation

Insān: human

Itihās: history

Irtidād: apostasy

Jagga: a community of genealogists

Jāgrans: all night-awake

Jajmāni: a rural system of patron and client relationship; peasant castes always performed the role of patrons for service castes

Jalsā: a congregation

Jamaat: a group

Jamaati: members of the Tablighi Jamaat

Jas: panegyrics

Jāti: caste

Jhālar: furbelow

Kabirpanthi: belonging to the sect of Kabir

Kabrā: mausoleum

Kacchi sadak: unmetalled road

Kākā: uncle

Kalmā : the lines of the Quran

Kalyug: the last Hindu epoch of fours marked by disorder

Kamins: services group/castes

Kāmiyā: labourer or servant

Kanphattās yogis: Yogis with split ears, a mark of a initiated yogi of the Nath sect

Khidmattiyā: bodyguards of royal emperors

Kheer: rice pudding

Khudkāsht: personal cultivation

Kirtan: Hindu musical praying

Kshatriya: Hindu warrior caste-class

Kuldevtā: family god

Madrasah: an Islamic school primarily for imparting religious teachings

Mahāsabhās: major associations

Makbarā: tomb

Mālik: master

Mandali: group

Markaz: centre

Maulavis: Islamic preachers

Melā: festival

Mohallā: parts of a town

Muharram: an occasion of mourning among Shia Muslims

Murids/khalifā/ pīrjādgāns: disciples

Mustaqim: a straight path; also interpreted as 'the right path' in Islam

Naga: Shaivite ascetics

Namāz: Islamic prayer

Nath: Shaivite ascetic sect

Nepāliyā: without a Meo pāl (either a person or a community)

Nimnvarg: low class

Nizāmat: district

Nirgun: formless or without attributes

Niyat: intention

Nuktāvali: collection of couplets

Pakkā: solid; metallic

Pāl: a Meo territorial unit

Pallakara: a small Meo pāl

Panchāyat: a local political body, meeting of elders

Panth: a guru cult

Paramparā: tradition/custom

Parivār pramukhs: family heads

Patti: strip

Pīr: a term for Islamic (Sufi) saints

Pratik: symbol

Purān: a Hindu religious text written in Sanskrit

Qankāh: a Sufi hospice

Qawwālī: A form of music associated with Sufi saints and sung at their *dargāhs*

Rājā: a ruler

Rāg: Style of Indian classical music

Ramzān: an Islamic month of fasting.

Ras: sentiment

Rasiyā: a vernacular form of music

Rozā: fasting during the holy month of the Ramzān

RSS: Rasthriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (National Self-Help Group), a right-wing Hindu organisation.

Sabadis: sayings

Sādh: Muslim priests and followers of Laldas

Sādhu: sage

Safāyā: clearing up

Sagun: With attributes or physical qualities

Sajrā: pedigree in Mewat

Samādhi: A state of intense concentration achieved through meditation. In yoga, the final stage, at which union with the divine is reached (before or at death).

Samprādāya: sect/cult

Sant: saint

Sarpanch: village headman

Sampādāyik Sadbhāv: communal harmony

Shivkathā: the tale of Shiva

Silsilās: Sufi saintly lineages

Shahādā: Declaration of faith in Islam

Shāyar: poet

Shiddh: a perfect yogi

Shirk: association/polytheism

Shobhā yātrā: pageantries/ritual procession

Shuddhi: purification, conversion, a purified community

Shudra: low caste-class Hindus

Srāddha: a Hindu ritual performed to pay homage to one's deceased parents and ancestors

Sufi: Islamic mystic saints, a Muslim individual who practises tasawwuf or mysticism.

Surā: the section/verses of the Quran

Swadeshi: homemade

Swāstikā: the Hindu symbol of auspiciousness

Tabligh: mission for Islamic preaching

Tāntric: related to Hindu esoteric traditions

Tapas: heat

Tapasyā: meditation

Taqiyā: concealing the true identity

Taqreer: religious discourses and reasoning

Tawhid: Oneness of God

Tazia: a Muharram procession

Tehsil: a division of a district for administrative purposes in India

Thāmbā: block/strip

Tyāg: abandoning

Ulemā: an Islamic scholar

Ummāh: concept of community in Islam

Urs: the death anniversary of a Sufi saint in South Asia

Ustād: an Urdu term for teacher or master

Vāt: epic or tale

Vartā: vow, fasting tales

VHP: Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), a right-wing Hindu organisation

Vyās: a Brahmin priest skilled in narrating religious tales

Wahdat-al-wujud: unity of being/god

Yagna: Hindu sacrificial rituals around a fire altar

Yātrās: pilgrimage/processions

Yogi: a meditator, religious person or mendicant

Zannat: heaven

Zuhr: midday Islamic prayer ■

