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Mukesh Kumar
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THE SPECTRE OF BINARIES

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, temples dedicated to Laldas, who was born to Muslim parents, have mushroomed all over north India. Although he is currently mostly worshipped by the Hindu caste of Baniyas (merchants or traders), Laldas was historically known for having a dual religious identity as a Sufi *pīr* (Islamic mystic or saint) among Muslims and *bābā* or *sant* among Hindus.[1] He preached *nirguṇ bhakti* (formless devotion) to the Hindu god Ram,[2] lived a married life, combined 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' religious doctrines and developed a distinct form of religiosity shared by people across religious denominations. The saint taught his followers to observe five rules: to refrain from killing animals and eating meat (particularly beef); to abstain from alcohol consumption; to avoid partaking of any food in their daughter's home; to not cultivate tobacco and sugar cane in the area; and to avoid stealing. The ultimate objective for devotees from diverse socio-religious backgrounds was to continuously chant the name of Ram.

Laldas and his teachings straddled the boundaries of 'Islam' and 'Hinduism'.[3] But his main followers, Hindu Laldasis of the Baniya background and Muslim Laldasis of the Meo Muslim background, began to identify him more closely with either 'Islam' or 'Hinduism' in the twentieth century. Born into a Meo Muslim family in the sixteenth century (1540 CE) as Lal Khan Meo, the saint is presently more popular under the designation of Baba Laldas. Following his guru Kabir, Laldas not only advocated worshipping 'God' in a *nirguṇ bhakti* manner but also lived by the values of 'Islam' in his personal life.[4] Like Kabir, Laldas, his religious instructions and the Laldasi

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panth (religious path or way) founded by his followers traditionally did not discriminate on caste and religious levels.[5] The saint considered institutional religious identities as impediments in the path of *bhakti* (devotion). His teachings are still followed by people of both religions. But the saint's identity and associated religious practices have recently been transformed, indicating a shift from a shared liminal religious entity to an emerging component of north Indian devotional Hinduism.

This book is an attempt to understand historically and anthropologically a changing form of religious culture around the *bhakti* figure and the religious order of Laldas that has undergone multiple transformations since its inception in the sixteenth century. In doing so, the book analyses the changes in shared religiosity of Laldas, who characteristically spoke of an inward Lord transcending institutionalised 'religions'.[6] It mainly shows how the cultural memory around him has evolved over time. While saints like Laldas typically welcomed followers of any religious background in the past, their tradition did not normally sustain a shared religious ethos in the long run. Since the early twentieth century, Hindu and Muslim followers of the saint have been disputing each other's claims over his identity and numerous shrines. As a result, these shared or mixed shrines have presently become precarious, as tightened religious identities emerged and the financial clout of Hindu devotees grew, alongside the rising religious reformist politics among 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'.[7]

The book goes beyond its initial scope to explore the semantics of syncretic and anti-syncretic dynamics in north Indian society, explaining how the notion of religious purity advocated by reform organisations, the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat, came into existence.[8] It further explores how devoted followers of the saint responded to the growing reformist pressure. They employed various strategies to cope with the situation, ranging from concealing their faith to subtly expressing their opinions through lyrical poems. These coping mechanisms allowed them to navigate the challenging environment within and outside their homes. Furthermore, the shared religious practices of Laldas's followers, which were generally condemned by reformist ideologies, did not succumb to purist views but instead found ways and means to survive. Overall, the book examines the relation between religion, culture and power in Mewat in the light of heightening sectarian tensions in north India in recent years over religious identities, conversion, shared shrines and cow protection among other issues. The growing religious tensions surrounding Laldas's shared shrines point to a shift in the dynamics

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of socio-religious relations between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' over time. Taking a *longue durée* approach, the book provides a nuanced analysis of the making and unmaking of this shared religious figure, exploring the conflicts both within and between different religious communities at his sacred sites. These divergent trends allude to a traditionally incorporative nature of Indic religiosity and recent exclusionary tendencies of reformist politics in India.[9]

Apart from the main shrine at Sherpur (Figure 1.1)—situated right on the border of eastern Rajasthan and southern Haryana—where the saint is buried with his sixteen family members in Islamic-style graves, there are two other main shrines and numerous new temples dedicated to Laldas across north India.[10] The two other main traditional 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) in Alwar in eastern



FIGURE 1.1 The Sherpur shrine of Laldas or Khan at Sherpur Village, Ramgarh, Alwar

Source: Photo by the author.
Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all the photographs in this book are taken by the author during fieldwork in the area between 2016 and 2019.

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Rajasthan. These three traditional shrines, located in Sherpur, Bandholi and Dholidoob villages (see Map 3), are among the central places of shared worship of Laldas.

Changing the outlook of the religious order of Laldas was historically the work of a variety of socio-religious, economic and political forces. However, in recent times, the dominant influence of orthodox Vaishnava[11] beliefs held by the Baniya community,[12] particularly their strong emphasis on temple worship and veneration of images or icons, has significantly shaped and solidified the religious identity of Laldas as primarily a 'Hindu' figure rather than a liminal entity. People's devotion to Laldas and his family members has resulted in boons, which have contributed to the Laldas order's meteoric rise as a wealthy religious order. Currently, the Baniyas play a crucial role as the principal advocates and driving force behind the ongoing religious transformations within the order. The Baniyas, probably the wealthiest caste cluster in Indian society, responded to their strong religious appeal in Laldas with their money and power, transforming the overall character of the order and the saint. In order to attain their objectives, the Hindu (Baniya) followers of Laldas—who although agree that the saint was a Muslim—have begun constructing new and marvellous temples. One such temple that also became one of my main field sites was built in 2015 in Punahana (Figure 1.2), which stood at the heart of the town.

Visitors to the aforementioned temple were all Hindus, mostly Baniyas. Such new temples of Laldas not only reveal the story of Hinduisation of the order but also show intricate ways through which some shared religious practices evolve, change and acquire newer forms with time. The comparatively new temples of Laldas fulfil some unique 'devotional desires' of Baniyas in a religious manner that generally requires experiencing the physical presence of a deity. More importantly, these new temples of Laldas, spread over north India, stand in ritual and symbolic contrast to the main shrine.[13] For instance, at the main shrine in Sherpur, the centres of ritual offerings are graves (*kabra*, or mausoleum) (Figure 1.3), unlike these new temples in which a well-adorned Laldas idol (as shown here) is installed. These temples have ironically endowed a strong advocate of *nirguṇ* (formless) devotion with a *saguṇ* (God with attributes) anthropomorphic form.

The process of building new Hindu-style temples of Laldas has happened mainly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century to bring the imaginary of the saint more in line with the traditional religious orientation of the Baniyas. They began to propitiate him in the Vaishnava style of religious

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FIGURE 1.2 The new temple of Laldas at Punahana

Source: Photo by the author.

worship, which has historically been favoured by the Baniyas (C. Bayly 1992). Installing idols (images) of the saint in many temples in Mewat and neighbouring regions implies symbolic and ontological transformations that are a complete subversion of Laldas's teachings and his *samprādāya*'s

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FIGURE 1.3 A *kabra* in the Laldas shrine at Sherpur

Source: Photo by author.

(religious order) shared practices and beliefs.[14] I argue that the rise of shared religiosity around Laldas and the persistence of disputes between the two different types of religious followers indicate historically changing forms of religious cultures in north India in general and Mewat in particular.[15]

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Additionally, this new symbolism and meaning of the shrines and the new persona of Laldas allude to the displacement of the religious symbols of one group by the other. While these transformations are designed to meet the devotional needs of the wealthy and powerful merchant class, they also represent changes in a constantly shifting network of socio-religious relations and belief systems around shared sacred spaces, defined as 'religioscapes'[16] by Hayden et al. (2016). Each religious group sharing a sacred site constitutes its own form of religioscape, such as 'Hindu' religioscape or 'Muslim' religioscape, intersecting and sometimes mutually opposing each other's religious practices.[17] Constantly shifting social horizons and forms of interactions between various religious communities exhibit and sometimes force changes in religioscapes, depending upon the power dynamics of inter-religious relations (Hayden et al. 2016: 28–31). Similarly, the changes at Laldas shrines also demonstrate that religious cultures evolve and change over time, generally in tandem with the rising tides of comparatively newer forms of ideologies and power dynamics in society. In a way, the 'Hindu' religioscape of the Laldas order is slowly expanding since Baniyas continue to build new temples. The majority of Baniyas perceive their wealth and prosperity as the direct outcome of their genuine service, or *saccī sevā*, to the saint. As a result of this belief, there is also a substantial influx of material contributions to the saint's shrines and new temples, marking changes in physical settings, symbolic meanings and ritual practices at the traditionally shared sacred sites.

These changes also led me to ponder the following questions: What are the social, religious and economic developments that are reshaping the contemporary religious perspectives of the Hindu and Muslim Laldasis, causing them to act for the transformation of traditional forms of religiosity? How do we comprehend and distinguish between the past and present religious engagements of people who presently identify as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'? How have religious boundaries, identities and practices changed and evolved historically in relation to religious spaces traditionally shared by people of all faiths? Which major forces have transformed the religious culture from the one that was more plural and mixed to the one that is more segregated?

The answers to these questions are inextricably linked to the transformations that have occurred at the Laldas shrines and the increasing significance of the Hindu aspects of the saint's religious order and persona in recent decades. However, the focus here is not on the system of classification

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but instead on how the historical growth of religious and communal consciousness around social categories led to the current teleological outcome of mutual distrust and hatred against each other in religious communities. In turn, these developments also affected religious cultures around shared shrines of saints, such as that of Laldas. Consequently, it would be more useful to explain the processes by which members of these diverse religious communities with varying religious orientations have come to identify their identities and shared practices around the shrines of Laldas as either 'Islamic' or 'Hindu'. These shifts continue to have an impact on the outlook of the dominant Meo Muslim community and on local inter-religious relations in Mewat.

THE AREA, MEWAT AND THE MAKING OF THE OTHER

The book is set in the Mewat region, located 65 kilometres south-west of the capital of India, Delhi. Mewat derives its identity from the Meos, the majority inhabitants of the region, and geographically spreads across the border regions of three present-day north Indian states: Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Overall, Mewat is located within a triangular zone bounded by three major cities: Delhi, Jaipur and Agra. It covers an area of nearly 9,000 square kilometres without constituting a single administrative unit. Mewat, as shown in Map 1, is, thus, closely identified as a cultural zone, defined by the distribution of the Meo peasant population and the use of the Mewati language.[18]

Numerous peasant communities reside in and around Mewat, creating a sort of caste boundary. Due to their numerical dominance, their locations are generally identified by caste names. For instance, the districts beyond the north and north-west sections of Mewat (the western side of Alwar, and parts of Rewari and Gurgaon) are controlled by Ahir peasants, whose territory is termed the Ahirvati (the Ahirs' habitation) in popular parlance. Similarly, Jat peasants can be found in large numbers in areas beyond the north-east and south-east of Mewat; this region is known as the Jattiyaat. Similarly, Meenavati and Gujarvati are two distinct peasant caste cultural zones (after the Meena and the Gujjar peasants, respectively).[19] There are remarkable similarities between these peasant castes who bestow on one another equal social status, including the Meos. All these caste communities identify as Hindu, except for the Meos, who are Muslim.[20]

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Mewat is flanked by the Aravalli mountains, colloquially called *kālā pahād* (the black mountains), which occasionally rise to 500 metres. The region is one of the least fertile areas on the outskirts of the alluvial Indo-Gangetic plains. In the absence of perennial rivers and other freshwater sources, irrigation heavily relies on either rainfall or waterpumps. The area experiences low rainfall, resulting in a hot, dry and semi-arid climate.[21] Economically, Mewat is currently recognised as one of the most underdeveloped regions in India.[22]

Traditionally, Mewat has been a meeting ground of diverse religious traditions, characterised by the presence of Sufis, Naths, Jains and Bhaktas, among countless others religious streams (M. Kumar 2022a, 2002b; Mayaram 1997b, 2004c). Beyond the binary of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', it represented a mosaic of various religious orientations and a complex arrangement of social relations. However, Mewat and Meos have currently been highly defamed by Hindu right-wing activists and popular media. Hindu right-wing activists describe the region as a 'dark place' and a 'hotbed of breeding terrorism', with Muslims supposedly engaging in forced religious conversion of Hindu girls as well as cow smuggling (Bose 2022).[23] These issues have sparked numerous sectarian conflicts in recent years, with many people labelling the area as the source of 'anti-national' activities. This association is largely due to stereotypes and prejudices against the Muslim community, which have led to an inappropriate classification of the region as a hub of criminal activities and lawlessness. For instance, in 2016, just before the beginning of an 11-month fieldwork in Mewat, 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 robbers and kidnappers'—these were the usual allegations 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.

With the help of a friend in Delhi, where I was temporarily based, I was able to find a local friend who agreed to show me places in Mewat. 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'.

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Not once did my 'Hindu' friend, whose background was the middle-class peasant caste Yadav community, refer to them as the Meos. Instead, throughout the few days I stayed with him, the collective noun 'Muslims' and the adjective 'Muslim' kept popping up continuously. This popular understanding of the category 'Muslim' is pan-Indian. A growing concern with religious boundaries, a trend already set in motion in the twentieth century, drew my attention to what could be referred to as a fixation with the colonial idea of religious difference.[24] Although not entirely meaningless, the assumption that religious identities in India are fundamentally exclusive entities currently has significant sway over political-bureaucratic understanding and underpins many academic discussions, particularly those on the themes of secularism, religious tolerance and inter-religious relations.[25] In these discussions, religious communities are assumed to be monolithic, internally coherent, homogenous and externally non-interactive. Such an understanding is 'the objectification of culture', a process both 'totalising and individualising' (Cohn 1987: 224–54) in approach. With the beginning of the 'modernity' projects of the colonial state in the late nineteenth 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, 'the position of the subjects was constituted by the colonial state by classifying and naturalising categories and identities' (Cohn 1996: xi). These categories were mostly created in a mutually opposing binary manner, such as educated or uneducated, rich or poor, male or female, young or old, Hindu or Muslim, Welsh or Scottish and so on (Cohn 1996: xi).

Unfortunately, many political scientists, anthropologists and historians of South Asia still continue to reify—consciously or unconsciously—religious, caste and community groups, describing them as possessing coherence and definite boundaries.[26] 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.[27] 'Scholars too heavily rely on Hindu and Muslim as descriptive adjectives and categories', as Gottschalk (2000) 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 2000: 3).

The friend with whom I was travelling in 2016 appealed to the same bounded notion of religious communities. He was conscious of his own

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