
AN EPHEMERAL LINE IN THE SAND

In order to comprehend various interconnected aspects, such as the historical transformation of identities, shared places of worship and blended socio-religious customs, it is imperative for scholars of religion to adopt a comprehensive viewpoint that considers the dynamic nature of evolving religious cultures. Understanding the diverse religious landscape of South Asia requires going beyond rigid categorisations of 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' and instead recognising the historically embedded connections and conflicts among 'locally' developed religious practices. Without acknowledging these complex interrelationships, it is impossible to grasp the full extent of Indic religious diversity. Pre-existing elements of religious cultures may take different and separate routes, can mould and be moulded by social and political forces. But, despite these changes in the (re-)structuring of a new religious worldview, certain shared devotional aspects remain in vestigial forms.

When the Laldas religious order was established in the sixteenth century, it was based on various strands of 'Sufi' and 'Bhakti' doctrines that promoted the transcendence of two institutional religious identities, 'Muslim' and 'Hindu'. In accordance with the teachings of the saint Kabir, Laldas formed a unique religious synthesis that gave priority to a popular expression of a distinct religiosity. The religious traditions associated with Laldas underwent a gradual transformation, eventually being categorised under a specific religious category. In this process, the concept of 'religion' itself, which is a dynamic and evolving network of power, also transformed

its meaning. Whether it was the devotion of a 'Sufi' or 'Bhakti' saint or the creation of 'locally' based 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' reformist movements, they all interacted with one another in a highly intricate manner, often adopting features of their religious opponents in order to accomplish their own goals. The emergence of the Laldas order in the sixteenth century needs to be explored in this context of diverse religious trends vying to establish supremacy over each other. His teachings centred on the promotion of non-binary identities deeply rooted in the local context of Mewat. He is revered to this day for his ability to bestow blessings and perform miracles. Studying the historical interconnections between different conceptions of 'Sufism' and 'Bhakti' allows for a clearer understanding of popular religiosity associated with Laldas, which stands in contrast to institutionalised expressions of 'Islam' and 'Hinduism'.

In South Asia, beneath the uniform description of religious categories, there exist intricate networks of alliances and conflicts encompassing diverse religious orders, beliefs, cultures and practices. These multifaceted interactions often transcend the idea of 'religion' and emphasise the notion of an ideal 'human' in 'Sufi'- and 'Bhakti'-inflected devotional sensibilities. It is crucial to acknowledge and embrace a pluralistic and diverse range of religious orientations that defy simplistic binary divisions when addressing complex issues of religion, faith and identity. Instead of adopting a binary mode of thinking, scholars should aim to critically challenge it and explore the various responses to attempts aimed at imposing such a binary perspective on pluralistic religious identities that are forced to acquire homogeneity by reformist agendas.

The book highlights that until the beginning of the twentieth century, the notions of 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' were associated with forms of religious consciousness that were fuzzy in nature. For instance, religious antagonism was often expressed in terms of one *samprādāy* or *panth* (order/path/sect) against another, rather than being framed as a Hindu versus Muslim dichotomy (Dalmia and Faruqui 2014: xxi). Exploring the stories of Laldas and their relevance to 'local' identities and religious practices sheds light on the evolving nature of this religious order. Importantly, the book argues that in this process, institutional religions did not overshadow the significance of sect/order. But they gradually became the dominant framework for behaving and thinking. Nowadays, 'religion' and religious identities generate more 'cacophony', surpassing discussions of other social identities, such as caste and sect, at least in the public domain.

More importantly, the formation of caste, clan, village and diverse religious identities can be better understood by considering the significant role played by primordial social attachments, such as kinship relations and descent lines. Many individuals and communities establish connections to saints, deities, animals or other humans, which in turn shape their sense of identity. These primordial attachments serve as the foundation for the formation of various identities, highlighting the intricate interplay between social and religious affiliations. However, caste and religion are identities often articulated along the lines of differences.¹ In many theorists' treatises on social identities, 'difference' has occupied central stage, with the routine usage of homogenised notions of 'culture' and 'society' (Jenkins 2008: 24). The attention to difference to emphasise caste and religious collectivities is still prevalent in most academic writings in India. This issue of repeatedly describing collectivities as one uniform group such as 'the peasant', 'the Meos', restricts scholarly works from critically presenting internal diversity of the objects and community they choose to study. With the advent of colonial modernity projects and the emergence of socio-religious reform groups, there has been an increasing trend of seeking religious homogeneity by categorising diverse religious orientations as belonging to specific religious communities. However, change and continuity have been immanent in these mutually constituting and competing forms of religiosities. These religious sensibilities also reflected the socio-economic connection of Meo lineages with both 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' in the past as well as indicated the presence of incongruent symbols within a collectivity.

Boundary making or identity construction of a collectivity is a long-term historical process. The origin of claims about the legitimacy of religious, caste and reformist group boundaries is often significant, as are the implications of those boundaries, closely tied with the construction of 'religion' and 'faith' as categories of thinking, analysing and behaving. The monolithic and bounded conceptualisations of religion, religious identities and symbols became a way of both differentiating socio and religious communities and unifying them into a nationalist force.

However, the boundaries are constantly evolving, getting shaped and reshaped by multiple forces ranging from social and economic changes to the rise of newer forms of religious politics. 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,

as analysed in previous chapters, diverse cultural forms, such as multiple versions of religious epics, folk stories, myths and forms of genealogies rooted in the socio-economic experiences of communities like that of the Meos and Muslim Jogis.

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 (once these categories were used in the public domain and accepted by people) commonly shape 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 2008: 103).² 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, it is more fruitful to look at the interaction and co-activities among individuals in daily lives or sharing a shrine to understand change and continuity. In doing so, the focus should remain on 'individuals in co-activity', such as in revering a shared saint or site, engaging in similar religious and cultural practices within a cultural zone—as was explored here in the context of the Braj, Mewat and Rajasthani—but also at diverse ways of negotiating co-activities in conflict. The sharing of the shrines of Laldas by various religious communities also presents a challenge to understand the idea of sharing and mixing beyond syncretism.

LALDAS AND SYNCRETISM

Is the traditional image of Laldas closer to what most scholarship on religion would consider as syncretism? Can the inclusion of 'Bhakti' and 'Sufi' elements and norms within the Laldas order be classified as syncretism, or does it deviate from this concept? The idea of syncretism generally refers to the synthesis of different religious forms.³ 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 mixing is syncretism.⁴ 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: 22). Despite its varying usages and the meaning attached to the phenomenon, syncretism has never lost its central significance. It points

out different aspects of 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 or 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 and so on. Furthermore, it also misrepresents the co-existence of diverse values and symbolism as a derogatory idea. However, 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 and Shaw 1994).⁵

Within Christian theological discourse, syncretism is frequently employed in a negative manner to describe phenomena within non-Western churches that do not neatly conform to Western Christian traditions. 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 and Shaw 1994). However, from the nineteenth century onwards, the discipline of religious studies shows that syncretism was present in the earliest forms of Christianity (Droogers 2008: 9). Thus, the Christianity of the West is itself 'syncretic', and even more so than when employing the distinctly Western construct of 'religion' (Richard 2014).

Building on the Western understanding of syncretism, many scholars have uncritically extended the use of syncretism in Indian contexts. Medieval Indian society is often believed to have displayed significant cultural tolerance when it comes to religious and cultural synthesis. As Islam and Christianity expanded their presence in India, both religions integrated themselves within the existing framework of beliefs and practices rather than completely discarding them (S. Bayly 1989: 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 as a conceptual tool to explain the complex processes of religious intermingling (Burman 1996, 2002; Courtright 1999; Das 2006; Roy 2014 [1983]). For instance, Asim Roy (2014 [1983]) pointed out that Bengali Muslims and Hindus continued to share textual forms, myths, rites and festivals until the late nineteenth century. Many cults, Bhakti saints and Sufi *pīrs*, who attracted communities and individuals cutting across the religious divide, have been subjected to analysis under the term 'syncretism' by scholars. These studies aim to present a narrative of positive interaction

and peaceful coexistence, which contrasts with the present-day hostility observed between the two religions (Burman 1996, 2002; Courtright 1999; Das 2006; Roy 2014 [1983]). Thus, the phenomenon of syncretism came to imply that it promotes the objectives of harmony and tolerance. However, the term was generally applied without any differentiation to refer to all kinds of religious movements that appeared to be complex, hybrid or ambiguous, even when positive outcomes are not apparent.

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 1994b: 202). Reformers engage in discussions within the confines of the Quran and Islamic theology, focusing on interpreting and implementing religious teachings and principles according to Islamic scripture and theological frameworks. Syncretism is never considered as an important religious value, common to both Hindus and Muslims. Both Islamic theology and academic discourses considered syncretism in India as a Hindu phenomenon that was crucial in encouraging the worship of Sufi saints (Van der Veer 1994b: 202). Although the belief systems in Mewat are multivocal and multifaceted, currently the discourses of purity and religious separation are privileged over those of religious diversity.

The centre of Hindu–Muslim synthesis in India is mostly the shrines of the Sufi and Bhakti saints like Laldas. 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 scholars have suggested that the answer is ‘no’ (D. Khan 2004b: 213–14; Van der Veer 1994). Merely visiting a shrine is not syncretism until and unless the values and symbols of various kinds coexist together (Van der Veer 1994).

With regard to Laldas, the use of syncretism accords a secondary status to shared religiosities as distinct forms of ‘religions’ compared to Islam and Hinduism, especially when all religions are a construct (Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2003; Bloch, Keppens, and Hegde 2009; Pennington 2005). By characterising the Laldas order as syncretistic, it implies that the institutional structure of both Hinduism and Islam influences it, suggesting a blending or impurity within the order. This interpretation also enables present-day Hindu

devotees to claim ownership or affiliation with Laldas. Laldas, along with numerous other *bhakti* figures, has played a significant role in the emergence of distinct religious traditions that are not inherently syncretic in nature. While Hindus and Muslims have both been involved in these traditions, their participation alone does not make these traditions syncretic. Assigning the label of 'syncretic' to Laldas would not only suggest a perceived superiority of mainstream religions but also undermine the fundamental concept of diverse trends in *bhakti* as a unique expression of religiosity that aims to transcend religious boundaries. Therefore, scholars analysing shared religious figures like Laldas should not privilege the institutionalised forms of religion while adopting syncretism as a theoretical concept. One of the major limitations with the concept of syncretism is that it is confined to a narrow focus on boundary making and does not view ambiguities positively (Mayaram 1997c: 39). Syncretism seldom deals directly with its object, preferring institutional versions of religions over folk/popular ones and orders like Laldas.

But then the question arises: How should one see the religious order and shrines of Laldas if not through the lens of syncretism? The religious order characterised by shared saints like Laldas ought to be viewed as composite heritage sites, signifying more than a mere convergence of institutional 'religions'. Instead, they symbolise the emergence of new 'religions' in their own distinct forms. Several verses of the *nuktāvalī* referred to the inward search for a direct personal experience of the divine emphasising the concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and endorsing Hindus and Muslims for selflessness, love and devotion in their relationship with God. Diverse religious cultures can occasionally coexist, borrow from and influence one another. For instance, Laldas not only questioned the relevance of religious and caste categories but also followed and blended *nirgunḥ bhakti* (formless devotion) to the Hindu god Ram with the devotional practices of Sufism and its concept of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of God) and *mustaqīm* (the correct path). Both the *nirgunḥ bhakti* of Laldas and the *waḥdat al-wujūd* complemented each other in his conception of God, exhorting everyone to walk on the right path. Laldas's teachings, although not explicitly tied to any particular religious tradition, encompass universal spiritual principles that align with the broader concept of *mustaqīm*. Moreover, the path of Laldas and the notion of *mustaqīm* are interconnected through their shared concept of spiritual guidance and righteousness. His teachings emphasised the significance of moral conduct, self-discipline and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Laldas highlighted the need for individuals to align their

actions with higher principles and values to lead a meaningful and purposeful life. The saint did not reject the Sufi notion of piety marked by themes of love and devotion to God, even if he advocated a *bhakti* view of God and 'religion' in his teachings.

One gets an essence of the 'religion' of Laldas from numerous sayings and couplets attributed to him illustrating that diverse religious orientations may form their own distinctive 'religioscapes'. Laldas firmly believed in the unity of all religions and preached a message of non-difference between them. Similarly, he rejected caste distinctions and emphasised the equality of all human beings. The saint encouraged his followers to lead a virtuous life, to practice meditation and to live a life of contentment and detachment. Therefore, religious orders like Laldas are distinct 'religions' in their own right with values of universal righteousness.

Laldas believed that 'religion' should promote moral and ethical values, such as compassion, honesty and selflessness. He expressed that these values are essential for leading a virtuous and fulfilling life. Syncretism does not recognise this kind of diversity in the religious worldview of many Indic saints. Instead, the term privileges the idea of 'world-religions', neatly categorised with clear doctrinal principles, implying that these religions are the only 'real' religions that exist globally. There are many other religious traditions and practices that are not included under the category of 'religions' because they are considered to be 'impure', 'mixed' or in other words syncretistic. Some of these forms of religiosities may have equal or greater significance for people in different parts of the world. Moreover, the term 'syncretism' assumes that all religions are coherent and unified entities, with clearly defined boundaries and doctrines. However, each of these 'religions' is made up of a diverse set of beliefs, practices and traditions, and there is often significant variation within each tradition, both across time and across different geographic regions.

In discussing the religious diversity of Laldas, 'Indic' is a more useful term to describe shared practices which were generally influenced by many localised themes of devotion across religious boundaries. Indic refers to religious practices beyond the boundaries and doctrines of Hinduism, Islam or any other religion. 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. Peasants'

world often contains a rich repertoire of such engagements consciously and unconsciously shared with each other. Any attempt to separate these saints, shrines, groups, and individuals based on a single and bounded category would be unrewarding. The shrines, saints, and their histories, when examined from ‘the *longe durée* perspective’ (Albera and Couroucli 2012: 5–9) highlight the changing nature of religious mixing and sharing over time. The lens of syncretism can hinder our ability to fully comprehend the diversity within the religious world. Attempting to understand such diversity solely through present-day religious classifications does an injustice to the historical context of orders like Laldas.

MIXING, SHARING AND BORROWING

‘Mixing’ of diverse values and boundaries characterised Laldas and his order, therefore, his spaces should be approached analytically as ‘mixed spaces’ (Bowman 2010; Hayden 2022), considering ‘mixing’ as historically the norm of every aspect of daily life than mere ‘aberrations’. Although interaction between the religious communities may lead over time to change the ways in which mixed spaces may be both shared and contested (Hayden 2022), ‘mixing’ still remains the paradigm of continuation and change around religious personas. Scholars in religious studies, anthropologists, historians and sociologists who study the idea of ‘religion’ should take intermixing as an origin point of their analysis to question and investigate the construction of ‘religions’ as bounded categories. Religions and religious views in India like elsewhere have diverse origins, producing a complex religious world that is an amalgam of multiple religious traditions.

When individuals from different religious backgrounds interact or when a specific religious tradition expands to new regions, there is a potential for cultural exchange and adaptation. A notable example of this can be seen in the Caribbean, where the African diaspora fused elements of African traditional religion with aspects of Christianity, giving rise to mixed religions like Vodou and Santeria. These practices reflect the dynamic nature of religious expression and the capacity for traditions to evolve and incorporate ‘local’ customs and beliefs. Similarly, Buddhism adapted to local customs and beliefs when it spread to China, resulting in the development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. 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, symbols such as the cow, sacred locations, pilgrimages, shared saints, and shared myths and stories constituting an Indic world that defies and surpasses a binary classification of 'Hindus' or 'Muslims'. Beside their religious loyalties, each community and caste group contribute its own set of socio-religious values towards making a specific region culturally vibrant and liveable.

As the frontiers of Islam moved eastwards around the twelfth century, it 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 marriage and caste norms prevalent among Mewati Muslim communities. The present cultural practices of the Meos, Jats, Ahirs and Gujjars along with other peasant castes in the area are a result of the synthesis and sharing of common cultural traits. For instance, the religious path of Laldas emerged in the sixteenth century at a time when the devotional aspects of the saint's teachings reflected the concerns of a rural world that were at odds with both institutional Islam and Hinduism. Many couplets of Dugarisi Sadh attest to this idea. Since then, the meanings of the shrine, saint and his teachings have undergone transformation over time. Those transformations are vital to understanding the process of social and religious changes.

Contrary to existing works on the Meos and the area, it is evident here that despite being a Muslim community, as a result of mostly Sufi influence, the Meo's peasant status prompted them to root their sense of a collective peasant self in Hinduism and the Indic symbolism common to other peasants. For instance, it was the peasant status of the Meos that 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 in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, practical necessities often led to semiotic changes in the cultural-religious order of a community. However, such cultural and religious ordering of a popular world may not always have an ulterior motive. This phenomenon potentially demonstrates both a collective desire among the middle-class peasants and diverse strategies employed to establish themselves as a landed community. Indeed, the Meo

community like others endeavour to construct a meaningful understanding of reality and an 'ideal world' for themselves, with power and prestige being paramount concerns. This drive for social recognition and influence shapes their collective aspirations and motivates their actions in various spheres of life. This desire compelled the Meos to function as a cohesive collective, while at the same time, individuals within the community sought individual autonomy. This juxtaposition brought together the individual and collective intentions, desires, religious beliefs and cultural practices, creating a dynamic interplay between personal aspirations and the shared values and norms of the community. For instance, the majority of Meos as a community desire to form an ideal Muslim self for themselves as Sunni Muslims, while several Meos deviate from such a collective intention due to its exclusionary nature. Many Meos still promote shared religiosities deeply ingrained in devotional traditions and follow 'locally' rooted cultural forms, such as language, dress, food, customs, habits, marriage practices and rituals similar to 'Hindu' peasant castes, surpassing the attempt to generate monolithic religious blocks.

OPPOSING AND APPROPRIATING

Disputes at shared religious spaces are manifestations of a new trend of competition between religious communities who mutually oppose each other's religious symbols at a shared site. The common cultural-religious sharing of saintly figures and religious orders by Hindus, Muslims, Christians and other religious groups has in recent times generated what Robert Hayden et al. (2016) call 'antagonistic tolerance' and 'competitive sharing'. This has been defined as a negative definition of tolerance which is not based on the idea of an active embrace of the other. This trend has become a worldwide affair persisting on a global level from the Mediterranean regions to South and South-East Asia and other parts of the world (Hayden et al. 2016). Therefore, many shared religious spaces worldwide are undergoing transformations by making forceful architectural and symbolic changes at the shared sacred spaces to fit the criteria of a region and culture centric hegemonic 'religion' by eliding the traces of a shared history and a common past.

However, contestations at shared shrines may not be fully understood by only analysing social and political relations around such spaces. Such changes are closely tied to changing forms of the idea of 'religion' and religious cultures prompted by a combination of religious, political and

economic forces. To adopt a comprehensive approach, it is crucial to consider various aspects, such as the conceptualisation of God, the diverse forms of ritual practices, the nature of competing belief systems, the meaning-making efforts of the groups involved in sharing a shrine and the transformation of intercommunal relations. These factors, along with political changes, need to be taken into account in order to understand how and why a shared shrine has evolved to possess its distinctive form and modern identity.

In current thinking, Hindus and Muslims, in India are trying hard to locate shared saints and their religious shrines with either one religion or other, by appropriating these shrines as either a temple or a Sufi *dargāh*. Contestations at the Laldas shrines in Mewat are evidence of the emergence of new patterns in religious cultures. These include the power of the Baniyas 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' as a political category has thus infused with other social categories, boundaries and practices of social and political relevance. The emergence of notions of Islamic purity played an important role in the rise of Muslim intra-religious contestations at the shrines of Laldas which had crucial links with Meos becoming Sunni Muslims, a sign of transformations in a 'locally' rooted religious culture.

The instances of conflicts observed at the Laldas shrines serve as indicators of the shifts in religious culture and religious consciousness. These conflicts highlight the need to legitimise mixed, liminal and shared practices within the present-day context, reflecting the evolving nature of religious practices and the challenges associated with accommodating diverse beliefs and rituals. This separation of complex Indic phenomena such as the figures of Laldas and other saints like 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 but was equally affected by economic forces and changes in India. Already divided along caste lines, 'Hindus' continued to identify themselves as a bounded community in opposition to the 'Muslim' other. Since the first half of the twentieth century, the politics of Hindutva essentially became anti-Muslim.⁶ In the twentieth 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. The hardening of religious boundaries was shaped by both local and national politics, reform

organisations and changes caused in religious cultures by transformations in their devotional apparatus and religious worldviews. After the gradual disintegration of traditional forms of social relations formed around peasant and landholding communities like the Meos and caused by the slow collapse of this system (a collapse that is still ongoing), the shared devotional spaces and the interdependence of Hindu and Muslim communities in Mewat were negatively affected. The religious culture and devotional pattern is usually tied to their respective socio-economic status, and their meaning-making is usually mediated through religion.⁷ Changes in religious worldviews of a community thus most often reflect changed socio-economic experiences.

Although, historically, inter- and 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 twentieth century partly due to the rise of communalism in India. Identities are typically contested at sites of border crossings and transgressions. However, differences were put aside during the fairs and festivals when the shrines became particularly vibrant religious spaces. Religious boundaries still existed, but cooperation between people (the Muslim priest, Hindu, Muslim, Jain, and Sikh devotees, the 'lower-caste' attendants and the temple trustees) seemed enhanced, and differences became ephemeral. It is possible that 'antagonistic tolerance' or 'competitive sharing' is among a number of strategies deployed by claimants to the shrines.⁸

As was observed in the preceding chapters, these divergent processes of and contestations about defining identity and the religious practices around the shared shrines of Laldas have left enough space for the slow Hinduisation of the saint and his religious order. 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 in Mewat in general, including at numerous shrines such as that of Shah Chokha, are harbingers of current religious transformations. While none of the features of Laldas's 'Hindu' status can be completely denied since he preached formless devotion to Ram, he attracts relatively little attention among Muslims nowadays due to the strong impact of the Islamic reformist Tablighi Jamaat among most Muslims of Mewat and their purist ideas about not worshiping such saints.

By the operation of transformation processes and the invention of traditions in Hinduism, Laldas is being gradually converted into a Hindu saint. Numerous connections between symbols of Hinduism and other

religious streams and sectarian orders made the conversion of identity and appropriation of Laldas an easy process. Since Hinduism is not a 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 Indic practices. An example of this interplay can be seen in the case of Laldas, where his religious order is being assimilated into Hinduism due to the association of the saint with the chanting of Ram's name. The Baniyas were historically the 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, Laldas is being given an anthropomorphic form in the new temples, with Brahmins appointed as priests, in contrast to the Meo *sādhs* at the traditional shrines of Laldas.

Simultaneously, the Baniyas, through their wealth and influence, are actively creating new religious traditions to assimilate Laldas as a Hindu saint. Here, it is worth noting that close intercommunity relations for economic purposes traditionally kept some social and religious differences under control, especially between those communities which were interdependent upon each other, so that public disputes between communities were minimised due to shared interests. The 1990s in India greatly disrupted the traditional arrangement of social and economic relations necessitating changes in socio-religious relations.

This study has further shown 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 the saint Laldas. The Tablighi Jamaat emphasises 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 were not totally different from popular practices of the Tablighi Jamaat. Thus, the Meos could act in continuity with their traditional orientation when they adhered to the Tablighi version of Islam. The life Tablighi Muslims live in *dhikr* (remembrance of God) in the mosque is similar to the teachings of 'Sufi' and 'Bhakti' saints and the life they lived and promoted. This demonstrates that shared religious values exist in vestigial forms among the Meos. Therefore, shared saints, religious symbols, stories, narratives and shared beliefs and practices are hard to erase from the 'locally' rooted conceptions of 'religious life' despite the notion of purity being strongly present. Then the doctrines of purity must indirectly imbibe culture-specific traditional religious values, as the Tablighi Jamaat does in Mewat,

by introducing similar forms of religious notions once prevalent in the past. For instance, the Tablighi Jamaat adopts various Sufi doctrines once greatly admired by Meos without properly acknowledging the importance of it.

Hegemonic theological considerations with political implications have long monopolised the domain and discourse of several closely related disciplines in analysing the connections between the formation of nation, nationalities, secularities in South Asia; therefore, scholars have rarely moved beyond the old-fashioned obsession with these themes. The reason was precisely related to the emancipation of India (and other countries) from a colonial subjugation and deciding the course of its future as a nation prioritising collectivity over individuals. The oft-repeated phrase of 'the idea of India' pushes the agenda of nation as a collectivity, composed of separate chunks waiting for their respective places to be found and fixed by political ideologies, systems of governance and democratic institutions while discarding the role of individuals shaping and acting upon these boundaries with their deeply felt personal experiences of belonging.

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 spheres 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. Additionally, if the notion of religious purity acquires a hegemonic form, the most pressing issue emerges regarding the response of devotees about their faith in a shared saint. Do all traditionally shared forms of beliefs, customs and rituals, judged to be impure, disappear? This issue is hardly analysed in any academic writing. Scholars need to recognise and value the significance of diversity in ways of dealing with the contemporary religious pressure upon devotees of shared shrines to reform and purify without assuming them to be passive recipients of new changes. Human beings can exercise agency, manipulate power and maintain what deems to be important to them even under most compelling situations. Often scholarly works tend to focus solely on the establishment of boundaries between religious communities, overlooking the crucial aspect of individuals directly or indirectly opposing such boundary-making efforts by religious reformists. The experiences of Meo women and other Muslim individuals exemplified a broad spectrum of transformations and reactions in relation to a dominant interpretation of 'religion'. These responses encompassed intricate transformations in devotional practices, the resilient

nature of some specific religious beliefs and symbols and subtle acts of passive resistance to undesired changes.

NOTES

1. In particular, in the late nineteenth 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).
2. Anthropology is necessarily comparative in nature: it is never an isolated study of networks and relations in a particular society (Gingrich and Fox 2002: 1–24). Jenkins (2008: 121) warns that ‘the open-endedness of everyday life should recognise the routine imminence of change and transformation’.
3. Syncretism is a term used to describe the blending of different cultural or religious traditions into a single system. It is a ‘contentious and contested term’ (Stewart and Shaw 1994) that has undergone many transformations in meaning privileging the problematic idea of ‘religious purity’ and ‘high religions’. The ancient meaning of syncretism was used by Plutarch to refer to unity among Cretans. The sixteenth 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 meanings and values (Adogame, Echtler and Vierke 2008: 5–8).
4. A large body of literature has been devoted to the study of syncretism, variously understood as acculturation (Herskovits 1941), hybrid or mixture (Turner and Turner 1978), a means of transforming religious symbolic systems (Droogers 1989), politics of religious synthesis (Stewart and Shaw 1994) and a process intertwined with contextualisation (Adogame, Echtler and Vierke 2008).
5. Some scholars may view syncretism negatively for reasons such as cultural appropriation, dilution of traditions, cultural imperialism and potential conflicts between different groups. However, it is important to note that syncretism can also have positive outcomes such as promoting cultural exchange and creating new cultural expressions. Ultimately, whether syncretism is viewed as good or bad depends on the perspectives and values of the individuals and communities involved.

6. A new dimension to this anti-Muslim politics appeared with the rise of Mandal politics and after the Babri mosque demolition in 1992.
7. The leading theorist of cultural materialism, Marvin Harris, claims that social-cultural life is often a response to practical necessity on the earth. In a somewhat similar sense, social life and practical necessities are displayed in the cultural behaviour of people, including their religious practices. A change in any aspect brings changes to other aspects of human life as well.
8. By the time I realised this aspect, I was approaching the end of my fieldwork. The main reason for not exploring this aspect further was, thus, time constraint.