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## CONCEALMENT AND SECRECY

### HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

He who hid well, lived well. (René Descartes)<sup>1</sup>

Wherever there is power, there is secrecy. (Taussig 1999)

How did devout followers of a saint respond when a dominant reform organisation deemed their beliefs and ritual practices as impure? Did they abandon all the 'impure' beliefs, or did they find ways to navigate the influence and power of the reformist ideology? In such circumstances, faith begins to operate through acts of concealment and secrecy,<sup>2</sup> which become potent tools for managing societal and religious pressures. Some of these practices of concealment/secretcy among the Muslims of Mewat ran afoul of the puritanical Tablighi Jamaat, which discouraged the veneration of saints as *bidat* (innovation/heresy) and *shirk* (polytheism), considering them as antithetical to Islam. Concealment and secrecy practices represent a significant form of social knowledge that helps sustain social institutions and human relationships (Simmel 1906).

Fluidity across religious boundaries between 'Hinduism' and 'Islam' is not a new idea; it has been analysed in a large number of scholarly works (Amin 2016; Assayag 2004; Bigelow 2010; Flueckiger 2006; Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Gottschalk 2000; D. Khan 2004a; Mayaram 1997a).<sup>3</sup> While these works effectively display the flexibility of religious boundaries, they fail to delve into the implications when reformist groups arise and promote the notion of a rigid, uniform and pure religious boundary. In Mewat, as in other parts of India, reformist groups strongly emphasised the segregation of

religious communities based on their identities and ritual practices. However, little attention has been given to the phenomenon of resistance to, or passive negotiation with, these powerful reformist forces that oppose religious blending.<sup>4</sup>

Many Meo and non-Meo Muslims, mostly women, still venerate these saints, although they conceal their devotion to evade the wrath of Meo men and other Tablighis. Their stories of concealment reveal intricate processes of contestation and accommodation between the Sufi and Tablighi Jamaat ideologies, the divergent beliefs of male and female in a family, and different dynamics of the relationships between the powerful and the powerless.<sup>5</sup> To operate effectively, secrecy as a type of societal knowledge relies on three essential elements: individual actors who engage in concealment; an audience, from whom the secret is concealed; and a power structure that the secret undermines or challenges. Muslim devotees of Laldas, Shah Chokha and other saints hid their 'true' faith from close social groups, such as the male members of families, village superiors and Mullahs.<sup>6</sup> In these stories, the Tablighi Jamaat was the overarching power, Laldas's and other saints' followers were concealers and their family members were the audience and sometimes agents of the Tablighi Jamaat. It is crucial to note that power here is not regarded as a static phenomenon, nor is it concentrated in a single authority. Instead, power is perceived as a relative and widespread phenomenon that exists in various ideological forms, distributed throughout different levels and areas, akin to the network of veins in a body as described by Foucault (1978a, 1982).<sup>7</sup> My analysis considers the Tablighi Jamaat as a bastion of the power of male Meo Muslims in the Mewat area simply because of its immense appeal ideologically and otherwise.

Drawing on everyday stories of people, the aim here is to reveal how secrecy functions to secure a desired world alongside the 'real' one.<sup>8</sup> Although there were many similar cases of secrecy and concealing practices by Muslim followers of Laldas, Shah Chokha and other saints, the majority of the anecdotes presented here are from the Sherpur shrine and the Shah Chokha tomb in order to provide a thorough contextual account. Muslim visitors felt more at ease when visiting the Laldas shrine in Sherpur. This was primarily due to the fact that the shrine was not under the jurisdiction and control of the Tablighi activists. Muslim visitors to the shrine did not come into direct contact with the Tablighis, who were stationed across the road in front of the main gate of the Sherpur shrine. In contrast, at the tomb of Shah Chokha, the Tablighis had complete control over the entire complex. Both

Sherpur and Shah Chokha were Tablighi-influenced villages; however, unlike the village of Shah Chokha, the number of Tablighi workers in Sherpur was much smaller. The Meos' strong backing for the Tablighi Jamaat mission had resulted in the establishment of a unified code of religious behaviour for the majority of Muslims in the area. However, there were still many Muslims who had not completely discarded their previous religious beliefs, customs and practices, despite the strong presence of Tablighi ideology. In order to protect these, they found concealment and secrecy very useful. The objective of the ethnographic narratives discussed here centred around concealment is to explore the significance of concealing practices as a means of passive dissent employed by believers to navigate the pressures arising from their devotion to saints. Following Hugh Urban's (1998: 218) suggestion, the focus here is not so much on 'the content of secrecy and instead toward the forms and strategies through which secret information is concealed, revealed, and exchanged'.<sup>9</sup> Some of the ways in which secrecy works as a useful form of skills and knowledge representing a certain degree of passive resistance in the face of unwanted attempts to discipline people's religious practices and beliefs may have universal forms.<sup>10</sup>

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES OF SECRECY AND CONCEALMENT**

### *AHMAD'S SECRECY*

The first 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 5 kilometres from the temple of Laldas in Punahana. The story began one early morning, when Ahmad drove a group of Hindu devotees (who were his clients) on a ritual pilgrimage to the holy place of Vrindavan in the north Indian city of Mathura. The city is famous 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. Throughout Ahmad's career as a taxi driver, he had several opportunities to visit sites associated with religions other than Islam. Despite these excursions, he had never felt drawn to these faiths until the day he witnessed a miracle.

Upon arriving in Vrindavan, Ahmad and his group of religious visitors discovered that the temple dedicated to Lord Krishna would be closed in the afternoon. Therefore, they decided to wait within the temple complex. As

the afternoon progressed, Ahmad realised that the time for *zuhr*, the midday Islamic prayer, was approaching. In order to fulfil his religious obligation, Ahmad chose to perform *namāz*, prostrating himself within the temple complex. While in prayer, he closed his eyes and immediately had a vision of a finely dressed figure adorned with marigold garlands. Despite the unexpected sight, Ahmad tried to dismiss it as a mere daydream and refocused on his prayer. Surprisingly, the same vision appeared again when he closed his eyes for a second time, leaving Ahmad bewildered. Initially, he attributed it to his own imagination and temporarily ceased praying. Afterwards, he went to wash his face using water from the tank that was on the premises, before resuming his further attempts to pray. The same image kept following him and manifested itself as a shadow in the tank-water, just as he was going to splash some water on his face so that he could feel more refreshed.

The incident frightened him. He decided to go inside the temple that evening without sharing this incident with his customers about what had recently transpired. Following the customs of his Hindu clients, Ahmad purchased flowers, sweets and a coconut to present as an offering to Lord Krishna. To his amazement, the idol of Lord Krishna inside the sanctum was the exact same image that had appeared in his vision a few hours earlier.

In an effort to comprehend the possible significance of this event, Ahmad began collecting information about the god. Ahmad belonged to the Damrot clan of the Meo community. It is worth repeating here that the Meo Muslims assert a special kinship relationship with the god Krishna through their lineages (*pāl*). As mentioned previously, five of these thirteen *pāls* have Jaduvansi ancestry (the descendants of Krishna). Ahmad's clan, the Damrot of Bisru village, attributes their identity to the belief that Jaduvansi Meos are descendents of the god Krishna (Jamous 2003: 1–25).

The episode, and the awareness of his *pāl* and community's history, prompted a profound religious transformation in Ahmad's life. He developed an immense respect for Krishna. While remembering Allah or Laldas or any other saint, he never forgot to acknowledge the authority of the Hindu god as well. Despite the fact that he prayed simultaneously to Allah, Laldas and Krishna without distinguishing between them, he never displayed his association explicitly with the latter two. Krishna and Laldas occupied a place of religious importance in his life but were the objects of secret worship.<sup>11</sup>

The story of Ahmad, while unusual, is not unique in its representation of meaning. Many people in South Asia have faith in the spiritual beings of other religions. In general, such tendencies are seen as 'polytropic' or 'syncretistic'

religious behaviour (Carrithers 2000; Roy 2014 [1983]). For instance, when it comes to the religious activities of Jains, the religious distinctions between 'Hinduism' and 'Jainism' completely dissolve (Carrithers 2000). Not only do the Jain and Hindu religious identities exhibit characteristics of religious malleability and fluidity beyond religious boundaries, but so do other religious identities. Presently, however, the majority of incidents of religious boundary crossing involve Indian Hindus, Christians, Jains and Buddhists who believe in various Sufi shrines and ritual practices of other religions. Presently, examples of Muslims crossing religious boundaries do not occur as frequently or on a similar scale now.<sup>12</sup> Historically, there are many examples of Hindu–Muslim cultural interaction resulting in mixed practices among both religious communities. What could be referred as 'Indic eclecticism' or 'religious pluralism' was once replete with examples of Hindu–Muslim eclecticism.

What is significant about Muslim eclecticism is the contemporary choreography of religious faiths in an era characterised by narratives of religious separation that have caused changes in religious consciousness. This division can be explained in part by the political mobilisation of religious communities into separate entities, but it can also be explained in part by individuals' lived realities. The place of saints, particularly Sufi saints, has long been a source of contention in Islamic theology. For many Islamic faith renewal movements, veneration of saints is sinful or forbidden because it is not sanctioned by the Quran or Hadith. The veneration of Sufi and other saints, particularly among Muslims in India, is viewed as a corrupt form of 'Islam' inherited from 'Hinduism' and idolatry, a perversion at best and apostasy at worst.

This is further supported by an incident I witnessed within the precincts of Shah Chokha's tomb. During one of my regular visits to the *madrassa*, an older student named Saiket asked me in a casual conversation, 'What is the point of worshipping a dead person?' referring to the grave of Shah Chokha. This appeared to be a discourteous comment that may have annoyed a large number of visitors. In response, I said, 'Why do you believe that?' Saiket responded, 'Islam prohibits the worship of the dead ... He is not different from us. He is one of us. If I die one day, would you start worshipping me?' The issue further became clearer one Thursday when I was in conversation with a devotee of Shah Chokha, Maqbul Khan (he invited me to a Sufi *jalsā* in his village). Saiket stopped to join our conversation and subsequently he and Saiket engaged in a heated discussion over the role and significance of

saints in Islam. Saiket accused Maqbul Khan of being a Hindu in his religious practice since he visited the *dargāhs* of Sufi saints. Here is an excerpt of 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 *Darood-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 *maulavi's taqreers* [theological discussions].

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

Tablighi workers from many villages held similar views as Saiket, and such encounters between Tablighi Muslims and Sufi Muslims were frequent and unpleasant. Sometimes arguments escalated to accusations and to minor violence. Tablighi workers held extreme views on the worship of Laldas and Shah Chokha saints which was disliked by Sufi-inclined Meo Muslims. During fieldwork, I noticed several verbal disputes leading to minor scuffles. I observed another dispute one day when I was conversing with Fakruddin, who visited the tomb regularly with his grandson. Some young villagers of Shah Chokha whom I knew also joined the conversation, which soon turned into a verbal spat between them and Fakruddin and his grandson. Fakruddin's grandson grabbed the collar of a person who had made a disrespectful remark about the saint saying, *yā mare huye budhē tum choḍo kyo nā* (why don't you leave this dead old man alone). I had to intervene to stop the fight. Most villagers were now Tablighi supporters, and the *dargāh* was under the control of a Tablighi *maulavi*; due to this, there were frequent encounters between Sufi and Tablighi believers. Meos and other Muslims adhering to each group were easily identifiable from the names of their villages, and the Tablighi-influenced villages outnumbered the Sufi ones.

Most Muslim residents of Mewat and Shah Chokha and Sherpur villages had been profoundly influenced by Tablighi preaching and appeared to be committed to the Tablighi's version of Islam. There was barely any celebration in the year 2016 when I visited the Shah Chokha tomb. Many elderly devotees claimed that the *urs* gathering at the *dargāh* was much smaller than it used to be. A small number of people offered a communal prayer and distributed *biryānī*.<sup>13</sup> 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. In 2011, there was a violent feud over the celebration of the saint's *urs*. Most villagers of Shah Chokha were against holding any kind of cultural event, especially one that included *qavvālī*

singing and the usage of loudspeakers. The Sufi faction insisted on celebrating the event in their accustomed manner, despite the Tablighi villagers resisting furiously. The simmering tension turned into a violent clash with both sides hurling stones at each other. Although no one was seriously hurt, this incident was part of ongoing clashes from time to time. The origin of such confrontations can be traced to the late 1980s, when a similar dispute took place within the premises of the *dargāh*. A famous Meo *maulavi* of the area, Hasan Khan Gangehi, had taken charge of the *madrassa*. 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.<sup>14</sup> Gangehi's actions were viewed as disrespectful to the saint by many Sufis. A large caste *pancāyat* was organised and later removed Gangehi.

When disputing the charismatic authority of a saint venerated by Muslims, Tablighis often framed Sufis as 'other Muslims' in their narratives. These 'other Muslims' were Sufi believers who did not adhere to the Tablighi doctrines and believed in the charisma of Sufi saints.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to this theological and ecclesiastical claim of the Tablighis, many Muslims in South Asia and elsewhere revere the Sufi saints or the saints of other religions (see Albera and Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012; Dalrymple 2004). For Indian Muslims who continue to pay visits to saints and shrines like Laldas for a variety of reasons, including religious and materialistic, the development and success of religious reform ideologies like that of the Tablighi Jamaat have produced both a visible and an invisible pressure.

This type of (political) pressure, which was fabricated in the name of reform and piety, has, nonetheless, opened a new window for understanding the sociology of disguising one's 'true' beliefs. Ahmad's story offers a point of departure for contemplating the issue of religious synthesis as well as the performance of secrecy and concealment. At first glance, 'religion' seems to be a matter of experience and personal preference for him, rather than one of identifying association with a certain religious identity. Ahmad chose 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 did the transition to a uniform and pure version of 'Islam' succeed in a community whose history and rich folk narratives demonstrate the equal importance of both 'religions' in their social lives, as we saw previously in the context of the Meos' veneration of Laldas? The Tablighis, through their current interpretation of Islam, have effectively



created an environment that discourages the traditional Meo rituals and customs. Engaging in activities that go against 'Sunni Islam' is now seen as embarrassing or subjecting oneself to the scrutiny of other Muslims. Even Muslims that one does not know personally can cast doubt on the veracity of an Islamic ritual, such as paying homage to the graves and shrines of the pious saints. The members of the Tablighi Jamaat who worked outside the shrine of Laldas in Shergpur and at the Shah Chokha tomb, as well as the Muslim villagers who lived there, were known to engage in heated debates with Muslim visitors who came from other parts of India. They often argued about the position of saints like Laldas and Shah Choka in Islam and the objectives of their pilgrimage. This form of humiliation in the public has grown into a common habit. In the case of Ahmad, such enquiries might come from members of his family. His relatives were strongly opposed to the veneration of Sufis and actively discouraged any activity of this kind. Some of Ahmad's cousins were active clergy for the Tablighi Jamaat. In light of these circumstances, Ahmad was unable to share his experiences fearing that his beliefs would be completely dismissed. This line of inquiry from Muslims, whether they were known to the believer or not, generated societal pressure; nonetheless, the believer's trust in saints or Hindu gods and goddesses did not necessarily vanish as a result. Instead, the tactic was to conceal such beliefs and to practice the act of secrecy.

Ahmad chose not to reveal his experience to anyone, sensing that he might be mocked for his belief. He decided to hide his belief in Krishna and engaged himself in secretly practicing his faith. Purposeful concealment or secrecy is 'one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity' (Simmel 1906: 462). Secrecy helps to negotiate an intimate form of power to enable smooth functioning of family relationships and societal values, and to evade the wrath of patriarchal control. 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. In these relationships, every lie, whatever its content, is a promotion of error with reference to the mendacious subject. Moreover, 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 1906: 445).

In Ahmad's case, the true conception of his experience was open to multiple meanings and interpretation of religiosity other than to the issue of valid and invalid religious practices sanctioned by Tablighi Islam. The

multiple meanings of 'religion' are generally 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. In addition to Ahmad's personal experience, the following stories shed light on various facets of concealment and secrecy as well as the dynamics of these practices in response to varying degrees of societal and familial pressure, within the context of the veneration of the Laldas and Shah Chokha saints.

#### THE RELIGIOUS DILEMMA OF THE TWO SISTERS

The sisters Rabiya and Fatima (Figure 6.1) 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, sincerely observed the religious duties of a Tablighi Muslim on a daily basis. Every Saturday, their father used to go to the Tablighi Jamaat *markaj* 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 *markaj* was generally followed by the long hours of sermons and theological discourses by the clergies. At first, the speeches by the Tablighi Jamaat's *maulavis* (Islamic preachers) revolved around the significance of adopting a pure way of Islamic life, before giving examples of the Islamic religious figures and narrating their biographies. Based on these stories, every member of the Tablighi Jamaat was expected to perform 'the act of prophetic mimesis' (Noor 2012: 149). At regular intervals, the attendees were constantly reminded of the actions and behaviours expected of a devout Muslim in accordance with Islamic scriptures. These reminders highlighted various practices that were deemed incompatible with the Tablighi or global version of Sunni Islam, which had been adhered to by people for generations.

The sisters Rabiya and Fatima whose husbands had become close friends with me, a friendship that started in the premises of the shrine, were closely associated with the two mutually opposing perspectives among the Meos. Akbar, husband of Rabiya, shared his and his younger brother's marriage story and, one day, invited me home to talk to their wives. Both sisters, as they narrated, were accidentally married into a family of Sufi adherents, a fact their Tablighi father only realised much later. As stated earlier, under the



**FIGURE 6.1** *From right to left:* Fatima, Fatima's husband, and Rabiya and her children

*Source:* Photo by the author.

*Note:* 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.

influence of the Tablighi Jamaat, there were a significantly greater number of Meo Tablighi villages than Sufi-dominated villages. Both groups rarely accommodated each other's perspectives. The tension between these factions within the Meo caste regarding the veneration of saints had intensified to the extent that marriages between villages of different clans and kinships, which were previously common, were now discouraged.

The everyday rhythms of both sisters' lives connected the two families, which oscillated between the traditions of Sufism on the one hand and the anti-Sufi theology of the Tablighi Jamaat on the other. Prior to their marriage, both sisters had never visited any tombs or shrines since their father considered it an act of *bidat* (innovation/heresy). Having been raised in a Tablighi environment, Rabiya and Fatima's lives revolved around the belief in monotheism or the supremacy of one God. Initially, their father was unaware of the Sufi-oriented ideology upheld by their husbands' families. As soon as he became aware of it, he immediately warned his daughters to not visit

any shrines, assuming they had adopted their husbands' family traditions. He explicitly told both sisters that if they disobeyed his wishes, he would permanently cut off ties with them. Faced with this dilemma, they promised their father that they would never set foot in a shrine.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, after their weddings, as soon as the two sisters reached their new home, they were taken with their husbands to the tomb of Shah Chokha and the shrine of Laldas to seek the saints' blessings before embarking on their married lives. It was a tradition in the village of the bridegrooms' family to acknowledge the authority of the saints on any occasion of importance in their lives. Be it the birth of a child, a marriage or employment, people who lived in the Sufi villages would often pay homage to the saints. Rabiya and Fatima had no choice but to adhere to their new family's customary practice.

A few years later, the elder sister Rabiya was expecting a baby. Unfortunately, her child did not survive the birth. The problem did not end there, and doctors could not save her next three babies over the following years. Rabiya's harrowing experiences not only undermined her personal faith but also profoundly shattered her religious convictions. During this time, she had accompanied her husband to the shrine of Laldas and 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 either Laldas or Shah Chokha. Their shrines did not appeal to us.'<sup>17</sup> But, after the hardships and tragedies of losing her babies, she decided to commit to a complete faith in the saints. Rabiya remembered, 'I made a wish of offering a *caddar* [piece of cloth offered to the grave of Sufi saints] to the saints in case our next child survived'.<sup>18</sup> 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 Laldas's or Shah Chokha's power better than me.'<sup>19</sup> She started visiting the shrine and the tomb at least once a month and performing all the required rituals. This transformation from a non-Sufi adherent to a Sufi adherent resulted from Rabiya's self-revelation.

This situation created tension for the two sisters, particularly for Rabiya, as it highlighted a contradiction between what she had been taught by her Tablighi father and what she had personally experienced. Despite all this, the sisters' faith in the saints had increased, disregarding the emotional blackmail of their father, who frequently demanded that they should not visit

the shrines. 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 saints. To sustain kinship and family relations, both sisters kept their belief in the saints secret from their father, especially the miraculous experiences they had had. On the other hand, they also had a feeling that their father knew about their religious attachment to the saints. Here, Rabiya felt that her father might have sensed that his daughters have gone against his wish. Therefore, he also participated in maintaining the secret of their faith by not openly acknowledging it. At 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 of concealing. The trick to keeping this type of secret is 'don't ask and don't tell' (Taussig 1999). As Taussig (1999: 7) 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.

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 pretended to get angry, but, in reality, he respected his daughters' decision under the disguise of not knowing anything. On the contrary, Rabiya openly shared everything with her mother, fully aware that her father would eventually come to know about it.

Secrecy has been linked with various crucial functions in human society, such as helping to 'shape human relations' (Simmel 1906). When the mask of secrecy is exposed or 'defaced', this act has the power to 'destabilize social and political institutions' (Taussig 1999: 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. For every secret to be realised someone must not only conceal something but someone else must know or suspect this concealment (Beidelman 1993: 1). In Rabiya and Fatima's case, the audience for the secrecy was slowly growing; therefore, it had the potential of becoming a public secret or known secret.<sup>20</sup> Over the years, not only close family

members but also their distant relatives had an inkling of their closeness to the saints, but nobody asked 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, secret deals between governments in diplomatic relations, the lies told by parents to their children, secrecy in socially illicit sexual relations—these are mainly 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. Therefore, ‘public secrets’ are those secrets that ‘the public chooses to keep it safe for itself, which in turn, help them to slip into denial’ (Daniel 2006: 2). The next example reveals a process of concealment among people who lived outside Mewat and who had invoked the name of Laldas, Shah Chokha and other saints at some point.

#### *ABID'S LONGING FOR AND BELONGING TO THE SAINT*

Large numbers of Meos and other Muslims from the Mewat region had migrated to distant places, mainly the Gulf countries as well as the regions of Mumbai and Gujarat, to find work. These migrants often visited the Laldas shrines and Shah Chokha's tomb upon returning home. They were easily recognisable as ‘outsiders’ because they did not frequently visit the shrine or the tomb—I noticed them, even though I was a first-time visitor. In moments of distress and disappointment, most of them looked for help or solace from their local religious deities and figures like Laldas. The story of one such person, Abid, is pertinent to this discussion.

Abid, aged 41, lived and worked in the Middle East. He looked frightened when I first approached him in the premises of Laldas's shrine. His uneasiness stemmed from the apprehension of being caught in an undesirable situation of visiting a shrine and expressing his admiration for the saint that he secretly admired but publicly hid. The members of his extended family were supporters of the Tablighi Jamaat and his family discouraged veneration of the saints. For Abid, the social burden of carrying the symbolism of religious purity in a society which had changed rapidly in religious terms of Wahabi<sup>21</sup> ideology was too much. The reformist politics had persuaded a major chunk

of the population in the area of the importance of puritanical Islam in a way that the reformist view formed mainstream public opinion. In this situation, concealment or secrecy gave Abid a chance to accommodate, negotiate and exercise his personal belief vis-à-vis these dominant purist religious values.

While living in Saudi Arabia, Abid has faced many hardships including—as he revealed to me—the loss of his valuables, including his passport and work permit. Following an unsuccessful search spanning two days, filled with countless prayers and acts of worship, Abid eventually reached the decision to invoke the name of Laldas. 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 shared with me that within two hours of invoking the name of the saint, he received a phone call about his lost valuables. He took an immediate vow to offer a *caddar* to the saint 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.’<sup>22</sup> Abid’s use of the term ‘our god’ reclaims a local form of popular Islam in India, showing Sufi saints are considered gods not only by Hindus but also by Muslims (Mohammad 2013).

Abid 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 saint rather with a place meant to be the centre of Islam in the world. Without denigrating the status of any religious figures, Abid maintained, ‘... all religions and gods are equal, one should have freedom to invoke what one believes in.’<sup>23</sup> According to him, neglecting the saints of Mewat constituted a huge mistake by the Meos, including his family members. Abid did not begin his daily routine or any work without reciting the name of the shrine. For him, the saint connected him to the almighty (that is, Allah) because he is the medium, a ladder to reach him, since such saints are very close to Allah. However, under the changed circumstances produced by the success of the Tablighi Jamaat doctrines, he was no longer able to express devotion to the saint publicly. What is important here is that during our entire conversation he 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 shrine, he had completely covered his face with a cotton towel. He was afraid of being seen publicly. This and other actions indicated his uneasiness about visiting the saint. For instance, his son parked his car nearly a kilometre away from the shrine, even though vehicles normally drove 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 shrine necessarily invokes 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.

#### *HARUNI'S TRICK TO NEGOTIATE PRESSURE*

Due to pressure from reformist groups, previously held beliefs do not necessarily disappear or succumb but instead adherents find their own ways to cope with an unwanted situation. In another narrative, a woman named Haruni, aged 60, successfully maintained her faith in the Sufi saint Shah Chokha, although overtly denying that she worshipped him.<sup>24</sup> On my regular visits, I used to sit at her small grocery shop for conversations 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 a household and taking care of four children fell upon Haruni. With the help of a government-run welfare program of the Mewat Development Agency, she managed to obtain some funds to start the shop. Throughout this entire 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 worshipping the saint in her village. The main reason for her for not being willing to speak about her faith was the opposition from male members of her family to the idea of visiting the shrine. Her father-in-law used to fight with her over this issue. Due to her unpleasant experience, she felt compelled to conceal any outward manifestation of her faith in the saint. 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 opposing their belief in a saint was primarily mediated by exposure to the teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat. Mewat was characterised as one of the least developed regions in India, with an alarmingly low overall literacy rate. Notably, the female literacy rate was considerably lower compared to that of males.<sup>25</sup> As a result, women had limited exposure to Islamic scriptures. In addition to the literacy gap, traditional patriarchal norms played a significant role, restricting



women from participating in male-dominated spaces. For instance, women were not allowed to sit with men during Tablighi Jamaat programmes. The Tablighi Jamaat also operated with a focus on prioritising male involvement and participation. In such contexts, it was 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.<sup>26</sup> Tablighi Jamaat was largely a male-centric organisation; women had a very limited exposure to its public activities.<sup>27</sup> Particularly in the area near the shrine of the saint, the majority of Muslims believed in the Tablighis' doctrines. The Tablighi Jamaat had thus established a framework of power with constraining/disciplining objectives, operating through the mind-set of male adherents.<sup>28</sup>

It was often female family members who concealed their faith in order to avoid conflict with male family members. Concealment also helped female believers to sustain family relations, thus protecting social institutions and relationships with men of their families. Following Hegel, Taussig (1999) speaks of the dangers of defacement, the flow of negative energy, tensions and self-destructions of social relationships. Secrecy and defacement involve a significant relationship where, as described by Taussig (1999: 8, 221–30), 'the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a revelation that does justice to it' by being brought into the open.<sup>29</sup> But in this way if something meant to be secret is exposed (revealed) then it negatively impacts societal and political institutions, resembling 'the labour of the negative' (Hegel 1910).<sup>30</sup> Especially for Muslim women who visited these shrines, hiding faith in the saint Laldas and other saints helped them to evade unnecessary fights with their Tablighi husbands, fathers and family heads.

Haruni was an uneducated woman who was told all the time by her father-in-law what was Islamic and what was not. The practices of the Tablighi Jamaat had become a male sphere, where everything was a matter of male honour. What females believed and worshipped had the potential to bring dishonour to male family members and might even make a man hang his head in shame in front of his Tablighi peers and other villagers. The *maulavi* urged the Muslims of the village to abstain from paying a visit to a shrine or the tomb in the village. In such a challenging situation, Haruni faced great difficulty in upholding her religious inclinations. She found herself grappling with the complex task of managing multiple sources of authority, both within and outside her household, all of whom aimed to control her religious beliefs and suppress her inclination towards Sufi faith. She had to navigate a path

that would enable her to deal with the influence of various agents representing the ideological power of the Tablighis. Later, when Haruni began to trust me, she disclosed her tactics of managing the pressure and secretly maintaining her faith in the saint. She revealed that at least once a month she visited the shrine of Laldas and did the same thing at the tomb of Shah Chokha in her village. To implement her plans effectively, she usually sent a child first to enquire about the *maulavi*'s presence on the premises of Shah Chokha. She kept sending a child to enquire until she heard of a suitable opportunity. As soon as the *maulavi* was absent from the premises, she went there and paid a quick tribute to the holy saint.

Hence, the devotees, predominantly Muslim women, of the saints in Mewat relied on concealment and secrecy to navigate the reformist pressures of Tablighi Islam, promoted by their male counterparts within their families. In a selfless act of service, many Meo men willingly embarked on preaching tours of the Jamaat, encouraging female family members to abandon the veneration of saints entirely. Despite ongoing debates and disputes regarding the role of saints in Islam, the history of the Laldas and Shah Chokha remained deeply ingrained in village narratives, intricately linked to the lives of the people. The inhabitants of Sherpur and Shah Chokha continued to identify themselves as descendants of these saints in various ways, thereby demonstrating the endurance and resilience of certain social practices and structures despite concerted opposition. Nonetheless, the pressure on the shared beliefs and practices of Muslims in the region, particularly those who adhered to Sufi and Bhakti saints, intensified. Their devotion to Laldas or other religious figures necessitated the concealment of their true faith.

#### FORMS OF EVERYDAY RELIANCE ON THE SAINT: HAZRA'S STORY

Hazra (70 years old) and her elderly husband performed the duties of custodians at the tomb of Shah Chokha. On the very first day when I entered into the premises of the tomb, 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 offer *namāz* with other Muslims. I then sat next to Hazra and started talking to her. Hazra told me that her sons had abandoned her, and she was very upset with the situation. She then started contradicting what the *maulavi* had been previously saying to me. She said, 'I believe in Dada Shah Chokha wholeheartedly, but I could not say that in

front of him'.<sup>31</sup> She recalled that many of her wishes had been fulfilled thanks to the grace of the miraculous saint. Like Rabiya, Hazra had lost some of her children at birth, and she was hopeless and depressed. Then one day she decided to visit the tomb 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.<sup>32</sup>

She also fondly remembered a recent incident where her bag, containing 20,000 rupees, was stolen. After an unsuccessful search, she turned to the saint for blessings. In her plea to the saint, she declared, 'If I don't recover my money, I will stop believing in you'.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after, she spotted a man in the market carrying the same bag. In such instances, the worship of a Sufi saint often correlates with the fulfilment of desires. The attainment of worldly and material needs highlights the intricacies involved in the religious practices of individuals who are expected to adhere to a 'pure' religious path. The all-encompassing reform organisations and their endeavours to establish religious boundaries had become an everyday concern for many Muslims in Mewat. Nevertheless, instances of concealment resulting from pressure exerted by these reformists were not limited to the Muslim community alone. There were also numerous occasions where Hindu visitors, driven by political obligations and external pressure, routinely concealed their religious beliefs in an obvious Islamic figure.

#### *THE RELUCTANT HINDU FUNDAMENTALIST: SHIVA SHANKAR'S ANXIETIES*

Shiv Shankar Singla, 65 years old, lived in the Ballabgarh region of Faridabad which borders Mewat. He was a shopkeeper by profession and a Baniya by caste. He had a long-term association with the Hindu reformist group, the Arya Samaj and with a right-wing political group, the RSS. The political opinion of the RSS is that India should be a Hindu country rather than a secular nation as it is at present. This kind of political mobilisation is often achieved through religious means. Shiv Shankar always blamed Muslims for denigrating the nation, based on the myth of the golden period in ancient India.<sup>34</sup> Religious notions and symbols can be used in mass mobilisations, and political-religious pressure created in the name of reform and purity creates spaces for the concealment of aberrant faith practices. Despite his hatred for Muslims, he explained his visit to the tombs of the Islamic saints of the area by saying *pīr bābā to sabke hai* (Sufi *pīr* belongs to everyone).<sup>35</sup>

Behind his religious devotion to the Islamic figure (Shah Chokha) but hatred for Muslims as a community lies the concept of the miraculous or charismatic personality of the saint.<sup>36</sup> 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 (Weber 1968). The concept of power linked to a charismatic personality, such as that of the Sufi saints, is perceived as legitimate power that does not require enforcement. Shankar's belief in the charismatic Sufi was part of a universally accepted legitimate power as the power of a supernatural being cannot be questioned. In Shankar's case, the Sufi saints represented an ultimate source of power rather than being a representative of any institutional religion. However, his understanding of the Islamic religion and his opinions about the Muslim community were shaped by the everyday behaviour of ordinary Muslims rather than his personal association with Muslim saints. More importantly, Muslim saints, in particular, possess power lying beyond a Hindu's religious threshold (Bellamy 2011). But this kind of power is rooted in otherness. Hindu devotees often visit the tombs of Muslim holy persons to harness such powers in otherness (Bellamy 2011).

Every Thursday, Shiv Shankar either went to the tomb of Shah Chokha or offered a small piece of green cloth in the name of the 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 was diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctors dismissed any possibility of saving her life. Shankar not only travelled across regions and met healers, doctors and medical specialists but also tried every form of medicinal practice. Somebody suggested that he should visit the shrine of the saint Shah Chokha.<sup>37</sup> 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 ill daughter, went to the shrine on a Thursday and performed rituals there. Miraculously, as Shankar recalled it, his daughter started showing signs of improvement in her health within a short span of time of their visit to the shrine. Mesmerised by this experience, he felt bad about his long-held ignorance, as he pointed out to me. Profoundly shaken internally, he chose to keep his experience a secret, refraining from sharing it with anyone. Motivated by the desire to shield his daughter's reputation and driven by a profound fear of ridicule from others, he consciously chose to keep his belief hidden from public knowledge. Nevertheless, despite concealing it,

he continued to steadfastly embrace the role of Sufi saints and rituals in his daily life. Concealment is thus an important aspect of social life that allows humans to navigate socially built non-navigable domains. Thus, 'knowing what not to know is the most powerful form of social knowledge' (Taussig 1999: 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.

In summary, religious faith in saints and the methods of negotiating pressure with the ideologies of power that try to discipline that faith find ways and means to sustain. The shrines of Laldas and numerous other tombs like that of Shah Chokha have historically been the centres of devotion among Hindus and Muslims in the Mewat region. The evolution of the reform movements, stronger among the Meo Muslims in the region, has led the majority male Meo Muslims to adopt uniformitarian Islamic religious practices. Historical circumstances had 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 saints is the most severely criticised practice by the Tablighi Jamaat. In this context, people who still want to maintain their faith in saints such as Laldas and Shah Chokha for whatever religious reasons face difficulties.

Despite the changing circumstances, there were still Muslims who maintain faith in the saints but were unable to openly express it due to social and moral pressures. The public display of their association with the saints can lead to conflicts, as I regularly observed during fieldwork. As a result, believers, particularly women who hold a less powerful position in the region, adopted the practice of secrecy or concealment to navigate the pressure and passively resisted the imposed ideological power. Unlike Muslim men, Muslim women faced the dual pressures of the reform organisation and family members in their lives. Some female visitors to shrines had to conceal their faith in the saints to avoid jeopardising family relationships. Men, in an effort to preserve their male 'honour' within the community, regulated women's visits to Sufi shrines. Therefore, by examining the sociological practice of concealing faith, one can gain insights into the internal dynamics of the Muslim society in Mewat.

Not all shared practices 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 individual desires to worship freely but also social institutions such as family, marriage and kinship ties.

Chapter 7 explores how, in the wake of religious separatism, Jogi and Mirasi bards articulate positive messages—containing forms of passive and civil resistance—about religious harmony, unity and synthesis through their new poetic songs. The desire to passively resist an unwanted situation of religious disciplining at the hands of Tablighi activists culminated in the poetic songs of the bards of the Meo community. An analysis of the lives of the impoverished and powerless bards vis-à-vis the reformist pressure of the Tablighi Jamaat constitutes a further example of passive resistance against the Islamic reformists and the former patrons, the Meos. Accused by the Tablighis of non-Islamic practices, the bards articulated their concerns through positive messages in new poetic songs.

## NOTES

1. This is the epitaph inscribed on Descarte’s tombstone; he may have chosen it himself.
2. Concealment and secrecy are closely related ideas, although there are some minor differences. Concealing, sometimes, could be an unintentional act while secrecy is a practice. I am aware of those differences, but I am using these terms interchangeably in their shared general sense because it was difficult to figure out the true nature of hiding one’s faith from an audience. Over time concealing could transform into secrecy and secrecy into public secrecy. In defining secrecy, scholars Warren and Laslett (1977) refer to those behaviours that the mainstream public considers immoral or illegal, which therefore have to be hidden.
3. These are just few works among a plethora of literature.
4. Resistance to pressure and domination is a highly complex phenomenon which employs both passive and active means in its operation. But 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, 1999). For critiques of this lacuna of passive resistance in the subalterns works, see Hugh B. Urban (2003: 493–519); Bayly (1988: 310–20). Hugh Urban's writing describes the passive resistance in the context of religious sphere, but his focus, too, is on secrecy as a weapon of the marginalised. See Urban (1998: 209–48, 2003, 2008: 66–83).

5. All the participants for interviews were either regular visitors or occasional saint worshippers. Apart from normal conversation for a brief period at the shrines and 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 of only those people who fully agreed and had no problems with mentioning what they told me. I anonymised every character by changing names and places.
6. The idea of passive resistance was obvious because many women used to get very angry about the reformist ideas being imposed on them. Some elderly women used to argue with *maulavis* and other unrelated Muslims over the veneration of saints. However, they mostly did it with unknown Muslim men. About their male family members, many women expressed unhappiness about constant religious disciplining by them.
7. Although I am aware of Foucault's works, I have no intention of engaging with them in this book to avoid an unnecessary digression from the main themes. My fieldwork observations reflected Foucault's concerns about the relationship between knowledge and power. I cite him to acknowledge his body of work.
8. Most stories of concealment were recorded from women. Most of them were in a hurry to leave the place as soon as possible. On some occasions, elderly women were more vocal; one woman said, 'we are not afraid of anyone'. However, this woman was from a far-off village. They openly criticised the stand of Tablighis for stopping and persuading people from visiting the shrine. The stories discussed in this chapter are among multiple similar stories that I came across. I have chosen the ones which best reflect the themes underlying our discussion here.
9. Secrecy also implies '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 suggests that Christians should conceal their identities in American public life so as 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 of society and the faith of their religious others.

10. For instance, in *Managing Invisibility* (2014), Hande Sözer describes dissimulation and identity maintenance among Alevi Bulgarian Turks through protective concealment, a well-thought-out strategy to maintain group cohesion vis-à-vis a dominant majority. Similarly, such practices were also prevalent among Shia Ismailis across the world.
11. Ahmad revealed his secret to me after a long time when he started trusting me.
12. Although this seems like a sweeping generalisation, at least in Mewat the process of religious uniformity has been on the rise. Many Muslims shared that they visit Laldas, whom they consider as their *pīr*, but they denied praying at religious spaces of other religions unlike in the past.
13. The reference to the size of the gathering was pointed out by many elderly attendants, who claimed it used be much larger in the past. In 1882, Channing noted that the gathering was of almost 10,000 people. In 2016 it was only around 500 people.
14. There are now only two families in Shah Chokha who openly claimed to be Sufi supporters.
15. The total number of Muslims who believe in Sufi saints has drastically gone down after the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in the area.
16. Interview with Rabiya and Fatima, 9 March 2016, Nuh, Haryana.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. It is important to differentiate a 'public secret' from other types of secrets. A public secret is known by a large number of people.
21. Abid used this term. Wahabi refers to an eighteenth-century Islamic reform movement that originated in Saudi Arabia. There are a number of works available on Wahhabism.
22. Informal conversation with Abid, 25 June 2016, Sherpur, Alwar.
23. Ibid.
24. I am grateful to Islamuddin for putting me in touch with Haruni.
25. District Census, Mewat, 2021. Decennial Census Operations, GoI.
26. There are also separate Tablighi groups for women. These proselytise among Muslim women, but they are very few in number.



27. 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.
28. 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.
29. Taussig takes this phrase from Walter Benjamin's work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928).
30. Hegel's (1910) philosophy is known for its dialectical approach, which involves the interplay of opposing concepts or forces leading to their synthesis. The labour of the negative in Hegel's philosophy represents the transformative and creative power of contradiction and opposition. It illustrates how conflicts and negations lead to the development and evolution of concepts, entities, and ultimately, our understanding of the world.
31. Informal conversation with Hazra, 30 January 2016, Punahana.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Terming ancient India as a golden period in Indian history was a colonial orientalist construction to defame Muslim rulers.
35. Writing about charisma, Weber (1968) suggests an allegiance is shown to the person who carries the unique attributes and abilities by virtues of performing unimaginable tasks. Such charismatic appeal creates the authority of the person.
36. 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.
37. Interview with Shiv Shankar Singala, 3 February 2017, Punahana.