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In the Framework of South Asia

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Introduction

Fluid Faith, Rigid Religion: In the Framework of South Asia

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South Asia's religious landscape, from a close distance, conjures up an image of an assortment of innumerable faith rivulets that criss-cross; organically inter-nurture each other, before merging in to an ocean of unfathomable imagination and deep philosophy; a cognitive, civilizational

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construct that runs parallel to the starchy neatness of official nation-state paradigm of imagining South Asia. South Asia, in that sense, is visually more akin to a wanderer, a mystic, who has been variously referred or tagged or stamped depending on the linguistic affiliation of the ever changing frontiers. The wanderer thus becomes a dervish, a fakir, a Guru, a Baba, a Bhikhu or a saint, to essentially comfort and cater to our modernist fetish for marking out a boundary. In spirit, however, the wanderer defies boundaries, flattens notions of certainty around human sense of limits; thereby particularly undermining its cartographic apparatuses and their grand claims. South Asia's sense of 'religion' gets beautifully reflected in the idea of such a wanderer. It all persuades for a rethinking and reimagining of a tangible body as 'another South Asia'[1]. The 'another' in the quest of South Asia is a marker of unofficial exploration, defiant discourse, and utopian imagination. This is indeed not an idea of South Asia that rules the roost of nation states, diplomatic discussions, and utilitarian narrowness of a body such as SAARC (*South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation*). The framework of South Asia conducive for a discussion along the lines of fluid faith ought to be non-nation state centric, away from the political dominance of state craft. And it shall be inclusive of both, celebration of utopias and comprehension of realities, dreams of future and nightmares of present, recognition of possibilities and acknowledgement of anomalies. Therefore, complex dynamics of fluid faith and rigid religion is a mainstay in the essays in this special issue of the *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*. While we admit the significance of utopias we don't give into some of the politically constructed socio-religious atavism. And hence, the essays seek to present manifold reasons for celebration and lamentation at once. After all in the complex socio-cultural and political situation it is unjustifiable to be content with linear formulations. We tend to be optimally critical of linearity that dominates official imagination of religions. Ours is not a census-concern to count religion, nor are we inclined to settle with the simpler text book idea of unity in diversity. We endeavor

[1] The idea of 'Another South Asia' emerged in an interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars from International Relations, Sociology, Anthropology, Art History and public intellectuals of the region. For details, see Pathak (2018).

to understand the becoming and unbecoming in the same breath, and that renders the narratives complex, and analyses nuanced.

Hence, we acknowledge the dominant notion of religion, largely influenced by Judeo-Christian formulation from the west, with fixed boundaries and compartmentalization. This modernist notion of religion pervades our understanding today. Therefore, a rather scintillating account of primitive religiosity in the anthropology of religion, starting with Émile Durkheim, seeks to show the enumerated communities, territorialized rites and rituals, and sealed off totemic practices[2]. It was an approach informed by the imperative of modern industrial society. It rendered everything related to fluid faith into rigid religiosity, to say the least. Islam was one religion, so was Hinduism, as was Christianity. But Sufis did not mean anything in the mapping of religions. Dervishes did not fit the framework. Any monk affiliated with any denomination of Buddhism was easy subject to the modern framework of reckoning. But a monk who wandered across the length and breath of religious map, dwelling upon diverse faiths, was not a suitable candidate. Say for example, a medieval poet of Bhakti tradition Kabir spoke critically of both, Hindus and Muslims, and propounded a heterodox faith would not be suitable for the rigid religion. Sects and cults with abundance of faith may easily fall out of the purview of mapped religions even though they derive a great deal from the sources with religious significance. And if these faith based wanderers, communities, sects and cults find entry in disciplinary or political discourses, they are only as sidekicks, either as an alternative to religiosity or a problem case. It is as though practices of everyday life and religiosity could be separable. And as if the derivative cults and sects were entirely unrelated to the religious groups, and hence social science deemed it as an exclusive entity.

This tendency persists in anthropology, studies in comparative religions, theology, and very common sense. Hence, there would be one discussion on *Hindutva* (a political construct of Hinduism), another on folk Hinduism, and

[2] One can find this tendency evident in most of the classical ethnographic monographs, ever since Durkheim's discussion on totemism as an elementary form of religious life. A task of exhaustive literature review based discussion can be saved for some other occasion.

yet another on the mainstream Hindu dharma. Are the three unrelated? If they are unrelated, it is so for the strategists, experts, and pundits. But, are they unrelated for the people who are called Hindus? As though, a pundit versed in Sanskrit literature does not mouth the juicy folk sayings that regulate the everyday life of commoners! Likewise, it is perhaps unjustifiable to think of Islam and Sufi practices entirely disconnected. And, hence the fluidity of faith and rigidity of religiosity can seldom be imagined as two twains that never meet. So on so forth.

In the context of South Asian region, the notion of religion is intimately embedded in its everyday practices that celebrated pluralism and intense and intimate cohabiting amongst communities that predicated local or micro over meta-structures. In other words, the realm of sacred in this part of the world operated on a philosophy of non-binary, where 'self' subsumes the 'other' in a spirit of accommodation, rather than antagonistically constructing it for its own definition and existence. Much of the colonial and post colonial pressure and politics, amply reflected in census exercise, attempted to cast the community identities in distinct, separate and individualized mode. This was essentially to undermine everything that fused state of self and the other and its organic historical and cultural moorings (see Embree 1977, Kaviraj 1992, Chatterjee 1994, Nandy 1998, Behera 2018).

As a natural corollary, the dominant notion of religion with a clean sense of membership and non-membership engendered the hegemonic concept of 'world religions', subsuming (and perhaps annihilating) in the process a vast swathe of teeming tiny, but robust, faiths and belief practices. This predatory streak within the so called world religions could be possible because of its very conceptualization as impermeable boxes. Well supported and patronized by and integrated with the modernist/ colonial paraphernalia and its accompanying power apparatuses, these mega religions wreaked havoc on landscapes with vastly different philosophies and histories.

This civilization bedrock, nurtured by centuries of deep inter-community linkages and coexistence, obviously then steadfastly resisted the new colonial/modern paradigm of identity politics. The rigidity of religion gets constantly interrogated by the fluidity of faiths, if and only if one can be

reflexive enough to note the pervasive fluidity. Innumerable sites and instances of inter-faith collaborations that dot the region of South Asia stand as a reminder of that force of the fluidity. Festivals, commemoration, fairs and feasts celebrating the 'other' continue to replenish the syncretic roots of history and civilization. The rhetoric mongers who employ the word syncretism without an iota of what it means may perhaps not understand the aesthetic details of the term. But, an ordinary citizen lives with it, despite the sporadic disturbances caused by undue political interventions. In Punjab, India, and so in Pakistan, for instance, there are innumerable mazars and Sufi shrines that are venerated and maintained by people of all faiths, questioning the rigid framework of religion in this part of the world. Faith framework has been under interrogation for a long time, more systematically since the British colonial regime introduced the census as a tool to figure out the world of the natives. Progressively as the colonial regime and its policies made the communities aware of their 'self', the identity politics even in the post colonial context continued to exert pressure on the fluid territory of faiths and its inbuilt pluralism and the spirit of coexistence.

This special issue is a modest attempt to set a stage for the dramatic dynamics of fluid faith and rigid religion. And as it is with most of the performances, this too is signified by a punctuation mark that does not suggest a finality. We intend to keep coming up with a lot more as far as unraveling this complex interplay of the two seemingly opposite disposition is concerned. And we come back with a question, loaded with our intellectual agnosticism as well as emotional truthfulness: are the two, fluid faith and rigid religion, not related at all? In other words, we promise to keep asking: are we not faithful at all on all those occasions when we surrender our fluid faith to the excruciating institutions of religions?

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The *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology* (IJHI) is a biannual scholarly journal devoted to the study of humanities and social sciences, the nature and origin of humanistic ideas. IJHI encourages interdisciplinary approaches engaging the following domains: philosophy, philosophy of religions, political philosophy, political science, history, history of religions, history of ideas, history of science, anthropology, sociology, educational science and communications theory. One of its primary aims is the integration of the results of the several disciplines so that its articles will have a synthetic character in order to acquaint the reader with the progress being made in the general area of socio-human studies.

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Resisting Fluidity, Territorializing Practice

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Abstract: This paper focuses on an understanding of sacred shrines in South Asia. Predominant historical debates on religion in South Asia have situated sacred shrines through the polar lens of either 'antagonism' or 'shared' spaces. Both communalist and secular historiography have utilized these narrative tropes to assign meaning and decode ritual practice at sacred shrines. Historical debates on shrines are thus embroiled in the polarity of such ideological debates. This is despite the intrinsic fluidity of popular sacred spaces in South Asia. Paradoxically, it is this fluidity that has also been violently resisted in recent times. What kind of threat does fluid faith practices pose to expression of fundamentalist beliefs? These kinds of resistances offer us an opportunity to understand the worldview of fluid faiths, and the contours of ritual and bodily practices. Through select case studies, this paper attempts to situate popular Sufi shrines and demonstrates that despite continued resistance, fluid sacred shrines and practices continue to proliferate and offer a critical window to the 'modern' worldview of 'great' religious traditions.

Keywords: sacred shrines, Fundamentalism, popular veneration, territoriality, practice.

The heydays of militancy, from the late 1970's to the early 1990's, in the Indian territory of Punjab strengthened both 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' fundamentalisms.[1] It was also the period when several sacred Sufi shrines

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[1] This trend was mirrored on the Pakistani side by the rising tide of an array of radicalism of both Sunni and Barelwi types. For a comparative reading of religious fundamentalism in

like that of Hafiz Musa near Ropar had just started to emerge from the tragedy of partition and helped organize a marginal Punjabi 'Muslim' community. This shrine also bore the brunt of bombings and killings allegedly by 'Sikh' militants. In a similar vein, a memorial shrine of Baba Lakhdata[2] that was always under the supervision of 'Hindu' Khatris, witnessed the killing of one of its senior caretakers Baba Mangat Rai (d. 1987). Elsewhere in India, sacred shrines had started to emerge as important signposts for political conflicts to resolve perceived historical wrongs, for instance, in the case of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh)[3] and the shrine of Baba Budangiri near Chikkamagaluru (Karnataka)[4] that emerged as battlegrounds for protracted legal and political battles for ownership of shrines. Shrine of the most significant Chishti Sufi saint of South Asia, Muinuddin Chishti was also similarly bombed in 2007. This territorialisation of shrines has serious implication for sacred spaces in India which have always allowed fluidity of faith practices.

In the neighboring Pakistan, shrines of popular Sufi saints have also been targeted by the emerging wave of radicalism in the twenty first century. This has resulted in suicide bombing of saint shrines affiliated to almost all branches of Sufi orders that emerged in medieval India. To mention a few, Bari Imam was bombed in 2005 that killed 20 people and injured more than 100,[5] bombing at Baba Lakhdata's shrine that is one of the most popular in

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South Asia, see *The politics of religion in South and Southeast Asia* edited by Ishtiaq Ahmed. Farzana Shaikh's *Making sense of Pakistan* focuses on cultural and ideological underpinnings of Pakistan. Alix Philippon's essay 'A sublime, yet disputed, object of political ideology? Sufism in Pakistan at the crossroads' explores the complex co-option of Sufi shrines by the state, yet targeting of *pirs* and *gaddi-nishins* (caretakers) in the political landscape of Pakistan.

[2] Sakhi Sarwar or Baba Lakhdata was the most popularly revered saint of Punjab in the nineteenth century. Three major fairs which were held in the Sarvar calendar in the colonial Punjab – Dhaunkal in Gujranwala; the *jhandamela* at Peshawar; and *kadmon ka mela* at Lahore – were complemented by similar festivities on a lesser scale at local shrines, whose formation and endowment manifested the nature of the customary culture of Punjab and the extensive worship of the *pīr* (Rose 1919: 566).

[3] For a detailed reading on these conflicts see Mandal and Ratnagar (eds., 2007) and Gopal (ed., 1993).

[4] For a reading on the conflict see http://www.pucl.org/reports/Karnataka/chikamagalur.htm (accessed on 02 March 2018).

[5] 'Suicide blast at shrine; 20 killed', *Dawn*, 28 May 2005,

the entire north of India and Pakistan killed 50 people.[6] Shrines of the earliest of Sufi mystics like Data Ganj Baksh (d. 1072) and Baba Farid (d. 1266) and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (d. 1275) that have epitomized the form and content of Sufi traditions in South Asia, were similarly bombed in 2010, 2010 and 2017 respectively.[7]

It is curious to note the peculiar similarity of these targeting by religious radicals who perceive the fluidity of faith practices and the presence of religious others as threat to their notion of religious boundary. However, there is still are a large plethora of shrines that have not experienced these contestations and are a major centre of veneration for people across formal religious traditions. One only wonders if theories of 'war over sacred grounds' or 'antagonistic tolerance' proposed by Ron Hassner (2010) and Robert M. Hayden (2013) respectively, can be used as broader arguments over veneration of sacred shrines. Also, much of scholarly attention has been about major shrines and about claims of ownership and, therefore, ignore a larger plethora of popular shrines that dissent dominant perspective on sacred veneration.

It is thus crucial to understand why people across perceived religious affiliations continue to have deep veneration for popular Sufi saints and their shrines. Scholars working on saint veneration in South Asia have tried to comprehend this process through several conceptual terms. Such practices are often believed to be 'syncretic' and used to indicate a kind of positive blending of 'major' religious traditions. Scholars have therefore proposed that these 'folk', 'pluralistic', 'lived' or 'vernacular' practices create space for social harmony. Carla Bellamy (2011) proposes that sacred practices at Sufi shrines are 'ephemeral', while Domonique-Sila Khan (2004) argued for identities on the 'threshold'. None of these theories

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https://www.dawn.com/news/141098 (accessed on 3 March 2018).

[6] 'DG Khan shrine bombing: Death toll reaches 50', *The Express Tribune*, 4 April 2011, https://tribune.com.pk/story/142210/militants-attack-shrine-in-dg-khan-3-dead/ (accessed 3 March 2018).

[7] Peter Gottschalk situates these attacks in the larger milieu of similar targeting of Sufi shrines elsewhere in the Islamic world (http://theconversation.com/who-are-the-sufis-and-why-does-is-see-them-as-threatening-73431, accessed on 2 March 2018).

question the fundamental basis of religious identity. Harjot Oberoi raises a significant problem here and says,

> It is all very well for historians to think, speak and write about Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, but very rarely pause to consider if such clear-cut categories actually found expression in the consciousness, actions and cultural performances of the human actors they describe (1994: 1).

Predominant historical debates on religion in South Asia have, thus, situated sacred shrines through the polar lens of either 'antagonism' or 'shared' spaces. Both communalist and secularist historiography have utilized narrative tropes to assign meaning and decode ritual practice at sacred shrines that has limited historical debates on shrines to the polarity of such ideological underpinnings. This is despite the intrinsic fluidity of popular sacred spaces in South Asia. Paradoxically, it is this fluidity that has also been violently resisted in recent times. What kind of threat does fluid faith practices pose to expression of fundamentalist beliefs? These kinds of resistances offer us an opportunity to understand the worldview of fluid faiths, and the contours of ritual and bodily practices. Through select case studies, this paper attempts to situate popular Sufi shrines and demonstrates that despite continued resistance, fluid sacred shrines and practices continue to proliferate and offer a critical window to the 'modern' worldview of 'great' religious traditions.

Religion and Faith: Practices in Indian History

Academic scholarship in South Asia that has tried to understand religion, predominantly searched for 'essence' of religious tradition by analysing their 'source' and 'original components'. When this 'source' gets recognized, religion is ahistorically established in its 'pure and unchanging essence'. This largely 'modern' conception of religion then seeks to explain the 'foreign imports' and 'influences' as derivate from 'original'. Eaton (2014) laments how contemporary scholarship on South Asia reduces religions to

> recipes in a cookbook authored by some unidentified master chef. Thus the recipe for Islam, as presented in the piece, consists of one God, a

> master text, a master historical narrative, a master community, a credo ('orthodoxy'), and the sacred space of Mecca. The Hindu religion, by contrast, consists of many or no deities, many texts, many narratives, an absence of a credo, and a plurality of normatively hierarchical mini-communities (306).

However,

> people do not always follow normative recipes, often preferring to concoct their own religious traditions. Or, they might disagree over which recipe is 'right'. Indeed, they might not even be aware of the existence of a recipe, or in any event of a single one that applies exclusively to themselves, a condition that fairly describes the greater part of South Asia's population before the eighteenth century (306).

This scenario has long persisted within the historical debates on religion in Punjab which has not just been the earliest centres in the north India to receive Islamic faith practices and its repository of Sufi shrines, but also provided a fertile ground for the emergence of Nanak *panth*.[8] Both these traditions had strong critical engagement with existing Nath practices, yet continuously redefined notions of piety. It is this discursive dialectic of sacred practices in Punjab that makes the region a fascinating subject of investigation. However, historical scholarship on the region has predominantly retained oriental discourses on religion, identity and practices. Thus, the imagination of religious traditions and rituals are informed and identified more by the way sacred practices were reformed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, than by the way they historically evolved. Therefore, even while arguing for diversity in the 'Sikh' tradition, Pashaura Singh over-emphasises the doctrinal precepts of the tradition (2013: 27).

[8] Rather than using religious qualifier ('ism'), I prefer to use Indic term *panth* (translated as community) that historically locates faith traditions. Therefore, rather than labelling the teachings of Guru Nanak in the eighteenth century 'Sikhism', I prefer to locate it within its historical milieu of the sixteenth century *panths*. This Indic term also helps us in recognizing 'in-the-making' process and 'practice' dimension of faith traditions. For a useful reading on situating languages and literatures of the vernaculars in North India see Heidi Pauwels (2012).

In the textbook imagination of sacred landscape in contemporary Indian Punjab, it is thus difficult to situate Nāth *panth* and Sufi practices that occupied a prominent place in the region before the rise of Nānak *panth*. Followers of a monotheistic belief centred on the veneration of formless Shiva, Naths initiated members of all castes, including those outside the Hindu caste system, such as Chāndālās and sweepers into their non-hierarchical order (Rizvi 2012: 332). Coincidently, the arrival of Sufis in India took place not long after the Nath or Kanphata *yogis*[9] became organised in the beginning of the thirteenth century. Naths were free to drop in for meals at Sufi hospices, which in turn were open to any and all visitors. Moreover, in a country where cremation was the preferred funeral method, both groups practiced burial; Sufi tombs, to the untutored eye, must have fit the model of the lingam shrines or *samādhīs* set up over *yogis*, who were customarily buried in the lotus position. The similarity between *yogis* and Sufis extended to the point that the heads of Nath *yogi* establishments became known by the Persian term *pir*, the common designation for a Sufi master (Ernst 2005: 24).

A recent scholarship of Nayar and Sandhu (2007) on *Siddh Gost*, a discourse between the Nath *jogis* and Guru Nanak is a pleasant yet rare departure from the predominant historiography of the making of 'Sikh' tradition that is understood more through difference than borrowing. Composed by Guru Nanak, it is one of the many hymns (Var Ramkali *salok* 2-7 of *pauri* 12)[10] contained in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. *Siddh Gost* forms a significant component of Nanak's dialectics with contemporary religious milieu and outlines his understanding of 'Ture' yoga. While there remains ambiguity regarding the time and place of its composition, the encounter still is important. Guru Nanak's encounters with the Nath yogis are further detailed in Bhai Gurdas's *Vārān* and the various hagiographies about Guru

[9] Kanphata (Split-Ear) *yogi*s is a popular designation of the Nath *yogi*s which links them with the long history of the ancient Shaiva tradition of the Nath *siddha*s or Nath *yogi*s or Gorakhnathi as disciples of the supposed founder of the *sampradaya*, Gorakhnath. For a scholarly reading of Nath *panth* see Veronique Bouillier (2012).

[10] The hymn is also cited in *Miharban janam-sakhi* (a 16th-century biography of Guru Nanak) and can be viewed as a means of legitimizing the hagiographical account of Guru Nanak's encounter with the Nath yogis.

Nanak's spiritual journey (*udasis*) to the 'north country', where many followers of the Gorakhnath tradition lived.[11] *Purātan janam-sakhi* describes Guru's fifth journey, during which Guru Nanak is said to have met several Nath *panthis* (48).

Schomer (1987) suggests that the Sants were closer to the heterodox religious traditions of India - the Buddhists, the Jains and the esoteric Shaivite tradition of the Nath Yogis - than they are to orthodox mainstream of Vaishnava devotional religion. However, the general scholarly consensus is that the Sants represent a synthesis of Vaishnava Bhakti and elements from the tradition of the Naths. The Sants also have many points of commonality with the Sufis, who were present in India from the twelfth century onwards and contributed to the religious environment in which the Sant tradition evolved (8). While the argument on the influence of the Sant tradition on the Sikh tradition has, for the most part, been accepted, yet several traditional Sikh scholars contend that Guru Nanak was not, in actuality, influenced by the Nath tradition, basing their argument on the fact that Sikhism is founded on the path of the householder that values social involvement, such as selfless service (*seva*) (Nayar and Sandhu 2007: 105).

Nayar and Sandhu, however, exemplify that Guru Nanak does appropriate the Nath terminology of Hatha Yoga,[12] but he modifies it for the sake of teaching his own spiritual message. In presenting the spiritual path of self-renunciation while living in the world, Guru Nanak actually transforms the traditional system of yoga. Thus, while Guru Nanak does use

[11] In contrast to Guru Nanak's hymns that refer to the Nath yogis (though without providing any historical information about his encounters with them) Bhai Gurdas's *Varan* and the hagiographies do provide descriptions of Guru Nanak's meetings with the Nath yogis. Bhai Gurdas's commentary on the *Guru Granth Sahib* describes Guru Nanak as having definitely met the Nath yogis or Nath *siddhs* (Varan I. 28-31). Guru Nanak is portrayed as having climbed up to Mount Sumera (regarded as the center of the world according to mythological texts) (Nayar and Sandhu 2007: 50). However, the predominant belief also spelt by W.H. Mcleod contends that the *Siddh Gost* might have taken place at Achal Batala (55).

[12] The word *hatha* (lit. force) denotes a system of physical techniques supplementary to *yoga* more broadly conceived; Hatha Yoga is *yoga* that uses the techniques of *hatha*. Hatha Yoga is first referred to by name in Sanskrit texts dating to around the eleventh century, but some of its techniques can be traced back at least a thousand years earlier, to the epics and the Pali canon. For a more detailed reading on the tradition and its associated texts see James Mallinson (2012).

terms associated with the Nath tradition, he changes them to fit the larger context of his perspective on 'world' and 'liberation'. This incorporation of the concepts from the Nath tradition suggests a certain degree of influence regardless of the modification of the terms by Guru Nanak in the larger context of Sikhism (2007: 106). A mid-seventeenth century account *Dabistān* speaks of Nanak's praise for Muslims, and also the avatars, gods and goddesses of the Hindus, but he regarded them all as created beings, not the Creator. He denied the (possibility of) Descent (of God into human soul) or Union (between God and man).[13]

Nanak's philosophy emerged out of redefinition of the wider complex of religious traditions of his times where borrowing and critique went hand-in-hand.[14] It is thus important to note that despite political differences and violence which marked the latter phase of Mughal history, the mystical verses attributed to the thirteenth-century Chishti Sufi Shaikh of Punjab, Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar and included in the Guru Granth Sahib were not removed.[15]

The following case studies seek to explore some of these connects between sacred traditions in pre-colonial South Asia and try to see them in contemporary contexts. My major purpose is the see faith practices at popular Sufi shrines through intersectionality of time and memory. It is between this intersection that I will explore possibilities of arguments around fluid 'faiths' and rigid 'religion'.

[13] They say, he held the Muslims' rosary in his hand and put (the Hindus') sacred thread on his neck. (He recited the formula of faith and offered prayers in the Muslim manner, and recited the *mantras* and *gayatri* and offered *puja* according to the Hindu religion) (Habib 2001: 62).

[14] Critiquing Mcleod's ruthless dissection of *janamsākhi* to recover 'historical' Guru Nanak, Simon Digby's underlines that rather than rubbishing the Sikh hagiographic tradition it is significant to locate it within the predominant *tazkira* tradition (1970: 301-13).

[15] The Sikh scripture has over a hundred verses ascribed to Shaikh Farid, only slightly less than those credited to Kabir, for instance. In the Sikh/Punjabi traditions, Farid is venerated for his devotional poetry, included in the Guru Granth Sahib (Aquil 2011: 127-128).

Everyone's Baba, Multiple Shrines

Some important mystics and popular *pirs* in Punjab assumed a distinction of belonging to shared faith practices not just in the sense of being common sources of veneration but also as inspiration for dedication of multiple shrines. While visitation at most Sufi shrines displays remarkable fluidity, some communities construct exclusive shrines dedicated to them. In this section we shall explore shrines, iconography or popular literature related to Baba Farid and Baba Haji Rattan in the Indian Punjab.

Baba Farid Shakarganj (d. 1265) is among the most popular Chishti saints of the region. Venerated both by Sikhs and Hindus because of his significant verses that were compiled in Guru Granth Sahib, the Sufi mystic is also popularly identified as a 'Sikh' *sant* by devotees in Faridkot. Several *urs*/*melās* in Punjab are dedicated to his memory. Eaton gives a detailed historical account of the religious and political authority, rituals[16] as well as local perceptions of his shrine at Ajodhan (in Pakistan), which later came to be known as Pakpattan (the holy ferry) in the honour of Farid's memory (2000: 230-48). A disciple of Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 1232), Baba Farid settled at Pakpattan in 1236 where he stayed until he breathed his last in 1265. Baba Farid's one hundred thirty devotional verses (*shalok*) are enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak is said to have collected them for Shaikh Ibrahim, a direct descendant of Baba Farid (Ahmad 2009: 198). A popular reception of his poetry is narrated by Baba Mehshi Shah of Batala Sharif. He describes that Guru Granth Sahib was conceived by Baba Farid, and enriched both by Sikh Gurus and Bhagat poets.[17] This popular reception of saints and their poetry as 'connected' is widely extant in Punjab and ruptures the linear narratives of dominant religious discourses.

After the partition of India, east Punjab was severed of its association with the parent shrine of Baba Farid. However, Farid's visit to Faridkot continues to enliven him in the popular memory, which remembers his celebrated visit to the town (Image 2, see Annexe). The legend narrates that after performing a solitary *chilla* (forty-day meditative retreat), when Baba

[16] Ritual complex instituted at the shrine of Baba Farid included spiritual initiation, *dastār-bandī*, *urs*, *qawwālī*, Bihishti *melā* and *langarkhāna* (Eaton 2000: 206-207).
[17] Interview conducted on Baba Mehshi Shah on 7 February 2010 at Batala Sharif, Batala.

Farid visited the town (then known as Mokhalpur) the construction of the main fort complex was in progress. The construction officials forced the saint to work on the site and when a basket full of clay was kept on his head, it started floating over Baba's head. When this incident was reported to the King, he apologised before the saint and sought his pardon. Before the arrival of Baba Farid at Mokhalpur, several failed attempts to settle the city had been made. With the blessings of the saint, the city thereafter prospered and was renamed as Faridkot. This narrative appropriation and incorporation of Baba Farid into the

> landscape, personal lives, and oral traditions of the largely Sikh population [is conceived] through stories of the origins of the shrines, accounts of miracles past and present, and the strategic performance of poetic works attributed to the saint (Bigelow 2012: 34).

Anna Bigelow (2012) who also studied this town notes two shrines in the area. Firstly, Tilla Baba Farid, consisting of three structures - a relic shrine, a gurdwara, and a mosque - providing ritual spaces for all Baba Farid's devotees and secondly, Gurdwara Godri Sahib. Bigelow suggests that these sites memorialise Baba Farid's encounter with a 'Hindu' king who became his devotee but did not convert and set a local precedent for non-'Muslims' who could participate in the veneration of a 'Muslim holy man without abandoning their own religious identities' (2012: 34).

One of the major problem with Bigelow's analysis is usage of religious categories to situate faith practices which, on the contrary, defy academic notions of formal religious affiliations. Image 3 (see Annexe) portrays the popular representation of the saint, five lamps, green flags and an old tree venerated by a 'Sikh' devotee. The Gurdwara is located within the premises of the relic shrine and shares a common wall with a Mosque in the name of the saint that is under the management of 'Muslim' caretakers. Gurdwara Tilla Sahib is managed by a trust Tilla Baba Farid Religious and Charitable Society presided by Inderjit Singh Khalsa, an advocate and a prominent Punjabi figure of the region. The trust also runs several educational institutions.

Since Gurdwara Tilla Sahib is not managed by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the supreme governing body of historical gurdwaras, it has a layout that is pleasantly different from SPGC managed institutions. Located just adjacent to the fort of Faridkot, the shrine complex has a memorial dedicated to a sacred log of wood on which Baba smeared the mud on his hands. A small shrine has also been dedicated to the *van* tree that is the source of the sacred log of wood. The sacred corridor then leads to the langar hall is named after Bibi Fatima, the daughter of Baba Farid. The adjacent hall is a gurdwara where sacred hymns of Baba Farid from Guru Granth Sahib are continuously read. During annual festivities celebrating the arrival of the saint (Shaikh Farid *Āgam Parb*) several flex banners commemorating saint's arrival are put up throughout the city by various political parties. Subhash Parihar notes that

> although there is hardly any Muslim population in the city, the number of daily Hindu and Sikh visitors to the local shrine of the saint and particularly of those who visit it on every Thursday is far greater than the number of the visitors to any local Hindu temple or Sikh *Gurūdiwārah* [gurdwara] (2001: 115).

Gurdwara Godri Sahib is located just outside town, at a site believed to be the place where Baba Farid performed his meditational *chilla*.

In the neighbouring medieval town of Bathinda, shrine of Baba Haji Rattan also encapsulates the multiple narratives of belonging as well as legitimacy for respective religious identities. According to one legend, he was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and was blessed to live for over 700 years. The first references to Haji Rattan in Islamic literature dates back to twelfth century.[18] The shrine of Baba Haji Rattan is associated with the popular legends of the visits of 'Sikh' Gurus; Guru Nanak, Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh.[19] There are several narratives around Baba Rattan's identity. Some accounts ascribe him a Nath identity and

[18] Mohammed Ayub Khan, 'Religious Fusion in the Subcontinent', *The Milli Gazette,* April 16-30, 2005. For a more detailed account of Haji Rattan and his shrine, see Subhash Parihar (2001).

[19] Rose mentions several other versions of the tradition of Baba Haji Rattan.

relate him as the son of Raja Mankiya Parikshak of Dang town in Nepal where he became a disciple of Gorakhnath and established a temple there (Sikand 2003: 202). Bouillier and Khan (2009) give a detailed account of the multiple identities of Haji/Baba Rattan. He is one of the very few saints who had been documented and contested by writers and chroniclers from South Asia, Central and West Asia, Spain and Syria. A major reason for his reference is because of a narrative claim of his being associated with Prophet Muhammad who foretold his birth at Mecca in Arabia where he travelled (Haj, and therefore the surname Haji) before finally settling at Bathinda after his reported 'conversion' to Islam (Sikand 2003: 196-214).

Subhash Parihar structurally situates the tomb of Haji Rattan in the thirteenth century that been subsequently repaired by both Hindu and Muslim officials of the area since medieval times (2001: 109). He also notes the splendour of the fair which was held at the *dargah* pre-partition through a poem of Babu Rajab Ali (1894-1947) who migrated to Pakistan post-partition.

> I have spent eighteen years bearing sharp spears on my heart. Separation is killing [me]. Yearning for the native land I always have. Bungalows of Canal [colonies] and festival of Rat[t]an I do not forget.
>
> The sand dunes of [Haji] Rat[t]an where singing concerts were held, haunt me (cited in Parihar 2001: 119).

Partition had a profound impact on the *dargah*. Before Partition, the *dargah* owned a vast landed property that was subsequently taken over and reserved for public buildings or public space such as the vegetable and grain market. A part was given to a nearby 'Sikh' *gurdwara* which also had the charge of *dargah* administration between 1947 and 1960. In 1960, the *dargah* administration was taken back from the gurdwara management and entrusted to the Bhatinda department of the Punjab Waqf Board, which has its headquarters in a small modern building, inside the *dargah* compound (Bouillier and Khan 2009: 566). Gurdwara and dargah today are separated by a common wall. The former is now managed by the SGPC.

The official narrative related to 'Sikh' association with Baba Rattan is displayed on a large board inside the gurdwara:

> Shri Guru Gobind Singh ji passing through village Bhucho and Bhagu reached Bathinda on 21 June 1706. He called upon Baba Haji Rattan and gave discourses to him and liberated him from the cycle of birth and death. A gurdwara is enshrined on this spot. When the people (*sangatan*) of Bathinda came to know about the visit of Guru Gobind Singh at Baba Haji Rattan, they came to the place to have a glimpse (*darshan*) of the Guru. The *sangat* was overwhelmed listening to the discourse of Guru. Later they requested him to come to the Qila (fort) rather than staying in this desolate place. The Guru then asked the disciples if they have any worries. They narrated that they have long been troubled by a one-eyed devil (*deo*) who lives in the fort and keeps destroying the living places of the people. They seeked Guru's blessings for redemption from the devil. The Guru called upon the devil and asked him the reason for his mischiefs. The devil said that he has been hungry for a long time and pleaded to the Guru for redemption from hunger, as a result of which he will leave the fort forever. Guru Gobind then visualized and said that in a nearby village Nat Banger there lives a bull commonly shared by ten villages. People have been very troubled by this bull. Guru asked Bhai Mailagar Singh to lead Singhs and fetch the bull. They fetched the bull and the Guru asked Bhai to sacrifice the bull and offer the same to the devil to satiate his hunger. The devil was then instructed to proceed to Sirhind where his services were required and to never return. People then requested the Guru to take along with him droughts from Malwa to Deccan who kept the word (*recorded by the author on 13 February 2015*).

This version is met with some scepticism by the people of the *dargah*. Everybody agrees to the visit paid by Guru Gobind Singh, but according to the Maulvi, at that time the *dargah* was already there. Gobind Singh was fed and taken care of. Then he declared that a *gurdwara* should also be constructed on the spot in order to give shelter to the pilgrims. Pir Chand Shah, who was at that time the *sajjāda nishīn*, gave him ten *bighas* of land. Subsequently the name of Hajji Rattan was added to that of Guru Gobind Singh on the gurdwara (Bouillier and Khan 2009: 568).

Despite Waqf Board being the formal custodian of the *dargah*, a Muslim Human Welfare Society has been running the affairs of the *dargah* (Image 5,

see Annexe). Hussain narrated to Yoginder Sikand how due to 'notoriety of the Board' some local Muslims had to set up their own committee. Besides the

> Waqf board people are mostly Deobandis, who have no faith in the Baba […] and displayed little interest in the proper running of the Baba's shrine (2003: 206).

Akbar, an official of the Waqf Board was not pleased by Sikand's conversation with Hussain and asked 'what those grave-worshipping Barelwis' said. Akbar contested the story around Baba Rattan and 'proclaimed […] [that he] was a scheming imposter and a pathetic liar who had falsely claimed to be a companion of the Prophet' (210), corroborating the polemic around the identity of Baba Rattan. These narratives attest to fluidity around the receptivity of Hajji Rattan and how mainstream 'Sikh' tradition as well as reformed 'Islam' looks upon the tradition of saint veneration in the contemporary spatial contexts.

The Partition also brought to end *dargah's* relationship with Naths who used to come for Baba Rattan's *urs* and to participate in the wrestling tournaments (*kushti*) from a nearby village Nathana (some 20 km from Bhatinda). In the middle of the village stands the temple of Kalunath, which had formerly close relationships with Rattan's *dargāh* (Bouillier and Khan 2009: 568). However, the legends of Baba Haji Rattan's 'Nath' antecedents are still extant in the popular narratives.

> [The] inclusive nature of this tradition, its historical developments, and the fact that it has multiple connections and ramifications should warn us against any simplistic classification (Bouillier and Khan 2009: 593).

Situating Veneration at Popular Sufi shrines

Until recently, the entire range of scholarship on Sufi shrines in India, from Gaborieau (1983) and Chambert-Loir and Guillot's (1995) essays on cult of shrines in Islamic history, to more recent works by Currie (1989),

Eaton (2000), and Troll (2003), has understood them from the dominant perspective of Muslim piety and devotion.[20]

Bigelow's work (one significant exception) on the shrines of Sheikh Haider at Malerkotla (Bigelow 2010) including her work on Baba Farid's shrines at Faridkot (Bigelow 2012) and, Carla Bellamy's (2011) work on healing practices at the shrine of Husain Tekri near Jaora in Madhya Pradesh utilising indigenous categories, brings research on the theme closer to an understanding of contemporary faith practices. Both the scholars, however, investigate this plurality or encounter by situating them in perceived Islamic shrines.

A typical Sufi shrine in Punjab comprises of a *dargah* (a cenotaph built around or above the grave of a mystic), a *langar khana* and in few cases an adjacent mosque. While many shrines (depending on the spiritual affiliation) have some restriction on the entry of women inside the sanctum, no such restriction exists in Punjab, except for the shrine of the orthodox order of the Nasqbandi Sufi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi. While every Thursday remains an important day to offer *dua* at the shrine, longer celebrations are held during *urs* (death anniversary of the saint), the duration of which varies from one day to almost a week.[21] *Urs* is usually accompanied by *sama* and *qawwali* and continuous *langar*.

In Punjab, *urs* is also accompanied by a fete, an occasion for enjoyment and celebration. In rural shrines, such occasions also attract folk musicians and performers who sing the popular narratives from the life of a patron saint. Wrestling tournaments are organised at several shrines. While *dargah* constitutes the core of the shrine practices, the periphery is marked by a

[20] Gaborieau's introduction to Troll (2003: v-xxi) provides an interesting reading on the range of scholarship on Sufi shrines in India.

[21] Gracin de Tassy (1995) a French orientalist who visited India the nineteenth century unapprovingly remarks that most religious ceremonies of Indian Muslims are local innovations established as a result of unconscious Hindu influences, which conform little to the spirit of the Quran and are sometimes even contrary to its spirit. He further laments Muslims' pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, some of whom are apparently non-Muslim, and their performance of 'semi-pagan ceremonies.' Indian Muslims have also created new ceremonies performed by both Shias and Sunnis. Some of them are consecrated to the memory of *pirs*, who are to Muslims what *deotas* are to the Hindus. They visit the tombs of these *pirs* on Thursdays and sometimes on Fridays (32-33).

diversity of intermediaries and ritual performance like 'possession'[22]. Thus, despite Tassy's nineteenth century orientalist critique of 'Muslim' practices in India, his list of 'Muslim' festivals include celebrations at the shrines of Goga (Gugga) *pir*, Sultan (Sakhi) Sarwar (also remembered as Lalanwala *pir*), Kabir and Baba Lal (1995: 88-112).

Veena Das argues that the heterogeneity of everyday life invites us to think of networks of encounter and exchange instead of bounded civilizational histories of Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity. The structures of feeling in a neighbourhood define these networks of exchange and encounter as much as by the pressure of authoritative discourses.[23] It is also important to trace saint veneration in the genealogy of Muslim debate in India, where one of the main issues have always been 'syncretism', or 'Hindu influence' and 'Hindu participation'. The charge that saint worship resembles Hindu polytheism is, however, strongly rejected by defenders of the practice, for instance, Barelwis. They base their defence not on the notion that the practice promotes harmony between Hindus and Muslims, but on the claim that it is an orthodox practice, in continuity with the Islamic past (Fusfeld 1987, cited in Veer 1994: 193). The defenders deny that saint veneration is syncretic. However, there is ample evidence to prove that saint veneration was and is prevalent as a vibrant practice in the lands from where these practices travelled to, as much as they took shape in India (Wilson 1983 and Khosronejad 2012).

Tarikare beautifully illustrates this point through a case study of Muharram celebrations that take place in Mudgal in Raichur district of Karnataka:

> The climax of these celebrations is the coming to 'face-to-face' of Hasan and Hussain. Hassan and Hussain are represented by two silver torches. These are decorated with colourful cloth and flowers and made

[22] Anna Bigelow's (2010) study of the *dargah* of Haider Shaikh at Malerkotla draws a complex picture of this ritual performance which is ultimately subsumed within the identity of the shrine.

[23] However, she also underlines that these relations are vulnerable to events at different scales, hence relatively peaceful social life can be disrupted, and relations between neighbours can morph into violence (Das 2013: 80).

> into 'gods'. To see this rendezvous, which lasts for just a second, about a lakh of people of this region stand faithfully at the gates of the Mudgal fort and wait. In terms of caste and creed, these 'people' consist of Bedaru (hunters), *dalits*, *kurubas* (shepherds), Lingayats and some Muslims. On being questioned about this 'encounter' people narrate an interesting story: 'Hassan and Hussain, wandering from Arabia arrived in Mudgal. The younger brother Hussain entered the town admiring its beauty. The elder brother Hassan went outside the town admiring the beauty of the fort. By that time, it was evening and the fort gates were closed. So, the younger brother had to stay inside and the elder brother outside the town. Thus the two brothers were separated and brought together for an encounter once every year' (Tarikare 2009: 102).

Here, historical formulation is easily broken down by the world of faith and

> [the] epic war of the seventh century, which took place in the fields of Karbala village (on the banks of the river Euphrates in Iraq) gets transferred into the hands of the communities of various religions in India and underwent astonishing transformation, Hassan-Hussain had come to Mudgal as the sons of that soil (Tarikare 2009: 103).

Can we thus understand the rise of Sikh *panth* in isolation from its Nath *panth* and Sufi contexts? This is an important problematic which has not been a concern for theologically centred enlightenment narratives on history of the region. However, this finds a significant expression in popular Sufi shrines in contemporary Punjab. As Ibbetson wrote in 1881:

> On the borderlands where the great faiths meet (…) the various observances and beliefs which distinguished the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled, that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than other, or to decide in which category the people shall be classed (101).

This raises one fundamental question regarding the evolution of religious traditions, i.e. whether there exists an understanding of religion that remains static and complete to qualify classification as 'great faith/traditions'? Or is religion as a category inherently unstable? Can this

category escape the long-term view of spatially located traditions that have constantly evolved, at times by revisiting older debates in the moment of the contemporary? Is it then possible to sustain terms like syncretism that have derogatory origins in Protestant Reformation, though still used by the votaries of plurality and secularism? Any treatment of religion as homogeneous or autonomous vastly oversimplifies complex questions of historical change.

> Syncretism, by proposing that religions can be mixed, also assumes that religions exist in a pure unadulterated state. Where shall we find a historically untouched religion? Is there any religious tradition untouched by other religious cultures? Has any religion sprung into existence fully formed, without reference to any previously existing religion? If pure and irreducible religions cannot be found, a logical problem follows; syncretism becomes a meaningless term if everything is syncretistic (Ernst 2005:17).

Carl Ernst alternatively proposes a 'polythetic analysis of religion,'[24] one that avoids essentialism, striking a practical balance between similarity and difference, and makes comparison a problematic enterprise, by abandoning a number of a priori prejudices about religion that are no longer justifiable (19-20).[25] Eaton similarly proposes 'double movement' between

[24] The polythetic approach to religion is extremely helpful. No longer is it necessary to attack or defend arguments of influence or authenticity, since it is now possible to acknowledge freely that numerous examples of hybrid and multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines can be at work in any particular religious *milieu* (20-21).

[25] Ernst gives an interesting example of Nasqbandi *silsiā*, which in recent times has transformed itself from its historical baggage as one of the most orthodox of Sufi orders in South Asia. Naqshbandi Sufi leaders in northern India have taken significant steps to spread their teachings among Hindu disciples, including a number of Hindu masters who explain the Naqshbandi cosmology with terms from classical *hatha yoga*. These Naqshbandi branches (centred particularly on Kanpur) constitute what is in effect a new Sufi-based school of *yoga*, known as *Ananda-yoga*. Particularly important practices of these groups include silent recitation of the name Allah to awaken the *chakrās*. The overall doctrine of the identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm, common to both Islamicate and Indic traditions, permits a wide-ranging series of analogies between Sufi notions of subtle centres with *yogic chakrās*. This recent development, which inverts the Orientalist view of the relation between Sufism and yoga, is a striking indication of the way in which the history of religion can defy the expectations of essentialism (26-27).

the local cultures of South Asia and the theological norms of Islam that makes the study of Indian Islamic traditions so fascinating (2002:10).

Several anthropological debates on understanding, what has been termed as 'everyday religion' between the dialectic of 'ordinary lives' and 'grand schemes' have sought to account for the complex duality of religion as an everyday practice and a normative doctrine (Schielke and Debevec 2012:1). The concept of 'grand scheme' is again historically problematic since it takes a narrow 'immediate' view of complex historical debates. While it is not desirable to detach popular veneration from 'grand schemes' or 'great traditions', what is being proposed here is to see religious debates as 'processual,' that are fluid and 'in the making', where normative and discursive practices are dialectically embedded in the moment of contemporary. Everyday religion thus permeates both private and public lives, among both privileged and non-privileged people, between state and non-state milieus. It may have to do with mundane routines, but crisis and special events may also punctuate those routines (Ammerman 2007:5).

Thus, the significance of the 'social context' becomes very crucial to understand the form and direction everyday religion takes (6), making today's cultural and religious contact far more complex than either the historiography of 'conquest' produced through textual abstraction or 'revelationary' and 'missionary' perspectives. Recognizing both the agency of 'ordinary' individuals and collectivities in negotiating everyday lives becomes crucial to analyse popular forms of piety and devotion (14-15).

The study of shrine practices opens up a foray of possibilities on understanding religion in South Asia. Shrines are sites of memory and are bestowed with notions of sovereignty, in this case through the agency of Baba Farid. Yet, shrines like Baba Haji Rattan at Bathinda and multiple narratives around his identity are also intersecting nodes of diverse faith practices. Rattan's twin identity follows the tropes of popular hagiographies of saints like Kabir, Nanak and more recently Sai Baba that defy claims of formal religious affiliations.

Practice aspect of faith traditions also foreground materiality and spatialises relics as much as texts and rituals. Therefore, Baba Farid's wooden relic shrine at Faridkot symbolizes his body and memory that

enlivens his presence in the past as much as past in the present. Shrines sometimes also challenge the contemporary contours of demography that is a hallmark of post-partition historiography. Attempts to territorialise faith practices through the construction of a dividing wall between the mosque, tomb and gurudwara of Baba Haji Rattan fructure dominant narratives of religion and identity. Punjab is thus a region fundamentally shaped by religion that is in-the-making.

It is this possibility of spatialising religion that render the very category of religion unstable. At least in the longue durée of historical processes, faith practices have remained predominantly fluid.

Annexe: Photos by author

Image 1:
A painting on *Siddh Gost* by Hari Singh at Gurdwara Achal Sahib

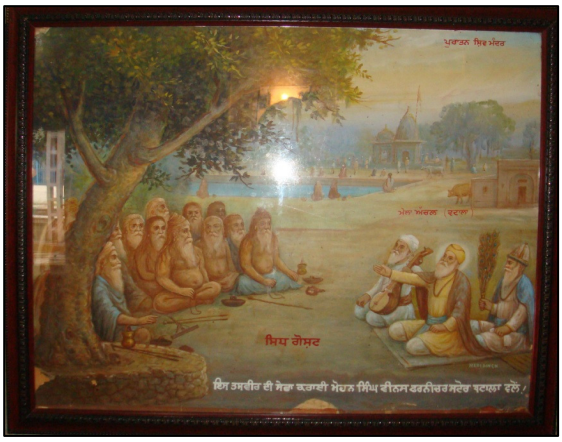

Image 2:
A popular poster representing the story of Baba Farid's visit to Faridkot

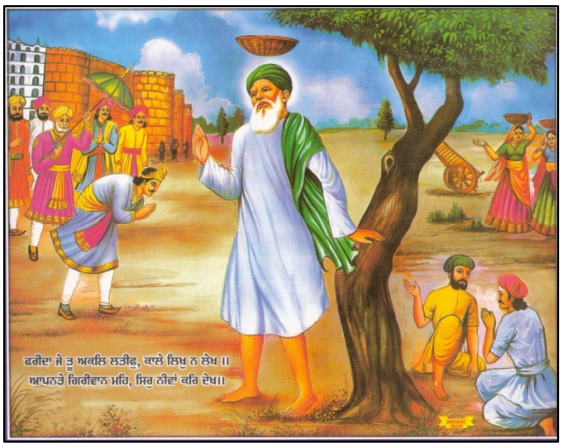

Image 3:
A ‘Sikh’ devotee offering prayers at Tilla Baba Farid, Faridkot

Image 4:
Dargah of Haji Rattan (left) and newly constructed mosque (right)
with gurdwara in the (center) background

Image 5:
The members of the Muslim Human Welfare Society manage the *dargah*

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In the Land of Lalon:
Enigmatic Interface of Religion and Politics in Bangladesh

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Abstract: The cultural history of Bangladesh gives prominence to Lalon Shah, the renowned Bengali mystic. The shrine of Lalon attracts pilgrims and religious tourists. The mystic sang his vision of the world through songs resembling the bardic style and Baul tradition. The poetic imagination depicted a worldview critical of religious chauvinism, Islamic as well as Hindu. Lalon may have joined the official Bangladeshi heritage value today. But the contradictions that the mystic-singer faced in the colonial times have not disappeared. Even though the Liberation War promised a unity of all Bengali speaking populace in the former Eastern Pakistan, there were prominent quarters of support to the Pakistani army on the religious grounds. The famous Shabag mobilization, with its precursor and aftermath, underlined that the War criminals, the Bangladeshi supporters of Pakistan, shall be punished. The state did respond to it. But the responses are well within the pale of contradictions. The state in Bangladesh can afford to ignore the importance of ever more aggressive Jamaat-i-Islam.

While the textbook celebration of unity and diversity may count various religious minorities, such as Hindus and Buddhists, along with the majority of Muslims, as amicably coexistent in Bangladesh, one cannot deny the presence of contradictions. Far from the realization of the Lalon's dream of an awakened spiritual self, Bangladesh today is inclined to the ideology of religious majoritarianism.

This essay seeks to delve into the details of the contradictions, spanning historical trajectory, starting from the time of Lalon Shah, the Liberation War, to clarion call for the punishment of the war criminals in the wake of the Shahbag. The objective is to understand the possibility and limits of dealing with the interface of religion and politics in Bangladesh.

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The essay in implication revisits the idea of secularism in the context of Bangladesh, asking: Was Bangladesh ever secular?

Keywords: Secularism, Bangladesh, Islamic, Lalon Shah, Shahbag, Baul tradition.

In common banter one praises Bangladesh for keeping religious away from the constitution ever since the conception of the nation. Everyone imagines the nation to be aligned to linguistic commonality rather than religious ethos. Among various other nation-states in South Asia, Bangladesh clearly articulated an idea of secularism as one of the fundamental principles of the state policy in the constitution. To demarcate a sharp line between the politics and religion, the constitution seeks to eliminate communal preference and domination. It guarantees to not extend state support to any religion, positively resist the abuse of religion for political purposes and no discrimination to individuals for his/her religious beliefs[1]. But, it did not take much time to have a constitutional about turn. The commitment to secularism was undermined in the constitution as 'secularism and religious freedom' was replaced by 'absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah' in 1977.

It furthermore accentuated the transformation as the constitutional commitment was made to install Islam as the state religion in 1988. At present, the state beholds the spirit of secularism while Islam remains the state religion. This politico-historical trajectory of becoming and unbecoming of a secular is fraught with ambiguity. The seemingly irresolvable contradiction between the markers of identity, Bengali and Muslim, makes the trope of discussion complex. This essay seeks to unravel the contradiction without promising any finality of conclusion. It is an

[1] Part 2, Article 12 (a), (b), (c) and (d) of the *Constitution of Bangladesh* (1972) defines the principle of secularism and freedom of religion as one of the state principles. *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* 1972 manifests the four fundamental principles of the state policy in the section part 2, Article 8, that include: nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism.
In this article we refer to Lalon Sain, who was very important for the Baul tradition. He was also known as Lalon Shah, Lalon Fakir or Mahatma Lalon, as we mention in the following pages.

exercise in agnosticism, as it were, that only allows taking liberty in comprehending dead ends. But, no dead end is without unlocked possibility, seemingly. Known for a fecund cultural premise for mystics, we summarily call Bangladesh the land of Lalon, a fakir who personified a counter hypothesis - one can be religious though not prey to identity politics. Such a religio-cultural distinction furthermore complicates our discussion. It fuels up the confusion to the extent that we fail to fathom whether we ought to be celebrating or lament.

Since a word on method of doing what one does is a (un)necessary prerequisite, this ought to be mentioned that we operate with a way of reading texts and context, ideas and instances, that can be called wanderer's reading. We stumble upon discussions in history of politics in Bangladesh, newspaper reports and analyses, blogs and the scenes that we have seen with our bare eyes without pretense of collecting data. We operate with a method that is more or less anti-method[2], for we don't resort to the methods and techniques learnt and taught mindlessly in the postgraduate courses and bestseller textbooks. We rejoice counter inductivism that allows us to go beyond inductive logic and factor in the unfit informations. In other words, counter inductivism demands from us to deal with more than what easily befits our framework of discussion. And thus we do not dismiss the examples and information that may not necessarily sit well with our central concern. We allow our curiosity to become our method, while we persist with our central concern - how does secularism fare in the contested Lalon land? We tend to be lustful seeker of story, for, agreeing with Bauman (1991), sociology can best do the job of telling stories, stories about stories, and so on so forth. Was there, or there was not, an interface of religion and politics in Bangladesh? And, to sum it up, what is the story about interface of religion and politics that haunts the history of culture and politics in Bangladesh?

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[2] Needless to say, we adopt Feyerabend's (1975) advocated approach to historically significant details pertaining to the interface of religion and politics in Bangladesh. We tend to agree with the idea that it is not a fixed method and technique that facilitates learning. Instead, it is some sort of intellectual anarchy that does. For us, this intellectual anarchy drives us to be perennially curious about everything that we read, see, and discuss in this essay.

The interface between religion and politics however was, and is, a foregone conclusion in modern Bangladesh. This entailed two sides, in a broad stroke, the proponent of secularism and the advocates of Islamic state. The secular stream of thoughts sought to imagine cultural lineage and practices of the people where the *Bengaliness* was central. The mystic philosopher and Baul[3] saint Lalon Shah was, and has been, an embodiment of a variant of secular ethos. It is a pivot around which all communities and creed could come together with a linguistic unity. It dissuades us from any sort of communal tendencies and intolerance in the name of religion.

Fakir Lalon in the 19th century Bengal strengthened the foundation of this variety that supports a critical consciousness toward the divisive tendencies of religious groups. Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan, premised on distinct linguistic-nationalist character, did not emphasise religion. It was culture and language, instead that owed origin to the Baul tradition in many ways. The essence of Fakir Lalon's philosophy is influential to conceive Bangladeshi variety of secularism, upholding the human values and a harmonious society embracing all religions. Curiously enough, the much-celebrated poet-saint did not have a cakewalk for his thoughts upset the socio-religious status quo in his lifetime. He was an irritation for the puritans, the rank and file of priesthood, and all and sundry, as much as he disarmed a large swathe of populace with his all-embracing humanism. The contradictions that the mystic-singer faced in the colonial times did not disappear in the modern qua liberated Bangladesh.

Instead the Lalon's land today is fraught with further conflicts around religion and identity. The Lalon's land is witness to perpetual incline of religious identification and decline of the Bengali secularism. The newspaper reports never cease to tell us tales about curb on freedom of expression and disdain of diversity. Thus it is imperative to examine the paradoxes in the country having an aspiration towards a heterogeneous secular society on one hand and on the other, the forces of religious values

[3] The Bauls are the spiritual sects in Bengal who known for travelling, singing and dancing in order to spread the message of spiritual peace and harmony. The Baul tradition of Bengal is inscribed in the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO. See https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/baul-songs-00107 (Last accessed on 17 February 2018).

conditioning realms of private and community life at national level. Hence the interface between the religion and politics becomes crucial. The instances of the killing of bloggers, youth protest at *Shahbag* [4], and socio-political responses towards the cultural transformations are testimonials to serve this essay the requisite evidences. This essay brings the paradoxical nature of contemporary Bangladesh, in relation to the politics and religion, to the fore.

For a good story shall begin on a pleasant note, we make a conscious attempt to elucidate the sources of hope. But then, when was hope without a specter of despair? This is particularly the case when we reflect on Lalon looking for more than a sanitized reading of mysticism with an eye at contemporary situation. The following discussion sets the stage to understand the complex interface of religion and politics across time.

Sound-scape of Lalon-Land

Lalon Sain (1774-1890 approx.) is one of the leading figures whose philosophical thoughts attached a unique significance to the Baul tradition of Bengal in general and Bangladesh in particular. His philosophy moves to a deep spiritual ground while taking into account the humanist underpinning of the society. The Baul tradition is one of the significant streams of Bangla folklore and musical heritage. It is been considered as the richest stream of Bengali folk music that expresses spiritual and philosophical tradition, popularly perceived as 'folk religion' (Goswami 2000).

As a practising lifestyle and cult, the Baul refers to the syncretic religion that brings together various sects including Vaishnava Hindu and Sufi Muslim tradition.[5] As a musical cult, it entails rich lyrics, simple instruments and bodily movement, known as Baul dance. Drawing on different aspects of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism - the three great religious traditions of South Asia, Fakir Lalon offered a syncretic cultural

[4] Blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was hacked to death by the militants associated with the Islamic groups in 2013. There were six gruesome murders of the secular writers, bloggers and publishers in 2015 that continued in 2016 as well. For more systematic analysis of this, along other thematic lines, see Pathak and Roy 2017.

[5] Karim, 2015, *Banglapedia*. *See*, http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Baul (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

tradition, a unique way of life for the Bauls. Following that particular lifestyle, his devotees have been carrying forward the tradition. In the colonial period, he took the endeavor of promoting the unique cult, and it started getting recognition as a distinct religion in the late 19th century in Bengal (Togawa 2016).

His philosophy desperately sought for freedom, aspired to get liberated from social discrimination, religious superstition and political corruption. In the 19th century, amidst intense caste and gender-divide of society, Lalon sang:

> When you came to this world
> What caste were you then?
> What caste will you be while departing?
> Why don't you say that?
> [....] Death will spare none [6]

Moreover,

> Everyone wonders, "What's Lalon's faith?"
> Lalon says, "I've never 'seen' the face
> of Faith with these eyes of mine!"
>
> Circumcision marks a Muslim man,
> what then marks a Muslim woman?
> A Brahmin I recognize by the Holy thread;
> how do I recognize a Brahmin-woman?[7]

Pointing at these contradictions and rigid rituals associated with Hinduism and Islam Lalon unmasked discrimination, antagonism and dogmatic nature of popular religions. At the same time, his effort was to spread a liberal view of religion that would enable one to be free from dogmas and liberate people to reach the supreme. Lalon liberates religion from the stratagem of society and polity. During the British-India, scholars, social thinkers and reformers from Bengal acknowledged the humanist

[6] Translated from Bengali by the authors from *Choudhury* (2008).
[7] Translated from Bengali by Sudipto Chatterjee; https://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/lalon_sudipto2.html (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

essence and progressive aspects of Lalon's philosophy. Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned poet and philosopher and many his contemporaries deemed Lalon's ideas distinct from the Western modern liberalism (Togawa 2016). This stimulus towards the pluralistic and harmonious sense of religion have been shaping up the collective conscience for a humanist, forward-looking society. That sensitivity and sympathy, arguably Lalon sensitivity, helped to constitute the Bengali nationalism, a prominent engine behind the idea of liberation from Pakistan, a nation state formed along religio-communal lines in 1947.

The ethos (and, arguably, pathos) of Bengali nationalism underpinning the idea of Bangladesh emphasized linguistic and cultural expressions of Bengali (Chowdhury 2007). The cultural forces since the initiation of the language movement in the then East Pakistan expressed the essence of secularism that the newborn state, Bangladesh, conceived as one of the fundamental principles. However, soon after the assassination of the prime leader of the Bangladeshi Liberation War, Sheikh Mujib, the religion-based politics came to the fore.

The idea of a secular Bangladesh was a prime suspect, and an undesirable spirit to be thrown away. With the development of religion based politics, the cultural field of the country was a site of restrictions and censure. The Baul culture had to face fierce oppression too (Togawa 2015). There is another side of the story of Liberation War that underlines the presence of the Bengali Muslim support for Pakistani army. In spite of the idea of Bengali nationalism as a unifying force, the Bengali Muslims sympathised with the Islamic appeals of Pakistan and 'connived' with army (Guhathakurta and Schendel 2013; Schendel 2009; Uddin 2006).

The formation of paramilitary forces, committees for peace-keeping in the then East Pakistan and strong stand of the Islamic political groups led by the Jamaat-e-Islam for unified Pakistan has been dubbed as misdeeds. Even now, Bangladesh is uncomfortable with some of the historical evidences of the connivance and collaboration of the handful of Bangladeshi Muslims. A report on the findings of the 'People's Inquiry Commission' on the activities of the War Criminals and the collaborators in 1971 confirms that there was propaganda by the Jamaat leaders to introduce

Pakistan as a sacred land for the Muslims and the home for the Global-Islam[8]. Many historical literatures, films and theatres[9] depict the anxiety of the non-partisan pious Muslims to support or not, the Liberation War. Many of these popular culture materials ephasise the dilemma of Muslims given the instances of rape and atrocity by the Bengali collaborators. Bringing the collaborators under trial remains vital in the post-independence scenario.

This is hitehrto unfinished task to identify the allies of Pakistan and hence the blame-game of labelling each other becomes crucial in the contemporary politics. Thus, it is not hard to assume the complex terrain on which Lalon sensitivity had to struggle. It is also not very far fetched that radical Islam found its space during the heydays of Bengali nationalism.

In continuity with the contradictions, a group of radical Islamists is still spreading hatred and hostility towards the Baul culture. Indeed, the communal forces of the society, qua puritanical religiosity prevailed during the colonial period when Lalon began spreading his syncretic form of Baul religion.

Born into a Hindu family and trained by a Muslim master Lalon had brought a critical outlook towards the established religions. As he asserted,

> The Hindus and Muslims
> are sundered into two.
> The Muslims aspire
> To their particular heaven
> Named Behest
> And the Hindus dwell on theirs
> Called svarga.
> Both these words.
> Like formal gates,

[8] The people's Inquiry Commission Report has been published by the *Committee of Resisting Killers and Collaborators of '71* in 1994, and can be accessed in the Liberation War e-Archive:
file:///F:/Papers/Secular%20Bangladesh%20lalon/People_s%20Inquiry%20Commission.pdf (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

[9] For instance, one could refer to Nilima Ibrahim's book *Ami Birangana Bolci* (The Voices of War Heroines), the play by Syed Shamsul Haq *Payer Awaj Paoa Jay* directed by Abdullah Al Mamun and staged since 1975, and the drama film titled *Matir Moyna* (*The Clay Bird*) 2002 directed by Tareque Masud. The trope of popular culture can be further enriched, and we have only named a few exceptionally commendable works.

Lifeless.
Who cares for them […][10]

While on the one hand, this blend of Sufism and Vaisnavism started attracting people, the reactionaries from both Hindu and Islam were not sitting back silently. Even, in the intellectual arena of 19th century Bengal the question of Lalon's religious identity became crucial. There were efforts to prove him a Muslim in the colonial period while today the Islamic scholars and Islamic leaders of Bangladesh blame him as an atheist and *Kafir* (disbeliever)[11].

In today's Bangladesh, Islamist speakers, leaders and scholars are vocal against the cultural practices of Baul and Lalon's philosophy. The Islamic groups dispute the Baul tradition as un-Islamic and polluting the devotees of Islam. The targeted attack and atrocities against the Bauls and considering Fakir Lalon as an enemy of Muslims in the modern Bangladesh show the Islamic intolerance in contemporary Bangladesh.[12] The aspiration and endeavors toward a true-Islamic society composed of *mumin-Musalmans* shatters the progressive aspiration of a culturally defined Bengali society. Secularism thus becomes an allegedly anti-religious idea in Bangladeshi commonsense.

However, the proponents of secularism had propounded *Dharma-Nirapekhhata* (an equal attitude to all religion without any prejudices) which did not mean *Dharma-Hinata* (without religion). While the commonsense would be oblivious of the deeper nuances of secularism, society would witness deepening of communal cleavage. One can certainly raise a question: why is secularism doubted as non-religious or at times anti-religious? To

[10] Bhattacharya 1969: 86.
[11] Masahiki Togawa (2016) examines how in 1940 the debate on Lalon's family religion started. He argues that the debate was closely related to the politics of colonialism and partition of India..there are many instances of hate speech terming Lalon as atheist, see for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N1mcyUIJ-8 (Last accessed on 28 January 2018).
[12] Atrocities against the Baul fakirs are frequently reported. The Islamic groups brought out a protest in 2008 demanding the removal of a set of sculpture which commemorated Baul singers in Dhaka. The protest was successful. See http://www.sacw.net/article156.html (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

ponder, it is required to examine the role of religion, particularly the multiple formations and influence of Islam in today's Bangladesh.

Islam and Secularism: History, Practice and Nation-building

Bengal came under Muslim rule in the 13th century and continued till the conquest of colonial. The British rule however did not dent the spread of Islam, much to the credit of the missionaries, mainly the Sufis (Ahmed 1981, Uddin 2006). It was not such a success during the Muslim rule prior to the British, as far as the popularity of Islam and conversion are concerned. However, the consistent empire and prolonged Islamic regime had a considerable influence in shaping the cultural worldview of the region. The Islam in Bengal is thus not an imported one, but a blend of the local practices, Sufi's instructions and rulers' politico-economic guidance. In the initial days, one of the major tensions around Islam was centred on the conflict between elites and marginal people.

As assumed by Uddin (2006), the Muslims from a petty religious class, 'petty religious gentry', had a significant role in spreading Islam in a more practical ways. There had been a conflict between the *Ashrafs,* cultural and linguistic elite, and the petty religious class. The elite Muslims' discomfort with the localised practice and enactment of Islam was in the backdrop of the attempts to guide and educate the Bengali Muslims for a true Islam. In ultimate analysis, however, the historical accounts indicate the rise of Bengali-Muslim culture as a consequence of the interaction between the borrowed Islam and rich linguistic-cultural heritage of Bengal[13].

The 19th-century Islamic reform movements had a great contribution to complicate the boundaries between religion and politics. Particularly in the socio-economic life of the Bengali Muslim community the questions of power, progress, dignity became crucial. Thus the political right and religious identity came into force together. From that point, the political expression and agenda of the religious community took a particular shape determining the character of nation state in the 20th century. But, it is difficult to claim that the interaction between religious practice and political

[13] For further details see Ahmed 2001 and Uddin 2006.

actions in the 19th century was a case of exploiting Islam and abuse of religion for the political agenda. One would rather look at the continuous effort of the external forces to keep the Bengali Muslims on the right track of Islam that was accompanied by the local elites who championed the religious nationalism. These collective forces were successful to stimulate the aspiration of the Bengali Muslims to accredit the unity and fraternity of the commonness in religious identity. This is the complicated ground where one could possibly try examining the moment of political interests superseding the religious practice and prospects.

The secularism, a contested idea in the political climate of Bangladesh, has an intense as well as a complex relation with the nation-building process. The proliferation of 'Bengaliness' with the linguistic and cultural distinction in opposition to the communal formation of Pakistan remains a central aspect for the pro-secularism forces. There is a dearth of comprehensive engagement with the socio-historical formation of the Bengali Muslim and transformation of Bengali Muslim culture to endure the secularism. One may try tracing the footprints of secularism in the pre-modern as well as pre-colonial literary and cultural context. But, there is risk of confusing the peaceful co-existence and fluid cultural traits as stately definition of secularism. For, the variety of secularism that emerges from precolonial textual tradition does not amount to state version of secularism, neutrality toward religions. Nevertheless, the shared practices in the multiple layers of popular religious traditions with the commonness in rites and rituals can be actualized as the base for constituting the Bengali culture that seeks to present a liberal society. On this note, it is imperative to state that the construction of Bengali identity on which the Bangladeshi nation-state has been established is exceptionally complex given its dramatic routs, continuous infusion by the external elements, the formation of religious communities and multiplicity of cultural expressions.

Scholars have identified the advocates of secularism as radical seculars and moderate seculars, both interested in anti-Pakistan struggle and aspiration of the Bengali-speaking people of the then East-Pakistan to be

liberated from religiously formed state oppression[14]. From 1947 to 1971, there are several events that denounced the exploitation of Pakistani rule. It was to overthrow the dominance of Islam that triggered the sense of 'Bengaliness' as a unifying stimulus for autonomy and liberty. In 1971, after the birth of Bangladesh, the enactment of secularism as one of the state principles was primarily a corrective attempt in contrast to its enemy-state Pakistan. It further resisted the communal wave in the newborn nation.

The thinkers and political elites along with cultural activists from the freedom movement anticipated the rise of religious forces and communal expressions. Thus they realized the need to manoeuvre the project of secularism[15]. The inaugural political regime got a little opportunity in making the project instrumental due to its limited timespan and other constraints. The regime of Sheikh Mujib was caught up with the priority to bring economic stability, handle political resistances and the natural as well as social disaster due to flood and famine[16].

The secularism project was, gradually sidelined, and then abandoned, after the assassination of the leading architect of Bangladesh in 1975.

Politics and Religion: Historically, Contemporary Hysteria

The birth of Bangladesh promised a scheme of keeping politics separate from religion. But that scheme was dropped with the arrival of military rules, which embraced Islam as a strategic imperative for the political survival and stability. The Islamic politics was brought back to the center of state activities. The ban over the religion-based political parties was withdrawn in the military-dominated rule (1975-1990). The General Ziaur Rahman's regime, the first military ruler in that era, faced violent opposition within the military that included some organised coups. To reach out to the public and gain political legitimacy he had no options left other than adapting Islam-based politics. The pro-secularism stance and liberal ideology was deemed suitable for the meek political parties of Bangladesh (Majumder 2016, Riaz 2008). Zia also formed a political party in 1977

[14] See Majumder 2016.
[15] Anwar 1973.
[16] Ahmed (1983) referred in Majumder (2016).

named as BNP- Bangladesh Nationalist Party that came back in power after the collapse of military dictatorship in 1990 and promoted Bangladesh as a moderate Islamic country. As evident, a new political milieu was ushered in with the political Islam ruling higher than ever before in public lives. This party continued the legacy of allying with the anti-secular political fronts which are mainly associated with the Islam based politics. During the regime of Ziaur Rahman, secularism was erased from the constitution and *Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim* (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) was inserted at the top of the Preamble. After his assassination, the then army chief general Hussain Muhammad Ershad came into the power and continued amending the constitution to rule the nation in a pro-Islamic way.

In 1988 the constitution was amended to establish Islam as a state religion of Bangladesh. The military dictator duo, Zia and Ershad successfully expressed their affection towards the pro-Islamic politics and contributed in bringing the religion back into the politics, headlong. The abandonment of secularism project of Bangladesh by bringing Islam into the politics was constantly challenged by the pro-secular, liberal and progressive fronts who claimed themselves as the forces of pro-Liberation War. Some of these repercussions of the ideological and practical conflicts between the pro and anti-secular fronts accelerated the political windmills of representative democracy in Bangladesh in the Post 1990s[17].

While there was barely any initiative to patronise the secularism project, the Islamic expression of the state sought to pander to the religious sentiments. One major area is education, as it is one of the dominant ideological state apparatus (ISA)[18] that shapes the subjects in a non-repressive, non-violent ways with the values and ideologies. To take forward, secularism and socialism, the basic state principles in 1972 version of the constitution of Bangladesh, oriented the ideological state apparatus of education and culture in a manner most suitable for the envisioned nation building. It was pertinent for the state to disseminate the essence of equity,

[17] The era of representative democracy can be denoted from 1991 to till date including a disruption for two years of military backed caretaker government (2006-2008).
[18] For more see Althusser 1971.

liberal ideology and secular worldview to cultivate the national consciousness in continuity with the promises made during the liberation War. But, the statistics and facts show that the rulers employed the educational ISA for religious purposes, in order to usher in a variety of religious-communal politics.

Ali Riaz (2008) shows that in addition to the four archetype *Madrasah*s[19] (traditional Islamic educational institutes), there emerged *Ahle Hadith madrasah* in the late 1980s with more conservative and strong political outlook. The education ministry of Bangladesh extended the legitimacy to the Islamic education by institutionalising the Directorate of Madrasah Education in 1977, and in 1998, the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board was established. Since the birth of Bangladesh, the growth of Madrasah education is phenomenal and the flow of student enrolment, national and global support, finance and multiple forms of patronisation has been uninterrupted (Barkat et. al 2011, Riaz 2008).

There are empirical studies that claim that the Madrasahs are also alleged hideouts for the Islamic extremist and terrorist organisations (ibid.). Indeed, this need not be generalized to target all such religious educational institutions. There must be many operating with educational objectives in the service of nation and society. But then, over a period of time, the widespread Islamic education thwarted the pro-secular forces in society. The political space too began to shrink rapidly as anything secular became a social suspect. A moment of catharsis was much needed for the fragmented secular forces to synergize on socio-political front.

In 2013, a youth-driven social mobilisation enabled the pro-secular forces to join hands and put across their demand- fulfill the promise to create a secular Bangladesh. Through the protest, popularly known as *Shahbag Movement,* the secular forces demanded death penalty for the war criminals of 1971. It articulated the call for marking a boundary between the political affairs of the state and religion. Opening up the platform for the pro-secular individuals and groups, the protestors urged for banning the

[19] *Aliya Madrasah* (Government supported), *Qwami Madrasah* (Deoband style private institutes), *Hafizia/Furkania Madrasah* (pre-primary Quran learning) and *Nurani Madrasah* (Maktabs for basic Islamic knowledge).

Islam-based politics and revert the nation to the secular goal. However, soon after the uprise of Shahbag, the nation could realise the forceful tide of anti-secularism. The youth protest was disputed as an anti-religious platform and the bloggers who drove the movement were termed as atheists by the adversaries. The adversary front was composed of Islamic political parties and groups; the *Hefazat-e-Islam* came up with an intensive action plan against the Shahbag protestors. They demanded the punishment of the Shahbag youths who, according to them, humiliated Islam by defaming the prophet Muhammad. In reaction to the Shahbag and some of the steps taken by the government which were disputed as anti-Islamic by the Islamic political parties, the *Hefazat-e-Islam* mobilized muslim Bangladeshi populace countywide.

In May 2013, a massive crowd composed of Islamic activists, ordinary believers and youths from madrasahs occupied the streets of capital town Dhaka. The people without a professed political agenda were convinced that the Islam is under threat and the state is patronising anti-Islamic activities. The gathering depicted secular stance as the real source of anxiety. The thirteen point demand made by the *Hefazat-e-Islam* included reinstalling the 'absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' in the constitution as one of the fundamental principle. This demand was premised on the allegation that the Awami League-led alliance government in 2011 had restored the word secular in the constitution following a judicial verdict in 2010. *Hefazat* systematically mobilized support in the street to have secular removed. And it also demanded capital punishment to the anti-Muslim campaigners and anti-Islamists, compulsory Islamic education in the primary to higher secondary level and sought ban on all kinds of 'un-Islamic' activities[20]. This shows the conquest of the Islamic socio-political forces over the secular counterparts, and the eventual surrender of state to the political Islamic injunctions in contemporary Bangladesh.

Amidst Shahbag protest and orchestrated appearance of the pro-secular champions, there was a continuous killing of bloggers and online activists who claimed to be secular and liberal. The series of gruesome killing of the

[20] http://www.thedailystar.net/news/hefajat-demands (Last accessed on 29 January 2018).

progressive and secular writers, publishers and bloggers bring back the issue of limit, in the Lalon land of immense possibilities. The imposed limit on writing blogs, publishing books and expressing the viewpoints has confirmed the silencing of freethinking. The killing of bloggers and life-threatening instances that began in 2013 took a ferocious character in 2015 when six murders were reported. Many failed or partially successful attempts to murder were reported too.

In 2015 and 2016 virulent intolerance surfaced in the form of attacks on the *Shia* and *Ahmediya* Mosque, killing of Christian priest, university professor and LGBT rights activist[21]. In the row of killing bloggers and intolerance from religious extremists, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh warned the writers of dire consequences if they did not observe the limit, and did not stay away from hurting religious sentiment in the name of free thinking. Ironical enough, the state had taken side with the murderous virulence of the Islamic politics. Suggesting to maintain a decency the Prime Minister declared that the government would not take any responsibility if such 'uncivilized attitude' (of free thinking) led to any unpleasant consequences[22].

The bloggers and progressive writers-activists disputed the statement of the Prime Minister as a way of legitimizing the killings and growing intolerance in the name of religion[23]. The limits were drawn by the politico-religious groups and state. The bloggers and online activists raised their concern and complained about the section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act - 2006 (amended in 2013)[24]. According to them, this can be imposed and abused by the government to punish and jail anybody on the ground of 'disrupting the law and order of

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[21] See for further details: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34966842 and http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34517434 (Both were last accessed in 29 January 2018).

[22] See http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/writing-against-religion-wont-be-tolerated-1209571; https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2015/11/08/pm-hasina-asks-all-to-avoid-hurting-religious-sentiments (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

[23] https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-bloggers-fear-threat-from-the-state/2960088.html. (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

[24] http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/bangladesh-ict-act-the-trap-section-of-57-1429336 (Last accessed on 6 February 2018).

the country' by publishing something online that hurt the religious sentiment, prejudice the image of the state or person[25].

The murder of writers by the extremists and detainment of the bloggers by law enforcement bodies since the Shahbag Movement in 2013 hinted the shrinking of freedom of expression. The control of and limit on the freedom of expression in the politico-religious context of contemporary Bangladesh continued by banning the 'controversial' books related to Islam. This also amounted to the shutting down of book stalls that allegedly indulged in 'hurting religious sentiments' at the national book fair, popularly known as *Ekushey Boi Mela*, in 2015, 2016 and 2017[26].

To keep the focus on the contemporary context, it is imperative to take account of the religious intolerance towards the literary practices in modern Bangladesh that includes attacks on writers in every decade who expressed their liberal thoughts earned the ominous epithet, offender of Islam. There is a suggestive sequence of attacks against Taslima Nasrin and poet Shamsur Rahman in the 1990s, Humayun Azad in 2004 and in 2015, science writer Abhijit Roy along with many bloggers-publishers. This has been the premise for the progressive and liberal Bangladeshis to get alarmed about deteriorating socio-cultural security. Anyone with a different perspective runs the risk of loosing life in such a circumstance. The complex and gloomy socio-political climate may render one pessimistic about the interface of religion and politics? This is not far fetched in the larger scenario in South Asia.

One finds it difficult, as does Vasudha Dalmia, the noted cultural historian, to be a 'Hindu' (might read Muslim in this context) and progressive at once[27]. One finds it difficult in the same stretch of argument, to be Muslim and progressive in contemporary Bangladesh. Dalmia further pointed out the tendency of the secular front allowing a specific group to

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[25] http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/92908 (Last accessed in 29 January 2018).

[26] http://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/ekushey-book-fair-publisher-banned-stance-against-academy-decision-1336045; http://www.newagebd.net/article/5631/bangla-academy-bans-shraban-prakashani-four-others-in-ekushey-book-fair (Both were last accessed in 29 January 2018).

[27] See the response of Dalmia in Pathak 2018: 61-63.

represent the whole religious community (Hindus/Muslims)[28]. This allows us to take a note of the possibility of exceptions- one can be a Hindu and yet not virulent nationalist. And likewise, one need not be a conservative political Islamist though being a devout Muslim. Thus, one ought to be looking beyond the narrow formulations that secular fronts can easily deliver.

Conclusions, Thus Far!

What we have arrived at in this essay is, to put it summarily- appearance, disappearance and reappearance of secularism in the constitutional and political life of Bangladesh. The present Awami League-led alliance government took the credit of bringing back secularism in the constitution after three decades. The Shahbag movement, as it is termed in popular banters, offered a convenient platform to the pro-Liberation qua secularism individuals and they put across collective demands to the government. But, the socio-political circumstances rendered secularism as anti-religion and at times atheist. The idea of secularism defined as *dharmanirapekkhata* makes little sense for the masses in everyday life. The term secularism has become equivalent of *dharmahinata*[29].

In this context, it is irresistible to think that secularism ought to ensure three major aspects: the right to religion, state's neutrality towards all the religions, and optimal separation of religion from polity. But, political parties rivaling to prove their loyalty to religious authority have only served the Islamist groups[30]. The textual secularism of Bangladesh has been elusive as appearing and disappearing in the text of the constitution. The

[28] Ibidem.

[29] The tendency of perceiving the secularism as atheism could be traced in the Bengali socio-political context as Bhattacharyya (1983) refers Faruqi (1969) that, many Muslim minds would consider the meaning of *Dharmanirapekkhata* as what its Urdu analogue *ghayr mnazhabi* means contradictory to religion or irreligious.

[30] The current prime minister of Bangladesh fulfilled the demand of Islamic groups and commanded removing a sculpture of Lady Justice that was disputed as Un-Islamic. The government claiming as pro-secular removed 17 poems from textbooks and added Islamic symbols abiding the demands of religious forces. See https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21722858-public-statuary-paying-price-bangladeshs-government-pandering-islamist-zealots (Last accessed in 8 February 2018).

prime minister's assurance to run the county as per the *Madinah Charter* terming Bangladesh as a Muslim majority county, and at the same time, asserting *dharma jar jar, rashtro sabar* (Religion is for Individuals, The State is for all) adds layers to the elusive secularism. Moreover, it is imperative to take into consideration the attempt of the same government to bring the war criminals under trial. Thus there is evident paardox the state exhibits in Bangladesh.

The potency of the paradox is emphatic in the context of Lalon land with an inherent sensitivity toward religious-communal divides. One ought to mention that Lalon sensitivity is dimmed in front of nationalist Bengali and Bengali-Muslim sensitivity, as it were. The politically informed Bengali-Muslim sensitivity asserts its discomfort about the cultural features that a secular Bangladesh would seek to promote. Any sign of religio-cultural practices of the Hindus, which has a lineage to the colonial and pre-colonial period, is dubbed as undesirable.

In contemporary Bangladesh, Muslim Bengali sensitivity attempts to dispute the generic Bengali culture as *Hinduani* (Hinduaised) culture, ill-informed about the historical lineage of Bangladesh. Seeking for such a distinction for the Bengalis of Bangladesh, this particular variety of religious-cultural sensitivity tends to forget that people reside a civilizational whome rather than a cartographic fragment. This has been strengthened by variety of vested interests, such as global Islam with a rigid idea of Muslim *Umma*[31]. The grand-narrative of Bengali sensitivity makes cameo entries in the state orchestrations, post card imagining of Bangladesh, and tourism industry and any account of lustful development in Bangladesh. The political battle between Urdu and Bengali underpinning the Bengali sensitive during the Liberation struggle is too thin a wave to ride on. Instead, what rules the roost is an irreparable impediment to the Lalon sensitivity.

As discussed at the outset of the essay, the Lalon's land is a premise of religious-cultural ideal, characterized by liberal and forward-looking values. As such, it would have been more conducive for the democratic ethos in

[31] See Uddin 2006: 155-178.

Bangladesh. It would have been enabling for the freedom of expression and in surpassing the battle over culture and identity. Having undertaken a journey through ironies and anomalies, in historical and contemporary milieu, this essay underlines a pessimistic note as it shows the threat and atrocities against the Lalon sensitivity. There have been instances of burgeoning attacks on the followers of Lalon, more so since 2008. There was a bizarre instance of Islamic organisations staging protest to demand the removal of five sculptures of Baul near Dhaka international airport.[32] The sculptures were removed, but the battle between the religious and secular fronts continued. The secular bodies demanded the circle to be named as *Lalon Square*, and the Islamic groups sought for the installation of a *Hajj Minar* (A tower commemorating the *Hajj*). A neutral sculpture titled *Dibbyadarshi – Shargiya Gyaner Mashal* (*Divine Sighted - The Flame of the Heavenly Knowledge*) came into existence to resolve the apparent conflict. But the undercurrents of the battle over culture and religious identities, coupled with political ideologies, remains hitherto unresolved.

The religious fronts continue to wage war against the secular-liberal cultural forces in Bangladesh. Ironically, the so-called secular government removed Lalon's poem along with that of Tagore and others from the school textbooks in 2017 in response to the demands of Hefazat-e-Islam[33]. The attempt frustrated the pro-secular intelligentsia. The enigmatic interface between the religion and culture, resulting into the triumph of religio-political forces, persists with the rant of 'save the Islam'. In this wake one can only sit in prayer and long to see attempts to innovate the ideas and values of Lalon beyond the duel of secular and Islamic in Bangladesh. And we wish to hear, more promising augury of wish fulfilment - Amen!

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[32] http://2005-09.newenglishreview.org/blog_direct_link.cfm/blog_id/17593/Sculptures-Removed-from-Bangladesh-Airport-After-Muslim-Protests (Last accessed on 17 February 2018); http://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-59639 (Last accessed on 17 February 2018).

[33] http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/07/21/corrections-no-changes-school-textbooks/ (Last accessed on 17 February 2018).

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Rituals, State and Legitimacy: A Study in the Context of Political Power Shifts in Nepal

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Abstract: Culturally significant rituals whether they are conducted in Kumari Ghar (abode of the virgin goddess) of Kathmandu or in Ram Janaki Mandir of Janakpur among others, offer roles for the state head of Nepal to perform. With the 2006 peoples' uprising leading to the declaration of Nepal as a republican state in 2008, such rituals have become sites of contestation for legitimacy between the former king and the president. The first president of the Republic of Nepal, a Madhesi intellectual and the erstwhile senior Nepali statesman, Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, and the second president Ms. Bidhya Devi Bhandari, a widow of the late Communist leader and a senior politician herself, performed rituals that were considered sole prerogatives of the Hindu monarchs for centuries. It is expected of the future Presidents and Prime Ministers to have their own castes, religions and gender in Nepal too. But the fact that rituals need to be given continuity and the state heads need to participate in them for the sake of cultural legitimacy is bound to promote liberal and pragmatic notion of rituals in Nepal. This sociocultural reality of Nepal, the paper argues, demonstrates important facets of rituals that they may not be as strict and closed as they were in religious practices.

Keywords: Hindu monarchy, cultural legitimacy, state, religious rituals, moral, Nepali politics.

Culturally significant rituals whether they are conducted in Kumari Ghar (abode of the virgin goddess) of Kathmandu or in Ram Janaki Mandir of Janakpur among others, offer roles for the state head of Nepal to perform.

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With the 2006 peoples' uprising leading to the declaration of Nepal as a republican state in 2008, such rituals have become sites of contestation for legitimacy between and among the former king, the president and common people. The first president of the Republic of Nepal, a Madhesi intellectual and the erstwhile senior Nepali statesman, Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, and the second president Ms. Bidhya Devi Bhandari, a widow of the late Communist leader Madan Bhandari, and a senior politician herself, performed rituals that were considered the sole prerogatives of the Hindu monarchs for centuries. Media and the public reported and watched as well as participated on these occasions with great interest and curiosity. The 'New Nepal' has opened up very different power trajectories for the future Presidents and Prime Ministers irrespective of their castes, religions and gender. But the fact that rituals need to be given continuity and the state heads need to participate in them for the sake of cultural legitimacy is bound to promote liberal and pragmatic notion of rituals in Nepal.

This socio-cultural reality of Nepal, the paper argues, demonstrates some important facets of rituals - they may not be as strict and closed as they are often thought about. Nor can they be taken as thoroughly open since much depends upon the policies that the state lives by. Rituals can also be used to create gaps. But the fact that relationship needs to be mended keeps on reminding both the parties the exigency of maintaining moral, political and cultural order in the communities and beyond. Thus the heads of the state need to take and handle rituals carefully.

Rituals and Republic State

Nepal was rigorously rehearsing to be a republic state during the years 2006-2008. Political protagonists of different generations and ideological backgrounds were working on the scripts with a republican texture of the nation. A series of political and constitutional rituals were being set out only to be violated next moment. Though often hailed as the historical moment and a fast changing phase in the history of this nation, the times occasionally seemed mundane and fixed, as it were. For a researcher of performance cultures of the Kathmandu Valley, the following questions would sound pertinent then:

> Will these phenomenal tremors in politics and emotions of the Nepali people bring any changes in traditional performance culture? What will happen to the roles performed by the king as head of state on cultural events and performances in Nepal, especially in the Kathmandu Valley since many cultural performances here demand his ceremonial presence? Are the traditional communities and committees formed to look after such cultural events and performances prepared to explore out alternatives? Will the absence of the king-protagonist make any difference for such performances? (Rijal, 2007:7).

Such questions were prominent then because the last Shah king of Nepal, Gyanendra Bir Bikram was trying his best to secure his or 'Hindu king's' space in the psycho-cultural sphere of the country. In the capacity of the last bastion of the still functioning Shah dynasty, he desperately tried to secure space for him and his progeny. He kept on participating on the annual Shivaratri pooja held on the premise of Pashupatinath temple. Though the then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala observed the *bhoto jatra* (the festival of vest) of 2006, Gyanendra was still the king and resided in the Narayanhiti palace. Disgruntled, as it were, he offered a series of rituals including the famous *pancha bali* ritual at Dakshinkali temple, located in Southwest point of the Valley. Deities seemed to have ignored him, as it were, this time round too.

The 21 July 2008 meeting of the Constitution Assembly elected Dr. Ram Baran Yadav as the first President of the Republic of Nepal. Right after a few days of his premiership, an official letter from Lalitpur District Administration Office through the Home Ministry was sent to Koirala with a request to observe the *bhoto jatra* during the Rato Machchhindranath Rath Yatra on 26 July.

For the first time, the President was offered a ritual space often taken by the former kings during the bhoto as well as other ritually important jatras of the Valley. Among other jatras, the Indra Jatra, and particularly its last day known as Kumari pooja bears a significant value as the state head is ritually required to receive especial tika and blessing from the Goddess Kumari. As the last of the Shah kings, Gyanendra tried his best to keep intact the relationship between the kings and the blessing of the Kumari, 'a

durable icon of Nepali culture and religion' even after 2008 the year monarchy was abolished. So much so that he 'invited all the former living goddesses to his residence to honor them' (Toffin, 2013: 71) in 2010.

Given that the bottom line of the 2006 People's Uprising called under the leadership of Seven Major Political Parties Alliance and Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) that had been waging 'People's War' from 1996 was to make the Nepal a Republic State. Ironically Gyanendra was supposed to have helped the country prepare for the republic state since he went on making blunders one after another. Himself responsible for the tragic predicament he was to go through after 2006, he was seen fighting a loosing battle. With no hope at horizon, he set out to perform a series of pooja and rituals. Capturing Gyanendra's this mode of fall, Alistair Scrutton for *The Reuters* writes,

> King Gyanendra had appeared at a temple to worship the Hindu god of destruction. It was the kind of ritual that once had Nepalis in awe, but now the talking point form once reverential subjects was whether or not their monarch would be stoned (17 March 2008).

Gyanendra tried the Vijaya Dashami of 2006 and later years to reassert his persona as the king. Vijaya Dashami, also popularly known as Dashain, no doubt is the biggest as well as ritually significant festival of the Hindus. At Narayanhiti Palace in 2006 and 2007 and then Nirwal Niwas, his residency at Maharajganj, he kept on offering tika to the visitors who mainly comprised of former Royal Palace staffs and staunch royalists. Anne T. Mocko calls it 'the new rival tika tradition' (2016: 180). The number of such blessing takers from Gyanendra on Vijaya Dashami has dwindled down over the years whereas the same day the Sital Niwas, the official residence of the President becomes agog with commoners and dignitaries. Gyanendra is no longer the rival to the President of Republic Nepal now.

Description of a particular historical event is in order. Prithvi Naryan Shah, the founder of the Shah dynasty in Nepal, and also the maker of modern Nepal conquered the then Kathmandu, one of the three small kingdoms from the Valley on 25 September 1768. Given that the historical day was also the occasion of Kumari Jatra that year, Jaya Prakash Malla,

the last Malla king of Kathmandu was 'unable to muster his forces from among the celebrating tipsy subjects, fled to Patan'. So much so that Shah, the conqueror 'magnanimously ordered the celebration to continue' and as part of the ritual, the Living Goddess Kumari 'placed a red tika blessing' (Anderson, 2010: 135) on his forehead. The indigenous communities who had their kingdoms lost to Prithvi Narayan Shah critique him in the post 2006 political context of Nepal. Many hesitate to call him the unifier of modern Nepal. Activists and academics believe that Shah had brutally killed many Newar citizens from the Valley during the wars. But the fact that rituals initiated and nurtured by the Newars have been recognized by the state of latter times makes one believe that kingdoms may rise and fall but some rituals continue to retain their power and status. Gone were the Malla kings, so are the Shah kings. But the chariot of Indra Jatra keeps on rolling on the precise date along the precise lanes. At the right time and place do arrive the state heads of the Republic of Nepal, foreign diplomats and dignitaries to take the *darshan* of and blessings from the Goddess Kumari. The rituals and jatras of Newars have survived all kinds of political changes.

Now back to the *bhoto jatra*. Dr. Ram Baran Yadav's participation in the *bhoto jatra* in 2008 can be taken as a culturally and psychologically significant event that replaced not only the role that the formers kings had occupied but also minimized the possible greater spaces that Nepal's rising ultra left force would take. As capturing political power and playing with the conundrum of Nepal had been going on during these years, a senior political scientist Lok Raj Baral wrote,

> […] the traditional authoritarian background and oscillating strategies and tactics of both old and new parties have invariably overshadowed the institutional development in the country (2012:5).

Republic Nepal's President's new ritual identity during the ritually important jatras provided a sense of institutional continuity in the changed social and political context of Nepal. The royalists naturally favored for minor changes whereas the radical left parties sought for overhauling the changes at all levels of the state machinery. On top of that, Nepal

Communist Party (Maoist) became the largest party in the election of the Constituent Assembly held in 2008. The former head of guerrillas Pushpa Kamal Dahal was elected as the Prime Minister. His comrade Baburam Bhattarai became the finance minister. Right after his budget speech, Bhattarai decided to stop the financial support that the state had been providing to cover the expenses of feasts and festivities held during the Kumari pooja at Kumari Ghar in 2008. Since this pooja is taken as culturally and ritually very significant by the Newars, the finance minister's decision was taken as a breach in the existing relationship between state and the Kumari Ghar.

This decision was reverted after the custodians of the pooja committee protested. Similarly, by the end of 2008, the Prime Minister office appointed a Sanskrit scholar Bishnu Prasad Dahal as the main priest of Pashupatinath temple replacing the tradition of Bhandaries or the main priests, who originally belong to the Southern states of India. Amid huge tensions, the Supreme Court reversed the decision. Rituals and ritually important temples felt the political tremors of the times. Amid these jolts between and among the political leadership of liberal and radical ideological orders, Gyanendra, the old order of power, and the Republic Nepal's first President, the *bhoto jatra* reached to its grand finale giving a sense of smooth political and cultural transition that Nepal went through during the years.

Political Shifts in the Valley of Rituals

Nepal was acknowledged as the only Hindu Kingdom in the world after the British Empire had colonized the kingdoms of the then India. It remained more so when the Republic of India declared itself a secular modern nation state. Nepal's rituals, architectures and cultural ambience as such as were regarded as a 'pond' that would help the foreign anthropologists and explorers to understand the vastness of cultural 'ocean' that India represented to them. Sylvan Levi, the French scholar visited Nepal by the end of the nineteenth century with a hypothesis that the Kathmandu Valley would be a wonderful field visit to understand and interpret the complex histories, arts and cultures of India (2005: 25). He believed that

anyone making a serious study of India's complex histories and cultures was prone to commit mistake without studying the arts and cultures of the Valley. Thus the Valley provided a solution to him and Indic studies wallahs. Though Levi was aware of the fact that Nepal is a multicultural and multilingual country, his stay in Kathmandu brought him in close contact with the performance cultures of the Kathmandu Valley.

The Valley and its inhabitants Newars are known for giving continuity for jatras and rituals of Hindu order for ages. The Newar kings were known for the ritual identity they tried to live and rule by. One or the other Newar king is known for either instilling new rituals or magnifying the older ones. One of the Shiva Deva clan kings from the early medieval period was supposed to have introduced the Bisket Jatra of Bhaktapur. Another Newar king from the Malla dynasty (10^{th} to 18^{th} century), Gunakamdeva was supposed to have introduced the Indra Jatra of Kathmandu. Similarly, the Malla king from Patan, Narendra Dev was supposed to have started the Rato Machchhindranath and *bhoto jatra*. The scale of jatras and temples the Malla kings installed and promoted during the Malla period in the Valley makes one believe that probably the Malla kings used the very jatras and rituals to legitimize and prolong their power. To borrow Geertz's term, the Malla kings too tried to project and 'fuse' their 'spiritual excellence' and 'political eminence' (1973: 223). Towns set by the Newars and their kings in the Valley are known for the kinds of rituals and festivals they hold annually or periodically. For example, Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu, the three major towns of the Valley are famous for Bisket, Rato Machchhendranath and Indra Jatra respectively.

> The annual calendar provides quite a number of occasions to celebrate rituals of renewal on a grand scale. The urban space is designed to serve as a stage for the collective enactment of performative acts (Gutschow, 2011: 86).

Major temples located in these towns remain agog with rituals throughout the year. Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, someone who has extensively written on architectures and jatras of the Valley regards the Newar towns as 'the abodes of gods'. He further writes that the gods of the Newars 'do not

always live inside their temples' but do

> [...] come out to renew their relations with humans, just as humans, as believers, visit the gods in their temples. Either way, for the residents of Kathmandu, the result is joy and festivals (2002: 9).

Since the Valley has remained the capital of small kingdoms of the Mall period, the Shah period (1768-2008) and now the Republic Nepal, one can imagine the scale of political changes it has gone through so far. Such changes and transformations are important because major rituals and jatras of the Valley require participation from the head of the state. Regarding the nexus between the state and ritually important performances that has come to settle down as cultural and political norms, playwright Abhi Subedi writes that despite the 'hostile meddling by the state' and the 'political occupations and usurpation' that 'introduced subversions', the performance culture of the Valley has remained 'alive' because of the people (2006: 5).

When political rituals go wrong

This narrative of Indra and Kumari as well as *bhoto jatras* vis-a-vis Nepal's political history of the recent years may prove that rituals in their core may remain flexible and fluid. But they may not tell other aspects of rituals. Unpredictability can also become part of ritual as much as it is part and parcel of human life in this universe. The question that should the state of head of Republic Nepal participate the rituals now depends upon the politics that the state is run by. Itself a subject of its own serious rituals, politics needs to be handled in careful manners. The year 2015 that Nepal lived through can be taken as a proof of it. As a part of serious ritual of becoming a Republican State, the 20 September 2015 meeting of the Constituent Assembly endorsed the Republic constitution of Nepal though its closet neighbor India was supposed to have asked the major Nepali political leaders to delay this ritual of promulgating constitution for the reasons only the diplomats would know.

Many speculate that the Bharatiya Janta Party led government of India expected the Nepal's Republic constitution retained Nepal as the Hindu state. Thus Nepal-India relation that feeds on myths, rituals, cultures and

socio economic reality started to go through 'breaches' that manifested in various crises. The prime one was being the conflict between Nepal as the state and the Madhesi leaders who were not happy with the limited political rights given in the constitution to the people of the Madhes, the southern part of Nepal. Irked by the anti-Indian political fervor that was boiling up in Kathmandu, a 'partial blockade' to the free flow of goods across Nepal-India border from Indian side added more complexities to the existing political unrest. On top of that K.P. Oli and his United Marxist Lenin (UML) party was blamed to have played a major role in 'breaching' the tacit understanding with India by becoming 'closer' to the People's Republic of China. Amid these political and diplomatic rituals which seemed to have gone terribly wrong, the 28 October 2015 meeting of the Constituent Assembly elected a senior UML leader Bidhya Devi Bhandari, the widow of late communist leader Madan Bhandari, the party founder, as the second President of Republic Nepal.

It was now the turn of President Bhandari to attend major religious rituals of the country. Unaware of what lay in future, the second President set out to participate the famous Bibav Panchami at Ram Janaki temple, Janakpur on 16 December. Bibav Panchami, a ritual that marks lord Ram and Sita's marriage ceremony draws a large number of Hindus of all kinds of origin at Janakpur annually. President Bhandari's participation in the capacity of the head of the state created a serious clash between the security force and the protesters that made the temple authority halt the ritual for some hours. The protesters were reported to have shown anger over the violation of cultural sentiments of the people of Madhes.

First, the protesters were reported to have become unhappy because a widow no matter how important political post she may have occupied was allowed to perform the pooja. Second, the security personnel with their leather shoes and dogs were allowed to enter the holy premise. Expressing their ire to the temple authority for not handling the ritual seriously, they vandalized the temple properties. Reporting the event, a correspondent of the national daily, *The Himalayan Times* writes:

> We had warned anti-Madhesi President from visiting Janakpur. Her

arrival ruined the festive atmosphere,

> Yadav (United Democratic Madhesi Front Dhanusha Coordinator Sesh Narayan Yadav) added: 'After normalcy returned in the evening, Ramjanaki Bibaha Panchami programme was formally concluded' (6 December 2015).

This clash and the supposedly 'the cleaning of the temple' after the President returned to Kathmandu triggered views and opinions from all sides. Capturing the violence otherwise, Pramod Mishra, himself a Madhesi academic residing in the USA now expresses his opinion about the event of the festival:

> Sympathisers of the Madhes movement have blamed the hostile Kathmandu media and Pahadi response as propaganda against the agitation, while the opponents of the movement have insisted that it was nothing but Madhesi's backwardness and prejudice against women in general and widows in particular that occasioned such an incident (24 December 2015).

From the point of view of a researcher of the performance cultures, it appears to me that both the President and the protesters seemed to have understood the significance of rituals very correctly. The President and her advisors must have taken this very occasion of the ritual as a matter of mending the broken ties between the Kathmandu, the political capital and the disgruntled Madhesi peoples and their leaders. Similarly, the protestors too seem to have understood the message that the rituals would carry if disturbed deliberately at this point. Thus by protesting and also by 'cleaning the temple', they seem to have deliberately made 'head of the state' often regarded as 'high' look 'low' and the Madhesis and their cultures which were taken as 'low' by the Kathmandu-centric polity of the past as 'high'. By blurring and creating a new hierarchy, their message was clear: until and unless the political rights of the people are addressed no state head, particularly the leader of UML can be accepted to the Madhesi people culturally and psychology particularly at the juncture of Nepal's contemporary political history.

The protesters neither represented the temple authority or pooja committee nor had any official mandate from Madheis people to obstruct the President's visit. It was simply an eruption of the ongoing political

agitation. Neither did the Presidential Office have any problem with the temple authority. No such Presidential visit to Bibah Panchami did take place in 2016 and 2017; however, the President Office has been extending its best wishes for the pooja to be completed successfully annually. Now the youngest daughter of the President Bhandari married to Abhishek Yadav, son of a Nepali Congress lawmaker and also the nephew of the former President Dr. Yadav, and importantly, someone who comes from Mithila region in 2017, one is not sure if she pays her visit to the bibah panchami of this year as much depends upon the politics beyond the bibah panchami rituals.

Interestingly, the Kathmandu Valley and the Mithila region share some very strong historical and cultural ties. Many scholars from Mithila region had migrated to the Kathmandu Valley during the time when the Muslim invasion took place here in the thirteenth century. This migration of scholars to the court of Malla kings did directly contribute to the flourishing of arts, literatures and cultures of the Valley. Many scholar priests such as Kirtinath Upadhyaya, Raghunath Jha, Shreenath Bhatta and Mahinath Bhatta among others were supposed to have played major roles in instilling all kinds of life cycle rituals during the regime of Jayasthili Malla (1383-1429) (Shah, 2055 B.S.: 39)[1]. Both the Valley and Janakpur as the representation of Mithila area hold key positions in the political and social revolution of Nepal. Mithila region is often taken as the land of freedom fighters, intellectuals and revolutionary leaders. Now the capital of province no 2, Janakpur and Mithila region has evolved as one of the key cultural and political forces in Nepal.

Under the leadership of K.P. Oli, the UML Party has made a sweeping victory in the legislative and provincial elections held in 2017. Madhes-based political parties too have made significant victory in province number two. The BJP-led Indian government is expected to take a policy to smoothen its broken relationship with Oli and his government that is going to form soon. Sushma Swaraj, the Indian foreign minister made her official visit on February 1, 2018 as part of the refreshing India - Nepal diplomatic

[1] 2055 B.S is the current year, according to the Nepali calendar.

relationship that had gone away since 2015. Though much cannot be predicted about the future of Nepali politics, what one can wish is that the Oli-led government, Madhes based parties and India to bring the rituals of politics on track so that no bibah panchami festival gets obstructed in the years to come.

Bhoto jatra and Bibah panchami[2]

Bhoto jatra and bibah panchami have their respective legends and myths. The legend associated with bhoto jatra goes like this: a local farmer from Patan had his precious bhoto/vest stolen. To his shock and amazement, he finds a ghost wearing it. The ghost loved the vest so much that he refused to part with it. Thus, the two fought endlessly. Finally, both of them were taken to the court of king Narendra Dev. Since neither of the party could provide sufficient proofs, the king decided that the vest remained with lord Machchhindranath. Since then every year on the particular day of the Machchhindranath Rath Jatra, the bhoto is displayed assuring people that it has remained safe.

Similarly, the myth of Bibah Panchami goes like this: King Janak himself a great scholar and devout disciple of lord Shiva announced that any Kshatriya prince who could lift the mighty bow of Shiva safely stored at Janakpur palace would be eligible for making nuptial ties with his daughter Sita. Time and venue was fixed for the competition. No prince other than Ram had the strength to lift that mighty bow. Janak happily holds the sacred marriage ceremony between Ram and Sita in Janakpur.

Bhoto jatra, thus, is a symbol of things, which have remained safe and placed in an order. The message of this myth is that people, their leader either in the form of king or president, divinity and supernatural forces of all kinds, need to maintain a covenant among themselves. Similarly, the marriage ceremony of Ram and Sita itself a major event, is a symbol of union of the rightful souls that are to play significant role in creating moral and spiritual order in the world. That only spiritually and morally superior beings can become the ideals or leaders of people is the message.

[2] Panchami literally means fifth; Bibah Panchami is a vernacular term to indicate the festivity related to fifth day of wedding.

In the case of bhoto jatra, the participation of the President is compulsory whereas in the second case such participation is voluntary. The particular day of bhoto jatra in the Valley has been recognized as official holiday for the government employees whereas it is not the case with the day of bibah panchami. Dr. Yadav, a Madhesi intellectual as the first President of Republic Nepal's ritual identity overshadowed his political and ethnic background, whereas the existing political unrest at Janakpur did not favor the political and ethnic background of the second President. Needless to say that Kathmandu's Newars have enjoyed much more economic and political opportunities than the common Madhesis from the Mithila region. Thus so much depends upon the ideologies of the rulers of the past as much as the one of the current times. Madhesis and minorities of Nepal did not receive much attention during the Rana period (1846-1950) as the

> Raison d'etre of Rana was the exploitation of the country's resources to sustain a centralized state and administration and ensure the personal enrichment of the Rana ruler and his family, internal and external circumstances (Regmi, 1988: 26).

Mahendra's party-less Panchayati system introduced in 1961 was autocratic at the core. It is blamed to have blocked the development of local cultures. Such undemocratic policies taken by the rulers of the pasts makes one believe that Nepal's road ahead cannot be safe until the mistakes of the past are corrected in the changed social and political contexts.

> The bottom line, however, is that no matter where all these minorities are, they are all suppressed and oppressed by nationally dominant group. As long as national domination continues this in-group domination may not be effectively weeded out (Bhattachan, 2008: 91).

The conclusion that one can reach out of these two different ritual events is that how Nepal as a modern nation state is going to address the rituals of its people depends upon the political rights it provides to its citizens. Rituals are surely the psycho-cultural sites for parties of all types to come together and legitimize each other's status. But rituals cannot be separated from the political and economic condition of their practitioners.

Since Nepal as a state has remained responsible force for creating division among people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, it remains a subject of contempt unless the mistakes of the past are corrected. Therefore, any President or for that matter, the head of state of Nepal should sit to correct the mistakes committed by their predecessors as part of a serious ritual in making a better nation before he or she decides to join the rituals of people across the country. The bhoto jatra of 2008 is as significant a message for the President as the 2015 bibah panchami of Janakpur is. I would like to end the paper with the following remarks made by Kapila Vatsyayan regarding the culture of this part of the world:

> The flow of a tradition may be compared to a double-reed flute. One reed is a perennial strain, a tonic, immutable trans-space and–time; the other reed plays the tune of immediate time and space. The one is repetitive but stable; the other changing. The two together create the music that sounds different at different times (2005: 40).

Thus much depends upon the quality of the mind of the listeners. Those who hold the capacity of understanding the 'sounds' sent by the rituals in form of oracles can make best of the occasion. Leaders of the people in the Republic Nepal need to learn to listen to the music coming out from the 'double-reed flute'.

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"Spiritual Begging": The Dichotomy of *Ziyarat* in Pakistan?

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Abstract: The article is based on years of researching begging in the context of South Asia around locations such as traffic intersections, bazaars and shrines. The central idea that it explores is how the practice of *Ziyarat* (Visitation), a contested ritual journey to the shrines of Saints, is actually a form of begging, albeit, on a spiritual level. It elaborates on the novel concept of *spiritual begging* and the relationship between such supplication in a sacred space and internal poverty using supporting notes from the field participants and illuminates the intra-religious pluralistic conflict which exists within Islam on this practice.

Keywords: South Asia, Sufism, Islam, spiritual begging, shrines.

Begging in a religious sense in the Western world is termed mendicancy and is used in the sense of a religious ascetic begging for subsistence and nothing more as he or she divorces him or herself from society in his or her quest for salvation. Such poverty is often linked to the mystical strand of religions and is voluntary in nature. It is present in Islam and has been practiced under the contentiously named 'mystical' branch of Islam, Sufism. The reference in the Quran to inner poverty *faqr* is the human nothingness in comparison to God's greatness. Within the context of Islam, there are *faqirs* (religious renunciants), who seek an inner poverty/humility *faqr* in their spiritual path, the 'Sufi' path, *tasawwuf*, to gain a greater and deeper knowledge of God in order to be closer to God.

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Lings (2005) notes how the mystics of Islam "speak of themselves as the poor, *al fuqara* - (plural of *faqir*)." He traces the origin of the Sufi term to the verse in the Quran: "God is the Rich and ye are the poor" (XLVII: 38; and also XXXV: 15). "O men, ye are the poor unto God, and God - He is the Rich, the Object of all Praise" (Ibidem, 2005, p. 47). Frembgen (2012) writes of a long tradition of begging in connection with asceticism in the geographical contexts of Southern and Central Asia. In the context of Lahore, Pakistan, he cites the Patron Saint of Lahore, Ali Hujweri advocating the benefits of begging for Islamic mystics. The Sufis beg in order that they may endure the humiliation of begging, and may perceive what is their worth in the eyes of other men, and may not become proud themselves.

However, it is not only *faqirs* who wish to connect with God, Muslims who may not particularly belong to a Sufi Order may also seek a connection on a spiritual level. I discovered this during earlier research on socio-economic begging in Lahore, Pakistan (Saeed, 2007; Saeed, 2010), whereby I observed that begging was going on in three contexts:

(i) The first was the beggars who begged out of a socio-economic need.

(ii) The second were the *faqirs* (religious renunciants).

(iii) The third context was a more philosophical angle of begging whereby lay people were supplicating at a shrine on a spiritual level, when conducting the *Ziyarat* (Visitation). There would be differing intra-religious pluralistic views according to whether the person held a Sunni, Shia or Sufi view.

Boivin (2015) defines the term *Ziyarat* as emanating from the Arabic word to visit. Defining the term in a Sindhi context within India and Pakistan, for Boivin, *Ziyarat* (Visitation) is a name referring to a minor pilgrimage, whilst the major pilgrimage is that of an individual to Mecca. In this given context, Boivin asserts that:

> [...] the *Ziyarat* is a journey to a holy site, usually the tomb of a holy man. It is thus a ritual journey, which is performed following rules often exposed in books. The main goal is to get a piece of the saint's *barakat*. Although the etiquette can vary, there are some gestures which can be found everywhere in Sindh, and in the Indian subcontinent, like touching

> the tomb, or putting a *chador* (shawl) upon it. Such offerings are reputed to provide spiritual benefit or *sawab* (2015, pp. 340-341).

He then, goes on to write about the practice of *Ziyarat* (Visitation) mirroring popular piety.

Providing a historical context and building upon the purpose of the *Ziyarat* (Visitation), Frembgen (2012) writes of the "ritual veneration of saints" (2012, p. 30) as a popular Sufi tradition which developed between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries replacing direct contact with God through a veneration of a *Pir* (spiritual guide) who acts as mediator to the Absolute. Believers would visit the Shrine in the hope of relief to their problems. Frembgen nuances Boivin's take on receiving the *barakat* (blessing) as a goal of the supplicant by noting that the tomb of the intercessory Saint is representative of a concentration of the Saint's *barakat* (blessing) which is the central source from which the positive energy emanates.

For those, on this pilgrimage, there is an element of an internal poverty but not on the level that the *faqirs* are trying to achieve. This internal poverty is an emptiness within oneself, the need for something often spiritual and intangible which requires a supplication to God and which leads this third category of lay people to beg on a spiritual level to God via a Saint who acts as an intermediary.

I have coined the essence of the practice of *Ziyarat* (Visitation) for the purposes of this research[1] as "Spiritual Begging". It is an interpretation of what is happening in literal terms, in that when a person visits a Shrine to say a *dua* (prayer), it is in itself a supplication to God via the Saint who plays an intercessory role. The understanding throughout the thought process here is that the ultimate supplication is to God via the Saint, as it is the Saint, the *Wali* (Friend of God), that will fast track the *dua (prayer)*, as a result of his or her closeness to God. The *Ziyarat* (Visitation) that I am

[1] As aforementioned, this project emanated from research on begging of a socio-economic nature. The more philosophical angle of begging was initially what I began to think of which led to an audio-visual project on *Ziyarat* (Visitation) within the wider topic of Sufism.

writing about is pilgrimages to Shrines of Saints who have died and the pilgrimage is to the deceased *Wali* (Friend of God).

Spiritual Begging

I will elaborate on the novel concept of *Spiritual Begging* and the relationship between such supplication in a sacred space and internal poverty using supporting notes from the field from my participants. In doing so, the intention is to illuminate the complexities surrounding the controversial and contentious issues that emanate from the analysis in a lucid manner using a written critique. What I aim to elicit is the actual essence of the *Ziyarat* (Visitation) which is the spiritual supplication to God via the visit to the *Wali* (Friend of God) in the context of Pakistan.

In order to critique this issue in any depth it is important to discuss the origins of Sufism as a starting point, giving a historical background followed by a discussion of the contemporary intra-religious pluralism witnessed within Pakistani society on questions of visitation of shrines; providing rationales for why a puritanical interpretation of Islamic practices would condemn it as well as exploring how Sufis would legitimize it within the context of Islam. I will then provide an initial or preliminary insight and a discussion of the practice of *Ziyarat* (Visitation). There are, of course, many different degrees to this debate and we cannot reduce the concept of *Ziyarat* and the visitation of shrines to a dichotomy of those who condemn it as *shirk* (polytheism) or *bidat* (innovation) and those who practice it. As with other practices, there will be a spectrum of rationales where people will practice it at different levels, but I will use these two stances to start a discussion on *Ziyarat* (Visitation).

The interviewees have answered questions as to whether Sufism is a deviancy from traditional Islam and notions of piety and politics occur in the realm of the religious sphere. Questions of religious freedom with regards to intra-religious pluralism and why it is attacked ideologically and physically through violent attacks subsequently also arises.

As alluded to in the introduction, the research upon which this paper is based is comprised of two components: an audio-visual documentary and a written (textual) component.

The methodology comprises of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Qualitative interviews have been undertaken which have been filmed for the documentary from four samples of people:

1. Academic scholars of Islam and Sufism from the UK, Pakistan, Sweden and Denmark;
2. Religious Priests *Maulanas;*
3. Religious Priests *Sheikhs;*
4. Supplicants/devotees of Shrines.

The above selection of interviewees will provide a visual heteroglossic text, in the form of featuring in the documentary in an audio-visual format which in general and for the written critique will provide an insight and enrich the viewer with multiple voices for the debate holding different perspectives. The academic scholars of Islam and Sufism and religious priests from schools representing more puritanical versions of Islam and Sufis will provide authority in their fields for the project.

This project is ongoing and so far field research including interviews span a period of five years, from 2013 to 2017. Interviews featured from amongst my sample, within this paper, are from largely Summer 2013 and Summer 2017.

What is Sufism?

Sufism is often regarded as the inner (esoteric) dimension of Islam with the *Shariah* (religious rules) being the outer (exoteric) dimension and the basis of it. Roger Frager (2004) reiterates the importance of the *Shariah* (religious rules) through his description of the four stages of Sufism which comprise the practice and understanding in Sufism. These are *Shariah* (religious law), *tariqa* (the mystical path), *haqiqah* (Truth) and *marifa* (Gnosis). He emphasizes how each of these stages is built upon stages that go before it. The first stage is the *Shariah* (religious law) which he notes as the "basic foundation for the next three stages". This

> [...] consists of the teachings of Islam, basically the morality and ethics found in all religions. It provides guidance to us for living properly in this world. Trying to follow Sufism without the *Shariah* (religious law) is like trying to build a house on a foundation of sand. Without an ordered life built on solid moral and ethical principles, mysticism cannot flourish. In

> Arabic, *shariah* means 'road'. It is a clear track, a well-travelled route that anyone can follow (Ibidem, p. 12).

Elaborating on the term, Sufism, and venturing into Sufi practice, Chittick (2005) states that the term Sufism "is an appropriate name for doing what is beautiful and striving after spiritual perfection. He maintains that it is built on two foundations-Islam or submission to God" which includes (the practice of the *Sharia* and what is known as the prophetic model; the second foundation is *iman*, faith, which is the acceptance of basic Islamic teachings concerning God, prophecy and the Last Day) (Ibidem, p. 15). Chittick lays emphasis on the inner transformation of those who follow the Sufi path *tariqa*. In his words, "[...] the powers of the soul are turned toward God" (Ibidem, p. 16). The practice, therefore builds upon the practices within *Sharia* and includes exercises of a devotional and spiritual nature. *Dhikr* or remembrance of God is the most important (Ibidem, p. 16).

Frembgen (2008) writes an interesting study and focuses on etymological aspects of the Sufi and Sufi traditions (Ibidem, p. 3). Centring on the inner aspects of Islam, the spiritual dimensions *ilm al-batin* which is the esoteric knowledge. The Sufis' lives are "centred entirely on God", whereby they put their entire faith *tawakkul* in Him. The Sufi's aim to recognise everything in reference to God. This is a recognition of the absolute unity and uniqueness of God *tauhid* which forms the philosophical core of the Sufi tradition (Ibidem, p. 4). The closeness to God of the Sufis is as I will later discuss one of the attractions for supplicants to visit their shrines.

Conflict: intra-religious pluralism

Sufism is not a new concept and neither are the ideological conflicts between those who follow it and its adversaries. Professor David Thomas, a scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations expanded upon this and provided a historical insight[2]. He said Sufis have been known throughout Islamic history and gives the example of *Al Hallaj* and the rapid increase of

[2] Interview with Professor David Thomas, a scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, conducted on 31st July 2013, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

Sufi Orders from the 12th and 13th century globally. Thomas (2012)[3] shed further light on the ideological conflicts between Sufi and Sharia based teachings and told me:

> There sometimes have been conflicts between the practices of the Sufis and the legal teachings of Islam. In *Sharia* (religious laws) there are the teachings of Islam in that Sufis sometimes have, you might, say allegorized the teachings of Islam. There are Sufis who have said that the *Hajj* to Mecca is not necessary because the true pilgrimage is the pilgrimage to your own heart, and the real *Ka'ba* is not the building in Mecca but it is in fact your heart. Now, that is the spiritualization of the teachings of Islam, that you could argue in fact in line with true Islam but you can see very easily that somebody who takes a more literal, more practical view about Islam would say that it actually is a defiance of what Islam is really teaching. So, it is not at all difficult to see why many Muslims have found a contradiction between Sufism and what we are calling traditional Islam because this raises the question, what is traditional Islam? Is the *Sharia* (religious laws) based Islam the true traditional Islam or is the more spiritualized form of Islam the true traditional Islam? The great 11th century thinker Al-Ghazali in his very important work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences in Islam*, some people regard it as the greatest work after the Quran, attempted to show how the external aspects of Islam, the internal aspects of Islam are both needed in a full Muslim life. In doing that, he showed in that work how there is no necessary contradiction between what we are calling traditional Islam and Sufism.

Dr Faiza Mushtaq[4], a sociologist who has studied contemporary Islamic movements in Pakistan, contextualizes the Barelvi movement which began in the late 19th century in India and elaborates on what she terms the biggest battles within the religious landscape in the subcontinent where reformist movements like the *Deobandis* and the *Ahl al-Hadith* also emerged. She shared with me:

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[3] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.

[4] Interview with Dr Faiza Mushtaq, a sociologist, conducted on 25th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

> One of the ways these modernist, or reformist movements, of Muslims distinguished themselves was by attacking older styles of mystical popular customs of Islamic worship and portraying them as deviations from the true path of Islam. As being aberrations and straying away from the proper way to experience and understand and implement the correct teaching of Islam. [...] This is what we can call the *Deobandi* and the *Ahl al-Hadith* position, what we sometimes, a bit widely and erroneously refer to as the *Wahabi* approach to Islam. The critique of this style of Islamic worship which includes *Ziyarat* and shrine worship and intercession with pirs is that it ends up entailing the worship of other human beings and which takes you away from implementing the correct strictures that will make you a proper Muslim, that will actually bring you closer to God[5].

Dr Lukas Werth[6], an Anthropologist specializing in Sufism also spoke of the intra-pluralistic tension of ideologies and informed me on notions of modernity:

> So, I would link the *Deobandi* fundamentalist, and other brands of fundamentalism to modernist notions of Islam rather in opposition to traditionalist ones and I would group the mystical dimension of Sufism in all its empirical impressions, I would put that with traditionalism. So, for me the question is why Sufism? What is Sufism's relation to modernity? That's how I would frame the question. Rather two particular brands of modernity those particular notions, particular ways of modernity which have come to define some contemporary Muslim practices[7].

According to the Jinnah Institute, the fundamentalism alluded to by Mushtaq (2017)[8] above, emanates from a militant Wahabi ideology imported from groups belonging to Saudi Arabia (Jinnah Institute). Such contempt has manifested in fatal attacks on Shrines. In the current climate the dichotomy between the fundamentalist and Sufi views has intensified and is now more visible than ever. In February 2017, over seventy people

[5] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[6] Interview with Dr Lukas Werth, an anthropologist specializing in Sufism conducted on 4th June 2017, in Lahore, Pakistan as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[7] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[8] Interview with Dr Faiza Mushtaq, a sociologist, conducted on 25th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

were killed at the Lal Shahbaz Qaldar Shrine also known as Sehwan Sharif in Sehwan, Sindh, after a terrorist attack. It is not the first time a Sufi Shrine has been attacked in the context of Pakistan or indeed globally in the Muslim world. In July 2010, a double suicide attack claimed the lives of more than fifty people and injured around two hundred at the Shrine of Data Saheb in Lahore. In October of the same year, a double suicide attack again targeted the Shrine of Abdul Shah Ghazi in Karachi, with eight fatalities and sixty injured. Notable others have been documented with huge fatalities. Globally, too, there has been an increase in intolerance towards Sufi Islam and attacks on Shrines have been reported in Egypt, as well as other geographical contexts (Welle, 2017).

Hence, it seems according to conservative Islamic scholars, the practices of the Sufis' violate the fundamentals of Islam whereby they are performing *bidat* (innovation) an innovation of new practices and when they believe and follow a Sufi, they believe that they are committing *shirk* (polytheism) which is an association of God. Sufi scholars and followers would maintain that in their practices when they follow a Sufi Saint, it is in their role as 'Friends of God', *Walis* and they are therefore, praying via the Sufi who plays an intercessory role as the mediator between them and God.

Lings (2005) notes how H.A.R. Gibb had pointed out these attacks as Sufism was being perceived as a deviation from "true Islam" and therefore causing intra-pluralism within the religion and an internal strife many years ago (Ibidem, p. 3). Chittick (2005) writes of the frequency of these internal attacks throughout history, often arising over the increasing amount of social and political influence the Sufi Masters gained which was seen as a threat to the judiciary and rulers (Ibidem, p. 22). Frembgen (2004) too, cites the clash between conservative religious scholars and the mystics, which has been around since early Islam.

Elias (1998) notes how the Sufi orders served as institutions of education, and how in contemporary times they have been praised and 'vilified' as they have been over time (Ibidem, p. 595).

Thomas (2012)[9] illustrated this viewpoint by commenting upon the intra-religious conflict. He told me:

> Many Muslims have over the centuries condemned Sufism. Mainly because a Sufi often reveres his spiritual master and would be seen idolatrous revering him above God himself. Also many practices of Sufism would be seen to deviate from the traditional practices of Islam. Other Muslims have not taken that view and of course many Sufis would say, that they are good Muslims. It has even been said that Sufism is the true heart of Islam. So, of course there is a wide variety of views. It is certainly the case if you are, shall we say a *Sharia* based Muslim, somebody who follows the regulations of the legal teachings of Islam you might regard Sufism as something of a deviation maybe because Sufis very often sit very lightly to the normative practices of Islam.[10]

Having established that there is huge dissension behind the rationale for visitation, it is also important to understand briefly here the attraction of going to the shrine of a Sufi Saint and trying to understand the qualities of the deceased Sufi Saint that lead people to their shrines.

Martin Lings (2005) writes of the intensity of intimacy with God along the spiritual path which was sought by the Sufis:

> The Sufis speak of 'seeking to be drowned' (istighraq) in the verses of the Quran which are, according to one of the most fundamental doctrines of Islam, the Uncreated Word of God. What they are seeking is, to use another Sufi term, extinction (fana) of the created in the Uncreated, of the temporal in the Eternal, of the finite in the Infinite; and for some Sufis the recitation of the Quran has been, throughout life, their chief means of concentration upon God which is itself the essence of every spiritual path. (Lings, 2005, p. 25)

It was this closeness to God of the saint that was further illuminated by Dr Mustafa Draper, a scholar of contemporary Sufism. He informed me:

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[9] Interview with Professor David Thomas, a scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, conducted on 31st July 2013, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

[10] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.

> A Sufi is someone that essentially aspires the spiritual way or the inner dimension or inner path which is encapsulated by Islam as a religious tradition and as a doctrine, as a kind of outward behaviour, and Sufi is someone who is constantly looking for that inner dimension that is seeking the inner dimension, seeking a closer, immediate experience of the divine, which they will gain from the outer but also will often do extra/particular spiritual activities, prayers, for example, and *Dhikr* the repetition of the names of Allah to draw closer towards the notion of the divine, the divine presence.[11]

Dr Imran Iqbal[12], a scholar specializing in colonial and post-colonial geo-politics of South Asia further highlighted the intangibleness and saintliness of the whole issue. He added that the Sufis are:

> [...] entering into that mystic, that intangible world, in which they try to if not see, feel the existence of the spirit and the soul and for them the best way or the real way to reach God since God is not a tangible being, God is more like you know an idea or an [...] let's say how they put it, *noor*, that we call light, so they try to reach God through finding or connecting themselves with the soul which they believe exists within us and it cries and it needs to be harnessed. It needs to be connected, so that we can feel. And I guess this is from where we get the concept of *tasawwuf,* which is the base of Sufism because they try to reach God through *tasawwuf*, through deep meditation, you know, by disconnecting with the tangible things around and entering into a spiritual or intangible world, so I guess, this is how they become a Sufi[13].

A Muslim cleric in the UK, Pir Muhammad Tayyab ur Rehman[14] of the Qadria Trust, mentioned the qualities of the *Walis* (Friends of God) who are mentioned in the Quran:

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[11] Excerpt from an interview with Mustafa Draper, a scholar of contemporary Sufism, conducted on 15th July 2013, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[12] Interview with Dr Imran Iqbal, a scholar specializing in colonial and post colonial geo-politics of South Asia, conducted on 13th June 2017, in Lahore, Pakistan as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[13] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[14] Interview with Pir Muhammad Tayyab Ur Rehman of the Qadria Trust, conducted on 10th July 2017, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

> *Allah*, in surah Yunus, 11 chapter, *ayat* 63, informs us, "Unquestionably, [for] the allies of *Allah* there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve" so the word *Wali* which is related to Sufism, it means *Kurb* and also *Nusrat*. *Waliullah* is that person who after fulfilling their obligation, and this obligation can be in the form of *Hajj*, fasting, *zakat* (obligatory alms), *namaz* (prayer), and so after fulfilling their obligation the person gains *Allah's kurb*. Therefore, when that person prays to *Allah* even more, *Allah* says that I become his hands, his mouth, his ears, and so whenever this person makes any movement I am there. As such when this person prays to *Allah*, *Allah* accepts his plea[15].

This would re-iterate the points made earlier on the quest for a closeness to God by these Sufis and this would lead to a better understanding of why lay people go to Sufi shrines as agents of God where their plea would be heard sooner.

The cleric then went on to explaining the signs of a *Waliullah* (Friend of God) and told me:

> So, what are the signs of a *Waliullah* (Friend of God)? There are many signs. *Wali* (Friend of God) is he who does not lie and follows the *sharia*, which means his actions are correct. In accordance with the *sharia* the person performs good deeds. Such a person is called Sufi. And some friends of *Allah* say that surely such a person is with *Allah* all the time. And that when a person has reached such a stage then there is nothing which can strike terror in their hearts. Nor are they irrecoverably saddened by death of something or someone. When a person is dying, there are two things which they are concerned about. One, their children. What will become of them? And the other fear which they have is that after their death, what will happen to their business? House? And other such matters. So, *Allah's Wali* (Friend of God) does not worry about these things. Why? Because *Allah* has already shown the gifts and rewards of Paradise to him, and so he does not worry about these matters[16].

The above excerpts would give Quranic authority to the fact that *Walis* (Friends of God) are a part of Islam and the strength of their prayers as a result of their closeness to God.

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[15] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[16] Ibidem.

It seems people observing these rituals of shrine visitation are going there in the hope of receiving spiritual/divine assistance from God through the agency of these Saints, who as a result of their closeness to God will act as intermediaries in this spiritual process which provides spiritual healing for the supplicant.

Ziyarat: The Words and the Deeds

On the whole, in answer to my question of why people visit shrines, participants amongst devotees, responded by saying that they regularly visit as they had always done so. The reason was that if they visited 'all would be well'. Out of my sample, they did not just come when they were in trouble, they visited regularly as the visitation kept troubles at bay, something which the conservative standpoint would find problematic. The majority also said they were at peace at the shrine. The surroundings had a calming effect. When asked whether their prayers were answered, almost all said they were but did not always disclose what their *mannat* (request) was. The general understanding was that they came to the shrine of the Saint as a result of them being a revered friend of God, the ultimate supplication was to God. One informant[17] expressed the same: *Hum unko Khudha tho nahi samajh teh, voh wali hain Khudha keh, hum gunegaar hain, unki Allah jaldi suntha hain.*[18]

What my informant is saying above, is that she does not pray to the *Wali* (Friend of God), the ultimate prayer is to God, but as "we" as lay people are sinners on earth and the *Walis* are friends of God, our prayers are more likely to be fast tracked via the Saint. The intercessory role of the Saint here is explicated.

Although the actual *Ziyarat* (Visitation) is an untangible process whereby devotees are making a supplication to God via the intermediary Saint, if the devotee carries out other ritual processes often associated with *Ziyarat* (Visitation) which I will describe below then capturing the associated acts, if undertaken, can convert the process of this spiritual practice into an aesthetic expression of devotional life. Capturing both the

[17] Interview with a female devotee, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

[18] "We don't think of the Saints as God, they're Friends of God. We're sinners, God listens to them sooner". English translation by author.

audio and visual aesthetics of the *Ziyarat* (Visitation) was important for me, this included shots of devotees engaging in prayers at the sanctum, the offerings in the form of *nazar niyaaz* often comprising of flowers, sweets, incense, a shawl, *chaddar*. There are different levels of veneration and or reverence whereby people may visit the shrine to say a prayer for the deceased Saint and then make their supplication or the devotee may want to engage in other rituals such as offering flowers out of respect or placing a shawl over the tomb. These rituals may extend to a more intimate level of bowing to and kissing the grave. These latter two rituals would be highly criticized by those against the practice and seen as blasphemous, whilst devotees will say this is all done out of a respect for the Saint and the seeking of a closeness to God via the *barakat* (blessing) of the Saint which is the aim of the visitation.

I will now write a little about the ritual process of *Ziyarat* (Visitation) that I observed in the field. For most shrines, there are male and female entrances. Women are not allowed to enter the actual sanctum and therefore the filming was done from the outside where there was always a door or a window connecting the sanctum to the women's area. I have to add here, that at a shrine such as Data Sahb, one of the most popular shrines of Pakistan (Pannke, 2014), getting to the sanctum is a difficult experience. On the way, people who were employed at the shrine in positions of security and cleaning were asking for alms as they were aware that devotees are in need of something and would be in a certain pious mindset so as to offer a donation. On reaching the sanctum, offerings are then given to the resident priest who will conduct a *dua* (prayer) on behalf of the supplicant. In return, the priest would give the donor a garland of roses or rose petals. Although the most laborious part of the visitation is done, some devotees offer further offerings in the form of *nazrana* (offering) to be made. One of my informants[19] told me that this is an offering given to charity. Although it is often made once the supplication is fulfilled, my informant told me she makes this offering each time she goes as for her it is an act of charity. There are many *deghwalas* (caterers) who cook the *deghs* (huge pots of

[19] Interview with a female devotee, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

sweet and savoury rice). Often there is competition between the caterers as to who can give a cheaper rate. The offerings are fed primarily the poor, but in actual fact anybody who is visiting the Shrine is eligible, this may include people travelling through the city. A prayer is said over the *degh* and then distributed. The idea is that the recipients of the distributed food will then also give their blessings to those feeding them.

Omar Shaukat[20], a scholar of Islam highlighted the broader understanding of practice of *Ziyarat*. He told me:

> People who would try to defend these practices will point to the events in the Prophet's life himself where his companions seem to show a lot of regard for the things of the Prophet, like the clothes he was wearing, or the water that he touched, or the utensils that he held. And then the other followers of Prophet Muhammad developing a reverential attitude towards those objects that the Prophet had touched. And so, these contemporary figures, would then point to these kind of practices in the Prophet's life and say reverence for holy people and the objects they touched and blessed, its a tradition that goes all the way back to the Prophet and hence something like a *Ziyarat*, or Visitation to a holy shrine, is part of that whole culture[21].

Thomas (2012)[22] went on to discuss how the actual veneration of the Sufi shrine can be regarded as a deviation from Islam and declared:

> I suppose if you think of the veneration of the Sufi shrines then you are getting to a point where it seems to be real deviation from traditional Islam. In many parts of the world Sufi masters have been buried in shrines and these have become centers of veneration, centers of visiting, and also centers of intercession, where people go to ask the master who is buried in the shrine to plead before God about their needs[23].

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[20] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[21] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[22] Interview with Professor David Thomas, a scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, conducted on 31st July 2013, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[23] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.

The devotees claim that they are ultimately pleading to God and see that in accordance with Islam. If the plea was to the Saint and not God, that could be seen as heretical. Shaukat (2017)[24] goes on to problematize the concept of *Ziyarat* with regards to who the person conducting the *Ziyarat* is praying to further than just the plea to God or the Saint. He explained,

> Now one might get more detailed and ask the question what exactly does the visitation mean/entail and does it also mean praying for the soul of the deceased whose grave you are visiting, or assuming the soul of the saints or the ones you are visiting is watching over you, and is able to converse with you, or assuming the body of the saint is also protected so the point is that in the visitation itself, there are lots of different ideas that can be generated and they might have different connotations, and understandings, and origins, in different places in the Muslim world[25].

Praying for the soul of the deceased here would come as a mark of respect as the *Walis* are the Friends of God, those who are closest to him. One devotee[26], for example, maintains that, whenever one conducts *Ziyarat*, saying a prayer for the deceased soul would be the first thing to do, followed by a supplication to God. The rationale, again is, as aforementioned that the *dua* (supplication) will be fast tracked.

Indeed, the concept can be further discussed with regards to styles of reverence and to whom, the Saint or to *Allah*? Many of my participants mentioned this point and what became apparent was that there is a spectrum of reverence which would amount to different degrees of respect given to the Saint from whom the supplicant is seeking an intercessory prayer to God. In each case, the devotee stated that the ultimate supplication was to God and there was no one above Him.

Points of contention that were brought into the arena of discussion were those aesthetic actions such as bowing/prostrating to the grave of the *Wali* (Friend of God), kissing it, laying a *chaddar* (shawl) over the grave.

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[24] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[25] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[26] Interview with a female devotee, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

Shaukat (2017)[27] mentioned:

> So, for example prostrating before the *qabar* or the grave of a saint [...] some of the debates that happen concern this issue of what is the difference between a prostration which is an act of worship versus a prostration which is an act of reverence. So, for example those who disagree with this practice would point to an understanding of the word *sajda* (bowing) which is the word for prostration here as specifically, an act that is only directed towards God. The other folks would say, no not necessarily you can have the act of prostration or *sajda* which is directed to non-God entities but again with the understanding that you are not worshipping them but are only showing them reverence [...] those who justify prostrating before Saints' graves find support for the practice from within the Quran when in the chapter called Yusuf non human entities are shown as prostrating before a prophet and then the family of Yusuf/Joseph also prostrate before him out of reverence [...] Muslims are disagreeing with each other over the issue of what constitutes proper worship of God.[28]

Pir Tayyub (2017)[29], for example, was vehemently against the prostration before the shrine. The rationale behind that was one should only bow before God and would bring about an association with God. There was no room, according to his view, to bring in the debate which was brought forward by Shaukat (2017)[30] of the difference between reverence and worship.

Critiquing the debate

What seems to be lost in the debate is why people are choosing to go to shrines. The supplication through spiritual begging is requesting a spiritual healing and is one that involves compassion and empathy. One of the

[27] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[28] Ibidem.
[29] Interview with Pir Muhammad Tayyab Ur Rehman of the Qadria Trust, conducted on 10th July 2017, in Birmingham, UK, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[30] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

devotees[31] informs me of how the visitation gives her peace. Although she does not disclose her *mannat* (wish/prayer) explicitly when she goes to the shrine, what was alluded to was that she requests immaterial things; a sense of peace, happiness for her family, unworldly things that other humans in this world cannot provide. As aforementioned, other people seemed to be going as they had always done so and this would bring to the debate the opinion of those who oppose it as emanating from a superstition and therefore vilifying it as unislamic in that sense (Elias, 1998). However, what some of the devotees also said was that over the years they have seen an increase in people attending the shrines as a result of increasing societal pressures and personal stress. A male devotee[32] said one current tension on the rise was the inability of finding suitable men for marriage for "our daughters and sisters". At another Shrine, my guide[33] who was from the transgender community told me that people would not openly tell me what they were seeking but directed my attention towards a couple and said it was quite apparent that they were praying for a child. Mushtaq (2017)[34] supported this idea. She told me:

> So the idea that whenever you are in need or whenever you have any troubles or whenever you need to communicate with God for any reason you go through one of these sacred, larger-than-life-personalities because that is how you become closer to God. That is the fairly widespread, more common belief[35].

Often those who are visiting shrines are those people who have no other hope and the fact that they are going to a shrine is a last resort. Mushtaq (2017), again, informed me of potential specific examples of when people would go to a shrine:

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[31] Interview with a female devotee, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[32] Interview with a male devotee, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[33] Interview with my guide, a devotee from the transgender community, conducted on 17th November 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[34] Interview with Dr Faiza Mushtaq, a sociologist, conducted on 25th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[35] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.

> So, let's say if you want to have a child and you are unable to do that then you would either go to one of the shrines of these big Sufi Saints, to pray or you go to a local *Pir* (spiritual guide) and ask for some sort of prayer or some sort of intercession, or something to drink, some amulet to tie around your arm. It can be for other things you desire, for example, if you want to get married, get a promotion in your job, or seek some sort of opportunity. That's when you rely on some sort of very close spiritual supervisor or spiritual intermediary who will help you in getting your prayers answered through God. That has been a fairly common, a fairly widespread, way of being religious[36].

Indeed, often when you go to a shrine, there are people who are very emotionally charged as already mentioned above. Men are often to be found bowing their heads, kissing the shrine as usually women are not allowed into the sanctum where the grave is. Women may also be found to be bowing but in addition are supplicating in their own style too. Often they are singing *naaths* (religious chants), crying, reading holy *ayats* (sacred verses). Depending on where you are in a shrine, the atmosphere can be calming, however, my own experience is that one can connect with the emotional energy that people are investing at these sacred spaces. The contradiction here by those who are in opposition to the practice of *Ziyarat* is that one should not be spending so much emotional energy here. Mushtaq (2017) elaborated on this point of emotional energy:

> The criticism here is that if you are going to shrines and spending so much emotional energy and investing that in achieving closeness to a spiritual human intercessor, well that's incorrect. That is considered problematic because this person is earning your devotion and allegiance which you owe only to God. So, there has been a very concentrated, theological, ideological, practical onslaught against this practice. These ideological groups, exist side by side and one side is getting increasingly better funded and organized. This tussle between two competing styles of practicing Islam, and whether going to shrines is correct or not, has become a pretty heated battle now[37].

[36] Ibidem.
[37] Ibidem.

So even though we have already discussed how those who are visiting shrines are those people who have no other hope and the fact that they are going to a shrine is a last resort and an intercessory path to God, not as they would claim in lieu of God, the fundamental and more conservative view would still endorse that anything you require you should request from God directly. Below Werth (2017)[38] reaffirms the more puritanical view as the modernist answer to *ziyarat* being condemned and echoes some of what was said by Shaukat (2017)[39] vis a vis the question of what is the correct way of worship at a shrine. He mentioned:

> The modernist answer would be, in brief a simple "no" because you only pray to God and not to a Saint. The question is about, I am not the one who is legitimizing something or not, to put it like this first. But, still looking at the tradition of Islam, my answer, my personal answer, would be a simple "yes" [...] because there is no central authority in Islam which could altogether define what is appropriate and what not, anyway there remains the broad and wide question of what constitutes praying at a Shrine? Which way do people do it? What do people try to accomplish there? There are a thousand ways, so my brief answer would be that it is as legitimate as any other forms of praying. From a normative perspective, of course there are problems with that but it should never be forgotten that Sufism entails also quite experimental practices; tries to reach out to the divine to make an effort, in so many words; to gain meditation; to gain some level of meditation, to be able to experience, in this light, practices at shrines which are going on have to be understood first and foremost.[40]

A tension, is therefore, present as a result of the ideological conflict and the question whether such a religious freedom should be endorsed.

However, there is this notion of an esoteric healing being conducted via these Holy shrines. There is a wealth of literature where academics have discussed this concept which could be included in future research

[38] Interview with Dr Lukas Werth, an anthropologist specializing in Sufism conducted on 4th June 2017, in Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[39] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[40] An excerpt from the interview with Dr Lukas Werth, conducted on 4th June 2017, in Lahore, Pakistan.

(Pfleiderer, 1988; Levin, 2008; Pirani, Papadopoulos, Foster, & Leavey, 2008). Shahzad (2014) illuminates how a Sufi shrine in either an urban or rural setting "is not a static phenomenon" and writes of the "socio-religious" elements of a shrine that are forever changing. For him the Sufi shrine is well rooted within both the religious and cultural ethos of a Muslim society as it is revered in the hearts of the public. In doing so, he notes how the shrines play a great role in resolving problems of devotees which are both physical and metaphysical in nature. He describes these as the "ideological, political and economic forces acting at a shrine." For him, the ideological elements "are an outcome of *Shari'at* (religious law) *Tariqat* (the Sufi doctrine or path of spiritual learning), beliefs and rituals" (Shahzad, 2014, p. 105).

With regards to political elements, these are comprised of the *waqf* administration, ruling authorities along with religious organisations who manage the shrines. The economic part of the shrine manages the income and expenditure of the shrine. As a result of the above three facets, the shrines are able to function and Shazad goes onto describe how the Sufi shrine can be termed a community centre for religious activities (Ibidem) and the number of visitations by devotees is increasing as they bring with them a multiple array of problems to the Saint to act as intermediary (Ibidem).

Although the socio-religious angle to the practice of *Ziyarat* (Visitation) seems important to those that are devotees, those following a strictly *Sharia* (religious laws) based understanding of Islam would again, not pay heed to the quest for esoteric healing emanating from devotees. As one informant[41] who was against the practice explained to me, "All you need to do is ask God". Here, the emphasis was on making that supplication to God directly and again alluding to the fact that *Ziyarat* (Visitation) in essence would constitute *shirk* (polytheism).

[41] Interview with an informant, conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

Conclusion

The paper started with an insight into how I became interested in *Ziyarat*. It was the spiritual begging, in a literal sense, that I was observing and which has been interpreted as contentious. The central question within this research is whether *Ziyarat* is a part of Islam and that has brought about questions of correct worship of God in Islam.

Mushtaq (2017)[42] added the importance of understanding how in an academic context we must understand the very different perspectives:

> I would say that as scholars of Islam we have to understand that there is no one correct way of saying, "this is properly Islamic and this is not". You find many, many, Muslim groups around the world contemporarily and historically who claim that they are Muslims and their proper way of practicing Islam means that they seek guidance not just directly through God but through these various intercessory mechanisms as well [...]. So there is nothing that they need to reconcile between what their understanding of being a devout good Muslim entails and experiencing this mystical or spiritual type of Islam. Whereas there are others who would insist that being a true Muslim means that there is no room for any spirituality or any mysticism and that a very literalist, textual, appreciation of Islamic injunction is what we need.[43]

Scholars have been arguing these ideological debates surrounding Sufism for years throughout history. It seems on the point of *Ziyarat* (Visitation), there is a spectrum of etiquette of how it should be performed and there is also a spectrum of division between those who would condemn it outright to those who would agree upon certain gestures and not others. There are, therefore, certain aesthetic gestures with regards to veneration which brings the issue into a contentious arena. The degree to which you respect a *Wali* (Friend of God) is disputed. Prostration before a grave, kissing it, crying, crying loud, placing a *chaddar* (shawl) over the grave is in a strict sense and from a conservative viewpoint contentious. Whether all these actions are directed towards God via the *Wali* (Friend of God) is a

[42] Interview with Dr Faiza Mushtaq, a sociologist, conducted on 25th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[43] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.

counter position. As Shaukat (2017)[44] phrases the intra-religious pluralism: "Muslims are arguing with Muslims over the question of worship".[45] What seems to get lost within this ideological feud is the spiritual or esoteric healing that this spiritual begging is giving to those who are at a loss of any other help. If we are to follow this rationale, the shrines are acting as socio-religious centres (Shahzad, 2014) where people are turning to a divine intervention and assistance.

All of the people I interviewed contended that this divine assistance was emanating from God, the Saint was the intercessor and the shrine the medium through which their prayers were being facilitated. The devotees are praying for something that is missing from their lives, it may be a business they want to start up, a marriage, a child, better health or it could be love, something that is as intangible as Sufism itself.

The issue of 'hope' where there would otherwise not be any and the attempt to attain a closeness to God via the Saint has arisen. The Sufi shrines are as Shahzad (2014) and others have stated, socio-religious, offering an esoteric healing.

One of my informant's[46] account about her childless Aunt implies that she was engaging in *Ziyarat* (Visitation) as a form of spiritual healing through the process of prayer. For her Aunt who was childless in the 1960s, in a society where there was and still is so much emphasis on marriage and having a family of your own, visiting the shrine was a last resort, something she was using as a hope. On questioning my informant further about why she herself performs the *Ziyarat* (Visitation), when it is criticized as being an illegitimate practice as some would say that it by passes God's power by entrusting your faith in a Saint, she again reaffirmed this is not a supplication to anyone other than God.

Many of the articles I have read in relation to *Ziyarat* (Visitation) seem to point towards the lower classes with low literacy levels who visit shrines out of ignorance. There may be a large part of such classes and lesser

[44] Interview with Omar Shaukat, a scholar of Islam, conducted on 19th May 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.
[45] Ibidem. An excerpt from an interview on the same day.
[46] Interview with a female devotee conducted on 2nd June 2017, Lahore, Pakistan, as part of an audio-visual project on Sufism.

educated people that visit the shrines but then we are analyzing the phenomenon in a country where the poverty line is 40% and literacy levels are low nationwide, it would be assumed that the larger part of people engaging in any low cost or free activity in the city would include the poor and those of a low socio-economic background. It would therefore, be a reductive stance to make such an assumption. Nawaz Sharif is a frequent visitor as was Benazir Bhutto. In a similar vain, celebrities in Bollywood have been cited as visiting Ajmer Sharif before the release of a film. The common link in the rich or the poor visiting such a spiritual place would be a lack of something and the need for some spiritual assistance, which would heal them spiritually.

The aim above was to present notes from the field explicating the complexities surrounding the debate around *Ziyarat* (Visitation) in an academic sense and to start a discussion using two sides of a spectrum, comprising a dichotomy; one which condemned the practice and the other which legitimized it. The etiquette and rituals surrounding the *Ziyarat* (Visitation) brought it into a more contentious plane whereby what constitutes correct worship of God in Islam was what was being contested.

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Minority Perceptions of Majoritarian Religion: Interpreting Symbolism of Sinhala Buddhism in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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Abstract: In every religion, devotees often employ religious symbols and adapt them into their own socio-political and cultural spectrums. This religious symbolism has been mostly identified as a surface manifestation of contested socio-political spheres. In the context of Sri Lanka, Buddhism which is nurtured and fortified with its core doctrinal teaching and majoritarian protection is no exception. Therefore, the devotional practices of Buddhism are interwoven with the texture of devotees' daily experience and have very intangible manifestation in everyday life. At an analytical level, these popular practices are subjugated by twofold performative domains. One is the *devotional or conventional symbolism* through which the devotees satisfy their devotional and emotional needs by performing various ceremonial and ritual acts. The other is *radical or contemporary symbolism* which manifests a certain religious identity for Buddhists while distinguishing themselves from other religious and ethnic entities. The devotional symbolism largely connected with the use of symbolic objects like Buddhist flag, *Dhamma Chakka*, images of Buddha and his disciples, secret *Bodhi* tree and other audio-visual icons for fulfilling devotional needs. In contrast to the basic rounds of rituals and ceremonies of devotional symbolism in Buddhism, radical symbolism is exposed to a more politicized domain where the conventional Buddhist symbols are being politically reinterpreted and utilized for certain political identity formation. In this line of thoughts, it is evident that contemporary Buddhism is not only fabricated by such ideological and political manifestations but also conceive an active role in politics in Sri Lanka.

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This turn has significantly transformed conventional Buddhist symbolism into more radicalized and self-styled one.

Keywords: Popular Buddhism, Devotional Symbolism, Radical Symbolism, Sinhala Buddhist Ideology.

It has been an inevitable reality in every religion that devotees adapt and assimilate religious practices into their own social and cultural spectrums. For instance Buddhism as a philosophy which discusses the realistic nature of the world from a deep philosophical perspective has been passing through newer socio-political developments in the world. In the case of Sri Lanka, devotional practices of Buddhism are interwoven with the texture of devotees' daily experience and have very intangible manifestation in everyday life. At an analytical level, these popular practices are subjugated by twofold performative domains. One is the *devotional or conventional symbolism* through which the devotees satisfy their devotional and emotional needs by performing various ceremonial and ritual acts. The other is *radical or contemporary symbolism* which manifests a certain religious identity for Buddhists while distinguishing themselves from other religious and ethnic entities. The devotional symbolism largely connected with the use of symbolic objects like Buddhist flag, *Dhamma Chakka*, images of Buddha and his disciples, secret *Bodhi* tree and other audio-visual icons for fulfilling devotional needs. In contrast to the basic rounds of rituals and ceremonies of devotional symbolism in Buddhism, radical symbolism is exposed to a more politicized domain where the conventional Buddhist symbols are being politically reinterpreted and utilized for certain political identity formation.

On the other hand, the conventional symbolic performances are justified by devotional sensibility and establish a certain religiously constructed visual culture in the societies. Some of salient features of this visual culture are its massive exposure and sentimental appellation given by the majoritarian Buddhists. Somehow, what we can observe is that conventional symbolism is politically less sensitive than radical symbolism which is largely shaped by national ideologies. In this scheme of thinking, how these two symbolic cultures generated by Buddhists, particularly can be perceived by non-

Buddhist audience in Sri Lanka become more significant. Therefore, this paper intends to explore how such mainstream symbolic practices shaped and reshaped by both devotional sensibilities and ideological constructions of Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka can affect the sentiments of non-Buddhists in the country. Further this paper argues that minority perceptions on such majoritarian religious performances can create space for contesting religious claims and also would generate latent religious and political tension between Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka.

Genealogy of Sinhala - Buddhist identity

The contemporary outlook of Buddhism in Sri Lanka as the majority's religion has become part of so-called Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and has been largely shaped by popular political connotations. The Buddhism that is practiced in Sri Lanka today is not the same doctrine that is said to have been preached by Gautama Buddha, but one that has undergone many waves of transformation (Uyangoda, 2015). Indeed, due to many of these transformations, contemporary Buddhism has been considerably deviated from its original generic position and conceives political characteristics with multiple manifestations. The scholarly literature on Sinhala-Buddhism shows that there is no single and unified Buddhism and it is differently manifested through diverse of textual, popular, political and ideological means (Uyangoda, 2015).

In early Buddhism, monks renounced materialism and devoted their time to the quest for liberation from the cycle of birth and death, living on the householder's generosity. Monks today, however, conceive a different role for themselves and consider social service (*samajasevaya*) which includes political activity as a key component (Zuhair, 2016, 8).

Somehow, what history evidently suggests is Buddhism was not aloof from mainstream political engagements and ruler had obligatory responsible as the guardian to the established religion. First of all there was the provision, by the state and its citizens, of the wherewithal for the maintenance of the *sangha* (*Bhikku* order). Secondly, there was the use of part of the country's agricultural surplus for the construction of religious edifices and monuments, and thirdly there was the king's duty to protect the

established religion (Silva, 1981, 45). These historical remarks which have been emerged as a basis for contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism can be traced to the *Pali* Chronicles, namely *Dipavamsa* (Chronicle of the Island), *Mahavamsa* (Great Chronicle) and *Culavamsa* (Lesser Chronicle), texts which are unique to Sinhala-Buddhism.

The most influential among these historical texts is the *Mahavamsa*, written around the sixth century C.E. by a monk named Mahanama whose aim was to glorify Buddhism and the rule of Buddhist kings in Anuradhpura (Zuhair, 2016, 11). At the same time, the *Mahavamsa* claims that the 'Sinhalas' (lion people), an Aryan clan which spoke a Sanskrit-based language, were the first to arrive in the island from North India. Indeed, what can be amicably observed today is these historical constructs have created a strong ideological basis for Sinhala-Buddhist identity. Using these historical yardsticks, it can be observed that this Sinhala-Buddhist ideology has been incrementally blended with the political ideologies driven by the political elites in the country over the time.

The recognition of Ceylon as a Sinhalese Buddhist state, calling state protection of Buddhism in 1950's had remarkable impact upon Sri Lankan politics on the basis of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Since 1956, successive Sri Lankan governments dominated by the Sinhalese have sought to protect and establish a link between state and religion (Imtiyaz, 2010, 8). Later, this required the state patronage and foremost position for Buddhism through constitutional means. For instance, the article 9 of the 1978 constitution granted a special place in the constitution for the Buddhist religion, while protecting the religions of the minorities (Ibidem).

Established through such legitimatization, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists developed a sense which sees no distinction between the Sinhala-Buddhist identity and the Sri Lankan identity. For them, other groups can exist in the country and expect to be treated with respect as long as they acknowledge the supremacy of Buddhism and the primacy of the Sinhala language and culture (Zuhair, 2016, 11).

In the cotemporary context, the Sinhalese account for nearly three quarters of the population while the Tamils account for less than a quarter. Moreover, the Sinhalese are well aware of their historical tradition, which

goes back to ancient times, that they took possession of the island in the time of the Buddha (Deegalle, 2006, 28). Therefore, such historically constructed consciousness of Sinhala-Buddhist people for their political claims is by no means unrealistic.

Orthodox Buddhist symbolism

To a large extent, there is an exploration of Theravada Buddhist attitudes inpreventing physical violence as understood by the Pali canonical literature and finding ways in creating peace in Sri Lanka (Deegalle, 2006, 1). It is possible to identify two key texts - the *Dhammapada* and the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* - to demonstrate that Theravada Buddhism has a sound basis in denouncing violence and its condemnation of violence is founded on strong moral and ethical teachings as taught by the Buddha.

Primarily, Buddhist philosophy lies on the moral principle of *ahimsa* which literally mean to non-violence and it is considered to be the most important in both theoretical and rudimental aspects of Buddhism. Similarly, this principle occupies a considerable position in orthodox Buddhist symbolism which is largely compatible with the traditional Buddhist teaching. Somehow, what is visible as objective symbols in Buddhist temples, *Bodhi* tree, Buddha's sculptures, Buddhist flags and other devotional rituals performed by devotees (*Bodhi pooja*, meditation, *pirith* chanting) are not mere ceremonious or superstitious practices, but they are intellectual constructions fascinated by deeper teachings and mental culture of Buddhism.

On the other hand, traditional and philosophical meaning embodied in these Buddhist symbols is noteworthy to understand and justify the virtues of Buddhists. For example *Bodhi* tree is the symbol of enlightenment while Buddha's footprint represents the auspicious characteristics of the Buddha. Further, sculptures reflect Buddha's both great spiritual and physical personality while Buddhist flag illuminates the six colors emanated from Buddha's body. Particularly, the meaning of *Dhamma Chakka* is connected to four noble truths and the noble eightfold path which are the core philosophical teachings of Buddhism.

From a conventional sense, Buddhism, being non-violent and tolerant doctrine, does not denounce external forms of reverence (Narada, 1973), but it advances a crucial contrast between symbolic adherence and actual spiritual engagements. Similarly, Buddhism advices its devotees to seek for the right balance between symbolically driven practices and the other religious performances that are mainly focused on spiritual gaining.

This orthodox symbolism in Buddhism has some salient features. Firstly, the relative space for spiritual and devotional gaining in the orthodox symbolic practices is high and there is less space for political or ideological consciousness. Secondly, these symbolic practices are fabricated by the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and are mostly aligned with the spiritual framework adopted by Buddhism. Thirdly, this traditional symbolism is a devotionally oriented and inward looking practice which largely seeks for spiritual development. Therefore, the impact of this traditional symbolic engagement on non-Buddhist communities is relatively less. In other words, due to high spiritual meaning attached to these symbolic activities, they are politically passive and morally enriched.

It has already been observed that this orthodox symbolism in Buddhism advances non-violent approach and it primarily rests on what devotees are intended to spiritually achieve. Hence, traditional symbolic engagements of Buddhism are instrumental to serve devotees' interests and its intervention in the other religious aspects is relatively less. For instance, *Bodhi Pooja* which is a wider devotional practice of popular Buddhism is highly characterized by devotees' faithful imaginations and quest for religious blessings. *Bodhi pooja* can be defined as paying homage to the *Bodhi* tree and it has now become a popular ritual in Sri Lanka (Wickremeratne, 2006, 158). This ceremony is meaningful to Buddhists and fulfils the devotional needs of the pious devotees. Sri Lankan Buddhists believe that powerful deities of the Buddhist pantheon inhabit these trees, and by making offerings and prayers to them they will be blessed and their wishes fulfilled (Ibidem). Therefore, its central concern is to perform devotion towards secret *Bodhi* tree and there are no recognizable elements in *Bodhi Pooja* that provoke the sentiments of the other minority religious However, in the context of popular Buddhism, these devotional activities have become a

symbol representing Buddhism itself and often play active role in faith and piety of devotees.

Symbolism in contemporary Buddhism

As per general perception, the contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhist context is a topic of great debate. If we consider the evolution or the transformation of Buddhism since it dissemination throughout the island nation, a noteworthy fact is the apparent revolution of it. The original version of Buddhism preached by the lord Buddha has been utilized in a revolutionary and radical way. If we consider the symbolism used in Buddhist culture, for example, the *Dhamma Chakra*, the Buddhist flag, even the image and the role of a Buddhist monk has been radicalized. These symbols are being utilized vary widely by many parties to advocate the 'Sinhala-Buddhist ideology' in a political backdrop.

The distressing fact is that the very idea of 'calm, patience, peace, mindfulness and detachment' of the Buddhist philosophy is not being projected by them. Instead of such philosophical stances, these symbols are used and reinterpreted in different ways and are politically manifested. In other words, Buddhism has become politicized and now it is a tool to gain political advantages for various parties. The radical nature of some Buddhist groups bears unhealthy results and circumstances to Buddhism in general. And it carries drastic outcomes.

Buddhism highly advocates 'Peace' but under the present circumstances this very factor has become a question mark. What the general public asserts is that the more Buddhist monks involving in state affairs the more the crux of Buddhism being tarnished. At the same time, radical engagement of Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan politics has created various ambiguities among the minority groups. For instance, the emergence of *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) which was founded by Buddhist monks to promote the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhists and to make Buddhism a guiding principal of state affairs drew much of attention of non- Buddhist communities in the country. The JHU in its first parliamentary elections held on April 2, 2004 won 9 seats out of 225, or 6% of popular vote (Imitiyaz, 2010). From a broader sense, how these Sinhala-Buddhist

political forces used Buddhists symbols are totally different from how they have been used in the conventional Buddhist context. The devotional and secret meaning attached to these symbols are mostly overlaid by political slogans and claims based on Sinhala-Buddhist identity. However, explanations for the growth of such Sinhala-Buddhist identity can be better expressed through two developments.

The first is Sri Lanka's highly competitive and emotionalized-electoral structure, in which political parties outbid their opponents either on the pro-Sinhala-Buddhist or anti-minority policies (Imitiyaz, 2010, 43-44). The massive political rallies, demonstrations and political campaigns organized by JHU had more emotional impact on Sinhala-Buddhist voters while creating certain ambivalences among minority politics. Indeed, such broader Sinhala-Buddhist political network convinced minority politics to rethink of their relative power position in electoral structures and necessitated certain political strategies to encounter the challenges coming from newer political developments. Secondly, this process of recreating Buddhist- Sinhala identity had the intention of addressing the prevailing socio-economic issues in order to create a better position for Sinhala- Buddhist communities by maximizing their relative power position. This had led to a clear dichotomy between Buddhist and non-Buddhist in electoral structure in Sri Lanka and has drastically polarized voters around it.

On the other hand, in 2012, an extreme Sinhala-Buddhist organization called the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) (Buddhist Power Force) was established and created new venue for Sri Lankan politics. With a very short period of time since its establishment, the BBS rose to prominence, and received much attention in the media, both print and electronic, as well as social media, thus managing to capture a significant public space (Zuhair, 2016, 21). Similarly, it drew considerable attention and response from the minority political groups, particularly from Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. One of their key objectives of BBS was to draw attention to the threats faced by the Sinhala race in the face of globalization and uncertainties of minority of politics in Sri Lanka (Ibidem). Based on the political activities of BBS, it can be concluded that many of the conventional Buddhists symbols that are either in verbal or non-verbal

forms have been significantly transformed into a more politicized and radicalized domain.

Conclusion

The contemporary Buddhism is not only fabricated by various ideological and political manifestations but also conceive an active role in politics in Sri Lanka. To make the claim that contemporary Buddhism is more politically sensitized, its symbolic performativity is pertinent. This symbolic performativity has been shaped by both ideologically driven forces and nationalist fringe movements that are largely inclined to mainstream politics in Sri Lanka. The recent turn of Buddhist monks to active political engagements has opted strictly for Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic sentiments. This turn has significantly transformed orthodox Buddhist symbolism to more radicalize and self-styled one.

The orthodox Buddhist symbolism has been primarily constituted by various venerated elements such as *Dhamma Chakka*, images of Buddha and his disciples, Buddhist flags, secret *Bodhi* tree and a variety of other audio-visual icons. Despite deep spiritual meanings and devotional significance attached to such symbols, they are politically passive and are having less sensitivity towards non-Buddhist communities. In contrast, the contemporary Buddhist symbolism has transformed the orthodox Buddhist symbolism and its characteristics in many ways.

The contemporary Buddhist symbolism is politically active and radically manifested one. Similarly it has great impact on how non-Buddhist communities, particularly minority groups perceive the contemporary Buddhist political constellations in the country. This transformation is vividly visible in the vast mobilizations, public demonstrations, publicity campaigns organized by Sinhala nationalist fringe groups and their supporters. These events often draw attention of both media and general public while affecting the sentiments of non-Buddhist audience. On the other hand, these events have ameliorated many of the political responses of minority groups to a greater extent and have created a non-compromising religious-political climate in the country.

Another important feature of this contemporary Buddhist symbolism is that the given covert political support by some political parties to such fringe nationalist groups. Therefore, what is visible in today Sri Lankan context is political elites and politicians often employ emotional symbols such as religion to win and consolidate their political position (Imitiyaz, 2010, 1). Not the conventional Buddhist symbolism, but new Buddhist symbolism generated by self-styled nationalist fringe group such as *Bodhubalasena* and *Ravana Balaya* (Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organizations based in Colombo have various emotional and political impact on minority groups).

Annexe

Figure 1: Buddha's footprint

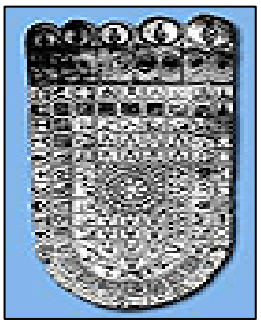

Figure 2: *Dhamma Chakka*

Figure 3: *Secret Bodhi Tree*

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Faith, Fluidity and Famine:
Mahima Movement and the Subversive Subaltern Politics

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Abstract: This paper argues for an understanding of religion as contested 'terrain of the political', where dominance and subversion enter a game of transcendence. While the hegemonic religions attempt to manufacture consent, the fluid faiths of the marginalized emerge as a discursive critique and subversive politics. "Mahima Alekh Dharma", one of the most fascinating and intriguing religious movements of contemporary eastern India, emerged in the late nineteenth century from the womb of a devastating famine. The rebellious religious movement decried idol-worship and discarded the position of Brahmins as the mediators between Gods and human. Through the prism of the Mahima Movement, this paper explores the dialectical nature of subordination and subversion in the religious terrain of the political and attempts explain how these contestations sculpt the present emancipatory politics of the Dalits and Adivasis.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Famine, Social Movement, Cultural Hegemony Dalits, *Adivasis*.

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> "On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value".
>
> Dr. B.R Ambedkar[1]

While scholars of the 'modern' Dalit movements have cherished the arrival of modernity, although, in the form of colonialism impregnating a language of equality, to an erstwhile caste ridden tradition of Indian society[2], this article is an invitation to engage with the moral and material world of the Dalits and *adivasis* to understand faith as a site of subordination and subversion. It encourages moving beyond the binary constructed around the metaphor of 'the Doctor and the Saint', embodying the modern vs. traditional narrative of emancipation of the subaltern.

Through the prism of Mahima Dharma, a nineteenth century rebel religious movement that emerged from the womb of the *N'anka Durbhikshya* (the Great Odisha[3] Famine)[4] and became popular among the lower castes and *adivasis*[5], this article attempts to engage with the enmeshed world of religion and politics embedded in the social, and seeks to understand the emancipatory projects articulated by contesting the epistemology of the hegemonic religious practices. Religion becomes a 'contested terrain'- a site of subordination and subversion.

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[1] Constituent Assembly Debates, 25th November, 1949. Volume 11, Document number 165 Paragraph no. 325.

[2] See for example, Zelliot, E. (2001), Omvedt, G. (1994), Guru G. (2007).

[3] Odisha (earlier known as Orissa) is a State in eastern part of India. While the eastern boundary of the State is adjacent the coast of Bay of Bengal, the Western border is demarked by the Eastern plateau of India.

[4] *N'anka Durbhikshya* (the Great Odisha Famine) occurred in 1866, an official estimate counted 400000 people died despite the British Government relief measures (Odisha Famine: A documentation of Primary resources, p. XIII).

[5] Indigenous Tribes.

When the Doctor Became Saint

'I will not die a Hindu'[6], Babasaheb[7] Ambedkar[8] announced at Yeola[9] in 1935[10]. The announcement came as 'shock to most of India'[11]. In a climate where religious symbolism dominated the political narratives of nationalism, the rejection of a majoritarian religion was monumental and went quite contradictory to the Gandhian perception of the problem of untouchability as a problem of self - the collective Hindu self (Nagraj, 2010: 35)[12].

A year later, Ambedkar published the 'Annihilation of Caste'[13] in which he unraveled cognate connections between caste and Hinduism, to the extent that the destruction of later is indispensable for the annihilation of the former. Eloquently expressed as a metaphorical tussle between 'Self-Purification vs. Self-Respect'[14], this paradigmatic difference between the approaches of Gandhi and Ambedkar to the question of caste has been perceived as a dichotomy between 'the doctor and the saint'[15].

> While the Doctor was searching for a more lasting cure, the Saint journeyed across India distributing a placebo (Roy, 2016: 130).

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[6] Omvedt, G., 2004, p. 61.

[7] Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is popularly known as Babasaheb, a juxtaposition of *Baba* - a Holy Man, and *Saheb - an English educated man.*

[8] Arguably, the most important political figure in contemporary India, Ambedkar was born into an untouchable caste. His educational achievements are a source of inspiration and pride for millions of Dalits in India. Master of Arts and doctorate in economics from Columbia University, master of science and doctor of science in economics from London School of Economics and Political Science, Barrister-at-Law, Grey's Inn, London. Above all, a revolutionary - crusader against the Caste system.

[9] Yeola is a municipal council in Nashik district of Maharashtra - a State in the Western Coasts of India.

[10] This announcement was part a speech delivered to the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola in Maharashtra.

[11] Zelliot, E., 2005, pp. 3-6.

[12] Gandhi maintained that untouchability is a problem of perception and needs an effort to change the minds of the Hindus. Caste was understood by him as a unique form of division of labour, peculiar to Indian Society.

[13] Originally a speech written for a Conference of Jat Pat Todak Mandal (Society for Abolition of Caste Systen), could not be delivered as the organizers thought the speech was too radical. Later on published as a book.

[14] Nagraj, 2010, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 21-61.

[15] Arundhati Roy titles the introduction to the a critical edition of *Annihilation of Caste* as 'the Doctor and the Saint'. Anand S. eds, 2016.

Nagraj (2010: 26), on the contrary, proposed a dialectical rather than a dichotomous reading. That both the personalities and paradigms, while clashing with each other, also shaped each other.

> Babasaheb had always opposed treating the question of untouchability as a religious matter, but after his engagement with Gandhiji he accepted the primacy of religion […]. Yeola Declaration of Ambedkar was an act of recognizing the legitimacy of the Gandhian mode while rejecting the choice for which the solution was sought.

I suggest understanding the announcement as a culmination of frustrating existential journey which surfaced as a rage in the 'Annihilation of Caste' to a realization on the 25th of November 1949 expressed in his speech to the Constituent assembly, where Ambedkar made a nuanced disjunction between the 'political' and the 'social'[16]. He seemed to have realized the limitations of an emancipatory project in the realm of 'formal electoral politics', to invoke Habermas, a *systemworld* solution to an issue that is rooted in the *lifeworld*[17].

This realization resulted out of a long struggle with the politics of representation[18]. After the announcement Ambedkar set out to explore the possibilities for an emancipatory project in the realm of the social. His later writings, particularly *The Untouchables*, would be written "in memory of 'Nandnar', 'Ravidass' and 'Chokhamela'"[19], which showed his intense engagement with the literature of the Bhakti Movements[20].

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[16] Dr. Ambedkar's Speech at the Constituent Assembly Debates, 25th November 1949. Volume 11, Document number 165 Paragraph no. 325, available at: http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Debates/cadebatefiles/C25111949.html, accessed on 9th of March 2018.

[17] Habermas, J. 1987, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 2, *Lifeworld and Systemworld: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 113-198.

[18] Bandopadhyay, 2000, 'Transfer of Power and the Crisis in Dalit Politics in India, 1945-47', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol: 34, No. 4, pp. 893-954.

[19] Ambedkar, B.R, 1979, 'The Untouchables Who are they and Why They Became Untouchables?', *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7, pp. 233-382, New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Gvt. of India.

[20] Bhakti Movements refers to an eclectic tradition of faith that emphasized devotion and opposed rituals and institutions as path to salvation. These movements were promoted by

This is quite contrary to his earlier position when he had advised against construction of Chokhamela temple at Tryambak[21]. I believe, this engagement was both to search for an indigenous tradition of equality, as well as, to reconstruct history for a modern Dalit identity. The Doctor had already marched on a path of Sainthood - the path of conversion.

Fluid Faith: The Sunya and Apocalypse

'Mahima Alekh Dharma' is one of the most intriguing religious movements of contemporary Odisha emerged in the late nineteenth century, founded by an abstemious, itinerant ascetic saint popularly known as Mahima Goswami. The wandering Saint, set up his Ashrama in Joranda, a small town in the district Dhenkanala in central Odisha with the help of the then feudatory king[22]. Bhima Bhoi, a 19th century rebellious radical saint poet of tribal origin, played a crucial role in popularizing the new cult by writing the complex philosophy of Mahima Dharma into beautiful poems (Boli). His language appealed the masses as it was colloquial, easily understood and joyously recited by common people. This new dharma decried idol-worship and discarded the position of Brahmins as the mediators between Gods and human beings (Banerjee-Dube and Beltz, 2008: 13-15).

The social base of Mahima dharma was constituted by the subordinate groups-members of untouchable caste[23] and tribes[24]. There are very few historical records of Mahima movement, mostly documented by colonial

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yogis (renouncers) who wandered around the landscape spreading the messages of devotion.

[21] Zelliot, E., 2005, *Ambedkar's Conversion*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, p. 3.

[22] Dhenkanal, now a district in the State of Odisha, was a feudatory State during the colonial rule. In 1960s, Raja Bhagirath Mahindra Bahadur was the King of Dhenkanal (Odisha Famine, 2016).

[23] Beltz (2007:98) finds more than 99% of Mahima Dharma followers belonging to *Ganda Pana* caste. *Ganda Panas* are the lowest of the low untouchable caste in Odisha.

[24] Majority of followers of Mahima Dharma in the Hill regions belong to various tribal groups belonging to the Kandha tribes. Bhima Bhoi also belonged to the same tribal group.

administration. However, hagiographic literature, myths and legends, mostly circulating in the oral traditions, give us important accounts of the emergence, growth and development of the religion. In fact hagiography becomes far more interesting than history. Analyzing hagiography and history symbolically, I attempt to pull a thread to connect the fluid faith of Mahimites[25] with that of famine and the way fluidity contested the cultural logic of the dominant religion.

Mahima dharma believed in, and disseminated the idea of ultimate formlessness of the divine power and encouraged worshiping the *sunya* (Void) or *Alekh*[26]. The God is ultimate Void and is without form and attributes, compassionate, and can be apprehended only through mystic intuition (Rath, 1994: 23). The God is 'often addressed as *Alekh Parama Brahman,* which stands for the absolute that cannot be defined' (Baumer, 2010: 42). As Bhima Bhoi wrote,

> The one who is the inexpressible Brahma is beyond the imagination of any form […] the secret lies in the nameless[27].

The concept of *sunya* (Void) manifests in various traditions of devotion in both Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. However, the most unique aspect of Mahima Dharma's articulation of the Void is the conception of *Mahasunya* (the ultimate void). In the following Centos of *Stutichintamani*[28] Bhima Bhoi expressed this thought:

> Nothing did exist then.
> Neither the earth nor elements.
> Not even time: origin or dissolution. [29]

[25] The follower of Mahima Dharma.
[26] Etymologically from the Sanskrit word *Alekshya,* which means *without characteristics* (Baumer, 2010: 42).
[27] Bhima Bhoi, *Bhajanamala*, quoted in Baumer, B, and Balz J. 2010, *Bhima Bhoi*, *Verses from the Void: Mystic Poetry of an Oriya Saint*, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 289.
[28] The Jewel of Spiritual Hymns.
[29] Centos VI, Satpathy, S. 2006. *Bhima Bhoi*: *Prayers and Reflection*, Bhubaneswar: Rupanter, p. 47.

First, Bhima Bhoi's writings seemed to have conceived the creation of everything from nothing. This ultimate void is origin of life; which not only exists outside but also within. Hence the search for the *Param Brahma* - the ultimate source of truth - must then begin 'inside out'. Secondly, it suggested that life is like a smoke, as it originated from the great void, will dissolve into the same. In fact, apocalypse had an equivalent significant presence in Mahima philosophy (Satpathy, 2006: 30). The third and most distinguishing aspect of Mahima philosophy is the idea of *Sunya,* presented in the writings of Bhima Bhoi which is both impersonal and personal conception of the ultimate supreme being (Baumer, 2008: 159-160; Baumer and Beltz, 2010: 44-45). Bhima Bhoi expressed this concept of *sunya* as a personal god which has the twin attribute of 'being nowhere' and 'being everywhere'.

As Mahapatra (2017: 18) explains this complex symbolism through the metaphor that emphasized that higher reality

> [...] of fire and the object that was aflame. Fire like air does not have a physical being, a dimension, a shape or form. It always assumed the shape and form of the object which was burning. Higher realizations of life are the realizations of the 'being' of fire and not 'becoming' of the objects which burn.

These ideas also resonated the philosophy of the *nirguna* tradition[30] of fifteenth century north India, such as Kabir, Ravidass, Guru Nanak etc. Baumer (2010: 45) explained that the idea of *Sunya,* has a lot of similarities with tantric Buddhist, Saivism[31], as well as, the spiritual tradition of Nath Yogis of Gorakhnaths[32]. There are, however, no historical evidences of any direct linkages or borrowing from these traditions by the Mahimites and if we go by the hagiographical writings and legends, it is hardly possible that

[30] A tradition within the Bhakti (devotion) movement, that believed in non-attributive perception of God.
[31] A tradition within Hinduism which worships Shiva.
[32] Another devotional tradition that emerged in the Northern India, has a significant presence in Indian religious and spiritual as well as political landscape.

Bhima Bhoi, would have known about the existence of such traditions. There are attempts to locate Mahima philosophy in the historical and philosophical traditions of India. Scholars locate this conception existing within the cultural traditions of Odisha, in the writings of the *Pancasakhas.*[33] Escheman called Mahima Dharma an autochthonous movement and located the emergence of the movement in time, as part of global surge of protests against rituals and mediations (Escheman, 1978: 375, Mahapatra, 2017: 19).

The Mahima movement should not be equated with the grand projects of the 'Indian renaissance'[34], largely led by the newly Western educated Indian intellectuals, who were mostly men (Mangharam, 2011: 82). These reform movements sought to reinterpret the mythical texts of ancient India to recreate a 'modern' Hinduism. While these new, Western inspired ideas reinterpretation of Indian tradition, the Mahima Dharma critiqued and reinterpreted the scriptures with its references to a peculiar Oriya tradition which had already expressed similar thoughts a century before.

> Mahima Dharma seemed to be inspired from a rich and old tradition of 'apocalyptic' writing in Odisha known as the *Malika*[35] (Betlz, 2008: 81).

Mahima Dharma is, in the words of Eschmann (2008: 32), paradoxically an anti-tradition movement within the tradition.

This (anti)tradition contested the absolute power of the Kings, the Brahmins and the deities (Banerjee-Dube, 2009: 43). Interestingly, while, the hegemonic Brahminic tradition of the Jagannath religion[36] is increasingly been associated with Oriya identity and nationalism, the appeal of Mahima Dharma has also grown in popularity.

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[33] The Five Friends (Five Poets, Achytananda Das, Ananta Das, Balaram Das, Jasabanta Das, Jagannath Das) of fifteenth century Odisha who wrote for the masses in their colloquial Oriya, bring complex philosophy to the masses.

[34] The nineteenth century religious reform movements in Indian Society.

[35] *Malika* is a book of predictions written by Saints and Seers.

[36] In Odisha, the Jagannath religion is synonymous to Brahminism. The three deities of Jagannath - *Purusouttam* (the ideal man, Balabhadra, the elder brother and Subhdra, the sister) - are well known as the contemporary symbol of pride of Oriya identity. Historically, this tradition has played an important role in the process of legitimization of politics in the region, for details readings, Eschamann et al, eds. (1986).

The practices and asceticism of Mahimites resonates a fluid faith - a collage of or rainbow of ascetic practices.

> For example, nothing illustrates it better than the idea of prostrating to Alekh seven times in the morning and five times in the evening which - if seen along with the daily eating routine[37] - suggests influence of Islam. Again, the imprints of Christian missionaries and their activities in colonial Odisha can be said to have had influences by looking at the zeal through which the movement was propagated and spread, which included a network of tungis (viz, outposts). It also incorporated the logic of 'sin' and 'confession', with the sanyasis confessing to the chief patriarch[38].

Bhima Bhoi also indicated the perception of people about him. In Boli (Centos) XX, he wrote the following.

> People abuse me, call me a Christian [...]. I compose hymns for the benefit of the world.
>
> Yet, they call me a ghost [...]. His Guru belongs to the Jati of the Moslems. He eats of a potshed"[39].

The Blindness of Being: The Power of Poetry

Bhima Bhoi (1850-1895) was at once a mystic and a rebel. His poetry reflect the tension of a mind that experienced, in almost equal measure, the ecstasy of a true saint and anguish over the inequality and suffering human has to live through. Since Mahima Dharma didn't have formal written version of philosophical manifestations, Bhima Bhoi took it upon himself to articulate one. He composed devotional verses that conveyed the spiritual message of the cult to the laity; as a result, there the mass base for the incipient movement grew exponentially (Satpathy, 2006: 11).

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[37] Regarding the eating habits it is of particular importance to note that the Mahimites do not accept food after sun set.

[38] Pati (2010: 47).

[39] Eating from the same potshed is considered to be a cultural trait of the Muslims. Boli (Centos) XX, Stuti Chintamani, translated by Satpathy, S. 2006, Bhima Bhoi: *Prayers and Reflection: selections from 'Stutichintamani'*, translated from the Oriya by Siddhart Satpathy, Bhubaneswar: Rupanter, pp. 76-78.

[40] Nayak, P.M, 2001, p. 99.

> Bhima Bhoi was the protestant poet, who wielded his pen against the prevailing social injustices, religious bigotry and caste discrimination.[40]

Like his *Guru*, the hagiographical accounts of Bhima are cryptic and presented in codified manner (Baumer and Beltz, 2010: 21). It is conventional assumption in Odisha that he was born into a tribal community and received no formal education. He was also an orphan and said to be congenitally blind (Rath, 1994: 23). The birth of Bhima Bhoi is a matter of great deal of controversy. While his place of birth remains a mystery, what is more mysterious is the controversy surrounding his parents. Some believe that he was an *Ayonisambhuta* - a person who is not born out of a womb - *ajanma* (Jena, 2012: 19). This line of belief adds to the mystic element to his personality as somebody who was born divine destined.

The divine origin of the saint poet is substantiated by reference to *Kalpasahinta* and *Adisanhita,* written by Achyutananda Das, one of the famous fifteenth century *pancasakhas* (Five Friends). Achyutananda seemed to have predicted the birth of Bhima as a reincarnation of Radha[41]. Others believe that Bhima Bhoi was a child found abandoned by a *Kandha*[42] family. Whatever might be the case one thing is clear from his poems that Bhima Bhoi's birth and his childhood was painful and full of misery. He talked about it at length in *Stutichintamani* - his biographical poems.

While, Bhima Bhoi's Boli (Centos) in *Stutichintamani* have verses that establish his blindness, the same text also claimed that he saw his *Guru*[43]. According to Nayak (2001:102):

> Bhima Bhoi is himself responsible for these confusions […]
>
> *Mahima Vinod* (*The Travelogue of Mahima Swami*)[44], his only work that contained passages of natural descriptions, were 'largely imaginary

[41] Radha was the lover of Krishna in Mahabharata. The Radha-Krishna affair is a much celebrated narrative of Bhakti movement in India. Sahu, K., 2011, *Bhaktakabi Bhima Bhoi,* Cuttack: Dharma Grantha Store, pp. 7-10.
[42] *Kandha* is the name of a tribal community in Odisha.
[43] Panigrahi (2003) p. 59.
[44] Mahima Vinod is the travelogue of Mahima Goswami, written in peotic form by Bhima Bhoi. Bhima Bhoi seemed to have composed the verses while listening to his Guru's account.

> and repetitive, and his occasional delineation of the abode of the Void may be characterized by the flight of his fancy'[45].

The question still remains, was Bhima Bhoi physically blind, or what he mentioned in the verses is a state of 'blindness of being' - not able to see the divine - the *Param Bhraman*. Even Homer, the Greek poet is considered to be blind, but somehow could see through his inner eyes (Baumer and Beltz, 2010: 34-35). In my view the contrasting claims in hagiographical accounts are ways of appropriation. If Bhima is an incarnation of God, then he cannot be born into a *Kandha* (tribal) family. If he is a *Kandha*, he has to be blind in order to see the ultimate being. Without a deformity the tribal cannot be associated with divine.

Bhima Bhoi enjoys a pivotal position in the rich Oriya literature of resistance. 'For in Bhima Bhoi', writes Nayak (2001: 118),

> [...] as in Aurobindo[46] or Wordsworth, feeling and thought, emotion and ratiocination, poetry and philosophy are inextricably blended.

Bhima was a relentless writer and singer. He wrote several voluminous collections of poetry, which he used to sing as well. *Stutichintamani,* his philosophical autobiography, was a collection of cantos is the most popular of his writings, laced with deep inner existentialism, carried a tone of rebellion to the social inequalities. These poems of Bhima Bhoi have become integral part of Odisha popular culture.

According to Satpathy (2006:12),

> [...] formulated in the nineteenth century, amazingly continue to appeal to the different sections of a large number of present day 'consumers'. From the street side hawher's shop along with crime thrillers to 'romantic' novels[47],

to various archives in educational and religious institutions, these cantos move the masses, engage the academics and more over lend itself to

[45] Nayak, P.M, 2001, p. 102.
[46] Sri Aurobindo was a philosopher and a significant leader of Indian nationalism, later became a Saint poet and spiritual reformer.
[47] This is the level of the popularity of his poems.

alternative healing practices. He had a unique style of conveying the complex epistemological and ontological ideas in simple earthly language of the common people.[48] In his poems, Bhima Bhoi seemed to have mourned the loss of human values and degeneration of humanity and pleads for the ultimate void to rescue the world from its incessant degeneration (Das, 1996: 8-11; Nepak, 1996: 23).

Bhima Bhoi had unprecedented poetic acumen and was a charimatic poet.

> If *Stutichintamani* contains chapters of twenty couplets where each line carries twenty letters and *Brahma Nirupana Gita* comprised twelve chapters in couplets where each line contained twelve letters. Most of his writings were in dialogical form, quite similar to Phule[49]'s *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) (Deshpande, 2002:47).

Bhima's earliest work, *Nirbeda Sadhana*, is a dialogue between Mahima Goswami and Govinda Baba (incarnation of Jagannath). While the latter is querying, the Guru is clarifying, quite similar to Phule's *Gulamgiri* in which Dhondiba[50] is asking questions to be answered by Phule. In case of Bhima, the dialogue between the *Guru* and *Shisya*[51] continued in *Brahma Nirupama Gita*, and *Srutrinisedha Gita* (Nayak, 2001:108; Deshpande, 2001:49). *Astaka Bihari Gita* is the book of apocalypse, in which Bhima follows a unique style of writing. This book is a cluster of octaves, where the order of the alphabet maintained in the first three octaves is reversed in the last three. The theme of the cycles of birth and death thus is indicated through the structure of his work (Nayak, 2001: 109-110).

The poems of Bhima Bhoi reflected a concern of the misery and melancholy of people arising out of the materialistic condition. It must be noted here that similar concerns existed in the writings of both Phule and Marx[52]. Besides being a poetic genius, Bhima Bhoi was also a critique of

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[48] Bala, R. 1996, *Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi,* Cuttack*: Sarala Sahitya Sansada,* Odisha Book Store, p. 30.
[49] Phule, Jyotirao Govind Rao, a nineteenth century leader of the Dalit Movements in Maharashta, for more see Despande, 2002, O'Halon, 1985.
[50] A fictitious character who poses questions that Phule answers.
[51] Disciple.
[52] Deshpande, 2001: 21.

colonial modernity. *Stutichintamani,* associated the commodification of the forests in the Eastern Ghats of India as a result of the *Firangi*[53] military aggression with massive scale deforestation (Satpathy, 2006: 22). This degeneration of nature finds a startling description by this ingenious poet who turned the predicate into subject and embodied the nature that enabled him to portray its anxiety over its own wellbeing.

The following lines from *Stutichintamani*, which is about the prayers of the grass and trees to the God;

> The blade of the grass prays,
> O Lord, let the cow graze me,
> but let me not be rooted out;
> let me not be burnt in fire.[54]

Hegemony vs. Subversion of the Subalterns

The Jagannath religion remains a constant point of contestation in the Mahimite hagiography and legends. Jagannath is believed to be the first disciple of Mahima Goswami. In *Nirbeda Sadhana*, the *Anadi Purusa* or the Supreme Being is introducing Lord Jagannath to Bhima Bhoi as the human incarnation of the Vishnu whose abode is Jagannath Temple at Puri. When he learnt about the incarnation of the Supreme Being, he left all the luxuries of the Big Temple and came in hurry and asked the Supreme Being to accept him as a disciple[55]. As soon as Lord Jagannath was converted by Mahima Goswami, all his sins as an incarnation were eliminated, and he was baptized as Govinda Baba. This is how Lord Jagannath was absorbed into the Mahima tradition (Behera, 1997: 2096). There seems to be a clear-cut contestation with the Jagannath religion and a critique of its rituals and the cultural practices that was legitimizing a power nexus between the

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[53] *Firangi*, is a popular word in Hindi and many regional languages, which refers to a foreigner, especially a British white man.

[54] Boli (Centos) XIII, *Stutichintamani*, Satpathy, S. 2006, translated by Sathapathy, S. 2006, Bhima Bhoi: *Prayers and Reflection*, Bhubaneswar: Rupanter, p. 61.

[55] *Nirbeda Sadhana,* p. 3*,* in Sahu, B., 2011, *Bhaktakabi Bhima Bhoi Granthabali,* Cuttack: Dharma Grantha Store.

Brahmins and the Kings (Deo, 2015: 7). In *Stutichintamani*, there is direct attack on the idol worship of wooden structure[56].

> Behold now the Vaisnav form. Listen to its wondrous tale. The Daru-pratma, the deities and idols are now buried deep in the earth.[57]

On 1st March 1881, a significant incident occurred, which testifies the contestation of Mahima Dharma's opposition to the hegemony of the Brahminism as Jagannath culture in Odisha. A group of 15 people (12 men and 3 women) forcibly entered the Jagannath Temple, carrying earthen pots of cooked rice, with the intention of burning the three idols. This group was believed to have come from Sambalpur located in Western Odisha. They claimed that God has disappeared from the wooden idol of the Jagannath, but people still worship these idols blindly instead of Satya Mahima Dharma. It was also reported that these fifteen men and women were part of larger group.

However, this group was overpowered by the priests of Puri, but the tussle resulted in the death of a person named as *Dasaram* (Deo, 2015: 37). All the men and women were arrested and were imprisoned. Bhima Bhoi, was alleged to be the mastermind of this attack. The middle class based newspapers and weeklies 'framed' Bhima, as a man having 'illicit relationship with women and a fraudulent leader struggling to keep his mass appeal intact' (Satpathy, 2006: 19). Due to its overwhelming adherence among the lower castes, classes, questions were asked about the worth and contribution of this Dharma in Society (Satpathy, 2006: 19).

Religion, Politics and Cultural Hegemony

The attack on Jagannath temple is probably one of the very few documented histories of Mahima Dharma. The colonial documentation termed these people as 'fanatics'[58]. Utkala Dipika, a local weekly in

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[56] The three idols of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are made out of wood.

[57] Centos XX, Stuti Chintamani, translated by Sathapathy, S. 2006, Bhima Bhoi: *Prayers and Reflection*, Bhubaneswar: Rupanter, p. 84.

[58] See for example, Buckland, C.E, 1902, *Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors: A Narrative of Principal Events and Public Measures During their Period of Office. 1854-1898*, Vol. II, Calcutta: Kedarnath Bose.

Oriya[59], reported 'the Lord of the Universe is in danger' echoing the middle class apprehensions of Odisha society (Deo, 2015: 39, Nayak, 2001: 105, Banerjree-Dube, 2009: 43). The attack is a glaring evidence of Mahima Dharma's resistance to the increasing Hindutvasation of Odisha society, through the promotion Jagannath culture.

Although Odisha is predominantly a tribal society, yet non-tribal upper caste minority population have seized the positions of power. 'Local chiefs of obscure origins' have played an important role in this process. These chiefs in order to legitimize their rule over a largely tribals population, became champions of 'Hinduism' by inviting Brahmins to their courts. These Brahmins, in turn, cooked myths about royal genealogies of the local chiefs. This sacred-secular power nexus of the Brahmins and Kings, developed a strategy of acculturation, by appropriating the *adivasi* culture and faiths into the fold of Hinduism. The local deities of the *adivasis* were given royal patronage and the mythology of the kings being the servants of these *adivasi* Gods were floated for legitimization (Deo, 2015: 8-21).

This acculturation was accompanied with peasantization of the *adivisis* The idols of Puri temple once known as *patitapabana* (Savior of the Down trodden), the *Dinabandu* (friend of the weaker sections), was elevated to *mahapurusha* (great man) and *purushauttama* (ideal man). Subsequently, the *sabara devata* (Lord of the *Adivasi*) became *Rastra Devata* (Dash, 1996: 360; Deo, 2015: 38).

When the Sultan of Bengal took over Odisha in the 16th century, he adopted a confrontationist approach. The deputy of Sultan of Bengal, named as Kalapahada, burnt down the three idols that created adverse sentiments among the people of Odisha not only towards the Sultanate but also towards Islam in general. Mughals also captured Odisha in 1580, but failed to penetrate the deep forests Western Odisha. Mughals adopted a strategy of settlement in which the fertile plains of Coastal region were taken over by them for direct management. Puri was declared as crown land. They appointed 23 *Garhjats* (local chiefs) who remained autonomous with an

[59] The people of Odisha speak a language called Oriya, which is one among many languages existing in Indian society.

annual fee to the Mughals. The King of Khurda[60] was appointed as the *Gajapati*[61] (patron) of Puri and the head of the temple. The King of Khurda applied the age old proven strategy by renewing the cult of Jagannath. He invited Brahmins from outside and settled them in Puri. New mythology was floated for a new process of hegemonization (Deo, 2015: 25-26).

From 16th century onwards, Oriya literature projected Jagannath as the Lord of Odisha (Dash, 1978: 361).Towards the end of nineteenth century, the *Rastra Devata* (Lord of the Empire) was secularized after the fall of the empire, and was associated with Oriya nationalism in its formative phases. One of the prime reasons for this association was the historical role; this culture had played in incorporating the *adivasis* into a process of homogenization. The Oriya nationalism, the new homogenizing force, banked on the same age old strategy of homogenization. These factors provided a condition for the association of Jagannath with Oriya nationalism and Jagannath culture as the predominant national culture of Odisha. The Raja-Brahmin nexus successfully evaded onslaughts of time in the form of invasions of the Mughals and the British colonial power.

Mahima Dharma emerged as a counter-hegemonic movement against the domination of this raja-brahmin nexus. It emerged as a movement to address the issues and concerns of the Dalits and *adivasis*. Religion became a 'contested terrain', where subordination and domination was confronted by a fluid faith that arose from the material context of the subaltern population The story of Mahima Swami's meet with an *adivasi* in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha, help us symbolically decipher this counter-hegemonic project. While meditating at Kapilas, a tribal *Sabara*[62] named as Sadananda from a nearby village accidently saw Mahima Goswami and lost his sense overwhelmed by the radiance of the Saint. Mahima Goswami brought him back to senses with his enigmatic touch and accepted the request of Sadananda to accept fruits and wood for the sacred fire in that particular spot (Jena, 2012: 6-7).

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[60] A district of Odisha, earlier a local kingdom.

[61] *Gajapati* is an entitlement awarded to the King of Puri, because the King of Puri automatically becomes the head of the temple.

[62] The name of a Tribal community in Odisha.

Mahima Swami earlier revealed himself at Puri, and then went to Kapilas. While Puri has been an epicenter of Vaisnavism, Kapilas is a famous pilgrimage of Saivaism[63], where he met this tribal. One can symbolically decipher the movement of Mahima Swami as a movement from the mainstream society to address the issues and concerns of the *adivasis*. Similarly, Bhima Bhoi's establishment of an Ashram in Khaliapali at Sonepur can be understood as again a further move to reach out to the *adivasis*. Sonepur was a feudatory state with majority *adivasis* population, yet dominated by minority Brahmins. Bhima's movement to Khaliapali, like Mahima Swami's movement to Kapilas, is extremely political act of subversion.

Famine, Food and the Faith

Just after the British conquered in 1804, a series of famines plagued Odisha. The frequency and duration was alarming - almost every alternative year[64], for more than half a century, suggesting a complete collapse of the economic system of a region that grew under the shadows of Bengal Presidency. The poverty of Odisha virtually remained conjectural cornerstone for the growth of the colonial capitalism in Calcutta, The famine - *Na'anka Durviksha*[65] devastated Odisha in the year 1866. While famines were not new to Odisha, it would not be an exaggeration to state that *Na'anka Durviksha* is the highpoint of a famine-ridden economy and society on the verge of extinction due to hunger and starvation[66]. This does not mean that large scale starvation deaths were/ is alien to Indian

[63] Saivaism has been a popular faith among the *adivasi* population.

[64] Starting from 1806, 1808, 1809, 1817, 1828, 1836, 1837, and 1842 as documented in Odisha Famine - Na'anka (1865-1866): *A Documentation of Primary Resources*, 2016, Bhubaneswar: Odisha State Archieves, p. xv.

[65] As it occurred on the ninth year of Raja Divyasingh Deva, the Gajapati of Puri's ascendance to power hence *Na'anka*. Also known as the Great Famine of Odisha.

[66] The colonial administration reports blame several factors resulting in famine; crop failure due to premature cessation of rainfall, frequent settlements, unregulated export of food grains, geographical isolation of Odisha, absence of suitable means of transport and communication, inherent defects of British administration, lack of irrigation facility and absence of a trading class. Odisha Famine - Na'anka (1865-1866): *A Documentation of Primary Resources*, 2016, Bhubaneswar: Odisha State Archieves, p. xv.

landscape. If death caused by lack of food to a large scale population can be defined as famine, are we not in a permanent state of famine?

What I attempt here is to question the dualism of idealism vs. materialism, especially in the context of religion and faith, and delve into the enmeshed domain of material and moral that produce a *lifeworld* which gives strength for survival in the event of acute human misery. Food is crucial to a hermeneutic of famine. While food envelops the entire materialistic logic of existence, it is also coerced by cultural connotations of consumption. An account of famine is inadequate without the cognition of the convulsions in cultural domain. Instead of a conventional 'economic history' of famine, what I have attempted to explore the experiential aspects of this colossal human misery and how a religion emerged from the womb of this wretched condition.

The data available of this famine is only for the regions which were directly under British control[67]. The compilation of 'primary resources'[68] on the great famine' does not have any information of the tributary states[69] and their condition. The postcolonial historians, take shelter in language of conventional economic history and landholding patterns to argue that the condition of these states were different as they were not subjected to predatory practices of revenue, hence were not badly hit by Famine[70].

This overemphasis on the critique of colonialism and 'modern' legal rational administration ends up giving a lot of leverage to both the autonomy and glorification of the pre-colonial / feudal forces. The fact that labour, in these states was subjected to layers of expropriation does not find a place in their analysis. Dhanagare (1974) while discussing the social condition of the Hyderabad, the largest princely states during the British colonial rule, gave a picture of the extreme condition of misery of the

[67] The British kept the fertile coastal regions of Odisha, under their direct control. The relatively unproductive and inaccessible Hill areas were controlled through the local rulers. These chiefs worked as agents of deforestation of the tribal forests and became mediators of the British exploitation of the tribes (Deo, 2015: 29).
[68] Odisha Famine - Na'anka (1865-1866): *A Documentation of Primary Resources*, 2016, Bhubaneswar: Odisha State Archieves.
[69] The states ceded by the British colonial administration.
[70] Banerjee-Dube (2012: 40).

peasants and landless labourers. The argument that these regions were not 'badly hit' during 1866, can only be sustained if we propose that they were already in a state of famine. I attempt to show the rise of Mahima Dharma as a popular movement in the context of this famine. The temporal coincidence is too imposing to ignore the relationship between the two.

Two sources become lifeline in constructing this account. First, the book of primary resources published by the State Archives of Odisha has an autobiographical account of a person named Ananta Das. This account is a poetic recollection of the famine. Ananta Das was only eight years old when he experienced the famine. He was rescued by the Christian Missionaries and survived to write his story. Secondly, the account narrated by Fakir Mohan Senapati, the father of modern Oriya literature, in his autobiography.

Ananta Das belonged to a family of nine people on the verge of poverty. In his recollections, he often mentioned the significance of a mango tree that sheltered their raged and thatched life. He had seven brothers and sisters of which he was the youngest. With two parasite adolescent sons, Ananta's family lived in tatters, occasionally begging to survive. Ananta Das described the onset of famine in the following manner:

> The God Indra[71] did not have mercy; there was no rain for three years,
> The Sun became mightier and merciless, evaporating the remaining water from the earth.
> It didn't rain for many years, the earth cracked wide open,
> Food and grain all got over, everybody was starving and nobody gave anybody.[72]

The description of the loss of humanity in the period of crisis, when nobody bothered about anybody, calls attention to the condition of a society in deep moral crisis. While the rich started hoarding food items and grains, the poor stared at starvation death. Those who were surviving did not have

[71] The God of rain.

[72] *Ananta Das'nka Atmajibani* (the autobiography of Ananta Das), Odisha Famine - Na'anka (1865-1866): *A Documentation of Primary Resources*, 2016, Bhubaneswar: Odisha State Archieves, p. 911. Author's translation from Oriya.

enough strength to perform last rites for the dead people. Ananta Das saw corpses lying everywhere, on the sides of the road, piled up, one after the other. People, out of hunger and starvation, started running into the forest and ate up unknown plants. Some of them experimented with boiling the leaves of unknown trees. It was a feasting time for the eagles and wolves as they preyed on the dead humans. Most of the corpses did not have eyes as they were eaten up by the eagles and crows, many corpses were lying half eaten by wolves or other animals.

Ananta Das described his own personal misery when his father went in search of food and never came back. Both of his adolescent brothers never bothered to help their own brethren. The mother of Ananta Das, out of options, sent him to his maternal Uncle's home for help. The description of an eight year old son departing from his mother in the context of famine is heart wrenching. Predictably the young boy lost his way and went on a path of no return. While wandering, what he saw was astounding human misery, where people all over the place holding earthen pots begging and pleading for food and dying without getting anything to eat. Ananta Das subsequently wrote about various ordeals he had to go through before being picked up by the Christian missionaries, who saved him, gave him food and shelter in Church. Later on, the orphaned and illiterate Ananta Das acquired education and survived to write his encounter with misery.

The Christian missionaries played a very important role in rescuing the people from their misery. These missionary institutions had a significant presence in the coastal regions of Odisha. Fakir Mohan Senapati also mentioned the significant role played by these missionaries during the time of famine. He was twenty-three years old working as a Headmaster in a school at Balasore[73]. In his autobiography[74], Senapati provides a vivid picture of the extreme condition of suffering.

> By mid-February the majority of peasants and all the artisans were scattered and chewing anything they could lay hands on. When the tender

[73] A district on the Northen Coastal line of the Bay of Bengal, which was attached to the British Government in 1804.
[74] Senapati (2014).

> leaves came out on the tamarind trees, people swarmed up them like monkeys. Everyone was just skin and bone with sunken eyes. Many young women, wives and daughters of good family, were roaming the streets wearing ragged, knotted saris, no more than a quarter the normal length. Their signs of motherhood, two flaps of skin, hung against their chests. Some had children in their arms with lips glued to those hanging skin flaps[75].

Dead bodies were lying on the roads, the rivers, by bathing tanks and in the woods, 'wherever you looked you saw corpses'. There were also reports documented by the colonial government of people eating the flesh of dead human beings. The relief measures supplied by the British government reached very late, yet when it reached,

> [...] starving wretches started running towards food centres (*Arnachatra*). As they were already weak, almost two third of them died on the way, rest succumbed to dysentery and cholera after gorging food in desperation.

While applauding the role of Christian missionaries, Fakir Mohan lamented the ignorance of Oriya society, particularly in the aftermath of famine, when 'survivors were branded as outcastes, the *chhatarakias*[76], for having eaten at relief centers'[77].

I argue here that many of the practices of Mahima Dharma emerged out of the famine that provided people a hope for survival. Mahima Dharma was a faith, at the crossroads of life and death, human suffering and salvation. Attempting to draw a relationship with famine and faith, particularly in the context where records and histories are mute spectators, I take the help of imagination. Ambedkar, while attempting to unearth the origin of untouchables wrote:

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[75] Senapati, F.M, 2014, p. 28.

[76] In Oriya language *chhatarakhias* is understood as a caste who have compromised their caste duties by eating from the *Arna Chhatras* (relief centres) created by the British – *Firangis.* Literally means people without caste, it is slang also often used while scolding others.

[77] Senapati, F.M, 2014, pp. 30-31.

> It cannot but be that imagination and hypothesis should pay a large part in such a work. But that in itself cannot be a ground for the condemnation of the thesis. For without trained imagination no scientific inquiry can be fruitful […][78].

Reconstructing a link that is lost in history, for Ambedkar, is like reclaiming the history, which is a work of art rather than dead science. In the same spirit I attempt to use imagination as methodological tool to reconstruct this aspect of Mahima Dharma's emergence.

The image of Mahima Goswami provides us with interesting symbolisms to understand the intimate connection of the emergence of Mahima movement in the context of misery. Mahima Goswami always lived in tatters, slept on roads, lived in acute austerity, hence was given names such as *dhulia Goswami* (Dust Saint), *Nirahari Goswami* (Saint who lives only on water) and *Khirahari Goswami* (Jena, 2012: 23-26).

What could be the significance of these myths of Mahima Goswami's food/drink habits in deifying him? Banerjee-Dube (2012: 28-30) documents in amazement the urgency with which the faith was initiated. Mahima Goswami seemed to be in hurry. Propagating to his Saint followers, an ethics of not resting for more than a night in one place, leaving behind both renouncers and householders. While the renouncers multiplied and went in different directions, the householders beheld the faith and popularized it.

Another distinct feature of Mahima Goswami was his *tungis*[79] (outposts), where large feasts of begged food were distributed for collective eating, almost similar to the relief centers. The only difference was that the resources for the *tungis* and food centers were created out of a collective appeal, contributed through alms and donations. Mahima Dharma, in fact, prescribed strict practices on food. Mahimites do not eat after the Sun set. There is an emphasis on cooked food than raw food. Even the renouncer Bhikshyu's were advised only to accept cooked food and advised never to

[78] Ambedkar, B.R., 1979, Vol. 7, part two, p. 244.
[79] *Tungi* is a semi temporary structure where people gather to recite and sing the popular devotional songs. These small units are also used for collective feasting.

accept food from the house of Brahmins, Kings, twice-born, barbers, merchants or astrologers[80].

In other words, it is not only food but the sources of food that mattered. The idea is that one must earn one's food and these categories of people live on the exploitation of the labour of others. Secondly, beyond caste and religious belonging, Mahima Dharma propagated the idea of collective eating from the same plate.

The significance of earning one's own food as an ideology particularly in the context of famine is important religious practice. Raja Bhagirath Mahindra Bahadur supported Mahima Swami in establishing the faith. He was also a member of the committee to find out ways and means to mitigate the famine. It was noted that

> [...] the conditions were so severe in the interiors that it was reported that a famine-stricken famished woman at Mahanga was in the habit of eating away raw human flesh which she removed from dead bodies[81].

The Bhima Bhoi also brought our attention to such misery in his writings. It is very interesting to note the sequence of events in his life and their relationship with the famine. If he was born in 1850, he must have been 16 years old when the famine broke out. In *Stutichintamani,* Bhima had mentioned that at the age of sixteen he became the disciple of Mahima Swami. His narratives of starvation and hunger in the early part of his life can be seen in the context of the great famine. Not surprisingly the great famine could have appeared as apocalypse to Bhima Bhoi. It would have seemed as if the world is confronted with a great deluge and something urgent needed to be done in order to save humanity from extinction.

[80] Baumer and Beltz (2010), p. 36.
[81] Odisha Famine - Na'anka (1865-1866): *A Documentation of Primary Resources*, 2016, Bhubaneswar: Odisha State Achieves, p. 903.

Religion as Contested Terrain

The German Orissa Research Projects[82] by scholars from Germany (Heidelberg University) have done extensive work on the Mahima Dharma. The scholars of this project have done comprehensive documentation of both the philosophy and organization of the movement. However, their narrative of Mahima Dharma. Banerjee-Dube (2012 [83] and 2008) has done a comprehensive documentation of Mahima Dharma by describing the fascinating formation of a faith in the context of colonial modernity. Escheman (1986 and 2008) while relating the context of famine with that of the popularity of faith, terms the emergence of Mahima Dharma as an autochthonous religious reform movement, yet part of the wave of religious reform movements characterized the nineteenth century India.

Banerjee-Dube (2012: 126-128) interpreted the cult as vibrant, significant, yet tamed by two important processes, first, by the British colonial administration and the way they categorization of the cult as essentially Hindu Dharma, secondly, the cult itself, in its quest for popularity succumbing to the pressure of the 'vedántasization'. She emphasizes the limitations of a legal rational and modern enumerative governance in 'classifying' Mahima Dharma as yet another reform movement within Hinduism, heaving a lot of trust in impersonal structures to a faith that guides everyday life of its followers. Modernity becomes that force of subordination of a radical religious system.

On the contrary, scholars of the Dalit Movement have marvelled at the way 'modernity' brought a new sense of equality, thus ushering in the era of 'modern' Dalit Movement, envisioned by crusaders like Jyotirao Phule and Babashaheb Ambedkar. The Phule-Ambedkar discourse has been hailed as 'historically arrived at' (Guru, 2007: 150-161), and has been popularly identified as the 'Dalit Discourse'. Zelliot (2001) explored, not only, the crucial role played by the leadership of Ambedkar, but also a combination of caste structure and the spirit of resistance in the 'cultural labour' of the

[82] The First Orissa Research Project was between 1969-1973 and the Second Orissa Research Project was between 1999-2005, for details, please refer to Eschamann, 1986.

[83] In her book *Religion, Law and Power: Tales of Time in Eastern India*, 1860-2000. Published by Anthem Press, 2012.

untouchables, providing the much needed milieu for a radical modernist articulation of Dalit emancipation. Omvedt (1994) located the Ambedkarite project of Dalit liberation in the larger context of the colonial capitalism having a pan Indian influence. O'Halon (1985) argued the nineteenth century colonial modernity and introduction of western education providing the modern language to question the traditional society and its allied superstitions. The binaries are quite apparent here and this binary suggests a fundamental Eurocentricism attached to it. One of the ontological aspects of this project is to question such binary construction by suggesting that caste and gender inequalities have been resisted by the people who bear the brunt of such practices in multiple ways. Instead of straight jacketing them into the binaries of 'pre-modern' and therefore 'reformist' and 'modern' therefore 'radical', we need to have a deeper understanding of the context and also how these movement 'frames' appeal to its adherents.

The fact that this particular religion is alive with more than 764 formal *tungis* and millions of followers from the lower caste and tribal background[84] is adequate evidence to suggest that the cult still remains a counter-hegemonic project. During my initial field study I came across many *tungis* which were informal, maintained by the householders. The role of these family *tungis* was to give shelter to the renouncers and organize mass collective feasts. Bhima Bhoi's songs are sung by lay householders in accompaniment of Castanet and Tambourine making the atmosphere charged with hyper-emotions and trance. The Mahima followers object to the projection of Mahima Dharma as a reaction to the ritual hegemony of the Jagannath religion. They assert that Mahima Dharma is revolutionary but not reactionary, it believes in the well being of all mankind and envisions a utopia of a world that is truely equal and without discrimination (Nath, 1998: 192).

It is clear from the above discussion of Mahima Dharma that even pre-modern Indian society had a radical language to articulate exploitation and discrimination. Many of these movements may have been appropriated by the ideology of the dominant groups. However, that does not stop the

[84] Eschmann (1986), p. 387.

marginalized to re-imagine and reconstruct the language of the language of resistance. Religion as a site of conflict and contestation, rather than consensus and coherence, is key to uncover this subversive subaltern politics. Faith seems to be an appropriate concept than religion to underscore the fluidity of this language of resistance.

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REVIEWS

John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (Eds.), *The Life of Hinduism*, Delhi: Aleph Group Company, 2017, 324 pp., ISBN: 978-93-86021-08-3.

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The life of Hinduism edited by Hawley and Narayanan is a courageous attempt to capture a snapshot of a religion as complex as Hinduism. The editors state at the outset that "the diversity of Hindu life is legendary, and the purpose of this volume is to present a selection of essays that will help bring that diversity into focus" (p. 9). The book achieves this avowed objective to a large extent by using the introduction to map out the various aspects of Hinduism into five interconnected strands underlying its life stream as a religion, namely, doctrine, practice, society, story and performance, and *bhakti* (intense sharing, devoted adoration). It then goes on to explore one of these, that is, the performative dimension of Hinduism from diverse perspectives. Most chapters follow a first person experiential, narrative account to provide a thick description of the practice of Hinduism as a religion. The book is arranged into eight sections: worship, life cycle, festival, performance, gurus, caste, diaspora and identity, and tries to make an attempt to interrogate the practice of Hinduism in terms of both an everyday phenomenon and a marker of important epistemological and existential points in one's lifetime.

While a majority of these essays have previously been published elsewhere, these are organized in a manner that gives cohesiveness to the narrative accounts that are being presented by bringing together in one place the works of influential scholars who are well-known for their research in this field. Thematically,

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although with considerable overlaps, one could divide the essays in the book under certain broad categories, such as: the conceptualization of the divine in Hinduism, the questions around physicality and tangible forms in the performance of Hinduism as a religion, the performance of festivals, the performance of Hinduism in relation to women both as subjects and objects, and lastly, the performance of religion in the Diaspora and the understanding of Hinduism as a religion from a non-Indian, mainly western context.

Under the broad theme of how the idea of the divine is conceptualized and performed in Hinduism as a religion, one finds the chapters by Huyler, Hallstrom, Kakar, and Hawley and Juergensmeyer. In the very first essay of the book, Huyler provides a descriptive account of worship, including performances such as the offering of *aarti* and *Prasad*, as a path to approaching God. Lisa Hallstrom provides a first-hand account of her journey as a researcher, studying the phenomenon of the guru Anandamayi Ma, widely regarded by her followers as an incarnation of God. Hallstrom explores how the divinity of the saint is regarded as transcendent of the everyday concerns of gender and form, and its continued implications for her devotees after her death. While, Kakar's chapter explores the world of the highly influential Radhasoami sect, by presenting a first-hand account of the performance of a satsang congregation at their dera in Beas in the northern state of Punjab. Hawley and Juergensmeyer too look at Ravidas as a saint but from the perspective of the larger Bhakti tradition in Hinduism and its emphasis on protest, thereby highlighting the crucial significance of Ravidas as a figure in the continued struggle against the caste system.

The second set of thematic concerns which cover most essays in the book are the questions around physicality and tangible forms in the performance of Hinduism as a religion. Essays by Eck, and Goswami and Case, respectively, both explore the practice of Hinduism from the perspective of tangible forms such as idols and shrines. For Eck, the point of concern is the idea of idols and imagery that form the focal point of performance of religion and its significance in a polytheistic religion like Hinduism, while for Goswami and Case, the physicality takes the shape of coming together of ideas of the sacred space and divine presence in the form of the Jaisingh Ghera in Vrindaban. Agehananda Bharati's essay takes the idea of physicality in the form of death as a rite of passage in the journey to becoming a Sanyasi. First published in 1961, Bharati provides a fascinating account of his experience of renouncing his tangible and intangible sense of self and worldly ties on the Manikaranika Ghats in Varanasi in order to achieve renunciation in the Hindu tradition. In the last two essays, that can be grouped

under this theme, by Linda Hess and Philip Lutgendorf we encounter the performance of Hinduism as a performance explicitly staged for an audience using paid actors. In this regard, Hess provides a detailed account of her experience of viewing the performance of episodes from the Ramayana, in the form of an open-air live Ramlila performance, and follows it with a discussion of the salient concepts around it such as Darshan, Lila and so on. Lutgendorf's essay, on the other hand, explores the significance of Ramanand Sagar's groundbreaking series, the Ramayana, on the Doordarshan channel. He highlights how the notions of performance and *darshan* in Hinduism got translated into the staging of the epic for the mass television viewing audience. The significance of performance of festivals in Hinduism gets articulated in the form of the discussion of the two main Hindu festivals, Diwali and Holi. Om Lata Bahadur presents a stepwise account of how the performance of Diwali as a festival is carried out. While the discussion around the performance of Holi by Mckim Marriott, first published in 1966, looks at the festival as the form of balancing between dramatically opposed yet interconnected forces of destruction and renewal, and the delicate balance maintained between the two. John Stratton Hawley's essay looks at the critical physical space of Ayodhya as the fulcrum around which the rising tide of Hindu nationalism has galvanized in recent decades in all its political complexities.

The issues around gender form the core, although not limited to, the three essays by Doranne Jacobson, Kathleen Erndl, and, Lalitambika Antarjanam. Jacobson provides a longitudinal account of the experiences of a young girl, Munni, from the onset of menstruation to her taking on the role of an adult woman in her marital joint household in another village. Erndl explores the concept of the belief and performance of goddess possession. She looks at the significance of the Devi possession as a manifestation of the divine feminine as Shakti in its multiple forms. Antarjanam's essay is in the form of a translated short story, originally published in a Malayalam journal in 1938, based on an actual event. The story highlights the complex intersection between gender and caste from the perspective of Tatri, a Nambudiri Brahmin woman expected live a life of seclusion relegated to the inner confines of the home. It casts a critical glance on intersecting notions of status and hierarchy in the lives of the so-called upper caste Nambudiri women.

Much of the last two sections of the book, looks at the issues around the performance of religion in the Diaspora and the understanding of Hinduism as a religion from a non-Indian, mainly western context. Narayanan's essay explores the underlying longing among the Diaspora to recreate aspects of the cultural-familiar and the significance of the faith based symbols and performance in this

syncretic process, through the recreation of the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills, Pittsburgh. This is followed by Chakravarti's essay which is a short account of some basic features of Hinduism, as the self-descriptive title of the essay itself suggests. Vasudha Narayanan, on the other hand, in her brief essay on the shrine of Shahul Hamid in the city of Ngore highlights how the performance of Hinduism and Islam have adapted to each other in the local everyday contexts in pockets of Indian society. The next essay by Shrinivas Tilak stands in sharp contrast to this, and to indeed the general tenor of the book. Tilak forcefully argues against the traditional predominance of non-western scholars in studying Hinduism as a religion. He asserts for the need for Hindu scholars, especially those in the Diaspora to 'take back' Hindu studies. While postcolonial studies have for long asserted the need for more 'indigenous' based knowledge, translating such an aspiration along religious cleavages could possibly have pernicious repercussions. The last chapter of the book, by Patton, Ram-Prasad and Acharya, explores the relationship and dialogue between Hindu and non-Hindus. For them, the idea of interlogue or samvada that has underlined the practice of Hinduism for millennia, holds the promise and template for a global interlogue between faiths in the times to come.

The book provides a broadly comprehensive account of Hinduism in practice from multitudinal perspective of ritual to politics and sacred space to diasporic identity. It compiles together mostly empirical based personalized essays which are written in an accessible style of writing and therefore tie in well with each other, conceptually and thematically. The two minor points of concern with book are that firstly, the account presented in some of the essays such as Marriott's essay on Holi, while influential, have become somewhat dated with the passage of time. And secondly, most readers who are familiar with India, are likely to be already familiar with descriptive accounts provided in some of the essays, such as the ones by Bahardur or Huyler. Nevertheless, while not a textbook in the traditional sense of the term, it would be of interest and likely to make a fascinating read for anyone looking for an introductory overview of various aspects of Hinduism in practice.

Sugata Bose, *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2017, 272 pp., ISBN: 978-0670090112.

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The book under review *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood,* written by a brilliant historian and parliamentarian Sugata Bose, includes several essays and speeches that reflect upon the different and multiple imaginations of free, flexible and united India with an extremely insightful historical analysis. The narration in the text is lucid, explanatory and lyrical but dense in its content with an enriching presence of historical stories, events and contemporary challenges desiring to carve out a better future for Indian nation. Situated in a proper context of Bose's commitments as a historian and a parliamentarian, the book's transition from historical analysis to contemporary topics is smooth, meaningful and thought-provoking.

The author, agonised by the rising intolerance and accelerating majoritarian authoritarianism, interrogates an uneasy yet significant triadic relationship between reason, religion and nation with a vision to illuminate uniquely Indian understanding of nationhood. Primarily, the book tries to contend the monolithic religious conceptualisation of nation and also opposes ultra-secularism that excludes religion from public/political life. Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, the author favours cosmopolitanism or more precisely Asian cosmopolitanism to recuperate alternative ideas of nation and nationhood complimentary to the religious sensibilities and tolerant to the diversities. Bose argues that Partha Chatterjee has misunderstood the ideas of Indian nationalists as merely a derivative discourse caged within Western Knowledge system instead various nationalists like Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo, Tagore, and Gandhi etc. were drawing their ideas heavily from Indian traditions and past. However, Bose misses the point that even though these nationalist were closer to Indian traditions and to large extent universal in their tone, yet they were thinking in the framework of nation and nationalism to which Tagore is the only exception.

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The book starts with a defining chapter *The Nation as Mother* wherein Bengali literature, Arts and Music shaped imagery of the nation as mother. In Bipin Chandra Pal's words "Our history is the sacred biography of the mother". The worship of mother grown in the early 20th century with the hymns of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Vande Matram* – as a nurturing motherland. Despite, the communal overtone of *Anandmath* to which *Vande Matram* was made a part, in the imaginations of Vivekananda and Aurobindo, the goddess compassionately embraces the non-Hindu faiths as well. The author creatively traces the fluctuation in terms nation and region in Bengali culture. Abanindranath Tagore's iconic figure Bharatmata which was originally made as *Banga Mata* (mother Bengal) later portrayed as Bharatmata is one such moment. Further, he argues while explaining the heavy symbolism of Bharatmata that this narration opens up small spaces for poor and subalterns to enter into the story. However, the author ignores that representation of goddess as nation created tension amongst the Muslims and excluded substantial number of population to be a part of that vision of patriotism. Perhaps, that is why the figure of mother as nation was deeply contested and attracted scepticism.

When it was suggested that *Vande Matram* should be sung in Congress gatherings, Nehru opposed the idea on the pretext that it will irritate the Muslims. Tagore wrote in a letter "it is inappropriate for a national organisation which is a meeting place for different religious communities". Thus for the sake of unity and harmony, Tagore remarked "we need peace, unity, good sense not rivalry just because one side refuses to yield a symbol that could arouse so much political passions could also be sacrificed by those prepared to die and defiled by those prepared to kill". Reflecting upon this, author narrates the tragic story of Parashuram as a metaphor to portray the communal axe that dislocates the mother figure.

Bose then moves on to examine Khilafat movement and Non-cooperation movement. He provides a detailed and careful analysis of Muslim patriotism which was largely ignored and applauds Gandhi's skill to combine territorial nationalism with pan-Islamism within which no necessary conflict existed. Out of this combination, a mass mobilization became possible in socially fragmented and fractured society of India. However, Congress's frequent convergences with Hindu Communal forces made Muslims apprehensive about their existence in a nation dominated by Hindus. Thus, Muslims demanded for special privileges or a loosely structured federal union but Congress's urge to construct a centralised state apparatus intensified the demand for a separate nation.

While analysing the economic aspects of post-colonial state in India, Bose suggests that there has been high bourgeois aspirations within the structures of planning in India. The state in post-colonial India has largely focussed the means enhancement for development wherein capital accumulation gradually transformed into an idiom. Consequently, the goals and values for overall development and welfare of the nation took a back seat.

As part of the therapeutic measures for India's future, Bose suggests recovering the universalistic aspects and cosmopolitan ideas in the thoughts of Pal, Tagore, Gandhi and Aurobindo wherein one can find a peculiarly Indian understanding of a nation not in conflict with the religious sensibilities. He brilliantly argues that there is no inherent conflict between reason and religion and in fact, religion plays a pivotal role in ushering the universalistic and cosmopolitan thoughts and practice. However, the author cautions, that those nationalists have been misinterpreted largely due to the lowly calculations of identity politics. Aurobindo's thoughts do not propagate religious bigotry but exist in a spiritual realm where nation and nationalism is not an end to achieve but the goal is to seek unity with humanity. Sugata Bose borrows the idea of layered and shared sovereignty from Aurobindo's excavation of the past as a peculiar feature of pre-modern India when autonomous and flexible federal unions existed. Thus, he favoured federal structure with larger degree of local autonomy and fiscal federalism.

Fascinated by the Tagore's idea of colourful Asian Cosmopolitanism, the author has provided an insightful understanding of cultural exchanges and intimacy that had happened during Tagore's journey to South and South-east Asia. Asian cosmopolitanism of Tagore is different from the western cosmopolitanism in the sense that it celebrates the existence of diversified identities yet universal in its thought and spirit.

In the speeches, Bose raises critical contemporary issues of freedom, hate speech, Kashmir issue etc. that are degenerating the health of this nation. Interestingly, Bose dedicated this book to the "students who value freedom" and states that "There should be no restrictions, except in extreme cases of hate speech. Our students and youth should be encouraged to question orthodoxies and think critically. In addition to giving them the freedom to think and speak, they may even be permitted the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them". The book is insightful, rich in terms of arguments, hopeful to build a better future and worth engaging.

Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (Eds.), *Modern South Asia: History, culture, Political Economy*, London: Routledge, 2017; 278 pp, ISBN:100815350341.

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Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal undertake the mammoth task of providing a comprehensive and challenging insights into the society, culture and economy of the 'recent construct' called South Asia. The book emphasizes on the pre-colonial and colonial Indian sub-continent; the post-colonial sovereign states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh with incidental discussions on Sri Lanka and Afghanistan inter alia. It is a full-fledged attempt at providing a nuanced understanding of South Asian historiography from c. 1700 to the present 21st century through historical facts, academic research, claims, counter-claims, narratives and subaltern perspectives. The book is divided into twenty chapters that highlight the themes of colonialism and post-colonialism in great detail. The themes of origin of caste, colonialism, regional movements, communalism and the partition of India are still pertinent to the present day dynamics between India and Pakistan which in turn shapes the politics of South Asian region.

The historical background of pre-colonial times, which is often construed as ruled by various centralized authoritarian kingdoms, reveals various empires that were "typically loosely structured suzerainties." The book breaks the mirage of Indian tradition as a changeless tradition. India's pre-colonial history is marked by the arrival of Aryans, Greeks, Parthians etc., the role of tribal groups in state formation, the practice of caste as defined by occupation in social practice and Brahamanical tradition counterbalanced by the popular Sharamanik traditions as well as the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. The pre-colonial era was marked by periods of imperial consolidation and decentralization. The conflicts and

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challenges from within the region as well as outside were absorbed and adapted to giving India its unique nature not devoid of dynamism. Hence, it was "diversity in unity" rather than unity in diversity. The author comes back to this point in their last chapter titled *Decolonizing South Asian History* to extend the argument on the multi-layered sovereignty instead of the unitary and indivisible sovereignty, which the authors assert, was a foreign import into Asia and Africa from post-enlightenment Europe.

The book, now in its fourth edition, travels through different historical epochs shedding light upon the changing dynamics of local and regional power structures in the pre-colonial India; the religious and bhakti movements; and the benign nature of Mughal rule that mostly relied on accommodation and adaptation rather than coercion in the religious and cultural realm. For example, the Delhi Sultans upheld the supremacy of sharia in their state but did not impose it on the non-Muslim subjects. Bose and Jalal break the myth of Muslims in India as a homogeneous category and carry the same thread of argument to justify the use of religion as a political strategy by Jinnah. The book delves into the social and economic reasons underlying 1857 revolt which was debilitated by the inter-state rivalries that defined the pre-colonial politics of the region and exacerbated by the agrarian crisis of high land revenue. The colonial period is posited as the transitional phase in which "much of India's 'tradition' was recast, if not reinvented" (page 5). It was during the colonial period that the categories of 'minority' and 'majority' were constituted, caste was included in census survey, religion was used to cut across regional lines and the equation between metropolis and colony changed in context of international trade and events such as Great Depression, and first and second world war. The anti-colonial movement converged with only one strand of nationalism providing post-colonial state with an ideological scaffolding to term every other demand for sovereign power as either communal or secessionist.

It provides a detailed discussion on colonial India highlighting the moral and economic underpinnings of the British Raj. The book also explores the role of intermediate social groups that invigorated the colonial superstructure extending the patronage network of colonial times into the post-colonial centralized control by Congress over Indian state. The colonial narrative, with brief acquaintances of British colonial rulers, corroborates the expansion and growth of British Empire at the cost of colonized people through various ways such as the ingenious council bill system that substantiates the claims made by historians on the drain of wealth from India.

Bose and Jalal present a dense and deft commentary on India's partition with incidents, events, poems and historical figures. The authors deconstruct the formal decisions during the time of partition and give us an insight into the informalities of the intentions and behind the scenes perspective of the entire decision-making process during the time of partition. There are two important points that are conspicuous in understanding the modern history of South Asia. Firstly, it is crucial to remove the baggage of partition's responsibility from Mohammed Ali Jinnah to the amalgamation of situational responses amidst the haste in transferring the power by British and Congress' demand for a unified state with a strong central authority. The book sheds light on the insecurity of the Muslim leaders like Jinnah who played on the religious card not because Muslims were religiously different from other communities, but because there were schisms within the Muslim community inherent in the heterogeneous Muslim community in India. In such a scenario, the religious card could rise above regional heterogeneity and the resistance of local powerful leaders in Muslim majority provinces. Secondly, the oft-repeated assertion of Pakistan for Muslims is misleading. The rationale behind using the religious card to trump other regional and caste cards substantiates the argument that Jinnah's Pakistan existed within the shared sovereignty of India and utmost concern for minorities within it. Jinnah, as it is argued, never envisaged Islam as the ideology to dominate the state of Pakistan. This reflected well in his address to the first ever meeting of Pakistan Constituent Assembly wherein he considered the people irrespective of their religion or caste or creed as the equal citizens of one state. The authors break the misread and misinterpreted Jinnah's image, as the critics of Islamic state called, 'Kafir-i-Azam'. The book further emphasizes the role of violent revolutionary leaders in overthrowing the colonial rule like Subhash Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh. It appreciates the philosophy of non-violence by Gandhi not on mere moral grounds but as a political weapon for the Congress and the country even though he considered non-violence to be 'infinitely superior' to violence (p. 125).

The book further unravels the chasm between the partition memories and the myriad contested meanings through a brief analysis of the historical construct and commentaries. The authors criticize the partition discourse, which is pertinent to the construction of 'others' and acts as a tacit instigator during communal riots, as conducive to categorizing religion as a whole in defining the victims and perpetrators. Bose and Jalal criticize the benign portrayal of rapists by Veena Das as husbands of 'former victims of violence' as it lends "an unacceptable degree of legitimacy to the social violence that accompanied the

partition of Punjab" (p. 179). The authors also critique and Gyanendra Pandey's treatment of all violence that was not violence by the state as an undifferentiated category, reasoning that it undermines the role of individuals as perpetrators of violence during partition.

There is as much diversity outside the Indian borders as within it. However, the argument of multiple suzerainties, the colonial construct of the categories of 'minority' and 'majority', playing religious and caste card against the regional one, the partition memories all converge into the larger argument for the future course of action for South Asian states especially India and Pakistan. The Kashmir issue as the bone of contention between India and Pakistan requires the states to jettison the 'conceptual similarity' (p. 225) of the indivisible and unitary sovereignty and instead opt for the multi-layered shared sovereignty that reverberates the pre-colonial setup and is informed by the colonial state structure. The post-colonial reality is in turn shaped by the mangled historical narratives of colonialism and nationalism in India and Pakistan that the authors attempt to dispel.

The authors find similar socio-economic problems in the south Asian states of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Since the book attempts to cover myriad cultural, social, economic and political issues over a long period, there are bound to be areas which can be discussed in detail further in order to make sense of the arguments. One such example is the claim that the problems of secessionist movements in Punjab, Assam and to an extent Kashmir are the result of a Congress dominated-centre is an oversimplified one without detailed analysis. The complex and important issues of the insurgency movements in North-east, as well as Naxalite and Maoist movements, do not find any mention, the latter is pertinent to the issue of privatization and the expectations of citizens are weaved around the idea of a welfare socialist state imagined by the Indian national leaders. The crucial point made towards the end of the book is that of 'democratic authoritarianism' signaling towards the underbelly of the Indian polity. The difference between the substantive and procedural democracy highlights the scalar concept of democracy. The overt and covert authoritarian tendencies of elected governments exercised through the unelected institutions of bureaucracy, army and lawmaking is a matter of debate in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. While the democratic paraphernalia does not guarantee democratic values to be upheld but the free and fair elections are a sine qua non of democracy. The paradoxical concept of 'democratic authoritarianism' given by the authors stands in contrast to what Samuel P. Huntington said about the inefficient, corrupt and short-sighted governments elected through elections as undesirable but not

undemocratic. The political developments surrounding the rise of Bharatiya Janata Party and its Hindutva politics, the communal and social issues of mob lynching of Muslim citizens on the issue of cow slaughter, breakdown of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 have all been touched upon briefly. Such developments questioned the secular credentials of the state but need in-depth discussion on the state-society relations and the wider culture of rights in India and other South Asian states. As the authors argue "the roots of the center-region tensions in South Asia have less to do with its inherent cultural diversities than with the historical circumstances of the immediate post-colonial period". The book suggests the plausibility of reconsidering the idea of sovereignty and nationalism positing culture that traverses the borders of South Asian states.

Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa, *Religion, Gender and Citizenship. Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, 271 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-40533-3.

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The question of faith and citizenship has been polemic in nature; categorically in feminist scholarship. There are intellectual attempts to explore the nature of hesitation which wavers around overlapping boundaries of religion in secular societies. Philosophy of feminism maintains crucial concerns with the authority of religion and power of state. Women's suffrage movement has been central to the conception of organized feminist movement delineating a sense of political power and 'gendered account of citizenship'[1] due to which 'process of greater female representation in state agencies gathered momentum'[2] and became plausible. The ideology of feminism has arrived at more than one ways of practicing feminism; endorsing and serving the question of women critically under multiple philosophies like liberalism, socialism, standpoint theory, theology etc. With the turn of the century the process of discourse formation has evolved, so has the interventions and implications of the women's movement. Feminist endeavour in revisiting their struggle consequently has led to the redefinition of their relationship with conceptual framework of state and religion. Correspondingly, the attempt of Line Nyhagen and Beatrice Halsaa in their book *Religion, gender and citizenship: Women of faith, gender equality and feminism* is expository towards understanding of religion and gender in present challenging political milieu. This monograph has emanated from a research project conducted with 'FEMCIT: Gendered Citizenship in Multicultural Europe: The Impact of Women's Movements'.

This book is insightful in bringing out the ignorance of feminist women's movement which has remained concentrated with autonomy agency and empowerment in 1960's over religion as subject of study which has shifted its focus from its institutional character to as against issues like 'abortion, contraception,

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[1] Molyneux, 2001, p. 166.
[2] Ibidem, p. 195.

women's bodies and reproductive rights' (p. 31). The book is neatly divided into 7 chapters each of them highlighting the relationship of religious women to the concepts of religion, feminism and citizenship in a manner which observes and examines their lived realities and participation. The rationale of this study is clarified in the first chapter, while exploring notions of faith, citizenship, and gender of Christian and Muslim women in Norway, Spain and United Kingdom. Entire book appears as an attempt to intervene into questions raised about conceptualization of gender and equality and 'secular-religious binary' (p. 4). It investigates the manifestation of religion as 'a resource or a barrier to European women's citizenship' (p. 22) through in-depth qualitative interviews with 61 women identified through snowball method from Christian and Muslim faith. Second chapter intervenes more deeply into exploring the validity of religion in the modern society discussing indistinct line between religious values and non-religious values like modernization, humanism or secularization. Whereas third Chapter distinctly foregrounds the discursive nature of 'autobiographical construction of identities' which explores everyday experience of religion by women of faith intertwined with their social locations like migration, culture, occupation etc.

Chapter four is on lived practice of religion and citizenship which reflects at how the process of migration has resulted in escalation of 'non-Christian' (p. 117) religions in Europe making Islam largest minority religion. Negative effects of which are experienced through the othering and discrimination; not to mention *Islamophobia*. These effects were illustrated through challenges which Muslim women experience in their lived citizenships as against Christian women in media, public spaces, workplace, etc. It brings out the linkages between religious identity and citizenship by providing critique of rights based approach which 'silences inequality based on gender and ignores the different statuses accorded by states and societies to different religions' (p. 115). Chapter five intends to talks about the plausibility of achieving gender quality in 'God-given prescriptions', within structures like 'family', 'public life' and recognizing gender equality as difference without hierarchy (p. 153). It lays the need to recognize 'religious freedom and gender equality as two distinct human rights which further problematizes their relationship with each other'; for example 'the Norwegian law on gender equality exempts the 'inner life' of religious communities. Consequently feminism is sometimes perceived as inherently contradictory to religious institutions' (p. 161). Chapter six has laid out research findings which exemplifies attitudes of religious women towards women's movement discourse in three idiosyncrasies 'strong embracement', 'contingent recognition' and 'rejection' (p. 188). Authors discern

multiple emerging strands and natures like liberal, radical, socialist of feminism along with 'Catholic feminism', 'Anglican feminism' and 'Christian feminism' in Spain, United Kingdom and Norway respectively. This feature inherently understands the space of religion within the theory of feminism. Last chapter completes the research study by summarizing the concerns, challenges and anxieties which were raised in the beginning about the effect of religious control and citizenship. It captures the expectation which interviewed women raised within their religious order about the division of labour, gender equality as 'equal worth' (p. 219), conformity to gender roles and sense of belonging to the country.

To that end, this book is based on exploratory analysis of ways in which religious women experience citizenship, State, value of gender equality, feminism and communitarian mileage while maintaining the dual characteristic of their identity as *woman* and *religious/faithful.* Yet there remains an element of incongruity in representation of each theme in the fundamental questions. Citizenship discourse appeared insufficient in contrast to proliferated themes and subthemes in feminism and women's movement discourse. Dispensability of law and justice in the development of citizenship discourse would enrich the debate which otherwise holds key concern in feminist activism and scholarship. This book is an attempt to explore the hesitation between feminism and religion through feminist methodology and sociological lens.

Authors moderately imports the anxiety of minority based identities in the plural society henceforth they underscore and collaborate the dialogues which in otherwise context remain largely untapped about *women* in sociology and *religion* in feminist theory. Although, this monograph is compelling in providing first-hand account of religious women while exploring intersecting realities of faith and citizenship in the lives of religious women; it would have been interesting to explore the disposition of religious women in comparison to otherwise category of *women.* Assessment of *religious identity* mitigated the other variants of identity which produce an effect on the politics of identity formations; such as role socio-economic background, role of institutions like family, marriage or education and alternative sexuality. Nevertheless, it is persuasive academic intervention based on empirical research in the field of sociology, political science and gender.

Reference:

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