

ONE of the crucial questions in contemporary India is how to understand and write about or represent the Hindu-Muslim civilisational encounter.¹ Historians tend to portray the encounter as a story of conflict or a story of syncretism ('harmony'). In both cases the focus is on elite cultures and styles whether in politics, architecture, language, literature, dress or dance. The problem with respect to the first position arises because the historical record is primarily an archive of conflict. An event becomes worth recording essentially when it involves some form of confrontation. Indeed, it is this which qualifies it for being termed an event. In the making of the archive there is hardly any room for everyday life, for day-to-day interaction; and little cognition of the processes of intersubjective existence whereby men and women (and social groups) constantly negotiate, compromise, give and take, and share pain, suffering and struggles. But it is only access to this information that can suggest how human agency intervenes to reproduce, alter and remake the lines of division drawn by religious identities.²

If the historian works with a notion of civilisation the anthropologist works with the key organising concept of culture. Only very recently is there a self-consciousness within the discipline of anthropology that cultural theories and ethnographies tend to overemphasise the coherence of groups. Lila Abu-Lughod points out in her work on Bedouin women that the study of culture gells difference into permanence.³ Even as ethnographies emphasize homogeneity, cohesion and timelessness, but they conceal the fluidity of group boundaries, languages and practices. Anthropology, thus, ends up with constructing, producing and maintaining difference. Anthropology, the

Meos of Mewat

Synthesising Hindu-Muslim Identities

Shail Mayaram

field of comparative religion, in addition to Indology and its variants around the globe takes religion as consisting of bounded, mutually exclusive cosmological ideologies.

Ideas of group identity and boundary are also central to bureaucratic understanding. Indeed, its sources are proximate to those of the historian. For example, the reliance on police and intelligence reports. The state's understanding of ethnic identity is primarily oriented to standardisation as its concern is with governance. A complex sociological universe must be classified, unmanageable peoples and groups placed into neat, tidy boxes and categories. The inexplicable and defiantly unclassifiable is brushed away as the exceptional, the abnormal, the deviant. Bureaucratic knowledge as well as the analytic understanding

of the world of social science scholarship tends to be grounded in the conception of identities in terms of the binary categories of either/or rather than of this and that. In this view, a group can be Hindu or Muslim and not simultaneously Hindu-Muslim. Both taxonomies of governance such as the census and academic disciplines, impel us to look for boundaries and identities. Therefore, the ground level situation of considerable Hindu-Muslim encounter and exchange comes to us as something of a shock.

Social scientists continue to address questions of identity politics primarily through the framework of ethnicity. The binary construction of ethnicity is also characteristic of the theorists/ethnographers of violence whose understanding derives from confrontation, opposition, a world of



Meo Mirasis singing their own *Mahabharata*. Photo : Shail Mayaram

rumours and rioting, numbers of persons killed and wounded and who structure from this an archaeology of conflict. One can see this in the entire genre of riot studies of which I myself have been a participant, despite efforts to emphasize that intercommunity relations were also marked by healing, by manifestations of caring across religious lines.⁴

The investigation of the encounter between Hinduism and Islam has been a major concern of my work because this is not only a border zone where cultures get blurred but a space of immense cultural creativity. Some of these ideas have been developed in my work on the Muslim Meos which has attempted an understanding of their world and their perception of various regimes across time as expressed by their mythic tradition and forms of popular cultural memory. Inhabiting a territorial region that falls between the important urban centers of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur they were constantly subject to conquest and extraction of tribute/revenue and were victims of violence and suffered constant inroads into their autonomy.

Traditions of Tolerance

Mewat, as the area where the Meos have lived for a millenium, was a terrain of peasant radicalism in the pre-independence period. It saw intensive work by the communist leaders such as the historian-activist Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf and others then working with the Indian National Congress. What struck Ashraf about the area and what he repeatedly mentions in his writings and correspondence is the very close intercommunity relationship between the Meos and other peasant-pastoral castes such as the Jats, the Ahirs and the Gujars. Ashraf wrote repeatedly that intercommunity living within the local system of governance formed an alternative to the growing number of communal conflicts taking place



Mirasi singers performing at a wedding Photo : Shail Mayaram

elsewhere in India.⁵ These traditions of tolerance and of living together had been worked out over centuries. This was no idyllic world of harmonious inter-community living since battle, conflict and feud were very much a part of it. But these were generally not fought along lines of religious division and could, for instance, involve alliances of Meo *pals* and Jat *khaps* on either side.⁶ Further, through a complex process of institution building, norms were worked out on how incessant conflicts were to be conducted and resolved.

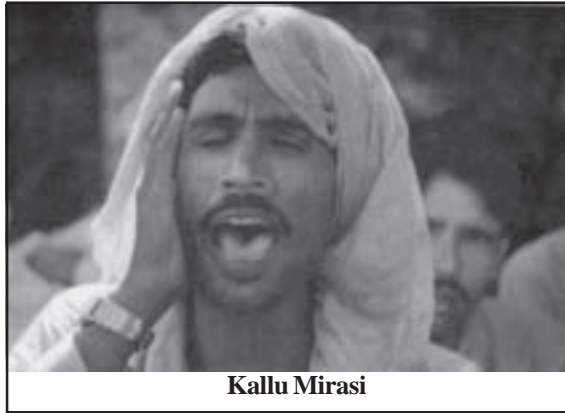
Traditions of tolerance and the local management of difference were, however, shattered by the growth of communal politics in the 30s and 40s and the Partition violence which unleashed a holocaust in the area. Mewat was the area where Maulana Ilyas had first tried his experiment with the Tablighi Jama'at that was later replicated all over the globe. Following the Partition Meos have become deeply involved in the networks of transnational Islam and in jama'ats which work among groups in South Asia and in other countries preaching to other Muslims their ideas of what being a "Muslim" means.

But how is it that substantial sectarian tolerance had prevailed in

Mewat for centuries? Much of it derives from the large number of groups with oral cultures and the ways in which they were participants in multiple worlds of meaning (textual and otherwise) which were not just passively received from a hypothetical great tradition but which were constantly transformed. The story of the Hindu-Muslim encounter then was told very differently in these oral traditions.⁷

This article deals with one such (re)telling of the Hindu-Muslim cultural encounter--as represented in the Meo version of the *Mahabharata* called the *Pandun Ka Kara*. Composed in the early eighteenth century by two Meo poets the folk epic is performed by Muslim Mirasis or Muslim *Jogis* to an audience comprised of Meo Muslims, as also non-Meos. The authors, performers and audience are, thus, Muslim. It is important to understand what the great epic means to them, how they remake, modify and recreate it and also how in the process they both draw upon, modify, elasticise and critique the so-called "great tradition" of Vedic and *paunic* Hinduism. The oral text also bears witness to the cultural creativity of oral traditions.

The cultural performance text that I recorded from Abdul Mirasi begins with the appearance of Gorakhnath with his disciple, Aughar.⁸ Gorakhnath is described as a *faqir*. This extremely powerful figure of medieval Indic sectarian life is regarded as a legendary *avadhut* (renouncer) and *siddha* of the eleventh century and greatest of the Nath *gurus* and founder



Kallu Mirasi

of the sect called the Gorakh Panth.⁹ The portrayal of his person in the Mewati epic suggests a complex, duplex identity as *jogi* and *faqir*, i.e., as “Hindu renouncer” and “Muslim ascetic” who begs for alms. The heat of his *tapas* gives him extraordinary magical powers particularly relating to fertility. The grains of barley that he gives the two queens render Kunti and Gandhari, who are both barren, fertile. That is how they become the progenitors of the Pandavas and Kauravas.

Aughar refers to an initiate of a Nath *sampradaya* or sect who has left home but has not undergone the initiation ritual of the Kanphata Yogis, that sears the earlobes. Aughar himself is held to be the preceptor of jogis called Aghoris, who inhabit cremation grounds and undertake the cult of the dead. The Aghoris were known for their interrogation of the brahmanical discourse of gender relations and family, social structure and ritual by transcending the limitations of *samskaras* and indulge in acts such as eating feces and forbidden sexual intercourse with low caste women.

In a section in the Mewati text there is an extraordinary dialogue between Gorakhnath and the initiate Aughar, about who to take alms from. Gorakhnath’s reply reveals a striking awareness of a woman’s body difficult to appreciate in terms of yogic

renunciation unless one looks at the cult’s subterranean levels involving sexual intercourse as reenacting the union of divinity, Shiva and his Shakti. Alms, Gorakhnath states, should only be taken from well-built women with heavier calves and not from barren women and courtesans who have thin, snake like calves. As the latter have no children they have firm and light bodies and can be identified from their swaying walk. But it is Aughar’s reply to Gorakhnath that is really radical. It states that God, the Guru and all men are born from the courtesan:

besa hi su har huya besa su hoga sab besa hi su tu huyo guruji besa su ho gaya ham

From a courtesan Har has been born from a courtesan all will be born.

From a courtesan you have come, my Guru, from a courtesan I have been born.

Har (from *hari*), of course, refers to either Shiva or God. The courtesan has often been seen as the other of the renouncer. In fact, both are on the margins of the social order of caste and the family. A striking leveling move takes place here. The Jogis are usually ascetic mendicants and certain sects are proponents of secret, sexual Shaivite tantric practices. The Nathism of the text suggests at ways in which the two poles of renunciatory asceticism and eroticism are combined in the sensuality of tantra.

The Nath Yogis are Shiva and Shakta *bhaktas*. In the *Pandun ka kara* Krishna does not play a role comparable to his centrality in the Bhagavat. Vedic and Vaishnava deities such as Indra, Surya and the nine *avatars* of Vishnu are mentioned but the folk epic is clearly grounded in Shaivite traditions. The move made in the text is very different from that of Tulsi’s

Ramcharitmanas (where Shiva worships Rama) or from the *Mahabharata* itself.

Cult of the Goddess

There is also a clear relationship as the text unfolds between the Nath and the cult of the goddess. The performer Abdul’s narration begins with the customary homage to the *ustad* (guru) and to the Lord (*khuda*) who is *pak* and *subhan* (pure and luminous). He then goes on to venerate Bhawani, the mother goddess: “with her seated within my heart/I open the box of knowledge”. Divinity has clearly both male and female aspects. The Mirasis worship their patron goddess Bhawani, at her *sthan* (shrine) at Dhaulagarh near Lachmangarh (Alwar district) where they offer her a *karhai* (sacred food offering). Guru Gorakhnath tells his disciple after he gets up from his sleep of twelve years to “get ready, wear your clothes, let’s go to the land of the *devi*”.

The constant use of the appellation *devi* for *Daropada* (Draupadi) in the Mewati folk epic seems derived from the later tradition of the *uppuranas* like the *Devi* and *Sakta Puranas*, such as the *Kalika Purana*. If the goddess is capable of extraordinary violence, death and destruction, she is also, in her form as *Durga-Mahisasurmardani*, the destroyer of evil. Draupadi is *kari* or black, of the night and darkness and has powers

of life and death over her husbands. Arjan (Arjuna) recognises this when he says, “Devi Daropada is our death”. In Arjan’s view Daropada is *malkal* or *malika*, the queen personifying death (*rani rupi maut*) and will bring about the death of her five husbands. The term comes from the Arabic *malkul* meaning real. Daropada has powers of both destruction and creation. Her portrayal refers to the considerable womb symbolism of earth, seed and fertility. Hence even as she can destroy the Pandavas she is vested with the power to save them, which she eventually does.

Fifty six children’s souls, sixty-four joginis, ascetics, satis and three hundred and thirty million deities are referred to in the *Pandun ka kara*. The joginis or the powerful female force of the goddess are believed to be the followers of Gorakhnath. They are the good/evil spirits and wild creatures who cluster around battlefields and inhabit cremation grounds screaming as they tear out flesh and drink blood in skulls. They relate to a mythic substratum regarding their creation by Durga, Shiva’s consort, in order to serve Siva and herself.¹⁰ The j(y)oginis are very important to tantrism and Tantric Buddhism and there are several temples dedicated to them. They have a widespread presence in medieval India.

The Mahabharata of Dalits’

In a Dalit telling of the *Mahabharata* that I have more recently come across which is one of the many *deval* stories sung in *jagrans* by ‘untouchable’ Meghwals there is a similar portrayal of Draupadi as the goddess. To begin with Yudhishtira comes and touches her feet. Later in the story she takes position on the *asan* at the center of a galaxy of gods and goddesses that are seated on her either side. They

ask her why she has failed to destroy the Pandava brothers as she had vowed. Her reply is stunning and refers to her as having deliberately provoked the great war in order to completely destroy her husbands. Tribal and Dalit tellings of the epic even as they identify Draupadi with the goddess, castigate Krishna for resort to duplicity and lies. One such story is that of Khatu Shyamji which holds Krishna as responsible for the decapitation of the bravest of warriors, Babrik, who is the son of Ghatotkach, the son of Bhim by the demoness Hidimba. Babrik’s headless body is worshipped in a temple in Sikar, Rajasthan commemorating the beheading of demon in sculpture. There is an obvious interrogation of the *pauranic* deity-demon classification here.¹¹ Scholar-anthropologist Dominique Sila Khan informs me that low caste Muslims are among the tellers of this story and the

priests of the temple seem to be of dubious twice-born status.

The first part of *Pandun ka kara* called the *Bhim ka kara* thematically develops the dimensions of desire in terms of Bhim’s love for Daropada and the corresponding lust for her of Kichak, the wife’s brother of the ruler of Bairath and the general of his army). After obtaining a boon from Shiva, Bhim kills him during the year of the Pandava brothers’ exile. Bhim seems to be the *bhakta purusa* to the goddess although Bhim is also another name for Shiva of Mahadev.¹² Subsequently, he measures the earth with his stride and digs the *killi* or peg at its precise center on the heads of the divine serpents, Basak and Shes. This act symbolises both kingship and the conquest of the older cult of the Nagas prevalent in Braj, which was, Charlotte Vaudeville argues, overlaid by Krishnite mythological stories of the conquest and control of Nagas such as *Kaliyadamana*.¹³

Shared Religious Space

Hazari Prasad Dwivedi’s celebrated work argues that *tantrism* is the inward retreat and degeneration of Hinduism following the Muslim invasion.¹⁴ I see it, however, as constituting a shared religious space that provided a new context for the interaction of specifically low and untouchable caste Hindu and Muslim men and often women. These were groups that had been denied access to *shruti*(revealed Hindu doctrine) in the *yajna* or sacrifice centred tradition of the Vedic corpus. It was in the *yoga* centric tradition of transcendental praxis that saw itself as *avaidik* that this new space was found.¹⁵ The *tantrik vidhi* that emerged from here was supposed to be done not in the temple but independently and did not need a Brahman ritual specialist. Sexual intercourse required a woman who could not be one’s own wife so



Ramzan Khan, Muslim jogi occupationally responsible for controlling locust attacks and ensuring crop fertility

that a Bhairavi had to be obtained. These were often low caste and independent women practitioners as, for instance, a man's love for a *dhobin* or low-caste washerwoman in Chandidas' Bengali story. Eliade describes the poems of the *siddhas* which protest against orthodoxy through the exaltation of the low-caste woman.¹⁶

Virendra Shekhawat argues that *tantra* emerged as an alternative to the prevailing *shastra* paradigm about 700-800 AD and continued as a popular trend for nearly one millennium.¹⁷ The movement remained at the margins of religious (both Shankarite Hindu and Sunni Muslim) orthodoxy and was marginalised politically as well. But *tantra* influenced everyone and spread into all sects, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Islam using the *panchmakaras* - meat, fish, wine, parched grain and sexual intercourse with low-caste women as ritual oblation. Cannabis and alcohol were also used.

Biardeau comments that *tantrik* rites constitute a form of social protest.¹⁸ An extreme manifestation of this is found among the Aghoris. Roxanne Gupta maintains that *tantra* embodies the otherness within Hinduism. By their very appearance and action the Aghoris mark themselves as the locus of a struggle. With their faces and bodies inscribed with mud and ash, they speak through the signification of bones, faeces, hair and skulls and suggest the opposition to *varnasramadharm*.¹⁹ As Lorenzen puts it, 'an attack on caste was an attack on the divinely ordained social order'.²⁰

Shankaracharya made an effort to reform and contain Shaivism. Some of the Shaiva schools were integrated into the dominant, brahmanical culture; others were marginalised like the Buddhists. *Tantra* survived outside the centre constituted by the



'I came back from Pakistan...' Photo : Shail Mayaram

four *dhams*. It flourished in north eastern India, in Bengal, the Thar desert upto Multan in the west and in Nepal and the Himalayan region. But it was incorporated, modified and critiqued by the Sufi and Sant traditions. The Nath Jogis then inhabit a liminal space bridging Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist ascetics; spanning Nath, Buddhist and Islamic tantra; Hindu and Muslim sects and folk religious practice; penetrating and the rites of untouchable, low caste, tribal, pastoral and peasant communities.

Who is a Meo?

What do stories, metaphors and images have to do with identity? A Meo once asked me a question after a long interview which unsettled my anthropological gaze, "Tell me who is a Meo?" I thought my research of nearly a decade ought to have provided an answer which I began in a long winded historical fashion. The simplicity of his counter question-answer was even more stunning. "Try and insult the Pandun before the Meos and see the angry result," he told me. In a sense the direction he pointed to is implicit in their response to the *Mahabharata* clans whom the

Meos regard as the ancestors of their own lineage. The folk epic then is far more than mere "myth" and is central to the cultural identity of the Meo Muslims.

To return to the point where this essay started, the Meo oral tradition has forced on me the recognition for the drastic need to revise our categories of ethnicity, identity and community. The narrative of the encounter between the civilisations of Hinduism and Islam is usually believed to have been one characterised by tension and violence whether in the historian or the sociologist's telling or in the versions of the state (as *officialese*). Meo texts suggest at the multiple trajectories of cultural exchange and co-existing civilisational traditions and the need to retell stories of the Hindu-Muslim encounter.

Notes

¹ In some senses this essay is both culmination of ground covered as well as territory that remains to be traversed in what one hopes will be a work on popular *Mahabharatas*. I am grateful, as always, for discussions to Komal Kothari, Mukund Lath, Ashis Nandy and Dominique Sila Khan and Sattar Khan and Francine and Daya Krishna

² For an elaboration of this theme see

- Shail Mayaram, "Rethinking Meo identity: cultural faultline, syncretism, hybridity or liminality?" In Special issue on Muslim identity in South Asia and beyond, fifty years after Indian Independence, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (formerly South Asia Bulletin), ed. Mushirul Hasan 17 (1997).
- ³ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 11-14.
- ⁴ Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedi, Shail Mayaram and Achyut Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhum Movement and the Fear of Self* (Oxford University Press, 1995).
- ⁵ Ashraf was General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee of the Indian National Congress of which Nehru was President. In the 1930s he and his colleagues had organised a vigorous Muslim mass contact campaign withing the Congress party that claimed a mobilisation of over 1 lakh Muslims. This was a major attempt to combat Jinnah and the Muslim League and to capture (and sulvert) Muslim League organisations. The movement was sabotaged, according to one school of thought, by a clique within the Congress itself. For a further discussion of Ashraf and his role in Mewat see my "Speech, silence and the making of partition violence in Mewat", in *Subaltern Studies* vol 9, eds. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ⁶ For a discussion see Abdul Haye, "The freedom Movement in Mewat and Dr K.M Ashraf, in *Mohammad Ashraf: An Indian Scholar and Revolutionary*, ed. Horst Kruger (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969).
- ⁷ For a further elaboration of this theme see my paper, "Of Tolerance and Secularism", for forthcoming conference volume on Politics, Culture and Socio-Economic dynamics in Contemporary India, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino, Italy.
- ⁸ This version was recorded from Abdul for Maujpur on 16-17 September 1987.
- ⁹ George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973). In this essay the more popular term jogi is used instead of yogi.
- ¹⁰ James Stutley and Margaret Stutley, *Dictionary of Hinduism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).
- ¹¹ Ashis Nandy's forceful presidential address to the American Academy of religion mentions the birth and decline/death of deities and the permeable borders between gods and demons but overlooks more radical processes of empowerment/dethronement such as the Khatu Shyamji-Krishna story represents. Republished as "Facing extermination: a report on the present state of the gods and goddesses in South Asia", *Manushi* 99 (1997): 5-19. For an attempt to understand the dalit mythic perspective see Ranajit Guha, "Svarga main aur dharti par ek pratiishvar ka jivanvratt", *Nimnavargiya prasang* (Hindi), eds. Shahid Amin and Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi: Rajkamal, 1995), pp. 15-39.
- ¹² Sitaram Lalas, *Rajasthani Sabad Kos* vol3 (Jodhpur: Rajasthani Shodh Sansthan, 1962-1978), p. 3385.
- ¹³ Charlotte Vaudeville, "The Govardhan myth in northern India" *Indo-Iranian Journal* 22 (1980): 1-45. Reprinted in *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch 3.
- ¹⁴ Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Nath sampraday* (Ilahabad: Hindustani Akademi, 1950).
- ¹⁵ For an elaboration of the principles and significance of these two streams in ancient India see Daya Krishna, *The Problematic and Conceptual Structure of Classical Indian Thought about Man, Society and Polity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).
- ¹⁷ Virendra Shekhawat, *On Rational Historiography: An attempt at Logical Construction of a History of Sciences in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- ¹⁸ Madeleine Beardeau, *Hinduism, The Anthropology of a Civilisation* (Paris: Flammerion. Reprint. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 (1981)).
- ¹⁹ Roxanne P. Gupta, The politics of heterodoxy and the Kina Rami ascetics of Banaras, unpub. Ph.D thesis, Syracuse University, 1993.
- ²⁰ David Lorenzen, "New data on the Kapalikas", in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 231-238. □

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