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## THE SPECTRE OF BINARIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apart from the main shrine at Sherpur (Figure 1.1)—situated right on the border of eastern Rajasthan and southern Haryana—where the saint is buried with his sixteen family members in Islamic-style graves, there are two other main shrines and numerous new temples dedicated to Laldas across north India.<sup>10</sup> The two other main traditional shrines of Laldas are in the villages of Dholidoob (where his parents, Chandmal and Samda, are buried) and Bandholi (where one of his sons, Kutub or Dhruvji, and his two daughters, Riddhi and Siddhi, are buried) in Alwar in eastern



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

Source: Photo by the author.

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

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

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

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

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



**FIGURE 1.2** The new temple of Laldas at Punahana

Source: Photo by the author.

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



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

Source: Photo by author.

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

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

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

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

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

### **THE AREA, MEWAT AND THE MAKING OF THE OTHER**

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

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

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

Traditionally, Mewat has been a meeting ground of diverse religious traditions, characterised by the presence of Sufis, Naths, Jains and Bhaktas, among countless others religious streams (M. Kumar 2022a, 2002b; Mayaram 1997b, 2004c). Beyond the binary of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’, it represented a mosaic of various religious orientations and a complex arrangement of social relations. However, Mewat and Meos have currently been highly defamed by Hindu right-wing activists and popular media. Hindu right-wing activists describe the region as a ‘dark place’ and a ‘hotbed of breeding terrorism’, with Muslims supposedly engaging in forced religious conversion of Hindu girls as well as cow smuggling (Bose 2022).<sup>23</sup> These issues have sparked numerous sectarian conflicts in recent years, with many people labelling the area as the source of ‘anti-national’ activities. This association is largely due to stereotypes and prejudices against the Muslim community, which have led to an inappropriate classification of the region as a hub of criminal activities and lawlessness. For instance, in 2016, just before the beginning of an 11-month fieldwork in Mewat, I became a little depressed by the entrenched negative beliefs about the region held by many people in proximate areas and big cities like Delhi and Gurgaon. ‘A place of Muslim terrorists’, ‘a mini-Pakistan’, ‘full of robbers and kidnappers’—these were the usual allegations I heard about ‘Mewat’ in general and about the Meo Muslims in particular. Many people suggested that unless I changed the field area of my research, I would not return alive.

With the help of a friend in Delhi, where I was temporarily based, I was able to find a local friend who agreed to show me places in Mewat. On the day we met, my friend in Mewat queried my interest in the Meos, asking me, ‘What is the purpose of studying Muslims? You could find a better topic for your research.’ When I asked him to clarify his comment, he invoked the prevailing negative knowledge about Muslims rather than information based on concrete evidence. His description of the ‘Muslims’ of the area included adjectives like ‘dangerous’, ‘thieves’, ‘criminals’, ‘beef-eaters’ and ‘terrorists’.

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

Unfortunately, many political scientists, anthropologists and historians of South Asia still continue to reify—consciously or unconsciously—religious, caste and community groups, describing them as possessing coherence and definite boundaries.<sup>26</sup> Fundamental religious categories such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', which are in fact internally diverse, have been homogenised, not only in political and reformist rhetoric but also in treatises supposedly written to counter such notions.<sup>27</sup> 'Scholars too heavily rely on Hindu and Muslim as descriptive adjectives and categories', as Gottschalk (2000) rightly points out. 'Such distinctions are, though, not without uses', he adds, 'but privileging them implies that such communal divisions exist for all South Asians at all times' (Gottschalk 2000: 3).

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

caste status in Hinduism, but he presumed that 'the other' (Muslim) was a homogenous group. Similarly, the initial questions many Muslims, whom we met in the process of fieldwork, asked us were also related to our religious identity. The Muslims we met differentiated themselves from other Muslims (by caste identity, such as the Meo, the Mirasi, the Qureshi, and so on)<sup>28</sup> but treated 'the other' (Hindus in this case) as a coherent group, or so it seemed to me. Identification with 'religion' seemed to have surpassed other measures of social identification in the public domain, at least in categorising unfamiliar people. It appeared that strangers were located first by religious categories so as to guide one's initial behaviour and conduct. Although these trends around newer forms of 'religious consciousness' have been powerful in shaping the binary outlook of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' currently, beneath the bounded conception of 'religion' and religious communities lay multiple layers of pluralism.<sup>29</sup> These pluralistic impulses always remained in the background until uncovered by in-depth social and cultural research. For instance, I encountered some unique practices of social solidarity, discussed here, across religious boundaries organised by village-level brotherhood rather than the simple binary of 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'.

The history of tension and contestations between local (Mewat) and imperial (Delhi) powers provides an interesting starting point to understand the multifarious nature of religious and social identities in Mewat. The area was an important part of the Mughal province of Agra and served to connect Delhi to both the Agra and Ajmer regions. Imperial rulers were keen to control Mewat because of its strategic location on these two important trade and pilgrimage routes. The text *Ain-i-Akbari* describes many of Akbar's imperial sojourns as he passed through this region when he travelled westwards, either to subjugate rebel chiefs or to visit the famous Chishti saint Moinuddin at Ajmer (Mubarak, Blochmann and Jarrett 1894). In a popular folktale about the relationship between a famous local Chishti saint, Shah Chokha (whose tomb is near the Punahana temple), and a Meo figure called Dada Bahar, the Sufi saint supported the demands of local Muslims against the imperial power of the Mughal court.

The legend begins by introducing Rajni, a renowned beauty whose father served as a local official for Akbar in Bisru village near the Punahana Temple. Rajni's exceptional beauty caught the attention of Akbar, who, upon hearing tales of her captivating charm, expressed his desire to marry her. As a result, Rajni was brought to the imperial court in response to Akbar's fascination with her. Rajni's father, Randhir Singh Meo, held a prominent position in the

village as its head and the local tax collector. Despite his high status, he was bound by the endogamous practices of his Meo community, which strongly believed that Rajni's marriage to Akbar would bring great dishonour to their community. To address this situation, a Meo caste council (*pañcāyat*) was convened under the guidance of the Sufi saint Shah Chokha. During the council, it was decided that Dada Bahar, belonging to the Chiraklot clan (*pāl*) of the neighbouring village Kot, would be given the task of bringing Rajni back home.<sup>30</sup>

Shah Chokha advised the Meos to take this course of action in order to safeguard their community's honour. He did not support the marriage or the practice of strengthening the Muslim *ummāh* (religious community) by encouraging Meo Muslims to enter into marital alliances with Muslims of non-Meo origins. Additionally, the opposition of the Meos to Akbar's alleged desire to bring a Meo girl into the royal Mughal harem highlights the difference between the religious consciousness of the Meos and that of their imperial rulers in terms of their Muslim identity and religious beliefs.<sup>31</sup> The saint was not working to unify Islamic religious identity but was supporting a Meo version of 'Islam'.

When, one day, Shah Chokha was passing the Meo village, Kot, he noticed Rajni, the wife of Bahar (popularly called Dadi Bisarani or 'grandmother from Bisru village'), whom Dada Bahar had rescued from Akbar and later married. The saint asked Dadi Bisarani to make *kheer* (rice pudding) for him. She replied that milk was not available as the young heifers in her house were not yet ready for milking. The saint asked her to bring a pot for milk. One of the saint's miracles was when he caressed a young heifer the animal began to give milk. While Dadi Bisarani was making the *kheer*, the saint sat next to her and began throwing the rice in various directions. When he was ready to toss a handful of rice to the east following three successful attempts in other directions, Dadi grabbed his hand, asking, 'If you throw away all the rice, how will I cook kheer for you?' The saint smiled and answered, 'Had you not stopped me, your children [Meos] would have spread in the eastward direction too.' The village still believes that the reason for the Meos' absence beyond this border was because Dadi Bisarani interrupted the saint and prevented him from throwing rice towards the east.

Kot, the village of Shah Chokha's friend Bahar, constitutes the present-day border between two communities, the Hindu Jats of the Rawat clan on the east and the Muslim Meos of the Chiraklot clan on the west. Kot is the last Meo-dominated village in this region. Another event from the

same folktale of Dada Bahar reinforces these local-imperial dichotomies and the fraught nature of the current religious distinctions among peasant communities, like the Meos and the Jats. The Meo Chiraklot clan of Kot village had always shared an antagonistic relationship with the adjacent village, Hathin, of the Hindu Jats of the Rawat clan. Bahar of Kot had killed many Rawat Jats in conflict. Amidst the escalating reign of terror, the Rawat Jats entered into a pact of brotherhood with the Damrot Meo clan of the Bisru village. This alliance aimed to foster unity and cooperation between the two villages in the face of growing challenges and threats from other villages. A similar alliance was also formed by the Chiraklot Meos with the Jats of the Sorot clan of a nearby village. In times of crisis or conflicts, the Muslim Meos of the Damrot clan in Bisru would stand in support of the Hindu Rawat Jats of Hathin, rather than their fellow Muslim Meos of the Chiraklot clan. Similarly, the village of the Jats of the Sorot clan would follow the same principles. Stories depicting imagined conflicts and wars between these peasant communities were common in the area. The primary sources of contention, as shared by village elders, revolved around village boundaries, leadership and control of resources. These conflicts were not based on religious differences or identities.

Even in the present day, the relationship between the friendly clans of the two communities continues to be characterised by a strong sense of *bhāi-cārā* (brotherhood), surpassing caste and religious divisions. Stories of the past about inter-community alliances and conflicts are still alive in actual practice. But cross-caste religious village affinities have significantly shaped these relationships. Peasant clans and village antagonisms are the main markers of community solidarity and differences, rooted in local dynamics such as geographical locations, concerns about village expansion and boundaries and clan populations. This relationship of cross-caste and religious brotherhood between Meo and Jat villages and clans developed several centuries ago is still lived in everyday life by extending invitation to each other in marriages, funerals and other ceremonies. One particular ceremony is that of anointing the chosen clan headman, or *caudhari*, the traditional power authorities who are still relevant, although without official state recognition. The anointment is always done by a group of representatives from the brotherhood alliance. For example, if the Rawat Jat clan headman has to be chosen, the anointing will be done by the headman and representatives of the Damrot Meos.

The folktale of Dada Bahar and other stories indicate that the differences between the Jats and the Meos had not been colloquialised in terms of religious

sentiments and identities, despite these two communities contemporarily identifying themselves as 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', respectively. These stories further illustrate that a significant aspect of Indic 'religions' is the importance of locally rooted social and religious practices that mediate identity-related social interactions. Prior to the twentieth century, local social practices were more valuable than the institutional 'Hindu' and 'Islamic' practices.

Members of the Mewati Muslim society continue to take pride in their resistance to Mughal and British imperial rulers (Mayaram 2004a) and in their loyalty to the land of Mewat and, by extension, India. Now they view their long-held allegiance to the land as an example of strong patriotism that has remained unshakeable even in the face of their passionate devotion to Islam. As they were true patriots and devoted to what is now India, they fought against the long reign of Muslim monarchs from the Arab and Persian lands. Throughout my research, Mewatis recounted multiple stories in which the Meos fought alongside other 'local' kings to repel foreign invaders, including Muslim ones. Hasan Khan Mewati, the king of the Meos, was often held up as a hero by contemporary Meos because he fought alongside the 'local' Hindu ruler, Rana Sanga, against Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, in 1526 CE.<sup>32</sup> Several Meos used this incident to argue that Muslims in Mewat sided with a Hindu monarch against a Muslim invader because they valued local brotherhood over religion.

The popular stories within the Meo Muslim community repeatedly highlight these chronicles. This also implies that 'Islam' followed at the grassroots level competes with Sunni 'Islam' practised politically in a global form (Mohammad 2013). Islamisation of the Meos appears to have been of a very different nature, and, as has been indicated previously, the assertion of Muslim identity was not an important aspect of Islamisation in the region (Bharadwaj 2017). For instance, the anecdotes of Laldas, who flourished in Mewat during the reigns of Akbar and Shah Jahan, are also full of instances of persecution perpetrated by Mughal officers. These anecdotes reveal the Meo peasants' distinct relationship with the Mughal state. It was not only that the local forms of 'Islam' contrasted with their imperial counterpart, but there was also a wide range of religious activities embedded within those local forms and meanings. Some of the narratives of Laldas also dispel the prevailing stereotypes about the Meos and Mewat. Whether it be cow veneration, worshipping Ram or genealogical ties to Hindu gods, Meos' everyday practices were historically anchored in Indic cosmologies, in

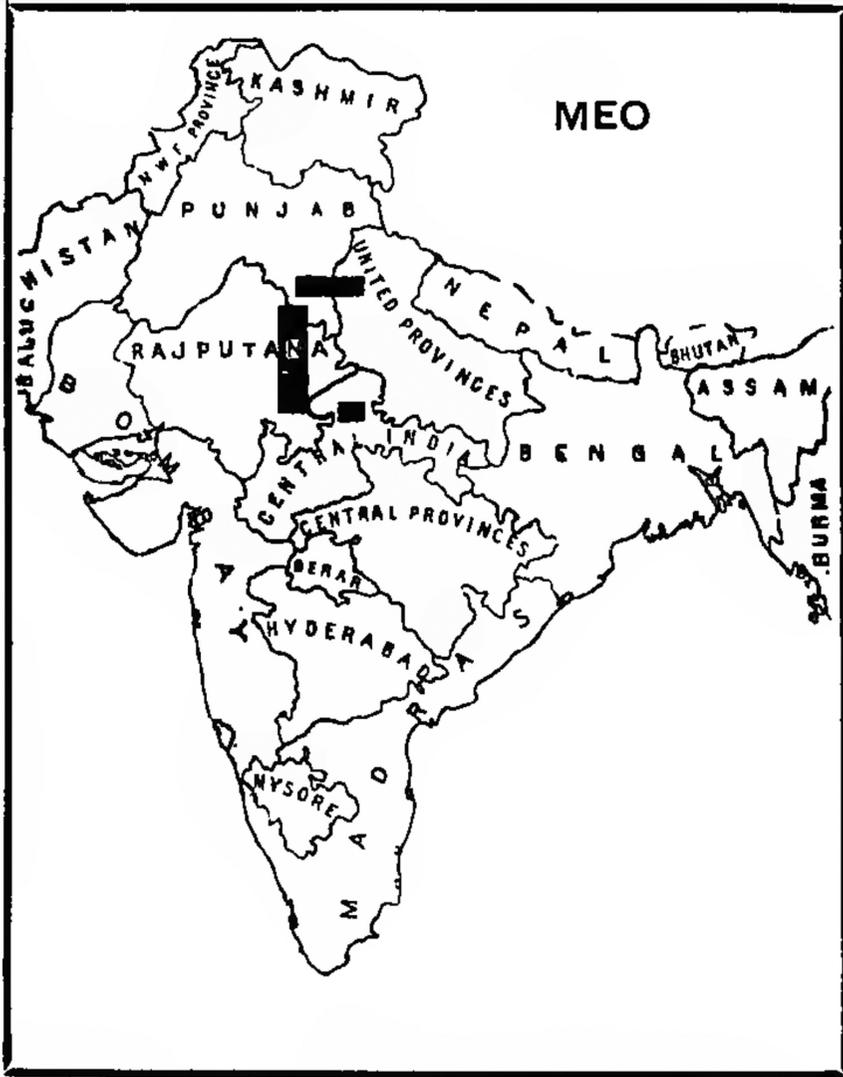
contrast to their present-day negative image constructed and perpetuated by the media and anti-Muslim Hindutva activists in India.

### **SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE MEO COMMUNITY**

Historically, the Meos constituted the majority of Mewat's population and were categorised as middle-caste cultivators in colonial censuses. Based on the 1901 census data, the Meos accounted for 168,590 individuals, approximately 2 per cent of the entire population of Rajputana (modern-day Rajasthan).<sup>33</sup> They were one of the largest groups of peasants in the states spanning eastern Rajasthan and southern Haryana. Specifically, in the two princely states of eastern Rajputana, the Meos constituted 113,142 people, more than 13 per cent of the total population in Alwar, and 51,546 individuals, or more than 8 per cent in the kingdom of Bharatpur (Hunter 1909: 313).

By 1931, the Meos had not only become one of the most populous castes in eastern Rajputana and southern Haryana, but they also formed the largest Muslim community in the area (Figure 1.4). Notably, out of the overall Muslim population of 186,500 in the Alwar kingdom, more than 80 per cent (146,460 individuals) belonged to the Meo caste (Table 1.1) (Cole 1932: 129; Copland 1999: 118).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in the southern parts of the British district of Gurgaon within the Punjab province, the Meos were the numerically dominant Muslim community. During the 1931 census, out of Gurgaon's total population of 740,163, approximately 242,357 individuals were Muslims, and slightly over half of them (124,821 individuals) belonged to the Meo community (K. Khan 1933: 79, 306).<sup>35</sup> Presently, the Muslim population at large, and the Meo community specifically, constitute a substantial segment of the population in the districts of Alwar and Nuh (Mewat).<sup>36</sup> This demographic presence empowers the Meos to exert influence over social and political developments in these regions.

Meos converted to Islam or signalled their commitment to adopt Islamic norms in their social life many centuries ago. Although they used Islamic symbols, they also continued to observe local marriage norms, rituals and caste endogamy (Chauhan 2003; Mayaram 1997a, 2004a; Jamous 2003). These rituals, some of which still exist, are comparable to those practised by Hindu peasant caste communities in Mewat's neighbouring regions. The Meo peasant world and the social, cultural and religious developments occurred



**FIGURE 1.4** The spread of Meo population in the late nineteenth century

Source: Risely (1999 [1915]: 340).

within a common social setting of interaction between these various peasant castes. It was this social setting, marked by shared socio-religious semiotics, which is one of the key Indic backgrounds against which the diverse religious outlook of these communities was formed. Among the Meos, the worship of 'Hindu' deities and goddesses, along with the observance of 'Hindu' rites and

**TABLE 1.1** Meo population of Alwar: Selected *nizā mats* (districts) (1931)

District	Meo population	Total population	Percentage
Tapukrah	12,411	27,058	45.8
Ramgarh	15,089	33,306	45.7
Alwar	18,937	43,705	43.4
Govindgarh	11,877	28,176	42.2
Kishangarh	7,713	31,083	24.8
Khairtal	7,713	31,374	22.4
Malakhera	5,722	35,017	16.5
Lachmangarh	8,140	49,472	16.4
Mandawar	3,580	31,079	11.5
Tijara	13,243	39,620	33.4

Source: Census of India 1931, vol. XXVII, Provincial Tables I and III.

customs, formed an integral part of their socio-religious traditions. Powlett (1878: 38), a colonial ethnographer,<sup>37</sup> wrote as early as the 1850s:

Meos are all Musalman in names, but their village deities are the same as those of Hindu Zamindars [landlords]. They keep, too, several Hindu festivals. Thus, the Holi [Hindu festival of colours] is with Meos a season of rough play and is considered as important a festival as the Muharram, Eid, and Shabibarat [all Islamic festivals]; and they likewise observe the Janam Asthmi, Dasehara, and Diwali [another set of Hindu festivals]. They often keep Brahmin priests to write *pili chitthi*, a note fixing the date of marriage. They call themselves by Hindu names, with the exceptions of 'Ram' and 'Singh' is a frequent affix, though not so common as 'Khan'.

According to colonial historical records, the names 'Meo' and 'Mewat' were in use for at least a thousand years prior to the preceding account written by Powlett in the nineteenth century. The name 'Mewat' is commonly thought to have been derived from the word 'Meo'. After the establishment of the first Delhi Sultanate kingdom in the twelfth century, Balban, a formidable ruler of the slave dynasty, led raids and plundered the Mewatis (Mayaram 2004a: 74–96). The Mewatis have continuously been portrayed adversely by Indo-Persian historians, Mughal sources and British colonial

chronicles (Mayaram 2004a). Barani (1285–1357 CE), the famous Persian historian of the Delhi Sultanate era (1206–1526), described the Meos negatively as ‘lawless plunderers, raiders, robbers and assaulters’ who had ‘virtually besieged Delhi’ (Mayaram 2004a: 74).

The Meo community’s origins are shrouded in mystery due to the dearth of historical materials before the tenth century. Mayaram (1997a, 2004a) draws parallels between the migratory histories of the Meos and the Jats. She carves out a space for the history of the Meo migration from the western side of India in the light of Persian and Arab chroniclers of Sindh. Under the pressure of the Arab forces after the conquest of Sindh in 711–12 CE, the Meo and Jat communities occupying the Sindh and Punjab regions were forced into the interior parts of north-west India around the tenth century (Mayaram 1997c: 26, 2004a: 19–26). Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Meo community saw significant socio-economic, political and religious transformations. In addition to their ties to Islam, the Meos started to become a community of peasants in the fifteenth century (Bharadwaj 2012: 217–19).<sup>38</sup> This process linked the Meos to Hinduism’s iconography, in addition to their prior ties to Sufi and localised forms of Islam. The ‘religion’ of the Meos was a form of popular ‘Islam’ that was mediated locally. Before the twentieth century, the majority of Meos were not concerned with their Islamic identity, despite observing certain aspects of Islamic rituals. Instead, they fought to preserve the local social customs and practices that were important to them.<sup>39</sup> However, these transformations in the peasant worldviews of the Meo Muslims strongly contained elements of piety, asceticism and renunciation which emerged during the Bhakti-Sufi period.<sup>40</sup>

Sufi, *bhakti*, tantric and yogic religious currents historically influenced one another’s patterns of religiosity and ways of being (S. Bayly 1989; Burchett 2019; Green 2008; Snehi 2019). Particularly, the confluence of popular Sufism and devotional Hinduism affected the early modern societies of north India (Burchett 2019). Many communities were influenced by a broad network of Sufi saints (Eaton 1993, 2015; Ernst and Lawrence 2016; Green 2012), some of whom also acquired a Hindu identity—for example, the Nath saints with dual religious identities such as Kanifnath/Rahman Shah and Ratannath/Haji Ratan (Bouillier and Khan 2009; Hayden et al. 2016). These developments led to the formation of religious communities centred around a new ‘Sufi’- and ‘Bhakti’-influenced devotional sensibility (Burchett 2019). Previous studies have questioned the idea of one coherent monolithic Bhakti movement (Hawley 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015b; Pauwels 2010). Hawley (2012) claimed that

ideas about the coherence of 'Bhakti' emerged centuries after the saints in these traditions lived in order to serve different religious and political aims. For example, some saints were later considered as representative of the 'Hindu' religion even though the saints had vigorously criticised Hindu practices and Hindu identity in their time. Similarly, the existence of a coherent Sufism is problematic, too (see Eaton 2015; Green 2012), since Sufism represents a complex world with complex relationships to Islam and Hinduism in South Asia and has vast regional differentiations and diverse saintly traditions. Consequently, each saint of Bhakti and Sufi backgrounds and their respective location need to be analysed separately to understand the complex nature of religious belonging.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, these developments also affected the Meo community and sparked significant arguments—first over the Meos' transition from a nomadic to a settled community and then regarding the Meos' conversion to Islam.<sup>42</sup> Mayaram (1997a, 2004a) correctly observes in her study that communities such as the Meos were both Hindus and Muslims in their cultural and religious practices, inhabiting a liminal space. Mayaram's analysis has not provided a comprehensive explanation regarding why and how the process of the Meos considering themselves as both *kṣatriya* (warriors) and Muslim occurred, and the specific conditions that influenced this belief. Therefore, further investigation is required to delve into the factors that shaped their self-perception.

Meos' link to the Hindu past is maintained by assertions that they are descendants of the two Hindu warrior gods and kings, Ram and Krishna, as well as Arjuna, a prominent warrior figure in Mahabharata. This, I suggest, is rooted in the relationships between kinship, land, the emergence of the concept of private property and peasant community rights—facts that Mayaram fails to examine in her works.<sup>43</sup> As private property rights established during the early years of Mughal rule, the Meos' declarations about their ties to these 'Hindu' figures served as a compelling justification for their claims to land, comparable to those of other peasants.<sup>44</sup> In this instance, a specific cultural process to create relationships with religious characters of these epics who are also kings demonstrates a close relationship between peasantry, land, ownership and cultural claims. Not only did Meo clans establish genealogical links with Hindu deities, but they also coveted land ownership.

The Meos maintain two distinct types of genealogies, one that covers the entire community and the other that focuses on specific families. *Pālo kī vanśāvalī* (the descendant lines of *pāls*) is the Meo community genealogy

that details the history of the Meo territorial clans, or *pāls*. They are often associated with a Hindu warrior god or a hero from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata.<sup>45</sup> Meo links to *kṣatriya* (warrior) status are rooted in the tradition of kinship formation centred on king-type gods. Five Meo *pāls* are Jaduvansi (the descendants of Yadu/Jadu, the clan of the Hindu god Krishna); five others are linked to the Tomar clan of Rajputs (the descendants of Arjuna); two *pāls* consider themselves Raghuvansi Meos (the descendants from the god Ram); and one small unit called *pallākṛā* is said to have descended from Nirban Chauhans<sup>46</sup> (Mayaram 2004a: 52). I recorded a series of *dohā* (couplets) from a group of Mirasi bards which nicely describes the narrative of five Jaduvansi *pāls*, which all relate their origin to the Hindu deity Krishna:

*jadūvans bahāl, pānc pālan main pāyo*  
*jabro dal mevāt, ek sāu ek samāyo*  
*jadū vansī ke bīc huyē hai kṛiṣṇā murārī*  
*brīj mandal ke bīc basā dī mathurā pyārī*  
*jā sū ab tak kahē jahān tīn lokan sū nyārī*  
*chhīraklot, duhlot ko jabro mero damrot ko dal*  
*punglot vā nāī kī sar nyuñ pāncho pāl sabal.*<sup>47</sup>

The Jadu clan flourishes, divided among five *pāls*  
 A powerful faction in Mewat, a hundred and one  
 Among the Jadu clan, Krishna [also called Murari] was born  
 In the middle of the Braj region, he founded the beautiful town of Mathura  
 People say it [Mathura] is unique in all the three worlds  
 Chhiraklot, Duhlot and my powerful Damrots  
 Punglot and Nai as well, thus, the five *pāls* stand strong.<sup>48</sup>

This passage begins by invoking the Jadu (Yadu) clan of Mathura, the centre of the Braj region and the abode of the cowherd god Krishna. Geographically, the Braj region intersects with Mewat and shares a close cultural resemblance in language, culture and music. The appropriation of Krishna as a deity who was also a cowherd by Jaduvansi Meos is similar to that of another peasant caste, the Ahirs/Yadavs. The concept of religious ancestry centred on Krishna has been essential to the establishment of the Ahir/Yadav community (Michelutti 2002). Similarly, many Meos regard Kanhaiya (Krishna) as *dādā* (literally, ‘grandfather’, a Mewati term for ancestors) and *autārī* (‘incarnated one’). His bravery and central role in the Mahabharata war is crucial for the

Meos. Two other Meo *pāls* call themselves Raghuvansis or Kacchwaha Meos and trace their ancestry back to another Hindu warrior deity, Ram, the hero of the epic Ramayana:

*kachvāhā rājput ramchandar kā potā  
jānai rāvan kūn bas kiyā diyā durjan ke gotā  
raghuvansī insūñ kahain saccā karūñ bayan  
hain ye dahngal yāi vansa main bankan bargujar balvan*

The Kacchwaha Rajputs are the grandsons of Ram  
Who vanquished Ravana and destroyed evil men  
Raghuvansis they are called, my testimony is true  
The Dhaingal are in this line, the brave Bargujars too. (Mayaram 2004a:  
54–5)

Sometimes more than two *pāls* associate their origins with the same figure. Meo *pāl* eulogies invariably extol qualities such as courage and generosity, which are attributes of royal monarchs and rulers, thereby implying a *kṣatriya* status. These panegyrics symbolise the community's assertion of its martial roots and traditions. The *pāl* is, thus, basically a clan's territorial unit. *Pāls* are crucial to Meo society's politics. They determine endogamous and exogamous marriage. The Meo Muslim community practices endogamy, but the Meo *pāls* follow exogamy. For instance, females of a particular *pāl* are customarily married into one or more specific *pāls*.<sup>49</sup> Hence, taking or giving daughters in marriage (*betī lenā aur betī denā*) marks the bond between *pāls*. Traditional conventions and intricate procedures govern the bridal exchange system, with occasional exceptions. Hence, a *pāl* is a huge extended family centred on brotherhood. In Meo weddings, parallel marriage is permissible for maternal cousins to marry paternal cousins as long as it does not violate the bride's receipt custom from a particular *pāl*. The *pāl* system also governs politics, dispute settlement and various other socio-political issues.

Meos' genealogical perceptions were expressed in material and symbolic practices. The Jogi and Mirasi bards<sup>50</sup> sing the origin story of a cluster of Meo *pāls*, about the same warrior ancestors, as well as panegyrics of each village, block, family and a *pāl*'s main personalities. One of the main concerns of genealogies is to promote those values that reflect the realities of a social community. Several questions arise here: Why did the Meos connect themselves with Hindu Gods? Why do the Meos claim the status of the Hindu

warrior class (*kṣatriya*) despite being a Muslim peasant community? At what point did they begin to make such a claim?

This warrior tradition among the Meos has connections with the Rajput martial tradition in Rajasthan.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, the process of genealogical identification in Mewat generally operates at multiple levels: religion, community, caste, village and personal. Meos link their collective social memories, history and pasts to the present, largely in the tradition of *itihās-purān*.<sup>52</sup> The political genealogies of *itihās-purān* and the genealogical stories of creation found in the Brahminical Vedas differ from each other (Thapar 1991). The genealogies found in *itihās-purān* texts marked a significant shift as they began to reflect the genealogical traditions of castes beyond the Brahmins, particularly those of political rulers. This departure from the traditional focus on Brahmin genealogies highlighted the importance of caste-based lineages and their association with political power and rulership (Thapar 1991: 6–12). A comparatively new form of non-Brahmin caste genealogy in the *itihās-purān* tradition was recorded and performed by the bardic castes rather than by the Brahmins. However, aside from the genealogies of the Brahmins and political rulers, common peasant and other genealogies did not emerge until after the fifteenth century.

In the case of most peasant communities such as the Meos, Jats, Minas and the Gujjars, their marauding activities earned them a negative reputation. Until the thirteenth century, these communities did not have a settled mode of life of agricultural cultivation. A peasant community like the Meos, the Jats—a pastoral community in Sindh around the twelfth century—underwent a transformation from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards to become a settled agricultural community (Habib 1995: 170–80). Moreover, the Meos underwent a similar transformation from an itinerant to a peasantry community, although their Islamisation was already underway (Bharadwaj 2012, 2016).<sup>53</sup> Later, there is evidence to suggest about the expansion of agricultural activities from the late fourteenth century onwards, which occurred on a large scale during the period of Mughal rule (S. Chandra 1996: 190; Habib 2011). In this period, the idea of private property began to emerge, even if loosely defined. This process intensified under late Mughal rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (S. Chandra 2003: 168–92, 2009; Habib 1999: 137). For instance, the Ahir (Yadav) community and Kurmi peasants engaged in *khud-kasht* (personal cultivation), which gave peasants certain private rights over the land (S. Chandra 2003: 168–92, 2009; Habib 1999: 137).

The Meos' genealogies are, thus, developments of the post-fifteenth-century period. Their genealogies offer a crucial means of understanding the patterns of social interrelations and socio-economic status, deeply rooted in the respective cultural imagination of a collective self.<sup>54</sup> What we see in the cultural imagination of the Meos is a reflection of the changes going on at that time. While Mayaram (1997a) asserts that the Meos were unconscious of their simultaneous Hindu and Muslim identity, I argue that the Meo connection to Hinduism was a conscious cultural choice because the cultural construction of *kṣatriya*-hood enhanced a deeper connection of Meo peasants with land. Meo kinship conceptions in the form of genealogical links with Hindu gods emerged later than their initial conversion to Islam and were connected to the evolution of the idea of peasant ownership of land after the fifteenth century. Moreover, the dual religious connection of Laldas is not different from the processes the Meo community was undergoing at that time. The shared religiosity of Laldas, therefore, reflects the once prevalent shared religious culture among the Meos. The kind of life most Meos once lived strengthens not only the locally rooted cosmologies of the community but also its varied associations with traditions like the Laldas order.

Aside from these important developments taking place around claims on land, the emergence of warrior sensibilities in the Mughal state shaped the Meo community's connections, especially with 'Hinduism'. A new martial ethos among the peasant communities first emerged during Mughal rule in the context of what Kolff (2002) calls 'the military labour market'. The Mughal imperial state's demand for soldiers made the emphasis on martial traditions an important aspect of village life. This created and redefined the martial sensibilities of rural peasants. Valour and bravery were already central to peasant-state relations, with the importance of self-defence in incidents such as non-payment of taxes as well as for survival in their villages (Hauser 2004: 404).

The areas the Meos inhabit now are the same areas mentioned in the Mahabharata and are close to Krishna's Braj kingdom. Islam on its own was not able to advance the traditional cultural claims of land ownership of the Meo peasants over the land of Krishna, especially when the Meos had already formed a relationship with Islam. To fulfil this purpose, the pre-existing cultural connection to 'Hinduism' came to be further emphasised. Meo genealogies and the Meo vernacular versions of the 'Hindu' epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, popularly known as *lankā ki caḍhāī* (the raid

to Lanka) and *pandun kā kaḍā* (the couplets of Pandu) (Mayaram 1997b), provide examples of such linkages. Bards of Meos, known as Mirasis and Jogis, recite these folk epics, which were originally written by Meo poets in the early seventeenth century.<sup>55</sup> Cultural developments like this signify the need for cultural resources to legitimise claims on land through kinship ties. The Meo's forms of kinship with Krishna, Ram and other figures—kings, warriors and the sole owners of the land—were rooted in the process of legitimising peasant rights and claims of private ownership on the land. Since the Meos are historically a powerful group of peasants controlling almost three-quarters of the land in Mewat (Channing 1882), their genealogies emphasise their superior social status through a claim on warrior qualities. Kolff's views on martial sensibilities among peasants in the Mughal period remain relevant today (Hauser 2004: 404). This martial sense of identity is still present among Meos, who often insisted to me that they were a martial and trustworthy community (*Hum ek bahādur aur vafādār kaum hai*).<sup>56</sup> The Meos were proud of their patriotic loyalties to the land and to their martial status, citing the examples of Hasan Khan Mewati and the numerous sacrifices made by the Meos in the 1857 rebellion against the British.<sup>57</sup> Among north Indian peasant communities such as the Ahirs, Kurmis and Jats, the claim of an ancient past full of *kṣatriya* (martial) glory was further strengthened in the first part of the twentieth century with the formation of many caste *mahāsbhās* (major associations) (Pinch 1996). The claim of martial peasant origins was reinforced by and deeply rooted in the Vaishnava traditions. Peasant communities, or *shudras*,<sup>58</sup> generally proclaimed *kṣatriya* status based on genealogical ties to Ram and Krishna, the two avatars of Vishnu (Pinch 1996: 82–85).

Nonetheless, it also appears that Mayaram's representation of the community as 'marginalised' does not resonate with the Meo's self-perception, emotions and sensibilities or their current landed status.<sup>59</sup> It can be concluded that a common theme across these peasant and landholding groups was the idea of being a community of warriors. The Meo's genealogies reflect the same concerns as other land-owning peasant castes' genealogies. The peasant martiality reflected in genealogies needs to be understood in the context of these groups' desire to own land, their memory of the martial ethos relating to their recruitment into imperial and state armies, and their desire to achieve and maintain a superior social-economic status. In the sixteenth century, Laldas was born into such an agrarian Meo Muslim family. He perfectly embodied the lax religious attitude of the Meos. Like many other Bhakti and

Sufi saints, he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but both and beyond, all at the same time.<sup>60</sup> His in-betweenness reflects the rustic agricultural milieu of the Meos, in which both religions co-existed in accordance with the devotional ethos of north Indian peasantry.

### THE RESEARCHER'S LIFE IN THE FIELD

I first took the horizontal L-shaped route in black on Map 2 from Hodal to Ramgarh in Alwar (Rajasthan), which connected to the main road from Gurgaon to Alwar via Firozpur Jhirka at Nagina. Hodal and Ramgarh were around 80 kilometres apart, linked by a *pakkā* (metalled) road. This straight asphalt road also passed through other smaller towns and villages in the Nuh district, including Punahana, Shah Chokha, Pinagwan, Badkali and Firozpur Jhirka, before reaching Alwar through the Ramgarh *tehsil* of Alwar. The road served the area's transportation requirements by allowing peripatetic three-wheelers and modified Indian jeeps to ply between neighbouring villages and towns. Moreover, the road also functioned as a marketplace for each town and village. Many fruit stalls, vegetable carts, rental cars, mobile repair shops and clothing stores, positioned on both sides of the road, made it a narrow thoroughfare in some places. The route connected the temple at Punahana via Shah Chokha tomb to the main shrine of Laldas in Sherpur village on the Rajasthan–Haryana border.<sup>61</sup> These were the three main fieldwork sites, apart from some other less frequently visited sites of Laldas and other saints (see Map 3).<sup>62</sup> Numerous other smaller temples and shrines were located within a 50-kilometre radius of the main shrine. A religious pilgrimage from these temples to the Sherpur shrine was regularly organised to either celebrate the birth of Laldas each year or build a common Hindu tradition of going on a pilgrimage.

Before I did ethnographic fieldwork, I looked at and analysed relevant historical materials from the archives in Delhi, Rajasthan and Alwar. Most of these materials were available online. I also gathered oral histories, biographies of saints and pamphlets and cheap booklets. Historical sources, ethnographic observations and interviews with people in the field not only helped compare periodic changes but also allowed to observe interconnections. At first, I used the participant observation method for a few months before identifying key themes to be examined in detail. After gathering basic information on the field sites, their social makeup and the three shrines and countless temples of

Laldas, the next step was to meet individuals in each village and neighbouring areas. Early in the fieldwork, I made friends with individuals who worked for the Mewati Development Society (MDS) in Punahana. Islamuddin, the local head of the MDS, not only helped me organise logistics but also became a very close friend and informant. He took me to several villages, let me stay at his house and the homes of his relatives, and set up many meetings with religious leaders, politicians and women (who were part of the MDS and were living around the chosen field sites).

An extensive fieldwork was conducted at a variety of field settings and among a wide range of social, religious and cultural communities. Multi-sited religious ethnography allows one to go beyond spatial limitations to include religious ideas, rituals and practices that exhibit similar or diverse forms beyond a specific locale. Often, specific religious traditions are rooted in diverse socio-historical contexts within and beyond a specific area. The comparative method of multi-sited ethnography, thus, helps to understand interconnectedness and transnational (trans-local) networks (Marcus 1995) as well as allows the comparison of the same issue from different angles, highlighting variations in perspectives and experiences at both individual and community levels. Adoption of this method reflected change and continuity across the traditionally shared religious shrines and newly built temples of Laldas.

A good share of oral history data was gathered from the Jogi and Mirasi, the two communities of minstrels who were considered to be 'low caste' by Meos. My first interaction with them was at the Laldas shrine in Sherpur, where they were performing at the annual *melā* (festival). These folksingers and oral storytellers traditionally sang popular tales about the Meo community and Laldas, among other saints.

I also collected data from visitors at the shrines, other bards and singers of the Jogi and Mirasi backgrounds, the priests who officiated there and numerous village and town residents. I lived near Punahana near the temple of Laldas and worked there from Tuesday to Thursday. Most Hindu visitors visited the temple daily, as that was a usual practice among followers, so I spent the entire day there for three consecutive days. During this period, I occasionally spent some of my time visiting other temples of Laldas in nearby areas. For another set of three days from Friday to Sunday, I carried out fieldwork in and around the main shrine of Laldas at Sherpur. Here, I proceeded in the same manner as I had at the Punahana temple. More crucially, speaking with Muslim villagers about the Hinduisation of

the Laldas shrine, as well as seeing the activities and reactions of Tablighi reformists to the recent transformations, helped me comprehend the influence of Islamic reformism on shared sacred shrines. As the saint Laldas was born on a Sunday, worshippers at his shrine in Sherpur flocked there more often on that day.

Occasionally, I ventured outside the confines of my field locations to meet with other individuals, including bards, who had connections to the shrines, as well as other Meos, Jogis and Mirasis. Marriage ceremonies, rituals, festivals, pilgrimages and other cultural events were common occasions for contact with important participants. I also made frequent trips to the *dargāh* (tomb) of the Sufi saint Shah Choka to see how the new Islamic reforms were affecting shared religious sites. The tomb was controlled by Tablighi Jamaat members. Mewat has also been an experimental ground for the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, and the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic reform organisation. For many reform movements and ideologies, imposing uniformity has been a leading political priority since their origin.

By examining people's responses to reform organisations' attempts to enforce uniformity, one can effectively explore the internal diversity of a community that is perceived and assumed to be homogeneous for epistemic and religious reasons. People's religiosity often reflects and is influenced by socio-economic and political changes, making it crucial to analyse how they either embraced or resisted the endeavour to homogenise their religious practices. During my fieldwork in the area, I delved deeper into the question of whether all liminal-syncretic traditions eventually fade away as reform organisations strive for purity by narrowing boundaries, or if certain liminal-syncretic practices demonstrate resilience. I sought to understand why certain traditions persist and show resilience while others perish by examining identity formation, the adaptable and diverse nature of religious boundaries, and the fluid dynamics of inter-caste relations on the one hand, and community divisions, boundary making and opposition to puritanical reforms on the other. Specifically, I focused on Laldas's shrines, new temples dedicated to him and the tomb of Shah Chokha to shed light on these dynamics.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

Following historical and disciplinary distinctions, the book thematically and analytically explores the aforementioned concerns and concepts. Chapter 2

examines the historical context of Laldas and the nature of religious activities around the saint and his shrines by analysing oral materials such as folksongs and folktales, hagiographical tales and popular beliefs. In addition, it also analyses the malleability of religious boundaries and the intersection of caste, clan, village and religious identities in relation to Laldas's widespread devotion.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine how Laldas has become a disputed figure among the Hindu and Muslim communities. These chapters explore contested sacred sites and the Baniyas' exclusive adoption of the Laldas order as a Hindu sect. Hinduisation of the Laldasi tradition demonstrates how reformist Hinduism practiced among the Baniya communities is now transforming folk traditions in a manner analogous to the gradual displacement of traditional beliefs by modern orthodox Islam among current Muslim descendants of Laldasis. Chapter 5 analyses the influence of the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat on this issue and how these contemporary reform movements have tried to replace traditional religious activities with new standardised orthodox practices and beliefs. It demonstrates how the growth of reformist ideals has affected shared religious sites.

Chapter 6 adopts a thoroughly new approach to consider how communities cope with the pressures to adopt orthodoxy through concealing their practices. Using the works of scholars such as Simmel (1906), Taussig (1999) and Urban (1998), I analyse concealment in the context of religious disciplining in a region where female literacy is low and the social structure is highly patriarchal. Many women and some men hid their faith in these saints for fear of being mocked and vilified. Individuals followed concealment to preserve a tradition of visiting a shared shrine. Chapter 7 also discovers forms of coping strategies, in this case by bardic communities in search of new patrons due to the realignment of the Meo community with orthodox Sunni Islam. It further investigates layers of resistance employed by members of performing artist communities in regard to the Laldasi and other shared tradition, using ideas of 'passive resistance' and 'public and hidden transcripts' developed by James Scott (1990, 2008). The final chapter, Chapter 8, brings together the various strands, historical, linguistic, anthropological, ethnographic and theoretical, to demonstrate how the study of Laldas and his traditional followers is relevant to both this specific community and a broader understanding of how diverse communities in India are now developing.

## NOTES

1. *Pīr* is a term used for Islamic mystics whose shrines are centres of popular devotions across South Asia, while *sant* (saint) is generally used for a living or dead Hindu ‘holy’ person. Meo Muslims and Baniyas (Hindus) were the two primary communities that traditionally followed the teachings of the saint. Baniyas, also known as Vaishyas, are one of the four *varnas*, or castes, in Hinduism, traditionally associated with trade, commerce and money lending. Their traditional status was ‘low’ compared to Brahmins and Kshatriyas.
2. By using the phrase ‘the Hindu god’ I do not intend to label a figure within a particular religion. Instead, it has been employed to convey a simplified sense of current religious significance of an entity to readers who may not be familiar with it. Ram has multiple imaginaries and interpretations in the minds of believers. By invoking Ram, Laldas indicated an omnipresent supreme being.
3. The terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Islam’ are not used in their modern usage; instead, they refer to amalgams of multiple forms of religious practices. Moreover, the term ‘Hinduism’ here does not refer to the modern understanding of political Hinduism, called ‘Hindutva’. Nor does my usage of the term ‘Islam’ refer to a single orthodox form of reformist Sunni Islam. Defining these two terms, ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’, religiously is a daunting task as they represent diverse meanings and traditions. I am following Flueckiger’s suggestion that we should expand ‘the boundaries of what counts as “religion” to include “ways of life”’ (Flueckiger 2015: 4). It is more appropriate to speak about several types of ‘Islam’ and ‘Hinduism’ rather than confining these terms to a single meaning.
4. Laldas was a *kabīrpanthī nirguṇ* Muslim saint. The term *kabīrpanthī nirguṇ* stands for a follower of the fourteenth-century Bhakti saint Kabir, who advocated the formless devotion of God. On the issue of devotion to Ram, there were two main schools, Ramanandi and Kabirpanthi. Ramanandi followed a more orthodox and *sagun* form of devotion, which is venerating God with physical attributes. *Kabīrpanth*, a fellowship of *nirguṇ* Ram, is generally considered more progressive (Hawley 2012, 2015a; Lorenzen 1995; Schomer and McLeod 1987). Again, it is doubtful whether all the saints followed a clear lineage of these two religious ways or not. Sometimes, saints had no connection to each other at all. The regional developments of *bhakti* (referred to as ‘nodes’

by Hawley [2015a]) differ from region to region. The major figures of the north Indian form of *bhakti* devotion were Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu and Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion. More on this issue comes in the next two chapters.

5. *Panth*, meaning 'path or order', refers to a Hindu *samprādāy*, or 'sect'. The origin of a *panth* is usually linked to the teachings of a particular 'Hindu' saint; for more information on this, see Juergensmeyer (1982). Although 'sect' does not correspond well with the Hindi word *panth*, I still use the term to give readers the closest idea of what *panth* means.
6. The idea of 'religion' and the division of the four 'world religions' have been challenged by many scholars (Asad 1993; Bergunder 2014; Juergensmeyer 2005; Masuzawa 2005). Sketching the emergence of 'religion' as a modern historical object and category of analysis, these scholars explored how Western concepts and religious practices have shaped the hegemonic understanding of 'religion' that we frequently use today. The critique of the term 'religion' challenges us to question the universality and objectivity of this category and to recognise the ways in which it has been used to justify colonialism and cultural imperialism among other issues.
7. Scholars like Bowman (2010) and Hayden et al. (2016) use the word 'mixing/mixed' over 'sharing/shared' to refer to a religious congregation at a sacred site because sharing presumes 'amity', which may not be the case at most sites analysed over a long period of time. Here, both terms are used interchangeably.
8. Although I prefer the term 'liminality' over 'syncretism' depending upon the nature of a religious interaction, here my usage of anti-processes of these two theoretical stands refers to both anti-syncretism and anti-liminality terms. The term 'anti-syncretism' was popularised by Stewart and Shaw (1994) in their very influential work to refer to the reform ideologies which oppose diverse forms and practices of religious synthesis and mixing. Anti-syncretic and anti-liminal terms here have been used to denote the ideologies of the two reform organisations which seek Hindus and Muslims to follow a 'pure' form of their respective 'religions'.
9. The term 'Indic' is used to refer to the broader cultural and social contexts of the Indian subcontinent, including its art, music, literature, religion and traditions. The complex and diverse societies that have developed in the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years share common philosophical and cultural roots and have had a significant impact on the region's history and culture. Indic refers to unique and mixed religious practices that cannot

be confined to 'Hinduism' alone, despite some obvious thematic overlaps between the religious practices of what is generally taken as 'Hinduism' and other religions, such as 'Buddhism', 'Sikhism', 'Jainism', 'Christianity' and 'Islam'. It indicates the breadth of South Asian norms beyond 'Hindu' doctrine or practice. Gilmartin and Lawrence (2000), who first popularised the term, write that Indic suggests 'a repertoire of language and behaviour, knowledge and power' that defines a broad cosmology of 'human existence beyond bounded groups self-defined as Muslim or Hindu' (2).

10. It is important to distinguish here between the terms 'shrine' and 'temple' when referring to the places dedicated to Laldas. A shrine is characterised by its lack of a specific religious identity, whereas a temple is typically associated with Hinduism. Therefore, all the locations dedicated to Laldas that are traditionally visited and subject to contention by both Hindus and Muslims are referred to as 'shrines'. On the other hand, the term 'Laldas temple' is used to describe buildings constructed more recently by Laldas's Hindu followers in the style of Hindu temples.
11. Vaishnava refers to the followers of God Vishnu and his incarnations, such as Ram and Krishna. They generally worship images of these deities in temples. The Vaishnavite tradition is known for its ardent devotion to a Vishnu avatar (mainly Krishna) and as such played an important role in the expansion of the 'Bhakti' movement in the Indian subcontinent from the second millennium CE. It has four schools of various denominations (*sampradayas*): Ramanuja's medieval-era *Vishishtadvaita*, Madhvacharya's *Dvaita*, Nimbarkacharya's *Dvaitadvaita* and Vallabhacharya's *Shuddhadvaita*. Brahminical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Panchatantra (Agama) scriptures and Bhagavata Purana are all important texts in Vaishnavism (Hawley 2015b; Beck 2005; Raj and Harman 2007).
12. The Baniya community is a caste cluster divided into a number of subcastes, such as Jain, Aggarwal, Gupta, Jaiswal and so on. The socio-economic status of various Baniya sub-groups, primarily identified as Hindus or Jains, considerably vary. Currently, the wealthy Baniyas also associate themselves with the one unified caste cluster. In rural areas, the term was mainly used for the village grain dealers in the past. These village-level Baniyas were not as powerful as the great merchants of the city, called Mahajan (literally 'great men') or Sahukar (money lender) (Bayly 1992). I am using the term 'Baniya' to refer to a 'petty business class' who were engaged in money lending, trading and grain dealing with the Meos in the past.

13. There are currently 15–20 new temples built in Alwar alone which I visited. The number of total temples in north India may be in hundreds. It was difficult to identify all of them within this project.
14. Throughout the book, the terms ‘idol’ and ‘image’ are interchangeably used. Although the use of ‘idol’ has a Christian root and ‘image’ is a preferred term, but the word ‘image’ does not fully capture the physicality of the material representation of a religious figure in a temple.
15. This is one example of a much wider phenomenon of shared/contested saints’ shrines in South Asia but also stretching through Anatolia and the Balkans, as well as the Middle East. See Hayden et al. (2016) for more information.
16. As described by Hayden et al. (2016), the concept of *religioscape* refers to spatial parameters of the social presence of various religious communities in a shrine, which are defined by ‘physical markers of the space in which practitioners of a given religious community interact’ with the other (28).
17. The physicality and temporality of a sacred space observed over a period of time define *religioscapes* as inherently fluid. For instance, Hayden et al. (2016) claim that devotees carry their respective *religioscapes* when in interaction with people of other faiths at a mixed site, affecting the built environment and intersecting each other’s *religioscape* through physical, material, symbolic and religious exchanges (28–35).
18. Carving a separate district of predominantly Meo population from Gurgaon district in Haryana was a long-standing demand which was first fulfilled in 2004 when the then chief minister, Omprakash Chautala, named it first as ‘Satyamev Puram’. The name was later changed to Mewat by the Congress government in 2005, followed by one more change in 2016 as Nuh by the BJP government this time.
19. The word ‘peasant’ is far from a homogenous category (Bhattacharya 2019; Stokes 1978; Thorner 1971), so its use should be clarified. The category of ‘peasant’ as opposed to merchants (Baniya) and Rajput warrior castes here refers to land-owning agriculturists from middle-caste status communities. Their traditional social position in the hegemonic Brahminic view was of ‘Shudra’, which is the ‘lowest’ category in the Brahminic fourfold divisions of Hindu society. But the peasant communities like the Meos, Jats, Ahirs, Gujjars, Patels and others, numerically, economically and politically continue to wield immense influence in various parts of India, not necessarily resonating the Brahminic view of the caste order.

20. The Meos currently identify themselves as Sunni Muslims, considering their connections with Hinduism as *bigār* (perversion). Their Muslim identity was largely shaped by a reform organisation called the Tablighi Jamaat in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as discussed in Chapter 5.
21. The excessive use of groundwater for agricultural and domestic purposes has caused water salinity. A report produced by the National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) scheme noted the overexploited use of groundwater (DACP 2016: 3). The major field crops in Mewat are wheat (49.8 per cent), millet (*bājṛā*/pearl millet, 32.8 per cent) and mustard (22 per cent) (DACP 2016: 4).
22. In the 2018 report of the Planning Commission (NITI Aayog), Mewat topped the all-India list of the most underdeveloped regions, with poor health resources and the lack of educational infrastructure cited as the reasons for its underdevelopment (A. Kumar 2018).
23. The issue of cow protection has led to multiple mob-lynching of Muslims in Mewat; see Ara (2023). Haryana, ruled by the Hindu right wing, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), enacted a cow protection act in 2015 and has recently passed an anti-conversion bill (2021) to polarise the sectarian debates even further. There are many cases of riots and killings in the region. Citing all of them is beyond the scope here. There are also many instances of widely circulated fake news related to these issues to defame Mewat.
24. The British colonial state saw India as made up of separate and bounded collectivities, considering differences in terms of caste and religion as the main feature; see T. Metcalf (1997) and Kolsky (2005).
25. The literature on this issue is too vast to cite here.
26. There are, however, a few exceptions: Assayag (2004); Bigelow (2010); Frøystad (2005); Gottschalk (2000); Flueckiger (2006); Mohammad (2013).
27. There are countless writings which consider the Hindu and Muslim sectarian and communal problems from a 'difference' perspective. Analyses of various aspects of secularism, communalism, nationalism and electoral behaviour in India require a focus on the bounded definition of religious groups. However, I understand the impulse and relevance of such works, but at the same time they work with a bounded and collective definition of religious communities, which under-communicates the internal diversity of a community.
28. The description of the self and the other Muslims by these Muslim groups in Mewat was mostly in terms of *jātī* (castes) than religious identity. Mayaram (1997a: 47–9) notes this aspect about Meos. However, for neighbouring

Hindu castes, the first identification was a religious one. Sociologists and social anthropologists have offered various definitions of this problem of caste among Muslims in South Asia. For instance, Barth (1998) notes, among Muslims of Pakistan, *jātī* or *qaum* (caste) is an integral aspect of social identity, while Marriott (1960) describes that caste ranking and social hierarchies are visibly present among Muslims in India and Pakistan. However, scholars generally agree that although the Hindu ideological justification for caste does not exist in the case of Muslims (I. Ahmad 1978: 11), behavioural Islam in the local context stands in stark contrast to Islamic scriptural requirements. Others have argued that inter-caste relations among Muslims cannot be simply reduced to the rank and purity of castes (see Raheja 1989: 80). The Meos' self-perception was deeply rooted in local notions of caste; therefore, they should be seen as practising a form of hierarchy that closely resembles the Hindu caste system. In recent years, the caste attitudes of the Meos have partially changed under the impact of reformist Islam. For instance, most Meos may pray with 'lower-caste' Muslims in mosques, but they still do not accept food from members of 'lower-castes' of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds.

29. Communalism in India is often referred to as sectarian differences between religious communities such as Hindu, Muslim and Christian. There is substantial literature on the rise and growth of communalism and the increased Hindu–Muslim religious consciousness encouraged by British colonial policies (B. Chandra 2008; Pandey 2006; Van der Veer 1994a), revivalist movements (Hardy 1972; M. Hasan 1985; Jones 1968) and the politics of local power and practices (C. Bayly 1985; Freitag 1989; Robinson 2007). As C. Bayly (1985) argues, whether 'a unilinear growth of a more homogenous Hindu or Muslim religious consciousness can be postulated is doubtful' (180). However, there is general agreement among scholars that communal (religious) consciousness generally increased in the twentieth century.
30. *Pāls* are territorial units and identities of the Meos. There are 12 main *pāls*, one smaller unit called *palakara* and 52 smaller clans. Marriage practices usually determine the rules by which Meo *pāls* delineate their status and show how the local symbolism of caste honour surpasses their religious identity. Many Hindu Rajput rulers from Rajasthan gave their daughters in marriage to Mughal rulers to strengthen their position and build alliances. Meo Muslims, on the other hand, are proud of the fact that their daughters were always given in endogamous marriage according to caste and clan lines. Therefore, their honour was not compromised, unlike the Hindu Rajput

- rulers, who allowed their daughters to become part of the Mughal harem. The *pāl* system is discussed throughout the book at relevant places.
31. Although cross-caste marriages among Muslims in Mewat are now encouraged by *maulavis* (theologians), it is still not a common practice. A few decades ago, some cross-caste marriages led to violent confrontations (Chauhan 2003).
  32. Raja Hasan Khan Mewati (reign 1504–27) belonged to the Khanzada Rajput community and was a ruler of Mewat. He was the son of the previous ruler, Raja Alawal Khan, and his family had been ruling Mewat for almost two centuries. His lineage could be traced back to Raja Nahar Khan Mewati, who was the king of Mewat in the fourteenth century. It is believed that his ancestors converted to Islam in the 1350s at the invitation of Firuz Shah Tughlaq and under the influence of the Sufi saint Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlavi's preaching. During the sixteenth century, he was instrumental in reconstructing the Alwar fort. In the Battle of Khanwa in 1527, Hasan Khan Mewati joined forces with the Rajput Confederation, bringing 5,000 soldiers to the battlefield. Unfortunately, he was killed in battle by the Mughal forces led by Babur. Hasan Khan Mewati's legacy continues to inspire people in the Mewat region and beyond. He is remembered as a brave and visionary leader who fought for the independence of his kingdom and the dignity of his people.
  33. Bannerman (1902: 72).
  34. In 1931, especially in Alwar, Muslims made about 25 per cent of the entire population (746,000), spread throughout 10 *nizā mats* (districts).
  35. Even after mass migration to Pakistan in 1947, the Meo population remained relatively stable. Bharatpur was controlled by Jat kings, while Alwar was dominated by Rajput lords.
  36. In Alwar, Muslims are currently in the minority (14 per cent), compared to the Hindu population (79.37 per cent); however, in Nuh (Mewat), Muslims are in the majority, despite the fact that the overall number of Muslims in both districts is considerably large (547,453 in Alwar; 862,696 in Nuh).
  37. William Percy Powlett was a British colonial settlement officer in Alwar (Ulwar) district in the nineteenth century. He carried an extensive survey of the district, which constitutes one part of the cultural region of Mewat. His work is an important historical source material for information about Alwar's physical nature, politics and history. His main contribution is to document oral folk materials concerning religion, belief and people's lifestyle. A section of his work devoted to Laldas is an important source of information for understanding the nature of inter- and intra-religious relationship around his shrines in the nineteenth century.

38. The writings of Shail Mayaram and Surjabhan Bhardwaj trace the history of Meos from the thirteenth to mid-twentieth century.
39. For example, in the case of the Meos of Singhal *pāl*, a popular folktale sung and narrated by Mirasi and Jogi bards also shows Meos' resistance to Islamisation. The tale celebrates Isardas, who not only refused to marry his daughter to a Muslim king but also refused to convert to Islam (Aggarwal 1971: 39).
40. Bhakti and Sufism are broad conceptual frameworks which are commonly known as 'movements'. They are highly diverse and complex cultural-religious phenomena. I am using the two terms in a general sense without discarding the complex reality. The Bhakti period is considered between 700 and 1800 CE and Sufism from 1300 CE onwards in India. The peak of Bhakti and Sufism is between 1400 and 1800 CE. Many influential Bhakti and Sufi saints were contemporaries. Like the saint Laldas, classification of these saints from present religious-theological point of view is almost impossible. More description of these diverse traditions coupled under the two terms is given in the next chapters.
41. The cultural encounter of the two is another complex issue, aptly discussed by Burchett (2019) and Snehi (2019) in their respective works. The high tide of these two major socio-religious movements of 'Bhakti' and 'Sufism' was preceded by Shaivite philosophy (such as the Nath and *tantric* traditions), which had already swept through north India (Ernst 2005).
42. The process is still going on.
43. The same issue is further discussed in Chapter 4.
44. In the sixteenth century, this process was still underdeveloped. But there was certainly an idea of private property emerging, although not in a clear sense. It intensified in the later centuries.
45. Most of the *pāls* organised by the Meo population is headed by a 'Choudhary' (headman) (Mayaram 2004a: 49–73).
46. A clan of Chauhan Rajput rulers in Rajasthan.
47. I recorded these couplets among a group of Mirasis from Natoli village in Mewat, namely Sannu Khan, Sahab Khan and Jumma. I am truly indebted to all these participants for the pain they took to perform for a small gathering of three or four people, including myself and my informant friend.
48. The English translation is mine.
49. This feature is analogous to the Hindu lineage (*gotra*) system. The son of a family from the Hindu peasant castes of Jats, Ahirs, Gujjars and Meena is not usually permitted by customs to marry into the *gotra* of his mother and

- grandmother. This practice among the north Indian Hindu peasants is restricted to the lineages only. By contrast, in the Meo *pāl* system it is applied to an entire *pāl*. There are a few exceptions also in which some villages belonging to the same *pāl* follow the *pāl* marriage system differently, such as they may take daughters from a *pāl* into which other *pāl* members marry their daughters. Then this custom is usually identified as the custom of that village only.
50. The Jogi and Mirasi are two separate communities of bards who mainly performed for Meos and were paid in cash and kind. More information about them comes with relevant themes throughout the book.
  51. The Meos' claims intersect with the claim of Rajput groups but is rooted in a peasant conception of the martial community, a widespread phenomenon among north Indian peasant communities (Pinch 1996).
  52. The term *itihās* means 'history', and *purān* refers to 'the legends of Hindu gods', mainly those of Vishnu's incarnations. *Itihās-purān* is a widely prevalent mode of the traditional historical consciousness across India (Mayaram 2004a: 52).
  53. Bharadwaj (2016: 93) writes that
 

from the late 14th century they began migrating to plains and settling down as peasants. This process was induced by rigorous military campaigns, large-scale clearance of forests and construction of garrisoned forts by the Delhi Sultans to contain their depredations; growing Meo population pressure on the scarce resources of the hilly terrain; the Khanzada chiefs pressurizing the Meos for relocating to plains and taking up agriculture; and the administrative integration of Mewat into the Mughal empire during Akbar's reign.
  54. Genealogy can pinpoint the historical memories of the socio-economic experience of a community or collective group while reflecting the present. Myth, memory and history in genealogical perceptions merge as does the present into the past (Goody and Watt 1963; Mayaram 2004a; Thapar 1991: 52–73). Memory 'can be useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience' (Confino 1997: 1388).
  55. The Mewati version of the Mahabharata was written by a Meo poet Saddullah Khan around the eighteenth century (Mayaram 1997b: 7).
  56. This line was repeatedly asserted by many Meos.
  57. The number of sacrifices made by the Meos during the 1857 rebellion exceeds any other district of the Haryana state. K. C. Yadav notes the total number of people who died from the Haryana part of Mewat was around 1,100 far more

- than the total numbers of 200 of the second placed district in the list; see Yadav (1977).
58. Shudra refers to the lowest category of the Hindu fourfold divisions into the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (kings), the Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (peasants and labourers).
  59. Moreover, the Meos were not always anti-state as Mayaram claims. Bharadwaj (2012) has shown that Meos were hired for the Mughal imperial postal services and as personal bodyguards to the emperor; they were known as *dāk-meorās* (Meo postmen) and *khidmattiyās* (service men) (248).
  60. This phrase is inspired by Lorenzen's phrase from his work about religious identity of Kabir and Gorakh as it expresses Laldas's situation perfectly; see Lorenzen (2011: 20).
  61. Sherpur, the village of the main shrine of Laldas, had a dominant population of Meos. The population also included members of some refugee groups from Pakistan that arrived after the partition of India in 1947. Sherpur's area size is 356 hectares. With a total population of 1,505 people (800 male and 705 females) in 267 families, the economic condition of the residents of Sherpur is much better than many villages as most residents own land. Most Meos (135 households) in Sherpur identified themselves as 'cultivators' in the 2011 Alwar district census. In Sherpur, 374 people identified as low-caste Hindu post-partition refugees who sometimes also worked on Meo lands as agricultural labourers. Apart from low-caste Hindu communities such as Jatav and Lohar, there were a few households of upper-caste Brahmins and Baniyas in Sherpur (Census of India 2011a).
  62. Punahana was dominated by Hindus of the Baniya caste. According to the religious data of the census of 2011, Muslims in Punahana were 55.40 per cent, followed by the Hindu population of 43.70 per cent of its total population of 24,734. The Baniyas had a variety of commercial stores, the majority of which sold everyday items. Most of the dwellings on the outskirts of the town were of Meos.